

The embassy of the Da' Empire to the United Kingdom was an imposing, rather than elegant, neo-classical building just off Grosvenor Square. It was a little at odds with the Georgian look of the area, but not so much as the 1960's American Embassy, recently vacated in favour of a new building in Nine Elms. It was an impressive enough building, and its only real claim to fame was the invisible bridge: a "force-field" a pair of Da' guards would throw gravel over to show that there was in fact a rote cars could drive over the seemingly impassable granite trench the Da' had erected around their embassy and grounds. The force field was, of course, nothing of the sort: the gravel they scattered *Indiana Jones* style to show drives were to go was in fact iron-cored: a set of giant electromagnets and careful shielding and magnetic lenses similar to those found in a SEM created a narrow band where the gravel would be trapped, levitated in position. The gravel did not show the surface you were traveling over, it was the surface. It was a standard piece of hocus-pocus, installed in All Da' embassies on less-technologically advanced planets to impress and terrify the locals. It didn't work: tourists came to take photos of it, and then went home. It could have been worse: given he Da' had initially meant to make re-contact with earth in the 1880's but got delayed by a series of political crises in their own empire, they had designed the building to intimidate those used to Victorian technology and were bitterly disappointed to learn that no one was the least bit frightened by doors that opened themselves or air conditioning.

This was not the embassy to which Cuthbert and the others were heading.

Although the Da' empire sent ambassadors to each and every individual country on earth, as one would expect, they made no secret of the fact that they found it difficult to deal with individual small nations and were used to dealing with, at the least, planet sized institutions. So, as was standard Da' practice, an Over-Ambassador had been appointed, to co-ordinate the efforts of the other ambassadors and to act as the personal representative of the Da' emperor to the entire population of earth, and one of his many extremely discrete residences was in London. No tourists ever visited to take photos, it was not marked on any maps, and even within the British government and diplomatic service only those with absolutely pressing business to go there even knew of its existence. But there was a second embassy, the embassy not to the United Kingdom Of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, but to earth in general, and it was to this rather gloomy Victorian townhouse (or rather the entire row of town houses) that Cuthbert went.

"This is a monumentally stupid idea" said Chrystal, her holographic head appearing over the dashboard. Occasionally items of clothing and the edge of a suitcase would stray into shot as she packed "If I'm flying to New York to negotiate how we should deal with the influx of Da' students first thing tomorrow morning, then surely he'll either already be there in New York or be busy working on the same issue."

"That presumes he cares enough about the issue to do something about it. Or even know about it." Cuthbert replied. "He's, well ...he's not exactly a hands on Diplomat."

Chrystal snorted. It was quite difficult to describe the appearance of Da' over Ambassador without sounding racist. If he was human, you would describe him like the King in a low-fantasy series: a huge, bear-like warrior of a man, powerfully built but starting to run to fat. However the problem was that all Da' were *born* powerfully built but running to fat: for them the peak of physical perfection was powerfully built but running to fat. As for a huge, bear-like warrior of a man, that was just plain racism. As a result whenever Cuthbert had to describe him, he described his role, not his appearance, and If Teddy Roosevelt's famed theory of diplomacy was right, Then the Over-ambassadors habit of saying nothing and lurking in the background whilst other Da' diplomats spoke softly left little doubt as to his role in the diplomatic process. He was the Bad Cop. He was, to put it simply, the Big stick.

His appointment had come as something of a surprise to many in the Da' diplomatic community and as a surprise to absolutely no-one in the Emperors personal circle of friends. He'd served as a General and was an old drinking buddy of the current emperor before he became the emperor, and although the Da' empire had been politically stable enough that having a general on your side had not been a reliable way to gain the emperorship for several millennia, his contributions and support of the Emperors election campaign had played a small, but very appreciated role in getting him elected to the Living Throne. And so on his retirement from the army he had got the retirement presents usually offered by a thankful emperor to a general of his standing and long-time supporter of House AkaiDo's political campaigns: a generous pension, the right to keep a small private army on behalf of house AkaiDo (nothing obscene, no more than a hundred thousand Da'), a retired ship-of-the-line to go with his army and, of course, a ceremonial civil service position: over ambassador to earth.

In the Da' army he had made his name putting down seditionist groups, mainly rebellions by technophobe cults, and in his foreign campaigns he had built on his experience of fighting technophobe Da', and specialised in bringing less technologically developed planets that opposed the Da' into compliance with the Empires wishes by use of military force. He had been very good at it, and the worlds had usually been brought into compliance quickly and with minimal damage to any natural or political resources that the Da' might later want to take for their own. He, famously, had no knowledge of who were the major powerbrokers on earth as of his appointment, or on what the internal political situation on earth was. He didn't need to: the under-ambassadors had all been exhaustively trained for that, some of them had prepared for significant chunks of their lives for the roles they would play on earth. He had apparently no interest in diplomacy whatsoever and seemed to have precocious little interest in politics outside of loyalty to the House and part to which his family hand belonged for seven generations. He said that although he could just about stomach the idea of being a statesman, he'd no desire to end up either a diplomat or worse, a politician. He was however a patriot, who loved his country and respected its leader, and who had instructions as to vaguely what that leader wanted out of their relationship with earth and specifically what he did *not* want, and he made no secret of the fact that if the diplomatic service could not, by whatever means see to it that things happened that way, he would go about it the only way he knew how. And so long as the diplomatic service seemed to be doing well without him, he was quite prepared to spend the rest of his life drinking, attending state banquets, looking threatening whenever the interest of the Da' Empire needed him to look threatening, and trying, very systematically and thoroughly, to find and sleep with every female Da' currently on the same planet.

He was, in short, apparently an ideal Ambassador. Human heads of state were always fast to praise him and state one of his good qualities, even if they seemed to have some trouble thinking of one: a sure sign of just how much he scared them, but they would then politely dismiss him as not knowing a great deal about diplomacy and how things were done on earth. Human diplomats however often remarked how his larger than life presence would so overwhelm their own heads of state that, having safely removed both heads of states and himself from the issue, real diplomats several ranks down the system who did know how things were done on earth to get on with things without inconvenient politicians getting in the way. Such ignorance and disinterest by a leader was, civil servants seemed to think, a great blessing. Cuthbert was, privately, less sure. As a General he'd been no revolutionary innovator in tactics or strategy, but was incredibly bright and adaptive, and no-one got as far as he had in Da' party-politics unless they were a very, very fast political learner. You probably had to be very, very informed and intelligent to appear to make such a good blunt instrument, and Cuthbert told Chrystal this.

"Sound like anyone we know?" asked Chrystal, nastily. It took some time before Cuthbert twigged that she was talking about him.

"I'm nothing like the Over Ambassador." He said mildly, paring the car.

"In personality, appearance, and demeanour: No. In Role: Yes. Don't get me wrong, your actually going about and solving crime and uncovering conspiracies and shooting guns and arresting people does international law enforcement a lot of good, but it *pales* in comparison to what I can achieve just by hinting that you'll be going about and solving crime and uncovering conspiracies and shooting guns and arresting people if other lawyers and policy makes don't listen to what I have to say."

"How the hell did someone as cynical and Machiavellian as you end up as the champion of human law?"

"I have to keep both you and other lawyers on the straight and narrow, I'd *better* be cynical and Machiavellian, when I'm the only one preserving the law. Good luck with the Ambassador, play nice and don't let him either bully you or try to shag anyone."

"I'll try my best, Cuthbert out."

"What does she mean 'when I'm the only one preserving the law'." Asked Will, getting out of the car. "Because of our job, half the time we find ourselves in messes the law never even *considered*, and where there's no precedent for what to do or whether what we're doing is lawful or not. How the hell do you preserve the law if you don't know what it is?"

“Ah, well not having attended law school I wouldn’t know, but I’d imagine she used her own best judgement.” Will looked blank.

“She makes it up as she goes along.” Translated Isaac.

“Huh.” Said Will. “I could do that!”

“No you couldn’t.” said Cuthbert, locking the car. “You work in law *enforcement*. Chrystal works in *Law*.”

“So?”

“So we’re often presented with situations for which no clear legal precedent exists and which no government on earth has passed any laws concerning. Which is a problem for us, as although the governments on earth want someone else to fix these problems for them, and are just about prepared to put up with the idea of a trans-national police agency to do just that, the idea of a trans-national police agency that can cross almost all terrestrial jurisdictions at will, uses alien tech, can ask the international criminal courts for arrest warrants for heads of state **and** makes up its own law as it goes along quite rightly gives people the screaming hebe jebbes. We may as well buy jackboots right then and there if we were making up our own law. That’s *why* Chrystal is so important to us.”

“How so? Because she’s a lawyer?”

“She’s qualified solicitor specialising in the History of English common law.”

“So?”

“So, cops making up the law on the fly is fascism: civilian lawyers doing it and then trying their best to justify it to society after the fact is the bread and butter of the global legal system. President set in English common law is considered in American courts to this Day, the UN, although they’d never admit it, runs more or less on English common law. A world spanning police force making its own rules is way out, but Chrystal, who has no powers of arrest and is not an agent of the KDA but an administrator hired by the KDA to do our legal work, sending her little letters to the international courts of justice or other lawyers working for governments in a similar capacity to her role in the KDA claiming she wants to check a point of law, when she’s in fact making up one based on ancient

precedent, spit, and common sense, is basically how international law was decided before first contact anyway. Other lawyers do it all the time: people send her letters all the time telling her what they think the law is and she replies and it goes back and forth until they either reach an agreement or take each other to court and hey presto legal president is set. Governments govern, police keep the peace and courts dispense justice: *laws* are made in private letters between lawyers, and always have been. “

“I’m sorry, when we took this job, was there some advanced cynicism class at induction that I missed or something? Possibly between the orientation lecture and the usual equal opportunities bull?” Asked Will.

“I thought you were very much in favour of equal opportunities and opposed to prejudice? And don’t turn the word ‘orientation’ into a sex joke, please.”

“Oh, I’m opposed to prejudice all right. Can’t stand discrimination, but in what way exactly am I equal to *that*?” said Will jerking a thumb over his shoulder to Snowball as they flashed their I.D. holograms to the very small peep-hole in the perfectly ordinary door. “Average male Da: Measured IQ of a hundred and fifty, life expectancy of around three hundred, sense of smell that can track a fart though a skunk’s breakfast and I once saw him pick up and throw a land-rover! And Da’ are polygamous.” He added, gloomily.

“So? I thought you and Grace were happy with your relationship.”

“Oh, we are, but a guy can have fantasies, can’t he?” said Will grinning as the door clicked open, and they filed inside.

Cuthbert got a little on edge every time they came here, which was more often than he would like.

It wasn’t that they had to surrender their weapons and be searched, they had to do that a lot of places: it was the fact that as they were on Da’ territory, the KDA had no powers of investigation here. He didn’t feel particularly vulnerable without a gun, but the fact he had no legal power to snoop into other people’s lives left him feeling a little put out. A little helpless. That, and the building design.

The Da’ embassy to the United Kingdom in London was imposing, but at least it had been built with the vague intention of making a good impression of visiting diplomats, making them feel as if a friendly welcome was at least a possibility: columns and all the marble were a little chilly, a little over-large and the paintings a little too grand in nature and martial in subject, but in keeping with the Victorian exterior there were at least few potted aspidistras, antique Turkish carpets and old leather sofas. However, as this was the Over-ambassadors personal patch, and as the only diplomats that would ever see the inside of this building would be the ones the Da’ were already trying to intimidate, the building design intentionally left a lot to be desired.

Cuthbert walked through checkpoint after checkpoint, as increasingly large and angry armed Da' in increasingly ugly and utilitarian armour stopped them and demanded, from their guide (a small, quite cheerful male Da' who manned the front desk) increasingly complex and obtuse passwords. And the further you got through the security corridor, the lower the ceiling got and the hotter and shabbier the room got. At the second to last security station your guide left you. Then came the trench.

The entire interior of the entire Victorian terrace had been gutted to make the trench. The room was a good three stories high to the ceiling, a dozen paces wide and floor level and nearly seventy meters long. You walked along the bottom of the trench as above you the walls rose, two sloping walls of blank, geometrically cut basalt blocks. You walked along the bottom of this cyclopean trench, at the bottom of the great "V" of stone, and in the walls you could hear the automated deface systems clicking and whirring away by themselves, whispering and sighing as some Da' at a console watched you on a screen and continually pressed the "Don't kill" button, second by second overriding the automatic intruder response. The ceiling was a blue black, and green and red lights washed over it like an aurora. It was like being at the bottom of an ocean trench. It was like talking a walking holiday in Ry'leth. Sometimes you would swear that you saw a stone block ahead of you drift along at head high from one side to the other, but you could never be sure. And it was cold, to keep the automated weapon systems from overheating. Very cold.

At the end were double doors, where you waited at least a minute, whoever you were.

Cuthbert waited. After three minutes, the doors opened.

The first thing that hit you was not the size or majesty of the room, or its occupant: it was the smell.

Like every human who dealt with Da', Cuthbert had long ago started using his sense of smell more than the average human on the street. True, by Da' standards even the keenest nosed human didn't *have* a sense of smell to speak of, but to have any chance of really understanding the Da' you had to *think* olfactorily, and the only way to do that was to try and use your nose. It wasn't the sort of thing he advertised, because it made you seem a bit weird, but he could recognise all of his co-workers, human or otherwise, by scent alone. He could pick Snowball out from another male Da', he reckoned, nine times out of ten. All Da' had, to even the most untrained human, a noticeable scent. It wasn't bad, per se, but the first time anyone encountered it they found it off-putting. It was just something they broke suspension of disbelief, if that was the correct way of putting it: people would accept they were talking to a seventeen hundred pound alien ursine by pretending it was just a human who happened to look like a seventeen hundred pound alien ursine, and did so on video-conferences of the phone or what have you. Put the same people face to face with a Da' and suddenly they didn't know how to speak to them. The illusion, that this was just another human being, an illusion that sight and sound and even touch could not break, crumbled under the power of the sense of smell. You were suddenly *very* aware that you were in the presence of an utterly utterly alien creature that, if they so wished, could smash every bone in your puny earthling body without so

much as raising a sweat. Some people, some of whom had loved the idea of meeting and talking with a member of a different sentient species, never got over that.

Others did. It was, Cuthbert had always thought, a dull, heavy sort of smell, and it had a very... furry... element to it. Some hint of fur. Dry, clean fur no doubt, no wet dog, but fur none the less. A certain undeniably animal oiliness. And with every other emotive species, Da' had fashions and trends in personal grooming. They'd never go so far as to use *perfume*, heavens forbid: the idea was, to a Da', laughable. They didn't want to cover or hide their scent, only supplement it with the latest little fashionable grace-notes obtained by adding a few extras to their diet, and intertwining vacuous bits of scented dried flora to their sleeping-mats. Spring-Autumn duality was the *in-thing* with fashion conscious Da' this century. The idea was that the scents of certain seasons were tied into gender identity, as a result female Da' out to appear their best spend a great deal of time and effort trying to get a hint of spring into their personal scent regardless of the actual season: new growth, dew, early flowers, tree blossom, re-awakening, fresh tree-sap, hunger: all the things the Da' associated with spring. Snowball, like all fashion-conscious male Da', tried to evoke an element of autumn woodland. He mostly smelt of male Da', but under that heavy must there was also dry leaves, leaf mould, early mists, crisp autumn mornings, wood smoke, Ivy and twisted roots, fullness and sleepiness, oncoming dark, and thoughts of sex: things that Da' associated with autumn.

The thing was, the Over Ambassador knew his job, and knew it well. His job was to be intimidating, and however much he may have liked to smell of crisp early autumn mornings in some apple-orchard in order to get female Da' swooning over him, he knew damn well that apple orchards and crisp autumnal sunsets didn't exactly strike fear into the hearts of men. Instead he had reasoned that if the slightest hint of something animal was enough to unnerve those unused to dealing with Da', then he could quite easily cultivate a personal presence that reached right into the human mind via the nostrils and flicked on the "Run! That's defiantly a dangerous predator!" switch.

It honestly hit you like a wall: "unwashed bear", although racist, was the obvious place to start describing it, although there was a certain bottom-of-lions-cage rankness that suggested said bear had probably just fought, ravished and then eaten a few dozen enraged tigers on his way there this morning, and then had an entire wolf-pack for afters. It was just pure, predatory fear. There was no part of your mind that *wasn't* telling you "if it smells like that, it's definitely going to eat you". It was flight-or-fight response at the first breath.

Fight probably wasn't an option: when Da', especially female Da' are in the presence of a male Da' they respect and like and feel safe in the presence of, they give off a chemical signal. It's completely involuntary and only other Da' can pick it up, and even then only subconsciously, via their Jacobson organ. The problem is, Da' are big: there are very few social ursines because of the resources that you'd need to feed such a group wouldn't be found often in nature. When the Da' first achieved sentience only a few Da' were smart enough and had good enough social skills to organise the systematic and planned food gathering to keep these groups together. So smart Proto-Da' built little family groups. The problem was, these smart Da' were not necessarily the biggest or toughest males, and so if the group leader was a smaller male he'd be killed or driven off, his offspring killed and his

females raped by one who was, and if the leader was female and her mate wasn't the largest and strongest, the same. Evolution selected in favour of the smartest becoming leaders of small groups, and then selected that leaders had better learn to become the strongest and toughest, even if they were not before. Enough of the chemical signal telling them that other Da' were happy for them to be in charge, and male Da' started to get raised testosterone levels and other hormonal changes to prepare him to fight off the challengers evolution had taught them to expect. It was, incorrectly, known as *second puberty* by most humans and the fact was successful male Da', successful in their own right or as the mate of a successful female, became di-morphic dominant males to protect themselves and their mates from rival males. A Good sized female Da' could be close to four hundred and fifty kilograms without exceeding her healthy weight. A male between six hundred and eighty and nine hundred . A dominant male would have a growth spurt leaving him close to one-thousand, three hundred and sixty kilograms, and have higher percentages of body muscle, stronger bones, faster reflexes and far higher pain tolerances than a normal Da'.

The ambassador must have been close to one-thousand three hundred kilograms, or just shy of three thousand pounds in old money. He was over three meters tall when he wasn't lounging on his side, and to keep with his "scare the crap out of the humans with barbaric splendour" theme he lounged like a champion. In his army days he hadn't longed in public for a second. He'd never have dreamt of it, just as he'd always been efficient and, if not cultured, then by no means publically uncouth. But his current job wasn't hurt by a little lounging: it tended to make politicians uneasy. He could lounge at a conference table and get the same effect Conan the barbarian needed a throne of skulls and two scantily clad women, one with a fan and one peeling grapes, to get. True, he did have two female Da' with him, but given the Da' didn't see the point of any clothing that couldn't stop small-arms fire, the Da' had no concept of scantily clad. And there were no gapes, although he was eating a bowl of meddlers with a great deal of enthusiasms.

Cuthbert stated. He couldn't see the point of meddlers: he'd tried them once, and the taste had been pleasant enough, but the very idea of a fruit that you had to wait until it was rotten before it became good to eat irked him very slightly, as if it was laughing at him. He wondered why the Ambassador ate the damn open-arsed things. Was it some kind of joke, a visual pun on how he saw human society, rotten before it was fully ripe, and just there for him to take? Or, more likely, had he just decided to eat them to annoy him? This was possible: for someone who claimed a complete disinterest in human affairs, he was very well informed about all of his visitors and missed nothing.

As they got the end of the room, The Ambassador finished his fruit and swallowed. He then stretched, showing off his muscles and claws, and yawned, revealing teeth the length of Cuthbert's hand to the wrist and a vast tract of protruding ursine tongue, the length of Cuthbert's forearm arm from wrist to elbow. He then looked at Cuthbert and signed. He rose to all fours and nudged one of the two female Da'. They both glanced at Cuthbert and the others before leaving though a side door.

"Thirteen." He said in English. He had the flattest voice and blankest expression Cuthbert had ever encountered, and Snowball's were pretty good. The Da' military taught you not to show how you were feeling unless you had to, but Cuthbert didn't mind: he was English, and so found it quite comforting.

“Over-ambassador.” Replied Cuthbert, bowing slightly. He felt rather than saw the ambassador’s annoyance: the ambassador had been expecting bowing on earth, but the books on official etiquette he had read were all from the 1870’s. The absence of bowing was a disappointment he had gotten used to and the sudden unexpected appearance of bowing was, he suspected, Cuthbert taking the piss.

“well?” said the Over-Ambassador after a painfully long pause.

“I need access to your central database and clearance to decode geo-linked incident reports. “ The Da’ police and military linked all major incidents they were involved with to a database of map-references, which meant that if you entered a coordinate then they could bring up all incidents associated with that position in space or on a planet’s surface, without having to trawl through thirty thousand years of records sorted by date.”

“Out of the question: all information approved for KDA use is already available. The reason only I can authorise access to the central database is because no human should access the central database, KDA or no.”

“Non-human access could be arranged.” Cuthbert said. The ambassador snorted.

“The vixen? No. If I’ll not trust human policemen, what makes you think I’ll trust vulpine lawyers?”

He didn’t suggest Snowball as an alternative, and Cuthbert didn’t even suggest it. Although the Da’ partly funded the KDA from the developmental aid they gave the earth, and they allowed their citizens to work for the KDA if they so wished, they were still highly suspicious of any Da’ who chose to work for an alien organisation. The ambassador hadn’t even acknowledged that there was another da’ in the room, although given the way dominant males treated other male Da’ that was pretty normal: Snowball wasn’t making any submissive or deferential gestures, but he was being careful to keep his bony-language non-threatening in the presence of such a larger and senior male.

Cuthbert considered his options. “What if I give you a specific co-ordinate on earth and a date range, would you then tell us if there was anything pertinent in the database about that time and place?”

The ambassador looked blankly at Cuthbert. “What’s going on?” he asked. “Why are you making this sort of request for data all of a sudden?”

“the Norwegians, one of the nations with on earth with a territorial claim to both polar regions, has encounter a problem at their southern polar research base. They seem to have uncovered something in the levels of ice from the Da’ occupation of earth and it’s knocked out all our communications in the Sothern polar region. The KDA is investigating, and it would help if you had any records linked to the coordinates they encountered this problem.”

The ambassador looked blank for some time as he digested this. “So this isn’t about those mad bloody students.”

“No.”

The ambassador considered this. “What are your coordinates?”

Cuthbert told him, remembering to convert them into Da’ decimal degrees, which was easier than it sounded on earth as the Da’ line of zero longitude was only degree or so to one side of the Greenwich meridian: they had wanted their date-line on earth to go though as little landmass as possible and so had put it in the mid pacific, just like the human international date line. The ambassador turned to the right and glared at the wall, and made a few sweeping gestures with his claws. Projectors in the hairline seems between the limestone wall-slabs flared, and a holographic display lit up and data begun pouring down the wall like a waterfall. Cuthbert didn’t watch it: there was no point; although he could decode written Da’ if given enough time and a pencil and paper, he couldn’t read it when it was being scolded though so fast. Instead he watched the Da’s huge claws. He had used a Da’ computer air-console before, and he could tell that the ambassador was pulling up data from a near-close source, the Da’ equivalent of opening a minimised program on your toolbar. He’d already had the data on those coordinates up before they came in.

“There.” The ambassador stated. A map of Antarctica and a single line of the blocky little letters used by the Da’ military burned cold and blue on the wall. Cuthbert’s heart sank: No Incidents Recorded.

“leave.” Suggested the Da’ Ambassador in a way that really wasn’t a suggestion. Cuthbert bowed and thanked him for his time, but before he could leave or raise himself from the bow, the ambassador surprised him. He usually treated non-dimorph males as beneath his station to notice, but he turned to snowball and asked him “You’re the navy brat, aren’t you?”

Snowball frowned, insofar as you could tell, and waited for some time as if he didn’t want to answer and hoped that by staying silent the ambassador might forget he was there, but after a moment he answered.

“Naval Supply Core.”

“Supply side?”

“Spacer side.” Snowball replied: both the Da’ Navy and N.S.C .maintained their own core of infantry for boarding actions and defending their space elevators, factories and supply yards. Spacers were the Da’ equivalent of “marines”.

The ambassador grunted. The Da’ army had a fierce but respectful rivalry with the spacers. He sniffed at Snowball a few times, the Da’ equivalent of looking some up and down, and then turned back to his bowl of fruit and begun tucking in. The holographic display shut down, the main doors opened and the two female Da’ re-appeared. Cuthbert got the impression that the interview was over, and turned to leave.

He had just got past the doors when the ambassador spoke again, without bothering to remove his snout from the bowl of fruit.

“Of course, if the navy brat had bothered to study his military history, like we do in the army, he’d know that the geo-linked records only go back to the founding of the empire. Pre-imperial Da’ records would come under the preview of the Ministry of Antiquities if non-classified, or the department of Secret Histories of the *civilian* intelligence services if still considered of value to the state.” Cuthbert winced. The Da’ military and civilian intelligence services had a sibling rivalry that historically ranged from friendly but competitive to outright fratricidal. At the moment they two organisations would work together reasonably well with only the bare minimum of deliberately make life difficult for each other, but the way they treated third parties like the KDA was openly hostile. And Cuthbert had realised that as he’d gone to the ambassador, and old army boy first, the Da’ spooks would like as not make his life hell.

“You’d have to talk to that bastardy Wessex to get those records.” Said the Over-Ambassador with just a hint of a laugh as the doors slammed closed.

Wessex’s office was in the same building as the ambassador, but at the furthest possible point to the Over-ambassador’s quarters. Wessex wasn’t his real name, but Da’ names were very long, complex, strictly formulaic things, more lists of genealogy and physical descriptions than anything else, and on everything save official documents Da’ referred to themselves by nicknames, and were quite happy to have one name in Da’ and other in English. Snowball had become Snowball on his first day in the KDA by universal agreement, and somehow That Bastard Wessex had picked up the name That Bastard Wessex.

In the finest traditions of spymasters the galaxy over, he advertised his position as a lord of espionage thusly: Cultural Attaché (In Chef). Cuthbert looked at the plaque on the door, and then pushed it open without bothering to knock.

“Ah, Cuthbert, so good of you to see me!” he hailed cheerfully. “Come in, sit down have some fruit!” said Wessex, smiling happily. That had always, Cuthbert thought, freaked him out. Da’ did not smile.

Before he’d got into law enforcement Cuthbert had been a bit of an anthropologist, and being the generation who had just reached university age at first contact had studied the da’. He’d met some Da’ anthropologists who had tried to learn to smile to study humans, and Cuthbert had always advised them not to bother. The last thing you want to do if you’re trying to put a human being at ease, he’d pointed out, is show that many teeth. Da’ could not get close to a human smile.

Wessex did. He was nearly, very nearly, spot on. That that as what Cuthbert, a man who took slightly worrying smiles very seriously, was upset by. Human diplomats who were unused to dealing with the Da’ were freaked out a little bit by it, but didn’t know Da’ well enough to get the full effect. It was so very *nearly* a perfect human smile that it managed the impossible: it played uncanny valley from both ends. It was weird if you were used to human smiles, and it was just plain creepy if you were used to Da’.

Unlike the Over Ambassador he was stilling behind an actual desk, a good quality Victorian-style desk, covered with all the things you’d expect from a human beings desk, in a completely human, well furnished, well decorated well light well ventilated office, and there was a sixteen hundred pound grinning ursine behind that desk. It just didn’t tally. Cuthbert wondered if he’d had surgical modification to enable that grin. It was just wrong. The smile was wrong, the furniture, exquisitely chosen, was wrong, the glossy well conditioned black fur was wrong (the Over-Ambassador had quite short mid-brown fur that always looked slightly dusty and had a few slightly irregular blading patches were he’d been shot or stabbed in the past). It was all just wrong.

It was a work of genius, of course. It achieved exactly the same off-putting effect as the Over Ambassador, just in exactly the opposite way. Cuthbert decided not to rise to it. He smiled back with one of his best and sat down in one of the extremely comfortable leather chairs and reached for the fruit bowl. It seemed to contain almost entirely meddlers. He took one without hesitation and took a gilt-edged plate and fruit-knife from the sideboard by the wall. Wessex’s smile faded very slightly at the sight of him eating the meddler with every sign of enjoyment, but he quickly rallied.

“And how can I help you, acting divisional commander ?” said Wessex smiling. “have you perhaps finally decided to sight your division up to the cultural exchange program I proposed a few months ago?”

Cuthbert smiled, as if the idea of dozens of Wessex spy's wandering around the KDA's secure locations under the pretence of studying terran labour conditions and work-culture was his hearts one and only desire.

"Well I'm still checking the legal side of it and talking over the idea with my administrator-" Chrystal had said she'd let herself be taken roughly from behind by a syphilitic combine harvester twice before she'd agree to any idea Wessex came up with. "But I'm sure I'll have a reply for you at some point." Chrystal had in fact already given him a highly specific reply to *that* particular idea of Wessex's, none of which he felt comfortable repeating in public.

"I'm sure you will." Said Wessex, who knew Chrystal's mind on the matter just as well as Cuthbert did. "I take it then you're here with regards to another matter?"

"Yes. We've been having a little problem with the Norwegian *Troll* research station in the Antarctic, and we were wondering if you had any pre-imperial records relating to those co-ordinates in your records... as custodian of all information of Da' cultural history, of course."

"And if the records were still classified by the department of Secret Histories and therefore quite out of my purview as a mere Cultural Attaché?"

Cuthbert smiled. "I'm sure that you'd be able to find someone who could get me those records: after all the point of the KDA is we keep anything that could damage earths stability or cultural development from occurring. Any records we need to track down treats would be ours by right under the Treaty of Tyrone, as I'm sure I don't need to remind you."

Wessex smiled, and pulled a sheath of papers out from under his desk, and put them on the desk just out of Cuthbert's reach.

"I here you're having some problems with the idea of Da' students studying on earth. A slight fear about them bringing unwanted technology with them, or effecting the lithium prices on earth."

"You hear a lot."

"I might be able to help you with that and in...other matters." He said, sliding the papers over but still keeping a couple of clawed fingers on the top so it couldn't be picked up. "If perhaps you agreed not to object to Da' students studying and certain...sensitive...educational establishments."

"Sandhurst?"

“Ha, how parochial you English are. WestPoint, mainly. Also the Chinese military academies, a few Israeli universities involved in anomic research and other defence and aerospace related fields of hard sciences, a few in similar courses of study in Iran, a few trailing Iranian, Israeli and North Korean students studying in the west, and, yes, maybe some studying in Sandhurst; you’ve never stopped foreign officer cadets from studying there before.”

“I make sure the KDA doesn’t object to your...”

“Exchange Students” he supplied helpfully.

“Exchange students, getting these positions were they can observe quite a *lot*.”

“It will be observed anyway. You know it will. It not Da’ students then human ones will accept help from us, to aid them paying of their tuition fees. Many already are. But it is more convenient this way.” He removed his caws from the papers. “For both of us.”

Cuthbert smiled, and picked up the papers. “Quite.”

“And of course if these students are accused on any crime, since the KDA polices all non-terran on earth, you can ensure that they are not punished or removed from their course of study unless there is clear evidence for wrong-doing, which I’m sure, will not be found. ..”

“Don’t push it. They’ll get a fair hearing. That’s all I can guarantee. “

“It’s all I expect. Who could ask for more, that fairness and transparency?”

“Speaking of transparency, what the hell do these records say? They’re written in English, but translated from Da’ legalese, and I’m afraid there a little opaque to me.”

“They say that we have no record of any military, intelligence services of police activity by anyone anywhere near those co-ordinates in the pre-imperial period-”

“Of for pity’s sakes Wessex If you want me to help you plant your students, you’ll have to give me something better than tha-”

"But" Wessex purred. "But there *is* a record of one of the pre-imperial factions having a research station of their own there, a research station investigating the pre-Da' *kestal* archaeological remains from the Cretaceous period when much of the Antarctic would have been habitable..."

Cuthbert groaned, and begun to pinch the bridge of his nose. "And they lost contact with the base."

"And they lost contact with the base. And sent a rescue team, at this point in Da' history their technology would have been roughly comparable to your own. "

"And then they lost contact with the research team..." Cuthbert said, guessing from the grin of Wessex's face

"In a manner of speaking. One message came though, to the tune of 'never dig here again. Don't send anyone else to investigate, I've buried it again but it's not enough, tell my wife I love her.' At which point the team leader detonated the fuel-air bomb he had been equipped with in case it was necessary to enact bio-containment protocols and blew himself up. He had, apparently, already killed the rest of his own team."

"Oh *goody*."

Wessex smiled. "Yes, quite. Details are in the document, and of course our teleporter is at our disposal for this mission, but even so, could I get your agreement not to object to my exchange students in writing *before* you head off? Thank you. Oh and do give my best to Chrystal. "exit is on the left, thank you."

It was a fairly quite car ride back to base.

"We're fucked, aren't we?" Asked Will, eventually as they got through security and begun getting the lifts down from the car park to their office.

"now now, less of that." Said Cuthbert. " We have the teleporter giving us an evacuation plan, the Da' military is on standby in the event we hit something we really can't handle, and we have the advantage of knowing a little of what happened to the Da' team . we'll be fine."

"When are we heading off, and how long does it take to write a will?" asked Will.

“Were heading of as soon as Snowballs’ been fitted for cold-weather gear, and you already have a Last Will and Testament drawn up. You left me you’re comic book collection.”

“Oh yeah. Wait, why does Snowball need cold weather gear? I’ve seen him running around Alaska in the winter in the buff. He’s got *fur*.”

“Well, for a start its Antarctica, not Alaska, but mainly its because here in London it’s the very beginning of autumn, but in Antarctica its early spring, and still quite wintery. He’s still in his summer coat. He won’t reach full fur thickness until mid October, and he needs to deliberately introduce himself to far colder temperatures than you get in London to encourage it to grow to its full thickness. That’s why he hangs about the meet market in Spitilefeilds from the end of august, he’s spending an hour a day in the cold rooms.” The lift doors pinged open. Snowball and will both got in. they both looked at the sign on the lift wall “twelve persons only” underneath the KDA had fitted its own sign. “Twelve human persons only: one Da’.” Will got out again and waited for the next lift with the others as Snowball went to get fitted. “Go downstairs and sort out all the paperwork and equipment you need for Antarctica.” Cuthbert said. “I’ve got to sort out some stuff with Chrystal about these students, so it’s out of the wa6 before we go, and then head home for an early night: Snowballs’ being measured up now, and we’ll get the completed gear in the morning.”

When snowball came back from being fitted, Will and Isaac were at their desks talking/complaining about having to go to Antarctica at short notice, and Cuthbert was deep in discussion with Chrystal’s hologram: reg’s stated that due to the risk of having them both killed in a single terrorist attack, they couldn’t be in the same building without very heavy security, and even if the building was a KDA building and had the security, they should avoid it as much as possible.

“Okay so the timing sucks for you.” Isaac said. “But imagine how few people get to go to Antarctica. In many ways it’s a treat.”

“It’ll be cold. Most of the time it’ll be dark, because it’s the early spring down there. Tentacled alien monsters are probably waiting to rape us to death.” He paused, trying to find something else to complain about. “it’ll be cold.”

“So? It’ll be cold. We’ll have the cold weather gear ‘tho” said Isaac, shrugging.

“yeah, but I really hate the cold.” Said Will. He noticed Snowball . “Hey Snowball, what’s the coldest place you’ve ever been? ” Snowball considered this.

“Deep space.”

“Whoa. Did it feel cold even though the suit?” Asked Dan.

“No suit. Da’ naval supply Core training program: they expose you to a hard vacuum in a cage in an airlock. The cage stops you blowing away, and your blood supply is linked up to an artificial lung on the inside of the ship so you don’t suffocate, but they make sure you know how decompression feels.”

“Whoa. How does it feel.” Asked Will. Snowball considered this.

“Uncomfortable. Hot: as although it’s cold, with no air you can’t cool your body by panting. You boil in your own body heat because your heat can’t escape through the vacuum. They tell you to close your eyes, but you can feel your tears boiling away, and if you open them the surface of your eye boils. You have to breathe out all the time or you explode, and the gasses in your digestive system expand, and you have to let them out, so you uncontrollably vomit, piss and shit non-stop until you’re completely cleaned out. Your sinuses expand and blow high velocity blood out of your nose, your tongue dries out so badly you lose your sense of taste for days afterwards and your eardrums burst; the medics grow you some new ones before they let you take the hard vacuum test. Without the life support machine, you die in two to three minutes, so they make you do five, so you know what dying would feel like., then they pull you back in and dunk you straight in an ice bath to cool you down, because you’re nearly dead from heat stroke by that point, and you breathe high oxygen air for a week due to the damage the oxygen defusing out of your blood at the alveoli’s does to your lungs.”

“Hold shit, never let me sign up to *any* branch of your military.” Said Will. Snowball didn’t comment.

“But it felt hot?” Isaac asked. Snowball nodded. “Hotter than anything.”

“So where’s the coldest you’ve ever felt?” asked Will. Snowball replied fairly quickly.

“Naval Supply Core Station 5964. It’s on a watery world about the same distance from its sun as Mars, a little more maybe. About one and a half times Earth’s size. A lot of tidal force from a gas giant in the same system. The tides squashing it and squishing it create friction in its core that generates heat and stops it freezing solid. The oceans are deep, hundreds of kilometres deep and the rock core blasts out lava and hot water. Life builds up around these vents and the accumulation of life, coral and tube-worm shells and silt build up around the vent until it’s a tube, a tube of living creatures and their shells from the core to the surface. Forms island chains. The planet takes years to have a single day, and so you get a night that lasts two years. The locals follow the sun, or stay put in tiny hamlets over the hot vents, eating deep-vent shellfish and keeping warm in the natural hot springs for two years until its light again. On the side that faces the sun, the ice melts and makes a perfectly circular ocean, facing the sun. As the planet turns the ocean moves along the equator, and around and around and ice melts and freezes again. In the very centre of this ocean it’s warm enough for photosynthesis,

and you get a big black alga bloom the size of the united states. A white planet, with a blue ocean and a black island of rotting algae. From space it looks like an eyeball. A big, blue-eyed eyeball.”

“How cold is it?”

“In the ocean, facing the sun, zero, it just hovers on the very point of freezing. In the algal island on the equator its warmer, three or four degrees. All the rotting algae actually raises the temperature to eight or nine in parts, the can see the hotspots steaming for miles. On the ice-sheets, if your near the equator where the ice only lasts a two before the sun comes again and melts it, between minus twenty and minus forty depending on weather. At the pols, were there is light but never enough to melt the ice, a lot colder minus sixty of seventy. On the dark side, they get carbon-dioxide hail in the coldest parts of mid-winter. Nothing survives if it goes more than a few meters from the hot vents. The locals build their homes right on the edges of the vents and stay alive by venting the steam from the vent thought them for the winter. They swim and fish the edge of the vents, they the lob the shellfish fish a few meters past the edge of the liquid on the solid ice so it freezes and keep until they need it, and then they tie it to ropes and throw it into the centre of the vents to boil it when they want to eat it, and the only light they get in the winter is from phosphorescent algae: there nothing on the planet that will burn, expect for the fat of the seals they hunt in summer, which it too precious for them as food to waste, and the methane and emergencies rations the navy makes in factory ships that harvest the rotting algae, that is, and it all goes straight to the navy, zero sales to the locals. They don’t want it, they think instant heat and food when you want it makes you soft.”

Will shuddered. “Then call me soft, I’m going to get a nice hot cup of coffee. Anyone want one? No? Okay.”

He walked to the coffee station, and passed Cuthbert and holographic Chrystal. They were talking about the negotiations in New York about the Da’ students, and how to get a sensible result I.E. the one they wanted.

“look Chrystal, just get them together in a nice restaurant somewhere and keep talking at them and plying them with booze until the agree in the vaguest possible terms, the announce immediately afterwards that they’ve agreed to specifics they haven’t, and try and convince them that they did after the fact. I know how these things work” Cuthbert paused to consider this. “But no Mongolian food, there’s only so many times you can get away with taking Vee Eye pee’s to the same three Mongolian restaurants before it becomes a joke. Find a nice French restaurant.”

“French. We’ll lets see Cuthbert, is the reason that I favour Mongolian restaurants because I like them, or is it because I’m a Canid and will be fatally poisoned by any of the following, chocolate, nutmeg, parsley, anise, S-”

“Yes well those things are heavily feature in a *lot* of French cooking” Cuthbert conceded. “But none of them are noticeably present in a Chateaubriand, and you can complain all you want about how you enjoy a healthy and varied diet and are in no way a relentless eating machine, we both know that if you walk into a French restaurant, or even *past* one, and Chateaubriand is on the menu, the chances of you having anything else that night are approximately zero.” Chrystal’s face took on a horribly agonised look of someone deeply conflicted, but in the end the steak won over pride and her face took the hopeful, contemplative look of a woman who could see a ridiculously large cut of beef being paid for by the tax payer in her immediate future.

“French it is.”

“Good. If logic and reason and law doesn’t bring them around to our side, the sight of you engulfing an entire uncooked cow in under a quarter of an hour should frighten them into submission. “

“Are you, a *human* making jokes about *my* table-manners?” Cuthbert stopped, mock-deeply-affronted.

“Chrystal, having been foolish enough to have grown a moustache once long ago in my wild and misspelt youth, I know first-hand how much of a nightmare it is trying to get food residue out of even the smallest patch of fur: there is a reason Da’ and Alandear always have impeccable table manners compared to us hairless primates, and I will never make a joke of it. No I was merely stating that you are, not to put too fine a point on it, of the Vulpine disposition, and as a result built along the lines of a Red Fox. Petite doesn’t begin to cover how lightly built you are compared to a human, and it just the sight of such an... elegantly built and softly spoken female demolishing , with the best possible manners of course, a blue-cooked two-person Chateaubriand by herself in under fifteen minutes is both deeply arousing and curiously, terrifyingly emasculating to all human males watching. And that’s when she’s the same species: throw in the cute fluffy features better suited to a Saturday morning cartoon character or the better class of *Manga* and the sight of you surreptitiously checking your inch-long fangs in your compact at the dinner table to make sure you’ve haven’t anything stuck between your teeth, and it is honestly a sight that, wherever else you may have had in mind when you arrived at the dinner table, occupies the entirety of you mind from that point on and returns intermittently to distract you at inopportune moments. Possibly for several years afterwards.” He paused to consider this “Usually around four AM.”

Chrystal cocked her head on one side, and put her hands on her hips and begun to tap her feet: a curiously human, learnt-gesture a little at odd with the vulpine head-cock and narrowing pupils.

“How long have you been waiting to use *that* one?”

"In its final form? A couple of weeks at least. You've got to admit, as inverted-compliments go, that's a good one."

"Inverted apologies."

"Sorry. It's been a long night."

"it happened *once* okay?"

"Twice."

"Once. I only one ever stole your share of a two person Chateaubriand."

"There was that meat fondue when were at that arms-fare in Geneva."

"Meet fondue. Doesn't count. Besides, I didn't steal your share: we all went quid's in on that meal, so I was stealing Will and Isaac's share too."

"Yesterday I put my sandwich down on your desk, went to the doorway to shout at Will and Snowball, and when I turned back--"

"Alright! I'm' a canine, okay? I don't share food. It's an in-built thing. It's not like I *steal*--"

"You raid our communal fridge about twice a week. It not that I mind, but the fact is, you work in a different office. On a different floor. Of a different building."

"And you horde useless possessions of purely sentimental value, talk incessantly, and don't ever say quite what you mean. We all have our evolutionary hang-ups."

“True, although that last one’s more of a British thing than a human thing. If you wanted a more universal human flaw, mob-violence or treating sex as if it was a contest would probably be closer to the mark.” Cuthbert’s brow wrinkled, as he remembered something.

“Speaking of which, weren’t you and-”

“I had to cancel because of this emergency summit. It’s no big problem: Third date is always hard, and he was very... understanding.”

“Yes, but they all are. Right until the point where-”

“No. not with him, and don’t you raise an eyebrow it’s not that I expect patience, not from a male, but its necessity. There are virtually no thought-foxes on earth. He has to stich with me because there are so few fish in the see for us. And I have to stick with him.”

“Well, at least he seems nice.”

“You’ve never met him and I’ve never told you any details about him.”

“You’ve not killed him yet.”

“Hahaha. Joke all you like, it is impossible to find any decent heterosexual Thought Foxes in London.”

“Really?” said Will, butting in as he walked to the coffee-station to get a refill . “What about that one who works for the Met?”

“Married.”

“The one who DJ’s on capital FM?”

“Married.”

“The one from division twelve that you dated for a while?”

“Up for it, but already in an ‘open relationship’.”

“Well....”

“Like I said: I’m a Canine. I don’t share.”

“Even so....”

“He had a boyfriend. Called Andree.”

“Ouch. Okay, the one who works around Blackfriars”

“Bi.”

The one who works at the Kestal embassy?”

“Female! You see this is why a wear a dress all the time, you humans are terrible at telling our sexes apart: I’m female, I’m lighter built and I have rounder tips to my ears and brush.” Chrystal noticed the look Will was giving her, and frowned. “No!”

“Sure?”

“Will!”

“All right, the one-”

“Bi. Don’t even finish if you were going to say ‘the one who works in that gay bar in Soho but talks about his ex-girlfriends when we keep having to arrest him for possession of banned technology’: I know you were going to say that, Will.”

“Worth a shot. The one who busks on the tube?”

“Andree.”

“Ouch. That one who works in division five.” Chrystal looked shocked

“He’s a Maned wolf!”

Will was nonplussed. “Is that good?”

“Different species.” Said Cuthbert. “*Chrysocyon brachyurus Erectus Alandear* rather than *Vulpes Vulpes Erectus Alandear*.”

“Oh. Well is everything still, yanno, compatible? In the trouser department?” Chrystal *glared*.

“It doesn’t matter how compatible or otherwise his trousers or the contents thereof might be!” she barked “it’s a matter of principle. No! Just No, I don’t try to match you up with bonobos, and I’d appreciate the favour be returned. Besides.” She muttered darkly. “With my sense of smell it’s hard enough dealing with humans and Da’: I don’t want to try shacking up with a species that leaves the bathroom smelling as though a bunch of pot heads have taken up residence.”

“Wha?”

“Maned wolves have a gland in their balder that adds a scent you their urine, chemically it’s a pyrazine, similar to the pyrazines found in hops or cannabis. “ Will continued to look blank.

“Their wee stinks of weed.” Chrystal translated.

“Oh, is that why the gents on level five smells like-”

“Yes.” Chorused both Chrystal and Cuthbert. Cuthbert looked put out.

“What were you doing in the gents on level five?”

“I was in a particularly long meeting, the ladies on that level were closed, and when the kestral uplifted my species, being avian and therefore lacking bladders, they didn’t consider the pressure weight of organs puts on them when walking upright if you’re not built for it.”

“Fair enough. The ladies on level five a horrible anyway.” Chrystal cocked her head on one side.

“Don’t ask” said Cuthbert.

“Bugger.” Said Will. “I thought someone on level five was actually smoking weed in the cubicles in his breaks. I thought, ‘Wow, and in the head of a global law enforcement force, that’s pretty bloody subversive’ I had bet going with Snowball and Isaac as to who we thought it was. Isaac thought it was you.”

“No he didn’t. He thought it was Jacques. Don’t try to get Isaac in trouble.”

“Yeah, I lied. Huh, Snowball bet it wasn’t anyone smoking Weed.”

“You bet against Snowballs sense of Smell?” asked Chrystal.

“I know. I’ve got to stop doing that. Still, I’m getting close to beating him at poker.”

“No you’re not.” Said Cuthbert.

“Am too.”

“He has virtually no humanly readable facial expressions, and he can smell when you lie. You’re really not.” Said Chrystal.

“Hey, I’m pretty sure I got all those little tells of his worked out!”

“Those aren’t tells” said Cuthbert.

“Yes they are, all those little twitches and scratching and the bit were he sticks his finger in his ear-”

“Those aren’t tells.” Said Chrystal. “he’s’ rubbing his eyes, and his nose, and picking at his ear and scratching... himself... because he’s harvesting bodily fluids from himself to scent mark the cards with. He uses eight scents, one for each suit, with increasing weight of scent indicating increased card value, and four others to mark out picture cards. It’s actually pretty clever because unless you had a sense of smell like mine or a mind like Cuthbert’s, you’d probably never work it out.”

“He’s... marking the cards?”

“Yes.”

“with... bodily fluids?”

“ ‘fraid so old chap.” Said Cuthbert. “try not to think about it.”

Will’s face went blank. “So when I reach for the bowl of crisps, I’m picking up food with hands that have been touching cards that have been marked with-”

“I told you not to think about it.”

“And you two knew?”

Chrystal and Cuthbert shared a look at the words *you two*. Will twigged.

“*Everyone* knew?”

“Well, having only played with you boys the once I wouldn’t know if *everyone* knew-”

“Chrystal told them all to get back at them when we banned her from playing. Their reactions with regards to the crisp bowl were pretty much the same: that’s why Isaac won’t touch the salt and vinegar anymore.”

“So why just me?” Will asked Chrystal.

“You got me a beagle-plushy for my birthday. Wearing a red jersey and riding helmet.”

“In my defence, I thought it was funny.”

“I thought you not knowing about the crisp-bowl was funny. And I think your decision to ban me was somewhat unfair.”

“You were cheating.” Cuthbert pointed out mildly.

“So is Snowball, to this day!”

“You were cheating badly. There’s brazen and then there’s spending the first fifteen minutes asking to have the rules explained to you again and again, spotting possible ways to cheat within that period of your first ever poker game, and somehow producing five aces in your next hand and yelling ‘Suck it, I win!’ across the table, developing clever, elaborate cheats after that first failed attempt, before getting drunk half an hour in and ending the night locked in the lavatory crying and refusing to give back any of the poker chips you swiped off the table when we went to get snacks.”

She pouted. “It’s a silly game anyway. And I’m canine: I don’t share. And in my defence as a canine, beer does not agree with me: the carbonation makes me feel ill and the damned stuff goes right though you after a few.”

"You'd had *one*."

"Canine: faster brain speed, but more sensitive to chemical imbalance."

"Sure. We believe you." Said Will.

"Will," she said smiling sweetly. "Get back to work or I'll reassign you to Antarctica on a permanent basis." She looked to Cuthbert and nodded. "Cuthbert."

"Chrystal."

"Try not to screw this up. I don't need to hear that this has gone bad when I'm sounded by a dozen diplomats and high-flying lawyers."

"I will. Try to play nicely with the other lawyers. Learn to *share* some of your toys."

"Oh, I *will*. You can trust me on that. Chrystal out."

"He's really scent marking the cards?" Will asked, making himself another cup of coffee.

"Yes."

"And you noticed?"

"I worked it out, it's not like he's marking them much, no human could ever pick it up by scent."

"I don't know." Said will, sipping his coffee. "I've got a pretty good sense of smell."

“You still drinking the free instant coffee rather than paying for the espresso machine?”

“Yeah, so? It’s horrible and tastes funny, but it’s free.”

“Snowball Isaac and Falc’ have been adding *bisto* to the coffee granules in ever increasing amounts for about two months now to see at which point you’d notice. Falc’ reckoned that the coffee itself was so bad you’ve never notice a difference. It’s about sixty-forty at the moment.”

“Bollocks. Chrystal still drinks it when she’s down here in person, and if it had something in it, she’d pick it up.”

“Chrystal puts ox blood in her coffee as it is.” Cuthbert pointed out. “She also eats cat biscuits with it, for the taurine.”

Will looked into his mug. He then looked over to the desks, where Snowball and Isaac were listening in and watching him with considerable interest over the tops of the desk-dividers. He then shrugged and kept drinking.

“Caffeine’s caffeine.” He said. “ By the way Snowball: it was Isaac and Falc’ who shaved ‘kick me’ into your arse-fur at the office Christmas party.” Will stood sipping beef-coffee contentedly and watching as practical-joke natural-justice took effect. Cuthbert sighed, and begun filling out snowmobile requisition forms. It was good that they got this stuff out of their system before they arrived in Antarctica, which would be all too soon.