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THE TOURNAMENT

The round of 1 048 576 The Net calls everyone it selects. That's the rule. Always at five in the afternoon, Eastern Double-Daylight Time. Always on the Friday before June's first Monday, the bulk of the month reserved for little else. More than a million phones sing out at once, their owners picking up as one, nervously hoping to hear the Net's cool, unruffled voice giving them the glorious news. Another Tournament is at hand! The best of our citizens will be pitted against each other, in a myriad of contests, the single-elimination adventure culminating in honor, wealth and an incandescent and genuinely deserved fame.

Some contestants like being with friends when the call comes. Not me. Bette claims I'm scared of being embarrassed by a silent phone. Maybe so. But I think
it's because my first call was a surprise, coming when I was a kid -barely eighteen-- and expecting nothing. I'm at least as superstitious as the next idiot, I'll admit it. And I was alone that first time as well as every time since. This is my seventeenth Tournament; I like my atmosphere of anxious solitude, thank you. And I won't change one damned thing.

Five o'clock. My phone sings, and my hands shake. Opening the line, I watch my viewing wall fill with the Net's milk-on-jade symbol, and the expected voice says, "Hello, Mr. Avery Masters. You are ranked 20,008 in the national pool, forty-seventh in your district. Congratulations, sir. Details will follow, and as always, the best of luck to you."

"Thanks," I manage, breaking into a smile. Forty-seventh is my best local ranking ever, but in truth, I'd hoped for better. My training has been going great; all my qualifying tests are up. But then again, who's to bitch? Positive
thoughts, positive results. That's what coaches tell you. With that in mind, I brighten my smile, reading about Monday's opponent.

Ms. June Harryman -- a district legend. She's deep in her eighties, both hips plastic and a carbon rod fused to a regenerated spine. She's made fifty-one appearances in the Tournament, including its very first year, and while she never finishes high, she's always there, always full of pluck, always garnering
local praise and national mention.

No, I think, I can't ignore the lady.

Don't look past tomorrow, coaches tell you. Even if tomorrow isn't for three days.

Our morning event is a 10K race, and the Net has given Ms. Harryman a twenty-five minute head start. That's a brutal lead, I'm thinking. It's probably
as much for her hips as her age. Then comes our afternoon game--some kind of puzzle; that's all I'm told-- and in the evening, in a tiny studio not ten minutes from my apartment, we'll go toe-to-toe in U.S. geography.

I bet the old gal knows a lot of geography. What could be worse, I'm thinking, than being knocked out in the opening round by some low-rank half-artificial grandmother?

When the phone rings again, I mute it. It's probably Bette calling to congratulate me, then tease me about my opponent. Except I'm not in the mood to
be teased. Just to feel confident, I start naming state capitals. And I forget Guam's, which puts me into a panic. I'm taking a refresher course when Bette arrives -- a breasty, big-hipped woman strolling into my apartment without sound. I barely notice her as she turns through dozens of sports channels, finally finding what she wants on the Net and cranking up the volume until my ears hurt.

"According to friends," says a well-groomed reporter, "she felt chest pains as she reached for the phone. It was five o'clock exactly." A lean, white-haired woman hovers over his shoulder. Ms. June Harryman. "An artificial heart is being
implanted --"

"What?" I cry out.

"-- with Ms. Harryman's long-term prospects deemed excellent."

"Didn't you know?" Bette's round face smiles, thoroughly amused. "Hasn't it told
you?"

It means the Net, which has to know. The Net handles emergency calls, controls every autodoc, and identifies consequences in an instant. Of course it knows.

A light blinks on my console. Punching the button, I hear:

"Mr. Masters, you have a bye for next Monday." Infinitely patient and incapable
of amusement, the voice gives no sign of being impressed with my remarkable luck. "Enjoy your weekend, sir. And we'll see you on Tuesday morning." 524 288

Reach the first round, and you're guaranteed a few dollars. It doesn't pay for a
cheap treadmill or two hours of forced hypnosis, but it's a wage, and for some people it's all they want. The illusion of being professional, that sort of thing.

Payoffs accelerate slowly at first; you need to get out of the first week before
you earn a living wage. Win your district -- my goal of goals--and you'll have a
comfortable life. But then come the regionals and the authentic wealth. And if you can defeat all twenty of your opponents -- one of us does that trick every year-- the Net awards you a billion dollars, tax-free, then transmits to you every congratulation from every one of your forgotten cousins.

Bette says the Tournament is silly. She says that a happy, wealth y nation needs
better obsessions. But I don't take her teasing too seriously; I'm naturally confident and self-assured, I hope. And besides, she lets me tease her in turn.
I like telling her she's one of those stuffy souls who pretend outrage, knowing
they lack the talents needed to win. "Poor Bette," [say, 'without mercy. "Poor,
poor Bette."

I make a fair living with these June competitions. Then for the rest of my year
I'm in training, always preparing, always working my body and mind into shape for next year's shot at immortality.

After Tuesday's competition, Bette calls to congratulate me.

"Did you watch?" I ask.

"No," she lies. "I just saw your name posted, that's all."

It was my first day of real competition, and I'm already among the last quarter
million contestants. Today's opponent was a man-child, a giant built of muscle and sinew, and for the morning's contest I was the one awarded handicap points.
That's how the Net keeps things interesting. It has files on our body types, muscle types, age and general physiology, and the formulas it uses have served well for half a century. Even with my handicap points, I was behind at lunchtime, the man-child lifting a mountain of iron over his bony brow. But in the afternoon, sitting in a VR booth, I piloted my biplane in combat, downing dozens of enemy craft and taking a healthy lead into this evening.

Bette tells me, "I didn't know you were such an expert in algebra."

"So you watched, did you?"

"Me? Never." Her face covers my wall; she doesn't bother softening it with a vanity program. "That was pretty cocky of you, telling that kid to lift quadratic equations for a change."

"You did see it," I shout.

She says, "Never."

She tells me, "I just hear the gossip, that's all."

I yawn, then say, "Bette, you know the rules."

"You need your rest. I know." But before she vanishes, she says, "I just wanted
to tell you, I've got a feeling about this year."

"What feeling?" I ask, trying not to seem too curious.

A wink, an amused grin. Then she says, "Never mind." She waves me off, saying, "You need sleep, and never mind." 262 144

I wake from a dream where I'm throwing basketballs in neat arcs, each one dropping through a hoop tinier than a bracelet.

Some competitors pay big money for implanted dreams.

This dream is genuine, which makes it feel like an omen.

Wednesday's opponent is a smallish woman, not quite young, and she shoots from Xs made by the Net, her marks closer to the hoop than mine. As is fair. Early on, either because of nerves or simple bad luck, she misses a string of free throws, then more distant shots. Then we play some one-on-one, weights on my

shoes, and I blow past her just the same, getting out to a fantastic lead. She's
so demoralized that she doesn't even finish the afternoon's puzzle, throwing its
plastic pieces across the gym floor, then stalking off in tears.

I want to tell her, "The Net notices. That isn't going to help next year's ranking doing that crap."

I want to say, "Play hard and face the consequences." But instead I concentrate
on my puzzle, finishing it in half the allotted time. It's a geometric wonder full of shifting rainbows, and I take it to the nearest robot, placing it on the
offered hand as the sexless voice says, "Your opponent has withdrawn, Mr. Masters. Thank you, sir, and until tomorrow . . . . " 131 072

We race diamond-frame bicycles in the morning, my opponent given a substantial head start, and after fifty kilometers of hills, wind and a sudden rainstorm, I
finish just twenty meters behind her, in a virtual draw.

In the afternoon we navigate VR landers over a cratered landscape, two hours of
hovering and repeated hard landings leaving us even closer in the standings.

My opponent is new to the district. She's smart, tough and capable of a withering stare. Tonight's contest is natural history, and as I take my podium,
one hand fiddling with my buzzer, I glance her way and show a weak smile, claiming "You'll win. Easily."

"Shut up," she advises.

She says, "I know all the tricks, son."

Old enough to be my mother, yet made of sterner stuff, and I have to admire her.
I win by points in the end -- by almost nothing -- and receive a fair amount of
local coverage as a consequence. ("Early round dramatics!" That kind of thing.)
But what's memorable for me is my opponent's whispered offer to see me later. "After you lose, darling boy." Romantically? I wonder. And she laughs, saying, "Hot wet sloppy fun," and giving me a lecherous wink.

I'm polite in my refusal and secretly intrigued.

Later, lying awake in bed, I wonder if her offer is genuine. Or was she attempting some kind of trick with my spirit, in revenge? 65 536

Friday, and I'm fuzzy. Stale. Half-dead.

Marksmanship is the morning's hell -- rifles, shotguns, bows and arrows, homemade spears -- and I end up deep in a hole. My opponent is a child, barely twenty and lucky to have made it this far into the Tournament. We play a board game in the afternoon, my strategies crippled by his wild maneuvers, and finally, with a ragged attempt at being the good sport, I concede defeat to the
little shit.

In order to live for the year on my winnings, I need to make it to the second Monday.

This Tournament looks like a bust.

But the kid comes from an enclave of fundamentalists, and he hasn't any grip on things as non-Christian as Chinese history. Standing behind my podium, I field questions generated by the Net. I buzz first, then answer. Buzz, and answer. And answer. And answer. Before we've left the Ming Dynasty, I've pulled into a comfortable lead. And then I stop buzzing letting the boy have his stabs, inexperience giving him penalty points and allowing me to take whatever leftovers are easiest.

Arriving home, flush with victory, I find Bette waiting, all smiles. "He almost caught you in the Mao years."

"Did not," I say.

"What's it matter either way?" Bette has no competitive spark, unless it's her fierce desire not to compete. "Let me take you out for a drink. It's the weekend now. Isn't one little drink legal?"

I feel lucky and at ease with myself. It's not the three beers that make me drunk. It's everything. And later, out of sheer joy, I coax Bette into my bed, using her round, unexcellent body until both of us seem happy. This isn't our first time; we're modem friends, meaning everything is possible. But afterward, in the dark, I start making mental preparations for next week, part of me wondering how I can coax Bette into leaving me, giving me solitude and the chance to recoup.

As if reading my mind, she rises, dresses and goes.

Then I sleep without dreams, crossing a great black portion of my weekend in a limp leap. * * * 32 768

Monday again.

Friday's fuzziness is gone. I'm sharp, smooth and self-assured, pounding at white balls pitched by human-shaped, Net-piloted robots, driving them toward a distant fence, then over it. Never, not even when hitting VR balls in my own bedroom, have I been this good for so long. And the handful of spectators--other people's families, mostly--seems caught up in the show, breaking into applause and stomping their feet.

The afternoon's puzzle is a knot begging to be untied. My fingers are magical, touching and tugging accomplishing the feat in what seems like an instant. Without effort, almost.

The night's subject is geology -- rocks to be named; tectonics to be described-- and of course I win there, too. Afterwards, I can't even recall my opponent's face. A man, I know. Of my age, I'm almost sure. But his name and every other shred of identity have fallen away, lost. 16 384

She's tall. Strong. Quick.

Yet to make our fight even more fair, she wears hard little boxing gloves and a
suit of puffy, self-cooling rubber. We're here to go a full six rounds -the morning's first contest. Both of us work hard to pace ourselves. You can win an
event too well, if you're not careful, spending all of your juices too soon. That's why we dance and stab, dance and stab. But then for no clear reason, in the middle of the final round, I decide to charge and strike, driving her back into her own corner, then hammering away with a series of grunting wet ugly punches.

My own gloves are soft and oversized, yet I manage to do damage. The woman's head, pretty in a doll-like way, snaps back as the final bell sounds. Consciousness lost, she topples, boom, and lies motionless on the clean white tarp. The Net deploys an autodoc while the robot referee tries to usher me aside.

Awaiting their turns are the other competitors-- seated; knowledgeable; enthralled-- and thinking of them, I pull away from the referee and stand over my victim.

In a moment of pure theater, I scream at her, trying to coax her to rise and fight me again. 8 192

The net congratulates me; it's become a kind of habit.

My opponent -- a man of my general age, build and intensity -- is being consoled
by the same smooth voice.

He defeated me in the high jump, then at gin rummy. Then he proved that he knows
more about the solar system too, edging me out in our last event. Yet according
to the numbers, I'm the victor. I drew lousy cards this afternoon, each card from a thoroughly randomized deck, then played them with all the skill I could muster. That skill was worth a bonus. And since we were almost identical in three categories, the bonus becomes everything in the end.

"Not fair," cries the other man. "This isn't right!"

"Fair or not," the Net reminds him, "our rules are public know[edge, all devised
by human beings."

"A poor sport," I offer, not quite whispering.

The Net says, "Yes," through the robot beside me. Then the second robot tells my
opponent, "You're welcome to file a grievance, should you wish. I can supply you
with names and e-dresses for any human official --"

"Shut up!" roars the man.

I stare at him, understanding him. Neither of us have ever won the second Wednesday. Tensions have their way of mounting, making us into new people.

Strangers, even to ourselves.

My opponent notices my stare, then charges over to say, "It likes you."

"Who does?"

An accusing glance at the nearest robot, at its solitary glass eye. Then he seems to lose his courage, taking a huge breath before telling me, "Forget it. Just never mind."

"Go home," the Net advises. "Start preparing for next year, sir."

I've never seen such despair on a face, and that could be me. Shattered. Cheated. Slinking off in shame.

"It likes you," he had said.

I glance at the glass eye, then, as if in reflex, I look far away. 4 096

Eight competitors remain in our district trials.

Our local millions arc watching. We can pretend to forget them, pretend we don't
care about them, pretend every color of ignorance possible. But some of the millions have come to watch today -- odd souls who aren't family members, who prefer their sports in person -- and with them is an air of expectations, that sense of breath coming fast, then held in the tensest moments.

It's a good day for tensions. From the standard pool of one hundred and eighty-eight physical contests, the Net has selected that event most loathed:

Figure skating.

There are eight of us, none expert. We're not even particularly good, as it goes. I know I avoid skates as much as possible, and my weights and running and
other athleticisms have blunted my grace. What matters is survival. What wins is
a good double lutz and no falls. Balancing myself between disaster and inspiration, I win technical points from the Net and the human judges, thank god, don't kill me for my lack of art.

Then after lunch, over neat green tables, we play pool, four games running simultaneously, spectators in the grandstand above. Every time I stoop to shoot,
I think of Bette. We've played a few times, me for the practice and her for the
hell of it. Somehow remembering her sloppiness is comforting, her self-mocking laughter inspirational. Even when I take my bad shots, slop saves me. I build a
lead that's enough to weather the evening's contest, which is cooking. And on this day, in a battle between two strangers, I prove myself to be the superior skater/pool player/chef.

Bette's right; this is a silly business.

Sitting at home, I ask the Net, "If everyone in the Tournament played everyone else, and I mean play them in every contest, would the same person win the whole
shebang?"

"I can't say," it responds. Without hesitation, without interest.

"This year's winner faces how many of us? Twenty." I shake my head, tossing my reader to the floor. "Twenty of us, and sixty contests. Is that a ridiculous measure of excellence?"

The response is quick but not immediate. There's an instant of silence, then the Net informs me, "Reality is chaotic. I can't calculate all the variables in one contest, much less all that can happen in a full Tournament."

I say nothing.

"By definition," it adds, "every Tournament is inadequate to the task."

I barely listen, thinking my own thoughts.

"Any more questions, Mr. Masters?"

"Did you know," I ask, "that billiard balls hitting each other lose their exact positioning in space?"

"Yes," it replies. Of course it knows.

I can't recall how many collisions are needed, but it has to do with the quantum vagueness of the universe. Leaning back in my chair, I close my eyes, imagining colored balls in motion -- countless; ceaseless -- chaos reigning on a smooth green table without rims, without ends. 2 048

It's evening, early.

I've come home to pack, getting ready for Alaska. Bette has come to help, which means teasing me for my tastes in socks. There's just one pair of district competitors left, they cover my largest wall, spouting on about architecture. I should be there, enjoying the applause and flashing lights, but my opponent -- last year's district winner; this year's first seed -- was disqualified this morning. The Net didn't like the taste of his blood. Using subtle, parts-per-ten-billion drugs, he had tried lifting his abilities just enough to win. As they say, "On the even playing field, molehills count." But then again, how do you hide your molehill?

What, I wonder, was that idiot thinking?

Bette wants to know what will happen to him.

"A suspension," I say. "For a few years, I guess." I close my suitcase, then sag, feeling almost fragile. Last night I dreamt of losing, and I woke convinced that I would lose. Today's contests favored my opponent; I'd had a good run of it this year, i was thinking. Nobody was more surprised by the disqualification than me.

"Why did he take the drugs?" Bette asks.

"To win," I respond, by reflex. "He was looking past me, aiming for the regionals."

She stands beside me, a meaty breast nudging my arm. "Did he really hope to slip
past the Net's tests?"

"Some of us do," I grumble. "I've told you the rumors." All the big names -- Yang and Fogg, Christianson and the rest -- use special elixirs cooked up in dark foreign labs. Their advantage is a hundredth of a second, a question in fifty. No test known can catch every illegal device --

"What if he wanted to be caught?" she asks.

I glance at her, then try changing subjects. "Come with me. I'll pay your way."

"Since when do you want a cheering section?" She has a hearty laugh and a way of
seeing through me. "I thought you preferred your friends out of sight and mind."

"Just this once," I say.

"Maybe," she responds. But later, after making love, she tells me, "No, I should
stay home."

"Why?"

"I've got crops to watch."

Bette is peculiar. In a society of wealth and relentless leisure, she raises her
own food and makes most of her own clothes. She's something from the Dawn of Man, which I find fascinating; and like a thousand other times, I tease her for
it.

She shrugs in the dark, then changes the subject. "I've watched replays of the disqualification. I saw your opponent's face when he was told." A pause, then, "Maybe he didn't know it, but I think he wanted to be caught."

"Did he?"

"He did so well last year." A deep sigh. "What if this year wasn't nearly as much fun?"

I can't understand her point.

"You've always said that all you want is to win the district. You don't expect to ever go farther."

Suddenly I'm glad that Bette is staying home. With a dose of cold fury, I tell her, "Go watch your fucking crops."

I'm more startled by the words than is she. 1 024

My opponent is the fourth seed in our district, the prohibitive favorite today.
Beat her, and I'm not just the local champion -- our lone warrior against the nation's best -- but I'm also one of the year's Cinderellas, guaranteed all the
attention that comes to statistical flukes.

For these next two weeks, the order of events is reversed. Mental contests in the morning. The usual afternoon game. And finally, in the long sub-Arctic dusk,
a physical contest -- something full of drama to captivate the distant throngs.

Today we're running 100 meter sprints, 512 identical races held in and around Anchorage. I enter it trailing, but not by much. To win, I have to make up my opponent's head start, then pass her, winning by a leisurely .3 of a second. "Just do a great race," I tell myself, settling into my starting block and looking at a string of lights --red, red, red, green. I wait. My opponent goes with her green light and a sharp tone. I wait. My red lights run to green -- beep -- and I leap up, racing the length of my narrow black lane, working to relax, to breathe, then extending my chest at the finish, twisting my head sideways to watch the numbers appear on the giant scoreboard.

"No!" I won by .299 seconds, which means, I realize, we have tied. An equal pile
of points has been awarded to each of us, and we'll have to run again.

"Rest," we're told, by the Net and by our gracious human hosts. "You'll go again
in an hour. Relax."

An hour later, we run mirrors of our first races.

Again, we tie.

This is big news. Huge news. In the next hour, every sports network and mathematical hobby channel sends reporters to supply interviews and inane commentary. A hyperactive fellow dances around me, begging for my thoughts, goals and dreams; and in lieu of honesty, I sputter cliches. "Concentration wins," I say. "One stride at a time," I say. Then gazing into a hundred floating, sparrow-sized cameras, I wave and say, "Hi, Mom!"

Everything is the same for the second rerace -- the lane; the crisp air; the dreamy remoteness of the world -- but this time I try willing myself to greater
speeds. I roar out of the block. My opponent is a distant form, and then she's forgotten. I make my legs burn. My lungs burn. I punch my chest through the laser beam, and turning, my eyes fuse on the board.

This is Hell.

My time hasn't changed, not by a hundredth of a second.

For the rest of my life, I realize, I'll have to race this race, never able to win, never willing to lose.

Then I think to look for my opponent, puzzled that she isn't standing where I expect. What's happened? A bent, hobbling figure is in her lane, the right leg bloodied by a terrific fall. I never saw her fall. I was too focused to

notice,
although tonight, in my hotel room, I'll watch the event a thousand times. Straining for speed, she tripped over her own foot, colliding with the ground and sliding, then rising, staggering toward the useless finish line.

The Net speaks through the scoreboard, saying, "Congratulations, Mr. Masters. You are champion of District Three-Eleven/'

The woman is in agony, face streaked with tears, the healthy fresh blood streaming along her leg. Wanting to be the good sport, I walk toward her; when my hand is offered, she slaps it away. When I say, "Next year," she tries to kick me with her bad leg.

"Get back? she shouts. "I'm racing here, asshole!" 512

This is who I am:

I'm that jerk at the party who knows everything about Byzantium, the chemistry of phosphorus, dog breeding, homosexual Presidents, and the fate of the Universe.

I'm the guy taken third for a pick-up game of basketball, then sinks ten circus
shots in a row, winning the game for his team as well as winning the hotdog reputation.

I'm a tower of confidence, admired by some, envied by most, and generally perceived as being distant. Remote. Cold to the point of glacial. (Although that's far from fair.)

I'm a mortal -- prince, stable boy or whomever -- who just might have once been
touched by the gods.

And now, maybe for the first time, I realize how I look to others. I find myself
surrounded by myself -- the 511 other district winners --and there comes a powerful urge to wilt, turn to dust, and blow away.

I'm not qualified to be here.

There's only one other competitor with a lower rank, and I'm watching her charge
through the obstacle course, through mud and hoops and across greased rails and
rope bridges. She's a portrait of focus and sputtery white energy. I envy her. We're performing in a giant stadium filled with screaming fans, yet I seem able
to hear her strong breathing, the wet grunts, and the squish of mud underfoot.

On a slippery slope, she plants a foot and turns too quickly, the crack like an
explosion. lingering in the air long after she has collapsed.

"That knee's finished," says the competitor beside me, his tone almost amused. I
recognize him. He's Elijas Fogg, this year's Number One seed: a tall and handsome man. No, a beautiful man. He's not my opponent, yet he seems to know me. As the crowd moans in one voice, he turns and remarks, "Well, now you're their favorite."

"Whose favorite?"

He smiles as if facing an idiot. "Who do you think?"

The spectators? Is that who he means?

"Now you're the one most like them." He grins with effortless menace, no set of teeth more perfect than his. "Among us, you're the closest to being average. Ordinary." A pause. "Pathetic."

I don't know what to say. Before us, robots lift a squirming, mud-caked figure onto a stretcher. Perhaps in response to the suffering, Fogg asks me:

"Do you know why they love the Tournament?"

The spectacle of it? The competition? Or the pursuits of glory and excellence?

I say none of those things.

His head lifts as if posing for some dead Greek's urn. "They love watching us claw at each other. They adore watching us crash and bum." A sideways glance at me, then a bitter smile. "Almost all of us fail, and the bastards drink it in."

My bastards, I tell myself.

"Mr. Fogg" I tell him, "you've always been an inspiration for me."

Of course I am, his face seems to say.

Refocused, reenergized, and given a sterling cause, I conquer the obstacle on a dead run, beating my opponent by just enough. Then I take my victory lap, trotting past the roaring crowd, arms overhead and my bastards on their feet, the air itself seeming to nourish me with its love. 256

The Net wakes me at seven-fifty, as asked.

When I want details about the day's competition -- my opponent; the events; the logistics -- it supplies accurate, thorough answers, anticipating most of my follow-up questions. Through the course of the day, it keeps me aware of time and my schedule, the scores and what I need to do to lead, then what I need to do to keep my lead. When I want a snack, its nearest robot delivers hard candy and half an orange. When I pull a muscle during warm-ups, it prescribes a legal anti-inflammatory, administering it through one of its autodocs while lowering my handicap by a mandatory amount. And when I win, the Net tells me, "Congratulations," with its changeless voice, nothing warm or unwarm about it, no trace of involvement, and nothing behind the words but an unshakable politeness.

Meanwhile, without fuss or failures, the Net runs our factories on the earth and in orbit. It manages our power grid, our stock markets, our information systems, and every entertainment that requires its talents. Mistakes are made --

thousands every day, none major -- but even the mistakes help perpetuate the image of seamless competence. The Net and several competing human agencies find
and measure each failure, and guess which count is always, always the most accurate count.

Victorious and grateful, I lie awake in my softly lit room, listening to new thoughts. I ask to see the Net's symbol -- a branching white tree on a background of stylized green humans. In a low voice, I ask, "Do you ever hold your own Tournament?"

"Toward what end, sir?"

"Pit your subsystems against each other. Give awards to the most incompetent ones."

"But for what purpose?"

"Your winner can be named the most human."

The Net says, "My subsystems don't resemble organic life."

Yet I don't care, smiling to myself, telling it, "And our winner is the most Net-like. What do you think? We can put them together. Send them out on a date,
maybe."

I laugh, asking the silence, "Wouldn't they deserve each other?" 128

In my youth, without a trace of affection, classmates called me Avery Allosaurus.

Old hobbies never leave a person. Thirty years later, I find myself unearthing all kinds of intellectual fossils, smashing my opponent in the morning's contest. It's pure luck that the topic is paleontology; my opponent is left punch-drunk, desperate. Sure, he wins back points while fighting inside a VR battle tank. But not enough points. I've got such a lead that in the evening, as
we climb different portions of the same rock wall, he elects to leave his safety
lines behind, trying to scamper to the top unencumbered, goat-style.

I can't see his fall, but I feel it.

I feel the crowd below turn to ice. Without sound, people watch the tumbling figure, that perfection of the human species no match for the rocks below. Then
comes a moan and collective shudder. My opponent is this Tournament's first death; a distinction is won.

Bette calls me afterwards, ready to console. Yet I don't feel guilt or sorrow. "He's to blame," I say, shrugging my shoulders. "I didn't remove the ropes, did
I?"

Bette looks tired. Unhappy. Wise. She's calling me from her cluttered house -- I've never liked that house -- and she tells me, "I rather miss you, Avery."

I make some appropriate mirroring noise.

She says, "You're doing well," with a sense of disbelief.

I need to be stretching, and reviewing. But instead I laugh and say, "You should
hear the talk about me."

"Like what?"

"I'm a jinx, people say. Going against me is dangerous. The Net loves me, and it
stacks the events against my opponents."

"Oh,' she exclaims, as if in pain.

"You should see them, Bette." A pause, a grin. "Some of them are actually
terrified of me. I'm the lowest-ranked person to make it this far in years, and
they're scared."

She nods. Then she says, "Stupid."

I agree. "You think I'm superstitious. You should see these people, Bette. All
day long, it's rabbit feet and rituals."

"All of it's stupid . . . !"

"But the thing is, I believe them. I am jinxed. I'm dangerous. The Net adores me
and it helps me. All that just makes me more confident."

"Idiotic. . . ."

"I couldn't have fallen tonight, Bette." I almost believe those words, adding,
"And if I had fallen, somehow, I would have just sprouted wings and flown the
rest of the way!" 64

Everyone has their favorite Tournament winner. Mine, without a microgram of
doubt, is Leonard Dab. In '81, I was a boy not quite thirteen, at the age where
heroes appear when you expect them. Dab was just unlikely enough to catch my
attention and sympathies. A veteran of almost thirty Tournaments, he'd never
finished higher than the fourth Monday. Small and gray, he was a sinewy alley
fighter, past the age of perfect recall and dependent an old joints and handicap
points. Today I realize why old Dab has been my favorite. There have been
greater victors, and prettier ones. When I was sixteen and hormonal, the
infamous Mattie Yung killed her opponent in the nineteenth round, in a karate
match; and of course I fell in love. Then there's William the Conqueror from
'79--- the largest point total of all time. Or Stef MacGraw from '51 and '53 ---
the only two-time winner. But no, still and always my favorite is the plain and
unlikely Leonard Dab, the Cinderella of his year, and now, after so long my
inspiration. My unwitting mentor.

Last night, after the final competitions, the Net randomly selected Tournament
history for the morning's competition. It's not a remarkable choice, but it's
fortuitous for me. Late-night studies can't make you an expert before dawn. Just
ask my opponent. Our M.o.C. is the best in her profession, reading the

questions
without favoring either of us; yet I can tell she expects me to answer first, and correctly. What's the biggest, fastest, longest, smallest in the Tournament?
Who did, who didn't, who should have, who perished? Amid flashing lights and musical tones, I thrive, building a lead worthy of its own trivia question. Out
of a thousand available points, I win 907. Even when I lose the next two contests, I remain entrenched in the lead, the Net just waiting to the end before offering me an official invitation to the Week of 32.

The M.o.C. congratulates me, then invites me to dinner in her hotel suite. Twenty years my senior, but lovely, she's the product of good genetics and every
available beauty aid. In the middle of the night, trying to rest, I ask how many
Tournaments she's worked in. "I started in '67," she replies, "and I haven't missed since."

Knowing there's no chance of it, I ask, "Did you meet Leonard Dab?"

She takes a quick breath, then laughs. "Did I ever!"

"You did?" I sputter.

"For an old piece of oak," she informs me, "he was a spry little maniac in bed."

I lie still, calculating the odds.

And now she isn't holding me, but my hero. The hands still touch me, but their curl and a new gentleness imply someone else. Someone treasured. * * * 32

Over the weekend, according to the Net's errorless count, I receive three million requests for introductions, interviews, business partnerships, other partnerships, product endorsements, and a crisp little message from Bette.

"Remember me?" she asked yesterday.

It's Monday -- lunchtime -- and I need a distraction. I call her, and the Net finds her outdoors, working in her shaggy garden. With a joking voice, I ask, "Haven't you been watching me?"

A stony expression, a shrug. "Now and again."

"It's going great," I tell her. Then I launch into a rambling, self-congratulatory speech, boasting about my current lead and my opponent's miserable prospects. This afternoon is chess; I'm really very good at the game.
Which means I'll take that event and hold on through tonight's pole vault --

"Who are you?" Bette interrupts.

I hesitate, for an instant.

"You look like Avery," she says, "but he was a bearable asshole."

"What's that mean!"

"You're boring," she says. "And worse than that, you're silly." She pulls up a

random plant. Weed or not, it doesn't seem to matter. "Why are we talking? We've
got nothing in common."

With the charity of a minor god, I decide that she's jealous. It's a question of
my success, and it's understandable. "Nothing's going to change between us," I assure her. "Soon as I'm done, in a few days, I'll come home and treat you to anything you want --"

"I'm doing what I want now," she says, her voice certain. Rock-solid.

"Are you?"

What does the woman want?

"When you lose," she asks, "what happens?"

I give a quick snort, then explain, "I'll start training again. I'll get ready for next year."

"But why?"

"Haven't you been paying attention, Bette?" I point a finger at her sun-washed face. "This is what I do for a living. Remember?"

She starts to speak, then hesitates.

"What? What is it?"

She opens her mouth, saying nothing.

"Say it!" I plead.

"I guess I feel sorry for you."

Now I'm mute, a mind geared for chess finding itself in a new game. How can she
pity me? It has to be jealousy, a fear of losing me. I try to leave things unresolved, smiling before I tell her, "I'm sorry you feel that way."

Once again, she says, "Remember me?"

It's the same voice, but it's not a plaintive cry for attention. Not at all. Like one friend bidding adieu to another, she's asking, "Will you remember me?"

"Hey -- !" I begin.

She vanishes with the stab of a thick little finger. 16

I am beaten.

That's the verdict going into Tuesday evening. Yesterday ! survived a poor game
of chess, making an inspired vault to hold my lead. But that won't happen tonight, and everyone knows it. Suddenly the other competitors and their entourages begin to smile at me, knowing the point totals, feeling enough at ease to congratulate me on my luck and determination. "You've made it interesting," they concede. "Interesting is good. At least for a little

while."

Tonight's event is a ski run, the snow freshly made and refrigerated --a long white ribbon winding down a green mountainside, made all the more treacherous by a warm Alaskan day. I haven't skied since last winter, excluding VR trainers. My opponent is a better-than-good skier, a three-time Week of 32 finisher, and she last skied in late April, honing her reflexes on the Greenland icecap. I can't win, and even I know it. How could I have ever hoped to beat these people in this business? With nothing to lose but my joints, I take the mountain like a madman, slicing over the finish line and fifteen entourages beginning to cheer, knowing how it will end.

My opponent follows. She doesn't exactly crawl down the mountain, but she knows better than to take chances. She always knows her time. She leaves herself ample cushion. On the tight turns she looks like a talented novice, poles biting the ice, a radiant smile growing by the moment, her victory in the proverbial bank.

Caution keeps her on the course too long.

Ten or fifteen seconds too long. No more.

The earthquake arrives with a terrific jolt -- not a big quake, but one focused beneath our locale -- and my opponent falls, then regains her feet and form. But then the sun-softened ice panics, shaking and sliding downhill, a terrific fluid mass pouting onto the fiat ground, spreading like a fan and nearly drowning half of the entourages.

As it happens, nobody dies.

But my opponent never crosses the finish line, and the line itself has vanished. Acts of God are covered in the Net's copious rule book, and despite a century of predictive science, earthquakes remain godly events.

By default, I'm declared the winner.

And still, despite the intervention of the Almighty, the Net merely says, "Congratulations." Its voice is as constant as gravity. "Until tomorrow, sir. And best wishes."

I'm standing in a meadow, watching slush melt.

No human wants to come near me.

They won't even look at me, I realize. They are that impressed and that afraid.

The same as me. 8

Today's opponent -- a popular, highly seated individual -- just happens to fall
down a set of stairs in the morning. He claims it's an accident, though a Net security camera saw him pause on the top step, dipping his head a few times as if in practice, then taking an elegant, athletic dive.

Intentionally or not, he gives me another win. By default.

With hours of free time, I decide to borrow on my winnings, purchasing gifts for
friends. I send to Bette an expensive crystal vase made on the moon, and a gross
of rootless roses, and the deed to a hundred hectares of prime black earth. I compose two cards. The first card reads, "Of course I'll see you again." But I don't send it, preferring my second attempt. "I want to see you. I want to see you now."

That card and my gifts are taken on the next hyperplane.

By evening, Bette has given the land to a wildlife foundation, and the Net delivers her bloodless "thanks but no thanks" note.

I'll hate her, I decide.

Soon as I have time. 4

My opponent arrives on schedule, but without her heart.

Certain people in the Tournament hierarchy are furious about yesterday's default. It diminished our audience, and this may not be the record year they'd
anticipated. My opponent has been warned that if she won't compete today, she'll
suffer, the threats as ominous as they were vague. She tells me everything as we
wait to enter identical VR booths. Wearing plastic armor and holding short plastic swords, we'll become generals in Alexander's army, our afternoon to be spent hacking the heads off Persians. Holding her weapon in mock defiance, my opponent tells me, "I'm not afraid of you."

I say nothing.

"Luck is statistics," she claims. "You've been lucky, but doesn't that happen to
one person in a million?"

Yeah, that's what the cliche says.

"And luck doesn't care what happened yesterday." She means to sound profound, but it comes out bitchy. "If yesterday's asshole had shown up, he would have beaten you and beaten you badly."

I touch her breastplate, waiting for her gaze.

Then I ask, "So why are you afraid?"

Eyes widen; her sword drops.

"I'm scared of myself," she admits. "What ?'know' isn't what I 'believe.'"

I believe I'll win, and that's what happens. Her heart isn't in the game, and she loses despite a last minute surge in the evening's sculling. In the end, I take the fourth Thursday, gaining entry into the most exclusive and hallowed realm imaginable.

Save one. The Round of 2

I'm awake, alert.

Despite a night of little sleep, I've never felt so alive.

Just as I'm ready to leave for the morning's contest, a man arrives, his calm voice telling me, "We have her." I hired this man last night. In a rented hyperplane, he and some associates flew home, running an errand for me. "All things considered," he warns me, "she's in good spirits."

Bette is brought to me.

On the wall of my penthouse suite, Elijas Fogg eats his customary breakfast in public view. His entourage -- relatives, staff, friends and lovers -- fill every
table in the restaurant; his manner is calm to the point of icy. I've been studying him. Without looking at Bette, I say, "I'm glad it's him. Do you know what he thinks about ordinary people?"

"Not much, I'd guess."

I grin, turn. "Are you all right?"

She doesn't answer, standing in the middle of the enormous room. Smoldering.

I can't blame her, but there's no time for apologies. "I've got a question for you, Bette."

"So ask it," she says.

"On the first Tuesday, you told me that you had a feeling about this year's Tournament. You implied that it would be special --"

"Avery," she snaps, "I tell you that every year. You just forget it when it doesn't come true. That's all."

I'm watching Fogg chewing on his ritual English muffin topped with grape jam. I
keep hoping for a trace of fear, a hint of weakness. That the man seems perfectly at ease unnerves me. Suddenly my breath quickens, my mouth going just
a little bit dry.

"There's a bigger tournament than yours," Bette adds.

The words strike my ears, but it takes my mind a long moment to string them into
a coherent whole. By then she's saying:

"Think of all the sperm in the world, Avery. All those frantic little boys with
their wriggling little tails. How many actually find their egg? One in a billion? In a trillion?"

Probably less, I suppose.

"We're here, Avery. But a trillion trillion other people are never even born. Never get the chance to exist. See what I mean? Existence dwarfs this bush-league contest of yours, which is just as it should be."

I say nothing, watching Fogg wipe his mouth with a folded napkin.

"Being alive is an enormous honor. Nothing else compares." Bette almost touches
me, then pulls away and tries to laugh. "Don't I sound maudlin? It's probably the stress of being kidnapped, don't you think?"

"I've got to go," I mutter.

She says, "So go."

I make myself stand, then I tell her, "Stay here. Or I'll fly you home, if that's what you want."

"That's what I want."

Fogg rises to his feet, and with a quiet, confessional voice, I admit, "All I want is to beat that bastard."

And Bette says, "I'm sorry," with genuine misery. The 1

It's the most watched Tournament day in history -- ninety-nine percent of all Americans -- and that despite my losing each and every round in turn.

During the final event, wrestling on a sweat-slicked mat, Elijas Fogg works me into a twisted position, then uses a questionable maneuver to break my right arm.

Mouth to my ear, he whispers, "You're just another bastard. Again."

The Net congratulates him, then me.

While an autodoc Sets my bone, reporters swarm around me. What are my thoughts?
What are my plans? With my new wealth I can train with the best coaches, in the
topflight facilities. Of course that's what I'll do, they assume; when I tell them I'm retiring, they're visibly shaken.

"It was a fun run," are my concluding words.

Fogg stands on the other side of the arena, and he's making noise about winning
next year. He as much as promises to become one of the authentic greats in Tournament history.

Can Fogg really repeat?

My audience abandons me for richer fare.

Turning to my autodoc, I ask, "What are the odds that in our universe, in the foreseeable future, I'll be reassembled from the atoms? I mean me. Just as I am

now."

The Net responds in an instant, that liquid smooth voice saying, "I don't know how to accurately calculate such a number."

It's funny. All the time and sweat spent mastering so much, and it never occurred to me that life was such a golden, splendiferous reward. Not once, and
it's funny, and the Net asks if I'm in some distress. . . I'm laughing that hard. . . .