



Episode 72

Houston, We Have a Problem

At ten-thirty on Friday night, Lisa Torte is starting to hate herself.

Why couldn't she have stood up to Mr. Lo Pat? Sure, she promised to help him with the Vaganza, but that was when she was still working at Lodestone, before she got the job at Veil. As a result of her spinelessness she has spent the entire day today running around, doing dogsbody errands that any novice runner could have performed, and she is beginning to believe that Mr. Lo Pat is punishing her for abandoning him -- which is probably how he sees it -- more than simply using her services as he otherwise would have, if she had never fled his coop.

One does not abandon debate gods lightly, unless one wishes to have the debates god return the favor. That is why she agreed to honor her commitment, even though the commitment in any logical analysis was null and void. The last thing she wanted was to make an enemy of Mr. Lo Pat. Leaving Lodestone was bad enough; making it worse was unimaginable. Who knows what horrors the man could inflict on her from a position as enemy?

But as the long day winds down, begun with the organization of the judging pool, through filling in as a judge herself on a policy round (a deliberate slice of malice on Mr. Lo Pat's part?) through driving out to the caterers in Queens to collect the swedish meatballs that had been left behind, she now regrets her decision. What could he do to her in the future that would be worse than the way he's been treating her today?

The school bus taking the team back to Veil will be leaving any minute. Everyone is finished their rounds, with the exception of Invoice O'Connor, who should be out any minute now. It is unusual that all the Policy teams have concluded their first day before the LDers, but not so unusual that anyone has done anything but remark its occurrence. It has happened before, and it will certainly happen again.

Too bad no one has thought to find out why it was happening today...

Lisa is sitting in the Manhattan Lodestone main office with Kalima Milak and Peter Stallone. They are idly chatting about the unexpected arc of Jim Carrey's film career and what colleges everyone is applying to and who's going up to the Algren-on-the-Beach tournament in two weeks and how the Round Robinskis are doing at the Vaganza. Mr. Lo Pat is in the inner sanctum of the tab room, which has taken over the principal's office. No one other than Mr. Lo Pat has gone in or out of that office all day. Ballots have been placed in an inbox on this side of an opaque pass-through window, which has opened occasionally for a dark, taloned hand to reach out and collect the papers, slamming the window shut immediately after. Neither Lisa nor Kalima nor Peter is upset by this situation; they are all Vaganza veterans, and have encountered Mr. Lo Pat's hand-picked tab crew in the past.

A polician from Veil comes through from the hallway, into the office. "Are we going to be leaving soon?" he asks Lisa.

She shrugs. "As soon as Invoice shows up. Is everybody on the bus?"

"Yeah."

"Keep them there. It can't be more than another five minutes. We have all the other LD ballots. Invoice's is the last round to finish."

The polician returns whence he came as the inner door to the principal's office opens and Mr. Lo Pat whirrs out.

"We are missing two LD ballots," he announces unnecessarily. "Kalima. Please send a runner down to see if the round is over and to pick up the ballots. The white sheets only, if necessary."

The Vaganza ballots consist of three sheets of paper, white on top, then yellow, then pink. The judge's comments on the top white sheet carbon through the other two sheets. If necessary, the top sheet, with the winner and loser clearly marked, can be submitted to the tab room while the judge continues writing the critique on the yellow sheet, a practice referred to as white-sheeting.

"All the runners have gone home," Kalima says.

Mr. Lo Pat's face darkens. "Did I release all the runners? Has the tournament ended today, and someone forgotten to tell me about it?"

These remarks are left unanswered.

"Since there is no one else to do it, would you mind going yourself and seeing what is going on up there? It is room two-forty, and the judge's name is Dr. Tango."

Kalima quickly rises to perform the errand.

"Who is Dr. Tango?" Mr. Lo Pat asks Lisa as Kalima disappears out the door.

"A parent, I think," Lisa says. "I don't know the name offhand."

Mr. Lo Pat spins his wheelchair around. "I want those ballots as soon as they're available." He whirrs back into the principal's office.

Lisa turns to Peter. "Do you know who Dr. Tango is?"

Peter shakes his head. "I don't know any of the LD judges," he says. "I have enough problems with the Policy judges."

Lisa smiles. "So I guess you're not interested in changing over to LD, then."

"Not exactly." Furrows appear in his forehead. "Rumor has it that you're going to drop policy at Veil and have them all do LD exclusively."

"The rumor is not true," Lisa says. "I'm perfectly willing to do both. I'm just trying to introduce a little variety into their humdrum lives. What exactly have you heard about this?"

"Well, let's see. I know that Tara and Invoice are no longer a team, which is like separating Smith from Wesson, and that Invoice is doing LD here, and that they're trying to teach you Policy but you haven't gotten the hang of it yet, and they're wondering if next you're going to try to introduce Speech, at which point they'll burn you in effigy."

"Hmmm. I was thinking that a little mandatory prose/poetry might shake them up a little bit."

"They'd rather play fairies in the middle school production of Iolanthe."

"I was thinking of that too, actually."

They are interrupted by the return of Kalima Milak, with Had Fleece and Tilde Hyphen-Emdash in tow behind her.

"Where's Mr. Lo Pat?" Kalima asks. Her expression is grim.

Lisa tilts her head toward the principal's office. "Back in there."

"You'd better get him."

Lisa doesn't hesitate. She jumps up and knocks loudly on the pass-through window. It rises up swiftly a moment later.

"Mr. Lo Pat? We need you."

"Do you have the ballots?" Mr. Lo Pat's voice comes through from the office.

"Not yet."

The window slams shut, the office door opens, and Mr. Lo Pat whirrs through.

"What is it now?" he asks angrily. "Has there been a nuclear war in room two forty? I can't imagine any other reason for this sort of delay."

Lisa turns to Kalima, who turns to Had and Tilde. With Had's blond all-American good looks and Tilde's Bride of Dracula style, they are night and day personified.

"The judge in two-forty is really whacked out," Tilde begins.

"Dr. Tango?" Mr. Lo Pat says.

"Whatever. She, like, has no idea what she's doing."

"We just finished A flight," Had continues. "She wasn't timing the round, so everything just went on and on."

"We did maybe ten minute cross-exes," Tilde adds. "The one A.R. went on for, like, fifteen minutes."

"And you let this happen?" The threat is implicit.

"We didn't have much choice," Had says, standing his ground. "She is the judge."

"But she obviously has no idea what she is doing!"

"Maybe. But neither of us wanted to be the one to tell her that."

Mr. Lo Pat takes a deep breath and refrains from killing the messenger. "Has the second flight started yet?"

"Just a minute ago," Had says.

"These two were just coming out of the round when I got there," Kalima says.

"Which means that the B flight is just beginning." Mr. Lo Pat turns to Lisa. "Come with me."

Mr. Lo Pat whirrs into action, barreling past Kalima and the others out into the corridor, with Lisa close on his heels -- or, more correctly, wheels.

"What are you going to do?" she asks him.

"We will time the round for her. It's too late to stop it now, but at least we can keep it going so that we get out of here at a reasonable hour."

"That's one of my kids from Veil in there debating," Lisa says. "We're never going to get home."

The ride in the elevator to the second floor seems interminable, but finally they are at the door of room two forty. They enter without knocking.

Invoice O'Connor is standing in the front of the room, obviously just concluding his opening speech. A Round Robinski is sitting nearby, taking notes, getting ready for her cross-examination. And halfway toward the rear of the room is the person who must be Dr. Tango.

Mr. Lo Pat and Lisa Torte take positions in the room, Mr. Lo Pat pulling a stopwatch out of his jacket pocket and indicating its presence to Invoice and the Round Robinski, while Lisa sits next to the judge, the good cop to Mr. Lo Pat's bad cop.

The round continues apace, that pace, at last, being the correct pace.

When her mind is clear of the problem of the evening's lateness, Lisa is more than impressed by Invoice's performance. She knew he would be a good debater, given that he is one of the top politicians in the country. But she didn't think he would be this good, not at LD, not his first time. But he manages to wage a battle royale with the Robinski that clearly goes his way, at least in Lisa's eyes. But she may be wrong; it is difficult sometimes to judge one's own debaters. One's personal involvement is so high that it is hard to separate the objective wheat from their forensics chaff.

When the round ends, the two debaters thank each other and the judge, and quickly disappear from the room.

The moment of truth has arrived.

"You are Dr. Tango," Mr. Lo Pat begins.

Dr. Tango nods. She is a middle-aged woman in a business suit, with fly-away blonde hair and wide black-rimmed glasses and a half smile on her bemused face.

"Yes," she responds brightly.

"Do you have your ballot from the first round?"

She nods and holds it up in the air.

"Please hand it to Ms. Torte."

Lisa takes the ballot. The winner and loser and their speaker points are marked correctly. She nods at Mr. Lo Pat.

"And who do you think won this round?" Mr. Lo Pat asks.

"I'm not really sure yet," Dr. Tango muses. "Who do you think one it?"

"Dr. Tango," Mr. Lo Pat says, "my opinion in this is not the one that matters. Would you please tell me who you think won?"

Dr. Tango ruminates for a minute or so. "I guess... the boy. What do you call him? The Aff? I could understand what he was saying better than the other one. That deontology business was, well, a little de trop. I'm a psychiatrist, by the way, and I--"

"And how many speaker points would you award to each of them?" Mr. Lo Pat interrupts.

"Oh, I don't know. Twenty-seven, twenty-eight?"

"Hand Ms. Torte your other ballot, please."

Dr. Tango does so.

"Ms. Torte, please award the win to Mr. O'Connor, with twenty-eight points, giving his opponent twenty-seven points, and run the ballot down to the tab room."

Lisa writes in the numbers, jumps up from her seat, and literally does run the ballot down to the tab room.

"And now, my good woman," Mr. Lo Pat says, whirring up closer to Dr. Tango, so that they are almost knee to knee. "You have cost me nearly an hour of my life. An hour I did not wish to lose."

I do not know who you are, and I do not know where you are from, but I will make it my business to find out."

Dr. Tango's wide eyes widen even further behind her glasses. "I'm not sure--"

"And when I find out," Mr. Lo Pat continues, ignoring her, "I will make it clear to everyone in forensics who you are and what you have done. And at that point," he says, his voice rising, "you will be banned from debate for the rest of your life."

"But my son--"

"You are going to leave this building now, and you are not going to return. Not tomorrow, not Sunday, not ever. Your name will be removed from the judging pool, as if it had never existed. You will tell your team whatever you wish to tell them, but if I see you on these premises again, they will all immediately forfeit the entire tournament." Mr. Lo Pat's face is inches away from Dr. Tango's. "Do we understand each other?"

The woman is speechless. Moisture is beginning to appear in her eyes.

"Good," Mr. Lo Pat says, whirring away from her. He raises his right arm, and points a stubby index finger toward the door. "Now leave!" His voice rips through the room. "Leave!" he repeats. "Before I lose my temper."

The woman pops up out of her chair and scampers out of the room leaving a trail of sobs behind her. Mr. Lo Pat remains alone to consider what has just happened. He sits stonily in his chair, staring at the open door, listening as the woman's footsteps disappear down the corridor. And then he allows himself the indulgence that any debate god would grant himself at this point.

A little smile forms on his lips, and as he recalls the path the first tear took down the woman's painted cheek, Mr. Lo Pat silently congratulates himself on another job well-done.

Will Dr. Tango ever judge in this town again?

Does Mr. Lo Pat truly enjoy torturing the weak?

Is Invoice on a winning roll?

Do we really have to start caring about that Cyrus person?

When Mulder and Scully get hungry, do they eat X-filets?

You'll never know from reading our next episode: "Oxymorons: Contradictory phrases or slow-witted cattle?"