

## Episode 10

### The Grinding Halt

It is not exactly chaos in the Boom Boom Room at the Trump Codswallop Hotel.

The seeding of paid Free Willy protesters has been joined by an ad hoc assembly of sympathizers among the assembled debaters, adding up to about twenty or so. They are standing inside the room, not necessarily prohibiting anyone's movement, but not exactly enabling it either. They had chanted for a few minutes but quickly grew tired of that, and now most of their energy is expended glaring at the non-sympathizers as they make their way to the registration desk.

Dearth Hannan is not in the room. Ditzier Bilgefont is now sitting front and center, explaining to registrants as they dribble in that things have been temporarily suspended. On the advice of counsel—that is, one of SUCKY's lawyers—he is keeping things necessarily vague. No, he can't really explain why. No, he can't say when things will start up again. Why don't you just check into your room and hang out? We'll send out an email blast when we know anything.

Haley Millstein and Jazz Voleski are hanging out on the first floor in the main lounge with about half a dozen other forensicians Hamlet P. Buglaroni, Jr., vaguely recognizes. He sits down on the arm of Jazz's chair. "They're not allowing anyone to register," he says.

"Why not?" Jazz asks.

Buglaroni shrugs. "Beats me. The Free Willy people are out in full force. I think Willy himself is with them."

Haley raises the phone in her hand. She's been texting. "That's the word," she says. "The Free Willys have shut down the tournament."

"How?"

"Lulu Luce says there was a court order."

"Can they do that?" Buglaroni asks.

"You tell us," Haley replies. "If they let Willy in, the injunction will be lifted. Or at least, that's the word."

“They won’t let him in,” Jazz says. “If they let him in, they have to let in all the BLSHITs and the Policy superteams.” Superteams comprise pairs where the two partners are not from the same school, but are from the same school district. Folks who can, who are bent on taking COC tin at all costs, mix and match among the schools to create the strongest entries.

Buglaroni shakes his head. “It’s a mess,” he says. “I didn’t come all the way down here to get shut out.”

“Nobody did,” Haley agrees with more than a little vehemence, since she’s the one doing the actual debating.

“I guess all we can do is wait,” Buglaroni says.

“It would seem as if,” Jazz agrees.

Buglaroni lets out a long sigh. If he spends all of Nighten Day’s money on a tournament that turns out to be a bust, there isn’t going to be a lot of money available the next time he asks for it. He wonders if he cares one way or the other about Willy Hubjut and the Right to Debate. Not really. But at the same time, he can’t do anything about it one way or another, so what does it matter?

He looks around the room and finds an empty seat. He might as well read a book while he’s waiting. He’s got nothing better to do.

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“What do you mean, you can’t explain?” Max Klarr asks. He is quickly slipping into Klarring mode.

Ditzier Bilgefont shakes his head and says nothing.

“Well, when *will* we be able to register?”

“I really can’t say,” Bilgefont replies. “Why don’t you check into your rooms? We’ll send out an email blast as soon as we have news.”

“We’ve already checked into our rooms. I want to register now so that we can go out and get an early dinner so that we can prep tonight.”

Ditzier shakes his head again. “Sorry about that. But there’s nothing else I can say.”

Klarr looks like *he* wants to say something else, but it is clear that nothing is going to happen no matter how upset he gets. He turns around and begins heading out of the Boom Boom Room, when he sees one of his Affluent Geek debaters talking to someone

carrying a Free Willy sign. Klass grabs his Aff Geek debater at the elbow and pulls him away, almost dragging him out of the room.

Out in the hallway, Klarr stops. He is still grasping his debater's arm. Tight.

"If I see you even thinking about talking to those people again, you are off the team." His voice is hard and cold but his volume is low, which makes him sound even more dangerous. "Understand?"

The debater nods.

Klarr lets go.

"Get up to your room. Get everybody there. I'll be up in five, and we'll start doing some research until things get moving here again. Get it?"

"Got it," the debater manages to say.

"Good."

The debater scurries off, and Klarr stands there, fuming. He has never been a friend of Free Willy and the RTD types. And now he is even less of a friend. First he loses Alice B. Alice, and now he might even lose the tournament?

*Mes étoiles!*

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Tab Ularasa opens an eye. What he sees looks suspiciously like a ceiling, which is his first hint that he is probably lying on his back. He is not uncomfortable; whatever he is lying on is relatively soft. He moves his hands a bit. Definitely soft. Probably a mattress. Good. The last thing he wants to do is wake up on a floor somewhere. Or worse, on a street somewhere. He has a reputation to maintain.

He opens the other eye and confirms his original conclusion. He is fully clothed and lying on top of a bed. A clock radio on a bed table says 4:20. The sun is out, so presumably it's the afternoon, and probably the same afternoon as the one he vaguely remembers from the Codswallop Pseudo-International Airport. Only a couple of hours have passed. He hasn't missed the tournament.

Whew. That would not have been a good thing. Not no how.

As a practiced hand in such things, he manages to rouse himself enough to get up and head into the bathroom. A bit of this and a bit of that, including a few glasses of water and a good face wash, and he feels much like his usual self. It takes more than a few crappy Bloody Marys to send Tab Ularasa into a corner for long.

He decides, not for the first time in his career, that he needs a drink. He regards himself in the mirror and sees nothing more amiss than usual. He finds a key card on the bureau, and now almost clearly remembers being escorted to his room by a very little man who vaguely resembled a garden gnome. Sure enough, Ularasa's bag and backpack are lined up next to the bureau.

It's Combat of Conquerors weekend. Right. Definitely time for a drink.

Grabbing his key card and patting his wallet pocket to make sure that the necessary documents are in place, and then patting his breast pocket to confirm that his iPhone is also at hand, he makes his way out the door and down the hall to the elevators. A placard in the elevator has an inviting picture of something called the Trump Ex-Wife Cocktail Lounge on the top floor, and Ularasa selects that button for his destination.

When the door opens, Ularasa is directly facing a fairly active lounge, much as promised on the placard. The room is high up over Codswallop, with a commanding view of the little city. Thirty or forty people are scattered around, and Ularasa recognizes a few of them. These are his people: debate folk, the ones who manage to slip away from their adolescent charges to grab the odd extra fortification. There are some empty places at the bar, and Ularasa heads straight to a stool next to a woman dressed quite unlike the average debate person, in a clingy light blue dress that, even from a distance, makes a definitive statement of availability. On the woman's other side is short man—is this entire tournament going to comprise short people?—and he is leaning into the woman discussing something most certainly not debate-related.

Ularasa settles in and orders a single malt from the obliging bartender. At which point the man on the other side of the woman in blue leans across and says, "I didn't know they allowed tattie walkers in this establishment."

Ularasa is startled, then looks over. The man is none other than Dude Firmguns, the notorious insurance claims adjuster, lady killer and programmer/creator of firmguns dot com, the dominant debate tabbing software. And one of Ularasa's favorite debate drinking buddies. "Dude!"

"The one and only."

The two men shake hands.

"And this is Persephone," Firmguns says, indicating the woman between them. Her hair is black and silky and half way down her back, and her blue eyes match what there is of

her dress. She smiles and nods at Ularasa, then takes a sip of her drink, which is virtually the same color as her eyes and dress.

A moment later Ularasa's drink arrives, and after a little small talk the three of them move to a table away from the bar where they can talk more comfortably than three across on stools. A waitress brings them all refills, and the conversation begins in earnest.

"I can't believe you took this gig," Firmguns says.

"*You* took it," Ularasa replies. "If you can do it, I can do it."

"I'm doing PF, my friend. At the COC, that's like falling off a log. At worst there's an evidence challenge in every other round, the judge decides in such a way that the judge's own team gets an advantage, there may or may not be a fist fight, and I don't hear about any of it until it's too late."

"What kind of judge makes decisions based on their own team?"

"Parent judges, of course. They've all decided that every round they win is another rung on the ladder to Harvard or Yale or some other high-pressure college. If dropping a hot team makes it easier for their own kids, you know what their going to do."

"That is totally unethical," Ularasa says, replacing his now-depleted first whiskey with its fresh replacement and taking a sip.

"That is totally parents," Firmguns replies.

"But the fist fights are an exaggeration."

Firmguns snorts. "I wish. There's more punches thrown in the COC PF judges' lounge than at Gold's Gym. The only good thing is that all the throwers are middle-aged non-English-speaking immigrants who might lose their green card if word gets out, so the fists fly and the next thing you know, the room is cleared and it's time to pair round four and nobody is the wiser."

Ularasa shakes his head. "Incredible."

"But it's nothing compared to LD, my friend. Which is why I'm surprised you're here."

"They paid my expenses, including my bar bill. Where else would I be? And how bad can it be, anyhow?"

"How bad? You realize that no one has tabbed LD here more than once in the last decade. Every single person does it exactly one time and then hits the highway, swearing never to return. People used to do it for free, for the honor of it. Those days are long gone."

“That’s ridiculous. You run the rounds, you send out the pairings, what else is there?”

Firmguns is absentmindedly running his left hand along Persephone’s rather overexposed thigh. “Well, let’s see,” he says. “Last year there were so many people claiming conflicts, that the judges couldn’t judge them for cause, that they ran out of judges halfway through the elimination rounds and had to hire freelance restaurant reviewers in from Louisville to finish the thing up. The year before that half the field when on strike to protest...” He pauses. “Damn, I don’t remember what they were protesting. Some damned thing or other. Anyhow, they refused to debate, so the tab staff said they’d forfeit them, but they would have had to forfeit about forty kids, so it ended up in a standoff and a shouting match, and the tab staff walked out after a couple of hours and got on the first Greyhound bus to God knows where and they haven’t been heard from since.”

“You’re kidding.”

“Not for one minute. As far as tabbing LD at COC is concerned, forget about it, Jake. It’s Chinatown.”

Ularasa considers his whiskey, swirling the liquid around in the glass. “Do they still provide mint juleps to the tab staff once the thing gets started?”

Firmguns nods. “Absolutely. It helps deaden the pain.”

“Then I’m on board for the duration. What’s the worse that can happen?”

Firmguns tilts his head. “I’m sure we’ll find out. You realize that we’re already under court order not to run the tournament.”

Ularasa is signaling the waitress for a refill. He stops in mid-signal. “What?”

“The Free Willy contingent got a restraining order or something. That’s the word on the street.”

“Some actual judge in a real courtroom actually bought into that Right to Debate baloney?” Ularasa shakes his head. “What is this world coming to?”

“It may be coming to a cancellation of this year’s tournament,” Firmguns replies. “And, not to put too fine a point on it, no nonstop juleps in the therefore not happening tab room.”

“A travesty!” Ularasa claims, sinking down into his chair. “An out-and-out travesty.”

Firmguns stands up, and a second later Persephone also rises. “You don’t mind if we catch up later, do you, Tab? Perse and I have some business to conduct.”

“No, no. You two go on. I’ll just sit here and drown my sorrows and pray that the tournament somehow gets back on track.” He takes the newest whiskey from the waitress who has just arrived at their table. “Oh, the humanity,” he moans, as his fellow tabber disappears out of the bar accompanied by the blue lady.

Oh, the humanity.

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Dearth Hannan is sitting in the Chancellor’s office in an clubby leather chair next to Filbert Horus-Pecan in a matching clubby leather chair, rather than behind his desk. The present Horus-Pecan to run the university isn’t much older than Dearth, a pleasant pinkish man with thinning hair who looks like he’s wearing his father’s hand-me-down tweed suit. Maybe he is.

“We should hear from Gregory soon,” the Chancellor says.

Dearth nods. The SUCKy lawyer drove over to Frankfort within minutes of her receiving the court order. While they were hoping for an incident-free tournament, they had been prepared for disruptive eventualities like a temporary restraining order.

“Gregory believes that if nothing else he’ll get the injunction stayed because of jurisdiction. Kentucky judges aren’t happy when Yankee judges stretch their arms too far.”

Dearth nods again. Kentucky isn’t the South South, but it often thinks it is. It depends on the issue at hand. Going back as far as the Confederacy, the state was usually scratching its head when it came time to put a stake into the ground.

“The tort is the meat of the thing, of course, but there’s not much precedent in favor of students doing whatever they want to in high schools, so that works in our favor. Then again, we’re a public institution, so we can’t fall back on our own privacy rights. It all boils down to whether the suit gets postponed. If the right court says we can hold the tournament despite the suit, we’re good. Then we address the case on its merits. Which, frankly, I don’t think are strong.”

“We’ve got hundreds of people pouring into the hotel even as we speak,” Dearth says. “They are not going to be happy about this, if we can’t hold the tournament.”

“They won’t be unhappy at us. We didn’t bring the suit.”

Dearth shakes her head. "I wouldn't be so sure about that. They've got like twenty or thirty people picketing the registration table. There's a whole bunch of people who believe that the right to debate outweighs the property rights of the schools, which is what this is all about."

"You're a philosophy student, Dearth?" Horus-Pecan asks.

"English lit. Should have an M.A. the end of next year. Sort of looking at education at this point. Level to be determined."

"You should be a lawyer. The world needs more lawyers."

Dearth can't imagine how to respond to that statement. As far as she is concerned, of all the things the world doesn't need more of, lawyers is right up there with telemarketers and kale recipes. But the Chancellor has always been a big supporter of debate, and has been consistently available to her since his uncle H.P. Horus-Pecan retired from coaching and handed the SUCKy team reins down to Dearth.

She is saved from putting her foot in her mouth by the ringing of the phone on the Chancellor's desk. The noise immediately stops.

"That could be it," the Chancellor says.

A moment later there is a perfunctory knock on his half-open door, and his secretary enters the room. "That was Gregory," she says without prelude. "He's emailing the new court order in a minute to the marshal's office. One of the deputies will hand deliver it to the registration desk at the hotel."

"Thank you, Marcie," the Chancellor says, standing.

Dearth also stands up.

"Well, Ms. Hannan, we seem to have won the day, at least for the moment. I have a feeling there is going to be one irate Yankee lawyer up there in Philadelphia when he gets his copy of the order. But that's between judges at this point. You're free to go on with the tournament."

"Thank you, sir. I appreciate your help in all of this," she says.

"Anything for the Combat of Conquerors," he says. He extends a hand to her, and they shake on their victory, however temporary it might be. "Now bring home some more glory for good old SUCKy," he says.

"For good old SUCKy," she echoes, and she is out the door and on her way back to the hotel.

She can let our her breath. The tournament will go on. At least for now.

Take that, Willy Hubjut!

*Will Hamlet P. Buglaroni make oodles of new friends among his circuit peers at the COC?*

*Will Max Klarr eat one of his Affluent Geek debaters for breakfast?*

*Will Tab Ularasa order another whiskey?*

*Does anyone know anything about this Persephone woman?*

*Is the COC back on track and ready to go?*

**We don't know the answers, and hesitate to suggest that even a hint of them will be in our next episode: "How many delegates did Trump win in the Marianas primary, or, Isn't Marianas Trump one of his various wives?"**