



Episode 7

Keep the Aspidistra *What?*

There is a palpable sense of excitement in the room when schematics are due. Not only is there the excitement of the upcoming round, but there is the hidden message of the skems themselves. And with each progressive round, the message becomes more and more important.

The first two rounds in any tournament are usually paired randomly. After that, the pairings are within brackets; that is, the two-ohs debate the other two-ohs, the one-ones debate the other one-ones, and the oh-twos debate the other oh-twos. By the fifth round, which is the final preliminary round at the Reconstruction Memorial, the pairings are becoming fairly complex, with breakdowns ranging from four-ohs to oh-fours. By the nature of the tournament beast, standings after the fifth round will determine who will go on to the elimination rounds, and the trophies and other accolades that accrue to those who go that distance. Depending on the number of participants, obviously anyone with a five-oh record is guaranteed to break, and the same is usually likewise true for any four-ones. But the three-twos, if any do break, will be fighting it out not with their records but with their speaker points. Every debater not only wins or loses a round, but gets an assignment of points from the judge as well. It's the high point earners who will be the ones to go on. The difference between breaking and not breaking is not only the difference between winning and losing, but the difference between spending the rest of the day as a non-participant, being on the outside looking in. And nobody wants to be there, if they can possibly help it.

At the Nighten Day table, the entire team, with the exception of Tarnish Jutmoll, is now assembled. In his place is Had Fleece, sitting next to Jasmine Maru. On Jasmine's other side is Camelia, who is reporting her experiences in her very first round in the Little Johnson, which has just ended. She is animated, for a Maru, as she describes what happened.

"My opponent dropped my entire case in his one A-R," she says. The 1AR is the first of two affirmative rebuttal speeches. "He didn't say a word about it. But it's not like he didn't have time. He used up two minutes, and when the judge signaled two minutes

remaining, he just sat down."

"So you won that one then, if your judge knows what he was doing. Who was he?"

Camelia shakes her head.

"You've got to know your judges," Jasmine says sternly. "You have to know who they are, how they judge, what they like and dislike."

Camelia lowers her eyes. "I am sorry," she says.

"You'll learn," Had says encouragingly. He smiles. "It's only your first round," he adds, to lighten the moment.

The Tarleton twins are seated next to Had, and next to them are Buglaroni and Morrie Prentice, playing some furious card game that requires them occasionally to make a noisy and violent lunge at a pile of cards between them. Next comes Cartier, whose eyes, behind her sunglasses, have not moved from Had Fleece since he sat down. The remaining three Nighten Day varsity LDers sit between her and Camelia.

In the introduction of our ensemble we have left those three other debaters nameless and characterless, which while easier for the reader, is not fair to these debaters. But a reader can only learn so much about so many at one time, and should not be overburdened with more names than the normal head can hold before that head is ready. Now, however, they can come on-stage, even though for the time being they must remain, alas, minor players.

Two of the three, for simplicity's sake, are ineluctably intertwined. Ellie DiBella and Trat Warner are seldom more than a foot apart. Ellie, sometimes known by the wags on the circuit as De Belle of Debate before she settled down with Trat, enjoyed an unusual reputation as the type of girl that actually dates, a rarity among forensicians, and a role that was eclipsed as much by her hooking up with Trat as the appearance of Cartier Diamond on the scene. With Cartier, the word dating didn't begin to describe it. Ellie usually manages to break into elimination rounds, while Trat has taken exactly two trophies -- and not particularly high-placement trophies at that -- in his entire debate career. Both Ellie and Trat are seniors, and have already decided to seek early admission at the same college. No one doubts that they will be buried together about eighty years from now.

Completing the triad is Griot Goldbaum, renowned as Nighten Day's smartest student. He too is a senior, and he's already racked up perfect 800s on his SATs. He's never slipped even a single point from high honors, including his phys ed grade, in his entire school career, starting at age two at the Nighten Day Care Center. He is short and chubby, with curly black hair sticking up from the top of his head like a tangle of holly bushes. A

long mandarin mustache gives him an air of oriental mystery, in keeping with his being the only full-blooded Inuit not only in Nighten Day, but in the town, the county, and perhaps even the state, with the exception of his immediate family.

More than anyone, Griot feels the mounting tension prefatory to the arrival of the schematics, as he is the circuit's resident skem diviner. Skem divination is a highly valued debate art, in which one attempts to determine one's record so far based on one's placement on the schematic. Given that the software that produces the schematics is both random and imperfect, only the most mystic souls ever reach true connection to the mana of the skem. Griot Goldbaum, above all others, has that innate mysticism.

By now, whenever anyone enters the cafeteria, every head turns in anticipation of the schematic's arrival. Occasionally an exceptionally loud wave of laughing or discussion boils up somewhere in the room, as tempers are at a high pitch of expectation. A chair falls over near the candy table, where local Andrew Johnson students are attempting to make a miserable profit from Skittles and Snickers bars, and someone gives an inappropriate yelp, and half the room shares in a nervous titter. Griot Goldbaum sits slouched in his chair reading *Gravity's Rainbow*, his eyes darting up regularly over the page to keep in touch with the consciousness of the room.

"I am not pleased by any of this!" The thundering contralto statement enters the cafeteria a moment before Amnea Nutmilk, her tangled hair surrounding her head like a surrealistic crimson halo.

Chesney Nutmilk is trailing in her wake, and he says something soothing to her, but his words have no effect.

"I am not here for my health," she says, again with room-filling thunder.

Chesney now appears embarrassed beyond redemption, and he slips behind his mother, attempting to disappear in her umbra. She continues marching through the cafeteria, heading toward the door at the opposite end of the room from the one through which she entered. She is about to pass through that door when a boy with a distinctly novice aura enters and bumps into her in a collision of train wreck proportions. The novice, who was bearing a sheaf of schematics, falls head first, the eight by ten sheets of paper flying into the room like the last autumn leaves in a flash hurricane. Mrs. Nutmilk stumbles backward, bumping against her son and tumbling into a heap on the floor while Chesney, arms outstretched, stands helpless above her.

"LD varsity schematics!" the novice cries as his chin meets the cafeteria floor, and a hundred teenagers come racing toward the scene.

Griot remains in his seat. "Bring me back one," he asks unnecessarily.

Had Fleece disappears into the melee that is scrambling to retrieve schematics, a nameless novice and Amnea Nutmilk from the cafeteria floor.

"He's cute," Cartier purrs softly.

"What?" Morrie Prentice asks.

Only Jasmine clearly hears what Cartier has said. The implication is clear, but she doesn't respond.

"Here we go," Had says, returning from the fray with half a dozen sheets. He passes them around the table, and everyone who's in the Reconstruction Memorial takes a look to see who they're debating next.

Griot carefully closes his Pynchon novel, dog-eared the right hand page. He tucks the book into his backpack and then lays a schematic on the table in front of him. He shuts his eyes and tilts back his head.

As the Nighten Day varsity debaters absorb what information is readily available on the schematic, each head slowly turns in Griot's direction. Amnea Nutmilk is still dusting off her frontispiece as a wave of students begins to draw towards the Nighten Day table, leaving her and Chesney to make their exit unnoticed. Within minutes, every LD varsity debater in the room is circling Griot Goldbaum, waiting, wondering.

His hands come down slowly to rest on the schematic. He opens his eyes.

The waiting is over.

"You're three-one," he says to Jasmine. "High speaker points. Ellie and Trat, you're both two-two. Good speaker points, not great. Trat dropped the first subpoint of his opponent's second contention."

"What about you, Griot?" Buglaroni asks.

Griot tilts an eyebrow at Buglaroni's novice effrontery. "Four-oh, Hamlet. Very high speaker points. Second seed in the tournament."

"What about me?" Had Fleece asks.

Griot runs his finger across the page. "Four-oh. Decent speaks. Your second judge didn't like your value premise."

"What about me, Griot?" someone asks from the crowd huddled around the table.

"What about me?" comes another voice.

"Hey, Griot! What about me?"

One by one he will answer their questions, and they will know their placements going into the final preliminary round, a sense of their total speaker points, and the strengths and weaknesses of their cases. The four-ohs will know they are going to break. The three-ones will know that this is the make or break round. The two-twos will hope against hope for a win with high speaker points.

And all Griot has before him is a list of who's debating whom, in what room and with which judge. Much of the schematic has been altered manually due to the failure of the computer to match everyone successfully. Yet Griot's magic is profound, as he has not called one standing, or one estimate of speaker points, incorrectly. He hasn't been wrong since sophomore year, when he learned the art of schematic divination from a graduating senior who was returning that year to his native Tibet.

"I'm in the A flight," Had Fleece says, standing up, looking down fondly at Jasmine.

"I'm in B flight," she responds.

"I know. I'll see you back here for lunch?"

She nods her head. She doesn't know how it has happened that Had Fleece is suddenly by her side, but she intends to do nothing to jeopardize her holding on to him.

"See you later," Cartier says to him.

He looks over at her, his expression unrevealing.

"See you later," he replies. He turns and walks out of the cafeteria.

Cartier watches him leave.

And Jasmine watches her watch him.

"Deal the cards," Buglaroni says to Mordred Prentice.

"Come with me," Jasmine says, grabbing Buglaroni's arm. "We've got work to do."

Will Griot Goldbaum's predictions once again prove correct?

Will Cartier Diamond find a way to steal Had Fleece from Jasmine Maru?

Will Amnea Nutmilk find true satisfaction at the Reconstruction Memorial?

Will HoraceMan, the superhero without any superpowers, ever leap a tall building in a single bound?

Will the Buffalo Bills win the National League pennant?

I don't know. The best place to look is in our next installment: "Fritters -- the Food that Follows You from Room to Room."