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Piker Press / June 8, 2026 / Short Fiction

Brain Games

By Matias Travieso-Diaz

June 8, 2026 ·  **Short Fiction** · cover story speculative fiction

Up for a challenge?

*Think of it
... that in
your
heart
there is
an answer
to all the
things
and sights
of the
world,
that*



*everything concerns you, that you ought to know as
much about everything
as it is possible for man to know.*

Hermann Hesse, *The Glass Bead Game*

One morning, notices were placed on prominent newspapers and the official publications of three different sports: the North American Go Federation (for Go players); the US Chess Federation (for chess

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players); and the American Contract Bridge League (for bridge players). All notices contained the following message:

EXCITING
NEW INTER-
SPORTS
COMPETITION

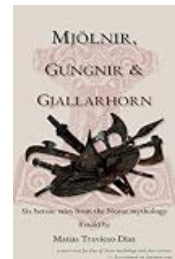
The Inter-Sports Competition Organizing Committee (ISCOC) and Superior Analytical Systems, Ltd. (SAS) are pleased to announce the world's first annual competition among players of the three leading analytical games: Go, chess, and contract bridge. Participation is open to well-qualified practitioners of any of the three sports, with the aim of choosing a "champion" for each sport and an overall multi-sport champion, who will showcase



[The Satchel and Other Terrors](#)



[1859: The Calm Before the Storm](#)



[Mjöltnir, Gungnir & Gjallarhorn:](#)



[The Dragon's Bite and Other Flights of Fancy](#)

their mastery
of all aspects of
calculation,
abstraction,
probability,
and strategic
modeling and
analysis. SAS
will award the
following
prizes: the
winner in each
sport category
will receive a
fifty thousand
dollar (\$50,000)
purse; the
overall winner
will earn one
hundred
thousand
dollars
(\$100,000). The
event will be
held at a private
location and
the
proceedings
will be closed
to the public,
but the
competition
results will be
widely
advertised. For
additional
information
and an
application to
participate in
this
challenging
event contact:
info@iscoc.com

Similar notices were placed in newspapers and Go, chess and bridge organization publications in China, Japan, India, the European Union, and Russia.

* * *

Lucas Jemison read the announcement and was intrigued by what appeared to be a unique opportunity for him. Lucas had been a member of the Manhattan Chess Club until it closed in 2002 and had achieved a lifetime 2330 FIDE rating, which brought him into the FIDE Master category. He believed he could have risen to the International Grand Master level but for having lost or drawn some key matches in which his thinking was clouded by arthritis medication. He was in his mid-sixties and remained active in chess circles, but had just retired from his engineering job with an aerospace company. He was a divorced man without children, so there were no family considerations that could impede his taking part in the contest. And he could use the prize money. Without hesitation, Lucas went on the ISCOC website and downloaded the instructions for participating in the competition.

Reading the details in the two-page application, Lucas was reminded of the adage about female bikinis: what the instructions revealed was tantalizing, but what was left unstated was crucial. Selected participants (approximately one hundred and twenty per sport) would be invited to participate and, upon acceptance of the invitation, would be conveyed to the secluded competition site, which would be inaccessible to anyone not involved in the event. Participants would be housed and catered to by the event staff. Each of the three contests would be held in a separate facility and would be conducted in accordance with current rules for the sport in question. The loser of a match would be eliminated and the winner would advance to the next round. Losing contestants would be returned to their points of origin by the ISCOC staff.

In the second phase of the competition, the winners of the chess, Go and bridge contests would engage in a game whose nature and rules would be revealed following their victory; after time was provided for

each to become familiar with the game, the three winners would compete among themselves until the overall winner emerged. No additional details on the competition were provided, and all entrants would be required to sign a nondisclosure agreement which prohibited revealing any information about the event.

Lucas was initially reluctant to participate in such a mysterious undertaking but, upon reflection, concluded that at his age he had nothing to lose and submitted his application. Over the next month, enough entries were received by the organizers that notices were sent to the selected participants, including Lucas, with additional instructions for a competition start date of June 1.

[“The die is cast,”] reflected Lucas and began travel preparations.

* * *

Travel to the competition site was a challenging adventure in itself: a two-stage plane ride that took him from a hub airport near his home to a small local airport in a low-population Western state, and then a harrowing trip over roadless terrain in a side-by-side ATV. Apart from the driver, there was another passenger in the vehicle: a foreign female with Asian features. Lucas was intrigued by her, but conversation was rendered impossible by the fact that the travelers had to don helmets, goggles, face masks, and other protective gear. They proceeded slowly, in uncomfortable silence, through a breathtaking panorama of distant snow-capped mountains, canyons, rapidly running rivers, and evergreen forests. They arrived at a cleared area where three large circular buildings had been constructed, one at each apex of an equilateral triangle. The driver stopped the vehicle at the entrance of the closest building and, after helping Lucas disembark and offloading his baggage, took off towards the next building to deliver his other passenger.

Lucas was met by a guard who took him on a brief tour of the building. At the center was the competition hall, where five dozen tables had been set up holding

game boards and pieces, digital clocks, score sheets, and high intensity lamps. Overhead cameras conveyed views of the playing area to TV monitors located throughout the public areas and the guest rooms.

Behind the competition hall were a living room area furnished with oversized couches and armchairs in neutral colors; a dining room; kitchens and other staff rooms; and a sprawling wing holding over a hundred bedrooms for players, staff, and visitors. The guard escorted Lucas to one of the bedrooms, deposited his baggage inside the room, and provided these instructions: "The kitchen is always open and breakfast is served starting at 6 am; lunch is available after noon, and dinner starts at 6 pm. You are welcome to go on strolls outside the property, but we discourage long walks because there are wild animals roaming the woods, including wolves and wildcats. If you have questions or need any assistance, just dial zero on your room phone and someone will assist you. The games start on Monday at 9:30 am sharp. Welcome and good luck!"

It was only mid-afternoon on Friday, and Lucas decided to take a nap, walk around the area, and relax as much as possible until the competition started. He had brought two of his favorite treatises on chess openings and printouts of recent games by Carlsen, Nakamura, Erigaisi, and other top players. He also had the most recent novels by Kingsolver and Hillary Mantel, but doubted he would have enough time for these. And, of course, there would be tournament matches on display on his TV. He would not be bored.

* * *

On the opening day of the tournament, the atmosphere in the competition hall was as tense as could be expected, but was overlaid with a sense of oddness as sixty pairs of players squared off against each other, each individual wondering what he or she was doing in this remote place. Lucas, sitting on table 37, scanned the room just before the buzzer sounded to mark the beginning of the matches. He recognized the faces of a few people he had seen in prior contests, but he was not acquainted with any of them.

He drew black and his opponent, a swarthy young man of likely Mediterranean ancestry, advanced his king's pawn two spaces. Lucas responded by launching into his own version of the defense in a Ruy Lopez opening. The game proceeded along expected lines until, on move twenty-nine, his opponent committed a tactical blunder that forced him to resign six moves later. The game was over before noon and Lucas, victorious, shook hands with his defeated opponent and went outdoors for a stroll.

He was walking along a pebbled path that ran along a meandering rivulet when he heard steps behind him. Lucas stopped to meet the other walker's arrival and was pleasantly surprised to recognize his ATV companion: she was a middle-aged woman of delicate features, her oval face framed by a mass of graying hair. She came forward to him and proffered a tiny hand whose long fingernails were painted in a shimmering lilac shade. "Hello" she greeted with a smile in heavily accented English. "My name is Mingxia Zhou, but you can call me Minnie."

Lucas was momentarily speechless but recovered fast: "I am Lucas Jemison and I am here to play chess in the tournament. What is a beautiful woman like you doing in this godforsaken place?" Minnie's smile tightened into a slight frown as she replied: "I am a 9-dan Go player from Taiwan. Three other players and I have the honor of representing our country in this tournament."

Lucas sensed disapproval at his unintentional slight and quickly replied: "I meant no disrespect, Miss Zhou. I am just used to seeing crusty old coots like myself compete in major chess events and beautiful ladies like you are rare. I am sure you are amply qualified to be here and admire your ability to play a game in which I would rank at best a low kyu grade." A short silence ensued, which Lucas hastened to break: "Anyhow, how is the Go competition going?"

A wider smile returned to Minnie's face. "As always, the quality of games in open tournaments like this one varies a lot. I was able to dispatch my opponent, a low-ranking man from Romania, in less than two hundred

moves. I am sure that sooner or later I will run into stiff opposition.”

Lucas sighed. “Same here. I am hardly at the top of the ladder, but expect I will be able to beat more than half of the players who signed up for this contest. Say, since we are both done for the day, would you like to join me for a late lunch, or early dinner? I have never been to Taiwan and would love to learn more about your country.”

Minnie started to voice a polite refusal, but stopped mid-sentence: “I regret that I am busy and need to do some studying But I guess I would have time for a brief meal.”

“Meet you in the dining room in half an hour?” replied Lucas genially.

* * *

The week proceeded with surprising speed. By Friday evening, Lucas had won all his initial five matches and was in the “final four” from which the chess contest winner would be determined. Lucas spent long hours studying the matches of his opponents to familiarize himself with the playing styles and predilections of each. Of the three, a Mexican master by the name of Agustín Recio was the easiest one to categorize: he was an aggressive player who launched relentless, sometimes risky, assaults on his opponents’ kings – he favored wide-open games with dashing attacks with rooks and knights. The second, a bearded Indian named Rajesh Patel, was a methodical player who avoided risks and excelled in long contests, where he would win by slowly building up positional advantages. The third and most enigmatic of the final four chess players was Martin van Houten, a blond, curly haired Dutchman barely out of his teens, whose eclectic style of play seemed to reflect a degree of flexibility. Lucas was a Capablanca-style player: precise, positional, and avoider of unnecessary risks. He felt he would be able to overcome Recio’s bluntness and cut through Patel’s laboriousness; it was van Houten’s unpredictability that gave him most pause.

Lucas was paired with Recio, and defeated the Mexican without great difficulty because Recio's brash attacks were met and rebuffed by Lucas' unassailable positioning. By the thirty-fifth move Recio's attacks cost him a pawn and left his pieces in unmanageable disorder. He resigned and got up quickly, barely saying goodbye and citing his desire to pack up so that the ATV driver could take him to the airport. Meanwhile, van Houten had matched Patel's prolixity and outlasted him in a marathon ninety move match that ended up when Patel found himself in a losing zugzwang position. Night was falling when Patel turned his king on the side and abandoned the competition hall without saying goodbye to anyone.

The final chess match proved anticlimactic. Van Houten could not replicate Lucas' superb positional play, and midway through the match attempted an all-out attack, which Lucas was able to parry without difficulty. Ten moves later, van Houten was forced to sacrifice quality, giving up a rook in exchange for a bishop to forestall a mating threat. Three moves later he resigned.

Lucas felt the need to decompress and proceeded to the living room area, intending to get a glass of chardonnay and watch the sunset through the room's floor to ceiling windows. He waved to an attendant, ready to place an order, when he noticed a figure sitting on one of the room's overstuffed armchairs: it was Minnie Zhou, who he had seen only in passing during the week. He approached her, his face opening into a broad smile, and greeted her a little too loudly: "Miss Zhou! What a pleasant surprise! What are you doing here?!"

Minnie got up and bowed to him, displaying a similarly pleased smile. "I was hoping to find you."

"What do you mean?" asked Lucas, grasping the lady's elbow and guiding her to the nearest sofa, where he motioned her to sit down and then joined her.

She explained: "I won my last match a couple of hours ago and was in the mood for celebrating, but my teammates are all gone, my husband and children are

on the other side of the world, and I do not know anyone else here, so I came into this building hoping to find you, only I was told you had not returned from your match. I decided to stay on and await your arrival, hoping you would come back in triumph and would not be slinking back to your room to pack your bags. But tell me, did you win?”

As the attendant came over to take his order, Lucas responded indirectly to Minnie’s question: “A bottle of champagne, please, and two glasses!”

Neither of them was much of an alcoholic beverage drinker. They laughed, chatted amiably, and drank continuously, and by the time they finished the bottle they were rather tipsy. Minnie had trouble standing up and Lucas gallantly offered to escort her back to her building, but after a few steps it became clear that she would be unable to negotiate the distance. Lucas then offered: “Would you like to come to my room and rest there?” She was too inebriated to reject the potentially lewd offering and weakly nodded in assent. Lucas summoned an attendant and between the two dragged the nearly inert woman to Lucas’ bedroom and deposited her on the bed. Lucas grabbed a pillow and a blanket and lay on the floor.

Within seconds they were both dead to the world and remained so for a long time.

* * *

Lucas was rudely awakened by a persistent ringing of the room phone. With some difficulty, he propped himself off the floor, crawled to his desk, and picked up the receiver. “Hello?” he muttered. A female voice responded: “Mr. Jemison, this is the SAS operator. Your presence is urgently required at the SAS offices on this campus.”

“SAS offices?”

“Yes, our underground offices at this site.”

“I don’t know what you are talking about.”

“We have an underground research center beneath the building where the chess competition was held.”

“Never knew such a thing existed. Anyhow, what do you need me for, and when?”

“We would like to have a meeting with the three winners of the individual competitions to discuss the next phase of the event. Your presence, as the winner of the chess segment, is required, as you will be a participant in the second phase.”

“I see. When do you need me and where am I supposed to go?”

“A hundred feet from the rear entrance to your building is a parking area, and in the back of it is an attendant’s booth. The booth holds the elevator to our underground facility. Take the elevator, which will bring you down to the front desk. Someone will take care of you there.”

“I see. When should I report?”

“It is now past eight. The meeting is scheduled for ten am. Please try to be there on time.”

Lucas cleared his throat. “I will be there.” He was in the process of hanging up when the voice continued, in a slightly embarrassed tone: “And, Mr. Jemison, we understand that Mrs. Mingxia Zhou is currently visiting you?”

Lucas hesitated for a moment but then, his mind starting to clear, he realized that denial would be futile. “Yes, she is here.”

“As the winner of the Go segment, she needs to come to the meeting as well. Please let her know.”

Lucas sighed. “I will.”

* * *

The next few minutes were among the most uncomfortable periods in Lucas’ life. He walked over to the bed and attempted to wake Minnie up from her deep slumber. He tried summoning her by calling her name, first in a whisper, then louder, and when she failed to react, he shook her shoulder gently, whispering her name into Minnie’s ear. Finally, she

shivered violently and opened her eyes with a start:
“What? Where am I?”

“In my room, Minnie. We both had too much to drink and I had to bring you here so you could get some rest.”

“In your room?” Her response was accompanied by a shudder.

“You could not walk back to your building. I am sorry, but do not fear. Nothing happened.”

“Ruined, I am ruined!” she protested.

“Nothing of that sort. See, we are still fully dressed from yesterday.”

“What will my husband say when word of this gets out?!” She started to cry.

“Minnie, nobody will find out, I promise. But listen, you need to go to your room, freshen up, and meet me here in an hour or so. We have an important meeting to attend.”

Minnie sat up and listened as Lucas related the call he had received. Minnie’s reaction took him by surprise: “So, we will be playing against each other next!”

Lucas had not fully considered what was coming up. “I guess so” he acknowledged.

“Here I am, sleeping with the enemy! Disgraced twice over!” wailed Minnie as she walked out of the room, slamming the door.

Left alone, Lucas felt a heavy dose of guilt. He was responsible for placing a very nice lady he really liked in an embarrassing position, and had no way to rectify the situation. He would have to do something soon to make up for his misdeed.

* * *

The SAS underground research facility was a vast array of offices, laboratories, computer rooms the size of football fields holding thousands of processing units, and manufacturing units where prototype

androids were built. Lucas and Minnie only got to see a small portion of the complex, for upon arrival they were escorted to a conference room that was already occupied by four people: a standing tall man with graying hair and matching goatee, dressed in a business suit; three younger men, also standing, wearing jeans and lab coats; and, seated, a thin, sandy-haired man in his forties, wearing a sport coat and dress pants.

The businessman greeted the newcomers, motioned them to sit next to the sandy haired man, and began: “Gentlemen and lady, I am Rupert Mayhew, Vice President for Product Development of Superior Analytical Systems, and the manager of this research center. I want to welcome the three of you to this meeting. Lucas Jemison and Mingxia Zhou, you know each other; in case you have not met him already, sitting next to you is Andrew Norton, from Aberdeen, Scotland. He is the winner of the contract bridge competition.

“Each of you represents an aspect of the analytical expertise that we at SAS endeavor to incorporate into our products. Chess, as embodied by Mr. Jemison, requires deep levels of calculation, positional judgment, and long-term planning under uncertain scenarios; Go, mastered by Mrs. Zhou, requires a search space so vast that pure calculation fails, forcing advanced abstraction ability; capacity to draw probabilistic inferences based on incomplete information, as required in bridge, is the area of Mr. Norton’s expertise. Ideally, we would like to find a player who combines these diverse talents in a single individual: a prime analytical agent, and we expect one of you is the one that best combines all three talents.

“To discern which of you three comes closest to the ideal, we have devised a game, based on a classical board game scenario, which you will learn to play. Each of you will be individually tutored by one of my assistants, these gentlemen here. Once he determines, and you concur, that you are sufficiently trained, you will have an opportunity to play the game, and your score will become your official entry. We will meet

here again to receive and compare the official scores and declare the overall winner. Good luck to each of you! Any questions?”

Andrew Norton raised the first of several questions: “What game are we going to play?”

“You will be playing a refined and updated version of a deduction game that forces the player to reconstruct a long story from several sets of disconnected facts.”

They moved Lucas, Minnie, and Andrew to separate rooms in the underground research facility, some distance apart from each other to preclude exchanges of information that could compromise the results of the experiment. Lucas noticed that his new quarters were larger and better furnished than his previous abode, and that this room had a work table on which sat a laptop, was windowless, and had walls of some material that caused sound to resonate strangely, imparting a claustrophobic feeling that made him wish to finish the competition as soon as possible and get out to go home.

He was just done unpacking when someone knocked on his door. It was one of Mayhew’s assistants, a timid man in his twenties who introduced himself as Arnie. He explained: “I am your designated tutor, and am here to walk you through the game you will be playing, a copy of which has been loaded into your laptop. The filename is “Detective” but you should only load it when you are ready to play the game itself. Another file, named “Practice” contains a copy of a similar game we will use to train you. Let’s give it a run.” He came and sat next to Lucas at the work table that held the laptop, turned the machine on, and loaded the Practice game.

Arnie then explained: “Both the practice game and the real one are based on the same concept. Each game consists of a series of chapters, each chapter opening with a screen labelled “main,” depicting the scene of a crime. You start off at the main screen and click on characters, objects, or documents to collect the names of items of interest, such as individual names, places,

actions, and so on, and enter the names of the collected items at the bottom of the main screen. You can go to any other rooms that are adjacent to the crime scene, and collect additional items of interest. When you are done, you click on the square that reads “analysis” and you are presented with a series of partially completed statements, which you must complete by filling in blank slots to piece together a narrative of what occurred. You will be notified when all words in that segment are entirely correct, in which case the segment will be locked in. The program keeps track of erroneous entries, to flag instances of filling a paragraph by trial and error. Each chapter in the game is completed when all blank spots are filled and what happened in the chapter is described correctly.”

“Seems straightforward” commented Lucas. “What is the trick?”

“There is no trick. The game unfolds as a sequence of interconnected, successive cases; solving one case helps unlock the next, with each case adding new context to a larger narrative. You win the game by solving all cases and fully understanding the overarching story.”

“But, wait. There will be three of us playing the game individually. Who among us wins?”

Arnie assumed a professorial pose. “We have developed a set of criteria for evaluating a player’s performance: (1) whether the player is able to complete all cases within the maximum time allowed, or only a portion of them; (2) the average time for completion per case; (3) the error rate, that is, the frequency of submittals of incorrect answers; (4) the dependence on the hints that sometimes are provided; (5) the logical coherence of the answers provided, and (6) the ability to explain each sequence of events in terms of cause and effect.”

“How much time are we allowed to complete a game?”

“You can pause the game to eat, rest, or sleep, but the maximum total time, however many days you spent playing the game, is thirty hours of play time.”

“When can I start the actual game?”

“Any time you want, but we should play at least a couple of practice games so you understand more fully all the concepts.”

Lucas frowned. “I want to get out of here as soon as I can. How about playing a couple of practice games today and letting me start the real one tomorrow?”

“Whatever you say,” replied Arnie.

“Let’s go then.”

* * *

The training session went well. Lucas was a fast learner and some aspects of the game fit well with his ability to think ahead and consider thoroughly all aspects of a situation; others (like driving probable inferences from available data) required exercising seldom used aspects of his mind. Arnie was a good teacher but seemed somewhat reluctant to let his student advance to the real game, and insisted on repeating aspects of the practice game over and again until, as the hour drew late, Lucas declared himself ready and dismissed the young man until the following day.

Tuesday morning after breakfast Lucas called Arnie and declared himself ready to start playing the game. Arnie showed up in Lucas’ room shortly thereafter carrying a headset and what appeared to be a blood pressure monitor. He explained: “You must wear the headset while playing the game. The computer will record your moves but we are interested in recording your brain activity as you conduct your analyses. The health monitor will keep track of your bodily functions.”

“Is all of this necessary?” challenged Lucas.

“Yes. We want to know not only how you play the game but also the level of strain the exercise imposes on your body.”

Lucas shrugged his shoulders and, raising no more objections, allowed himself to be wired and

monitored.

He began playing the game before noon on Tuesday and completed the game Thursday evening, having played a total of 26.2 hours. This came as no surprise to him, for he was a slow, methodical thinker and tried to analyze matters two or three times before taking every step. He had solved all ten cases in the game, needing to make only four corrections to his submissions, and was able to solve the problems without making use of any hints. He entered each solution in a single consistent pass, and was able to provide a correct explanation of the sequence of events in each case. His score was 92.6 out of a possible maximum of 100.

“Did I win?” “You did very well, but the game is still ongoing. Norton is also finished, but Mrs. Zhou is still playing. We need to wait and see” replied Arnie.

* * *

Minnie managed to complete all chapters in 29.8 hours, just short of the maximum time allowed. She had needed to make no corrections to her submissions, and had been able to solve the problems without making use of any hints. She had entered each solution in a single consistent pass, but – perhaps due to language limitations – had difficulty providing coherent explanations of the sequence of events in each case. Her total score was 91.0.

Norton had finished the game in only 16.6 hours, but his speedy performance was marred by frequent errors that required correction and twice had needed to resort to the hints provided. His overall score was 84.8.

“What happens now?” asked Lucas to his trainer.

Arnie was almost in tears as he responded: “There will be an award banquet in which you will be toasted as the winner. And ... that will be the end.” His tone was inexplicably lugubrious.

Lucas reacted with surprise. “What do you mean by ‘the end’? Is something bad going to happen?”

Arnie began weeping. “I can’t take this charade anymore. I did not sign up to be part of it!”

Lucas shook the young man’s shoulder. “Arnie, there is something you are not telling me and from the sound of it, it’s bad. What’s going on?”

“SAS is trying to overcome the limitations of the AI systems it manufactures, in which machines perform brute force statistical analyses of mountains of data and provide highly probable solutions to the questions posed. They want to capture the analytical powers of the human brain and somehow transfer them to the AI machines so they can learn to think independently rather than just manipulate data. The first step in doing this is understanding better how the human brain works.”

“What does that have to do with this competition?”

“This competition was devised to examine the main aspects of human intelligence: analytical calculations, pattern recognition, risk assessment, ability to weigh probabilities, development of strategies. Each of the games SAS selected exemplifies one or more of these characteristics. The games are intended to collect data on how the human brain does this; later, SAS intends to find ways to transfer these capabilities to machines so that the next generation AIs will be intelligent in the way humans are.”

Lucas stiffened at the explanation. “What do you mean by collecting data?”

“Human analytical ability isn’t localized to a single, discrete spot in the brain. It is spread among a network of locations, with one area playing a particularly central role: the prefrontal cortex, located in the front part of the frontal lobes of the brain. There are also the parietal lobes, which handle pattern recognition and spatial relationships, and the temporal lobes, that store and process knowledge and language. Data are transmitted across these sections of the brain by unique types of brain cells, known as pyramidal neurons, which form connections with each other and transmit electrical impulses back and forth. The data that SAS seeks to collect from the

competition participants are the mechanisms by which these neurons transmit, receive, and modify information from one to another in the form of electrical impulses.”

“And how does SAS go about collecting data from those neurons off the brains of the players?” With each question, Lucas’ voice was becoming louder and his tone harsher.

“Our surgeons perform delicate operations on the brains of the players to extract representative samples containing chains of neurons and bring them to the labs to perform analyses and experiments using them.”

“Do you mean SAS performs surgery on the players and steals portions of their brains?!” Lucas was now nearly shouting.

“Well, they try to keep the operations as limited in extent as possible. But, of course, there are risks and potential fatalities...”

“And how do they pick which human guinea pigs to use for their experiments?”

“They try to select the most suitable individuals. That is why they have this contest, so they can pick the best subjects, that is, the ones who do best in the competition.”

“How many people have you performed these operations on?”

“We started picking once the quarterfinals were reached. Eight per sport, twenty-one total so far.”

“And now they are down to us, the three winners, is that it?!” screamed Lucas.

“Yes!” acknowledged Arnie.

“And, since we were the top performers, they will take numerous samples from our brains?”

“Probably so.”

“So, they are planning on doing all of us in?! How do they think they can get away with mass murder?!”

“They have spent many millions on this project, including paying hefty bribes to the authorities in this State. There will not be a serious investigation if any concerns are raised. Plus, they screened the applications and selected only people like you, who did not appear to have a family that would be likely to ask questions.”

“But Minnie has a husband and children in Taiwan!”

“Hers is a special case. The four Taiwanese applied as a team, and the other three members were unattached so SAS figured that the chances of Minnie becoming a finalist were low enough to let her participate.”

There was a silence, as Lucas pondered what his next steps were. Finally, he asked: “What are they going to do to us?”

“At the banquet, they will serve glasses of cordial to make a toast. Your drinks will be spiked. You will pass out and wake up, if you do, in the recovery area downstairs.”

“We have to get away! Can you take us out?”

“My ATV is parked outside. I can drive you to the airport, and hope they don’t catch us before we can get on a plane.”

“Can you take all three of us?”

“My ATV is small and has room only for me as the driver and one passenger. I can take just you.”

There was a very long pause. Self-preservation and logic demanded that he leave and let the others be sacrificed. However, he was an old man without ties and Minnie was a nice lady he had wronged and had a family.

Finally, Lucas issued an order: “Arnie, you must find a way to alert Minnie and leave with her before the banquet. Go back to town and don’t come back!”

“How about you?”