



Series 2

Episode 25

1. Bloodlust on the Orient Express

Raga Dikeskroner had been many things over the years. He had ridden with the Cossacks. How long ago had that been? In his prime—in an earlier part of his prime?—he had caravanned with Roma from the furthest end of France to the furthest end of Spain. He had loved horses in those days. He still did, for that matter, although he couldn't remember the last time he had ridden. He missed it. He missed the thrill of a powerful animal pounding the earth beneath him. He missed the mystic communication of man and beast, the magic that made them one. Maybe after his present adventures ended he would head down to South America. A picture formed in his mind of riding with the vaqueros over the plains of Argentina.

Were there plains in Argentina? He would have to find out, one way or the other. Not much point in riding the plains of Argentina if there weren't any.

Raga was in a bemused, nostalgic mood this evening.

He had sat at royal tables, and he had sat around peasant campfires. He had spoken more languages than he could enumerate. Sometimes he had worked, if the work appealed to him. Sometimes he had lolled about, if the lolling about had appealed to him. Provided he had access to his survival needs, what appealed to him was usually what he found himself doing. And he could almost always find ways to survive no matter where he looked, so there were few limits to where one might find him, depending on when one looked. He was a creature of whim, of caprice and of hedonism. He was not unlike the other Old Ones in that.

For all his vast experiences around the globe, however, he had never before gone into the realm of children. There were some among the Old Ones who went nowhere *but* into the realm of children, but Raga had never been inclined to pursue that path until now. His tastes had always led him elsewhere, until, by chance, he found himself on the Orient Express a decade or two ago, traveling from Paris to Vienna surrounded inexplicably by a group from a private girl's school located in Zurich, if he remembered correctly. Yes, Zurich, that was it, definitely. He remembered remarking to a fellow passenger at dinner how unusual it was to find any sort of group like this traveling in such luxury, and his fellow passenger had replied that for this group it was not unusual at all. The speaker, a woman in her early thirties with a severe and dry appearance, explained in Italian accented French that she was, in fact, their headmistress, and they were not on a holiday but rather what could only be thought of as a Fine Arts field trip. Having conquered the Louvre and the Musee d'Orsay, they were on to Austria to sample the Secessionists. A truly *bon voyage*, Raga had responded, tipping his champagne glass to the woman. She had almost smiled in response. She had allowed herself a small glass of sherry as an aperitif, and she lifted it slightly. The rest of their conversation, like the train, wove a path to Vienna, covering the subjects of Mucha and Klimt and Schiele. Raga Dikeskroner was more than comfortable discussing the artists of a century ago. He himself had lived in Paris around that time, thriving in the world of avant gardists and art nouveau and then les arts decoratifs. The Parisians of the first decades of the Twentieth Century made today's Willing look like rank amateurs. He sighed at the recollection.

For the rest of that train journey, Raga had watched the Swiss schoolgirls with great interest. Their ranks were as closed to him as possible, and if any one of them had even noticed that he was alive, he would have been surprised. They bubbled and giggled and plotted, and the oldest couldn't have been more than sixteen, and even twenty years ago, sixteen was so much younger than it is today. Even worldly, spoiled rich girls, as he presumed these to be, tended to run to immaturity in that era not so long ago. They were not Americans. Of that there could be no doubt. There was nothing rough-hewn or casual about them. They were dressed almost as severely as their chaperone, although they carried themselves without her severity of manner. They would all be women soon enough, but they were girls now. And he had never bothered much with girls in the past. Or boys, not that it made any difference to him. He just naturally preferred the company of adults, preferably other Old Ones but otherwise anyone of their majority. As we said, he was never one to pursue that path.

But those hours on the train started him thinking. Fantasizing. He was not, of course, a sexual predator. That was not what he was thinking about, fantasizing about. But there were his survival needs. The blood that kept him alive should be all that much more satisfying if that blood were young and untainted. That was the idea that was intriguing him: the purity of the blood. The *absolute* purity of the blood.

It led to something that Raga knew well, something akin to thirst but buried so much deeper, and so much harder to slake.

In the years that had followed Raga had not attempted to scratch the itch that had been planted within him. But that itch had remained, and after his latest adventures had concluded and he had moved to New York for a change of scenery, he had decided that the time had come to follow that path wherever it took him. By chance he had learned that the high school forensics community existed. It had taken little diligence on his part to learn almost everything there was to learn about it: the online resources were abundant and freely available. And soon the persona of the veteran of the southern debate circuit—the chitlin’ circuit as he called it—was born.

As far as the chitlin’ circuit was concerned, it numbered only one member: Raga Dikeskroner. But these northerners didn’t know that. They didn’t know much at all about debate in the south, except that it existed, and they had no reason to disbelieve Raga when he said he had been a part of it. By the time anyone found out otherwise—if ever—he would be long gone. He figured a month or two at the most, and he would be where he wanted to be. With access to what he wanted to have.

The lust for the purity of the blood was no longer buried deep within him. It was now his driving passion.

And he meant to satisfy that passion very, very soon.

2. A Superfluity of Coaches

Tucker Gallstone didn’t kick into case-writing mode until everyone else in the house was asleep. She was in her room, sitting at her desk, hunched over her laptop. She was sending an instant message.

—I need an aff case

The reply came quickly.

—What’s wrong with the cases you already have?

—They suck big time.
—You broke last week at the Monteverdi.
—But I didn't qual. I need something different.
—Tucker Tucker Tucker! What am I going to do with you?
—You're going to give me some decent new ideas for the aff.
—Have you looked at the X Phi evidence I sent you?
—What about it?
—They've got some stuff that demonstrates an intuitive, multicultural revision of the cerebellum orthodoxy.
—I didn't see that.
—Didn't you read it?
—I read it.
—When?
—During science research.
—Shouldn't you have been doing science research during science research?
—Nobody does science research during science research.
Kimchi Bokkeumbap did not reply for a long time.
—You still there? Tucker asked.
—I'm still here, Kimchi responded.

And who was Kimchi Bokkeumbap? And why was he helping Tucker Gallstone write her cases?

Well, that was a bit of a problem. Kimchi liked young Tucker a lot. He had judged her last year when she was a novice and he was a senior at Brooklyn Behemoth, and he had been impressed by her natural debating talent. He had given her some tips at some point, and then more tips, and then more tips, and before long, he was her virtual coach. He was certainly more a coach to her than Tarnish Jutmoll. Granted, Jutmoll arranged for her to get back and forth from tournaments, but Kimchi helped her win rounds at those tournaments. Kimchi was now a student at Columbia.

And—and this was the problem, or more to the point, half of the problem—Kimchi was also an assistant coach for Veil of Ignorance. He was one of Eric Rand-Walsh's Seven Samurai. If Rand-Walsh ever learned that Kimchi was helping a competitor from another school, he'd have him up before a court martial in a heartbeat, and in front of a firing squad before the next heartbeat. And the other half of the problem? Tarnish Jutmoll had no idea that his young apprentice was, in fact, learning the dark arts at the hands of a rival.

Kimchi and Tucker had drifted apart toward the end of the previous season, but when Tucker had traveled with the Veilies to the Monteverdi, she

and Kimchi had immediately reconnected. But they treaded softly. They worked only in private. At the Monteverdi they had pretended the other didn't exist, and they hadn't exchanged a word, an email or a text. They had never made eye contact after the first moment of spotting one another.

And now, a week later, he was helping her more than he was helping his charges at the Veil of Ignorance.

This wasn't going to end well.

3. It Could have been Caliban

The house was quiet. Haagen, Ben and Jerry were all asleep. In the kitchen, Hamlet P. Buglaroni was sitting at the computer, working on a spreadsheet of everything that needed to be done for the tournaments the following week. He had already gotten one of the biggest problems out of the way, the sorting out of the food, thanks to Mrs. Plonk. But the list that remained unchecked was, although not terribly long, nonetheless terribly staggering. Each item seemed to be a nightmare of effort. Sort out housing. Find rooms for the rounds. Check out custodial. Get into firmguns.com to learn who the hell was coming. Check out judges; had Renate hired any at all? With one week remaining, it wouldn't be easy to get anyone if she hadn't.

He looked up at the clock. It was 1:21 a.m. Tomorrow morning, bright and early, he'd be heading up the Andy J attack on the Pups. At this point, the best he could hope for was that everyone who showed up on the bus was supposed to be registered.

Okay. One last look at the email. He clicked over to his gmail account.

And there it was. A message from Dude Firmguns at firmguns.com.

YO. YOU'RE ALL SET. YOUR ACCOUNT NAME IS ROTTENINDENMARK (YOU MUST GET THAT A LOT) AND YOUR PASSWORD IS ROSENCRANTZ. YOU CAN CHANGE THEM ON THE SITE. YOU HAVE FULL ACCESS TO THE ANDREW JOHNSON ACCOUNT. SEE YOU TOMORROW AT THE PUPS.

It was signed Dude Firmguns.

Buglaroni sank down a good six inches on the stool on which he was perched, as if he were a deflating balloon. One of his biggest aggravations had been removed. He finally had access to firmguns.com.

He quickly pulled himself up and logged on, just to make sure. Yep. There he was. And there was the information on tomorrow. And, lo and behold, there was the information on next weekend.

Oh. My. God. He had 250 registrants for the Reconstruction Memorial. And another 192 registrants for the Little Johnson, which hadn't even closed access yet.

He was going to need a bigger boat.

Will Raga Dikeskroner slake his thirst for untainted blood?

Do debaters in fact have any untainted blood?

Will Eric Rand-Walsh offer Kimchi a blindfold and a cigarette when he goes up in front of the firing squad?

Do they still allow smoking at firing squads?

Will Hamlet P. Buglaroni be able to handle the great numbers at the Andrew Johnson Reconstruction Memorial and the Little Johnson?

Will the Democrats and the Republicans both please shut up?

The surprising answers to none of these nor any other questions will be buried deep under the rubble of our next episode: "Ding Dong the Recession is Over, or, Who You Callin' a Ding Dong?"