

“Well how was I to know he was really the Deputy American ambassador?” Said Will.

“He was in the office of the Deputy American embassy.” Said Isaac.

“So, there are break-ins at even the highest security facilities from time to time.”

“Everyone else there seemed to think he was the deputy-ambassador.”

“Mass break ins.”

“A photo of him and his kids was on the desk.”

“Well prepared mass break-ins. Anyway, we signed the appropriate paperwork before we left, giving us jurisdiction on US soil, and had a valid search warrant, so I don’t see what all the fuss was about.”

“You didn’t have to strip search him.”

“It was me or Jacques, and no-one wants to see a Deinonychus with a search warrant trying to get you to take your trousers off. Anyway, there *was* alien tech there. In the room I mean, not the trousers.”

“A bug. Inside an ornamental carved US great seal that the Russians had given to him as a present. I think he was as surprised as anyone to find an alien bug in his office.” Isaac consider this. “Especially when he found out it had laid eggs. “

“Meh. Cybernetic spies are all the rage now. Even without alien tech you can fit a microphone on a cockroach and steer it remotely with a few electrodes in its brain. And aren’t the Us using brain-implanted remote-controlled, GPS fitted rats to sniff out earthquake survivors and miners trapped in rubble now a days? Besides, he thanked us when we killed the thing for him.”

“He was being sarcastic.”

“Hey, that was a highly skilled disposal of dangerous alien spy-technology carried out by a properly trained KDA agent after an exhaustive search for the source of a clearly alien power signal.”

“It was a centipede with a holo-camera and a micro-listening device growing out of its back. You hit it with your shoe when it tried to scuttle under the sideboard.”

“Yeah Isaac, but I’m putting the other description of what happened in my report.” Said Will as the lift stopped. They got out and walked, still arguing, to the Division Thirteen office area.

Cuthbert was at his desk in the corner, in the middle of a call with Chrystal. By the look of his face it had been going on for some time.

"No Chrystal, I don't think that asking Snowball to do that counts as excessive force.... No I don't care what his lawyers say, the building was that way up when we got there, we just ... made some extra doors in it to facilitate a quick rescue-cum-arrest. No look, if you mess around with that sort of alien technology it's possible, nay likely that you house ends up getting blown of its foundations and rolled halfway down the block by the blast. He's just lucky it was a light steel-framed pre-fab and not brick or concrete or it would have just collapsed on him and that would have been that. I -no - hang on a second now..."

He led up a sign in one hand. Many call-centres have signs saying “help” that phone operators can hold up if they get difficult customers. Cuthbert had had his own set of extra-large ones made.

It read: Stop bickering like an old marred couple and get back to work.

Will and Isaac looked to each other, they then followed his eyes to their desks. Both of their phones had “call waiting” lights flashing on at least two lines.

They looked back to Cuthbert.

“No, I am not going to use a teleporter that uses fifty thousand euro worth of electricity per pop when I can use dynamite costing fifty quid, or when I can just order Snowball to use his considerable physical strength, which we are already paying over the odds for in wages as it is. You’d not authorise me to use a teleporter in cases like this, so I find it unfair that you acknowledge any validity in complaints arising from incidences when we save money by smashing through a few inconvenient walls to rescue and then arrest a trapped person.”

He flipped the sign over. The other side read: There's always oversight paperwork if you don't fancy whatever it is I've just ordered you to do.

"We've already done our oversight forms for this week. And besides, there're too many calls there for us to handle" Said Will. Cuthbert pulled out a new sign.

Triage it: deal with the most urgent stuff now and we'll sort the rest when we have more time.

Cuthbert gestured around him. Everyone else not on patrol was at their desk answering phone calls too problematic for the usual operators to handle.

"Alright, but if any of these calls are from the American embassy, well, there's only so many times a man can apologise."

A new sign came out: Even if your sense of taste can crack cases, we do not LICK suspects. Invasive sniffing is acceptable, just, but that crosses a line. I don't want to have to keep reminding you.

Isaac and Will looked to each other. Isaac then taped the sign. Cuthbert peered over the top and read what was on it, then hastily scabbled for another, all without a let up in his conversation.

"No, this is not a symptom of a greater culture of overly-destructive male behaviour within my unit Chrystal, we really did need to rip those wall-panels off." A new sign came out.

Milk, no sugar. leave the bag in please.

Will and Isaac shook their heads. Cuthbert tried again. Eventually he held up a sign which read

Please go away and annoy someone else. Will and Isaac looked to each other and nodded, and went to their desks.

"Look Chrystal, you don't make pemmican without smashing a few bones, and you can't rescue someone from the ruins of his pre-fab if you're not allowed to rip off some of the reaming structural elements. It was an effective rescue, and a valid arrest. What I don't see is how this "Is exactly the sort of thing you *would* get with *your* work-culture." I didn't even know we *had* a work culture except possibly in those yogurts Snowball eats- I... No Chrystal, I do not think I'm being chauvinistic!"

Will picked up his phone and took the call on line one. He listened for a few moments to the Division fifty operator brief him on the nature of the call, said "Huh" and then was connected to the caller. At about the same time Isaac took his call.

"KDA division thirteen, you can call me Will--"

"You may call me Isaac. I have been briefed, but could you just tell me in your own words the nature of the situation?"

"I... look Chrystal, if this was a normal office job, then yes I *might* concede the fact that the staff being almost exclusively male and all purchasing their own firearms and comparing details of their new purchases at work *could* breed a culture of gun toting macho irresponsibility of the sort that *would* end up with some getting the walls of their pre-fab pulled off unnecessary, but this is a police special response unit, both guns and forcing access to suspects dwellings are part and parcel of what we need to do!"

"What *sort* of portal?" asked Will. "I mean do you have a big swirly thing, or a circular opening, or a rip standing unsupported in the very flesh or reality or what? Okay, so it's just an area where you're seeing things that have no right to be there? Look, I'm sorry but we have to ask, have you been on any medications or used any recreational drugs lately? No madam... caffeine doesn't count."

"Have you tried switching it off and on again?" asked Isaac. "You have, and it's still doing it? Okay., then it's probably a fake because there a lot of bogus Da' tech about,, but I'll check anyway. One sec." Isaac put the phone to his chest to block the receiver. "Division Twelve in Afghanistan have confiscated something they think might be the control module for a Da' support-weapons battle suit but there not sure so there trying to bring up a loading menu. Does anyone have my guide to Da' military programing languages?"

"Well your personal objections aside, yes, in an ideal world law enforcement would not have to carry weapons, and yes, I am opposed to British police carrying firearms as standard, and yes, I do pride myself on being able to deal with nearly everything without using lethal force, but you've got to admit Chrystal, the treat of lethal force helps an awful lot and... what do you mean? "That's exactly what a man would say?""

"Does the portal area seem to have defined edges. It does. Okay. Now you're in Newcastle, right? Near the Earl Grey pub? Okay. A major terror-plot on Alandrean tried to use time-travel to attack the earth not long ago- one of the points they tried to attack was that pub, during the Second World War. We stopped them but the area might have, well, echoes of an alternate timelines Second World War floating around for a while, You'd noticed? What *kind* of flying tanks?"

"Snowball get over here I need your help on this!" yelled Isaac. "Okay, so you found someone trying to smuggle it into Pakistan, probably from Iran, did they say where they got it? Couse not. Okay, that'll be a problem as Different Da' military organisations sometimes use different programing languages for the same hardware, so even if it is a battle suit C module, and even if we can identify which model, we may still need to know who last used it before it got to earth before we can access the logs."

“Did you mean ‘man’ as in ‘male’ or man as in ‘human’ Chrys? I’ve no problem at you taking pot-shots at male stupidity, you’re female, that your prerogative, but species profiling, that a bit of a low blow, even for a fox.”

“Kursk? How can you be sure it’s Kursk? Because *who* said so? Could... could you put him on the line? No, he’s just an illusion, The effect will be too weak for anything bigger than a photon to cross so he can’t actually hold the phone, can you just hold it out for him at the right height please? If you can hear gunfire he can probably hear us. Somnwaves making the portal itself resonate or some crap. Yes, puthim on ... Yar, Hallo? Grüße Kamerad, könnte bitte mir sagen werden, wo Sie zu diesem Zeitpunkt ? Sind In einem verrückten Engländer-Wohnzimmer? Ja, das ist gut, ziemlich viel was ich dachte.”

“Snowball. Snowball! You know your Da’ military equipment, come and help me out here! Okay one second, yeah, I’m putting him on the line...”

“Snowball. Please describe the artefact to me carefully starting with the mounting around the control surface.”

“I’m just saying Chrys, that when you are issued a nine-mil handgun for self-defence you are not supposed to wrinkle your nose and stick out your tongue in disgust, holding it only by the trigger guard with two fingers at an arm’s length, hide it at the back of the fridge for six months until the cold and damp rusts it solid, and then surreptitiously burry the thirty-two auto you were issued to replace it in you back garden in the middle of the night. Oh so it just burred itself did it? I am not changing the subject!”

“Nein Nein Nein, Denken Sie nur an diese als... gut, Sie wissen, dass diese Geschichten wurden Soldaten auf dem Schlachtfeld manchmal Engel sehen? Betrachten Sie es als wie die. Wir existieren nicht in Verlaauf- Kulturgeschichte Ihrem, und Sie nicht in unseren. Ignorieren Sie dies und es wird alle gehen weg bald. Was meinst du, Vertrauen Sie können nicht mich, weil ich Englisch? Hey, bin ich nicht verantwortlich, wenn Ihre britischen Empire faschistischen Gesprächsleiter gewählt, nachdem es den großen Krieg verloren!”

“Well, if it’s a Naval issue unit typing a random twenty digit number into the accesses strip will lock the unit, in which case it will remove the start-up interface and instead display only the last users medical records, including name, rank and service-designation and age, as well as the last know date of the suits use. It’s a security feature, so if you are about to be captured it will lock the unit, powering-down the attached suit to prevent any enemies from using it, and also to allow a medic to pull up someone’s records even if the person is unconscious and they don’t have the password to unlock the suits operational memory. We can then hand the unit to the Da’ naval attaché at any Da’ embassy and he’ll have the data we want extracted. However if it’s an army unit, typing a string of zeros will lock the device and bring up the medical data, typing a string of random numbers will

trigger the countdown for the units self-destruct. What do you mean you already entered the numbers?"

"Chrystal, what you don't seem to understand is that whilst yes having a gun does make you a target whereas in the same situation you may be left alone or allowed to slip away when unarmed, and yes being inconspicuous, relatively harmless and too much trouble to kill are very effective ways of surviving most violent confrontations, you have to remember that you're not some kid in a refugee camp on Alandean anymore. I know that if civilisation ended tomorrow you'd out-survive everyone else in London Snowball included, not in the least because of all the tinned food I know you've cached in the house and buried under the patio, but you are a KDA *divisional administrator*! I just run the show day-to-day. I catch the bad guys and identify and neutralise threats in the field. I work out the connections until I know to my satisfaction who did what and then I arrest them and hope like hell *you* and yours can find the evidence to make it stick in court. *You* are the one who issues the international arrest warrants. You are the one with the case-histories in your office. You have all the evidence and control which prosecutors get to see it and what country and what court we go to trial in. You cut the deals to get the testimony we need. You control the media to get the public support we need and you are the one who pulls the political string so we can continue to be allowed to do what we do. Killing me would set this Division back a few years, killing you would end it. You are a higher value target for any assassins and if they come for you, you won't be able to convince them to let you live because you pose no physical threat to them. Yes perhaps my unit is a little too ready to use force, but Chrystal, we're nothing compared to the guys we're trying to stop, so you'd better consider what you'd do if they did come, and I *beg* you to reconsider wearing body-armour on your way from your car to your door and carrying and learning to shoot a-

"Eighty-eight Mil cannon? Look madam, if I were you and an intangible semi-visible flying king-tiger panzer with an eight-eight, four twin twenty-mills and nine general-purpose machine-guns and a flying T-34 with Stalin's face painted on it five feet high were fighting it out in my living room, I'd get a camera crew around right now and sell the rights to the History Channel for everything I could. So the noise is keeping your kids awake? Big deal. So jet-pack Hitler is laughing at you from the ceiling? He's only got one bollock, who cares what he thinks: that footage must be worth a fucking bomb. Listen, off the record, we at the KDA don't like to encourage them, but there are some GREAT freelance paparazzi in Newcastle who would give you five grand no questions asked just to photograph that. No I don't see what you've got to complain about Madam, if life gives you lemons, make lemonade. If life gives you duelling Soviet and Nazi super-science in your living room, film it! You'd make a -"

"BOMB! Snowball why didn't you mention this earlier!"

"How I was I to know they'd enter any data before I'd finished talking? Stupid sodding primate impatience. Okay dofus, when the self-destruct is activated, the clamps holding the cover of the unit in place dis-engage. The front cover is designed to pull away easily by hand, but

that's for a Da': you'll need a crow-bar. Underneath are a series of wires. Just cut the blue one. what... of course they're all the same colour! Cut the one that *smells* blue!"

"Chrys, I'll start putting how things will look on the evening news above operational needs when hell thaws out and politicians become honest men. I'll still consider it, I don't like seeing Snowball on the telly pulling wall panels of a ruined house any more than you do, but I will do what the tactical situation requires to eliminate a xeno-tech treat be it a gentle talking to, a good shouting-at, shock-and-awe, pulling wall panels of and god-help-me, lethal force if it comes to it. And although I don't like giving credence to the idea that we use Da' field agents as blunt instruments to solve all our problems, you've got to admit that Snowball is pretty good at all of the above. It's not like a little bad press will just cause the agency to-"

"Self Destruct?" Asked Will who had wondered over to Isaacs desk. "Well if you don't know what wire it is you'll just have to cut one of them and hope. Better that letting the time run out isn't it? At least you've got some chance then."

"Will cutting the wrong wire defiantly trigger the self-destruct?" Isaac asked Snowball. Snowball gave him a look. "Right, silly Question." Replied Isaac.

"Cut the top wire on the left, as seen from above." Said Snowball. "Bearing in mind that the control panel is mounted at the user's waist and so for them to read it when they look down at it, displays the text upside-down. What do you mean you've already... well that's it then." Said Snowball as the satlaight pone-line cut into static.

Will and Isaac stared in horror. Un-perturbed, Snowball picked up the phone handset, lifted it up of the desk, and smacked it into the desk surface, once.

"You here me?" He asked as the static cut out. "You can/ good. That static was the magnetic pulse as the suits memory core was whipped. Fat lot of good it will be to you now. We'll have to take samples from the suits lining for gas-chromatography mas-spec if we want to work out where it's been now, and that costs extra. It'll come out of your departments budget you know." He noticed both the mixed angry and relived sounding shouting down the phone line and Isaac and Will's facial expressions and scent. "

"What?"

"The self-destruct only whips the suits memory?"

“Of course, what else would it do?” He looked from one to another, and finally it clicked. “You thought it was going to blow up?”

“You said bomb!”

“Logic bomb, that’s the human terminology for that sort of data-attack, isn’t it? Logic bomb followed by magnetic core-wipe. You actually thought there was explosives. You actually thought the Da’ military would build explosives into a suit it required their personnel to wear, and then set it in such a way that trying to restive the medical-data on a wounded soldier could *blow him up*? Just to stop the enemy capturing the on-board computer from a suit?”

“Well...”

Snowball stared for some time. Humans. He had known to expect the viciousness of the primate mind-set, but it still took him by surprise sometimes.

“That’s fucked up.” Snowball pointed out.

“We’ll what were we supposed to think, there are very few nice self-destructs in the world.” Said Will. “Just because we immediately thought that doesn’t mean that there’s anything inherently... *violent* about humanity. I mean look at us. Okay, there’s been a few Hitler’s and Pol Pots, but what about Gandhi, Mother Teresa...”

“Jesus.” Isaac chimed in.

“You *nailed your god* to a tree.”

“Poor example. Red, help me out here!”

Dakar, Red, Iñigo and Jacques who had just come in from their shift proceeded to ignore this, already in their own argument. Iñigo did hoverer gesture “Tea?”

“Milk, no sugar.” Said Isaac.

“Same.” Said Will.

“is that girl from division nine who makes the Russian tea still on assignment with us?”

“I don’t think so Snowball.”

“Pity. Okay, tea, black very strong fourteen sugars, three spoons of pine-needles, two of moss, do we have any moss?”

“Will you see if we have any moss left? Ta.” Yelled Will, cupping his hands in the vague direction of the kettle. “Two if you have it.” He paused to consider this. “In Snowball’s mug this time!” He added.

Snowball grunted in agreement. Iñigo wasn’t great when it came to tea. Last time he hadn’t left the space for Snowball to dilute his with cold water.

“Cuth, you want anything?” Will asked.

Milk, no sugar. leave the bag in please. The sign read. Will nodded. “Chrystal want anything?”

Cuthbert put the receiver to his Brest “I’ll ask.” He said. “Hey, sorry Chrys, that was Will do you want anything sent-up hot drink wise? Because you know, if you do, I can always get Snowball to carry it up. Or teleport it instead in case the sight of Snowball holding a coffee-cup sends the wrong message about our macho work-culture. Okay, yeah. New-Amsterdam Vixens’ coffee and try to get ratio right Will, it’s fifty-fifty espresso and ox-blood. What? No Chrystal, you’ll have to come down to get it, I’m not sending it up unless you approve my team’s ammunition expenses. No Chrystal, I don’t think it’s unreasonable to have the in-house armorers make obsolete ammunition types for us. Well what if I *do* end up in the 1880’s? I am *not* stocking .455 Webbley just out of misplaced patriotic nostalgia!”

Will sat back on his chair, fished the last bits of moss out of his tea, and lent back with his feet on the desk. Mug in one hand, he picked up his phone. Unless something serious enough to warrant the team being called out came up, it looked like being just another dull day at the office.

“KDA Division thirteen? Yes, well... I... .. *how many tentacles?*” he paused and stared at the receiver for a moment, then cupped his hand over the phone’s mouth-piece “Cuthbert, you may want to wrap that up. I think we’ve got a major one here... how do you feel about a brief trip to Antarctica?”