

The Con

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Stop Me If You've Heard This One

So this fat old nerd, two genius fangirls, a Klingon and his brother, and Lady Susan Vernon get on an elevator. The Klingon and his brother both glance at the older woman, but their hopes and eyes rest on the female fen—vivacious, pretty Chelsea, in particular. It is a truth universally acknowledged that an SF fan in possession of a Klingon outfit must be in need of a girlfriend.

Elsewhere, the athlete makes her way to the hotel, and Miss Moon settles into her room.

Patti Washington greets me, and her friend Chelsea brims over with recognition. Patti is the obvious genius; we all know that, but I've learned not to underestimate Chelsea. Beneath the bubble

of babbling Barbie, she can at least keep pace with her friend. They've been coming to this con since they were fanbrats of fourteen. They must be ready to graduate high school, assuming Patti hasn't fast-tracked her way through the tedium of formal education and started her PhD. I recall her that first year, sitting and talking to a science panel headed by Vernor Vinge, like the boy Jesus at the temple.

Thomas, the older brother, eyes Chelsea, and he's about to speak when Mark, through his gruff alien exterior, squeaks out, "*wanI' tlv!*"

Patti arches an eyebrow. "Do you want to buy a vowel?" she asks.

So Mark actually *speaks* Klingon. He looks strangely uncomfortable in the make-up, the latex ridges on his forehead and the costume, a bit of space armour over basic black and, even here, he's anomalous if anything can be. *Star Trek's* Klingons as costume are in a lull just now. Most cosplayers run either with the trendy or the terribly obscure. Some make obscurity a virtue, in fact, with recognition constituting a secret handshake. Maybe Mark just wants to be a warrior. I don't think he's been much of a warrior in his short life.

"I was, I mean..." He stumbles, awkwardly, for words. "That's good. See, I was trying to welcome you to the con, but I don't know a Klingon word for con. Um. So I went with *wanI'...* Yeah."

The elevator stops on seventh. Chelsea's smile is not unfriendly. Patti says, "It's a big universe. I'm

sure there's a planet where what you said makes perfect sense."

"We'll see you boys around the *wanl'*," says Chelsea. She precedes Patti out the door, raising her arms against the incoming crowd, clearing the way for her friend through a baffled family of Mundanes and a smallish creature in a hood, a sort of walking fish with salmon-skin and well-crafted cat-eyes. Patti walks confidently but, with her twisted hobble, awkwardly. The Mundanes and the fish-creature enter the elevator. The fish tickles something in the back of my brain, but I cannot recall from whose story it comes.

"Nice one," says Thomas, smugly, to his embarrassed alien brother.

"I thought I'd stand out," says Lady Susan, eyeing the hooded fish. The Mundane parents have that cornered look, but their young daughter seems amused.

The light dawns and I ask, "Are the Austenites meeting at this hotel?"

"Janeites." Lady Susan nods. "But we're not nearly so many as your group."

"So, are you Lady Susan Vernon?"

She curtsies. "Very good."

"You'll have a lot of company in costume this weekend." I've had my share of failure around women but, next to the brothers, I'm smooth as a Peak District lake. I glance again at the fish-creature. It has nostril slits near the top of its face; I

suspect that's how the wearer actually sees out—or rather, one wearer, for its four legs suggested two smallish people had crammed into the outfit. Judging from the placement of the arms, they must belong to the cosplayer at the back. A marvel of costume engineering, and damned familiar. It came from no movie, I'm now certain, but when I file through SF novels and short stories I cannot find a match. Am I experiencing extraterrestrial aphasia? I shiver, just a little, and much will transpire before I remember. *Best Original* always produces the most fascinating costumes at the masquerade. I expect this one will take best in show, up against various Avengers and cumoms, and video game characters that I won't recognize.

"You know, she's one of Miss Austen's most consistently underrated characters," says Lady Susan. "However did you identify me?"

"Don't sound so surprised," I say. She's beginning to sound like someone else I know, and the coincidence of *her* gathering being crammed into the hotel space left unoccupied by the SF con feels like a plot device from a Regency novel.

She reads my con badge. "Telfryn. That is a most interesting name."

"Telfryn Tyde," I say, extending a hand, and wonder if that violates Regency etiquette. We wish each other well, and she exits onto the eighth floor.

Mark the Klingon came looking for love. *Nga'chuq*. So did his brother. He started on his makeup hours

ago, while I sat in a church basement with Denise Moon. He has a plan. He hopes that, as he circulates Friday, he might, from behind the safety of his mask, draw the curious, and perhaps gain the attention of some hot fen in ears or anime outfits. Then he would make the Saturday evening party rounds as himself, reconnect with some of those same girls, maybe one special girl.

Some of what I relate I learned from a drunken and lovesick Mark a con later. I used sources where I could. The remaining absent spaces I've filled through otherworldly guidance. I like to believe I'm close enough to the truth.

This is the Gospel according to Telfryn.

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