

# Kevin, De-Claude

*By Robotech\_Master*

*July 15, 157 AL*

In a small office in Alpha Camp's central administration building, a fluffy white Persian cat the size of a large pony, with the slightly-squashed "peke-face" and large blue eyes characteristic of the breed, sat on his haunches behind a desk. The desktop comm screen was just for show, and not even activated; as a RIDE, the cat did all his work inside his head. He didn't even have to do it *here*; he could just as easily (and sometimes did) find a nice solitary spot outside in the Dry and comm it in. But the desk and the office helped him avoid contact with all the humans who were now making Alpha Camp their new home.

Kevin didn't really have anything against humans in general. They were people just like anybody else. But seeing them around reminded him that his experiences with *specific* humans hadn't been all that great, and he would just as soon not spend all his time thinking about that. At least AlphaWolf understood. He wasn't one to try to make him seek "therapy" or "get back on the horse" or "recognize that the first step is admitting you have a problem" or any of that crap. If Kevin wanted a job that would keep him out of humans' way, the financial expert system he'd gotten from being Harold Steader's pet made him a shoe-in for the position of the new polity's

Comptroller General. And so he was.

“You take my self, you take my self comptroll...” Kevin hummed to himself as he made the numbers dance. Numbers were fun. They were clean, simple...honest. They told you what they meant, not what they thought you needed to hear. They could lie, but only if someone else *made* them. And tracking down and fingering that someone else was part of the fun.

“Excuse me...” A voice brought Kevin out of his reverie, bringing him to look up past the desk. A human stood in the door to his office. “Do you have a moment?”

Kevin cocked his head. The human was of average height, clean-shaven, with short, dark brown hair. He spoke with a thick accent that Kevin’s reference database placed as eastern European. It was a little tricky to make out at first, but it cleared up when he ran it through the customized speech-recognition subroutines from that database. “The tourism office is down the hall and to your left.”

“Actually, I am here to see you...Kevin,” the human said, almost shyly.

Kevin’s eyes narrowed, his ears tilting back. “If you’re a reporter or a curiosity seeker, I have nothing to say to you.”

“No...no, it’s nothing like that,” the man said. “Please, just hear me out.”

Well, it was something different, anyway. Despite himself, Kevin’s feline curiosity was at least mildly engaged. “I suppose I can spare a few minutes.”

The man nodded, stepping into the office and taking a seat on one of the chairs facing the desk. “Thank you. My

name is Claude—Claude Roman. I'm from Earth.”

“I figured,” Kevin said. “We don't get many with an accent like that around here.”

Claude smiled. “I would imagine. It's not a problem for you to understand, is it? Sometimes I have trouble talking to other people.”

Kevin flicked an ear. “You're talking to a quantum supercomputer. Speech recognition is trivial, no matter the accent. Or language. I could even download a skill chip and understand you if you spoke in...Croatian?”

“Romanian,” Claude said. “That won't be necessary, but thank you. I'm trying to improve my English, and I need the practice.”

“Your English is already better than many of the native speakers I've run into,” Kevin said. “But why are you here?”

“Local politics,” Claude said. “I am—*was*—a mesh site developer. I ran the mesh site for our last local government, back in Romania.” He smiled ruefully. “I knew it would be controversial, but I had not expected quite how much so. When the government changed, anyone associated with the old government was *persona non grata*. In my case...since I was responsible for communicating that government's positions to the people, I came in for some extra-special treatment. As you say here, my bosses didn't like me, so they shot me into space.”

“All right, that's why you're on Zharus, but why are you *here*?” Kevin asked.

“When I arrived, it was just before Zane Brubeck made his big announcement,” Claude said. “I barely had

the time to learn what RIDEs were and why everyone was so concerned before it was...well, war. And...on the news, I saw you.”

Kevin’s ears lay back. “*Not* my finest hour.”

Claude nodded, acknowledging. “And I read the articles that came out, after.”

Kevin growled, ears flattening further. “Those damned invasions of privacy. The gendarmes had *no right* to leak my memory backup to the media. I should sue them for every penny they have. Bad enough to see my private thoughts splashed across the tabloids, but after that, all the curiosity seekers who came out to the camp... ‘Oh, you poor kitty!’” He glowered at Claude. “I need nobody’s pity. I think you should just leave the way you came.”

Claude raised a hand. “Wait. I am not here out of pity.”

“Yeah? Well, why *are* you here, then?” Kevin asked gruffly.

“Out of...I suppose *sympathy*.” Claude said.

“What’s the difference?”

“Pity is thinking you can’t stand up for yourself,” Claude said. “Sympathy is knowing that you *can*, and wanting to assist.”

“What makes you think I want or need your assistance?” Kevin growled.

“Need? Probably not,” Claude said. “From everything I’ve heard, you are doing very well for yourself. But *want*... come on, you live in Alpha Camp. Haven’t you wanted a pair of thumbs of your own?”

Kevin sneezed. “I’ve tried it. No thank you. I have

never had one single positive experience from Fusing, willingly or otherwise. Men don't want to be fluffy. Women don't want to be fluffy *men*. And bodyjacking...ugh. If I wanted to swim in someone else's raw sewage, I would go back to being a sewer worker."

"Then you have only ever met *stupid* people, and I am sorry for that," Claude said. "There is nothing wrong with being fluffy. You are exactly as you *should* be."

"How do you figure *that*?" Kevin grumbled.

"For one thing, Persian cats have been around for hundreds or thousands of years," Claude said. "It takes both sexes to propagate the species, so it's natural there should be males as well as females."

"There's a difference between keeping one as a pet and *being* one," Kevin said. "We're not exactly in demand as RIDEs. I checked. Persians are available as a custom dealer option on housecat RIDEs from several factories, but only about twelve males have been requested in the last ten years."

"That just means you're sought after by people of *very* refined tastes," Claude said.

"Like you," Kevin said.

Claude shrugged. "I used to...have a Persian I was very fond of, when I was younger. I like the breed for what it is, not because some figure from 20th century pop culture had one."

Kevin cocked his head. "My voice stress software says you're not being entirely honest."

Claude blushed. "All right. When I say I used to have one, I mean I *played* one in Virtual Life.

Anthropomorphic. He was an airship captain..." Claude

shrugged. “Perhaps there is an element of selfishness involved. I certainly could never afford to have even the cheapest Persian RIDE custom-made—especially now that there is more involved than simply commissioning a RI. And morally speaking, if I caused another male Persian RIDE to be brought into the world, would he be doomed to the same unhappiness you have found if we did not get along?”

“So you want...*me*,” Kevin said flatly.

“At the risk of causing an earworm, I want *you* to want *me*,” Claude said. “Or at least to try me out. Fuse with me. Read my thoughts. See if you think we could get along. If not, we go our separate ways...and I will have your tags, which will at least be something. If so...” He shrugged again. “If so...well, we would see how it goes.”

Kevin blinked. “You honestly *want* my tags?” His voice stress analysis couldn’t detect any dishonesty, but he’d never before encountered any man who said that and meant it.

“I want your tags...and I want to be *you*. The Fuser form you, anyway,” Claude said. “And I want to show you we humans are not *all* bad.”

Kevin shook himself. “I need to think about that.”

Claude nodded. “I understand.” He chuckled.

“Unfortunately, if I step foot outside of this building, I will probably be press-ganged by your Immigrations. I was only able to forestall them by convincing them I already had a partner waiting for me in here. If I come out again without tags...”

“They are a little...*enthusiastic* sometimes, aren’t they,” Kevin said. He looked at Claude and slipped into

fast-time for a bit of concentrated thought. As an afterthought, he used his access to Alpha Camp's government network to pull up all available records on Claude Roman. The data Uplift Immigrations sent back supported Claude's story. He'd arrived in May, 156, and stayed there until just last month. Then he emigrated to Alpha Camp.

Kevin replayed the entire conversation in his head, three times, subjecting it to every form of analysis he could. Claude seemed to be completely honest in what he said, save for that one time he'd tried to keep back what he meant about playing a cat in Virtual Life. Kevin also cross-referenced the term "Virtual Life." He'd heard it before from RIDEs who had Earth humans, but hadn't ever bothered to research it.

It turned out that Virtual Life was a kind of global virtual reality, like Nature Range or Bambi's Forest, where humans could take on alternate identities and roleplay them. Sometimes those identities collided unpleasantly with the real world, when the Earth government didn't like the way people kept trying to bring their virtual identities into the real world. He wondered if that might also have had something to do with why Claude had been deported to Zharus.

Regardless, now Kevin was starting to get even more curious. Perhaps it would be worth Fusing with Claude just to read the human's mind and see what the whole truth was. And, again, Claude was the first human male who had expressed an honest interest in Fusing at *his* convenience, and who had looked upon his fluffy white fur as a benefit instead of a drawback. And he had sounded completely

convincing when he had said it.

Kevin dropped back into the real world, then stood, padded out from behind the desk, and stretched. Claude watched, an eyebrow raised.

“All right,” Kevin said gruffly. “If you want to Fuse, stand up and let’s do this.”

Claude nodded. “Thank you,” he said, quietly, rising to his feet and stepping away from the chair. Kevin moved forward, wiggled his butt, and pounced. A moment later, his hardlight winked out, his metal body split open, and he sealed himself around the human. Then he was standing erect once more, for the first time in years.

Kevin felt Claude raise his arms, tilt his head forward to look down at them. “Remarkable,” he said. For some reason, the first thing almost any human did on first Fuse was look down at his hands and open and close them, as if to reassure himself that this whole thing was really happening. Kevin wondered if there might be a paper in that for some student of RIDE/human psychology.

But enough woolgathering. He turned his attention inward, slipping into Claude’s mind. As usual, it was a mess of random memories and associations. How did these humans ever get anything done with their haphazard meat-minds? He began accessing, reading, and collating. It would probably take several minutes of real time to make any sense out of what he was seeing.

“Hey, that...tickles,” Claude said. “It tickles the inside of my head. That’s an odd sensation.”

“Sorry. Should go away as you get used to it,” Kevin said distractedly. He was starting to get at least a general sense of Claude’s mindspace, and emotions if not outright



memories. It was true what he'd said—Claude didn't feel *pity* for Kevin, but he did feel bad about what he'd read concerning how badly Kevin had been used. And he felt that offering himself to make up for it was the least he could do as a human being.

Kevin actually paused at that, unsure what to think. The idea of a human intentionally subordinating himself to a RIDE was completely alien to his experience. Sure, he'd heard and read stories about it happening to other people, but had assigned them about the same credence a human would of reports of ESP, or Bigfoot and UFO sightings. People claimed they happened, but he'd believe it when he saw it himself. Only...now he *was* seeing it himself, and he *still* wasn't sure he believed it.

Meanwhile, Claude took his first few steps, turning Kevin's head to look around with his optics. "Is...there a mirror anywhere? I'd like to see how this looks."

"Restroom is down the hall to the right," Kevin said. He let Claude walk the body, since he was still devoting his full attention to what he found in Claude's mind.

"Thank you, my friend," Claude said.

*Friend?* Kevin had never had a human call him that before. This *was* a new experience. And being in direct mental contact with the man, Kevin could have no doubts that he really meant it. *I might just have to keep him after all*, Kevin thought. *At least until I figure him out a little better.*

They stepped into the bathroom, and Claude paused before the sink. As a RIDE, they were a little bit taller than human norm, but they could still crouch slightly to see their face. Claude raised a hand to his fluffy white cheek,

flicked his ears back and forward. “This is amazing...” he breathed. “It feels real in a way that Virtual Life never did.”

“It is real,” Kevin said. “And I’m having a hard time believing it myself.” More and more of Claude’s memories were setting into place, and they fit with Claude’s story. Kevin peered at Claude’s recollection of piloting his steam-powered airship in Virtual Life, a virtual reality with a slightly lower resolution and a completely different feel than his own Q-powered cyberspace. He met and interacted with other virtual beings—furry, mechanical, magical, you name it. A large number of them had been dragons. Kevin wondered if Claude had ever been to Camelot.

“Can’t say that I have, but I wouldn’t mind a visit,” Claude said. “Oh, sorry...was that meant to be a private thought?”

Kevin shook their head. “No worries.” He tightened up his mental discipline a little. It had been so long since he’d Fused that he’d gotten lax about keeping his thoughts discrete. Regardless, everything he was learning from Claude’s memories served to reinforce that the human had been honest in what he said. And Kevin actually wasn’t sure how to deal with that.

*I guess I’ll just have to keep him until I figure that out,* Kevin thought wryly. And to his own surprise, he realized...perhaps that wouldn’t be so bad. He was used to living alone, but that didn’t mean he wouldn’t mind having someone else to talk to. “Right. Let’s go for a drive.” Kevin took over again, walking them out of the building together, then converting to his skimmer bike form beneath the human. As much as Kevin loathed Harold Steader, he had

to admit the man did have good taste in vehicle modes. For all his fluffiness in the animal-inspired shapes, in this mode he was a sleek racing skimmer bike, inspired by the hoverbike James Bond had used to chase Chelsea Blofeld in the 2032 movie *Try, Try Again*.

Claude reached up to feel his furry ears, and turned his head to glance back at his fluffy white tail. Then he leaned over to peer at himself in Kevin's rear-view mirror—another standard human behavior on the first de-Fuse. “Oh, nice!” he said. He rested a hand on Kevin's dash. “Thank you! They look wonderful!”

“You're...welcome,” Kevin said. “Now hold tight. Just ‘cuz I'm fluffy doesn't mean I'm not *fast*.”

Claude gripped the handlebars. “I'm with you. Let's go.”

Despite Kevin's promise of speed, he kept it to the limit until they passed through the outer dome wall, making sure to bring up his hardlight climate shell before they left. Then he kicked in full acceleration, going from zero to just barely subsonic in about ten seconds.

“Wow!” Claude whooped, leaning forward against Kevin's sloped fairing. “This is incredible!”

“I'll bet your airship had nothing on me,” Kevin smirked.

They streaked through the desert, passing giant stone pillars and columns sculpted by the wind-blown sand, hopping over vast canyons and skirting tall mesas. Kevin headed for one of the places he liked to come to work when he wasn't in the office—a scenic overlook with the dramatically smoking Old Smokey volcano on one side,

and the high wall of the Harkonnen Plateau rising up on the other.

Kevin slowed as he reached the top of the mesa, then settled to the ground. A moment later, he Fused up again, and they walked out to the edge of the cliff. “So what do you think?”

“I think I am running out of adjectives,” Claude said. “This is really an amazing view. You come here often?”

“From time to time,” Kevin said. “I think a few others do, too, though I haven’t actually run into anyone. It’s a good place to think.”

“I see.” Claude looked up at the column of smoke rising from the volcano for a while. “What are you thinking about?”

“What do *you* think?” Kevin said. “You are...puzzling. I can’t figure you out.”

“What is to figure?” Claude asked. “I told you, I *like* you.”

“You hardly *know* me,” Kevin protested.

“True. But I think I *could* like you, from what I *do* know about you,” Claude said. “I like *what* you are already, and I see nothing at all wrong with *who* you are.”

“I suppose if you have already read the articles written from my memories, I might as well give you direct access to the source,” Kevin said. “You might just be the only person on Gondwana *not* to have seen them yet. I gather they even made it out to the peer-to-peer darknet. Damned gendarmes. Of course, it wouldn’t have happened in the first place if that idiot AlphaWolf hadn’t believed Fritz.”

Claude shrugged. “From what I heard, many people

made many mistakes. We all live and learn.”

“True. Here...” Kevin opened access to his memories, and a moment later felt Claude sifting through them.

“That Harold Steader really was an *idiot*, wasn’t he?” Claude mused. “Just how many RIDEs did he go through, anyway?”

“At least a couple of dozen,” Kevin said. “I have actually been in touch with a few of the others—I suppose that’s one good thing about the memory leaks, anyway. We have been considering forming a support group.”

“Do you have any idea what finally happened to him?” Claude wondered.

“No. All I know is, he disappeared a few years ago. Guess he must have Integrated, but if so he—or she—hasn’t come forward yet.” Kevin smirked. “Either the poor RIDE half is too embarrassed at what they got stuck with, or they know there would be a mob of angry RIDEs with torches, pitchforks, and maybe legal representation waiting.”

“What an *idiot*. To have the chance for true companionship a couple of dozen times over and just... throw it away.” Claude grimaced. “I would never have done that.”

“I don’t think it was really in him to look that far outside himself,” Kevin said. “Some people just...have no empathy.”

“And you belonged to a succession of people with no empathy. I *am* sorry about that,” Claude said.

“Eh. It’s in the past,” Kevin said. “But thank you.”

They stood there a while, admiring the view, then Kevin had an idea. “Let me show you something.” He

pulled Claude into his virtual reality space. A moment later they stood in a forest, two similar anthropomorphic cats together.

“Nice!” Claude said, looking around. “Is this Nature Range?”

“No, Bambi’s Forest,” Kevin said. “Nature Range for me is a little...different. But here is where I go to get work done, or watch media.” He demonstrated, waving a hand and producing a variety of data display panes floating in the air. “It’s a peaceful place, and nothing can hurt us.”

“I see,” Claude said. “I could do mesh site development work here, too?”

“I don’t see why not,” Kevin said. “I can download whatever development environment you prefer. We could do our work together.” He grinned as a thought struck him. “I’ll have to requisition a Fuser-compatible desk chair for my office.”

“So it’s settled, then?” Claude said.

“It...looks like it is,” Kevin said. “Huh. Of all the ways I might ever have gotten thumbs, this one never occurred to me.” He shrugged, then waved his hand at the rest of the virtual forest. “Welcome to me. Feel free to look around.”

“Thank you—I think I will,” Claude said. He started up a path that led out of the clearing, then turned to look behind him. “Are you coming?”

“You go ahead,” Kevin said. “I’m going to get a little work done. Just call my name if you need me.”

“All right,” Claude said, vanishing up the trail. Kevin chuckled, watching him go, and set one of the information display panels to follow him. He actually was fairly proud of the work he’d done on the forest, creating several

different areas with different appearances and environments. There were the forest, gardens, a small log cabin and barn, hiking trails, and even a small amusement park. It had been something to do to pass the time. He looked forward to seeing what Claude thought of it all.

After an hour or so of more number-crunching, Kevin yawned and stretched and decided to take a break. Claude was still in the amusement park, riding the ferris wheel, and Kevin didn't see a need to bother him. He opened the door in the trunk of a thick tree and slipped into the Green Room, and from there into his Nature Range.

As he stepped through the doorway, he dwindled into his natural form—a fluffy white Persian house cat of normal house cat size. On the other side of the Green Room was his own personal Nature Range—a duplicate of the log cabin and barn in his Bambi's Forest. Only in this version, it all seemed a lot larger...with a lot of places for tasty mice, voles, and other small rodents to hide. He stalked toward the barn door, tail high in the air, ears cocked forward to catch the squeaks and scurrying noises that heralded virtual dinner.

It took a few minutes of careful stalking, but before too long one fast *pounce* yielded a mouthful of squirming, wriggling, squeaking rodent. Kevin got a good grip on it and carried it outside, where he batted it around and played with it for a while until it finally expired. A little disappointed that it had ended so soon, Kevin picked it up again and trotted over to the house, to find his favorite sunny spot on the porch where he could enjoy his meal.

But as he got there, he found the porch was not unoccupied. Claude was there, back in his natural human

appearance. Kevin was so startled he dropped the mouse.

“I came back to see you, found the door was open...” Claude grinned, looking down at Kevin and the mouse. “Hey, the mighty hunter! What’ve you got there?” He squatted to take a look. “Good job! There’s one mouse that won’t be stealing any more cheese.”

Kevin looked at him, ears twitching forward, but didn’t detect any sarcasm in Claude’s voice at all. Then, before he had time to be surprised, Claude reached down and scooped him up, then carried him over to sit down in one of the chairs on the sunny side of the porch. A moment later, Kevin was in Claude’s lap, and Claude was gently petting him from head to tail. Kevin was immensely surprised a moment later when he started *purring*, loudly.

Claude grinned all the more. “Yeah, that’s a *good* kitty.”

Kevin sighed happily and curled up in Claude’s lap. *This is... he thought drowsily. I didn’t even know I was missing this. But...this is everything I ever wanted. Oh, I am keeping him. I am!*

Kevin dozed off in the warmth of the virtual sun. Claude chuckled, then yawned and closed his eyes himself. The two new friends slept, secure in the knowledge that, in the other, each had found exactly what he needed.

**THE END**