

“The Problem” Cuthbert said “Is Jesus.”

Snowball gave him a look of polite incomprehension for a few moments. Then he spoke.

“You’re a Baptist. I don’t think you’re allowed to say that.” He said, fishing noodles out of his soup. All Da’ were good with chopsticks; it was that or get fur in their food.

“No, No what I’m *saying*, right, is that although of course I have no problem with Jesus *per say*, the single biggest problem with time-travel enabled cultures is religion, as best demonstrated *in* Jesus, to pick a case study at random.”

“Right?”

“I mean look at you.” Cuthbert gestured across the table, nearly knocking over a plate of Dim Sum. “You are, not to put too fine a point on in, a Da’.”

Snowball considered this.

“Yes?” he answered. He wasn’t sure where this was going.

“Okay, and the Da’ evolved sentience how long before humans?”

He considered this. “Define human?”

“Pardon?”

“Do Australopithecus count?” Snowball asked patiently.

Cuthbert gave this some thought as he chewed on some bean curd. "Africanus probably does, Afarensis too, it's the most likely direct ancestor of anatomically modern man. Not sure about anamensis and the others."

"And anatomically modern woman."

"What?"

"You said 'Man' rather than 'Humanity'."

"Man is gender neutral in the original old English." Cuthbert pointed out mildly.

"Yeah but were not speaking old English, are we?" said Snowball. "Okay, first Proto Da', I dunno. A couple of million years before A. Afarensis. About that. No sentient Ursids before six million Bee Pee for sure. "

"Okay, and you discovered time travel, what? Thirty, forty thousand years Ago?"

"About that. The question of *when* we first encountered it no longer makes sense, but we first built a time travel device then. So?"

So to take a date at random after that, say 20,000 BC how many black market copies of the bible were in circulation at the appoint. Or the Koran. Or the Gita."

"In the Empire? Couple of millard at least."

"There you go." Said Cuthbert siding back and spreading both arms in a gesture of victory, nearly taking a waitresses eye out with his chopsticks as she put another pair of Tsingtao on the table. Cuthbert was unfailingly polite to waitresses and always tipped well, he just had a regrettable tendency to zone out and not notice his soundings once he got talking passionately. "No matter how well you police the actual time travel, how many attempts to

assassinate Hitler you stop, how many ancient battles you keep running according to the way events should have happened, you'll never stop the evangelists trying to give their religion a head start. We have to be lucky all the time, they only have to be lucky once, and for the rest of eternity people will keep circulating the copies of the texts."

Snowball considered this.

"We've never once tried to stop anyone assassinating Hitler. Or even *been* to a historical battle. "

"We were at Cannae the other month." Cuthbert pointed out.

"Yeah but that was an accident, and we only stayed because You and Will are massive history geeks and wanted to take a look once we were there. We've never been at one on official business. There's no point. We *know* from history that time travellers didn't appear at Cannae guns blazing, so if anyone tries to intervene, they drop themselves in a parallel timeline when the intervention of time-travellers at Cannae is a well-known historical fact, so when they return to this present there's no difference and we nick them for a class B Temporal Incursion with Intent to Bugger Things Up. You can't change the bits of history we know about because if you did, we'd already know. Q.E.D. you can only change the little bits around the edges no-one records."

Snowball considered this. "Or sometime the illegal time-travellers just nick loads of stuff because if you're nicking stuff, then ergo, it is a timeline where time-travellers nicking stuff is a historical fact, and so no-one will miss it. Remember that guy last month. How many Hope diamonds did he get before we got him?"

"Thirty-nine. And twenty-seven copies of Tut-ankh-aten's death-mask including five from timelines where the conversion of Egypt to Atenism by his father was a success, and forty-two sets of the crown jewels, including one from that timeline where Queen Victoria was secretly a robot."

Snowball nodded. They saw a lot of Steampunk timelines. “I still don’t see how he thought he could get away with trying to fence that.” As it turned out, even Christies of London got suspicious when you tried to sell them three Hope diamonds and a diamond-studded, solid iridium, uranium cored sceptre of monarchy/fuel rod. “But the point of it is, although you *can* change the *actual* past of this timeline, you can only do it in tiny, tiny ways that go unrecorded by history, as anything that’s recorded has had its wave-space collapsed as it has been observed. Basic Heisenberg dilemma. Plus its damn near impossible to find the right one, to find *our* past in all the infinite different timelines.”

“Yes, but you can steal stuff and then bring it back you what counts as your present. Hence the Before-Christ bibles. I mean.” Cuthbert leaned closer and waved a finger in Snowballs face, accidentally poking him in the nose (something few humans have done to a nearly eight hundred kilogram ursine and lived to tell, but Snowball had got used to human interactions. And human beer.) “I mean, what? How hard did your government have to try to stop devout Da’ Christians gate-crashing he nativity, the Sermon on the Mount and the crucifixion? Can you imagine the gospels if they had failed? *‘And lo, there descended from the heaves these bloody huge talking bears wearing W.W.J.D armbands, who proceeded to fall at His feet and worship him to his apparent confusion.’* You had to park a naval vessel in orbit over Bethlehem for *two years* to keep the tourist away and to stop the rival religions bumping him off!”

“Good job we did too, otherwise those Magi would have had nothing to navigate by.”

“-And before that you had the cult wars, different groups of Da’ killing each other over which human messiah was the one true messiah *before the saviours in question were born, and before humans had any idea about your race’s existence!* I mean, I’m a pretty devout Baptist, insofar as possible in this job, and I find that depressing as hell.”

Snowball shrugged. “I’m a Da’ and I think it’s depressing. It was my people fighting.”

“Over my species’ gods!”

“Says you. Nowhere in the bible does it say when Christ has his second coming he’ll do it in human form. Besides, he seems to be taking an awfully long time about it, perhaps he’s decided to manifest to some other species in the meantime.” Snowball took a sip of his beer and narrowed his eyes at Cuthbert. “You can’t really claim a god as your own just because he appeared on Earth whilst you were occupying it. We evolved on earth too, so that’s like claiming the postman as your own without checking if the post was addressed to the previous tenant of your flat.”

“And that’s the other depressing bit. You guys evolved on earth before us.”

“So? The kestal evolved on earth before *us*.”

“Yes, and you never found any archaeological evidence of their civilisation until after first contact with living Kestal, and we never found evidence of you or them.”

“The archaeologists fouled up. So?”

“So what if they didn’t? Look the little details of the past; they can be changed because the wave-space is un-collapsed? Yes?”

“Yes, so?”

“So after a long enough time it’s *all* Little details. Our lives, our existence, or present. It’s some else’s past, and what if after time, as knowledge of that past fades it all just... unravels. The collapsed wave-spaces un-collapse themselves again? What if you evolved on earth and then left-”

“We did.”

“- *and then* the knowledge of you faded, until it was *uncertain* if you even did so in the same time-line as us, and then only once we re-discovered you did the fossils start to turn up *because re-discovering you collapsed the wave space*. If the future is undetermined and events in our present collapses the wavespace and determine which futures remain possible and which do not-”

“They do.”

“-*and if time flows backwards as well as forwards-*.”

“It does. Well known fact.”

“- *then* surely by the same quantum mechanism, our actions in the presents collapse the wave-space and determine which elements of the *collective past* shared by *multiple timelines* remain true in our timeline and which did not. Either the past and future are fixed and unchanging, or both are mutable and our actions matter in present, future ad past.” Cuthbert finished with a mildly depressed flourish, losing one of his chopsticks. He pinched the bridge of his nose. It had been a long day, policing forbidden alien technology on earth, and a quick Chinese and a few beers had seemed like such a good idea at the time.

“Well.” Said Snowball after a pause in which Cuthbert flagged the waitress and got another set of chopsticks and, Snowball noted, a pot of tea rather than beer.

“Well what?”

“Which is it? Ridged unflinching destiny or a mutable past.”

“Buggered if I know. I’m just speculating based on personal experience.”

“Of time travel?”

“Of getting seriously dehydrated once at university and foolishly trying salvia for the first and only time on the same day. A word of advice, don’t do drugs, even legal ones. Fortune cookie?”

“Thanks.”

“But personal experience in time travel does seem to suggest that the past is... messy. Timelines merging and splitting and cross-breeding and all that. Just a thought, is all. Besides, you’re the advanced alien species here, what’s your opinion?”

“My opinion is they make up these fortunes as they go along. What kind of fortune is “The next great may bring you great prosperity, if only you have it in you to prosper.” They may as well say “Stuff happens, what the hell”. And get it over and one with.”

“They wouldn’t sell the cookies then.”

“-And why are you asking me? I’m in police work because I finished a change after the naval supply corp. My job skills are shouting at people, organising rotas, and shooting very large guns. I’m not a science-geek. I mean if asked by an ancient roman, *you* couldn’t explain every single element of a car, from the seat production to the distillation of the petrol, could you.”

“I could.”

“Well, yes, but you’re a freak. No-one is meant to read archaeology books until they could build a bloomery iron-smelting forge, built a pig-iron blast furnace with the iron form that, and build a béchamel converter from that.”

“Bessemer converter.”

“Whatever. I’m just saying in the twenty-first century no-one needs to know how to make saltpetre from horse-shit and draw a cut-away diagram of a Minie ball, complete with a method of boring out rifled barrels and making a good flint-lock to go with it, blindfolded. No one needs to know about animal-bone cuppel lead-smelting either.”

“I do. I work in time-travel. What if I get stuck?”

There was a rather pleasant electronic “Ping” Cuthbert winced, but got an iPad out of his bag and answered the call anyway. At least it looked like an iPad. The 3D holographic projector and the sonic scrambling that made both his speech and the sounds of the person on the other end of the call inaudible to anyone not sitting in a two-meter bubble of silence centred on the pad were probably optional extras not found on the usual app-store.

“Yep.” Said Cuthbert. At every other table in the restaurant people started dropping chopsticks and clutching their hands to their ears as the scramblers kicked in. Snowball watched with interest. Humans really were fascinating creature once you got used to the smell.

“Code in please.” Said Chrystal as her floating head appeared over the table. “She noted Cuthbert’s frown and added. “I’m sorry, I know it’s you but protocol says I need your service designation for a voice-check.” Cuthbert sighed. She was a damn good woma- a damn good genetically modified vixen, especially when it came to keeping most of the paperwork and Bureau-politics away from his men, but she was as constrained by regulation as anyone. Snowball glanced at the hologram and then went back to crowd-watching: one Chinese waitress started pointing and screaming about Huli jing. Cuthbert however could not hear.

“Acting divisional commander, KDA Division thirteen, Forbidden and Restricted Technology Regulation, service number-” As Snowball watched she started throwing glasses. There was by now a small stampede towards the doors.

“-even-six. So what’s this about Chrys?”

"You sober? I know you're off duty and said you were going to get a couple of beers, but something's come up I think you should probably see."

"Had a few, but should be fine as long as it's just an advisory non-combat role." He said, confident that Chrystal could only see his head and not the seven or eight bottles of Tsingtao cluttering his side of the table "I've already locked my guns in the car. Always do before I have a beer."

"Guns will not be required, thank god. Where are you?"

"Chinese restaurant in Hammersmith."

"Get down to the DeBeers London HQ, Pronto. Attempted Robbery of the vault, the BIG one where they according to rumour, keep the stockpile they in the past used to threaten to flood global diamond markets and destroy competitors, back in the days before they lost their monopoly in two-thousand. The Met are calling it in as suspected use of forbidden or controlled Alien tech, and Isaac and Will are still sorting out this month's suspiciously good horse-racing wins just in case it's another lottery-time-traveller."

"Alien weaponry?"

"None. Suspected teleporter. Earth-built, judging by the energy signature. Crude, but functional."

"Someone tried to teleport the diamonds out of the De beers vault?" Snowball asked, looking to the hologram now the restaurant had emptied, save for the one waitress, who was now in hysterics by the live abalone tank. That would have been interesting. Cuthbert, meanwhile, shook his head in amazement. If you were bright enough to build a teleporter

from alien scrap, and all you needed was a good collage xenology student who was friends with a few very good college physics and engineering students, then you were more than bright enough to make all the money you'd ever want legitimately. He understood why people still tried to do it via crime, it was far more fun, but really, it did make you wonder. Especially when they didn't know the risks.

"No Snowball, no-one on earth could build the scanners needed to locate the diamonds, that's far harder than the teleporter, and since taking the diamonds out would require knowledge of their exact location, you'd need an inside man, in which case you'd not need a teleporter to rob the place." *Although that and a space-transit ticket to the arse-end of nowhere could help* he thought. De Beers, back in the day, practically had their own army. They were not people with whom it was wise to fuck. "They tried to teleport themselves in am I correct?"

"Correct. The Met sergeant on the scene wants you there pronto to explain what the hell's going on."

"Do they have the suspects, or did they get away?"

"Suspects are dead. Very much so."

Cuthbert nodded. De Beers could afford ex-SAS guards, as well as many less professional professionals, which just made them all the more terrifying. "Shot?" De Beers denied keeping armed guards in their London offices, as given UK gun laws that would be unacceptable. Cuthbert wondered how they had kept a straight face whilst doing so.

"In a manner of speaking. There were high velocity objects fired from a device, certainly. It looks like they were operating from somewhere near the equator, perhaps targeting London rather than a De Beers regional HQ because of the rumours that the big stockpile is kept there. From the description of the scene I'm getting from the Metropolitan Police, it looks like they forgot to build a compensator for their teleporter. The Met sergeant sounds fairly shaken up."

Even Snowball winced. The earth's rotation at the equator was one-thousand six hundred and sixty-six point six recurring kilometres per hour, as the earth was around forty-thousand kilometres in diameter at the equator and made one revolution per twenty four hours. At Fifty one degrees north, central London give or take a few minutes of arch, the diameter of the earth along the parallels was only twenty-five thousand -seven-hundred-and-fifty-odd kilometres, so as it also made one revolution per twenty hours the speed of the surface of the earth was only traveling at ten-thousand and seventy-odd kilometres per hour. Or, to put it another way, since Teleporters maintained the speed and direction of any object entering them and ensured they exited traveling the same speed and direction, if you didn't build compensators, even really crude one like using a steam catapult to fire you at the teleporter so your speed matched the destination speed required for that latitude, then teleporting from the equator to London meant you arrived traveling east to west at around five-hundred and fifty kilometres per hour with no breaks, or, when you encountered a wall, lots of breaks. Although this *was* a viable prospect when it came to arriving on the inside of a big steel and concrete box filled with big boxes of the hardest and sharpest substance in nature, it was only a viable prospect for doing so exactly once.

"We'll be there presently. Send a clean-up crew to meet us there, and get the Tech guys to start trying to trace the origin point of the teleport. Look for mysterious crashes in national power grids. Try Indonesia or Singapore to start with, they have the sport of cash strapped geeks that might try this. Or central Africa, a lot of Da' and kestral tech gets dumped off the bottom of the Zero-Zero space-elevator and washes up along the coast of the gulf of Ghana, major industry there trying now-a-days to recycle the stuff. Maybe someone there got something working and decided to have a play with it. I'll see if there's anything imbedded in the west wall of the De Beers vault that might help identify them."

It was a depressing prospect. Dental and prints were likely out due to the sudden deceleration, and in the developing world few people had their DNA on record. He had to hope for a wallet or something.

"There in ten or fifteen minutes."

"Right. Chrystal out."

The screaming of the scramblers, quite inaudible to anyone in the eye of the sonic storm, cut out.

“Well,” said Cuthbert. “Seeing what’s waiting for us I think I’ll pass on desert.” He looked at the dessert menu. Lychees seemed to feature heavily in everything. “I think we’ll *definitely* pass on dessert, but now that I’ve been reminded, get the rental scanner from the car, the diamond-thieves might have once been in the system somewhere, you never know.” He turned to the waitress as Snowball muttered that he’d been looking forward to the desserts (As a Da’ he was not the least perturbed by dead humans, no matter what the state. The hard bit was dealing with the live ones) , and Cuthbert wondered briefly why she seemed to be in something of a state. Maybe she was one of those people uncomfortable around Da’ he thought. A bit odd for London, there were thousands here now, but some people just couldn’t adapt to non-humans. There was simply no helping some people, he thought.

“The bill please, if you would be so kind.” He checked his watch. “We’re in a bit of a hurry I’m afraid.”

“You want to go straight there, or stop to pick up some kit?”

“Let’s head straight there, the clean-up crew should have all the necessary equipment. Huh, the waitress seems to have run off. Leave some money Snowball, we better get a move on.”

“No time like the present, eh?” Asked Snowball, Cuthbert paused in the act of putting on his coat and sighed.

“Yes, that might just be right, I’m afraid.”

