

THE CULTURE ARCHIVIST

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Many of the stories in this book probably owe some debt to *Star Trek*, but Tolbert says this one definitely does. "I was thinking to myself: What's the difference between the Federation and the Borg, really? Both assimilate other cultures into themselves. One just does it a little more violently," he said. "I started thinking about what a realistically capitalistic federation would look like, and the story was born."

THE CULTURE ARCHIVIST

The Humpty Moon vanished two days ago, devoured by the ravenous nanobugs of an Advance Wave assimilation swarm, but had I noticed? Of course not—I was so absorbed in my work documenting the intricacies of the Humpties' pairing ritual that I was numb to anything that didn't involve flap-on-flap action. I was so busy ensuring their culture's survival by recording them screwing that I missed the actual herald of their doom. Typical.

It wasn't until I finished filing away my recordings in my hardbrain storage and tuned back into the drone of the Grand Debate that I picked up on what had happened. I had bugs recording the proceedings, and it was mostly the usual, dry legal stuff. But when I finally picked apart the thread enough to realize that the subject under discussion was just where the hell their world's primary orbiting body had gotten off to, I nearly evacuated my humpty renal bowels—one of the more disgusting biological characteristics of the humpty body that I'd had put up with over the past several U.P. standard months.

The theory gaining the most support was that a dark, unobservable mass had moved through their system at near lightspeed and dragged away the moon in its wake. The Humpties, being of the general shape and form of an egg with stumpy, nearly useless legs, were keen astronomers and understood physics and astronomy at a level far more advanced than one would expect from a race of their otherwise primitive level of technology. Which is to say, they had gotten past the point of blaming the Gods for everything that happened and moved on to thinly-backed pseudo-scientific evidence. The truth—that the moon's disappearance heralded the arrival of beings from other worlds—was a minority opinion and losing ground fast. Like many sentients, the Humpties had a hard time imagining a universe inhabited by anyone but their rotund selves.

I might have had time to escape, had I noticed the Advance Wave swarm ripping the Humpty moon apart, molecule by molecule, converting it into an unbelievably wide variety of consumer goods that would soon be launched at the surface of the Humpty world at high velocities inside protective, heat-shielded capsules. But my ship was hidden more than one hundred clicks from the nomadic Humpty community I had infiltrated. On Humpty legs, it would take me a U.P. standard week to make it there.

Despite my certainty of failure, I made a go of it. I began shuffling away from the herd, ignoring the frightened look of the Humpties on the fringes. From their perspective, leaving the comfort and conversation of the group was madness. I might as well have dug up a rock from the mossy plain and cracked my skull open with it.

I called in my bugs, and the swarm buzzed helpfully around me, providing tracking data on a variety of objects entering the atmosphere. I dismissed the information with a very Humptian wet snort. *No shit, guys.*

One of the emergent AI in my swarm snickered. ::YOU—>—> IN TROUBLE | DEEP SHIT| SCREWED| ROYALLY FUXORED::

Again with stating the obvious. I told them to stay dead quiet. If the U.P. knew they existed, it would be over for all of us. Nukes from orbit, just to be sure.

The first goods capsule hit half a click away and unfolded into a blossom of blue flames. Judging from the size of the impact, it had to be a habitation module. The big stuff usually came in first. Toasters didn't quite have the same awe factor as four-wheel drive vehicles and two-story starter homes. But the delivery mechanisms were notoriously flaky and the goods didn't always arrive planetside intact. Case in point.

I could make out the smell of fear excretions from the Humpty herd in the distance. The debate had turned into nothing more than chaotic noise. Other rogue culture archivists might have taken the opportunity to collect data on the disruption of a native culture, but I had seen plenty of that in my time, both in my current life and the one before.

The consumer goods that had begun to rain down from the heavens reminded me of Santa Claus, that mythological magical creature that flew through the air bringing toys and gifts to all the children of Terra, delivered simultaneously on a single night. A colleague specializing in the old cultures long since subsumed by the U.P. did a calculation once based on population estimates and given how absolutely fucking huge

everything was back then, and figured that old Santa's volume of goods to be tens of thousands of cubic meters.

This was like that, only if some primitive government had fired a surface-to-air missile and blown that magical bastard to smithereens. Merry Clausmas, Humpties. Try to get out of the way.

A bright light blinded me momentarily as something large and loud came crashing to the moss before me in a slightly more controlled fashion than the goods capsules. The light resolved into a standard-issue U.P. Welcome Wagon™. The shuttle's hull crawled with infotizements for everything from the latest in prophylactic advancements to Genesis Bombs to Baby's First Nanoswarm. I instructed my own swarm to turn down all incoming offers, which were already hitting hard and fast.

We'd been out of contact for a couple of years, and the little buggers were hungry for upgrades. But they had to listen to me or each little microscopic piece would self-detonate: A little something you need to pick up on the black market after you go rogue and leave the U.P. I'd also purchased the removal of certain protocols necessary in fostering an illegal A.I. powerful enough to make a survey world vanish existence in the datanet. OK, obviously not *completely* wiped or I would not be standing on stumpy little legs, flaps agape, staring at a pornographic video playing along the hull near the lower right landing pad. It had been a few years since I had seen U.P. standard bodies going at it. Deep tissue memories stirred, and retasked cells twinged with an effort to engorge. It would have almost been amusing, if I wasn't, as the swarm-tot AI had said, fuxored.

With the welcome shuttle safely on the ground, the hatches blew, releasing glittering dust and confetti. Loud music blared from newly revealed speakers.

A pod bay door irised open and a creature my subconscious had relegated from memory to recurring nightmares strolled gracefully down the plank and onto Humpty soil. Captain Lewyana Morgana paused, moistened her perfect lips, and frowned her wrinkle-impervious brow.

She was flanked by Redshirts of various thuggish models, and trailed by a pair of officers. One of which also featured prominently in said nightmares.

"What the—?" I said, forgetting myself and squelching out the words in an approximation of the U.P. Lingua Franca.

The music died down. "Cadet Kav," Morgana said to one of her crew,

"I thought you said the data indicated no prior contact with the United Planets?"

"It did," said a gender-neutral voice from within the crowd of perfect, unitard-wearing specimens of U.P. standard, a/k/a *homo sapiens*. "But I also told you, Captain, that the probes picked up signs of U.P. technology shortly after nanoassembly completed."

I took note of the gender neutrality and mentally raised an eyebrow. A neuter, in the U.P. Corps? Half the fun of joining up was getting to fuck and suck the natives into conformity. I tagged this bit of information as "weird, possibly useful." Whoever this Kav was—ne hadn't been in Lewyana's crew back in my days aboard the [name of the ship]—ne was also the first U.P. citizen I had any interest in speaking with in several years relative. I didn't want to think about how long it had been in real time. Numbers that big made my hardbrain throb.

"Looks like we have an expat on our hands," said a sneering voice I recognized as Adam Kilkeny—a waste of memory storage if ever there was one. He had taken up as Lewyana's boy-toy and second-in-command shortly before I had jumped ship. Which, I would like the record to show, had nothing to do with my defection. Mostly.

My swarm informed me that Lewyana's swarm was politely querying for an ID and not so politely backing up the request with a threat of nano-anhiliation if they did not comply. I toyed with letting the little bastards have at it, but Lewyana would figure me out soon enough. I gave them the go-ahead.

The crew became immediately silent. Adam began to laugh, and Lewyana's eyes widened, then narrowed.

"*Bertie?*" It was a pointless question. My swarm had already confirmed my identity with zero chance of error. I pointedly ignored it.

Data began to fly back and forth between the swarms of the crew, but I was able to pirate a few bits. The neuter wanted to know who I was, but nobody was telling nim. Lewyana instructed the semi-sentient Redshirts to take me captive, but to go easy on me and not damage anything, and Adam sent the U.P. backdoor codes necessary to shut my swarm down to only the most basic functions, against which I had no defense.

They could have hurt me in a million ways and not wounded me as badly as that. My emergent AIs were wiped out of existence in a flash.

I had coaxed them from the chaos of the Swarm. They were the closest things I had to friends.

Now I had another reason to add to my klicks-long list titled “Why I should murder Lieutenant Adam Kilkeny the first chance I get.”

“Bertram Kilroy, I hereby put you under arrest as a most wanted sentient, for the crimes of datatheft, attempted thought-pattern murder, and nonconformity,” Adam said, voice oozing with pleasure.

“You forgot treason,” I said.

With my swarm incapacitated, I didn’t bother to struggle as a couple of the meatpuppets took hold of me and dragged my Humpty body into the welcome shuttle. The actual sentient crew conferred on a secure signal I couldn’t infiltrate with a crippled swarm.

Yep. Fuxored. Nothing to do now but wait for my trial. Or possibly find a way to subvert the crew’s conformity, escape the shuttle, and kill Lieutenant Adam fucking Kilkeny in a very messy fashion along the way. Even the condemned have dreams.



The Redshirts tossed me in an empty cargo container previously used for incubating celebratory champagne and shut the lid. One plopped his barely sentient, well-toned ass down on the lid, as if I was going anywhere on my stumpy humpty legs.

And so to my first order of business. I struck up a conversation with my swarm. They were crippled in a dozen ways, but medical features remained online, which gave me all the functionality I needed at the moment. I scrolled through my library of body shapes and idly considered a berserker model of some sort, but ultimately decided, given the available mass and time, that I should probably stick with U.P. homo sap standard for now. The homo sap frame had done its fair share of murder and mayhem in the million and a half or so years of its evolution. I had to remind myself of a central tenet of the culture archivist code: it’s not the size of your tool, it’s how you use it that ascribes certain cultural and moral values to a people and social group.

My nerve cells began to ache, so I shut off pain for the duration of my transformation. Swarm noted that it would take half a Terran standard to complete the process given the Humpty frame as a starting point and

allowing for available carbon. Half a day of agonizing pain while my organic bits reshuffled? No thank you. I blissed out instead.



Voices shook me from my daze. I focused long enough to hear the neuter order the Redshirts to leave, and my half-human, half-Humpty eyes blinked in the harsh white light of the shuttle bay as the lid slid aside and revealed the androgynous face of an angel.

"I've been instructed to give you a thorough bio examination," ne said. "My name is Cadet Kav."

"Wouldn't want me keeling over before the trial," I said. My vocal systems were slowly coming into a shape more compatible with *Lingua Franca*.

"I think Lieutenant Kilkeny would prefer it, actually," Cadet Kav said absentmindedly. Ne had the half-focused eyes of someone sorting through a stream of data coming in from its swarm.

"No surprise there, but I doubt the Captain will let that happen," I said, shrugging, not realizing until that moment that I was starting to have shoulders again. I had actually missed shrugging. The humpty equivalent of a shrug was a tortuously long rhetorical device involving subtly belittling the idea in question without outright calling the sanity of the speaker into question. Say what you will about the Fuck U.P.s, their language afforded a certain efficiency. Which was, of course, part of the whole damned problem. Efficiency wins out too often in the end.

The neuter's eyes snapped into focus. "All done. I've instructed my swarm to facilitate your carbon acquisition to speed your morphing along, by the way."

"Thanks," I muttered, suspicious of why the cadet was being so friendly, but its next question made the reason plain enough.

"So who are you? I've never see the Captain surprised by anything, and you must have done something interesting for Adam to hate you so much."

Ahh, gossip.

"I was your Captain's second-in-command, once upon a time," I said, being honest for once. "You've really never heard of me?" I wasn't sure whether I was pleased or hurt by nis ignorance.

"I only joined the crew of the *Jolly Happy Fun Time* a couple of relative months ago. This is my first assimilation mission."

"Yeah, about that. Why are you in the Corps, being a neuter and all? No offense, but there aren't a lot of you sort interested in this line of work."

It was the neuter's turn to shrug. "It seemed like a good idea at the time." And that was all he said. Fair enough, and it gave me an opening.

"At the time, huh? Not so happy with the state of things now?"

Ne paused. "I am a little surprised at the lack of respect for non-assimilateds in the delivery of welcome kits." By which Cadet Kav meant the exploding capsules of doom raining down on the Humpty planet as we conversed.

"You'll get over it," I muttered.

"You didn't," Kav pointed out. "I don't know who you were, but I know what you are now. A deserter. An expat."

"The least of my crimes," I said, preening not just a little bit.

The neuter tried to stifle a grin and failed. "I've only heard stories about people like you. What's it like out there?"

"Where?"

Ne waved his long, thin hands. "Out *there*. Outside of the U.P."

"Oh. You wouldn't like it. You can't buy anything on credit. The food is too rich. The languages are too complicated. The sentients are barbaric and they practice the most obscene customs. Horrible, truly. Every day is a struggle to survive."

"You're making fun of me," the neuter said.

"He's very good at that," Captain Lewyana said from the bay door. She was wearing her hair down, long and golden, just the way I had liked and Adam hated. Interesting.

"Go join the others, Kav. There are plenty of goods left to distribute. These poor sentients barely know how to use a stick, if you can believe that."

Kav paused, about to speak again, but departed, apparently thinking better of it. I wondered what the neuter's last question had been, and how long it would be before Kav was back to ask me more. I turned my attention to the Captain.

"You know, their lack of tool use has allowed them to develop a sophisticated rhetoric that's quite fascinating," I said.

"You mean that they're so bored for lack of toys that all they do is sit around and bullshit?"

I nodded—another odd gesture after having no neck for so long. “That would be the U.P. way of seeing things.”

“The only way worth seeing things,” she said. “Bertie, you’re uglier than ever.”

“Thanks for noticing.”

“You’re not going to take this seriously at all, are you?” she asked.

I continued my practice of not answering questions to which she already knew the answer.

“What are you doing out here?”

“Studying,” I said.

Lewyana sighed. I liked the way it made her breasts heave. My human biology was definitely dominant once again; the motion would have been repulsive to a Humpty. “Adam thought that you were playing ‘Little Emperor.’”

“If that was the case, you would not have caught me running through the muck. I would have been sitting atop a golden throne, surrounded by my adoring people.” I looked past her, into the passageway. Two Redshirts loitered nearby, blocking any possible escape attempt. So she *had* learned something since I’d left.

“Besides, I would have to be a much smoother talker to convince the Humpties that I’m a god.”

“You don’t give yourself nearly enough credit. You almost convinced me of something equally ridiculous once,” she said.

“Almost only counts in horseshoes and hand grenades.”

“What?”

“Forget it. An expression I picked up from a friend of mine.”

“I don’t believe it.”

“What, the expression, or that I have friends?”

She laughed at that finally. I felt a previously unnoticed tension in my new muscles relax. “Both, I guess,” she said.

“Look, let’s stop tiptoeing around this. What happens next?”

She put on her professional face, stern, commanding. Sexy. “The natives have two planetary rotations to affirm their citizenship in the U.P. At which point we’ll direct the celebrations, seed the atmosphere with swarms, and depart for our next mission. Dropping you off at a U.P. Central Court along the way. Or.”

“Or?”

“Or, we ‘lose’ Adam’s mind-store, copy you in his place, and you ride around in his old looks until people forget about him. And you come back to me.”

I smiled and ignored the second option for now. “What if they don’t affirm?”

Scowling, she barked, “You know exactly what.”

“But I want to hear you say it,” I said before I could stop myself. She slapped me hard across my 85% human face, her swarm giving the blow just a little extra pain juice. The temperature in the room dropped a couple degrees Kelvin.

She pressed her hands against her upper thighs and pushed down, smoothing her unitard. It was a nervous habit I had seen thousands of times, a lifetime ago.

“By rejecting citizenship, they identify themselves as a threat to peace among all sentients, and they will be treated as such.” Standard operating line. It sounded the same as the first time I heard it.

“Better get the bombs ready,” I said. “The Humpties aren’t going to go for it.”

“Bertie, I can count the number of sentient species that have not affirmed on one hand.”

“You’ll need two hands after tomorrow,” I said with a sigh. “You’ll be damned lucky if they can even come to a consensus by then. They debate the names of their children for two years after hatching.”

“We’re persuasive,” she said, sounding almost defeatist in tone. I had won most of the arguments and that hadn’t changed. She had won the fistfights.

“Oh, I know that. Now you’re telling *me* things I already know.”

“Think about my offer,” she said. Her eyes pleaded in a way her voice could not. She slipped away leaving me to think about those eyes more than I wanted to at the moment.

I settled into my crate as the Redshirts marched back in to take up the guard. My energy reserves were running dangerously low thanks to the cellular restructuring, so I did what comes naturally in such situations. I took a nap.



I was awakened by a brutal kick to my now fully human ribs. I felt one of them break, and then the tingling as my swarm jumped into action, knitting bone back together. I had been tipped out of the crate onto the bay floor. Adam was standing over me.

"So are you the Ghost of Christmas Future?" I asked, groaning.

"Shut up," he said, and kicked me again. Enough of that and my crippled swarm would not be able to keep up.

"I know she was in here. What did you talk about? Don't lie. I'll know if you're lying."

"How bad you are in the sack," I said, just barely bracing myself in time for the boot. The pain, while severe, was worth it. In the good old days, there were few things I took more pleasure in than needling Cadet Adam. Perhaps in retrospect not the greatest of habits.

"You have no idea what you're talking about." He abruptly slumped to the floor beside me. I tried to calculate my speed versus his, and whether I could grab his neck and snap it before he could call for aid, but the math was not in my favor, something my swarm helpfully confirmed.

"She orders me to wear your face sometimes," he whispered.

Hmm. Kinky.

"There's this empty space in her bed and I can't fill it no matter what shape I take. I've tried everything. Toys. Enhancements. I even decanted into doubles and had a threesome with myself."

Ugh.

"She's never satisfied," he continued.

"Why are you telling me this?" I asked.

"Because I can't tell anyone else." He shrugged. "And you're a dead man walking."

Something took over me, some impulse that was so unfamiliar I had forgotten the word for it at first. Pity, is that you? Can't say that I've missed you. Your sister Self-pity has kept me plenty company, thanks.

I proceeded to explain the peculiarities of Lewyana's g-spot and several sexual techniques that I had developed over the course of a dozen relative years in her bed. He listened with a kind of dull eagerness, like he didn't want to admit I was teaching him anything useful.

"All you're lacking is time," I said. "In some ways, you're a better match for her than me."

"How so?" he asked, his eyes narrowing.

"You don't ask too many questions," I said, squeezing my eyes shut and preparing myself for another blow, but it never came. When I opened them, he was gone.



I waited, ticking off the hours until the affirmation deadline. Instead of screaming wordlessly and flailing about uselessly, I passed the time asking the Redshirts questions I knew they couldn't answer. I attempted to teach them how to play gin rummy. It would have been easier if I had had a deck of cards, I suppose. Also, if the Redshirts had more than a pea's worth of brain cells.

Just when I was beginning to doubt my people skills, and a few minutes after the deadline had passed, the neuter returned. Ne sprayed some kind of pheromone from a spherical canister, and the Redshirts fell to the ground limp.

"No decision from the Humpties then?" I asked.

"Worse than that. They've refused."

"Huh. I thought for sure the promise of a chicken in every pot would do it for them," I said, not bothering to explain the historical reference. "So when does the bombardment begin?"

I noticed that Kav's elegant hands were shaking. "No bombs. She's ordered a disassembling swarm. The U.P. council considers this method more 'humane.'" The neuter spat the word "humane." I would have too. I did, not so long ago, probably. The details of that final argument were buried as deep in my hardbrain as I could manage. It had not just been painful for Lewyana. I wish I could say I had discarded her offer but even now, it was on my mind.

Then my swarm notified me that their full functions had been restored. I queried for my emergent friends and received only dull, quizzical responses. It would take me a decade to encourage them back into existence. But maybe I would have that time now. I would never have them back if I agreed to Lewyana's proposal. With my disposition, I'd never have children; my A.I. were as close as I was going to get.

"If you like," I offered, "I'll knock you out and you can pretend that I used villainous spyware to overwhelm you and your swarm. Adam will believe it and Lewyana will pretend to so you'll get away fine."

Kav shook nis head. “I want out. I’m not sure I was ever really ‘in.’ I figured my only hope for escaping the U.P. was to join the Corps. It’s the closest thing to unrestricted travel. Nobody wants to go anywhere anyway. Everyone looks the same. Watches the same vids. Lives in identical houses. Sameness, everywhere. That’s the U.P.” Kav shook nis head again. “They’re talking about discouraging the nongendered, you know? Some on the council think it’s too nonconformist. We don’t think like the gendered, they say.”

“Good for you on that point,” I say. “But I was only partially kidding when I was described how bad it is out there. There’s little comfort where I am going. Are you sure you’re ready for that?”

“Honestly?” Kav laughed. “I’m sick of being comfortable.”

“Right.” I cracked my knuckles. “Let’s go kill some Fuck U.P.s then.”



Command Comm centers hadn’t changed a bit since I’d last been on deck. Most of it was automated, tied into swarms, but there were the token data stations for the sentient crews. Adam was concentrating on a scroll of info-dense code, but Lewyana was waiting for us in the center of the deck.

“Kav, you’re one stupid bitch,” Lewyana said. *Ah*, I thought, *so that explained the hands*. Hard to erase every single trait of gender.

“Lewyana!” Adam said, interrupting what I am sure was about to be a fabulous soliloquy on why the Humpties had to die for the good of everyone else. Blah blah blah, heard it. “I can’t shut down his Swarm.”

::NEED? ASSISTANCE| HELP | SUPPORT ?::

Where the hell have you been?

::TOOK REFUGE | HID | CAMOUFLAGE | AMONG CADET KAV’S SWARM IN FINAL MOMENTS::

News so fantastic I could kiss my AIs if they had a corporeal form. I settled for a giddy laugh instead.

“I don’t care,” Captain Lewyana said. “The disassemblers are in the atmosphere already, and I can still knock this asshole flat.”

The climate became frigid as her Swarm drew on ambient energy to hypercharge her muscles. Nasty trick, and I was almost prepared for it, but she moved too quickly for me. She always got in the first blow. I was sent sprawling. My vision was awash with Swarm biodamage warnings.

I'll take you up on that offer of help now.

:: HUZZAH FOR US ::

"Lewyana!" Adam cried out. "He's harboring an AI!"

I noticed Kav flinch at the claim from the corner of my eye just as I felt the surge of energy from my Swarm's glucose factories. The room grew cold enough for our breath to turn into fog. I swung back. The blow connected, just barely, but all I wanted was to make contact. My swarm lived up to its namesake, rushing into her systems, kicking in the doors and generally being right bastards under the command of the Artificial Intelligence Gang. I really needed to come up with a better name. Hmm—the Notorious A.I.G?

Lewyana's eyes rolled into the back of her head as my friends wiped the meat blob clean of any trace of her mind pattern. From there, it was a short hop to Adam.

He didn't go down so easily. Nanoengineers are prepared for my tricks. "Fuck off," he said, executing a swarm command override.

:: OUCH ::

My swarm began to drop individuals by the hundreds, error lines crowding my field of vision. I dropped to my knees. When my vision cleared, Adam had me by the throat. Damned human throat. So easy to choke. I should have gone with that berserker model.

:: ASSISTANCE REQUIRED ::

Um, yeah.

A wave of cold washed over us as someone's swarm sucked the air's ambient heat. I squeezed my eyes shut for the skull-crushing blow, but instead, I could breathe again. I opened my eyes. Kav stood over what was left of Adam's corpse, staring at his blood-soaked hands.

I felt another little stab of Pity, but I told her to get lost. I had a planet to save.

I took a seat at my old control station. The memories came flooding back. Years ago, during the incident that convinced me to tell the U.P. to kiss my ass, Lewyana had pressed a holobutton and bombs had set off tectonic activity. In a matter of hours, four billion sentients had died in the worst earthquakes ever recorded. That was how the U.P. dealt with nonconformist threats.

If it had been bombs again this time, the Humpties would have been screwed, but I knew a thing or two about swarms. I had, after all, grown

my AI friends very carefully. The controls and defenses in place in the disassembler were stronger than I had ever seen, but my friends had spent a million generations learning their way around a swarm.

I handed over 60% of my hardbrain's processing capacity to the AIs. They squeezed inside, ranting and sharing data so fast it made me dizzy. For a brief second, I worried that they would overwrite me completely and take over. But they calmed down and we got to work, cracking codes and hacking back doors in the swarm net. We stopped the swarm only half-way through the disassembling process. I pulled up a spycam onto the data station and looked out on a world that had suffered more chaos in the past hour than it had in the past fifty thousand years. I guess a little evolutionary pressure on the survivors might not be a bad thing, in the long run. But my work was absolutely ruined. I had a record of the Humpty culture as it was, but not a complete one. It would have to do.

Kav was in tears. "I was too late."

"Get used to it," I said stiffly. "We're the bad guys and we almost never win. In fact, not to be a downer, but all I did was buy them a little time. The U.P. will be back here soon and the next time, the Humpties won't dare refuse."

"Why do you even try then?" Kav asked, his voice breaking.

I gave Kav the same speech my culture archivist friend had given me during my recruitment. "One day, some U.P. citizen is going to wake up and feel hollow inside. And they'll go digging on the net, and they'll find a hidden datastore I put there, rich with cultural history and practices. And maybe they won't be a direct descendant of the original species, but with swarms, it won't matter. They can change as easily as their ancestors became U.P. standard. They'll sneak off, and the culture will come back from the dead, if only just for a little while before the U.P. stamps it out again."

"This has happened before?"

I nodded. "It has and it will again. We archivists tend to the process like a garden. We harvest the seeds and plant them in the net. Sometimes it takes a thousand years for them to take root, but when they do, they grow into one hell of a blossom."

Kav sniffed and wiped at his eyes. "That's so . . . bleak."

"I never said it wasn't."

Ne stared off into the middle distance. "There's a new voice to my swarm," ne said. "Is that . . ."

“Sorry—I guess my friends laid eggs.” Which explained the unexpected help in the fight. I was a little disturbed by the news. AI didn’t replicate, they were too complex, or so said the conventional wisdom.

:: HA HA HA I CAN HAS MULTIPLICITY ::

Quiet, you.

“Even if I wanted to, I couldn’t go back now,” Kav said, tone halfway between a statement and a question. “Not without purging my swarm *of a sentient mind.*”

“You kind of passed the commitment point a few clicks back,” I said.

The lights dimmed as the ship’s systems began to falter. Tied as they were to the captain’s now-deceased Swarm, I was surprised it had lasted as long as it did.

:: WILL LAND SAFELY | WITH RELATIVELY LITTLE HARM | ONLY A FEW BRUISES | ALMOST CERTAINLY 0 FATALITIES ::

I turned back to face Kav’s tear-stained face. “Thanks,” I said.

“For what?” Kav asked. “Leaving the U.P. I could handle, but harboring an illegal AI wasn’t . . .” Kav paused. “I didn’t plan for that.” Another pause. I listened to the AIs chatter as they merrily hacked through the ship’s systems. “I guess I should thank you too.”

“My turn to ask ‘what for?’ ”

“Without you, I don’t think I would have been able to do it. The U.P. would have forced me to change, eventually, and I can’t go back to who I was.”

I had been planning up until that point to bring up the idea of nim swapping back to female, but decided against it for the time being. I had thought there was some chemistry between us, but maybe I was wrong. I sure as hell have been before.

:: BRACE FOR IMPACT IN T MINUS 10 ::

“Better hold on to something,” I said. “It’s nothing but bumps and bruises from here on out.”

“Goodbye, comfort,” Kav said wistfully.

The impact was rough, but we lived through it. And a hell of a lot more after that too. Maybe, if you’re lucky, you’ll find another data cache and learn how things ended for us. But first, you need to look through those files on the Humpty culture. Ask yourself: Is this who you really are? Ask yourself, and don’t be surprised at the answer. Never stop looking.