

Ruis hit a button and an iris-door opened in his sitting room. Grinning, he slid down the tube to the Greensward.

He landed in the only well-kept area of the place. The rest was a wild tangle of plants. Ruis patted the one many-tentacled maintenance robot he'd been able to locate and repair, which was clearing a path centimeter by centimeter. Nineteen more robots lost within the thick, verdant greenery.

He stilled into reflexive immobility when he saw a man lounging against one of the rough stone walls, watching Samba play and pounce in the thick brush. What was a stranger doing here? How had he gotten here, so far from the public museum rooms? And why hadn't the Ship warned Ruis? Ruis' good mood evaporated like iceskim on a hot day. Anger at the intruder invading *his* Ship threatened to erupt into violence.

Ruis beat it back. He was a civilized man. And he was Captain Ruis Elder of the starship *Nuada's Sword*. He wouldn't let anyone take that away from him.

The slight pause to control himself gave him time to realize the man was unlike anyone he'd ever seen before, his hair an odd brown that didn't seem a color Ruis had ever seen the sun's, Bel's, light. And the man dressed funny. His trousers were long and straight-legged, of a dark brown with little ridges. He wore an odd shirt, and over that a heavy open jacket, made of rough weave of brown and gray, at the elbows were oval bits of cloth. In his hands, he fiddled with a small object with a long stem and a little bowl.

Ruis stared. Maybe he was someone far South. He'd heard the people on the Southern Brittany Continent wore different fashions.

The figure straightened and bowed in a short, uncomplicated movement that hadn't been used in eons. Definitely uncivilized.

"Captain Ruis Elder, I presume."

"And you are?"

The man gave a little cough that almost echoed.

Samba quit her chomping of mouse bones, burped, and walked over on graceful paws.

"You may call me Evan."

Ruis scowled. "And you are here because. . . ?"

Evan met his gaze steadily. "I hope to be your friend."

"I don't have friends."

Another clearing of the throat. "We, that is I, extrapolated that, and determined -- that is, I hope to remedy that."

"Why?"

Evan smiled, it looked false, but Ruis couldn't pinpoint how. Ruis sensed nothing dangerous from Evan, but the man's whole body language and mannerisms were subtly *off*.

He gave a little cough again. "Everyone needs a friend, a confidant--"

"Do you?"

The man looked a little startled, then a certain hollow bleakness came to his eyes. "Yes. I've been quite -- lonely?" His voice rang with a metallic edge.

"You tell me." Ruis narrowed his eyes.

Evan fiddled with the object he held. "Yes. Well. I also need a confidant, someone who will serve as an," he paused as if considering, "object to bounce ideas and -- emotions -- off."

"I don't consider myself an object."

"No, er, yes. No, of course not. You are a sentient being."

"Yes, I am. Exactly who are you?"

Even as he spoke, Evan's hair began to subtly change color darkening into a vivid maroon and finally ending up a vibrant purple. At the same time his skin tones paled to a chartreuse.

Ruis' mouth snapped shut.

Samba growled and jumped from the bushes straight through Evan to land against Ruis' chest. *Grrr, fake man. Ship made a fake. FamMan doesn't need anyone more than Me. I am his Fam, Familiar, companion.*

"Ship!"

"You needn't speak to it. You may speak to me. That is one of my purposes, to be an intermediary, someone you can identify with. A construct in the human form," Evan said.

"I've been doing fine speaking to the Ship. I don't have any problems imagining its presence or personality. And I would have trouble identifying with someone whose hair is purple."

Evan's skin turned a pale blue. His holo began to waver, rippling.

Ruis eyed him, wondering if there was a glitch in the Ship's projection of holos in the Greensward, or if the whole system was faulty. Evan certainly couldn't match the holos or the illusions Ruis was accustomed to as a Celtan.

He waved a commanding hand. "Begone."

"Wait, no! You don't understand. I have been a sentient program for some moments now. Do not reject me! I shall be discombobulated, my trons never to be reassembled again."

Ruis could only stare. The thing looked agitated, limbs jerking. He began to fade.

"Stop, Ship. Let Evan be." And that was exactly what Evan wanted, to be. Ruis couldn't kill it. He snorted, he was becoming too damn soft, caring for a Fam, lusting and more for a woman. He couldn't even dismiss a fake person. He scratched Samba on the head. "You mentioned something about your purposes?"

Samba kept up a disapproving rumble.

"Thank you!" Evan said. "Yes. I am a construct of the Ship. To be exact, I am a psychology program."

*Grrrrr. Fake man.* She turned and butted her head under Ruis' chin, rubbing him and purring loudly.

"I don't know what 'psychology' means," Ruis said.

"Ah," the equally false object was back in Evan's hands. "The Ship -- We -- I -- are concerned about your mental health."

Ruis snapped up straight. He knew those words. There were many Healers that dealt with the mind. They couldn't help him, though, their Flair didn't work around him, and it wasn't as if Ruis had an illness that could be cured. His Nullness was bred in his bones, never to be removed.

"We -- I have files on your blood pressure, pulse, skin-surface temperature, the usual angles of your standard movements, and the pattern of your brain waves. Your file shows that when you first arrived on board you were in a quite agitated, extreme emotional state. As you spend time on *Nuada's Sword*, this diminishes and becomes close to what was viewed as "normal" by your ancestors, yet there is still an underlying psychological disturbance of some depth and violence."

"So?"

"We -- I -- want to help." He cocked his head. "In fact, as a spokesman for the Ship, I must insist."

Anger slammed back into Ruis, but again he strapped it down. Anger, and hurt, that even here he was not to be left alone to be what he was.

Samba nipped his finger. He cursed and dropped her. She slapped her tail against his boots. *This is Our Place. We don't want to go.*

"Samba," Evan looked at the Fam.

She flattened her ears and hissed.

Evan cleared his throat. "I am simply an image of the Ship, Samba. You and I have spoken about this, do you remember?"

She huffed, then paced back and forth. She sniffed at the holo, then opened her mouth and curled her tongue in the sixth sense that all cats have.

Evan vibrated in some fashion that made her give a startled riff of purring.

*I remember. Ship is right. I talked to it. Let Ship help. She sniffed again, sat, and began to groom her whiskers. Let silly fake man help. No harm done. We still have lots of room to play, sleep, eat.*

Ruis hissed a breath out of his teeth. He refused to give up this life, though he'd been tempted from sheer rage and spite. Evan wavered before him, if he was a construct of the Ship he was no threat to Ruis, and he looked completely innocuous.

The Ship still considered Ruis in command. "Very well."

Evan smiled briefly, then before Ruis' fascinated gaze, stuck the strange object between his lips. Ruis had to keep his own mouth from falling open as he saw what seemed to be illusory smoke puffs coming from the thing. "What's that?" he asked.

Evan's brows drew together. "What?"

"That thing you're sucking on."

The construct's cheeks turned pink, then purple, then chartreuse. He coughed and the object disappeared, only to rematerialize once more in his hands. "It's a pipe. For tobacco."

"Tobacchew? Smoked, that stuff rots your lungs."

Now Evan's whole face turned a glow-dark pink. "Yes, hmm, it would. If I had lungs," he ended mournfully. He looked at the pipe. "It is a prop this image would use, as a member of the Earth intelligentsia."

Ruis snorted. "Celta has no intelligentsia -- there's a certain noble philosophical circle, I hear, mostly youngsters."

"Ahem." The pipe disappeared. "Yes, well. Then the pipe is not used on Celta?"

"Not to my knowledge, unless it's in secret family rites."

"Ah." Now only his ears turned pink while purple washed over his face.

Ruis sighed. "You need to get your skin tones programmed better."

Evan flushed blue. "Yes. Not only that, but it appears Our data banks are lacking in the current information regarding your culture. It will be difficult to help you reintegrate with your society--"

"I'm an outcast in my Society, a criminal, with a death warrant on my head if I'm found in Druida." All the ills of his situation crashed down on him. He could never claim the Lady he wanted, the one he ached for.

Evan blinked at him -- the whole illusion, not just his eyes. Ruis remembered an ancient phrase and grinned with all his teeth. "So put that in your pipe and smoke it."

Evan vanished with a pop.