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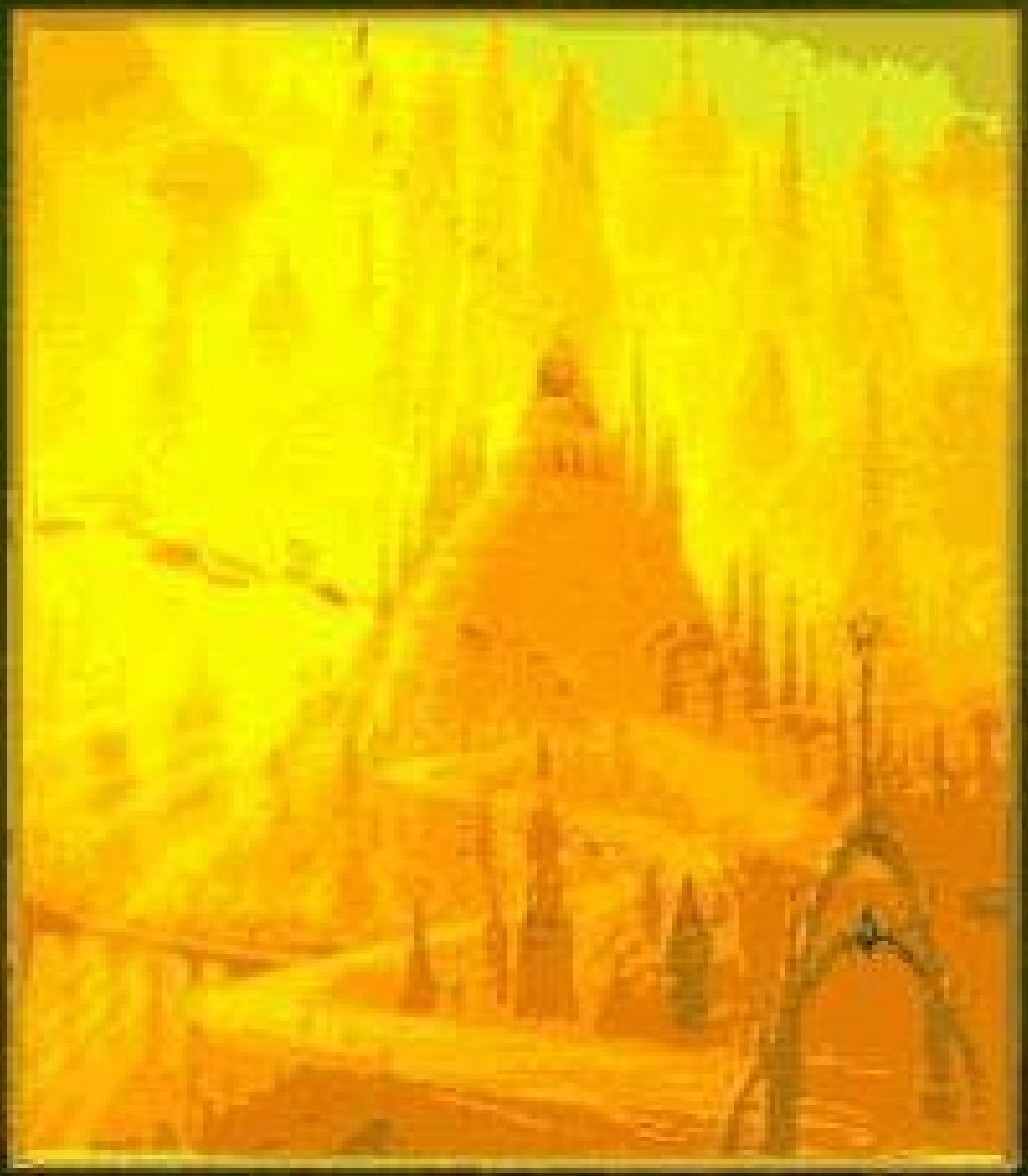
TAD WILLIAMS



OTHERLAND

City of Golden Shadow
Otherland Volume One
Tad Williams

This book is dedicated to my father,
Joseph Hill Evans,
with love.
Actually, Dad doesn't read fiction, so if someone
doesn't tell him about this, he'll never know.

Acknowledgments

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For more information, visit the Tad Williams web site at: www.tadwilliams.com

Author’s Note

The aboriginal people of Southern Africa are known by many names—San, Basarwa, Remote Area Dwellers (in current government-speak), and, more commonly, Bushmen.

I freely admit that I have taken great liberties in my portrayal of Bushman life and beliefs in this novel. The Bushmen do not have a monolithic folklore—each area and sometimes each extended family can sustain its own quite vibrant myths—or a single culture. I have simplified and sometimes transposed Bushman thoughts and songs and stories. Fiction has its own demands.

But the Bushmen’s old ways are indeed disappearing fast. One of my most dubious bits of truth-manipulation may turn out to be the simple assertion that there will be *anyone* left pursuing the hunter-gatherer life in the bush by the middle of the twenty-first century.

However I have trimmed the truth, I have done my best to make the spirit of my portrayal accurate. If I have offended or exploited, I have failed. My intent is primarily to tell a story, but if the story leads some readers to learn more about the Bushmen, and about a way of life that none of us can afford to ignore, I will be very happy.

Foreword

It started in mud, as many things do.

In a normal world, it would have been time for breakfast, but apparently breakfast was not served in hell; the bombardment that had begun before dawn showed no signs of letting up. Private Jonas did not feel much like eating, anyway.

Except for a brief moment of terrified retreat across a patch of muddy ground cratered and desolate as the moon, Paul Jonas had spent all of this twenty-fourth day of March, 1918, as he had spent the three days before, and most of the past several months—crouched shivering in cold, stinking slime somewhere between Ypres and St Quentin, deafened by the skull-rattling thunder of the German heavy guns, praying reflexively to Something in which he no longer believed. He had lost Finch and Mullet and the rest of the platoon somewhere in the chaos of retreat—he hoped they'd made it safely into some other part of the trenches, but it was hard to think about anything much beyond his own few cubits of misery. The entire world was wet and sticky. The torn earth, the skeletal trees, and Paul himself had all been abundantly spattered by the slow-falling mist that followed hundreds of pounds of red-hot metal exploding in a crowd of human beings.

Red fog, gray earth, sky the color of old bones: Paul Jonas was in hell—but it was a very special hell. Not everyone in it was dead yet.

In fact, Paul noted, one of its residents was dying very slowly indeed. By the sound of the man's voice, he could not be more than two dozen yards away, but he might as well have been in Timbuktu. Paul had no idea what the wounded soldier looked like—he could no more have voluntarily lifted his head above the lip of the trench than he could have willed himself to fly—but he was all too familiar with the man's voice, which had been cursing, sobbing, and squealing in agony for a full hour, filling every lull between the crash of the guns.

All the rest of the men who had been hit during the retreat had shown the good manners to die quickly, or at least to suffer quietly. Paul's invisible companion had screamed for his sergeant, his mother, and God, and when none of them had come for him, had kept on screaming anyway. He was screaming still, a sobbing, wordless wail. Once a faceless doughboy like

thousands of others, the wounded man now seemed determined to make everyone on the Western Front bear witness to his dying moments.

Paul hated him.

The terrible thumping roar subsided; there was a glorious moment of silence before the wounded man began to shriek again, piping like a boiling lobster.

“Got a light?”

Paul turned. Pale beer-yellow eyes peered from a mask of mud beside him. The apparition, crouched on hands and knees, wore a greatcoat so tattered it seemed made from cobwebs.

“What?”

“Got a light? A match?”

The normality of the question, in the midst of so much that was unreal, left Paul wondering if he had heard correctly. The figure lifted a hand as muddy as the face, displaying a thin white cylinder so luminously clean that it might have dropped from the moon.

“Can you hear, fellow? A light?”

Paul reached into his pocket and fumbled with numbed fingers until he found a box of matches, miraculously dry. The wounded soldier began howling even louder, lost in the wilderness a stone’s throw away.

The man in the ragged greatcoat tipped himself against the side of the trench, fitting the curve of his back into the sheltering mud, then delicately pulled the cigarette into two pieces and handed one to Paul. As he lit the match, he tilted his head to listen.

“God help me, he’s still going on up there.” He passed the matches back and held the flame steady so Paul could light his own cigarette. “Why couldn’t Fritz drop one on him and give us all a little peace?”

Paul nodded his head. Even that was an effort.

His companion lifted his chin and let out a dribble of smoke which curled up past the rim of his helmet and vanished against the flat morning sky. “Do you ever get the feeling. . . ?”

“Feeling?”

“That it’s a mistake.” The stranger wagged his head to indicate the trenches, the German guns, all of the Western Front. “That God’s away, or having a bit of a sleep or something. Don’t you find yourself hoping that

one day He'll look down and see what's happening and . . . and do something about it?"

Paul nodded, although he had never thought the matter through in such detail. But he had felt the emptiness of the gray skies, and had occasionally had a curious sensation of looking down on the blood and mud from a great distance, observing the murderous deeds of war with the detachment of a man standing over an anthill. God could not be watching, that was certain; if He was, and if He had seen the things Paul Jonas had seen—men who were dead but didn't know it, frantically trying to push their spilled guts back into their blouses; bodies swollen and flyblown, lying unretrieved for days within yards of friends with whom they had sung and laughed—if He had seen all that but not interfered, then He must be insane.

But Paul had never for a moment believed that God would save the tiny creatures slaughtering each other by the thousands over an acre of shell-pocked mud. That was too much like a fairy tale. Beggar boys did not marry princesses; they died in snowy streets or dark alleys . . . or in muddy trenches in France, while old Papa God took a long rest.

He summoned up his strength. "Heard anything?"

The stranger drew deeply on his cigarette, unconcerned that the ember was burning against his muddy fingers, and sighed. "Everything. Nothing. You know. Fritz is breaking through in the south and he'll go right on to Paris. Or now the Yanks are in it, we're going to roll them right up and march to Berlin by June. The Winged Victory of Samo-whatsit appeared in the skies over Flanders, waving a flaming sword and dancing the hootchy-coo. It's all shit."

"It's all shit," Paul agreed. He drew once more on his own cigarette and then dropped it into a puddle. He watched sadly as muddy water wicked into the paper and the last fragments of tobacco floated free. How many more cigarettes would he smoke before death found him? A dozen? A hundred? Or might that one be his last? He picked up the paper and squeezed it into a tight ball between his finger and thumb.

"Thanks, mate." The stranger rolled over and began crawling away up the trench, then shouted something odd over his shoulder. "Keep your head down. Try to think about getting out. About really getting *out*."

Paul lifted his hand in a farewell wave, although the man could not see him. The wounded soldier topside was shouting again, wordless grunting cries that sounded like something inhuman giving birth.

Within moments, as though wakened by demonic invocation, the guns started up again.

Paul clenched his teeth and tried to stop up his ears with his hands, but he could *still* hear the man screaming; the rasping voice was like a hot wire going in one earhole and out the other, sawing back and forth. He had snatched perhaps three hours of sleep in the last two days, and the night fast approaching seemed sure to be even worse. Why hadn't any of the stretcher teams gone out to bring back the wounded man? The guns had been silent for at least an hour.

But as he thought about it, Paul realized that except for the man who had come begging a light, he had not seen anyone else since they had all fled the forward trenches that morning. He had assumed that there were others just a few bends down, and the man with the cigarette had seemed to confirm that, but the bombardment had been so steady that Paul had felt no desire to move. Now that things had been quiet a while, he was beginning to wonder what was happening to the rest of the platoon. Had Finch and the rest all fallen back to an earlier series of scrapes? Or were they just a few yards down the line, hugging the depths, unwilling to face the open killing ground even on a mission of mercy?

He slid forward onto his knees and tipped his helmet back so it would not slide over his eyes, then began to crawl westward. Even well below the top of the trench, he felt his own movement to be a provocative act. He hunched his shoulders in expectation of some terrible blow from above, yet nothing came down on him but the ceaseless wail of the dying man.

Twenty yards and two bends later, he reached a wall of mud.

Paul tried to wipe away the tears, but only succeeded in pushing dirt into his eyes. A last explosion echoed above and the ground shook in sympathy. A gob of mud on one of the roots protruding into the trench quivered, fell, and became an indistinguishable part of the greater muddiness below.

He was trapped. That was the simple, horrible fact. Unless he braved the unprotected ground above, he could only huddle in his sealed-off section of trench until a shell found him. He had no illusions that he would last long enough for starvation to become a factor. He had no illusions at all. He was as good as dead. He would never again listen to Mullet complaining about rations, or watch old Finch trimming his mustache with a pocketknife. Such small things, so homely, but he already missed them so badly that it hurt.

The dying man was still out there, still howling.

This is hell, nor am I out of it. . . .

What was that from? A poem? The Bible?

He unsnapped his holster and drew his Webley, then lifted it toward his eye. In the failing light the hole in its barrel seemed deep as a well, an emptiness into which he could fall and never come out—a silent, dark, restful emptiness. . . .

Paul smiled a bleak little smile, then carefully laid the pistol in his lap. It would be unpatriotic, surely. Better to force the Germans to use up their expensive shells on him. Squeeze a few more working hours out of some mottle-armed *fraulein* on a factory line in the Ruhr Valley. Besides, there was always hope, wasn't there?

He began weeping once more.

Above, the wounded man stopped screeching for a moment to cough. He sounded like a dog being whipped. Paul leaned his head back against the mud and bellowed: "Shut it! Shut it, for Christ's sake!" He took a deep breath. "Shut your mouth and *die*, damn you!"

Apparently encouraged by companionship, the man resumed screaming.

Night seemed to last a year or more, months of darkness, great blocks of immovable black. The guns sputtered and shouted. The dying man wailed. Paul counted every single individual object he could remember from his life before the trenches, then started over and counted them again. He remembered only the names of some of them, but not what the names actually meant. Some words seemed impossibly strange—"lawn chair" was one, "bathtub" another. "Garden" was mentioned in several songs in the Chaplain's hymn book, but Paul was fairly certain it was a real thing as well, so he counted it.

"Try to think about getting out," the yellow-eyed man had said. *"About really getting out."*

The guns were silent. The sky had gone a slightly paler shade, as though someone had wiped it with a dirty rag. There was just enough light for Paul to see the edge of the trench. He clambered up and then slid back, laughing silently at the up-and-down of it all. *Getting out.* He found a thick root with his foot and heaved himself onto the rim of the earthwork. He had his gun.

He was going to kill the man who was screaming. He didn't know much more than that.

Somewhere the sun was coming up, although Paul had no idea where exactly that might be happening: the effect was small and smeared across a great dull expanse of sky. Beneath that sky, everything was gray. Mud and water. He knew the water was the flat places, so everything else was mud, except perhaps for the tall things. Yes, those were trees, he remembered. Had been trees.

Paul stood up and turned in a slow circle. The world extended for only a few hundred yards in any direction before ending in mist. He was marooned in the center of an empty space, as though he had wandered onto a stage by mistake and now stood before a silent, expectant audience.

But he was not entirely alone. Halfway across the emptiness one tree stood by itself, a clawing hand with a twisted bracelet of barbed wire. Something dark hung in its denuded branches. Paul drew his revolver and staggered toward it.

It was a figure, hanging upside down like a discarded marionette, one leg caught in the high angle of bough and trunk. All its joints seemed to have been broken, and the arms dangled downward, fingers reaching, as though muck were heaven and it was struggling to fly. The front of its head was a tattered, featureless mass of red and scorched black and gray, except for one bright staring yellow eye, mad and intent as a bird's eye, which watched his slow approach.

"I got out," Paul said. He lifted his gun, but the man was not screaming now.

A hole opened in the ruined face. It spoke. *"You've come at last. I've been waiting for you."*

Paul stared. The butt of the gun was slippery in his fingers. His arm trembled with the effort of keeping it raised.

"Waiting?"

"Waiting. Waiting so long." The mouth, empty but for a few white shards floating in red, twisted in an upside-down smile. *"Do you ever get the feeling. . . ?"*

Paul winced as the screaming began again. But it could not be the dying man—*this* was the dying man. So. . . .

"Feeling?" he asked, then looked up.