

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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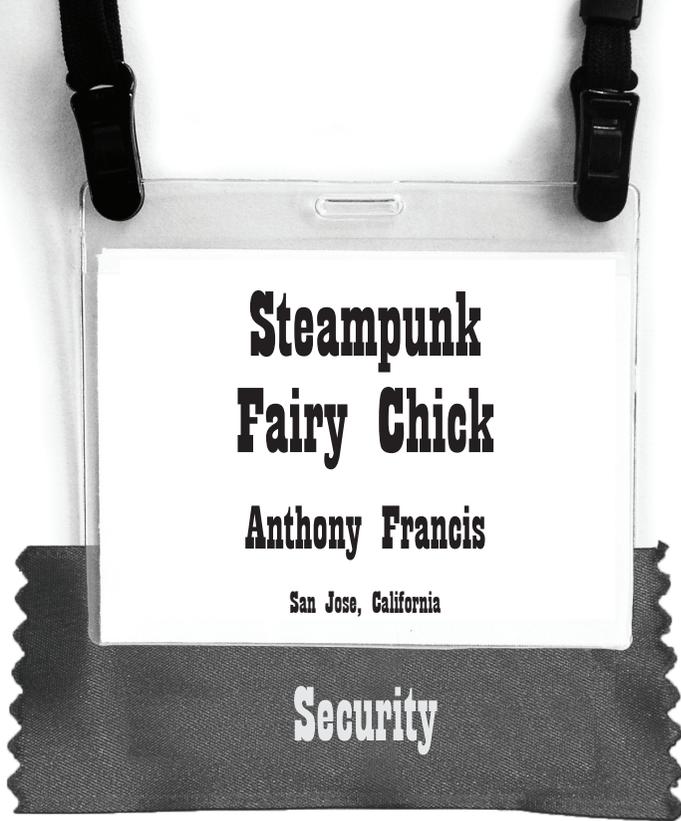
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**COMING JANUARY 2012 FROM
SPENCER HILL PRESS**

978-1-937053-00-0 (paper)
978-1-937053-01-7 (e-book)



“Dude, check out the steampunk fairy chick,” said the dreadlocked ruffian in the booth, elbowing his compatriot and pointing at Jeremiah *just* as she was stretching her copper dragonfly wings to work out a kink in her now very complicated back. “Her wings are moving!”

Jeremiah froze. The weight of her wings had been wearing on her, so she’d unfolded the four-jointed arms that supported the metal petals, flexing them independently—a fair trick to explain even when not holding a burrito in one hand and a sweet tea in the other.

The boys at the booth craned their necks, and the girl with them gasped, eyes going wide. Jeremiah prepared to dart out into the food court before one of them could cry “Foreigner!”—or was the word on this world “alien?”—and bring the whole restaurant down upon her.

But then the dreadlocked boy’s eyes drifted from her wings to her breasts, and Jeremiah relaxed as he pulled a wedge of plastic from his pocket. “Awesome. Mind if I take a picture?”

“Please.” She widened her grip on the burrito and tea to draw more attention to her chest, which seemed to work. All three boys

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in the booth leaned forward, and the girl with them rolled her eyes. Jeremiah arched her back, keeping her wings very still... and keeping the coppery insect limbs “hooked” into her vest doubly so. “Be my guest, sir.”

Jeremiah smiled stiffly as the dreadlocked boy took her picture. She still wasn’t used to her new home, this strange world of cell phones and light bulbs and airplanes, but the technology of this alternate future didn’t dampen her: they’d had as much gear, if a little different, back in 1908—that is, 1908... in the Liberated Territories of Victoriana.

What did dampen her spirits was the casual lack of respect for her gender. Take the boy’s description: “steampunk,” she guessed, was her garb. This was entirely fair: her gold tailcoat, black Faraday vest and thermionic guns were stylistically a century out-of-date, never mind the goggles that hid her glowing eyes. And “fairy” was also fair: with four wings, antennae, and six spindly metal limbs, she did look like a cross between a fairy and a metal dragonfly. But “chick” was entirely *not* fair: she was a soldier, not a frilly nothing, good only for bedding.

“So...” the dreadlocked boy said, tilting his phone sideways. “You here for the con?”

“The what?” Jeremiah said, distracted by the effort of keeping her sore wings from flexing. Then she realized he meant the event that had led Jackson to pick this venue for their meeting. “Why, yes, certainly. But isn’t it a bit early for that?”

“Starts tomorrow,” the boy said, the phone flashing. “I’m going steampunk, myself, but it’s a bear to get geared up. That’s why it surprised me you were already in costume—”

“Oh, it’s *not* a costume,” Jeremiah said, bowing and walking off to the counter.

Willy’s Mexicana Grill was a cavern fronted with glass, tucked away in an underground shopping arcade beneath the feet of this alternate future Atlanta’s mammoth downtown complex of skyscrapers. Reputedly, this world had even more impressive city centers, but Jeremiah hadn’t seen them yet. In fact, this restaurant was the first place she and her companions had visited.

Jeremiah folded her wings, their joints switchblading up, long petals draping behind her shoulders like a cape of shields, and seated herself at the high counter. The stool creaked under the weight of her new metal skeleton, but it held. Jeremiah stared out

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the glass, watching the colorful parade of twenty-first-century Americans pass before her early-twentieth-century Victorian eyes. Her antennae trilled as her teeth sank into the burrito, the Scarab's memories of eating grubs mixed smoothly with her own memories of eating here, holed up in that same booth with her companions, plotting how to find Lord Christopherson, her rogue uncle, and the Foreign monster he'd stolen—the alien Scarab now merged with her back.

Of all the places on this Earth, Willy's was *her* stronghold: first in memory, close to transit, beneath the offices of the National Security Agency where she now worked. Whatever bad wiring had possessed her uncle's half-machine, half-human computer, Jackson Truthsayer, to suggest that they meet here?

Outside the window, the air shimmered—and an oddly youngish woman with saltpepper hair, a high top hat, and an elaborate, dark blue dress appeared, staring straight at her: Jackson Truthsayer, holding an umbrella in one hand and her wondrous stopclock in the other.

Jeremiah jerked back; she never got used to Jackson's instant appearances. Jackson held her umbrella like a sword in her left hand, the thumb of her right poised over the stopclock's trigger. Then she lowered the umbrella and closed the stopclock with a snap, slipping it into a pocket in her leather corset.

"Greetings, Commander Willstone," Jackson said through the glass.

"Hello, Doctor Truthsayer," Jeremiah replied, leaning back. "I saved you a seat."



Jackson bit into the burrito and jerked back. She stared at it dubiously, holding the foil-covered mass with exaggerated care in her gloved hands. Then she swallowed with difficulty, and at last said, "Piquant."

"You must have gotten the hot salsa," Jeremiah said, staring with her Scarab-enhanced eyes at the half-human, half-machine woman. If Jeremiah concentrated, she could see through Jackson's top hat and trace electricity coursing through her vacuum-tube-enhanced brain. "But I don't think you came to review the cuisine."

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“No.” Jackson peered inside the burrito curiously. “I’m here for a truce.”

“*You betrayed Victoriana,*” Jeremiah snapped. Jackson wasn’t just Lord Christopherson’s computer; she was his right-hand-woman. “I should arrest you on sight.”

Jackson glanced over at her. “But you don’t.” She took another bite.

“How do you know that?” Jeremiah said, opening her tailcoat and exposing the hilt of her *Kathodenstrahl*. “Your hands are too full to work your stopclock—”

“I don’t mean you wouldn’t,” Jackson said, nevertheless setting the burrito down. “I mean you don’t. I’ve seen your future. We become fast friends. You’d have told me if you were going to arrest me today—and I’d go with you if you had.”

Jeremiah stared at the woman. Jackson had betrayed Victoriana in favor of Jeremiah’s uncle’s mad schemes; Jackson had built the clockwork time machine that enabled him to flee with the Scarab. But, when the Scarab had affixed itself to Jeremiah rather than to her uncle... Jackson had saved Jeremiah’s life, and her actions had spared the Scarab a life as a brain-dead slave.

They owed her a hearing.

“I’m listening,” Jeremiah said.

“Victoriana,” Jackson said, dabbing her gloves with her kerchief, “is going to fall.”

“You said as much,” Jeremiah said, “the last time we met.”

“I meant, fall in the future,” Jackson said. “Now, we think it’s falling in the present, or in our 1908, at any rate. When you forced us to flee, then followed us... you left our time travel technology in the hands of your superiors. And they’re in the thrall of the Black Tea Society.”

Jeremiah swallowed. The Black Tea was another breed of Foreigner, like the Scarab—the Scarab’s mortal enemy, in fact. But where the Scarab bonded to living flesh, the Black Tea possessed the minds of its hosts. It was subtle and patient; it could be everywhere.

“The Tea has already assaulted this reality once,” Jeremiah admitted. “A second airship, equipped with one of your cross-time navigation modules. We seized it and prepared for the worst, but nothing else came through. Temporal drift invalidates the course over time, and only you can program the navigears, so we thought that the end of it—”

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"They've attacked five more alternate worlds," Jackson said, passing Jeremiah a tasseled red velvet bag containing a wax record cylinder. "With five separate ships. That implies—"

"More machines, and parts of machines," Jeremiah said, scanning the cylinder briefly before sliding it back into the bag, "than we confiscated from your lab."

"So they've learned both to make the navigears and to program them," Jackson said. "It's only a matter of time. They don't even need to establish a beachhead; they only need to slip a Carrier of the Tea onto a world. The Carrier can brew more Tea, find more victims, sway more minds... slowly, quietly, patiently, until that world falls. And then another, and another—"

Jeremiah secreted the bag in an inner pocket. "What are you proposing?"

"We're on opposite political sides, but we should be allies in this fight," Jackson said. "We must establish a truce between our two factions, bring together delegations from all the attacked worlds, craft a defense, and, ultimately, mount a counteroffensive—"

"You want me to lead an army against Victoriana," Jeremiah said. "My *home*—"

"Ultimately," Jackson said. "Today, I want your help pulling that army together."

"Why here?" Jeremiah gestured at the sea of humanity streaming past, oblivious.

"This world has the strongest defense," Jackson said. "Ten thousand atomic weapons—"

"I meant, *here*," Jeremiah said, gesturing more specifically at a group of short, heavysset children dressed up in robes and carrying wands. "What on Earth possessed you of the idea that we should meet at a *science fiction convention*?"

Jackson stared at her. "You and I can defend ourselves, or nip out in a pinch. Our respective leaders are not so nimble. To meet, we need a space where we can both field well-armed delegations without comment—and where bystanders make battle unlikely."

Jeremiah glared. "You want to use these poor fanboys as human shields!"

"What?" Jackson arched a brow. "I don't precisely follow your wording, but I resent the implication, ma'am."

"I've been striving to learn the local dialect," Jeremiah said. Then she scowled. "But my accusation stands. Our outlandish

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dress will attract a swarm of these fantasists, and you plan to use them as *de facto* hostages to ensure our good will."

"These 'fantasists' will disguise *us* with *their* outlandish dress," Jackson countered, brow still arched, "and as for the need for *de facto* hostages... do you not have good will?"

Jeremiah was still scowling, but she looked away. "We do," she began. "And—"

A cool finger ran down her unexpectedly bare spine.

Jeremiah yelped, her wings flinching involuntarily. They struck a warm body with a loud *kwpang*, and a man's voice cried out as he tumbled back into the restaurant. Jeremiah shot a hand back, reaching for skin and feeling her tailcoat, and only then did she realize it was not a finger down her spine, but a *hand* down her *wings*: she had not yet learned to completely pick apart the sensations of the two parts of her new body. Jeremiah looked back and saw the dreadlocked boy from the booth collapsing backwards upon a table, upending it and all its food upon him.

"And I take it you'll accept," Jackson said, and Jeremiah glanced up to see her standing with her stopclock in the entryway of the restaurant, just out of sight of the other diners. "Yes? Excellent. Seeing as you're busy with your fantasist, I'll see you Sunday morning."

And in a blink, she disappeared.

"Did I just see that?" The dreadlocked boy stared after Jackson. Jeremiah pretended bafflement. "The woman with the corset and boots. She—"

"Boots. So that's what tumbled you off your feet," said a server, with a knowing wink at Jeremiah. "Y'all always are trouble. I'll get this, ma'am. You help your young fan."

Jeremiah reached for the boy. He stared at her hand, then took it and let her pull him up.

"Sorry, steampunk fairy chick," he said. "I didn't realize your wings were spring-loaded."

"How else could I make them move?" Jeremiah said. "But, come now: 'chick?'"

"What, would you prefer 'dude?'" the boy said—then caught her irritated expression. "Oh, uh..."

"If you freely apply 'dude' to both men and women, I would indeed," Jeremiah said. Then she smiled. "But I'll forgive you this one time."

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“So... anyway,” the boy said, extending a card to her, “we’re doing a steampunk photo shoot Sunday before the contest, so if you’re still wearing browns and buttons, come by the Marriot.”

“Thank you,” Jeremiah said, taking it and raising an eyebrow. “Wayfarer Jones?”

“My name,” he said. “I know, insert stock joke about hippie parents—”

“Who am I to complain?” Jeremiah said. “I’m Jeremiah Willstone.”

“No shit.”

“Not a speck of it,” Jeremiah replied, bowing—and no longer bothering to control her copper metal wings, which spread naturally as she ducked low, to appreciative gasps. “I make no promises, but perhaps I’ll see you Sunday, Wayfarer Jones.”



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Spencer Hill Press

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Contact: Spencer Hill Press, PO Box 247, Contoocook, NH 03229, USA
Please visit our website at www.spencerhillpress.com

First Edition: January 2012.

Kaynak, Kate and Wooldridge, Trisha J. (editors)
UnCONventional : a short story anthology– 1st ed.
p. cm.

Summary:

Anthology of short stories in which the convention or other social gathering is just a cover for something paranormal.

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Cover design by Gary McCluskey

ISBN 978-1-937053-00-0 : (paperback)

ISBN 978-1-937053-01-7 : (e-book)

Printed in the United States of America

No Ents were harmed in the making of this book.