

Episode 56

You Da Man, Girlfriend!

The whirr of the electrically powered wheelchair can be heard half a hall away.

"If he even thinks of coming into this room I am going to extract his brain and feed it to the termites," Kalima Milak mutters.

Tensions always run high in the days before a tournament.

Kalima Milak, Manhattan Lodestone's toughest cookie, and for that matter, possibly the toughest cookie on the entire debate circuit between Manchester-on-the-Sea and Guam-of-the-Tree Snake, has been put in charge of registration for the OriginalVaganza. For the last two weeks she has fielded innumerable faxes, e-mails, phone calls and snail-mails from around the country. If it were simply a matter of school coaches signing up their team members, it would be no big deal. But debate teams make traveling rock stars look like nuns settling into the chapel at their home convent. Forget the tray of shrimp in the dressing room, or the need to remove all the red M&Ms: these folks have real idiosyncracies.

Kalima, nearly six feet tall and two hundred pounds, is a not unprepossessing young woman. Her character has been forged in more fires than the uncomplicated flames of forensics; she has enough life experience to start her own cable network. And although she really doesn't wear a human ear hanging from the gold chain around her neck, it certainly looks like one. Kalima commutes to Lodestone from the most obscure rain forests of Staten Island, traveling land, sea and air, using more than one conveyance for each. It takes her longer to get to school in one day, round trip, than most students spend in transit in an entire semester. She uses that time to study, a prodigious effort that magnifies almost beyond comprehension her already awesome innate intelligence. She is rumored to have, among other things, a husband, a child, a police record, and an incurably bad attitude.

Except that the bad attitude part isn't exactly a rumor.

Only one person at Lodestone, including the entire faculty, is not afraid of Kalima. And that one person is Mr. Lo Pat.

"Peter Stallone!"

Mr. Lo Pat's voice thunders along the corridor, lassoing its prey a hundred yards away. Kalima exhales. Good. He isn't looking for her. The whirring sound diminishes as the wheelchair continues off into the distance.

Poor Peter Stallone, Kalima thinks. But then again, poor Kalima Milak. She's got her own problems to contend with.

Sixty-seven schools have pre-registered for the Vaganza. Sixty-seven, each with varying numbers of teams, coaches and judges. And it is Kalima's job to get everything straightened out and entered into the computer. She is sitting in Mr. Lo Pat's tiny office next to his debate classroom; he is one of the few teachers in the forensics universe to have not one but two offices, the other one being connected to the administration area. Why he needs two offices is hard to understand, and he never explains it. He takes what is his due, and does not expect others to question it.

Kalima is sitting in front of Mr. Lo Pat's Macintosh Powerbook, the one he uses for running the Tab Room operation software. Known as TRM, short for This Runs Murkily, the software -- written by convicts in a Georgia prison -- is notoriously pesky, which is why tab room personnel never attempt to operate it without help from the Supreme Being. And if the S.B. is unavailable, any available lares and penates will have to do. Even simply turning the program on required that Kalima start up the Powerbook in the Extensions-off mode, which is a Macintosh conundrum comparable in humans to waking up without a cup of coffee: you can get through the day -- maybe -- but don't expect to experience anything resembling satori. All Kalima is trying to do is enter the names of the teams, or more specifically, change the names of the teams already entered. Half the times she does it, she screws something up, because This Runs Murkily does, indeed, run murkily. She crashes one time in five.

What makes matters more irritating is that none of the sixty-seven schools, most of which submitted their final names last week, seem to understand the meaning of the word final. They are now sending in their more-final names, and Mr. Lo Pat has explained to Kalima that the most-final names will be coming in starting Wednesday, but it won't be until Thursday that the final-final names come in, followed at last on Friday by the real names, few if any of which, aside from the Round Robinskis, will be the same as the final-final names.

The more-final names have arrived in a variety of media, but because of the peskiness of This Runs Murkily, the electronic ones cannot be copied and pasted in. This is driving Kalima insane, because in debate, no one has a normal name. There are no Smiths and Joneses; they are all Tarnish Jutmolls and Chip Dwindles and Griot Goldbaums, names of either no known ethnic origin or, more usually, mixed ethnic origin. Siouxan first names, Kwakiutl last names, or nice neat first names like Tim followed by endless Tamil last names that simply defy correct spelling, even by Tamils. Most of the coaches submitting these names can't spell them, and every revised entry, even of the entrants that haven't changed, nevertheless spells their names differently.

"This really bites," Kalima Milak growls at the Powerbook, knowing that Mr. Lo Pat has regularly misspelled her own name with the same frequency when he's made tournament registration submissions.

A head pops into the office. Peter Stallone.

"Meeting in five minutes," he says, then disappears.

Kalima curses. Meeting in five minutes? She really needs that.

And then she hears the infernal whirring again. Her radar can pick it up three halls away, and once again it is approaching this little office. But this time it does not pass.

"Hello, Kalima."

"Hello, Mr. Lo Pat." She does not look up from the fax entry in her hand that seems to make no sense. Are these people arriving Thursday night or are they not? Do they want one hired judge or none?

Aaaargh!

"We are having a meeting in five minutes."

"I'll be there."

"How is it going?"

"It's going."

"Any real problems?"

"The hired judges, mostly."

Mr. Lo Pat nods. "Ah, yes. The hired judges."

The hired judges. These are the college students that every tournament tries to line up to provide a solid pool of neutral judges. They are especially important in policy, where any judges are harder to round up than LD simply by the stylized nature of the activity. The hired judges are paid in the neighborhood of a hundred dollars, and often they are put into position to fill in for a team that can't provide its own judges, which in turn pays that hundred dollars to the tournament. A well-run tournament has more judges than are accounted for, but that is no easy matter, as the college students who provide this pool have all the baggage of the normal college student, com-

pounded by the baggage of the normal ex-debater, compounded by the baggage of what is usually college-level debate on the policy side. Just try to pin these people down. Just try. They'll get you, my pretty. And your little dog too.

Mr. Lo Pat points his wheelchair toward the classroom. There are two doors in the little office, one to the classroom, the other out to the hallway. "We're going to discuss Vaganza assignments," he says. "Are you ready?"

"Let me just save this and back up."

"Yes. Always back up." He rolls off into the debate classroom.

"Yes, Mr. Bionic Coach, always back up," Kalima repeats, but only after he has rolled out of ear-shot. She growls once again at the Powerbook. "Come to Mama," she says, rubbing its belly, so to speak, as she drags and drops the preliminary information file to the floppy disk. "Do it, do it, do it..."

It does it, and it doesn't crash.

"Thank you, Masked Man."

She stands and follows Mr. Lo Pat into the classroom.

Most of the Lodestone team is assembled, and given the fact that there are enough of them to successfully invade Bosnia, seats are at a premium. Nearly a hundred students are squeezed into an area meant for thirty, but Kalima walks straight up to the front of the room where an empty seat is waiting for her.

People know better than not to leave a seat for Kalima Milak.

Mr. Lo Pat begins. "We are going to make the job assignments for the Vaganza now," he says in a relatively soft voice.

The room, which has been marked by small independent pockets of conversation, immediately grows silent. As mortals, they know better than to talk while their god is also talking.

"All freshman, from every activity, are runners. Does everyone understand what that means?"

There are no takers to answer his question.

"No questions? You all understand completely what to do? Mr. Kaneagoiyam?"

Mr. Lo Pat has picked a name not completely at random. Kaneagoiyam is a Lincoln-Douglas novice sitting at the floor in the back of the room, staring out the window.

"Huh?" Mr. Kaneagoiyam remarks sagely.

"Just as I thought," Mr. Lo Pat says. "Runners, children, run. They are at the bottom of the tournament food chain. No matter who tells you to do something, you do it, no matter what it is. Runners, do you all understand that?"

This time there is a murmur of assent throughout the room.

"Good. The next job is the judges' lounge." He names four students, all sophomores. "Your responsibility is to see that the cornucopia in the judges' lounge never shows the slightest hint of depletion. You are to make the miracle of the loaves and fishes look like the merest parlor trick. Do you understand that?"

"Yes, Mr. Lo Pat," the four say, nearly in unison.

"Excellent. Next there is the candy table." He lists eight names. "You can take turns at this, on your own schedule, but I will expect at least four of you there at all times. The prices are fixed, and there is no bargaining. This is not a Third World bazaar, or a New England antiques fair. The prices are set, and they are not up for discussion. You will sell soda, candy, flow pads, Post-Its, pens and tee shirts. Understand?"

Again, a nearly-in-unison affirmative response.

The next job, not a great one, is selling sandwiches to the debaters. Fairly simple, fairly easy to assign. Following that, there is the naming of the major domo to the tab room, the individual whose job it is to see to every whim of the tab team, from the continuous fetching cups of coffee to picking up their dry cleaning and vacuuming their living room carpets.

Then, finally, the job that is at the top of the hierarchy: the ballot table.

"The most important job for students at any tournament is the running of the ballot table<" Mr. Lo Pat says. "You must make sure that all the ballots are picked up by the judges immediately after the schematics are posted, and that every round begins immediately after the ballots are picked up, and that every ballot returns to the table immediately after every round ends. The runners are at your disposal for this. You are like generals in the army, with only one Supreme Commander." There is no need for Mr. Lo Pat to identify who the Supreme Commander might be. The Lodestone team is quite clear on the identity of their Ike. "I will be putting Ms. Milak in charge of the ballot table."

No one is surprised at this. Kalima is, after all, a recognized Master of the Debate Universe and, after Mr. Lo Pat, the most feared person at Lodestone. If she can't run a tight ballot table, no one can.

"Any questions?" Mr. Lo Pat asks. There are no hands flung into the air. "This meeting, in that case, is adjourned."

Mr. Lo Pat is the first to exit the room, whirring out the door and down the hallway. None of this students even think of moving until the sound of his battery has receded completely. Only then is there a classic scramble as too many kids try to get out too few doors at the same time.

Only Kalima remains seated, and silent. She will not admit it, but she is very pleased. She had assumed she would get the top spot, but she wasn't sure until now. But it has been stated, and that is that. Kalima Milak will be running the ballot table. After Mr. Lo Pat, Kalima Milak will be the most powerful person at the Manhattan Lodestone Original Vaganza.

She finally smiles. All is right with the world. She caresses the apparent ear dangling from her necklace, then stands and returns to the wonderful world of tournament registration.

Will Kalima rule the Vaganza with an iron hand?

Will Kalima rule the Vaganza with an iron ear?

Will all the registrations be correct when the teams arrive on Friday?

Is Peter Stallone doing something on the sly?

Was the Nostrumite at the latest Britney Spears sanity test?

He who laughs last laughs alone in our next episode: "Stalking: Crime against celebrity safety or natural technique for creating celery?"