

**Shambhala** by Alex Irvine

*somewhere on earth*

A technician named Avogadro Pierre, monitoring dataflows in a certain part of the Virt, looks up from his takeout noodles and says, "Uh oh."

*somewhere in the virt*

Shannon's foot hurts. It shouldn't, because she doesn't want it to and this isn't one of the PU spaces where you settle in advance on a list of permissible pains and inconveniences. She's in her house, in her space. The rugs are hers, the coffee brewing in the kitchen is Yirgacheffe. Out the window she can see Shambhala at the base of the mountains, and on the breeze she can smell her ocean. Everything feels exactly as it should, except for her foot, and the only explanation she can come up with is that she's been ported into a PU space and then maybe--but why would she do this?--had the record erased.

Just to make sure, she says, "Virt."

An Avirtar wafts into being and wags its tail. Usually she likes it when they look like dogs, but she changes this one into her Aunt Sara, because at this moment what Shannon is after is reliability.

"Virt," she says. "Am I in one of the PU spaces?"

"Sweetie, have you registered a list of permissible Personal Unpleasantnesses?" Aunt Sara asks. Remnant dog hairs cling to her sandals.

Shannon shakes her head.

"Then how could you be in a PU space?"

"Virt," Shannon says. "Just answer the question. Am I in a PU space?"

"Nope," Aunt Sara says. "Wait. Let me check."

There is a pause.

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"Nope," Aunt Sara says. "Wait. Let me check."

*somewhere on earth*

What with all the status lights going yellow in what the Virtizens like to call the Great Brain of Meatspace (but don't ask him how he knows, because he'd lose his job if anyone knew he was communicating with the Virt), Mike Chancey is reminded of the birth of his son Abraham, who was premature and got jaundice so bad that for a while he looked kind of like a sweet potato. Abe Chancey is now a grown man--well, sort of. Man might not be the right word, since Abe woke up one morning a couple of years ago, decided he'd had enough gastric reflux and erectile dysfunction, and did what had already at that point become known as the Virt Squirt. The yellow lights take on an accusatory cast; Mike imagines that Abe has somehow jaundiced the Virt, turned it against him. The yellow lights glow with filial resentment.

There are tipping points, Mike Chancey thinks. There is the invisible point beyond which your son no longer loves you. There is the point beyond which you can't say with a straight face that you enjoy being alive. There is the point beyond which all of the wars and disasters and creeping entropy of addled ecosystems mean that as a civilization you're moving backward instead of forward. It doesn't happen all at once, not like flipping a switch; but you can look back when you're on the downhill slide, and you can

see when it happened. Fate grants you that moment of knowledge and introspection on your way down.

On the Brain Board, red starts to replace the yellow.

Then the power goes out.

*somewhere in the virt*

Arthritis? Plantar fasciitis? Bunions? All of these terms come to Shannon like random vocabulary from a language she hasn't spoken in decades. Limping on her sore foot, she starts asking around. In the Grounds for Excommunication coffeeshop, everyone complains of strange pains and inexplicable emotional disturbances. They look at her expectantly, and she admits her foot pain. This seems to satisfy them. All of a sudden one of them says, "I think I need to take a walk," and out he goes into the sunlight. When someone in the coffeeshop crowd notes that he's not casting a shadow, a murmur passes through them. What's going on here?

She goes outside to check, and sure enough, she's not casting a shadow either. But she's not transparent. Uh oh, she thinks. Errors have propagated before, but the Virt has always been resilient enough to layer over them before Virtizens know they exist--especially the natives, who aren't as quick to pick up on little quirks. Now several of the personae goggling at the missing shadows are natives, which is ominous. As is the fact of the missing shadows all by itself. A little shiver prickles Shannon's spine. Did she port over to a PU space and have the decision wiped? Only an Avirtar would know, and they're not very communicative at the moment.

The conclusion that presents itself is troubles in meatspace. Not supposed to happen, she thinks; the Virt is self-sustaining, the redundancies and robustness of Shambhala relentlessly trumpeted. That was why she decided to make the move, because people she trusted told her it was safe.

How much time has passed in the world? she wonders--and starts to call up the information, but then decides she doesn't want to know, even if the Virt is able to tell her.

Around her, she notices that people are starting to flow in a single direction, and the sight makes her feel like she ought to go that way too. Before she does, though, she thinks it might be a good idea to check in on things down there in the physical world. She walks in the opposite direction.

*somewhere on earth*

Mike Chancey is looking over his shoulder as he welds together the newest security shells he's built around his clandestine channel. Invincible, according to his phalanx of Nerds-in-excelsis, but recent events have made him mistrustful. He runs checks, realizes that he doesn't know enough about the nuts and bolts of his own system to interpret the results, and goes ahead.

"Abe," he says. "I don't know if you're listening, but there are problems here. It would help if you could let me know what you're seeing."

He waits, but his son does not answer. Mike is looking at losing his job for sure if his security isn't quite as bulletproof as he thinks it is, but while there may be good reasons for preventing any but essential communications between the Virt and the world, those reasons aren't good enough right now.

"Abe," he says. "Talk to me."

But Abe isn't talking, and it isn't smart to keep this channel open for very long. Mike walks the corridors of the office building he privately thinks of as the Brainpan, looking for Gautam, his Nerd-in-Chief. Gautam is in his office, head down on his desk, arms crossed over his head as if he's expecting an airstrike. "Gautam," Mike says. "Give it to me straight."

"It's too horrible," Gautam says.

"It's only going to get worse if you don't tell me."

Gautam looks up at Mike with the empty light of existential crisis in his eyes. "I kept it going," he says, "but the only way I could do it was to slow time waaay down in there. At least I think I did. Mike, I can't...." He buries his face again and speaks into his desktop.

Mike's heart goes out to him. Gautam has the worst case of Squirt Envy anybody in the Brainpan has ever seen, but he also suffers the misfortune of being a rare genius in exactly the right job for both his rarity and his genius. This is a misfortune because Gautam was brought up with a sense of obligation to his fellow human beings, which means that while he wants the Squirt more than anything in the world, he also believes that he owes it to humanity to sacrifice this desire in order to keep the Virt running for everyone else. So. It's a sad case. But right now Mike needs the optimally functional Gautam, not the despairing Gautam, so he says, "Gautam. Goddammit. What is going on?"

"They're ... it's all *figurative*, Mike," Gautam says without picking up his head. "The disruptions triggered some kind of self-defense reaction. The Virt couldn't run all of its ABCs in every case, so it went for, like, approximations, and then it jumped from there to some weird kind of emergent metaphorical shorthand. It's crazy. I don't get it. And whenever I try to pop diagnostics in there, I get personae coming out talking like William Blake or Rumi or somebody. All this visionary crap." A sound like a sob comes up from the desktop. "I just had a conversation with a persona who thought he was the prophet Elijah."

That can't be good, Mike thinks. "What did it say?"

"I think it was quoting from some Sufi text, I don't know, I lost track." Gautam looks up suddenly, as if a problem has occurred to him. He likes problems if the first step toward a solution is apparent. "You know what," he says. "I specced out something like this a long time ago."

"Is that right," Mike says.

"Yeah," Gautam says, and is suddenly glum again. "I was trying out an idea about using figuration, you know, to give Virtizens a common background, baseline cultural literacy, trying to code not just the facts but, you know, modes of thinking." Realizing that he's about to run beyond the boundaries of Mike's understanding, he reels himself back in. "But when I ran the sims, once that started to happen, this kind of death spiral occurs. The figuration gets more and more abstruse, more cognitive distance between vehicle and tenor, you know? Then nobody knows what anyone else is talking about."

Mike has understood every individual word, but he is not at all certain that he's followed the train of Gautam's thought. "Ah," he says.

"So it's weird," Gautam says. "You start out trying to give everyone a similar sort of cultural or ontological syntax, and the code pivots back on itself and everyone is in their own *idios kosmos*, totally cut off. No *koinos kosmos*."

"Gautam," Mike says. "I don't know any Hindi."

"I don't either," Gautam says. "Picked that up in a book somewhere, you know? And anyway, asshole, it's Greek. But it means that when each of the personae starts to customize itself, it branches off so much and with such big leaps that pretty soon they're all so far away from each other that they can't communicate anymore."

"And that's happening now?" Mike is thinking of Abe.

"No, I don't think so. But it's going to."

*somewhere in the virt*

All of the Avirtars have gone crazy. Most of the dog ones are chasing their tails. Shannon can't even look at Aunt Sara, who has followed her all the way from her house, panting, "Let me check," with the pensive and disturbingly canine expression of a distracted idiot. Shannon goes looking for a newsstand, but they're all gone but one that erupts in a flood of letters that run away down the street at her approach. Left behind, by itself on the counter, is a broadsheet newspaper, alone on a low table and irregularly haloed by smeared and bloody handprints. She picks it up and from the texture guesses that today's edition of *Meatspace News* was printed from pretty good tenderloin.

The pages are blank.

And her foot is killing her, and something is wrong with her eyes, chimerical sparkles in her peripheral vision. The air is full of strange smells. She remembers reading, back when she was in college, that these sensations are often precursors to a stroke or epileptic seizure, neither of which would have been on any PU list she might have come up with. Epilepsy in Shambhala? A *stroke*?

"That's it," Shannon says. "I want out."

The Avirtars fall over into a collective faint. Now I've done it, Shannon thinks, and goes to the library, looking for the Squirt everyone calls Charon.

*somewhere on earth*

A Virt full of Squirts imprisoned in their own mutually incomprehensible languages. Probably, Mike Chancey thinks, it's some kind of karmic payback, since Shambhala is the cold-blooded capitalist shadow of a grand utopian ideal. Immortality! A life free of worldly pains and disappointments! Girls girls girls! Boys boys boys! The power of a million supercomputers, all in your head, and all forever! Except when it came time to get the thing off the ground, once it was possible every so often to render a working software approximation of a human mind, the dreamers ran afoul of the bean-counters. There was insurance to consider in the event of a failed Squirt; there was the question of market limitations, given the price of scanning and upload; there were legal questions about the status of Squirts, or posthumans, or personae, or virtual people, or whatever it was you were supposed to call them.

Thus Shambhala, the brainchild of an ALS-stricken devotee of Tibetan Buddhism turned real-estate tycoon whose fondest wish in life had been that Boulder, Colorado, could somehow be transplanted to the mid-California coast. He had the billion to get it started, and there were more than enough people with immense disposable income and equally immense disgust with their physical bodies to get it started (and thanks to Alvin Kuntz, they quickly added a number of other, ahem, quirky personalities). Someone even paid to scan and Squirt Ted Williams's frozen brain, giving Shambhala its first real celebrity, although the consensus was that the strokes made Williams a substandard raconteur. If it wasn't the limitless Virt imagined by futurists and visionaries at the turn of the century, well, the market would fix that soon enough as long as the technological infrastructure kept up its lightning evolution.

Some caveat there, Mike Chancey is thinking as he walks to a board meeting at which the sole agenda item is: red and yellow lights on the Brain Board, causes and remedies of. He could answer both questions in about ninety seconds--causes, widespread collapse of energy infrastructure and reluctance of bandwidth outsources to continue to be bandwidth outsources; remedies, dramatic downscaling including elimination of native personae and all spaces except the immediate environs of Shambhala--but if the meeting lasts less than three hours he'll devote his life to God.

The consensus around the table is that things are actually pretty good, power troubles notwithstanding

and regional wars notwithstanding and general uncertainty regarding the viability of post-industrial civilization notwithstanding. No one has any interest in welcoming a flood of evacuees from the Virt, in addition to which the technological obstacles are formidable. Trouble is, the question of whether Squirts are human has been tied up in the courts for five years now, and simply pulling the plug on the whole thing would cause intolerable legal exposure (although a voice from Finance pipes up that settling claims might be roughly equivalent in cost to the bandwidth upgrades proposed by the Nerds-in-excelsis; he is ordered to work the numbers again and report back). There is talk of building brains from pre-Squirt records, but it is objected that this will result in the loss of whatever personality changes occurred during a given subject's time in the Virt, and that loss is considered undesirable. There is talk of isolating a personality in a corner of the Virt, trapping it if you will, which has unsavory connotations but would only cause short-term trauma in the interest of long-term viability should a transfer--a rebodification--be successful.

Discussion ensues. The Virt, it is decided, will survive the current troubles. At least sort of. People with loved ones who have done the Squirt, however, are getting agitated, and since the cost of the Squirt is orders of magnitude higher than the annual income of the average citizen of planet Earth, this agitation is prominent and must be addressed. A proposal is advanced: Might it be useful in a public-relations sense to provide an outlet for the discontent that will doubtless accompany the current disruptions? Perhaps in the form of a lottery...?

Dissenters argue that those uploaded signed contracts acknowledging the irreversible nature of the transfer. This dissent is acknowledged, but there is the delicate matter of the Kuntz operation. Gag orders signed on the original settlements five years before contain out clauses that might be activated if a reverse Squirt were to be performed. The opinion of Legal will be sought. Marketing pipes up: Given the circumstances, wouldn't it be better to bend the letter of the agreements, out clauses or no out clauses, if public perceptions can thereby be massaged in the desired fashion? Then if they have to pull the plug--Finance, you're running those numbers again, right?--they can spin the lottery as a dramatic rescue.

This argument carries the day. Now the problem is that to do what they're thinking about doing, they need Alvin Kuntz. No one in the room relishes the prospect of working with him again, not after the way he almost took them all down before.

Mike Chancey sits silently through the proceedings. He's not surprised, except by the idea of the lottery, which is so profoundly stupid that only a vice-president of marketing could have conceived of it.

*somewhere in the virt*

Some kind of signal has gone out. Virtizens leave what they are doing and start walking, flowing in puzzled tributaries that empty into a few broad rivers of personae exiting Shambhala. They go in different directions, but with the appearance of purpose, as if they are being separated. It is raining tree frogs whose tiny bodies splash into fist-sized pixels when they hit the ground. Music is playing everywhere, and great curving snakes of lightning ripple through the mountains. Various parts of Shambhala appear not to exist. They're like blind spots; Shannon feels like she's seeing something there but can't focus on it and when she tries the old trick of looking just next to the place, it doesn't work because she doesn't really have eyeballs. But wait, it should work because she's supposed to feel like she has eyeballs, isn't she? She's way past unease now, well on the way to panic, but it's an anaesthetized kind of panic, yowling away in the back of her mind while her body walks calmly along a leafy side street. Sunshine dapples the sidewalk except where it's covered in frog pixels. Shannon's bones feel oddly magnetized, but she has no impulse to limp along with any of the main streams of exodus. Neither does she have any particular desire to know where they're going, or where they think they're going, or whether they have any idea where they're going. Her mind wanders, but her feet stay on the path to the library, where she has heard Charon hangs out.

If he exists. One of the things about the Virt is that things don't always exist, and if they do, it's not always a permanent situation. There's no commitment to permanence here, especially on the part of the native personae. They flutter in and out of existence like convection shadows in clear water. Charon is alleged to be a native, but one who has access to meatspace, which would make him remarkable if not unique; one of the clauses in the contract all of the Squirts signed, back when they had flesh-and-blood hands, enjoins them to avoid contact with the physical world. *Meatspace News* is a one-way channel, and if it's cut out, then something has gone genuinely kaput. Maybe Charon will know what, and maybe--Shannon's grasping at straws here, but straws are what she has right now--he will be able to help. If he is what the whispered consensus says he is, which is an illicit conduit to meatspace. There are various theories about why such a thing is allowed to exist in light of the no-contact clause in all S squirt contracts, but no one knows for sure. If she is lucky, Shannon thinks, she might find out.

On the keystone over the library's front door is the inscription *Oh time thy pyramids*. It wasn't there the last time Shannon visited the library, and when she enters the building she finds that interior is dramatically different as well. Usually an Avirtar is already waiting at the desk, but today the library is full of translucent blind men groping among shelves of books that reach up higher than she can see. At the far end of the room, she sees a door, and is walking toward it before she's consciously decided to do so.

*somewhere on earth*

The sound of an approaching outboard motor distracts Alvin Kuntz from the enjoyment of his daily cigarette. He pinches the coal off the cigarette, saving half of it for later, and goes around to the front of his house, which faces the beach on an island that was erased from world maps shortly after World War II. He calls it Alvinia, and considers that in view of all he's done for human civilization, he's earned the distinction of naming a lump of South Pacific sand and coral after himself. The Kuntz Virtual Rehabilitation Clinic helped create the Virt, pioneered the brain-scanning and personality-modeling work that led to the Virt, and incubated innumerable advances in nanobiology after the Virt's establishment. That, Alvin reasons, is more than enough to excuse a little hubris, even though you won't find his name on any research papers or in any of the standard histories and even though he can't set foot on the North American or European continents because of certain indiscretions on the part of people who should have known better.

The downside of occupying an uncharted island is that Alvin's only company is robots of his own design, so it is with great anticipation that Alvin rounds the corner of his house to see what visitors the day has brought, and it's with great dismay that he notices the various official insignia bedecking the boat and the sleeves and hats of its crew. Were he a younger man, he would run even though the island is less than a mile across at its widest, and only slightly longer. He stays where he is because by the time the flight impulse winds its way down centenarian nerves to his feet, the boat is already beached and one of its crew knee-deep in the surf calling Alvin's name.

"Get off my beach!" he shouts. "There's no extradition treaties in Alvinia!"

"We're not here to extradite anyone, Mr. Kuntz," the wet-legged sailor says. "All we need to know is where you're keeping the bodies."

"What bodies?"

"Mr. Kuntz," sighs the sailor, "I said we weren't here to extradite anyone. I didn't say I wouldn't hogtie you and throw you in the boat. How about we sit down in some shade and have us a little chat?"

*somewhere in the virt*

"All I can see anymore is the color yellow," a voice over Shannon's shoulder says. She looks and sees that one of the translucent blind men has followed her through the door. His breath is peppery, his voice

liquid and reassuring.

She looks around. Books books books. A single door. If she didn't know better, she would think she hasn't moved. "Do you know where I can find Charon?"

The Avirtar--or persona, she's not sure--waves vaguely. "Around," he says. "He's not yellow, I can tell you that."

Shannon wants to gamble and ask if Charon can get her out. Even if she's just piped back into a network where meatspace--the world--is visible again. Anything but this. Her misgivings get the better of her, though.

"Through this door?" she asks, pointing at the only door she can see.

"Eventually," comes the reply. "Or maybe not."

*somewhere on earth*

Alvin is getting tired of the interrogation. If Shambhala Virtual, or whatever they're calling themselves now, wanted to know what was going on, he's thinking, they should have come themselves instead of sending whichever variety of manicured goon he's currently dealing with. "The thing is," he says, "even if I knew where the specimens were, they're not just empty jars you can pour a personality into. Even if you could find the right person to put back into his original body, I don't think that would work. The neural pathways wouldn't fit anymore. They especially wouldn't fit if you wanted to put someone else in there."

"So you're saying we can't use their existing brains," said the sailor.

"Well, not if you want them to be exactly like they are in the Virt," Alvin agreed. "But who's going to know? Will *they*?"

"I don't know. Will *they*?"

"Interesting question," Alvin says. "We never did figure that out."

The sailor looks at one of his crew, a dark-skinned Asian woman in a floppy hat. "Quick take on the liability issues?"

"How quick?" she says. "There's still no settled law on whether they're people."

"Just get a sense, okay?"

She puts on an eyeglass display and starts working a palmtop.

"Tell you what," Alvin says. "You wouldn't have this problem if you used *them*." He jerks a thumb over his shoulder at the house.

"Who's *them*?"

Clearly this is going to take a while. Alvin lights his half-cigarette. "Soon as I'm done with this, come on in the house. I'll show you."

"Okay," the sailor says, and stands a short distance away. "You know, I was serious when I said I wasn't here to arrest you. But that doesn't mean I don't think I should."

"Alvinia's a free country," Alvin said. "You're welcome to your opinion."

"Uh huh. Why'd you do it? I mean, apart from being a soulless mad-scientist wacko?"

Alvin chuckles. "That was mostly it. But also...." He trails off. This is the part he can't explain to them, or shouldn't, anyway, because it makes him seem even more pathological than most people already think he is. But the plain truth--the real reason why he did it, and why he intends to do it again if he gets a chance--is that the world becomes a nicer place in direct correlation to how many of the moonpie idiots afraid of experiencing it are subtracted via the Squirt.

"Never mind," he says. "Come on inside and meet the help."

*somewhere in the virt*

Every room just opens into another, all full of books and all populated with deranged Avirtars impersonating writers. Currently Shannon is in a scene out of a Renaissance pastoral: sheep, gentle hillsides, bumpkin shepherds composing poems. There are three of them, two throwing verses back and forth and the third tapping time on his knee. "Methinks I hear when I do hear sweet music," one of the Avirtars says, and the second picks it up: "The dreadful cries of murdered men in forests."

"Ain't everyone who can write a double rhyming sestina," adds the third, and barks. "Now that's order."

Shannon doesn't know what a sestina is. The third Avirtar senses this, and explains. She's a little shocked by its sudden coherence, and starts to ask about Charon while she's got a lucid Avirtar to work with, but a fourth Avirtar manifests and steps in the way. It's wearing an old noir-movie getup, trench coat and top hat and lip-stuck cigarette.

"You know Philip Sidney, kid?" it asks.

"It's Marlowe," Shannon says. "I read that book. Everyone knows it's Philip Marlowe."

"Is you is, or is you ain't my Strepthon?" asks the second Avirtar. Then all four of them vanish, and she is no closer to Charon.

*somewhere on earth*

The next morning, a memo goes out, sketching the challenges of the situation. Mike Chancey is still shaking his head over yesterday's meeting. "A lottery?" he says incredulously. "What about the rest of them?"

What about Abe?

He's back in his office, attended by Nerd-in-excelsis Avogadro Pierre. "You're pushing your luck here, you want my opinion," says Pierre, and sneezes.

"And now they're dealing with Alvin Kuntz again. Could this get any more cynical?"

"Who's Alvin Kuntz?" Pierre wants to know.

"He's the guy who Squirted a bunch of patients at his VR clinic and then warehoused the bodies for nano experiments." Pierre is staring pop-eyed at him. "You didn't hear about it?"

"He *what*?"

"I'm serious. I think he did nearly fifty of them before anyone caught on. Now he's hiding out on an island somewhere. Working on robotics, I think."

"Jesus," Pierre says, and sneezes again.



"Had a flu shot, Pierre?" Mike asks.

"Ahh," Pierre says.

"Your funeral. Just don't die before I get in touch with Abe."

Pierre's waving his hands and shaking his head before Mike finishes the sentence. "No no no no no, la la la la la, I don't hear you--"

"Jesus, shut up." Mike has everything in place. He starts the creeper, of Pierre's design, that will raise Abe. It creeps. Pierre drops his three-monkeys attitude and watches, a proud craftsman. The channel opens.

"Abe, you there?" Mike says. He listens. "Tell me about it ... no shit. Okay, we're doing what we can ... they're what? Who's looking for you?"

He looks up at Pierre. "*Meatspace News* is down."

Pierre shrugs.

"Did you do that?" Mike says.

"La la la," Pierre says, but he's pointing over his shoulder, in what Mike belatedly figures out is the direction of the boardroom. Mike wishes a lingering death on all of the board members.

"Kid," says Mike, "we've got bad trouble down here. And it's not getting any better. You need to get out while there's still the bandwidth to do it."

He pauses.

"Abe," he says. "Please."

He pauses.

"Is that right?" he says, and cracks a thin smile. "I'm the *Meatspace News* now?"

Pierre's laughing.

*somewhere in the virt*

She is through the door and into a small, old-fashioned kitchen with a window that looks out onto sooty brick picked out by a shaft of falling light. The air is thick with cigarette smoke. An old man--this is enough to make him stand out, since very few Virtizens, native or Squirt, choose the appearance of old age--leans on a grimy kitchen counter. Also unlike the vast majority of Virtizens, he is wearing eyeglasses. On the back of his T-shirt, Shannon reads the name HENRY.

"Hey, baby," he says, and drinks from a bottle on the counter.

"Excuse me?" She doesn't think she's ever been called baby, at least not since she was one.

"I said hey, is all."

"Well, hey what?"

"Hey, you one of the ones leaving?"

Shannon nods. "Yes."

Henry shakes his head. "Lots of 'em think they're leaving," he says. "Not a single one knows where he's going."

"I know," Shannon says, which if not a lie is inarguably optimistic. How is she supposed to get out of this kitchen? There's only the window.

"That right? You know?" Henry finishes his cigarette and lights another. "Now what you want to do that for anyway? Zero-one silicon switch, zero-one quantum foam bubbling up into prokaryote paramecium parakeet philosopher, what difference does it make?" Shannon has spotted a fire escape, and she climbs over the kitchen sink and squeezes through the window. Behind her, she can hear Henry still talking. "Baby, stay here, hey, baby...."

*somewhere on earth*

Two soldiers are watching oil platforms burn. "Man, check it out in UV," one of them says. The other flicks his goggles and takes in the high-spectrum show. He likes the infrared better. They're both tweaking a little, and when bullets start to pock the wall around them they bound like rabbits around the corner and sit giggling until they hear the whistle and impact of automated ground-flash response shells torching the back side of the hill.

"Believe I'll peek out and see if the peasants got their barbecue yet," the infrared partisan says.

"Let me know how it turns out," says his UV-inclined comrade, but the planned peek never occurs because at that moment an oil terminal along the waterfront goes up in a blast that they find quite diverting in their spectra of choice.

*somewhere in the virt*

And maybe it's true that on the zero-one level it's all the same, and maybe it's true that after doing the Squirt, that's the level Shannon should be thinking about, but she isn't. When the Virt is coming down around your ears, Planck-length semantics are the last thing on your mind. Out Henry's window is a fire escape that goes down into an abyss, and now that she's clinging to it she can see that the airshaft is hexagonal in cross section, and that narrow walkways encircle its interior every ten feet or so, forming what looks like a cast-iron ribcage as far as she can see up or down.

Down, she thinks, and then is uncertain. What if it's up? She takes a quarter from her pocket and flips it, thinking that on tails she'll go down, but she misses the quarter on its downward arc and it pings through the iron grate between her feet and goes on pinging for several floors before ricocheting around on a platform and coming to rest.

She's in a mood for omens. Okay, she thinks, and begins to descend.

*somewhere on earth*

"I think it worked," Gautam says. "They don't know what the hell they're doing, but the ones who won the lottery, all of a sudden they all took off like Don Quixote. Problem is that the rest of them, not the natives but the Squirts, also took off, you know? But like in random directions. There are subspaces ramifying in there faster than I can catalog them. This isn't sustainable, Mike. What are you going to do with them?"

"Looks like we're going to drop them back into bodies," Mike says.

Gautam looks ill. "How ... bleah. Back into the meat. Hope you have a budget line for therapy expenses," he says.

*somewhere in the virt*

The quarter lies in front of a door that opens onto a cracking blacktop road. There is honeysuckle in the air, and the smells of oil and aftershave hitching a ride on evaporating sweat. An ancient car sits at the side of the road, black and dusty, one of its rear tires flat. Standing next to the hood, a young man with blisters on his face and bloody fluid leaking from behind his sunglasses is preaching.

"Where you come from is gone," he shouts. "Where you thought you were going to never was there, and where you are is no good unless you can get away from it. Where is there a place for you to be? No place."

She's looking around for walls of books, or fire escapes, or anything but this stretch of sun-baked asphalt that fades away into the hazy distance. Should I be looking for water? she wonders. I'm not going to find a ferry out here. The crowd, all translucent men who can only see the color yellow, shuffles its feet. Then one of them steps out, shedding his shape. He's like one of those blind spots back outside--if that's the right word--in Shambhala. Shannon can't quite see him.

She can hear him, though, when he says, "Keep going. Keep it up."

"Charon?" she asks.

He's gone. The not-quite-blind men all look at her, then look back to the preacher, who is pouring broken glass out of his shoes. Then she's moving again, down the road, past the crowd of men, who as she passes them momentarily flicker into the shape of Aunt Sara. When they reassume their shapes, she can see a stairway in the distance, rising from the shimmer where the road meets the horizon.

*somewhere on earth*

The truth, if anyone around the table is interested in the truth, is that the situation is getting dire. Meatside relatives of Squirts are screaming bloody murder, literally. The courts are still wrangling over the legal status of Squirts, and while it's all up in the air Legal is hip-deep in court filings and injunctions. Shareholders are antsy enough to talk about a board shakeup. Things are far from optimal. They'll get on top of it, sure, because innovating and solving problems is what Shambhala Virtual does. Right now, however? This moment under discussion? Right now they don't have the resources they need for the Virt--"divert to the Virt," someone says in passing, and they laugh harder than it deserves--because everyone from the Chinese to the Indians to the Saudis to the French to the Americans is busy putting out political and environmental and military brushfires of every description. The little misadventure down in Venezuela, the earthquake-breached dams in China and the Pacific Northwest, the refugee problem in Bangladesh ... instead of a gleaming posthuman future, the board of Shambhala Virtual find themselves, at least temporarily, sole proprietors of a monstrously expensive and utterly irrelevant luxury commodity. If only they could get all the goddamn Bangladeshis to do the Squirt, one of them jokes, they'd have one problem out of the way. Especially if they then pulled the plug.

But back to the task. There's a PR crisis to be massaged. Even if they have to pull the plug--which according to Finance might be workable if they strategize the settlements correctly--they at least need to get the lottery winners out. One of them opens a link to see whether Alvin Kuntz has come around.

*somewhere in the virt*

The stairs go on forever, it seems. Shannon is exhausted by the time she reaches the top, and frightened because she shouldn't be exhausted. She's never going to get out of the library, she's never going to find Charon, she's never going to talk to someone in meatspace and figure out what has happened. She sits on the top stair, ready to give up, and has the clear realization that she has in that moment understood despair.

Someone is talking behind her. "As is he who dreaming sees, and after the dream the passion remains

imprinted, and the rest returns not to the mind, such am I."

She doesn't look up. "What now?"

"For my vision almost wholly departs, which the sweetness that was born of it yet distills within my heart."

"Okay," Shannon sighs. She stands up. "Get to the point."

When she turns around, she is in a small stone chamber not unlike parts of the game-immersion spaces (although she shudders to think what this Virtquake, or whatever it is, has done to them and the personae in them; rampaging aliens and balrogs are all she needs right now). Set into the opposite wall is a low stone gate, slightly open. On the other side of it she glimpses a path that winds up the flanks of a mountain, the top of which is lost in a gentle obscuring radiance. Between her and the gate, a weary man with eyes that might have been transplanted from the preaching kook on the dirt road is speaking: "...through my sight, which was growing strong in me as I looked, one sole appearance, as I myself changed, was altering itself to me."

"Change," Shannon repeats. "Okay, change. Keep talking."

The man falls silent.

"I mean it. Keep talking," she says. "I've come this far."

"My mind was smitten by a flash in which its wish came," the man says, and a blaze of light from the top of the mountain floods the room, blinding her. When Shannon looks back, the old man is gone, and sitting in his place she sees a compact, dark-haired man wearing a worn suit. A smile plays about the corners of his mouth.

"What's so funny?" she asks.

"No one else could ever be admitted here, since this gate was made only for you," he says, and begins to bleed from invisible wounds. "I am now going to shut it."

By the end of this pronouncement, he is unable to contain himself. He bursts into shrieks of laughter as she pushes past him and rocks the gate on its hinges. It holds fast, and he laughs harder.

*somewhere on earth*

"I'm telling you, it won't work," Alvin says for the hundredth time.

"No, you haven't told me," comes the voice over the phone. Alvin has refused a video feed. He'd rather look out over the ocean and devote only one of his senses to whichever bureaucrat is going to harangue him this time.

"Then you could look it up. The neural pathways in all of my specimens are already set. Do you know how to rewire them? I don't, and that means that probably nobody else does either."

"Is there a way to make them think that they've come back down?" the voice asks.

"Could be," Alvin says. "That's not my field. What you're talking about is just another Virt, only, what, smaller. Go make one. You've got a building full of engineers and geniuses probably looking for a chance to get it right this time."

"Mr. Kuntz," the voice says. "This will all be much smoother if you can refrain from acerbic comments."

"My acerbic comments are hardly the worst of your problems, bud," Alvin says. "Your problem is that

you've promised something you can't deliver. Way I see it, you can either brush up your resum or you can just use the goddamn robots like I already told you."

*somewhere in the virt*

Smoke and laughter roll out when Shannon opens the next door. It's cooler here, which gets her hopes up that maybe she's nearing water. "This ideal moment when man," someone is saying, "in the grips of a particular emotion, is suddenly seized by this something *stronger than himself* which projects him, in self-defense, into immortality."

She shuts the door, then opens it again. The way must be there. "And who are you supposed to be?" she asks.

"A key," the man says. He is wearing a high collar and tie, and waving a bottle of something green and alluring. She smells licorice. "Capable of opening indefinitely that box of many bottoms called man, a key that dissuades him from turning back, for reasons of self-preservation, when in the darkness he bumps into doors, locked from the outside...."

And she is already through the door past him, and deeper into the library.

*somewhere on earth*

"You're going to what?" Mike says.

"What can we do? Kuntz says the bodies won't do the trick. Understand, Mike. We've got to make a gesture here."

"I'm not going to be a party to this," Mike says. "We can fix the problem. Gautam is on it. He'll get it done."

"Gautam is losing his mind, Mike. You're going to walk into his office one of these days, maybe today, and find that he's done the Squirt from his desktop just so he can be there for the end. Guys like him, the true believers, this is all about the apocalypse."

This possibility has in fact occurred to Mike. "Whereas for us it's about what?" he says to himself, but he's overheard.

"This is the wrong time to get sentimental, my friend. Don't ask questions when you already know the answers. Look, the robots are actually a pretty good solution. The evacuees will be out of the Virt, but they'll also still be out of the meat, which is what they wanted in the first place, right?"

Mike hears himself say, "Right."

"Right."

"So how many Squirts won this lottery?"

"We sent six."

Out of about thirteen thousand who have done the Squirt. And the millions of native personae who may or may not be people, depending on who you ask. Six. Mike doesn't have to ask. He knows they're going to pull the plug. You get a kind of sixth sense for betrayal and deviousness when you spend time around these people.

"One of them," Mike says, "is going to be Abe."

"Excuse me?"

"I said that my son is going to be one of them. That's my price. You want to keep Alvin under the rug, and you want me to pretend I don't know that you've already decided to pull the plug, you get Abe out of there."

"Mike, Abe is about the happiest Squirt there's ever been. Plus we need him up there. Your conversations are helpful to our marketing people."

Thanks a lot, Pierre, Mike thinks. "Burn me if it makes you feel better," he says. "But Abe comes out."

"Okay, if that's what you want, but that's not a very nice thing to do to your kid, is it?"

"Fuck you," Mike Chancey says, and goes to tell Avogadro Pierre that he needs to look for a new line of work.

*somewhere in the virt*

She is certain this must be the last. The room is bare and dark. The smell of old hay tickles her nose, and the scene resolves itself into a stable. Tack and farm implements hang from nails on the walls. Somewhere water drips. The man in front of her puts down a pad of paper and offers a sad smile. "You are not thinking of finitude," he says. "You are contemplating an apotheosis in which a temporary state of mind will become symmetrical above the flesh and aware both of itself and of the flesh it will not quite discard."

"I am?" Shannon says. "Let me pass. Please, let me pass."

"You will not even be dead," he goes on, and is talking over her as she shoves into him, pushing him back against the far wall, where the two doors are marked 0 and 1. He vanishes between them, and she hears his voice: "...until someday in very disgust he risks everything on a single blind turn of a card no man ever does that under the first fury of despair or remorse or bereavement he does it only when he has realized that even the despair or remorse or bereavement is not particularly important to the dark diceman..."

Shannon leans against the wall between 0 and 1, and it gives way.

*somewhere on earth*

"Good news," Avogadro Pierre says when Mike gets back to the Brain. "We've got all six of them down their blind alleys. At least I think we do."

"There needs to be a seventh," Mike says. "Find Abe."

"We were told six," Pierre says.

"The board says seven now, and one of them is Abe."

"If you say so," Pierre says, "but Abe makes himself awful hard to find sometimes."

"That's why you're part of the Praetorian Nerds, Pierre. Get it done."

*somewhere in the virt*

Between zero and one, Shannon is laughing. It feels like years since she's laughed. "Roll dice? After all this, *dice*?"

"We're down in the quantum," the Dark Diceman says. "It's all probability here."

No arguing that, Shannon thinks. She cups her hands and the dice drop onto her palms, one, two. She

rolls them without looking.

"Lucky seven," the Dark Diceman says. "Okay, good enough. Follow your nose."

And she smells water, feels the breath of it on her face. Shannon walks into the darkness. She closes her eyes when she can't see anymore.

*somewhere on earth*

"More good news," Pierre says. "I got Abe."

Mike nods. He wants to be happy, he wants to feel guilty, he wants to feel anything but what he does right now, which is selfish and abused and complicit in something horrible. "Thanks, Pierre," he says. "By the way, the board knew about Abe the whole time, I guess."

"No kidding," Pierre says.

"Yeah. I figure we're both about to walk the plank."

"Huh." Pierre thinks for a while. "Gautam's going to kill himself when they pull the plug."

"You might be right about that."

"Damn right I'm right about that." Pierre thinks a little more. "So, listen. You know where to find this Alvin Kuntz guy?"

"Come on, Pierre."

"No, I mean it. Gautam kills himself, I'm going to feel guilty for the rest of my life. Gautam goes off to an island somewhere and engineers his own, what, apotheosis, that's good for me."

Pierre has a point, Mike thinks. "Huh. All right." He has to look all through his desk drawers for a pen. When he finds one, he writes a latitude and longitude on the back of a Chinese menu. "You should go too," he says as he hands the menu to Pierre. "I doubt there's going to be much work around here for a little while."

Pierre is laughing. "Dope," he says. "You think I really got this for Gautam?"

And despite himself, Mike is laughing too.

*somewhere in the virt*

I'm going to have corpuscles, Shannon thinks. Alveoli. Phalanges. Or at least I won't be here anymore. Half-full, half-empty. She finds herself mimicking Henry. Silicon, quantum foam, what's the difference? If you have to ask, I can't explain.

How long have I been away?

Her next footstep splashes. She opens her eyes and sees a boat rocking in black shallows, five Squirts already aboard. A rope runs from its bow to the bootsole of the Dark Diceman.

"Oh," Shannon says.

"Fare?" the Dark Diceman says.

She realizes she still has the dice in her hand, and gives them back. She sees the Diceman looking over her shoulder, and turns to see another Squirt walking with his eyes closed in their direction. He's crying,

his muscles are twitching like he's having a seizure, but he's walking. "No no no no no no," he's saying.

"And two for him," the Diceman says.

"I have to pay for him?" Shannon says. "He doesn't even want to go."

"He got you here."

"That's Charon?"

"That's him."

"No no no no no," the Squirt weeps.

Shannon searches her pockets. "That's all I have."

But Charon's tears are falling like silver; suddenly there are coins everywhere, falling out of the infinite black around them. They ping and patter on the stones, plink in the water. The Diceman laughs the way you laugh when you've been made the butt of a pretty good joke.

"Okay," he says. "Good thing nobody else is seeing all this. The boat would never hold them all."

He steps aside. So does Shannon, because Charon is walking like a condemned man into the flat-bottomed boat. When he is seated on the front bench, Shannon steps aboard.

*somewhere on earth*

"Shannon DeWalt?"

It's been a long time since anyone used her last name. Eyes still closed, Shannon realizes she's heard a voice. Vibrations in an oxygen-nitrogen atmosphere have collided with the bones of her inner ear. I have a body, she thinks. It's a wondrous, impossible thought. She is exalted by it, feels her heartbeat quicken and a smile break across her face. *Alveoli, corpuscles, phalanges!* She inhales, feels the oxygen filling her lungs, raises her arms over her head and feels the muscles stretch. Her nose registers the smells of cut flowers, some kind of lubricating oil, antiseptic, a faint hint of deodorant. I made it, she thinks.

She opens her eyes. The ceiling is white. Indirect light suffuses the room. She sees her hands, polished and shining.