

Episode 6

I Guess the Sun is Over the Yardarm

Ditzier Bilgefont is not a large person. On the contrary, he is an unusually small person. On a good day he will claim that he is four feet four inches tall, but he's never actually chalked that high when there's been a measuring tool nearby. Three ten, more likely. In a word, he is achondroplastic. It could have been the defining characteristic of his existence, but he has not allowed that to happen. On the rare occasions he discusses it, he simply says, in the dullest way possible, that it is what it is, and he lets it go at that.

Nevertheless, he is hard-pressed to manipulate the person of Tab Ularasa, who is a tad under six feet tall, and an obvious consumer of one too many extra portions of the mashed potatoes over the last few years. Not to mention one too many rounds at the Up Up and Away bar at Codswallop Pseudo-International Airport.

Ditzier texts Dearth Hannan: ULARASA IS AS DRUNK AS A SKUNK. I THINK I CAN GET HIM INTO THE CAR, BUT IT'S GOING TO TAKE A WHILE.

Dearth texts back: WE RLY NEED A DRUNK TAB DIRECTOR THIS WEEKEND. FML.

Ditzier replies: F BOTH OUR LS.

He clicks off his phone.

"Come on, Mr. Ularasa," Ditzier says. He is sitting next to him on a bar stool and trying to shake him into a higher level of consciousness. "We have to get to the hotel."

Ularasa half opens an eye and, for the first time, regards the little man. "Who the hell are you?" he manages to slur out.

"I'm Ditzier. With the tournament. I'm here to take you to the hotel."

"Oh. Right. The hotel." He looks Ditzier up and down. He begins to say something and then thinks better of it.

Ditzier, aware that his appearance can take people by surprise and often elicit unfortunate responses, takes this as a sign of incipient sobriety on Ularasa's part. "Can you stand up?" he asks.

Ularasa looks down at his own lap, then up to the ceiling. He thinks for a moment, and then attempts to slide off his barstool, in Ditzier's direction. He is not quite ready for anything quite that athletic, however, and as he is about to tumble to the floor, Ditzier manages to catch him and prop him up against the bar, holding the bigger man firmly to keep him marginally upright.

"One false move and the two of us will both be on the ground," Ditzier tells him.

“You need some help there, mate?” the bartender asks, seeing the impending tragicomedy and coming over to them.

“I wouldn’t mind if you could get us started in the right direction,” Ditzier responds.

“Inbound or outbound?”

“Inbound. My car is right across the street in the first lot.”

The bartender looks up and down the bar. There are only a couple of customers, and they seem to be well settled at the moment. “Let’s go,” he says.

Between them, they manage to get Ularasa pointed in the right direction. Ditzier grabs the carryon bag that was at the man’s feet at the bar. Ularasa is able to shuffle a bit and generally move himself slowly if not gracefully. By the time they reach the entrance to the bar he seems to have a decent enough head of steam that the bartender can let go. The man watches as Ditzier and Ularasa keep moving toward the terminal exit.

“You seem to be okay now,” he says.

Ditzier looks over his shoulder. “We’re great. Thanks.”

“No problem. Good luck, mate.”

The bartender returns to his post as Ditzier and Ularasa keep moving slowly in the right direction. It isn’t until a young woman hustles past them pulling a wheeled metal bag that is almost as big as Ditzier that things go downhill. She barely nips Ularasa’s right foot, and as he turns, he looks at her aghast. “Is that your luggage, young lady, or are you planning to nuke Codswallop with the latest fashion in carryon suitcase bombs?” Ditzier is surprised that Ularasa is capable of such a literate sentence, but less surprised when the woman pulls away almost at a run, causing Ularasa to turn around quickly to see Ditzier a few feet behind him, pulling Ularasa’s own small wheeled bag. And Ditzier is not at all surprised when Ularasa lurches at him, crying, “Unhand my suitcase, you villain!”

A second later Ularasa is sprawled on top of his suitcase, as if he has fallen on his back from up in the balcony. They are beginning to draw the attention of all those around them as Ditzier discovers that he is still able to wheel the suitcase along, even with Ularasa half dead on top of it.

“It is what it is,” he mutters to himself as he wheels the semiconscious COC LD tab director through the terminal and out into the parking lot. When they reach the car, somehow Ularasa is able to regain enough self-possession to climb off the suitcase and into the back seat, where he proceeds to lie crosswise and begin snoring before Ditzier even has a chance to get into the driver’s seat.

“Thank God we were in the handicapped parking,” he says over his shoulder as he starts the engine. “Otherwise we never would have gotten here.”

There is no reply, other than a few disjointed snorts, from the back seat.

Dearth Hannan reads the text from Ditzier. He has managed to get Ularasa into his car and is heading toward the hotel. It is unlikely that the short drive will provide enough time for the COC's LD tab director to wake up, much less sober up.

She clicks off her phone. Everyone knows that tabbing is a job for the bibulous at best and dipsomaniacs at worst. Why should Ularasa be any different?

The smell of manure is strong as Hannan heads for the debate office. It is that time of year, when the Codswallop groundskeepers decide to lay down the first batch of the freshest, warmest, richest nutrients on the planet, fresh from the horse farms that dominate the local map. While there are those people who maintain that horse manure is, because of the speed in which it passes through the host, not much different from just laying out hay and oats in the first place, those people do not live in Kentucky. At least not for long. At Codswallop, the manure is used primarily as mulch for the trees and shrubs, which means that at the base of virtually every plant on the SUCKy campus there is today a new, rich brown cover. And it smells exactly like what it is.

It is one of the distinct characteristics of the COC, the smell of horse manure. Always has been, always will be.

The sun is high and bright, and the forecast is for a beautiful weekend. Normally this would mean that people would already be arriving, but the domino effect of plane delays has postponed the mass arrival until God knows when. Registration is going to go on into all hours of the night. Hannah can feel it in her bones.

The debate office comprises the entire top floor of the Horus-Pecan building. The original H. E. H-P may have been a generous donor to the college, but at the same time he did make sure that his own selfish interests would be served. H. E. H-P, Sr., had not reserved the floor for debate, however. It was his son, H. E. H-P, Jr., who renovated the place. It had originally been devoted to his father's avocation, coeducational Greco-Roman wrestling, which enjoyed a vogue for a while after WWII, until the unwanted pregnancy rate caused more than a few jaundiced eyes to look at the sport and see more than just American youth seeking healthy physical competitive recreation. As a matter of fact, way too often the whole competitive aspect was replaced by strategies and tactics that were much more on the cooperative rather than competitive side. Hence the unfortunate resulting Codswallopian baby boom. It was easy enough to turn over the site into classrooms suitable for two-person debate teams to face other two-person teams, in front of various adjudicators, with the proceedings seldom if ever metamorphosing into a free love session, as had been the case with the coed wrestlers. The lack of physical contact worked in debate's favor, reproduction-wise. The university was placated, and debate went on to become an important, albeit chaste, part of the school's extracurricular offerings.

One of the classrooms in HPB is nicknamed the War Room. This is where the team congregates before tournaments to work on their final prep, or to hang out among their closest peers in lieu of rubbing elbows with the riff and the raff of the non-debate persuasion at the student union, or to escape when they come to that point of, if they see their roommate one more time on this planet, they will simply have to take up assassination and to hell with the consequences. When Dearth arrives there are about a dozen people scattered about. A couple are talking to one another. The rest are focused on their phones or their laptops.

“Hey, coach,” someone says as she enters the room.

Everyone stops what they are doing.

“Happy D-Day,” another student calls out.

Dearth smiles. “The only thing happy about today is that four days from now it will be a distant memory.” She goes to the desk in the front of the room and leans on the edge, facing the team. “We’ve got our first arrival,” she says. “Ditzier has picked up Ularasa at the airport. Drunk as the proverbial skunk, Ditzier says.”

“It’s not even one o’clock yet,” someone points out.

“Ularasa is a professional. He doesn’t let the clock get in the way of his drinking. Any updates on the flight status situation?”

There is a bit of keyboard clicking. “Most people seem to be heading for the gates. They’re all running a couple of hours behind but flights are finally getting into the air. The whining on Facebook is down to about a level four.”

Dearth nods. “Everybody knows what they’re supposed to be doing for the weekend, right?”

“The building teams are all ready.”

“Who’s on registration?” Dearth asks.

A couple of students raise a finger or nod.

“Okay. We’ll drive over to the hotel after we’re finished here. Concessions?”

“We can get into the courtesy suite at the hotel any time after three. Everything else is set up for tomorrow through the university people.”

“Liquor?”

“On it. And the ice and glasses and obscenely salty snacks.”

“Water?”

“A couple of cases in with the hooch.”

“Put at least one of them at the registration area. Anything else?”

Each of the dozen students is wearing a blue “SUCKy Debate” tee shirt. They look around at one another. No one indicates any outstanding issues.

“Who’s selling tee shirts, by the way?”

A blonde girl speaks up. "That would be me."

"How many do you have?"

"A couple of hundred."

"What are you charging?"

"Twenty bucks."

Hannah thinks for a second. "Twenty bucks on Saturday. Fifteen bucks on Sunday. Ten bucks on Monday."

The blonde girl nods.

"Okay," Hannah says. "Anyone coming with me to the hotel, let's go. The rest of you, keep your phones charged."

With that, she steps off from the desk. Three of her team follow her out the door.

It is D-Day, Zero Hour.

Registration for the Combat of Conquerors is about to begin.

Did you look up achondroplastic or are you just assuming that you know what it means?

Will Tab Ularasa sober up in time for registration?

Is Ularasa simply one of a vast army of intoxicated tab staff at your average high school debate tournament?

Wouldn't you rather be involved in coeducational Greco-Roman wrestling than this whole debate business?

How much are those tee shirts going to be worth a week from now?

We hardly expect to learn any of these things in our next episode: "Stuffed animals go wild, or, When plush comes to shove."