



## **Series 2**

### **Episode 33**

#### **First Blood**

Raga Dikeskroner figured it was like anything else. You studied it in advance, so you knew what you were doing, and then you went in and did it. Simple as that. He had studied debate in depth, and he understood all the ramifications of how arguments worked and what they meant, and he had studied the scholarship behind the subject of juvenile justice, and he felt perfectly confident that he would walk into his first round and be totally on top of the situation.

It would have been easier to get blood from a stone, to use a particularly apt metaphor.

For reasons he didn't understand, Raga had not been called on to judge the night before. It was all done by computer somehow, and it hadn't bothered him much. On top of that, he had also not been called on for the first round of the morning, for which he had skipped sleep altogether, which again didn't bother him all that much, as sleep was never a particular priority for Old Ones, who could live, so to speak, with or without it. In fact, after his night's activities, he had been rather refreshed and ready to go, sleep deprivation notwithstanding, and he was a little distracted by having to spend the first few hours of the day at the Pup's central Starbucks, bobbing among the flow of the young and the vital. The company in the place was, in

a word, more invigorating than the caffeine. He still hadn't gotten used to the milieu of endless teenagers. Maybe he never would. Time would tell.

It was around ten o'clock when he moseyed over to the main chapel area where they were distributing ballots. The logistics of the tournament were not simple. Competitors were strung across the campus in building after building: some of them were classrooms, some of them dormitories, some of them nuclear waste disposal centers, some of them unfathomable—the typical university. How people found where they were going based on the fuzzy photocopied map that was distributed at registration was a puzzlement. How the events ran in an even remotely timely manner was a technological tightrope. Judges were asked to text the results back to the appropriate tab room. This was simple enough, in theory, but in practice there were plenty of judges out there to whom texting was a combination of brain surgery, rocket science and the Dark Arts, the mere thought of it turning them into quivering blobs of incoherent semi-humanity. How, and if, it all came together, was beyond Raga's comprehension. Not that it mattered to him. He would do his bit, play his part, and that would be enough. Later in the day, when he met with Tarnish Jutmoll to talk about a job of some sort, he would know more than enough to bull his way through. In fact, he already felt he could bull his way through.

And he hadn't judged a single round in his life.

Raga milled around in the chapel for a while, sticking to the corners, observing, keeping a low profile. People came and went in a steady stream, seeking ballots or dropping off ballots or asking questions. The ballot tables were the concierge of the tournament, the one place where people had a chance of obtaining information. Most of said information, it would appear, was some Pup pointing out where to go on one of those fuzzy maps.

At about ten thirty there was a flurry of activity as three Pups rushed into the room to one of the tables and started laying out ballots. One of them announced loudly, "Lincoln Douglas Round 4." The table was immediately swamped as the judges rushed over like a pack of wolves. Meanwhile, other Pups were posting papers on the wall, and students were rushing those postings in the same vulpine fashion.

Raga waited a couple of minutes for the first wave to die down, and then made his way to one of the postings. It listed who was debating whom,

and where, and who was judging. It took maybe thirty seconds for him to find his own name. Finally. He had a round.

He walked over to the ballot table, which was still swamped. There were probably a hundred judges attempting to find their ballots on a three foot wide table. The alphabetical arrangement of the ballots had quickly gone random as judges took their own ballots with little regard for the rest. It was nearly five minutes of shuffling and shoving and waiting before Raga was finally able to reach around someone to pick up the two sheets of paper with his own name on them.

DIKESKRONER, RAG they said. Oh, well. Close enough. Either the whole name didn't fit, or he had just acquired a new nickname. He looked at the location of the rounds. 245 Fluckschmecter Hall. He consulted his fuzzy map. He found it right away. Fluckschmecter Hall was about two miles from where he was now standing. It might as well have been at another university altogether.

He started walking.

Raga was not alone traveling toward the outer reaches of the Pup campus. Debaters, judges, groupies, road managers, p.r. assistants, religious pilgrims—you name it, they were on the road to some building or other remotely connected to the tournament. At least it was a warm, early Autumn day that made strolling along pleasant, although the time for the round printed on his ballot indicated that he was already about fifteen minutes late. In fact, he had been late literally at the moment he had picked up the ballot, if that timing were to be followed. The tab room at the Pups apparently ran on its own clock, and hoped that the tournament participants would somehow overcome the time space continuum to get things finished before they started. Nice try, but...not likely. Not when an army like the one Raga was a part of was on the march.

He eventually arrived at Fluckschmecter Hall and found room 245. There were no debaters there yet, and he took a seat at a desk in the back of the room. It was a basic classroom, the sort of place he hadn't been in so many years he couldn't remember. Blackboards all around, with chalk writings about what looked like the Seven Years War. Raga couldn't remember that, either. There were hard wooden seats with small foot-square desks attached. Windows open to the pleasant warm air, inviting whoever

was within to turn their backs on education and go off and enjoy life for real. Raga pulled out a legal pad and pen and waited.

Within a few minutes two teenaged boys entered the room. Raga, who had been operating at a bit of a remove from his longings of yesterday since leaving the Starbucks, had expected something of a jolt when confronted by two actual young people in such close proximity without any distracting crowds. But he hadn't expected two boys, and worse, he hadn't expected two boys so...ugly. Beyond ugly, actually. Ungainly, unkempt, uninteresting. One of them wore eyeglasses that ought to be strong enough to read the headlines from somebody holding up the *Times* on the moon. The other one's suit looked as if it had belonged to a runaway gorilla, and Raga couldn't believe that a single measurement of it anywhere matched the body within it.

Where was the vibe he had felt this morning? Maybe this wasn't such a good idea after all.

After a couple of minutes of fumbling around with papers and computers, one of the debaters—the one with the eyeglasses—stood up and faced Raga. “Any judge preferences?” he asked.

Raga shook his head. He knew that every judge was supposed to have his own paradigm for judging, a set of criteria on which to base a decision, primarily because the rules of the activity were such that, for the most part, anything went. Although Raga was a pretty good chess player, where the rules were simple but clear and unvarying, he imagined he could do all right where the rules were simply unnecessary.

“Opponent ready?” the debater asked.

The other student, still seated at his desk, nodded.

“Judge ready?”

Raga nodded again.

And with a sweep of his right arm as he started his timer, the debater began.

It would be beyond the abilities of this particular high school debate soap opera to adequately represent what happened next. Suffice it to say that the debater with the eyeglasses proceeded to speak so fast that, metaphorically, Raga was pushed back off his seat and fell to the ground, ass over teakettle.

Raga tried. It wasn't as if he hadn't been around the bend a few times in his rather extended life. He attempted to take notes as best he could, and occasionally a word or phrase stuck out from the swamp like a frog jumping to another lily pad and Raga was able to capture it before it slipped back into the muck.

After exactly six minutes by the ringing timer, the debater finished, turning off the timer with the same sort of dramatic sweep of the arm with which he had started it. His opponent immediately shot up and began asking questions. The two debaters faced Raga rather than one another, which Raga found slightly disconcerting, but the good news was that the interrogating debater was asking questions about what the first debater had just said, at a much more reasonable speed, and a lot of the mist now rose from that swamp as it was pointed out what, exactly, was going on.

The round proceeded along these lines, with some very fast speaking and some occasional slowing down, especially in the first debater's questioning of the second debater after his own mad dash through the swamp. Roughly forty-five minutes later, the first debater, the one with the eyeglasses, made one last swing of his arm to deactivate his timer, and it was over. For a couple of minutes the two debaters fussed with their papers and computers and the like, much as they had when they had arrived, and then they turned in their seats and looked at Raga.

He looked back at them. "Yes?"

"Disclosure?" the one in the gorilla's suit asked.

"Ah." Raga nodded. Disclosure. Of course. He had to tell them who had won and who had lost and, while he was at it, why.

He didn't have a clue.

"I think the standards debate went aff," he began. He wasn't quite sure what that meant, but he had read those words on an internet debate site, and the two debaters in front of him now didn't flinch.

Nobody said anything for a minute. Raga detected that he hadn't said enough.

"Aff's second contention stood, I think," he added hesitantly.

"What offense are you voting on?" the gorilla's suit asked.

Raga thought for a second. "The affirmative," he answered.

"I mean, what offensive argument?"

Oh. Raga looked at his notes for the affirmative. Eyeglasses had made some point about due process that the two of them had dickered over a bit, or at least that's what was written on the page in front of him, so he gave it a shot. "Due process," he said.

Gorilla's Suit nodded. And Raga detected a slight smile on the corner of Eyeglasses' lips. Had he actually managed to choose correctly? Even though he had barely understood a word that had been spoken?

This debate business wasn't so hard after all. Coaching it was going to be a snap.

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The two debaters left the room, and as Raga filled out his ballot and then texted his results to central tabbing, the second pair entered.

Raga stopping texting in the middle of typing the message. He didn't have to look. He knew. He could feel it.

It wasn't Eyeglasses and Gorilla's Suit this time. Without raising his eyes he saw legs go by. Female legs. Young female legs.

He smelled blood.

He looked up. Then he looked down at his new ballot for this round.

"Which of you is Nighten Day TG?" he asked.

The taller of the two, a slim blonde girl, gave him a thumbs up sign. He nodded.

"Okay," he said, and went back to finishing his text of the results for the first round.

A few minutes later he was finished, and the blonde was standing in the front of the room, waiting for him.

"Any preferences?" she asked him.

This time he was prepared. "I'm used to a little slower debate than is the norm around here, so if you didn't go too fast, that would help me enormously. Other than that, it's up to you."

"Gotcha," the girl said. And without the dramatic arm sweep, there was the click of a timer, and she was off and running.

Or, more to the point, jogging. This time Raga was able to catch almost everything that was said, not only from her but from her opponent.

And he enjoyed what he heard, a level of discourse that was much more refined than he would have expected from a pair of adolescents.

But he nonetheless still operated under a handicap as he listened to the round, but this time the handicap wasn't his inability to follow the speed of what was said. It was the inability of his emotions to remain under control. Everything he had felt so far since he had arrived on the campus was coming to a head. He was in a room with two girls, which is why he had decided to take up debate in the first place. They were two girls who were, he knew, far from Willing.

But that didn't in any way inhibit his need for taking. He could only imagine how the blood of those so young would infuse his system. He could taste their energy from across the room.

Imagine their energy if he could taste their blood?

Somehow the round played out, and it wasn't until the end when he realized that at some point today he'd be interviewing for a job at Nighten Day, that perhaps he had been under some unspoken obligation not to judge one of their debaters. But then again, Tarnish Jutmoll was in the tab room running things, and if he hadn't objected, there must be nothing wrong with it. For a moment Raga considered voting against the Nighten Day girl on general principle, to demonstrate that the prospect of working with her team hadn't corrupted his judgment, but that was as corrupt as if he gave her the win in the same pursuit of working with her team. And as far as he was concerned, she had won.

And there was more to it than that. She struck him as...special. She was good. Very good. But there was more, and it had nothing to do with debate.

This time when he disclosed his decision, he did so with much more confidence than before. At the rate he was going, by the end of the day he would be a pro at this. Which was good, because by the end of the day he was going to be interviewed.

The two girls packed up their things and left, and Raga finished filling out his ballot and texted the results. He knew he should hustle over to the chapel to check for his next ballot, if any, but he needed to rest for a minute first.

The warm air blew in through the windows. He closed his eyes and leaned back. It was going to be a beautiful day.

And this was only beginning.

Welcome to the Bahamas.

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*Is Raga Dikeskroner always going to give girls the win when they debate against guys in suits that look like they were previously worn by a gorilla?*

*Does Tucker Gallstone realize the nature of the person from whom she just received not only a win but 30 speaker points?*

*Are all the rounds at the Pups two miles away from the ballot table?*

*Do the people who think that texting is the same as selling your soul to the devil get charged for the unlimited data plan?*

*Will they text if their iPhones are able to use Verizon?*

**If we knew the answers to any of these questions, we wouldn't bother writing our next episode: "Is not knowing who the Kardashian sisters are the last measure of sanity in the United States today, or, Does everybody but us know this stuff, and can we keep it that way?"**