



Episode 8

Reservoir Hot Dogs

Had Fleece walks down the hall feeling the sense of confidence that usually starts kicking in for him on the second day of a tournament. According to Griot Goldberg, Had is undefeated in his first four rounds, which means that he is guaranteed to advance to the elimination rounds this afternoon. And Had Fleece is used to advancing to the elimination rounds. He is a senior, the captain of the Toulouse Lautrec team, and he can't remember that last time he participated in a tournament without taking home at least an Octofinal trophy.

For Had Fleece, that's just the way it is. He's used to it, and he expects it.

But Had is neither conceited nor pompous about his debating success, any more than he is conceited or pompous about his classical good looks or his consistent high honor roll average or his perfect SATs achieved in his junior year. Had doesn't even think about these things. In his own estimation, he is merely another schmuck trying to get through the day, but he's had a few lucky breaks. His lack of conceit and pomposity have made him the most popular boy in his class, another fact about which he is neither conceited nor pompous. In debate he works hard and he does well, which results he thinks are only to be expected.

Rank has its privileges, but the rarest of those privileges, and the most desirable, is the ignorance of rank.

At this point Had's mind is on the probable scenario of the afternoon's elimination rounds. Each one is sudden death, in front of a panel of three judges. After this many years, Had expects the usual suspects to break to elims, although there are always a couple of jokers in the pack who come out of nowhere and occasionally take home first place. Those jokers are too unpredictable to worry about, so Had concentrates on those usual suspects, the Masters of the Debate Universe, as Tom Wolfe might refer to them.

First, there's Had himself. That goes without saying.

Second, Griot Goldberg. Griot, Had thinks, is the smartest person to ever tread the debate

boards. Griot's intellect is swift and intuitive, always finding the core of any question, but he also possesses a mental filing cabinet of factual information that is inevitably impeccably accurate. Not only does he seem to know everything, he knows how to put his finger on where it's hiding in his brain, and he is able to instantly retrieve it. And if that isn't bad enough, Griot is something of a mystic, perhaps connected to a greater entity than Had is capable of recognizing.

Third, Chesney Nutmilk. He's not debating today, and there had been the rumor that he was dropping out altogether, but Had has seen him haunting the corners of the high school, pulled in his mother's considerable wake. If Chesney were to rejoin the circuit, the world of debate would be a harder place. Unless the mother factor had something to do with is.

The mother factor. Don't say that aloud too quickly.

Fourth, Kalima Milak, from Manhattan Lodestone. Toughest girl on the circuit, both in debating ability and life experience. She commuted over two hours on a variety of buses, subways and Conestoga wagons to get to her school every day from a foster home at the furthest reaches of Staten Island. Rumor had it that she was armed at all times, and there was no question that she was dangerous. Manhattan Lodestone might have a reputation as a milquetoast academy, but students like Kalima who fought for their lives to get in belied the school's pocket-protector image. If any doubt were held about the depth of her visceral reserves, they were removed at the sight of the apparently human ear she always wore as a necklace.

Fifth, and finally, at least among seniors, is Chip Dwindle. Representing Farnsworth Catholic, also in Manhattan, Chip (his real -- baptismal -- name) is the strongest of a brigade of all-male Farnsworth zealots who share a reputation as the fastest speakers in the northeast. Farnsworthians always dress similarly in blazers and chinos, a recognizable uniform of exception in the otherwise uniform debate sea of inclusion of dark gray and blue suits. To a degree they are interchangeable cogs in their school's attack on forensics, always running the same cases at blazing speed, leaving nothing behind but a whiff of incense and a hint of irony -- they are Catholic to the core.

The opponent Had will be facing now is unknown to him, from a school that only occasionally participates on his circuit. The schematic only tells him the school's name and the initials of the debater: Myrtle DD (on the same schematic Had is referred to as Toulouse HF). But if Had is four-oh, and there is no reason not to believe Griot's reading of the schematic, then Myrtle DD is four-oh too. In a five-round tournament, the pairings are high-low within brackets, which means that both debaters have the same records, but the computer pairs them with the highest speaker points debating the lowest speaker points within the bracket, the second highest with the second lowest, and so forth down to the middle, which is known as power protection. In theory, a tournament wants to pair the best two debaters in the final elimination round. While the first two pre-elimination rounds are paired randomly, subsequent pairings attempt to protect the best debaters from eliminating each other early on. While this may appear marginally unfair, it must be

understood that the assignment of speaker points, for which there is no rule and no agreement, is so arbitrary that fairness does usually prevail. As a matter of fact, often the assignments of win and losses are entirely arbitrary, which brings us to the issue we've been avoiding so far: the judge.

The judge assigned to his round on Had Fleece's schematic is unknown to him, which in itself is a bad sign. There are a few judges who appear regularly, either coaches or former debaters, and they generally have a clue about what they are doing, even if Had doesn't always agree with them. Additionally there are some parents that travel with their scions on a semi-regular basis, and while their decisions are less credible, they tend at least to be predictable, and theoretically they improve with each tournament as they learn more about what debate is all about. Had can adjust his style to any of those judges. But an unknown maverick can be anything: a parent judging for the first time, a bus driver, the phys ed teacher roped in by the coach out of sheer desperation. No training is required for judges, and little is given. Yet they are expected to follow forty-five minutes of serious argumentation over arcane philosophical issues, and not only assign a winner and a loser but assign the all-important speaker points to each. And to make matters worse, the speaker points range from 0 to 30, except everyone (except mavericks) know that they really range from 20 to 30, except on those occasions when they range from 1 to 50, when therefore some people think they range from 40 to 50 while others think they range from 35 to 50 (except mavericks, who think they range from 1 to 50), which in mathematical language means, don't even think about it. The speaker-point scale is always printed on the ballot, or at least the theoretical, longer point scale. What the judge makes of this is, well, up to the judge.

Had reaches his room and enters. His opponent is already there, sitting at a desk and prepping her case. She has written her name on the blackboard: "Aff Myrtle DD / Delia Demanda." Had nods at her in greeting and writes his own name next to hers: "Neg Toulouse HF / Had Fleece," then he sits down to prep his case. A moment later the door swings open with a crash and the judge appears in the doorway.

It is not a pretty sight.

"Is this room 27?" he asks. The number 27 is about the size of a groundhog on the door he has just banged open.

"Yes," Had responds.

"Good."

The judge waddles into the room as best he can, given his Jabba the Hutt girth. He is one of the largest human beings Had has ever seen, and certainly the largest one actually moving. He grunts and breathes loudly with each step until he reaches the back of the room, where he sighs deeply before attempting to squeeze himself into a student's desk, in which the chair and the desk are of one piece, and that piece not designed for Hutts. With some crackling and tinkling and further grunting, all of which goes on behind Had's

and Delia's backs, as they are both sitting facing the front of the room, there is eventually a subsidence of activity. Had and Delia exchange glances, acknowledging that they are both ready to begin, and Delia stands.

"Judge ready?" she asks.

"What?"

"Ready?"

"Oh, yeah. Sure. Whatever." His voice is breathy, reflecting the weight of his existence. Even sitting at rest is exhausting to him.

Delia begins reading her case, starting with a quotation, the usual beginning. Had sits at his desk with a yellow pad before him, and as soon as the quote is finished he begins noting everything she says. Her value premise. Her definitions. Her observations. Her contentions. Her subpoints. Her analysis. The game is won or lost on his knowing exactly what she has said and responding to it effectively. Delia is not a dangerously fast speaker, but she moves at a decent clip, and Had's Pilot pen is scratching across the page continually.

Which, as he sees out of the corner of his eye, is more than the judge is doing. The Hutt is half looking at Delia, half looking over her head. Once or twice his eyes close completely. He has no pad in front of him, and his sausagey fingers do not appear capable of holding a pen anyhow. He gives Delia no time signals, despite the fact that every piece of a debate needs to be strictly limited.

But Delia continues, unaffected by this presence in the rear of the room. Had has to admit that she's a decent debater, at least in terms of her case and presentation, although the real test is yet to come.

When she is finished Had jumps up for his three minutes of cross-examination. The two of them face the judge, and Had questions her on her case, exploring the weaknesses, preparing for his own case. The judge seems totally uninterested. When three minutes seem to have elapsed Had and Delia both sit down, and Had takes a few minutes of his allotted preparation time to get ready for his case.

The only redeeming factor in having a judge this uninvolved is that at least this is not a crucial round. If the two debaters are both four-oh, they will both advance to the elimination rounds despite who wins here. But that doesn't mean that either of them will let up. They both continue along, doing their best, trying to track their own timings, debating merely for the pleasure of debating, since the results will be at best unpredictable. Had does his negative speech and starts refuting the affirmative. There's another cross-examination, with Delia asking Had the questions this time. Then Delia rebuts. Then Had rebuts. Then Delia has a final short rebuttal, and it's over.

"Good round," Delia says, extending her hand to Had.

"Good round," he agrees. They shake hands in the ritual that is always repeated at the end of a round, good or bad, interesting or indifferent.

"Thank you for judging," Delia says in the direction of the Hutt.

"Thanks for judging," Had echoes.

The judge looks at them with a mystified expression. "Thanks for debating," he finally says. As the two debaters collect their things he finds his ballot and a pen and scribbles a few words, which are finished before they leave the room. As they exit, the second flight enters.

"Whew," Delia says when the door is closed behind them. "He didn't flow a word. Not one word."

"I thought he was asleep half the time," Had says. "So where's Myrtle?" he asks.

"Myrtle Beach. South Carolina."

"I've never debated anyone from South Carolina. You don't sound Southern."

"Is that good or bad?"

"Neither. Just a comment."

"I know how you Yankees are about Southerners," she says with a smile.

"Hi, Had." Cartier Diamond appears out of nowhere to stand right in front of him.

"Oh. Hello," Had says.

"See you later," Delia says, continuing down the hallway.

"Good round?" Cartier asks.

"Okay," Had says.

"I thought I'd come and look for you, too see if you wanted to go to lunch. I've got my car here, so we don't have to eat in the cafeteria."

Had hesitates. "Well, I was sort of thinking I'd wait for Jasmine. She's in the second flight."

Cartier sniffs. "Jasmine? She'll probably have lunch with her boyfriend."

"Her boyfriend?"

"Sure. Her boyfriend. You saw him. Hamlet Buglaroni."

"Buglaroni? But he's only a novice!"

"There's no accounting for taste, Had. Come on, let's go out. We have at least an hour. We can get something decent."

"I don't know..."

She takes his hand. "Come." She starts pulling him down the hallway.

And Had is not the first male to succumb to Cartier Diamond without a fight.

Will Had Fleece change his mind and keep his date with Jasmine Maru?

Are Jasmine and Hamlet secret lovers?

Will the Hutt judge appear in an electronically enhanced version of "Star Wars"?

Will the swallows be returning to Capistrano this year?

Are the stars out tonight (I don't know if it's cloudy or bright)?

Find out in our next installment: "Crab Cakes, We Hardly Knew Ye"