

The Tournament

Morning. A ray of sunlight hits me scorching hot. Through the decubitus ocular mask, squashed against my glued eyelids, I perceive a reddish wavering, a distant blown out candle. I know the way to the bathroom and I don't need sound indicators. The light comes on as I go in, but I do not see it. I place the mask in the sterilizer, and cleanse my eyelids with a solvent based solution. In front of the mirror I try to unclench them. But I can only squint for a moment through the bars of my filamentous prison, and I see my two burned eyes, languid, back from the work for Ordesmond. A stitch on the left makes me tighten them. I wash and comb my hair by heart. I get dressed, put on the titanium glasses and enter the declimatization chamber. The door shuts behind me with a snap, and the one in front of me opens, on the world. Immersed in the dark I am engulfed by the searing heat.

Today the Tournament final begins: a DEUS (Digital Experience United Societies) delegate came to take me and he's waiting for me downstairs.

"Good day, Dominic. Over here, please - I blindly advance towards the voice, because I want to spare my eyes.

I breathe: the air is a warm and recycled vortex that dusts me inside. Its smell of encrusted propellers and burnt plastic brings back in me distant images of the Earth, when my gaze still meandered among the burnt bodies, laid on mineral gardens, and measured the vertiginous height of the anti-radiation monoliths, sheltering under the screened mushroom-shaped pavilions. After a step I am drenched in sweat, and I can feel the fire sky that hangs over the city. I rush inside the air-conditioned vehicle. We go through Spring boulevard and Tulip alley that I remember adorned with statues of flowers. In town there is a new epidemic: screams, hands banging against the door, a smell of rot seeps inside the cockpit.

"Did Matiasovic make it?" At the preselections I had visited his New Atlantis. What an incredible feeling to swim with palmate hands, in the cool, through underwater temples and giant seashells.

The delegate seemed regretful: "Unfortunately he has become blind. Since then is heard no more."

We arrive at the Home Garden, location of the Tournament. In the declimatization chamber I disrobe and a water jet tones me and washes away the sweat. Then I wear the ergonomic suit. I will never get out. The delegate gently holds my hand and leads me to the building: "This is the room that we have prepared according to your wishes: 200 year old Nepalese forest air after the rain, bed tilted at 5 degrees, idroplast pillow. Now we go out. The left leads you to the Genesis hall. The second cabin on the right is yours. Anti-reflective walls, perfect lighting, and a giant active matrix screen. The dining room is over here. This is your chair. Like all of them, it has electro stimulators to keep the muscles in motion. Your breakfast is ready: carrot juice - a cold wrapping touches my left hand - bran and blueberry capsules - my right hand is on top of a pillbox.

"I present to you your colleagues: Yoko, Spiros, and Bill. This is Dominic. For any need I am at your disposal. You know the rules. I wish you good work."

We are the four finalists for the World Tournament announced by DEUS at its first and only edition. Its purpose is to create a new home for mankind. In fact, the world is by now uninhabitable. Any form of vegetable life is dry or forced into artificial caskets, the ocean has become a boiling mire, and the only surviving animal is the Kiutcke, that lives 300 feet underground, hiding in the stalagmite forests to throw off the last hunters. Twenty billion people live on earth. They are on the brink of extinction, exasperated, prey to hunger and disease; and they

besiege the city with lamentations and their rotting corpses, asking for a new life to DEUS, the masters of the world. Virtual buildings are today the only hope for mankind. For this we specialists are privileged: if we get sick we are treated in the best hospitals, our diet is varied and sometimes we even do eat meat. But we are, unfortunately, imperfect creators: you can't live in our worlds; only DEUS has the appropriate technology to turn them into reality. And as soon as the tournament will have as winner the most accurate, comfortable, and functional of all possible worlds, there will be a mass transfer.

I started at the age of 12. It's a devastating job. Polygon by polygon, gene by gene, quark by quark. In four dimensions, at 16384x16384. That's why all we architects of virtual worlds are almost blind. We only use our eyes to work, as for the rest we keep them closed and bandaged. Eye drops, vitamins, cortisone injections. We grope around to our computers, and there, just there, we unwrap the eyelids as the shell of a crystal.

I take one blueberry pill, I let it slip and I have to look for it feeling around the table. I bump into a hand, soft and smooth.

"Hello - thin female voice, the sound of pearls falling into a glass bottle - I'm Yoko. Sorry, but didn't you win the Metropolis prize last year?"

"So we have a celebrity! - Male voice - my pleasure, I am Spiros."

He indicates the position of his hand banging it on the table. I look for him: I get an energetic handshake. Then Yoko's adds to it, soft, with a scent of violet.

"Yoko, you are the tall and green-haired Korean? I remember a few images from the preselections ..."

"I'm not. I am Japanese, short. My hair ... I do not remember how I have dyed it the last time anymore. I'll tell you when I look in the mirror."

"How is your world?"

"I designed an egalitarian society, where everyone has the same opportunities. I'm working on it for 10 years now, it's a great bet, the only way to ensure that life has a meaning. Certainly it's terribly difficult to distribute resources without creating privileges. It is much easier to make unjust worlds. Like Spiros', so to speak!"

"Wha ..."

"Wait - I interrupt him - let me remember. Tall, beard, slightly receding hairline."

"Congratulations: photographic memory."

"You're the one from the Ancient Greece? I remember a few screenshots."

"Now it's called Olympus. I added ..."

"Another bit of injustice - intercalated Yoko, rather sharply."

"Better injustice than squalor. It's better suicide rather than dying of boredom in your world."

It was obvious that they couldn't stand each other. Soon after, ignoring her, Spiros turned to me:

"Mine is funny, on the contrary: the gods are wandering in it, in the flesh. You can meet Diana hunting, drink with Bacchus. If you're lucky you can become a friend of Apollo ... And how is it yours?"

I was proud of my world: "It is something never seen before. Hard to describe ... There are different beings, at different evolution levels. You go from primitive forms, such as the tolpo that has a hard time crawling, to super-dynamic forms, such as the tigullo that has no motion constraints: it runs, jumps, swims and flies - I smiled inside me: it was the place that I had reserved for myself. But the extraordinary novelty of Ordesmond is that it is a world in becoming: every being mutates, and it gains or loses the ability to move, depending on the degree of his mind's development. With more or less effort, to make myself clear, taking into account the starting point.

What you are inside you become outside. For example if you lie, or deceive yourself or someone else, you regress."

"So if I understand correctly, I would fly like a hawk - said Spiros - while Yoko, for instance, would barely crawl."

One of us had not spoken yet. I turned my head towards the area that had not emitted sounds but just a slow and labored breath, some rubbing and chewed pills:

"And what about you? Bill, right? - I had glimpsed him at the preselections: fragile, diaphanous as if to shield himself he had lived inside a protecting suit - What world did you make?"

"Cities in space, three-dimensional. You live in orbit assisted by androids."

I had seen hundreds similar worlds, he had no chance of winning in my opinion. People had had enough of science fiction.

Bill continued: "If I manage to finish it ... My eyes are killing me." I sympathized. I was suffering as well. Not even the Virsus, a galenic preparation of my own invention, gave me relief anymore. The first times it was enough a drop and I was able to work 16 hours straight without any pain. As a matter of fact, I was at the computer like an eagle aiming its prey. Now not even with 20 drops I was able to achieve that effect.

I'm inside my cabin, the only part of the Home Garden that I will ever see. The electro stimulators are functioning, the giant screen is on: everything is stretched towards the moment when I'll open my eyes to work. But I remain motionless for a moment to ponder my situation, and I feel overwhelmed by anguish.

It was just as I feared. My opponents were wasting an exceptional occasion. They were building stereotyped worlds, grounded in reality, slaves of history. They brought with them the usual heavy and weak body, chained to the ground, prey to the whims of biology. Where were they when there was no shelter even at night, when the moon bombarded by the sun rays unleashed its heat against the earth? Had they not seen fish crawling like worms out from the dried out oceans? Had they not searched for the streets hidden under the corpses? Now that we finally had the chance to start all over again, with new bodies, new laws, they confined themselves to merely insignificant changes. In a few years everything would be like it is now.

I am certainly the most skilled in virtual constructions. Some of my cities have won prestigious awards. But this time my life is at stake. If Ordesmond wins a dream life is waiting for me: I will be a tigullo, virtually unlimited mutation capacity. I will fly high up in the mountains and I will dive into the depths, I will be able to assume any form at the speed of an arrow. But if the winner was going to be a different world? What would it be the end of me?

In theory, according to the tournament rules, there can't be exchanged favors between the contestants, in reality it's quite different: the DEUS cannot control everything. I had to take the opportunity to dig a comfortable recess also in the others' worlds. Who worried me the most was Yoko, a Thomas More fanatic. I could hear her serious voice, enliven with authoritative sweetness, speaking of the need to take care in turns of the agriculture, and it was as if I saw myself already hoe in hand. Even her working methods were inflexible: methodical, straight, with the blindfold lifted to rid the face of the hair. When I get up, she's already at the computer. She stops at 14:00 for lunch break. Resuming is at 14:30. At 22:00 she goes to bed, even if just one bit is left to finish one of her cities. One of her horrifying cities that she showed me with pride: rigorous and wide, all the same, with straightforward and flat roads that intersect. Square towns, no downtown and no suburbs, windows that frame an equal portion of green and blue, the same particle of sun. If it was her world to win I'll ask myself what was the point to spare my eyes just to see the same view from every window. I had to convince her to do

something for me, but with caution: she was just the kind of person that holds its ground. During lunch break, while enjoying the rare white Kiutcke meat, I jokingly approached her:

"Can you build for me a house with a northern exposure, Yoko? Can I be exonerated from growing potatoes?"

She did not answer, she went to get the eye drops and then returned to work. I had never been in Bill's world. I wanted to examine it, but he said it was not worth the effort: "I am far behind. I guarantee that you'll want to spare your eyes for Ordesmond. Or you will have them like mine's that they seem glued with tar in the morning. It takes me an hour of lavations to be able to open them." It was true, Bill was always the last to get into the cabin.

Spiros, instead, he invited me himself, perhaps because he had an admiration for me. How can I forget that walk in Ancient Greece! Under a blue sky blazing with mermaids and mermen I swam in the sea rendered calm by Zeus to allow the birth of the twins conceived with Latona. I rode a centaur among golden vines and green olives, I rested in the majestic shade of a beech, drank frothy milk from a white heifer. I visited Olympus, home of the gods. Spiros was making them one by one, Zeus the caster of lighting bolts, Hermes with winged feet. He reserved for himself the place of Apollo, the zither-player. I would have loved to be a god. But it was not the kind of favor that he could do for me: it would have required at least four months of work. I then asked him to find me a place where I could live without doing anything, revered and respected. He proposed me to be a philosopher, and I accepted. But what could I give him in return?

"You could be one squittel."

"What do you mean?"

"Try."

He stayed two whole minutes inside Ordesmond. When he came out I keeked to understand his reaction. A thick drool was dripping from his conjunctival sacs, but his mouth was contracted in an ecstatic grin, and yes, he accepted.

"We understand each other - commented Spiros - nothing with Yoko instead. If I knew her password I swear that I would unleash to her a proper earthquake at the cost of ruining my eyes."

I sleep on my back, motionless. Because otherwise the blindfold slips away, and my eyes must take advantage of every drop of the ophthalmic cocktail. But tonight I cannot stay put. I'm thinking over about Spiros' world. The silk beaches, Olympus that hides his top among the clouds. Will ever Ordesmond be able to compete?

I'm hungry, and I head towards the freezer gropingly. Turning a corner, I bump into something:

"Who are you?"

"I'm Bill, are you awake too?"

"I cannot sleep, I'm thinking about Spiros' world."

"Is it nice?"

"It's divine. In my opinion it could win, and it would be a disaster. See, it has the usual things: men, women, animals. Gravity, photosynthesis, evaporation. Dust, the sky, the sea, the sun How long do you think it would last? In six months' time we are in the same situation we are now. Ordesmond is different. If I win, nothing will be like before. Do you want to see it?"

"I'd like ... but ..."

"The eyes right? If they improve ..." The last sentence came out fake, and I heard his breathing becoming labored.

He raised a hand and he put it on my shoulder: "I hope to see it soon. Now I go back to bed, but before, out of curiosity, why did you call it Ordesmond?"

"From Baudelaire - I was telegraphic, he would not understand anyway."

"Ah, Ordesmond: hors de ce monde! I love that poem." He seemed to be smiling, and it was the first smile that I felt since when I was in the Home Garden. "I was inspired by Leibniz - continued - but I think I'll call it a day, I can't keep up watching. I don't want to end up like Matiasевич." His voice was like the muffled gasp of the Kiutcke when he gets dragged to the surface.

"Do you want to try my eye drops? They're pretty good - I took the Virsus from my pocket - put two drops as soon as you wake up tomorrow."

The next morning I got up early to create for Bill a place in my world, although he didn't ask for it. I transformed him into it a triottolo, a highly evolved life form, of joyous nature, and with great freedom of movement: it could roll up, twirl, and above all, fly. After a few minutes I heard from the ticking of Yoko's steps that she was heading to her cabin. We were alone: now or never.

"Yoko, have you thought of a place for me, then?"

Her voice was standoffish: "You don't need it. In my world there is room for everybody."

"In that case you'll be a tolpo in my world- and I started to randomly drum with my fingertips on the keyboard - A myopic first generation pedalopodus."

"Hey! No jokes."

But I wasn't joking, and she understood. I remained silent, forcing her to find me just according to her sound recollection. After a collision with the other cabins she knocked on mine. A smell of violets spread around.

"Do you actually realize it or not that mine is a just world? I cannot do favors. I said no to Spiros as well. Furthermore, did you ask Bill? You don't even know his world, but you claim a place in mine."

"Do you want to take a look at how it feels to be a tolpo?"

She whispered: "Okay, okay: you win."

And so I became a *syphogrant*, involved only in study and research. Even in her perfect world the division of labor and hierarchy existed. Satisfied, I worked very well until lunch.

I found Bill already at the table: "How are your eyes?"

"A bit better, thank you, but they still burn. This afternoon I'll let them rest." I remained amazed: it wasn't possible that, having used the Virsus for the first time, he did not scream with happiness. But there was no time anymore for thoughts that were not finishing Ordesmond.

They were the last days, soon DEUS would have chosen the winner. We were all utterly exhausted and the final details were added with difficulty after increasingly longer pauses. The eyes didn't react anymore to the relief of the eye drops: my eyelids were like sandpaper, and I was bleeding at every movement of the pupils. Errors after errors. Yoko had yet to finish the rivers and she was having a hard time building the purifiers. Spiros had to reluctantly give up Diana the huntress. I heard them arguing, while Bill's cabin was silent: was he no longer working?

Ordesmond was practically finished, and I took a last inspection tour. The most advanced forms that I had created filled the space with joyous flights, always new patterns. Thrilling. But then I noticed that one was not flying properly. It was disharmonic, and it ended up falling to the ground. From there he tried several times to take flight again, but it only managed to limp pathetically. When I recognized it a flash of light and terror crossed my mind: it was the triottolo in which a few days before I had turned Bill into, and it was regressing.

It was as if all of a sudden a door was opening, and this door was leading to other doors that I had never went through. Why Bill had never shown me his world? Why The Virsus had no effect? I left Ordesmond, and rushed into the room where Bill was sleeping. I tore his blindfold off and

with my fingers I separated his eyelids. With an unprecedented effort I put his eyes into focus.

He had eyes like mine when I was a child, two transparent blue globes floating in snow white eye sockets, shaded by dry and thick lashes. Only those who had never worked with worlds could have similar pupils.

I grabbed him by his neck: he hissed the password.

I limped toward the cabins. The eye pain was so intense that it seemed to damage the other senses as well. I lost my balance and started to crawl, while the irate voices of Yoko and Spiros, which were unaware, bartering favors, guided me through the depths of my nightmare. I accessed Bill's computer.

At first I didn't want to believe it, so I opened my eyes widely like before an apparition. Then for hours I explored his world, I breathlessly raced on its gardens, through the enormous valleys, I climbed the monoliths and scanned the horizon, I filled every pulmonary alveolus with the swirling air. I looked for too long: when I came out (but then again did I come out?) the effort had made me completely blind. But it is no longer important.

I ran away from the Home Garden. No, no more tournament, no more life. Except the one with the Kiutckes in their underground tunnels, where gravity is so strong that you can only roll. The darkness so utter that blindness is a gift. Now even I emit their wheeze, even I run from the last hunters disguising myself in the stalagmite forests. And I whisper with Matiasovic the wonders of our worlds that will never be created. He tells me about underwater landscapes, about paths carved into the corals, leading to shimmering underwater squares, where currents give life to a golden algae shower. And I tell him about the extraordinary metamorphosis of Ordesmond, where nothing is and everything is becoming, and everyone, free from the tyranny of the flesh, endlessly continues to be reborn in new forms.

Never I will head to the surface again. I resolved this as I accessed Bill's computer, as I cast my last glance at the world that won the Tournament, at the perfect copy of reality.