

“Where the hell have you been? Get Cuthbert, this is going bad, I can feel it.” Said Will bouncing off Isaac in the broad corridor between the two rows of desks that made up division thirteen’s operational HQ. Isaac watched him hurry off to his own desk, curious and then walked up the aisle towards Cuthbert’s desk, which sat at right angles to all the others at the ends of the row, carefully stepping over piles of paper. Cuthbert, as acting divisional commander, was expected to keep a “clean desk” policy, which he achieved by shovelling anything that had been on his desk for more than a few minutes onto the floor. At the end of the day anything on the floor that had still not been dealt with went straight in the shredder: as a system for encouraging electronic communication it would have been very efficient, except that he had his e-mail server set to deflect all his non-priority e-mails to Crystal, who deflected them to her various underlings, and if you flagged an e-mail as priority and he decided it wasn’t, he’d add your name to his junk e-mail filter and never look at any of them again. Cuthbert liked face to face communication. The only 100% effective ways to get him to pay attention to something written down were to read it to him out loud, or file it away somewhere obscure labelled “TOP SECRET: NOT FOR KDA DISTRIBUTION .”

“What’s going on?” Asked Isaac. Cuthbert held up a hand for silence, indicating he’d speak in a moment. He was in his customary pose, holding a phone up against his shoulder with the side of his head and removing staples from a sheath of paper and feeding it into his combined scanner - shredder as he took the call. Occasionally the computer on his desk would ping as a key phrase was found, indicating that whatever he’d just shredded was probably important and he’d look at the screen for a moment, his hand hovering between the enter key to save, and the backspace to delete.

“What is it Isaac. I’m a tad preoccupied at the moment.” Backspace. Backspace. Backspace. Backspace...

“What’s going on? Will shouted something about Antarctica, ran away, ran back and shouted some more, and now seems to be calling his girlfriend in a futile attempt to re-book the theatre tickets they had for tomorrow.”

“Oh that. We’re all going to Mysterious Antarctica to fight some unknowable Alien menace first thing tomorrow morning. Pack clean socks. I... No Crystal, I’m taking to Isaac. Look this came at a bad time for me too I... look hold on.”

Cuthbert cupped the phone to his breast and looked at Isaac. His backspace hand did not stop: office rumour said it had its own dedicated brain in his elbow, like a dinosaur.

“Oh. What’s in Antarctica?”

“Penguins. But unless they are especially aggressive penguins with alien technology that’s not why we’re going. The Norwegian’s just lost contact with their Antarctic base at Troll in Queen Maud’s land, and the British bases in the adjacent British Antarctic Territory are picking up very strange radio

signals, or rather were until the line went dead. The last message was... interesting. Something they pulled out of the deep ice further inland and brought back to their base. Movements in the deep ice. Dozens of tentacles rising out of the sea when they brought their find back to Troll. Panicked screaming; the usual. The British Antarctic survey is sending a team over to investigate, as are the aussies and the yanks, but the weather conditions are making it impossible to get near to Troll without a teleporter. Also since the Argentine territorial claim overlaps with the British claim, the arguies are saying that *if* whatever the Norwegians have found is a weapon and the British help them recover it, then they are in breach of the nineteen-sixty one Antarctic treaty that states that the Antarctic is to be used only for non-military purposes, and so the British should withdraw their claim to the Antarctic. And it's happened at the worst possible time as the UN vote to, in principle, let Da' students study on earth has just been ratified by the US, UK, EU and a whole other bunch of people, and the KDA general assembly wants me and Chrystal to explain how we're going to police all these Da' students to make sure they don't bring their high-tech home comforts with them because any one of them could have technology that could make entire sectors of industry on earth obsolesces overnight if they got into the wrong hands. So get fitted for some cold-weather clothing, pack and get ready to go visit the head of the British, Norwegian, Australian and American Antarctic surveys in one hour. And don't stop eating until I tell you: you're supposed to consume five-thousand killer-calories per day for mother before going to Antarctica to build yourself up, we're going tomorrow, and it's not like we could stop for a kebab once were there." he went back to his phone call. "That's a point, Chrystal, how are these students supposed to *pay* for their educations and sundry other purchases such as beer and junk food and hang-over cures? We've not even got an exchange-rate uniformly understood with the Da' because they have so little trade with us there was no point. They're banned in trading openly with us without a UN permit because they'd destroy or industries overnight, and paying in gold for what they do buy is banned because that could crash earths gold markets, but I don't want ten-thousand students trying to pay their way into Oxbridge with big lumps of rare earth metals! No, I know that rare earth metals are the usual way The Da' pay for things on earth, but we're already starting to see lithium-inflation, and I don't want another businessman trying to tip waitresses in enriched uranium! Sort out some common rate of exchange between say, lithium or neodymium, something useful in electronics, and the US dollar and then once that's done I'll be happy to address the *other* several million problems with this idea...what? No Chrystal, I know that technically Lithium and uranium aren't rare earth elements, group one and anthracite series, but in an economic sense they are treated as such I... Chyrs, please I don't have time to get pedantic about chemistry, you can sing Tom Leher at me till you go blue in the face under the fur, it's not helping any..."

Isaac nodded and, humming Tom Leher under his breath, went to pack.

"What...Is the meaning of this?"

Said the head of the British Antarctic survey. This was, all things considered a reasonable enough question given the head of the American and Norwegian Antarctic surveys were somehow suddenly in his office, along with a whole group of badly dressed men, what looked like a Deinonychus, and a very large white-furred Da' who was stoically holding onto the arm of the American, either to

prevent him from falling over or to prevent him from actually punching the worst dressed of the badly dressed men.

Not badly dressed, he realised suddenly as the man turned to him just... uninteresting. None of the men were wearing anything that would turn heads on a busy London street, but even so, the one the American was shouting at, you'd be hard pressed to find less interesting, insipid and bland clothing unless quite a large team of fashion experts sat down with behavioural physiologists and had decided to have some contest amongst themselves for the least memorable clothing combinations on the planet.

Which was more or less what had happened. Perception filters and pheromones that interfered with the brain's transcription of short-term into long-term memories soaked into lapels could get the ammeter MIB so far, but just looking uninteresting was still the best way to avoid getting a second glance.

The man smiled.

"Ah, you must be Sir Robert. So glad you could meet with us. As you see, I've taken the liberty of inviting a few of your counterparts to this meeting so we could get a broader international perspective."

"What the Hell just happened?" asked the American. "Where am I? what's going on." The Norwegian took a chair and looked nervously from the American to the man.

"-even if some of them were a little... put out to be teleported here at such short notice. I'm Cuthbert."

Sir Robert hesitated. He had heard no concrete news on what had happened in Antarctica, but he wasn't stupid. There were rumours. And besides, the man clearly had authority to openly cross international jurisdictions and access to Teleporters. That didn't leave many other options.

"You'd be the chap from the KDA?" he hazarded. The man smiled.

"Yes, you'd be quite accurate in the surmise." Said Cuthbert. He'd not read the file on Sir Robert but he could recognise Old School Tie Civil Servant when he saw one, and worlds like 'Surmise' seemed to put them at ease. And Cuthbert like to put people at their ease when possible.

“what’s going on? Why has the KDA taken me from my office. I’ll write a formal complaint to your boss and he-” “

“Her. Could you help us with some enquires, Sir Rodger? “

“If... fi I can. News has only just reached us, and I’m unsure as to what I could do to help.”

“I am also” said the Norwegian “Unsure as to how much help I could offer...Indeed if I could be returned to my previous location I would be of far more help to you there.”

“I’d also appreciate being told where I am hand how I got here.” Said the American, taking a seat and glaring. “You called me up and asked if I’d like to help you with your enquires by tela-conferencing with my British and Norwegian counter-parts, and the next thing I know-”

“The state department does not think your Antarctic survey warrants a secure phone line; so this is a functional necessity of talking in private, for which I apologise. Also, when speaking on unsecured lines the KDA uses *video-conference* to mean video-conference, and *tela-conference* as a euphemism for *teleporter extraction*, something I had hoped you might have known. I’m extremely sorry, but I couldn’t ask you if you felt okay with being teleported to London over an unsecured line: If word got out that what is going on is serious enough to warrant using up so much of our teleport run-time then we’d have rouge states crawling over Antarctica even now.”

“So this is about what’s going on at Troll?” asked the American, glaring at the Norwegian. “I had been told that the loss of communications was due to adverse weather conditions and that the situation would be fixed quickly.”

“Adverse yes, weather, I’d guess not.” Said Cuthbert. “Perhaps you would care to shed some light on the issue, Mr Sigurdsson.” He shifted awkwardly.

“One of our survey teems went in-land from Troll to take environmental cores as part of our climate change study. There secondary objective was to recover ice-cores dating back to the Da’ occupation of earth to help us understand why there is so little pollen or air-pollution evidence indicating the presence of pre-human industrial civilisation or earth. Simple, harmless archaeology, you understand.”

“Of course.” Said Cuthbert, trying not to roll his eyes.

“Well, we got a radio message indicating we had found an obstruction to the coring, something harder than the ice at the depths we had hoped would date back to the Da’ period. The expedition leader decided to use thermite charges to excavate and see what this obstruction could be, bedrock was nearly a kilometre further down thought the ice, you see, and well..”

“he found something.” Sigurdsson shrugged.

“Our communications with the team went hay-wires then. They then came back to abuse, we’re sure of that, and when they got back the communication with the base went hay-wires also.”

Cuthbert stared for some while. “I see. And you at no point tried to contact the Treaty of Tyrone Cultural and Archaeological Agency to ask for advice, or our advisory teams, who would have reminded you that even archeologically recovered alien technology is still subject to vetting, modification and or arbitrary confiscation at the discretion of the KDA.” The man looked nervous.

“We were after ice-cores, the team leader was surprised and exhilarated by the idea of finding something from the Da’ period. He acted thoughtlessly...”

“Yes. And you still had contact with the team at this point?”

“Those... those at Troll did. It’s not like we in Norway routinely listen in on radio conversations between our Antarctic expeditions and their base.” Cuthbert sighed.

“Perhaps you should start. Okay, has anyone else been poking around in the ice, to any of your knowledge?” He asked the room. Sir Rodger and the America shrugged.

“Were sending a plane from Amundsen-Scott to try and re-establish contact with Troll, but the weather is delaying take off.”

“We’ve sent a boat and an overland team.” Said sir-Rodger.” The Australians have also sent one of their research ships” Cuthbert considered this.

“Cancel the plane: by the time the weather clear they’ll be no point. The boats can be our plan b.”

“And what is your plan A?” asked the Norwegian. Cuthbert raised an eyebrow.

“How did you get here from Norway?” he asked, spreading his arms and showing the room.

“Ah. Teleports.”

“As soon as we are provisioned and have an approved plan, yes. We’ll re-establish contact, and given we are the best qualified to deal with any... unusual occurrence, we’ll request your cooperation in this matter. Especially when it comes to keeping this out of the press. The last thing we need is a rival bunch of tech-hunters turning up.”

“If, if there is anything we can offer you, equipment, guides.” Said the Norwegian.

“We have our own equipment, thank you.”

“The Antarctic conditions, even in summer, require very specialised-”

“We have our own equipment, thank you.”

“Well, if there is anything we could do, any gesture of our gratefulness in this matter.”

“Not doing it again would be a nice start, sir.” The Norwegian smiled, nervously.

“I was thinking more of a physical token of our gratefulness; we’d really rather anything that might show our government in a poor light be kept out of the press.”

The Norwegian was aware of an almost Antarctic drop in the metaphorical temperature of the room and was suddenly aware that all the other KDA agents had stopped breathing and were looking at Cuthbert. Even the Da’ seemed on edge. After a second, in which his smile froze, Cuthbert said “Although I am not a member of the British police force, KDA regulations say that whilst on British soil I behave as such. Therefore I am unable to accept gifts.”

The Norwegian felt like he was balancing on a tightrope. “I merely thought that providing you with, say, a good Antarctic cold weather fur coat, something practical of that nature, might lift your spirits.”

“A fur coat?” Asked one of the other agents, who had up to this point been silent. “Actually, I could do with one. But not a real fur coat, that’s cruel.”

“No.” said Cuthbert.

“But the regulation colt weather gear is itchy, and it smells like the locker-room.”

“I said no.” he turned to the Norwegian. “KDA field agents may not accept gifts. Non-field staff may, so long as they pass our vetting procedure and are declared. If you really want to be able to say to the press you contributed something to this mission, you’d have to talk to one of our non-field staff, such as my administrator, but she’s an extremely busy person..”

“Ah, well in that case do you think your administrator would care for a fur coat?”

Cuthbert considered this. “Nooo.... Somehow I don’t think so. She’s already got one you see.”

“Any... any other apparel?” Cuthbert considered this again.

“well, she usually wears a green silk dress...”

“A green dress?” asked the Norwegian.”

“But not a real green dress, that’s cruel.” Muttered the dark-haired agent. “I suppose you could offer her one of those, but she’d tell you in no uncertain terms were to put it.”

“She doesn’t approve of gifts either.” said Cuthbert.

“Not even a box of chocolates?” Asked the Norwegian with increasing desperateness.

“*Definitely* not.” Said Cuthbert. “Well, if that’s that, we have to go and prepare for a trip to Antarctica. If you all hold still for a moment, I’ll et a teleporter lock-”

"I'll get the ferry back." Said the Norwegian, hurriedly. Cuthbert nodded. Teleporting was... somewhat jarring.

"I'll fly back." Said the American, a little shyly. "You see, my wife's always wanted to come see England, and if she found out I was in London and Didn't get her anything, she'd kill me." He said with all the conviction of someone who knew his government would be paying his first-class fare back, and was not about to let a freer shopping trip to London get away from him.

"Very well, in that case, if you'd excuses us, well show ourselves out." Said Cuthbert. He nodded to all three of them, and then, with his men, left. As he retreated up the corridor the following exchange was just heard.

"What Have I told you about quoting *bearnaked ladies* lyrics when I'm trying to work, Will?"

"Sorry, but in my defence, it's been One Week since I did it last..."

"Oh do shut up."

"Well, that's another date up the swanie because of inexplicable alien activity" said Will, as they drove back from the Antarctic Survey. "Cthulhu himself had better have manifested, because if this turns out to be nothing and I've cancelled my theatre tickets for no reason Grace will be seriously pissed off."

"I don't think she was that keen on going anyway." Said Isaac.

"And what would make you think that?"

"You booked tickets to see *Pokémon The Musical*."

"Hey! She was totally up for that! She'd even made a nurse joy costume!"

"Dear lord..."

"Hey." Said Will. "Cuth' you've missed our turning. The KDA HQ is that way!"

"We're not going back to HQ. The Norwegian said that found that thing in the layers of ice dating back to the Da' period." He said, setting his jaw in a determined look. "Snowball. Call the Da' embassy in London. Tell them... tell them I'm going to see the Over-Ambassador to earth, and I'm going to see him *now*."