



Series 2

Episode 14

Part One: Firmguns is Willing

Dude Firmguns was in Firmguns heaven. His dinner companions were not one, not two, not three, but four young women. And somehow or other, this was a working session?

If this were work, Firmguns was ready for some overtime.

They were meeting at a restaurant just off the Pup campus. It was a Friday night, and school was in its first few weeks, and it was still summery enough outside that the restaurant had placed half a dozen tables on the sidewalk, where the five of them were now sitting drinking some kind of white wine. Firmguns was fairly certain that he was the only one of them legally in a position to do so, but that had neither stopped them nor the waitress.

There were times when Firmguns wished he had gone to an Ivy League school. At Upper Schmegeggie, you needed not only an unshakably valid I.D. to even look at a drink, but also a notary public, your mother and at least two Popes to cosign an affidavit to that effect. Here at Pup, apparently, the prevailing sentiment was “anything goes.” Which, of course, was not the worst thing in the world. Four women, lots of white wine... His imagination was reeling.

But that wasn't why he was here, of course. Although if that was where he ended up, so be it. He was here to plan for the upcoming Pup-a-Roni, the first big college tournament of the season. Firmguns was the acting tournament director. The young women with him were, first, Aphrodite Dirae, a dark-haired fury of a girl dressed entirely in black, who was the

captain of Pup's Parliamentary team. She was, Firmguns had discovered, a pre-law senior from Wisconsin. Firmguns was very good at learning about any women who were around him; maybe that was why they responded to this otherwise unprepossessing, noticeably short (despite the lifts in his shoes), heavily-accented New Englander: he wanted to know all about them. The other three were all juniors, team members who had been assigned leadership of, respectively, debate, speech and congress in the upcoming Pup-a-Roni. They were named Alecto, Megaera and Tisiphone; the first two were blondes, poly-sci and pre-med, one tall and thin and the other small and round; the third, English Lit thinking journalism, was possibly red-headed, but Firmguns had his doubts about the provenance of that color given the lack of corresponding paleness in her skin tone. That is the thing about a connoisseur of women: all factors are taken into consideration, none were deal-breakers, and all were interesting. Why would an attractive woman with, probably, perfectly acceptable auburn hair decide to go practically orange? The answer, whatever it was, would intrigue Firmguns no end. Which is, perhaps, another reason why most women responded to him positively: he was interested in them, and every aspect of them.

Let this be the guide to the lovelorn. To be appealing to those you desire, be interested in them, accept them and care for them, no matter what. The rest will come easy.

"So where are we on judges?" Aphrodite—or Dee as she was called—asked.

Dude was staring at her long fingers sliding up and down the stem of her wineglass. "We're covered in all divisions," he replied, lifting his eyes. "And people are still coming in. I just signed up an LD judge from somewhere in the south. Anyone know a Raga Dikeskroner?"

The four women shook their heads.

"Anyhow, he was the most recent one, and the only one I wasn't too sure of. The rest are all the usual suspects."

"Concessions?" Dee asked.

Alecto took that one. Dude noted that she too had long, thin fingers, but hers ended in nails painted a dark violet, almost black, a tiny hint of Goth in an otherwise All-American Midwestern façade. Dude liked tiny hints of Goth in his women, but then again, Dude liked...anything...in his women, so that shouldn't be taken as indicative of much.

"Got water, soda, Red Bull, candy, the works," she said, "ready to go to all the main buildings."

"What keeps people from just wandering off and buying from the stores around the campus?" Dude asked.

Alecta shrugged. "Nothing, really, except laziness."

"And high school kids are notoriously lazy," Dude said. "But also notoriously cheap, so don't overcharge, or you'll lose them. For that matter, they're notoriously good at wandering off aimlessly if you even give them half a chance, like we'll be doing, but there's nothing you can do about that."

"We've got our best sales people working the concessions," Dee said.

"How do you define best sales people?"

"The hot ones. High school kids may be lazy, cheap and peripatetic, but they also like looking at hot college students, so we'll man the booths with the best we can come up with, both genders."

Dude nodded. That was the kind of thinking he liked at his tournaments.

"What about rooms?" Dee went on.

Magaera, the round blonde to Alecta's straight blonde, took that one. Which was good, because Dude liked curves as much as not. "I've already spent five hundred dollars bribing every custodian I could find, plus there's still another five hundred in the bribe trust fund, as needed."

"We spent nine hundred last year, feathering the custodial nests," Dee said.

"I know. So we should be covered."

"Right. Anything else?"

"Judges' lounges?" Dude asked.

At this point the waitress came by to take their dinner order, but no one had even thought about looking at the menu yet. So they all ordered another drink. Since the dinner would be paid for by the Pup Parli Association, no one gave a thought to how much they were spending. Dude noted this as yet another difference between the Pups and the Upper Schmegeggies.

"Judges lounges," Dee repeated. "Right. Where are we? We've got two, one for speech and one for debate."

"Why not just one?" Dude asked.

"We didn't want any religious wars or anything. Mixing speech and debate judges can be a recipe for disaster."

Dude thought about it. "To be honest, the politics are more among judges and coaches of the same persuasion than across boundaries, but then again, no tournament ever had too much judge hospitality."

"That's what we thought," the orange-haired Tisiphone said. "So we've got a masseuse hired for each one, bartenders for both after five o'clock, a sushi chef who will go back and forth between the venues, and we'll have the hot tubs ready after the last rounds of the day."

Dude Firmguns's eyebrows lifted. "Hot tubs?"

"We want judges to really enjoy their experience at the Roni. This seemed like a good guarantee of it."

"But I didn't know that the Pup even had hot tubs!" Dude said.

"Of course we do," Tisiphone said. "We're an Ivy school."

"I'd like to see them," Dude said. "Just out of professional curiosity."

"We could go after dinner," Dee responded.

Dude Firmguns raised his fresh glass of wine that the waitress had just laid down in front of him and tilted his head. "I would like that," he said. "I would like that very much. Are you available?"

"Who?" Tisiphone asked.

"'Who?'" Dude repeated.

"Yes. I mean, who are you addressing? Who are you asking to go with you?"

Dude Firmguns sipped his wine and smiled. "Why, all of you, of course."

Of course.

After all, it was Dude Firmguns we're talking about here.

Which would mean that, of course the invitation was for all four of them.

And, of course, all four of them accepted it.

"So let's order dinner before the kitchen closes," Dude said.

All of a sudden, he wanted to eat something. The idea of a long, leisurely dinner had been supplanted by...

But once again, our role as a high school debate soap opera for the family market precludes us from explaining any further.

Part Two: Kennerji is Willing

Meanwhile, on Texas time...

A high school cafeteria during a debate tournament is a cross between triage in a busy emergency room, a deserted ruin and, well, a high school cafeteria. It all depends on when you happen to visit it. Between rounds, every seat is taken and every table is full of people eating and drinking and computing and playing cards and, more than anything else, talking. Not yelling, not cavorting (or at least not yelling and not cavorting overmuch), but just talking. Talk is the stock in trade of the forensician. They are born to it, and they do it with only the slightest provocation. In the long history of monasticism, for example, not one forensician has ever been known to take a

vow of silence. It would be simply beyond the frailty of their specific human condition.

When rounds are in progress, on the other hand, the cafeteria is relatively deserted. A few stalwarts might be tweaking their cases at the last minute, but for the most part there is nothing in the place but the collected detritus of the average teenager, everything from loose articles of clothing to half-eaten bagels to empty cans of Red Bull.

At the moment at Claudio Monteverdi High School, it was between rounds. Which meant that the cafeteria was slightly less in motion than Omaha Beach on D-Day morning.

Certain schools had claimed turf, if there were enough of them in the entourage to do so. Veil of Ignorance, for instance, with its Seven Samurai and all its debaters, had two tables pushed together. Each debater had an assistant coach poring over cases with them, pointing out what they needed to know from what they had learned so far. When the next pairings were announced, they would each get specific instruction on facing the specific debaters that they were going to meet. Because the affirmative case positions were all published online in some measure of detail or another, there was no element of surprise in the rounds, at least on the part of the affirmatives. This disclosure is like discovery, where the lawyers share evidence before a trial, in aid of removing surprises and, ultimately, in aid of fairness. Whether or not it was fair that a team like Veil could employ its Seven Samurai to prepare its negative debaters against a known affirmative position while a team like Nighten Day, represented solely by one lone, lorn Tucker Gallstone, who had no one to draw on but herself, was a moot point.

At one table, three of the few mavericks attending the event had managed to find each other. Tucker, who after two rounds was undefeated, was staring at her computer screen, her face scrunched up as she tried to parse the meaning of a new piece of evidence she had heard in her last round. Next to her, Ramchen Chowder from Punxsutawney Phillips Exeter Academy was in about the same position, staring at a computer but, in his case, substituting one piece of evidence for another in his set of responses against a position he had just heard. He too was undefeated. His judge slash coach, Boner Corkzit, had disappeared into the judges' lounge immediately following the last round. The judges' lounge's food was a couple of levels up from what the debaters ate, plus there were some couches to stretch out on. Boner would show up in time to prep Ramchen for round three, at least for a little while. He was getting paid, after all.

Completing the party at their table was Kennerji Allawalla, a junior from a school in Arkansas. Unlike the others, he was not staring at his

computer. In fact, he was quite notable for what else he wasn't staring at, which was Tucker Gallstone. To Tucker, Kennerji was this kid she ran into on occasion who seemed to know a little more about her than she knew about him, whereas to Kennerji, Tucker was a goddess.

Life is like that sometimes.

The problem with conducting business with a goddess in a high school context is that it is probably best that the object of one's adoration not know that the adoration is in fact happening. Probably the best way to send said object screaming in the other direction is to lay bare the feelings of one's heart. Come to think of it, this would be true at all ages of adoration and the objects of same. There is a sharp line between casually hanging out versus declaiming undying affection, and unless one is proposing marriage to someone one is pretty sure is going to accept the idea, it is best to steer as clear of that line as possible.

Kennerji's only hope was that, with time, Tucker would get used to him. The problem is, while she was as gorgeous as any of your everyday teenage goddesses, no more or no less, Kennerji was something of mutt. His name, which might make one think of glorious bronze Bollywood heroes, was misleading, given that while his father was a quarter Indian, he was also equal portions of Irish, Kenyan and Japanese. Family reunions for Kennerji were like UN general assembly meetings, where half the people had no idea what the other half were saying and they were all a single perceived insult away from total war. And as far as Kennerji was concerned, he had somehow inherited the worst traits of all his genetic sources. Short, chubby, red haired, olive skinned—he was a Mendel experiment gone horribly wrong. On top of that, his social skills were, sad to say, less than optimal. He could debate well and come up with twenty-two responses to every line of analysis in seconds flat, but outside of rounds he was far from polished, and he couldn't think of much to say past "Hi," when he ran into the goddess of his dreams. That and, maybe, "Howsitgoing?" all one speedy, mumbled greeting. He was a lot more comfortable communicating with her on Facebook. On Facebook you could think for a minute or two before coming out with anything, and so you could be clever. In debate you were trained to think for a second and be clever. In normal everyday life, you were on your own.

But it doesn't take much to see that the problems of three little people don't amount to a hill of beans in this crazy world known as debate, and Ramchen, Tucker and Kennerji and their relationships, or lack thereof, notwithstanding, there was a tournament to run.

At seven forty-two, Eric Rand-Walsh came marching into the cafeteria. Tucker watched over the top of her computer as he strode directly

up to his team's tables. He had a piece of paper in his hand that Tucker knew beyond a doubt was the schematic for the next round. Somehow Rand-Walsh knew who was debating whom before anyone else in the field.

Power has its privileges, apparently.

Tucker shut down her computer, and turned back to the cafeteria entrance. A phalanx of students bearing schematics for the rest of the world would appear shortly.

She sighed. She wanted to get the news early. She wanted to have an in with the tab room. She wanted to be a Veilie, with her own samurai officially attached to her as her private debate coach. Across from her the Seven Veil Samurai were now seriously working away with the students.

She sighed again.

A moment later the cafeteria doors swung open and schematics were made available for everyone else. In addition to the Monteverdi students carrying the pages still warm from the copying machine, Hem Viadud was there, whip still in one hand, top hat removed and held in the other. That Viadud ran a tight ship was clear from the fire in his eyes, visible from a distance of a hundred yards. Anyone who saw the fierceness in those eyes—and the whip in his hand—was not inclined to mosey getting to their rounds.

Also coming through the door was Boner Corkzit, also bearing a schematic. Not as quick as Rand-Walsh, perhaps, but seeing him with a schematic caused Tucker to revise her opinion of the situation. The schems must have hit the judges' lounge first. Things weren't as unfair as she thought.

In a minute Boner was working with Ramchen, leaving Tucker and Kennerji to their own devices: he did not have a private coach either. He quickly ran up and got a couple of schematics, one for him and one for Tucker. As he returned and handed her hers, he saw it.

Oh, no! Not this!

“Hey,” Tucker said. “We're hitting this round.”

Kennerji was almost staggering. He was going to have to debate Tucker in the next round. The mutt was going to have to face the goddess in the field of open combat.

Could it get any worse than that?

Part Three: Raga Dikeskroner is up to his eyeballs in the Willing!

Raga Dikeskroner opened his eyes.

It was night

It was the right time.

And he was hungry.

He dressed well for his evening's excursion. Anyone could look like peasant. Raga preferred to look like a lord. In fact, one or twice in his life he had *been* a lord, or something like it. Live long enough, and almost anything could happen.

He wrapped his red silk tie a second time then folded it in, creating a perfect windsor knot. The collar of his light blue shirt was perfectly stiff. His navy suit fit as if it were made for him, because, well, it *had* been made for him.

Sometimes he went for a southern persona. When he was doing the debate circuit, it seemed to work. But other times he was himself. Someone had once defined that self as “vaguely continental.” He smiled; he liked that. Vaguely continental. “How do you like that, all y’all?” he said softly, turning toward the mirror over his bedroom drawers.

He laughed.

His reflection in the mirror—yes, he had a reflection in the mirror—laughed too.

The music in the club was loud and repetitive. Very techno. Very cold. Which meant that the room was hot. Very hot.

Raga sat at the bar nursing a kir royale.

There was only one club like this in New York City. In any city, there was only one club like this, if there was any at all. More than one would be...unnecessary. It wasn't as if the streets were overflowing with the Old Ones. Their numbers were so small that most of them knew each other, if not by name, at least by sight. Their very nature kept them limited in quantity. If the undead started outnumbering the dead, there wouldn't be any room for the living. Or any living for the undead to prey upon. Think of it as culling the herd. Eco-management. Natural selection. Whatever. The numbers of the Old Ones were manageable, and that was all that mattered.

The numbers of the Willing, on the other hand, were at the highest Raga could recall ever seeing. He had survived times where there were no Willing, when “life” depended on his skills as a natural predator as compared to his skills as a social predator. Natural predation meant animals. Social predation meant humans. There was no comparison.

The Willing were all young, of both genders. They were the ones who were a little “different” from the vast ocean of the Unwilling, which is why the Willing sought the company of the Old Ones. As for the Old Ones, of course they wanted their Willing to be as young and ripe as possible. So a club like this, mostly frequented by the Willing, was not particularly careful in concerning itself about the age of its habitués for legal purposes. That a sixteen-year-old might sidle up to the bar and order something silly like an appletini didn’t bother the bartenders, who produced their requests without pausing for even a second to think about demanding identification. Under twenty-one? You’ve come to the right place. Not unlike the Ivy League. Anyone worried that law enforcement might shut the place down? You’ve got to be kidding. These were the Old Ones. They did not know the meaning of the words “law enforcement.” They knew no laws other than their own, and succumbed to no force other than their own. In this golden age of Willingness, the Old Ones lived as never before, rich in the satisfaction of their bloodlust.

Thank you, Stephanie Meyer. If you only knew...

Raga crooked his finger at the bartender, who quickly responded with another kir royale. The bartender—also the owner of the club, taking some time in front of the house to measure the crowd—was neither an Old One nor Willing, but merely one of the intelligent few who sought profit wherever it might lie. Raga nodded at him, the bartender nodded back, and Raga turned back again to study the dancing mob of mostly teenagers. Then his eyes slowly scanned the edges of the room, where here or there other Old Ones stood or sat and, like Raga, studied the room. Like Raga, they too were exceptionally handsome, and exceptionally well-dressed. Some men, some women, some a little bit of both.

Raga sighed. The thing is, it was so...boring. So easy. With so many Willing so readily available, all the excitement was gone. The need to turn Unwilling into Willing had been eliminated. The Willing did it all themselves. The Old Ones could taste of the fresh young Willing to revive their own souls without ever having to leave the building.

It wasn’t like the good old days when one had to be a master of the seduction of the young and innocent, the turning of the Unwilling into the Willing when they didn’t even know what Willing was. That was where the moment became alive. In a world where vampires were fictional fodder for teenage fantasies, metaphors for love and longing, the Old Ones were almost an anomaly. When everyone wanted you to exist and give themselves to you, if you did actually exist, things tended to get a little dull.

Or course, it wasn't as if all the myths and legends were somehow true. For the record, the Old Ones were perfectly able to withstand sunlight, and primarily lived on the same basic vitamins and minerals and proteins as the living. Their ability to die was not limited to heart-stakes or silver bullets; they were, mostly, as human as the next person. It was merely that they had plugged into an immortality based on the assumption of the blood of others into their own bloodstreams, which connected to the source of their souls and rendered them unlikely to die. Any blood would do, although human blood was best, and it certainly wouldn't work for just anyone, meaning that the average person on the street could not start sucking blood and expect, as a result, to live forever. The Old Ones shared a genetic heritage that made the difference. Not surprisingly, that heritage was central European in origin. There was more than a modicum of truth in the stories of Vlad the Impaler. Not much more than a modicum, but some.

The music was louder now, and if anything, colder. And the room, if anything, was hotter. Raga decided that the time had come to...dance. And to follow through with whatever else happened. It wasn't the thrill of the chase, the turning of the Unwilling into the Willing, but it would get him through the night.

There would be plenty of time for the Unwilling soon enough.

After all, Raga was in the process of getting himself a job.

Among a multitude of the Unwilling.

He put down his glass and stood up. And slowly danced himself into the center of the room, into the center of the Willing, who were drawn to him like the proverbial moths to the flame. After all, he was one of the Old Ones.

And he was also a pretty good dancer, but that, dear reader, is beside the point.

Will Dude Firmguns remember to bring the soap?

Will Kennerji Allawalla ever declare himself to Tucker Gallstone?

Will Tucker Gallstone ever become a Veilie?

Will Hem Viadud whip any stragglers at this tournament?

How exactly will Raga Dikeskroner end his evening?

Will fans of Nostrum survive the next two weeks while we're on hiatus?

Now is the time to get bait on your breath as the answers prove not to be found in our next episode: “I was a vampire for the FBI, or, the tooth? You can’t handle the tooth!”