



The SPEISENSTEIN Files

7. Award of the Courts

The glittering foyer of the Hyatt Regency is busy. Along one side a wide notice welcomes the International Meeting of the ISHR. Below it is the registration desk, a long trestle table covered with green cloth arranged with alphabetical signs, behind which sit some half a dozen ladies in uniform. They are busy. From each of them a line of elbowing cardiologists reaches out like a peptide chain on a ribosome.

Speisenstein and I are sitting chatting in a corner and watching the world go by when, in through the revolving doors, arrives Witherington. Behind him appears a trolley laden with his personal effects, leaving him free to carry what we must assume to be his most precious possession. To my surprise it turns out to be a tennis racket.

“I didn’t know Witherington played tennis.”

Speisenstein snorts. “Thinks he does... Hi K.I.!”

Witherington walks over. “Seen Audley around?”

“Audley won’t be in ‘till tomorrow,” I tell him. “He had to be at some satellite and stayed over to see family.”

“Pity. I wanted a game with him.”

“I’ll hit with you,” Speisenstein offers.

“Well. You know how it is. Audley and I are about the same level and...”

“You must be pretty good,” I say.

“Good club level.” He is intent on making a minute adjustment to the strings of the racket with his fingers.

“Why don’t you play with young Joe Smith, my graduate student?” suggests Speisenstein. “He’s pretty good. Might be up to your standard.”

Witherington looks up. “You think so?”

“He’ll be OK. There he is. Hey Joe! Come over here. Dr Witherington would like a game of tennis. Are you game?”

“Sure,” nods Joe. “Whenever.”

Witherington gives the pony tail a long cool look. “I’ll pick you up in an hour’s time right here,” he says and disappears into the elevator.

“OK Joe,” says Speisenstein. “Don’t forget we meet at four to go over your presentation.”

Joe nods as he walks away.

“He is one of the finalists for the Young Researchers Award,” explains Speisenstein. “I’ll need to polish up his act.”

“Witherington must be a good player. Is Joe really up to that level?”

“Joe reached the finals of the Junior State Tournament. He was captain of the College team. Could have turned pro, but wanted to be a scientist.” Speisenstein’s features round into a look of piscine satisfaction. “He’ll kill him,” he adds.

Tea and biscuits are set out on a low table, and we are sitting back in our armchairs and setting the affairs of the ISHR aright when Witherington appears. He limps in evident pain toward us and slumps in an armchair with a grunt.

“Tea?”

“I think I’ll take a scotch.”

“Good match?” asks Speisenstein.

“He’s a fine player, that Joe,” says Witherington. “Impeccable serve, great forehand, perhaps a bit weak on the backhand. Thanks. No water.”

“So he stretched you.”

“My God he did! But experience counts, you know, in the long run. We played three sets and went to a tie-breaker each time. What a match!”

“You’re late,” says Speisenstein. “What the hell kept you?”

Joe sits on the edge of a chair. “I guess the tennis took a bit longer than expected.”

“So I hear. What the hell are you playing at, Joe. Your job was to kill him.”

“You didn’t tell me that, Doctor Speisenstein. I just thought he was some good friend of yours. And, well, he was a real nice guy and, you know, not so young as he had been. And real serious about his game. You know what I mean. I kinda couldn’t beat up a decent old fart like - excuse me, Sir - a real nice old gentleman like that.”

“Joe, you gotta lot to learn my boy. Let’s go and sort out your presentation. Got the slides?”

The Young Investigators’ Award Committee is in session. It is generally agreed that we have had a good session. But the truth is that, by now, we are jaded; and we are all hoping for a quick agreement. Through the window we can see the barman getting ready for the cocktail party.

Witherington, from the chair, has been at pains to give the other two members their say. I have spoken in favor of a European presentation. Audley has strongly contested this point of view. He is at this moment waxing lyrical about a young lady from Japan. Witherington and I exchange glances. Audley’s partiality to the fair sex is well known.

“Well gentlemen,” says Witherington. “I can see we are not going to find it easy. Let me put it this way.”

He then proceeds to summarize what Audley and I have been saying; but, in some uncanny fashion, taking twice as long as we did.

Audley and I are afflicted with a hypnotic nodding.

“The point is this,” Witherington appears to be concluding, “both your first candidates have shown a great deal of originality and merit; but, if I have understood correctly, there are some rather fundamental doubts in each case.”

Audley starts to tap his front teeth with a ball-point.

“If that is the case,” continues Witherington, “why don’t we consider your second choice; the boy Smith. OK, so his work may not have the brilliance of the other two; but it is sound and we can be sure that we are not making fools of ourselves. Remember what happened last time. My suggestion is...”

“To tell the truth, I could hardly follow a word he said,” interrupts Audley. “All those convoluted sentences and split infinitives. My God! Is that going to be the scientist of the future?”

“You’re right, Bill. The presentation wasn’t all it should be. But I think we all know who to blame for that. He is, from my own personal knowledge, a fine straightforward young man...”

Outside, the first guests are raising their glasses to their lips.

“Good work, Joe.”

“Well, I’m not sure I deserve it.”

“Course you deserve it, Joe” says Speisenstein. “Hell! You worked hard enough.”

“I sure am grateful for your help.”

“Joe, it was nothing. Just that little extra polish. Gotta learn to use the right phraseology. That’s all. Just need to give the right impression. You’d’ve won it anyway.”

He turns to me. “That’s right, isn’t it?”

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