

Part Three.

The Met sergeant was worried. Harry was a good bloke, expecting his second kid, and he was worried about him. He was worried about the idea of some fucking cockney gangsters running around with ray-guns when most bobbies didn't even carry guns. But most of all, he was worried about the KDA.

He knew how they worked, vaguely. After re-contact the two big alien powers, The Da' and the Kestal, had agreed a deal with the U.N. and then separately with all the governments of earth individually. They didn't want to interfere in earth, but they didn't want any of their enemies interfering in earth either, so they had got Earth to sign up to a treaty called the Treaty of Tyrone that several other planets in a similar position to earth had signed up to when they had made contact. It meant they wouldn't try to get a foothold, and wouldn't let any alien other power get a foothold on earth, so long as earth's governments also made sure no alien power got a foothold on earth. They gave some humanitarian and development aid, and a lot of their rich used Earth for their offshore banking, which was why the UK treasury was full 'cause the government bailed out all the banks in '08 and so owned a controlling stake in most of them when the alien money started pouring through them, and there were a few migrants, mostly just curious, some refugees, some people with secrets to hide, but mostly the Da' and Kestal left earth well enough alone.

The one issue was, they didn't want anywhere on earth being used as a base for their organised criminals, acting from somewhere beyond their laws, so the treaty of Tyrone insisted that as part of the deal where they were protected from alien invasion, all countries on earth had to meet certain standards when enforcing their own laws so they wouldn't provide an "easy base of operations" for alien criminals. Mostly there was no real change in how countries policed their own laws, but in some specific areas the Da' and Kestal were very fussy on how the law was enforced, usually relating to alien technology, immigration, space-transit, diplomatic crimes, crimes against common-sentience, weird stuff like that, and so all countries had to meet these standards exactly or find the Da' and Kestal getting unfriendly. The cost was so high on other planets that the Tyrone Treaty's governing body had set up, on the other planets that had signed the treaty, an organisation funded by Kestal and Da' aid money to police these few areas and let signatory nations call in its assistance as and when they needed it rather than set up their own alien-policing agencies at their own expense. The KDA.

He wasn't sure exactly how it worked, but he knew that each country had its own branch of the KDA, except North Korea who had wanted to set up their own organisation and pay for it themselves rather than let outsiders in. So the British KDA recruited British agents who worked within British law and had comparable powers to Met Special Branch plus some Border-agency powers, in America they had the same powers as the FBI plus some Secret Service powers and so on, and you called them in if you needed help. He knew that France and America and all the other countries had their own branches of the KDA. But he also knew that people could transfer from one country's jurisdiction to another just like that, and that all the branches met up to discuss training and funding and policy. As far as he could tell, the KDA was not a global super-police, but they still changed badges and countries and jurisdictions like he changed socks if they felt they needed to crack a case. He knew they also

routinely loaned agents from one country to the next, or, if it was true, that they had long ago given up caring where nation boundaries were except to change badges at them. He also knew their global HQ was in London because they couldn't choose between Washington or Beijing and this was the compromise the Kestel suggested, so lots of High-ranked agents who dealt with big international cases wound up there. He was also pretty sure that while 90% of the time they only got involved in a case if you asked for their help, certain crimes they considered it their jurisdiction to go for anywhere in the world, regardless of what the local police thought.

He was pretty sure that Alien weaponry use was one of those crimes.

The one who seemed to be in charge, Cuthbert, now that instance on first-names only was one of their known weirdities, had finished talking into the empty space a few feet above his iPad and had put it away and was walking over. The Met Sergeant could feel his gastric hernia playing up, never a good sign. The man smiled his disarming smile again and the met sergeant found that made it worse.

“Right Sergeant, I've been given authorisation to answer any of your questions. You are, I'm sure you'll be glad to hear, officially 'in the loop'.”

The man smiled his dammed smile again. The sergeant felt his stomach try desperately to get *out* of the loop.

“I'm very glad to hear that sir.” Said the Sergeant gravely. “Might I ask exactly what bran- what *division* of the KDA you work for?”

Cuthbert smiled. “I am the permanent acting Divisional Commander for Division thirteen.”

His stomach barrel-rolled. In the past he had worked with Division Thirty, who negotiated hostage situations and who he'd been hoping would be here now. They had all sorts of translators and psychologists who were experts in all sorts of alien languages and cultures, and now a days you needed them for some hostage situations because some of these people were quite clearly from another planet far as their behaviour went. He'd also worked with Division Twenty-Nine who were psychologists who provided psychological profiles for alien serial killers and other criminals when human profilers failed to provide any clear profile, and Thirty-One who were more psychologists and translators, this time specialising in interviews and interrogations. He thought Thirty-Two did counselling for Alien victims of crime, but he wasn't sure. He knew that divisions Fourteen to twenty-six were the ones that provided normal police with “secondary intervention” physical, operational help as and when you asked for it, equipment, boots on the ground, men who knew where to put a bullet in a Da' or Raptor to actually put them down, that sort of thing, and he knew that twenty-seven to thirty-nine provided non-tangible aid, training and expertise and the like, the joke was they were the call-centre cops went to if you needed advice over the phone, and thirty-nine to fifty-two were admin and support for the others, but all he knew about the first thirteen was

they were the ones who dealt in “Primary Intervention”, who came without invitation, who dealt with those few crimes the Kestel and Da’ got very fussy about. The armed, active-response units who wrote out their own international arrest warrants if they needed.

“*Permanent* acting commander?”

“I was offered the Job of commander. I’m still thinking it over.”

“How long have you been thinking it over for?”

“About a year and a half.” Cuthbert noted the look. “My great aunt made my great uncle wait two full years before giving him an answer to his proposal of marriage. At least I’m not that bad.”

“But, why?”

“They can’t fire me if I haven’t formally accepted yet. When they said I could take some time to think it over, they should really have qualified that. Or at least got suspicious when I asked for it in writing.”

“Permanent acting head, for Britain?”

“For earth. And, Alandean and a couple of other planets. The pay’s alright but the hours are murder. Especially the ones that go backwards.”

“Backwards?” Cuthbert nodded gravely

“Backwards. Actually tell a lie those aren’t that bad, it’s when time starts to go sideways that you need to start worrying.”

“Sorry, what *exactly* does Division Thirteen do?”

“Mostly, whatever the first twelve Primary Intervention Divisions don’t want to. Our title is ‘Forbidden and Restricted Technology and Phenomena’. So alien weaponry on earth would come

under our jurisdiction, although we often have to work with Division Twelve, “arms dealing, narcotics and people smuggling”, Division Seven “nuclear, fusion, plasma and power source crimes and WMD regulation”, or if alien weaponry is used to aha, *permanently alienate* someone deemed globally important, with Division Three, “assassination, political kidnap blackmail, espionage and extortion”. What the alien weaponry is, how it works and how to deal with it is our problem, how it got here, how it could affect global power grids, and who it’s used on are other people’s pet areas. We also deal with time-travel, GM eugenics, cybernetics... the usual deranged government or mad scientist stuff. Half the countries on earth are trying to develop this stuff, and the other half trying to help us stop them. Sometimes different branches of the same government.”

“So... you have no practical experience of hostage situations?”

“Been taken hostage twice, escaped both times. I got lucky: one of them was The Vancouver Towers.”

The Met sergeant winced. Cuthbert nodded. “Don’t worry, the hostages are civilians, so getting them out alive is our main concern. WE don’t let people use KDA agents as bargaining chips, but we’ll not risk normal every-day people like that.”

“Bloody right. That was....” He failed to find the right word. “Evil.” He settled on. Cuthbert shrugged.

“The hostage takers were directing operations from within the building, so long as they were still alive they were leaking KDA secrets to terrorists who were using them to plan attacks. The leak had to be stopped, there was no way to take out the hostage-takers with special forces: we *built* that building to be unbreakable by direct force, and all the hostages were KDA agents. They knew the risks when they signed up. The air-strike was selective, when the building came down, no civilian lives were endangered. I was there, my team got out before the tower fell. I don’t envy whoever made that call, levelling our own building, but it was the right one. Now” Said Cuthbert making it clear that that little discussion was over. “You now have clearance to be told about the alien weaponry that is being used, but given I haven’t had a chance to work out what it might be there’s not much point in asking me right now. I suggest you pull back your men by fifty meters or so whilst I get a good description of the weapon from my men, and if whilst you’re pulling your men back if you could get your men who witnessed it hit that poor soul together so I could talk to them, then that would be most helpful.” He nodded to the Sergeant, who looked back and then shrugged. He watched Cuthbert walk away. He looked and sounded like a history- teacher, one at one of the better state schools, the ones that middle-class parents changed their religion and committed minor fraud to get their kids into, and permanent acting commander sounded like such an *administrators*, title, but there was something just a little... off about him.

Cuthbert walked back to Isaac and Will. Snowball was with them. Will had decided shortly after meeting him to take upon himself the duty of getting Snowball to appreciate the true beauty of human culture in all its richness, and so was in the process of telling him a dirty joke. Of all the myriad anthropological techniques he had seen, Cuthbert had to rate it, disturbingly, as one of the more affective.

“And the doctor Goes to write out the prescription, and as he tries to sign it the patient says ‘why are you trying to sign that with a thermometer Doc?’ And the doctor says “If that’s the thermometer, Where’s my Pen! Where’s my pen, get it?” Snowball looked blank for a moment, and so Will repeated the punch line putting on an accent for the doctor that was either meant to be Yiddish or German, as far as Cuthbert could discern. Then he frowned, and tried a different, encouraging approach.

“Come on Snowball, think about this one. The last time you had your Annual KDA physical, where did the Doctor put the thermometer? So if the pen and the thermometer got mixed up...”

“Oh. I get it. Very funny.”

“Exactly!”

“Guy with a pen in his ear. “

“Exactly in his, wait, what?”

“In his ear. Last KDA physical I had the Doctor used an ear thermometer to check my temperate. Not the best for getting an accurate core temperature, because in cases of hypothermia the body will keep the brain warm even if the rest of the core starts to loose heat, but very good for taking quick readings.”

“Right.” Said Will, wearing the horrible expression, familiar to anyone who dealt with Da’ a lot, of being unsure if trying to explain further would make the situation better or worse.

“I mean it is fairly amusing, as a mental image. A guy with a pen sticking in his ear.”

“Oh yeah, yeah, The old Pen-in-the-ear joke. Very funny.” Said Will giving up out of sheer embarrassment and taking the lid of his coffee to help it cool down.

"It would be funnier if it was a Da' doctor 'though." Said Snowball.

"Oh yeah why's that?" Asked will, taking a sip of his coffee.

"Because then the pen would be up his ass."

Will coughed mid-chug and sprayed hot coffee all over himself. As he started to mop down his sodden trousers with his hand, he caught Snowballs expression. It was almost imposible to read Da' expression without practice, but Will had plenty of that.

"You *bastard* Snowball! You utter utter *bastard!* You did that on purpose! Good work! I was sure you wouldn't have heard that one." Snowball made a face.

"Please, every culture that's invented both the rectal thermometer and *writing* has a version of that joke. In our version it's a digital stylus, and it's funnier because the doctor is female and the patient was asking for suppositories in the first place, but the basic joke is the same."

"Yeah, but waiting until I had a mouth full of hot coffee before letting on, that was pure class. Hey Cuthbert, Is Snowball learning about human humour from me or what?"

"Well done Will, You may have created a monster. And Snowball I know you were taught 'international English' but please, *arse* not *ass*: you are not an American, and the thermometer was not lodged in a donkey."

"Well if you want *that* sort of a joke."

"Not now Will. Not after last time, I'm still getting official complaints from the Vatican. Now, whilst our friend from the Met gets his witnesses together, tell me what you've seen on the weapon."

"Its-"

“Not you Snowball: I know *you* know what it is, but just as an exercise I’d like it if us humans tried to work this out based on deduction, rather than relying on your sense of smell. Will?”

“We didn’t see the officer get hit, we arrived latter, but... well...”

“You lobbed stuff over the barrier to see how they responded?”

“You noticed the coffee cup?”

“The Lilt can. And I wish you and Isaac wouldn’t do that. What If they’d panicked and started shooting wildly with hostages in there?”

“I dunno, I never got that feeling from them. “

“”You’ve spoken to them?”

“Nope. But, well, it’s not like they set out to take anyone hostage, and they’re only accused of bank robbery. Most of these impromptu hostage taking things fizzle out without too much violence. It’s not like America where if you pull this shit you know the cops will try and kill you. They are London criminals, they know as much as we do we’re probably not going to shoot them unless they do something *really* stupid. Even with a cop injured, they’ve got too much too loose to hurt a hostage.”

“True. And they swerved to miss to dog. And their accents...”

“What?”

“Nothing, I’m rambling in my old age. What did the weapon look like?”

“Streak of light, lashed out of that window there... no wait, the one there, and flung the cup and the tin in the air a few feet.”

"A few feet. Humm. Scorch-marks?"

"None that I could tell. No melting of the tin or fire on the cup."

"Noisy?"

"A quiet little crack noise, noting like as loud as a gun or suchlike."

"A streak of light, what colour?"

"Pale blue. Like a blue glow-stick. Not bright." Will paused. "It didn't travel in a straight line, as far as I could tell, more sort of an arch."

"Odd. What do you think?" Will shrugged. "Plasma-Taser? They sometimes seem to have arching shots in strong wind or rain." Cuthbert considered this. Plasma-Tasers worked by using a laser to ionise the air so it conducted a current, which shocked people into submission. Rain, moisture and wind could disrupt the ionised channel of air the electricity arched through, creating shots that were not-quite laser straight in some situations. They also made a hell of a noise.

"No; as you described it, it's too quiet."

"Yeah, I thought that, but I couldn't see what else it would be."

"Hummm, Isaac?"

"No clue some sort of reflective flechette? Something spinning as it flies, with one dark and one reflective side, strobing in the sodium lamps? Whatever it was, it whipped out of there sharpish and hit the target dead-on" Cuthbert went and peered cautiously over the barrier. "No sight of any projectile embedded in the floor, or anywhere near. No ricochet embedded in the wall, no fragments. A gas-crystal flechette could shatter then evaporate on impact, but how would that have

a non-reflective side? Hummm. Whipped. Lashed. I'm not sure we're not barking up the wrong tree with the idea of it as an energy or projectile weapon. Or barking into the wrong rock-pool."

"A stingbox?"

"One way to find out. Snowball, if you'd care to let your educated nose do the honours?"

"Stingbox. Not in great shape." He snuffed at the floor for a moment, picking up the spot the bank-robbers had field over an hour before. "Only one. Well hydrated, but they're not feeding it properly."

"Ah, and any other-"

"Can't tell. There's another of those bloody urban bee-keepers near here somewhere, and it's all I can smell. Bees everywhere."

Isaac and Will looked a little nervous at this, and even Cuthbert seemed a tad concerned.

"umm, Snowball, If you'd be so kind, third glove compartment down on the left, I think I've got a"

"On it."

Snowball ambled off, passing the Metropolitan Police Sargent as he passed. Some very senior Met officers were now arriving on the scene, and it didn't help that he was being distracted by the sight of a large Da' rear-end sticking out of a red people carrier as muffled clanks and thuds echoed from inside. Especially as there didn't in fact appear, from the outside anyway, to be enough room inside the people carrier for the rest of the Da'.

"Division- acting divion- permin.." he gave up. "Agent Cuthbert? This is an armed standoff, shouldn't he" Said the sergeant, gesturing towards the large furry rear end bobbing up and down amid the muffled clunks and swearing. "Be wearing some sort of body armour? Or failing that clothes." He added, a tough desperately.

“Do *you* want to be the one to tell him to put on clothes? He’s wearing a utility belt: by Da’ standards that practically eveningwear. And it takes him ages to get into his armour. No point really. Who’s this?”

“I’ve brought Fire-arms Officer Constable Alec Williams. He was next to Harry- next to Sergeant Brown when he was hit. He’s the only one who got a good look at whatever it was hit him.”

“Jellyfish.”

“What?”

“It was a Jellyfish. A small domesticated Portuguese Man-O-War, genetically modified to have a single long stinging tendril coiled helically around an actuator muscle. Ah thank you Snowball: The marmalade if you would? They’re grown inside specially made chitin or polymer boxes, you activate them.” He said, lobbing a jar of marmalade over the barrier and then ducking back around the corner “either with a nerve impulse, or with a flick of the wrist, or by pulling a trigger. Think what a ballistic knife is to a normal knife, and start with a whip, and you’re pretty much there. But alive, of course.”

“Are you telling me.” Said the Sergeant weighing his words very carefully as he was fully aware everyone, including his superior officers were listening in on this. “That Sergeant Brown was wounded by a *Jellyfish*?”

“Yes, that’s right. It’s a Dict weapon.”

“You’re telling me!” Cuthbert Sighed.

“Four letters, one *tee*, no *kay*. Short for *Dictyoptera*. It’s not what they call themselves.” Cuthbert looked to Snowball, who made a short clicking-chirping noise in his throat. He sounded like a mechanical Bird.

“Right, thank you Snowball, but most of us primates can’t even begin to pronounce any of their language. They evolved on one of the worlds the kestral seeded with Terran life forms and just left, as an ecology experiment. Hot, humid, lower gravity than earth. Favoured the growth of very large insects *Dictyoptera* included. Picture a one and a half metre, sorry, five-foot tall Praying Mantis.” Added Cuthbert. He had an instinct for who used imperial and who used metric, and this sergeant was defiantly an imperial man. It was a knack. He also knew if people preferred “one-thousand five hundred” or “fifteen hundred” just by looking at them. I could never understand how other people didn’t, but that again, he didn’t understand imperial units or fifteen-hundred at that, but it put people at their ease.

“Five. Foot. Tall. Mantis.” Said the sergeant. He hated insects. Which units were used were not at the top of his mind at that point.

“Yes. They were discovered by another alien race, The Micta, weird sorts, who noted they were semi-sentient and decided to modify them into a sort of slave-race. You see, like many mantises’s, the young display a form of ant mimicry, or did once. This evolved into a pheromoneal mimicry that let the adults lay their eggs in bee-hives, and fooled by the pheromones the bees would care for and feed the young, and the adult *Dict* kill and eat anything that might raid the bee-hive. So the young developed in bee-hives, and the adults were harvested by the Micta who took advantage of this pheromoneal co-dependence and used a sort of pheromoneal restraining-bolt they developed to control them. But the kestral noticed this and, taking a dim view on giving someone full sentence only to enslave them, found a way to circumvent this.”

“Fascinating. Why is this relevant, and what’s with the marmalade.”

“So now fully sentient and free.” Said Cuthbert, in full lecture mode now. “The *Dict* went about fighting for the freedom however they could. And because at first, seeing as they didn’t have weapons, they had to improvise. “

“Improvise?”

“A growing *Dict* nymph needs a lot of food, especially protein, and that one thing the bees have trouble providing for it. So females lay a single fertile egg with a few hundred sterile ones for the nymphs to eat. Trouble is a lot of other things would like to eat these eggs as well. So they evolved a chemical in the eggs, which is released when you crush them; there’s some chemical in *Dict* saliva that counter-acts it so it’s not released when they eat the eggs. The chemical is almost identical to the one recent by a bee if you swat it: the one that tells every other bee in the area to attack you. Except the eggs have more of it. A *lot* more of it.” Cuthbert looked the Met Sergeant right in the eye. “Hence the marmalade. If these people have *Dict* weaponry, then there is a good chance they have

access to specially-reared genetically-modified attack-bees and what are essentially paint-ball guns full of sterile eggs that, when crushed, make ever bee for miles around attack you. “

“Ah.”

“Yes.”

“The marmalade?”

“Lure any bees out of hiding. Honey works better, but we were out.” The Met Sergeants eye flicked, traitorously, to Snowball.

“Nope.” Said Cuthbert. Me I’m afraid: I missed breakfast, and there’s a toaster in the car. And that was, I’m pretty sure, Racial profiling.”

“Sorry.” The Met sergeant considered this. “So that incident a few months ago, with the Da’ KDA officer in Paddington train station holding a very large jar of marmalade...”

“Was Snowball and he was checking for a possible hidden weapons cache, yes.” Cuthbert winched at the memory of that one. It had taken about thirty seconds before someone had made the obvious joke, and after half an hour of hearing a new variation of it every minute and even being gifted a pair of wellies and a promise that a duffel-coat and hat combo was coming soon, Snowball had poured the marmalade over the jokers head. At which point the normal, everyday non GM, un-weaponised wasps had turned up. Will still hadn’t forgiven Snowball fully.

After a few moments of contemplative silence, Cuthbert, Will, Isaac, Snowball and the Met sergeant peered cautiously over the barrier.

The jar of marmalade lay there like just another super-market tragedy requiring a mop. There was a district absence of killer bees.

“Waste of bloody Marmalade if you ask me.” Said Snowball. After a moment he noticed the looks he was getting and shrugged. “So maybe some racial profiles are true. Sue me.”

“Must have just been a normal urban bee-keeper you could smell, Snow.”

“Yes.” There were a lot of them about now a days, Cuthbert thought, It was very much the “In thing” and this new trend did seem to irritate the cities Da’, who felt a bit like a human might if wafting the smell of fresh bread in your face whilst you were trying to concentrate on work had suddenly become fashionable. It could be worse, he supposed: Chrystal’s next door neighbour had taken up urban chicken-keeping.

“No weaponised bees?” asked Isaac.

“No weaponised bees.” Cuthbert replied.

“Fighting with bees and eggs, how *exactly* does that work?” asked the Met Sergeant.

“Surprisingly well. At first, in their war of independence, they just them with slings: the sudden lashing motion of their killer fore-limb is good for throwing like that. Later they developed the idea of machining screw-treads into their Spiracles; they have two dedicated ones near the shoulders that only ever exhale. Into this they screw a pipe leading to a one-way valve and a compressed air canister. They top up the air at high pressure each time they exhale, and the air powers what’s basically an over-the-shoulder paintball marker. The eggs are all a fairly uniform size, and fairly flexible so they seldom jam or burst in the barrel, and they have their own lubricating mucus sabots. Females top up their ammunition from the unfertile eggs they constantly churn out, as part of their reproductive cycle”

“The only weapon in the world that fires weaponised period at you.” Added Will helpfully

“and as all *Dict* are female when they are first conceived, and temperate helps dictate what sex they develop into in the eggs, males have vestigial ovaries in their upper abdomen. They surgically re-route their fallopian tubes through their thorax to exit at the shoulder and connect it directly to the weapon. Hormone-therapy them makes the produce the sterile eggs.”

“But it messes up the males behaviour and appearance, they go a bit... transgender. I suppose you could say-”

“Will, were you about to make the Eddy IZard joke? Please don't. Just because it involves people covered in bees and cross-dressing doesn't mean the situation calls for it. Anyway, that is their main short-range weapon. At longer range they use a Maser mounted on their other shoulder, with the novel addition of using it to ionise channels through the air like a plasma-Taser and use these channels to carry charged molecules to the target.”

“More ‘attack me bees’ pheromones?”

“Sometimes. Sometimes radioactive markers so their artillery can zone in on you. Sometimes they just implant a deadly neurotoxin into the cut the laser just made.”

“Like a deadly laser-printer.” Added Isaac.

“Or at very close range, they use whips. Like I said, the motion comes naturally to their predatory fore-limbs. As they were already using other invertebrates as weapons, and modifying them for purpose; twenty per cent of their bees are throwbacks to an unmodified design, but the rest have smooth un-barbed stings and are modified to sting with a toxin similar to that found in Funnel-web spiders, then I guess it seemed logical to them to find a creature with a very long poison tendril and modify it into a weapon.”

“A jelly-fish whip.”

“The tendril can be over twenty metres long, the poison causes enough pain to incapacitate instantly, paralyses within ten seconds, and the paralysis stops breathing in under five minutes, and although they favour wrist-mounted versions themselves, beak-mounted versions for kestals and hand-held versions for Da' and humans have been reported. The whip uncoils like a spring when activated, so there as accurate as firing a gun. More, even. They make them as gifts for export. Their society is based around a concept similar to that of *xenia*-”

“Awesome warrior princess with killer whips.” Said Will.

“- the ancient Greek idea of strangers and guests exchanging gifts to cement friendly trade relationships.” Said Cuthbert. “Which is the problem: they give away this stuff as, well, collectors’ items. They think the people who receive them only see it for its rarity value as a gift. That’s all they care about. So they’ll trade *lethal* bits of alien weaponry for rare cigarette cards.”

“One offered me a genuine fusion-bomb for my comic books.” Said Will. “Could have got my own plasma-rifle for my miniatures collection, too. They just never presume the person they’re giving this stuff to sees it as anything other than a collector’s piece. They are a complete nightmare to Divisions Division Twelve and Seven.”

“So, this weapon is alive?” Cuthbert nodded.

“Yes. It had a mucus layer that stops it from drying out, but you still need to give it water preferably twice a day, and water full of algae or plankton for food every few days or it dies.”

“Good eating on one of those.” Said Snowball, rotating the barrels on his Vulcan by hand to check them. “Up to a litter of fresh water in the sack on the back it has to stop itself drying out. Packed with nutrients too. You just need to know where the poisonous bits are, but the poisonous bits phosphoresce slightly, so it’s easy.. We used to look forwards to getting attacked with stingboxes in the Da’ military. Especially if we were thirsty.”

“You *ate* your enemies’ weapons?” Snowball gave the Met sergeant a *look*.

“Better than having them fire at us again. What would *you* have me eat to get that result?”

“Oooo-kay. Stepping back from the precipice a tad.” Said Cuthbert. “The good news is the Da’ have an anti-venom that works very well on this, so you friend Sergeant Brown should make a full recovery within a few days. And as we have the anti-venom already on Snowballs medi-chip, it will be realised into his bloodstream automatically if he’s hit.”

“Okay, so what now.” Cuthbert considered this.

“They still have shotguns, right?”

“Yes.”

“Huum. But they swerved to avoid the Dog. And their accent, I heard on the radio intercept and recording from the bank. Estuary English: these guys are no more cockney gangsters than I am. And *Dict* weapons. Flashy but useless, really, compared with kestal or Da’ weaponry. The sort of thing you buy of some alien bloke in the pub because you don’t know any real arms dealers. I wonder if we are dealing with professionals or some very enthusiastic and unlucky wannabes here. Hummm. Fire-arms Officer Constable Alec Williams, how many shots did these people fire at sergeant Brown before he was hit?”

“Sir?”

“You heard me. How many shots did these people fire at sergeant Brown before he was hit?”

“Three. Sir.”

“You never said that when I asked you before!” said the Met sergeant. Fire-arms Officer Constable Alec Williams glared, but stayed silent.

“And being a trained Fire-arms Officer sergeant Brown would have raised his gun to fire back, and only then was he hit. They don’t even want to shoot at us. I’ve seen the interphase on a stingbox: The default setting sends the sting out in an expanding cone-shape: hits everything in a twenty-meter thirty-degree arch with a failing, spasming whip. Its child’s-play to aim on single shot too. If they missed three times, they meant too.” He looked to the warehouse. “They have shotguns too, and we’ve not even seen a sign of them.”

They’ll be afraid. Soon they’ll panic and start trying to use the life of the hostages to bargain, they haven’t even made any demands yet because they never planned on this becoming a hostage situation. But they may really think that would work. Statistically, the longer a hostage situation goes on, the greater the chances it will end in a death. I’ll not have that. They need to understand how week their situation is, and how their best chance is to come peacefully. Snowball, has that thing still got the titanium plate that protects the muzzle-end?”

“Yes.”

“Good. There a door around the next corner, according to street -view. Smash it in with the Vulcan, there’s a good chap, and damn well make sure the barrels are spilling at the time. Once inside, you know that to do.”

“Yes *sir*.”

“*What!*”

“Sergeant, in order to end this with the lowest statistical chance of a fatality, they need to understand that their situation is non-viable.” Said Cuthbert, tucking his clipboard under his arm like a pace-stick. “Nothing says ‘You’re fucked’ like a seventeen-hundred pound ursine with a Gatling cannon.”

“But this is insane! You’ve made no plans, you’re officer had no backup, they’ve still got hostages...”

“Not for much longer. This gives us our best odds.”

“Actually.” Said Isaac. “by far the best odds are from a simple civilised negotiation and a pormice that.”

“Don’t bore me with maths, Isaac.”

“You’re the one who brought it up! The best odds are-”

“From negotiation, *if* they think they can trust us not to kill them if they surrender.” Cuthbert looked at his clipboard again, then got out his iPad. “I know something you don’t about the situation, ‘Zac, that might alter your calculations slight. Isn’t that right Fire-arms Officer Constable Alec Williams?”

“Sir.”

“Don’t Sir me.”

“What’s going on?” asked the Met Sergeant.

“Sergeant brown is, apparently, a very capable Fire-arms officer. So why then was he forwards in clear view of the hostage takers without his squad, with only Fire-arms Officer Constable Alec Williams there with him? I doesn’t sound like anything an experienced officer would do...”

“Well.”

However, I’m willing to go out on a limb here and say that although none of the rest of his team saw him get hit, when you asked for witnesses, sergeant, you were told he was listening to the radio and then suddenly headed of towards the warehouse, and was hit shortly afterwards?”

“How did you?”

“The names of the bank-clerks taken hostage were announced on the police radio about two minutes before he was hit, and then repeated again a moment latter. One of them was a Susana Deets.”

“So?”

“-Who before she married last month was a Susana Williams. Out of interest I looked her up.”

“Secret illegal KDA database on Britain’s citizens?” sneered Fire-arms Officer Constable Alec Williams accusingly.

“Facebook.” Said Cuthbert, showing the Met sergeant the iPad. “ Sister?”

“Half sister.”

“What.” Said the sergeant, his stomach sinking. Cuthbert smiled, without any trace of humour.

“According to the photos online, Sergeant Brown was at the wedding. He must have recognised the name on the radio, realised that Constable Williams here and snuck off on his own and ran to fetch him back before he did something stupid, like provoke the hostage takers into a shooting contest.”

“They’ve got my sister.”

“Half sister. And thanks to you the hostage takers already think we’re out to kill them. So negotiation is pretty much out. When that fails there are two options left: Intimidation, or direct violence Snowball.” Said Cuthbert, over the sound of a Vulcan cannon revving up and the *clang* of a steel warehouse door parting company completely with its doorframe. “Excels at both.”

There was a few moments of relative quiet, followed by a series of screams, a few shotgun blasts, the thunderous rumble of a Gatling weapon firing and what could only honestly be describes as a roar.

“Maybe Snowball wasn’t the best chose for this.” Said Isaac. “We could have used Jacque.”

“He’s on leave. And besides, up close, really close, a Da’ is even scarier than a Deinonychus.”

“He’s eleven-foot nine. He can’t fit though *doors*.”

“He weighs one thousand seven hundred and forty eight pounds on an empty stomach and carries a Gatling gun that weighs three-hundred pounds loaded and has a titanium battering-ram on the front. He doesn’t need to *use* doors.”

“True, but we should at least get him to remove the underslung RPG; that thing’s not safe.”

“True, but last time we tried he said he wanted to replace it with a flame-thrower.”

The roaring, screaming and shooting was really now quite pronounced.

“They still have shotguns, you know Cuth”

“Probably loaded with duck-shot. These guys are not pros. Besides, a shotgun against an angry Da’? At worse he could loose and eye.”

“He’d be really pissed off if he lost an eye again. And Chrystal would kill you. It costs nearly a grand to grow a new one, and we’d have to update all the files on the rental scanners at HQ *again*.”

“The hostages...” muttered the Met Sergeant in a shocked tone. Cuthbert looked at him, surprised.

“We have a teleporter lock on them, and the scanners in the mini-van can see right through the walls of the building, here look, you can see on the iPad, oh, those stairs have collapsed under Snowball, oh wait, nope he’s pulled himself up using that guy as a lever. If someone so much as points a gun in their direction we’ll have them out of here. Come on, we teleported your sergeant brown out cleanly. We can do the same with the hostages any time we want. They were never in any danger.”

“Then why didn’t you do that right away!” Cuthbert looked at the Met Sergeant as if he’d just stared to dribble.

“And resolve the situation using nothing but alien technology? What sort of message would *that* send out right before the re-negotiation of the non-tradable items section of the Treaty of Tyrone? Why do you think I had Will chase off the government agents masquerading as press but leave the actual paparazzi here? This is going live round the world. I’d like to see any change to the treaty after *this*.” He sniffed. “And besides, it’s been such a long time since Snowballs had a chance to do this. He really gets most terribly bored sometimes.”

“It’s been a week.” Said Isaac. “Eight days.”

“And he’s been bored stiff for all of it.” Isaac looked at Cuthbert.

“He’s only got about five facial expressions. How can you tell?”

At this point they were interrupted by a large vertical strip of the warehouse wall disintegrating violently.

“What was that?” yelled the Met Sergeant.

“Probably Snowball; shooting the Vulcan into the wall in front of the suspects to warn them not to get any closer. If I know him, there be a volley into the wall near the next stairwell-” It became suddenly too noisy to talk an eight-foot tall strip of concrete about thirty feet from the last segment exploded outwards in little fragments, and then the noise of shooting stopped, although the screaming didn’t.

“-to show them they can’t get away. Next will be a volley over their heads, to make them duck-”

A horizontal strip of wall disintegrated, starting at the top corner of one of the vertical strip and moving briskly to the top corner of the other.

“And then KDA policy recommends getting hostiles to jump up and down if you can, to dislodge any concealed weapons.”

“How do you get them to jump up and down-”

A horizontal strip, at what would have been about ankle height on the upper floor of the warehouse, also decided to part company with the rest of the wall under persuasion from 20 mm shells. Little splinters of concrete blow outwards made it nearly as far as the cordon. The ursine roaring from inside continued, but the human screaming had died down to frantic burbling.

“right.” Said Cuthbert. “I think they might be in a mood to surrender now chaps. sergeant, please bring your fire-arms officers to the cordon to cover them as they do so.” Said Cuthbert, pulling a large GLOCK out from under his coat. The sergeant stated. The shoulder holster was plainly visible, now you looked at it. Somehow with the calculator hanging right by it, he hadn’t noticed. Isaac had also produced a handgun, a SIG .357 from somewhere, and the Agent calling himself Will a huge revolver. Cuthbert sighed.

“Will, the reason I took the Smith and Wesson five-hundred away from you was because we agreed it was for use against Da’ suspects only. Unless you want me to confiscate the Mateba auto-revolver too, *please* put it back in that car.”

“Fair enough. Colt nineteen eleven or the see zed seventy five?”

“ leave it entirely up to your better judgment.” Said Cuthbert, aiming the GLOCK twenty at the warehouse wall, the Met Sergeant looked at him askew.

“What are you doing? there’s not even any *doors* in that side of the building.”

The muzzle end of a Vulcan cannon punched through the centre of the rectangle of wall damaged by cannon fire. After a moment's pause, the entire rectangular section of wall gently collapsed on itself and fell outwards with a noise like an entire terracotta army being de-mobbed. The three KDA agents levelled their guns at the wall. As the cinder-block dust cleared, it revealed Snowball squatting quite happily in the wreckage of the warehouse's upper floor next to two bank-clerks, chewing on something. And five very frightened, looking men lined up, hands on heads, against what a few moments ago was the wall. One appeared to have a particular dampness of trousers, unsurprising given how close his head was to the point the Vulcan had punched through the concrete. Snowball moved the still spinning Vulcan to a few inches behind his head, and then lowered it and gave him a gentle nudge in the back. He windmilled for a second, before falling forwards down the slope of shattered concrete with a small scream. The other four took one look at the dozen armed officer in front of them, and the one *Da'* behind them, and followed without hesitation, arms raised. The Met rushed forwards, and it became just another arrest.

“Well.” Said Cuthbert. “You’ll get my report tomorrow morning. In the interim, here’s what you should and should not include in your report. I’m not allowed to tell you to hush anything up, in this situation, but well, let’s just say with all the people who want to get their hands on alien weaponry, it’d be easier all round if certain bits were left out.”

The Met officer looked at the piece of paper, formally of the clipboard, he had been given. “Don’t worry. I’m not putting the bits about marmalade of killer jellyfish in a report. I’ve got a routine psychiatric evaluation coming up as it is. Weapon called a sting box, made by aliens called the *Dict*, works like an automatic bull-whip covered in a deadly poison. That’s all I need to include.”

“Good. Now if you’ll excuse me, I need to collect the evidence of alien weapons use, for analysis.”

“We’ll need the gun as evidence.”

“So everyone who wants to reverse engineer this stuff knows where it is? No sorry, but under the powers vested in me under the treaty of Tyrone I’m confiscating it. An expert witness report detailing its range, effectiveness and dangerousness will be made available for use in trial, but no weapon, and no details on how it works.”

Cuthbert took a clear plastic evidence bag, and strode forwards to the wreckage of the building. He poked around in the shattered concrete as Snowball, with surprising daintiness, helped the two

bank-clerks down. After a moment Cuthbert unearthed a large oval box, with a black plastic handle and trigger attached to the underside. At the muzzle end it had a three-part squid-like beak, and the upper surface of brightly coloured reflective chitin had two wing-casing-like folding flaps in it.

One of them flapped open pathetically as he lifted it. It was surprisingly light.

“Snowball!”

“What? It would have to be destroyed anyway, and I was thirsty.” He said, still chewing concededly.

“That’s not the point. You cannot just *eat* the evidence in a bank-robbery case!”

“Reg’s say all weapons found must be made safe immediately, even in it compromises their value as evidence.”

“They meant unloading guns if necessary. Oh well. At least Chrystal didn’t see that.”

Cuthbert became aware of the TV camera crews there at his own invitation, at about the same time his KDA issue iPad *pinged* .

“Cuthbert, what the hell am I looking at on the news. Was that a *building* Cuthbert? And what on earth is Snowball *chewing* ??”

“Ah, well, funny you should ask that Chrys’...”

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