



Episode 43

And You Call Yourself an Immortal?

It isn't easy being a debate god.

Homer had it right when he imagined divinity, at least as it applies to the debate universe. In the Iliad, while the armies of Agamemnon duke it out with Hector's assorted multitudes, the war moving back and forth between Troy and the ships, the gods also fight among themselves, sometimes championing a mortal (especially any mortal they may have sired), sometimes just making trouble for the fun of it.

So it is with the debate gods. While their mortal students engage on the field of combat, the gods move among each other waging their own battles, occasionally descending from Olympus to appear among their human charges, always eternal while their charges change from minute to minute, or at least with every new batch of novices replacing every old batch of graduating seniors. Once in a while a new god joins the pantheon, occasionally from spontaneous generation but usually from within the ranks of the mortals. In either case, being a god isn't all that it's cracked up to be. Like Homer's version of Ares, you can get cut up pretty badly when you venture forth into the real world, but also like Ares, the good news is that you are immortal, and you will live to cause new mischief another day. Ultimately, the problems that come with being a god are pretty much the same as those that face the mortals, the only difference being that the gods are forever.

Which is why Mr. Lo Pat is not happy. As a debate god, he is immortal. But like an Olympian god, he is not exempt from the petty woes of humanity. And at the moment, he is beset by petty, human woes.

"I am not pleased by this," he announces. Like any god, he measures actions as they affect him, even when he is neither their cause nor their affect.

Lisa Torte does not respond. They are in the teachers' cafeteria of Lodestone Technical. It is seven-thirty in the morning, about half an hour before school begins. Other teachers come and go, mostly to collect coffee, doing little more than nodding at their two forensic colleagues.

"You should have talked to me first," Mr. Lo Pat goes on. "I had high hopes for you at Lodestone, Miss Torte."

She sips coffee from a mug on which are printed the words, Narrative Isn't.

"I know you were planning to go on for your masters," he says. He doesn't look directly into her eyes as he speaks. "That will be unlikely if you're teaching full-time, as you must at Veil of Ignorance."

"I can still get my masters," she says.

"How?" He stretches the word out, as if to deny the likelihood of an answer.

"I don't know. But I can."

"You could if you were here. I would have supported you in that. I could have arranged your schedule to allow the necessary days off, and the requisite amount of studying time."

"I am a licensed teacher, Mr. Lo Pat. I can teach. Veil of Ignorance offered me the job, and the debate team. How could I turn down that sort of opportunity?"

Mr. Lo Pat sighs, then shakes his head. "You are so naive, Lisa."

She furrows her brow. "Naive?" No one twenty-two years old likes to be called naive. No one any age likes to be called naive.

"They're using you. They've got a problem that needs a quick fix. You are the quick fix. For a short while everything will be fine, and they'll let you do whatever you want. But once the Obo-mash brouhaha dies down, they will look at you differently. You will have a free ride for a year or two, but after that..." He shakes his head again.

"You're just saying that," she responds.

"These are priests, Lisa. You can't trust them."

Mr. Lo Pat whirs over to the coffee-maker, and helps himself to a half cup of decaf. He is very fond of the parts of his body that still work, and he does his best to treat them well. But he will occasionally allow himself a petty indulgence such as this.

"You're not being fair to them or to me," Lisa Torte says to his back.

He spins around quickly and faces her again.

"Not being fair? Look what they did to Seth!"

"They didn't do anything to Seth. Seth did it to himself."

"That seems to be the party line on this, but I don't agree with it. You forget, Seth also used to work for me. Say what you will about the man's private life, he is an excellent educator, both in the classroom and as a coach. He made a mistake that in no way affected his team, but rather than rallying around him, they tossed him to the wolves."

"You didn't expect them to do nothing, did you?"

"Not nothing. But they could have been more discreet. Instead, they fired him practically before his plane landed back in New York. And they replaced him with you even before the seat at his desk was cold. I don't like that. They could have at least consulted me."

Lisa raises an eyebrow. "Why would they do that?" she asks.

Mr. Lo Pat narrows his eyes. "If not me, who?" he replies.

Which is quite the correct response for a god, debate or otherwise.

"Has anyone heard from Seth?" Lisa asks meekly, changing the subject.

"I have, of course."

"How is he?"

"How do you think he is?"

"What's he doing?"

"He's not teaching at Veil anymore. You're doing that for him. You start on Monday?"

Lisa nods. "Tomorrow is my last day at Lodestone."

"I was expecting your assistance at the tournament," he says. Manhattan Lodestone's Originalva-ganza Tournament looms closely. "It will be very difficult without you."

"I'd still love to help," she says.

"That will not be necessary. I will make do." Even a god can sound like a martyr.

"Mr. Lo Pat, I want to help."

He nods. "Very well." And a god is always magnanimous.

He whirs back from the coffee machine.

"What I really don't understand," he says, "is how you intend to handle all those Veil policy de-baters. You know nothing about policy." And a god is occasionally cruel.

"I know more than nothing."

"But your own training is Lincoln-Douglas."

"I was hoping to perpetuate policy while adding LD."

"If you try to bring LD to Veil of Ignorance, the ceiling will probably cave in."

"It's worth a try. There are probably plenty of kids who would rather do LD than policy, but Seth never gave them the chance."

"Seth has trained those students," Mr. Lo Pat says. "The reaction to LD will be Pavlovian. All you will have to do is utter the term, and they will be on you like mongrel dogs. Mark my words. They are policy people to the core, and they are trained to believe that any form of debate other than policy is tantamount to heresy."

"Then it's about time they learned otherwise."

"Did you explain all this to the priests who hired you?"

"They never asked."

"I didn't think they would. Anyhow, you still do intend to allow policy?"

"Of course. They have a big team. They should go on."

"With you as their coach."

"With me as their coach."

"Well, Lisa, I wish you well, of course."

"You don't make it sound as if you wish me well at all, Mr. Lo Pat."

"But I do. Seriously. You can always come to me for help and advice if you need it, no matter what happens. I'm behind you a thousand percent."

"I'd settle for a hundred."

Mr. Lo Pat never looks comfortable in his wheelchair, and he probably never is comfortable. No one knows what pain, if any, he feels from his disability. Few people even know what his disability is.

"I want you to leave Lodestone as a friend, Ms. Torte -- Lisa. Regardless of what we've said here today. I would like to think of you as a former protégé, someone I have introduced to the forensic world, and made a place for in it."

Lisa Torte looks at him wide-eyed. Lisa was the NFL national LD champion half a dozen years ago, before she had ever even heard of Mr. Lo Pat. Rhetoric was one of her areas of study in college.

One doesn't expect hubris from a god.

"It's nice of you to say that, Mr. Lo Pat. I appreciate it."

"Excellent. Well, then, good luck, Lisa."

"Good luck, Mr. Lo Pat."

He whirs his wheelchair out of the cafeteria and into the hallway.

It isn't easy being a debate god.

Then again, having no sense of reality isn't easy either, even if you're not a debate god.

Will Lisa Torte survive without Mr. Lo Pat's special tutelage?

Will the Manhattan Lodestone Originalvaganza Tournament succeed without her?

Is anyone really going to want to fly an airplane with over 800 seats?

Where does Condi Rice buy her traveling clothes?

Why does Garth Brooks still wear that hat?

Even if we knew the answers, we wouldn't publish them in our next episode: "The Wee Kirk: Small Scottish church or young starship captain?"