



UnCONventional

Twenty-Two Tales of Paranormal Gatherings
Under the Guise of Conventions

TEASER

Edited by Kate Kaynak and Trisha J. Wooldridge

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"So, what's our next con?"

Deenna settled into the tedium of driving as the stress of being under scrutiny drained away. The rain started minutes after they left the city and merged with highway traffic.

"Westcon." Cukluk consulted the modified iPad. "Then TerraCon, WhoCon, and then we skip a week, unless we want to try to tackle the Prachett Awards convention."

"I don't think so." Daassin took out her bag and carefully repacked her equipment. The failure of a purchasing card had necessitated a hasty exit. "They expect you to look like a native at those sorts of events."

"But there would be food," Deenna pointed out. "And a place to bathe and rest."

"We aren't as familiar with the set-up," Daassin said. "Odds are higher of us making a fatal mistake."

"I can figure it out," Cukluk said. "I know I can. Just give me a chance."

Deenna smiled at him but Daassin shook her head.

"Let's wait and decide when we get to that point." She removed the unwieldy contraption of cannibalized parts from

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her bag, repositioned it and tried to make it fit again. "Westcon is an easy one. TerraCon wasn't bad last time, but WhoCon is tricky. Smaller and more specialized. We aren't going to pass as easily."

"Aliens pass anywhere there're costumes," Deenna said.

Daassin frowned. "And they don't do costumes at awards ceremonies."

"Fans do."

"Fans don't get access to the good stuff! *Drrt!*" Daassin swore as her modified reconfiguration attachment refused to fit neatly in the bag.

"I could figure something out," Cukluk insisted. Daassin turned around in her seat to glare at him.

"Look, Cukluk," Deenna said, "Why don't you get some rest, all right? We have a long drive ahead of us."

"I can take a shift driving," he offered. "You know I can do it as well as either of you on the highway. It's easy, and I've memorized the route."

Daassin shook her head. "It's too risky. Their police units hide all along the roadways. If you made a mistake and one of them spotted you, it would be all over."

"But—"

"No!"

Cukluk sighed, and then obediently settled himself down among the bags in the back seat. In a few moments, he was dormant.

Deenna looked at Daassin with mild reproach. "He's just trying to be helpful."

"I know, I know, but he gets on my nerves sometimes. Being stuck in this crazy place is bad enough without having to worry about a male."

"Come on, Daassin, Cukluk's not just any male. He's got some brains in that cute head of his. You've got to admit, he's been pretty *crokking* useful."

"I suppose." Daassin stared out the window.

"Admit it, we probably wouldn't have this vehicle if it weren't for him," Deenna said. "It was pretty clever, going up to a native writer at the bar and getting him talking. 'Gee, there's so much we take for granted, living in this world, that an alien would never know about. Driving a car, for instance. Say, if I really were an alien from another world, what would I need to know about

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the laws and the rules?" Cukluk got that native going, sucked him right into the pretend. Saved us a lot of risk and danger."

Daassin glanced into the back seat at the blissfully dormant little male. "He likes talking to them. Sometimes I worry he's going to say the wrong thing."

"He's done pretty well so far," Deenna said. "Maybe it's just because he *is* male. More sensitive. He's able to read them better."

Daassin shivered, looking out the window again. "I hate having to talk to them. I never know what to say, how to react to them."

"I know. It's gotten easier; I'm learning some of the basics. I'm not as afraid of them as I was at first. But I'll admit, it's still nerve-wracking."

"Their language and expressions can be so subtle. You can't tell if they are lying. You can say something you think is harmless, but it might make them angry or suspicious. Better to avoid talking to them at all."

"If we don't talk to them," Deenna said, "we can't find out what we need to know to survive. And to get home."

A large transport vehicle passed them, spraying oily moisture all over the windshield. Deenna groped for the wipers. She could never find them when she wanted to. But let her reach for the inside light or the air control, and it was the wipers she found first, every time.

Daassin slouched down, letting her head rest against the back of her seat. "Can you imagine living all your life in this insane world with its bizarre role reversals? Having some arrogant male as your boss, being expected to do all the domestic work? *Dirt!* What a nightmare!"

Deenna glanced over at her partner sympathetically. "We'll get home some day, Daassin."

"I don't know how much longer I can take this constant stress, going from con to con, playing this game, hungry and dirty and tired for days on end."

"They can't have given up on us. They must have sent out a search party."

"But how would they find us?" Daassin cried. "*Crok*, it isn't like they can just scan the planet for our life signs or some *dirt* like that."

"I know."

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"And what if one of us gets sick? What do we do then? Or if we get into serious trouble and they find out this isn't just the world's most awesome make-up job?"

Deenna sighed. "I know, I know. We've got no choice but to keep going. And the cons are our best chance."

The overcast sky brought an early dusk. The strange landscape with its jarringly symmetrical buildings and fields faded into shadow. Daassin got out her entertainer. Soothing swells of birdsong filled the car and colored lights played over its interior.

"Please don't run the visual while I'm driving," Deenna said. "It's distracting."

"Sorry. The sound all right?"

"Sure, that's fine."

After an hour or so, Daassin gave up and turned the entertainer off. "You want some rest?"

"That might be a good idea. These roads, so *crokking* straight all the time."

"No kidding. Makes you want to veer off into some field and do sine waves."

They pulled over and switched, pausing to stretch their muscles as they walked around the vehicle. Deenna looked up, but couldn't see the stars. The clouds were too thick.

Daassin leaned against the vehicle. "Do we have anything to eat?"

"The usual." Stale bread and bruised fruit. Con food.

"You know what I want right now? A nice, thick, tentacle steak. Sliced just right."

"Chewy, but not tough."

"Slow-cooked in its own ink."

"With a savory krill sauce."

"Ah!" It was a cry of anguish and relish in equal proportion.

With a sigh of resignation, Deenna got the bag from the back seat, careful not to disturb Cukluk.



It had remained cloudy with occasional rain for the past three days. "We need to stop for fuel," Daassin said, watching the icons and choosing an exit.

"I'll pump it!" Cukluk offered.

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Daassin shrugged and handed him the purchasing card. "This one should still work."

He jumped out as soon as Daassin came to a stop in the station. As long as nothing went wrong, their appearance wouldn't be a problem. The natives would stare, grin, maybe point and laugh, and that would be it. Push the card in the slot, fill the tank, get away from there.

This time something went wrong.

Cukluk appeared at the window. Daassin rolled it down and he handed her the purchasing card. "It won't authorize." He glanced uneasily to either side.

"*Drirt*, it must need to be reprogrammed," Daassin muttered. "Fiendishly complicated algorithms on those magnetic strips. There's another one in the outside pocket of my bag."

Deenna found it and passed it over. As they waited, tense, they heard Cukluk chirp to the native on the other side of the pump, "We're going to a convention!"

The native muttered, "Goddamn Star Wars freaks."

After a minute, Cukluk's nervous face reappeared at the car window. "This one doesn't authorize either."

"*Crokking drirt!*"

Deenna said, "Do we have enough fuel to get to the con?"

"Maybe, but—"

"Then let's go. A failed purchasing card is what got us into trouble last time."

"All right. Get in, Cukluk!"

They pulled out of the station with anxious glances in the rear view mirrors. Cukluk sat sideways in the back seat, keeping watch behind them until they were several miles down the road. "That was our last card. What are we going to do when we get to the con?"

"We'll think of something," Deenna said.



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