

GRAVITAS

S. CHRISTOPHER

Gravitas

by S. Christopher

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Thor's Day

Ante Meridian

THE bi-annual science fiction and comic book convention attracts several hundred devoted fans to a meeting center just north of town in the river delta to the east of I-5, where traffic never seems to move faster than 15 miles per hour. Ben wears a simple, pocketless black t-shirt, black jeans, and hiking boots. He feels warm, relaxed, and peaceful, almost dreamlike. He weaves his way through crowds wearing everything from actor fan club t-shirts to full book, comic, movie, and TV show costumes. It's not always pretty. Men outnumber women by twenty to one, but a naïve count based on apparent gender of outfit skews the numbers toward an uncomfortable detente.

Many of the attendees wear effectively-the-last-woman-on-earth goggles, too.

The big draw this demi annum, apart from the chance to hunch over a table full of collectible game cards, collectable miniature wargame tokens, or uncollectable but still awfully expensive imported German board games with your closest friends is the zombie Alec Guinness and some guy who played a robot or alien in some film. Otherwise, it's exactly like normal Friday night plans, except that it's in a larger space with more people and it's daylight. Ben can't decide if expanding the coverage to include the recent trend of syndicated half-fantasy action shows is positive. Though there

are often more women present—however prurient he knows it sounds, he primarily thinks the general crowd behaves slightly better with an improved gender ratio—the question and answer sessions often degenerate into asking the guest for hugs and half-panicked queries if the guest remembers the questioner from a previous con where she wore this or that costume or asked this or that stupid question.

Positively this does afford the guests plenty of opportunities to demonstrate their underappreciated acting abilities. That is, actors lie.

Ben avoids the merchandise hall passionately. Sometimes an indie company will release a new book, comic, *collectable*, but usually it's an excuse for sneering hobby store regulars to harass someone new and for bookstore owners to argue with their distributors. If you need a fresh pack of collectable gaming cards to play in a tournament, and the rules are exceedingly clear that you do need many fresh packs, you can so fortunately buy them at just over cost in the exhibit hall. Some of the booths do have autograph sessions, and if you're fortunate enough to have someone who loves fans as much as Neil Gaiman or Jeff Smith, it's worth braving the mess to spend a few moments with someone who can appreciate the magic of the moment from both sides, at least if you can avoid being squished between two sweaty comic shop employees.

Ben avoids the deliberate mondegreen of the filk sessions too, about which the less anyone says, the better. He tries to push "Paint it Black" out of his head, but keeps hearing "dwarf" instead of "door" and shudders.

One of the big auditoriums right now hosts blooper reels from some random television show. They're interchangeable; a door fails to open or an actor forgets his line and swears and the crew laughs and the audience falls out of their chairs and rolls in the aisles as if it weren't exactly the same as a M*A*S*H blooper reel from 1982—the tenth season, not the eleventh—except that the Alan Alda counterpart wears half of a puppet on his face. People pay \$45 per head per weekend for this sort of thing, though there's a sizable discount for multi-headed costumes, says a sign by the door. Ha ha. For a group of mostly adolescent males bonding over the pain of society's misunderstanding, they're surprisingly non-speciesist.

The other large rooms have their own problems. Costume contest? No. Snow White didn't have to shave his legs, but definitely earned that title for his lily-white skin. Live Action Role Playing is a vampire game. Ben can't imagine standing around in velvet and fluffy poet shirts to misquote Blake,

whom he likes. Even if he felt like chatting cheerily about how depressed and disaffected he feels, he fears that he'd giggle every time someone addressed him as Greatlord Ryvenclawe Wolfensbane.

The only remotely interesting event right now is a comic session. It would be fine without the fans.

The striations of comic fan culture are endlessly fascinating as twisted reflections of the feared and hated mundane world. The bottom end of the mainstream is all the 12 year old boys who still care about the surface stories of superheroes. This is the church of the rising action, where there are no beginning and no endings, just good guys chasing bad guys perpetually and ineffectively.

Next come the 15 year old boys who've bought into the idea that a flawed superhero is an inherently interesting concept, having apparently never read multiple ancient Greek tragedies. They use this idea as a "you must be this sophisticated" shibboleth to prove their superiority over the younger group. There's *violence*, for example! Real violence, and swearing!

Ben appreciates how clever it is to market to the disenfranchised outcast, full of hormones but too skinny to get dates and too awkward to play any sport with a ball in it. There's no shortage of artists who can transcribe softcore scenes from dubious exercise videos, exaggerate human features of the bulging or bouncy kind, and steal plots from whatever soap opera's on at the time. You can almost change the yacht club into the Fortress of Justice and names such as Tiffani Vanderthorpe into Evilina Octopusgirl. Mix in a spine-crushing amount of violence without apparent consequences.

The only real source of innovation in the comic world is the rule requiring at least four variant covers for every special issue.

Manga fans sit somewhere to the left of and above the wish-fulfillment groups, mostly because the traditional difficulty in finding good imports means that only the dedicated can find anything good, but also because it's such a broad category. Ben hasn't cared enough to notice the social strictures there but suspects that giant-robot-only fans fall somewhere near the bottom of the cultural ladder.

It's not clear how to treat the people who collect little girl comics. The writers are rarely women. They're more often old men who think that kittens, rainbows, and enough pink to look like an explosion in the Valentine's Day factory will somehow attract little girls.

Finally, there's a group of mature, intelligent people who prefer comics that actually take advantage of the medium to tell literate and interesting stories. Any of those fans who've read original source material—Lovecraft almost counts, Chesterton counts, Tolkein ought to count but is pretty mainstream, and being able to quote Ambrose Bierce should count double—can make for decent conversation, though you definitely want to avoid fanboy topics like, say, variant covers and whether the black and white indy market still has value.

You can throw out easily half of this group by asking if comics are a genre or a medium. Ben always slowly backs away from anyone who seriously expresses the belief that the comic page is a new art form that deserves respect merely for breaking free of the written word.

As in any other group, the people who think they're princes and queens among men probably aren't. Anyone who has to drop names to join a conversation ("Oh, I was just talking to Alan Moore's wife's cousin the other day, and she said he's definitely doing the Swamp Thing/Watchmen

crossover”) instead of graciously mentioning the work of up and coming writers or artists in the hopes of passing along good fortune, scares him. He tries not to visualize a cocktail party devoted to measuring the size and integrity of lightsaber packaging. Their toys come in cellophane and, occasionally and shamelessly, kids’ meals.

Ben can’t actually remember consciously deciding to attend, or even actually paying at the front door.

Five or six volunteers in bright orange VOLUNTEER shirts and name tags rush to clear a path through the halls for shuffling zombie Alec Guinness. He loses fingertips with alarming frequency. The volunteers plant highway barricades in front of doors to the closed main auditorium in clear violation of fire codes, and just then a renegade band of Klingons picks a fight with the spiky haired cleaned-for-American-kids’-cable anime fans of the fighting genre—the ones where they spend most of a season trading one or two punches per episode.

A queen bee volunteer squeals. She’s slightly pudgy, thirty-something, and very short with a cute, motherly face and a dark, short ponytail. Her embossed R2-D2 earrings catch the light and really bring out her eyes as she pulls Alec Guinness out of the way. In his desert wanderer robes now you can almost see that he’s a minute away from Dying the Tragic Death of the Mentor. Two Klingons leap at the underprepared spike-heads. It’s a distraction tactic; the other Klingons throw down a table full of amateur showcase art for cover. Figurines and maquettes of gravity-proof 19 year old women apparently capable of juggling swords and guns while performing trapeze acts go flying. Twenty percent wear racoon costumes.

Most spike-heads manage to escape, but the stupider among them squat and grunt and try to evolve into stronger forms. That doesn’t work against the incoming threat of four-hundred pounds of enraged Klingons. Hairgel bleeds sadly down walls, tables, and too-shocked-to-move onlookers.

The amateur artists of the hijacked table stalk off to pen angry notes which the Comic Journal will ignore in favor of another screed either from or about Dave Sim.

The Klingons fire wildly but hold their position; there’s a lot of WWII trench warfare strategy, possibly left over from a vigorous Axis and Allies tournament earlier. The blooper session pours out and several anti-Trekkie fans milling in the hallways take ricochet damage. The crowd divides: TV

sci-fi fans who hate Klingons, assorted Discordians and Technopagans who love a good brawl, and anime fans. The latter are reinforcements; some of them have swords that turn into guns, or at least sharp, oversized cricket wickets that turn into guns.

A handful of orange-shirts march toward the Klingons wielding giant silver serving platters for shields. Unfortunately, they don't hold up against projectile, not energy, weapons. A pile of red-shirts and broken shards of coffee mugs grows.

All of this noise attracts the LARPer who decide that the proper response is to fan themselves with kerchiefs stowed in their sleeves. Vampires affected with self-loathing have little tolerance for violence. One yells "Get a life!" a la William Shatner on Saturday Night Live. There are nervous titters.

Two or three spike-heads break their concentration by sprouting defensive tentacles. This gives them the rally they need to mount a reliable defense. They stop losing ground as they lob their lighter casualties into Klingon space like so many pineapple-headed human-sized spears. Lavender blood seeps through the carpet. Ben can't tell whether someone doped prune juice with stomachache medicine or some Klingon went way overboard with the makeup. Something strikes the wall above him and he looks up; he's behind a huge Bender-the-robot cutout holding a petition to bring back Futurama, which he signed willingly.

Conference security peeks his head around the same corner as a stray shot tears the last word off of poor Bender's speech bubble. Ben watches him mouth the phrase "Renew my shiny metal..." and walk away. Eight dollars an hour isn't enough to care.

The Klingons now have a two-front war. Anti-Trek pins them in on one side. The anime fans demonstrate a now-credible style by evolving greater and greater hairstyles; some have gone from blue to yellow to purple via pure concentration. Yet the Klingons have a secret weapon: their queen bee.

Take an average-looking woman, remove her makeup, and put her in an unflattering outfit apparently built around an armored corset. Layers help—think leggings, multiple slips, petticoats, and skirts, and an undershirt. A male tank top is best. Add a long-sleeved shirt, even if the sleeves don't reach to the wrists, a vest, and a jacket where again, sleeve length doesn't

matter. Each layer can date from a different decade, or at least a different geologic period of fashion history. It also helps to wear as many buttons, pins, and VIP passes from as many cons as possible. A sash is optional.

She can be pretty or not; it's best to be just on either side. The important thing is that she is one of the only women around and, more importantly, is willing to put up with the kind of attention she will receive.

Most of the women he's seen so far are just honest fans—pleasant and reasonable people. However, the lure of being a queen bee is too much for a certain type of woman to resist. If she can't do it elsewhere, perhaps a law office or a junior high school, here must do.

The queen bee rules wherever she can find willing subjects. There's no shortage here. Ben blames all parties. Anyone willing to give into the illusion that the woman holding court over a table of rapt fans is the most important or attractive or interesting or beautiful woman in the world really deserves the results, Ben thinks, in the same way that people in democracies deserve their leaders. Failing to show proper deference here, though, is a whipping offense.

Strange few of the professional actresses suffer this; they've survived long enough in the business to fake politeness and realize that science fiction or fantasy television isn't exactly the Boardwalk of the entertainment world's real estate listings. Male actors are less cognizant.

The real genius of the Klingon tactic is that a queen bee commands immediate respect. It doesn't hurt that their queen bees show more than enough well-tanned-one-way-or-another cleavage, but it comes primarily from her unwavering belief that she deserves immediate respect. The hive of followers helps. Though the entire attendance as a group preaches distrust of authority (mostly from having authority come down on it so hard or at least failing to protect it from peer groups who don't secretly cry when the sensitive types compose angry poems vaguely about them or understand the allusions of the artistic types and their visually similar supervillains), it generally falls in line at the shrill whistle of "do as I say".

The gentlemanly zombie Alec Guinness shambles in to petition for peace. The remaining volunteers, and a harried con organizer with a clipboard and five years' less hair than when he started the real work six months ago, watch him from around a different corner. He's also capable of commanding authority. The 5'9" actor (an inch shorter four years after his passing) has

no chance against the 5'2" Klingon warriorette, who's admittedly 5'6" in heels with an impressive bosom not out of place at a Renaissance Faire, which Ben calculates would require less makeup—and not just on the face—but just as much whalebone. Of her dozen Klingons, eight still offer serious suppressive fire, two are clearly casualties, and three or four huddle and whisper plans to sneak Romulan Ale into the Grand Ball later. Ben had some once. It's just three-dollar wine with four dollars worth of blue food coloring added. She brushes past the actor, then jinks to avoid gun-sword fire and accidentally knocks him into a wall. He crumples.

Anime fans tend to be a little younger than the Klingons—high schoolers rather than college kids and disgruntled record store employees. Most of a cubic meter of actual factual real female bosom is a major distraction. That's it for the spike-heads. A half-hearted anti-Trek/Klingon skirmish continues, but it has mostly degenerated into self-described "hilarious" Shatner impressions and toupee jokes that weren't funny the first time, ten cons ago.

Ben takes another bite of the chocolate and peanut butter granola bar he didn't know he had out of the backpack he doesn't remember carrying. He hums as a preemptive measure to block out the parley.

"What are y'all doin' to ma boys?" she screeches. "Y'all need to sho' some respec' before I throw you on outta here! This is ma con! This is our room!" She launches a string of unimaginative profanities that even these guys outgrew in junior high school.

Randy will love hearing about this later, though Ben hopes it's from another friend secondhand. He cringes trying to imagine how he could possibly explain why a Klingon has a Georgian accent. He suspects that she's used the words "huggles" and "LOLLERS!" in actual face-to-face conversations.

The whole scene is a lot less funny in person, with the orange-shirts unable to master conference rule number one (don't kill your guests, even if they're already dead) and six (no actual fireable gunswords or working phasers with costumes) of conference organizing, the Klingons unable to use the elements of surprise, organization, and arguably superior firepower to overcome their foes, or the fact that the spike-heads, having put up a credible defense in the end, look ready to cry after a lecture delivered in Internet chat room format from a housewife and mother of two who probably can't inspire the same discipline in her children, husband, dogs, or even lawn.

By gum, she has it here, Ben reflects. The anti-Trek fans start singing

and reenacting a Leonard Nimoy music video about hobbits. The severed head of zombie Alec Guinness comes to a rest at his feet.

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