

Kadrik and the Pod

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[Translated from Eumid-var-Evendo into Psimer]



Art by: Viko Menezes

I guess the first thing to go wrong in my life was my hatching. Basically, I missed the fun part. Y’know, the whole big initial terrasymbiosis bit, where a planet becomes just barely habitable and the vanguard wave bursts out of their seed pods and gets to work making the planet truly livable. It’s all very dramatic, very cool. And I missed it.

The second thing to go wrong is that, shortly after my hatching, while I was eating my shell, I got a little too excited and ended up gnawing off the end of my left hind leg, which is why I have this cool foot. The scientists made it out of a native fungus they modified to build tools and housing units and stuff.

Anyway, I poked my way out of my pod during the *second* wave, when the planet was well on its way to being a real Eumidian paradise. Me and the other second-gen vanguards are supposed to assist the continuing terrasymbiosis process, but let me tell you, that’s boring as waste disposal. Running around the planet gathering material for the terrasymbiosis engines until you drop dead? Spending your days and nights trying not to freeze and fighting off megafauna? I know that’s exactly what I hatched to do, my purpose set by a critical need identified by the union-mind, but it’s terrible and dull and I hate it. I gotta admit that I have a hard time doing, or even paying attention to, stuff I don’t really care about. My performance was “subpar” and “not befitting a vanguard” and “a bit pathetic, honestly.”

That's why I'm stationed here, in the sludge bit of the planet where the tropical habitable ring bleeds into the frozen white wastes.

My ongoing mission is to retrieve the last few unhatched pods scattered across the muddy plains. They smacked into Evendo millennia ago along with the rest of the first-gen vanguard pods from the seedships, but they weren't lucky enough to land anywhere that became permissible for life, so the pre-person slurry inside remains in hibernation. The unhatched pods are still enormously valuable, though. Even if they're no longer viable, they retain undifferentiated, highly programmable biomatter we can use. Speaking of, if I screw this up, I'm going to get "volunteered for functional reprocessing," which is the polite way of saying they're gonna throw me in the recycler and harvest my genes and protein. Normally, we only put dead people and damaged pods in the recycler, but apparently, I'm about as useful as either, so. This is kinda my last chance. But I hate this stupid job. It's busywork since we've combed the planet, like, five times already. And as I said, I'm not too good at doing things I don't care about. Even when my life is on the line.

So now I'm out here in the transition zone, carving huge looping figures in the mud with my power-sledge, and trying not to think too hard about how today's the last day in the solar revolution and I'm one pod away from my quota. The worst part is that this isn't even my fault. I actually did *try* to search for pods. But, you see, this planet wasn't always an empty ice ball before we showed up. It was once a lush world teeming with life, and a lot of that life was huge, and it also had surprisingly good hibernation abilities (for a non-Eumidian, that is).

Now that we're basically thawing the whole planet, some of that life is waking up. And a lot of that life is hungry. One lovely example is this creature I'm calling Gobbler, and she's making my job even more of a nightmare. Every time I find a pod these days, and that's not often, along comes Gobbler. She chases me away and—you won't believe this—gobbles up my find. It's a wonder that I was able to safely retrieve the ten pods I have.

It's sunset now, and things are looking hopeless. But let me tell you something, I'm not gonna drive back to the habitat and "donate" my biomatter. That's right. I'm cutting off comms, spitting out my tracker, and deserting. Call me "selfish." Call me "a sorry excuse for a vanguard." I'm *not* dying in a recycler. So, I turn my speed to max and shoot off toward the tundra.

The first few sun-turns are tough. Though vanguards don't need much sleep, we do need *some*. But I can't get any, because Gobbler is definitely stalking me. I honestly can't blame her. She and her mates have, I don't know, baby gobblers to feed. If I were in her situation, I wouldn't really let an easy meal pass me by, either. Speaking of food, I'm basically starving. I really didn't plan this well.

My autos—the vast conglomerate of tiny selves that make up my mind—clash together, struggling to weave together conflicting thoughts into the best plan of action to handle the situation I've gotten myself into. But the only idea I can come up with is to keep driving. So, I do.

By the fifth day, I still haven't reached the ice plains, but all the big vegetation is gone, leaving little more than tiny shrubs and grasses and just a ton of lichen, which tastes nasty, but it's not like I have a ton of options here. Some of it is actually pretty beautiful, though, glowing gold and red against the rich black dirt. I nearly miss the stasis pod, partly because of all that plant stuff and partly because it looks nothing like a Eumidian pod, which is thin and sleek with lots of pretty leaf patterns. The surface of this round hunk of metal is a mottled crimson, with overlapping lines of lumpy armored plates going down the sides. It blends in perfectly with the landscape. But once I spot it, I turn the sledge around for a better look.

The stasis pod is a Kav construction, going by the shape and trademark color palette. The thing you need to know about the Kav is that they suck big supervoids. I don't want to be speciesist or whatever, but they do. They screwed up their own planet by mining it into oblivion, watched us usher Evendo out of its ice age, and then tried (and failed!) to scare us off and take the planet for themselves.

I hop out of the sledge and swipe off the dirt crusted over the faceplate. Inside is not a Kav. It's a human. And it's still alive, according to the blinking row of lights along the pod's side. This is my first time seeing a real live human in person, and I'm sorry to say that I don't have anything particularly complimentary to report. Now, I'm no narcissist, but I've got a flawless bright green carapace, glittering teal compound eyes, lovely mandibles, and in comparison, humans are sorely lacking. I'm just saying.

So, I'm looking at the soft lumpy alien in the pod, my stomach twisting, and I'm thinking to myself, *I'm gonna eat this thing*. This is closely followed by: *Wait, can I eat this? What if it makes me sick? And: Should I eat this? Like, what are the ethics here?*

Look, I've never had human before, and again, I'm really, really hungry. We vanguards have extremely high metabolisms. That's relatively speaking, compared to other species. From my perspective, *we're* normal and everyone else is a bunch of freaks. But it occurs to me that maybe the scientists back home might be able to revive the human. And even if we can't wake it up, this creature must be packed full of all sorts of useful stuff we could use—alien protein complexes, genetic material—I dunno, I'm not a scientist like my broodmate Zoritt.

But more importantly, everyone will be busy wondering how one alien ended up in a stasis pod built by another alien species and *not* if I'd be more useful broken down for spare parts. If I come back with this, I won't have to spend the rest of my whole life eating lichen and trying not to get chomped by Gobbler. I hitch the stasis pod to my sledge and turn back toward the enclave.

As I said, there's not a lot going on out here right now, which is probably for the best. I have only the stasis pod for company. Eventually, I find myself talking to the alien. I tell the human about all the weird fauna I've encountered on the tundra: Spike-Back and Huge Eye. Too Many Legs, Big Puffy Thing, and Even Bigger Puffier Thing. I talk about Zoritt, my only real friend, and how xe's the one who took me aside after I lost my third sledge—I drove it off a cliff doing wheelies, long story—and warned me my next failure would be my last.

I get comfortable running my mouth. Soon enough I'm telling the human about other stuff, too.

"My autos aren't good at anything," I mutter, during a brief lichen-gathering stop (ugh). "Or if they are, I don't know what that is yet. I'm not particularly hopeful I'll ever find out, but at least you'll buy me some time."

The human, of course, doesn't respond. But they don't judge me either, and that means a lot.

"I hope they can wake you up," I say, patting the side of the stasis pod as I settle down for the second night. "Clearly your life hasn't been too easy, either, or else you wouldn't have ended up trapped in ice, far from home. Maybe you're a screwup, too."

It's not my best thought, but I find myself wishing it were true. Everyone back at the enclave is so dedicated to their work, so *perfect*. I'm just trying not to get recycled. It would be nice to have someone around who makes mistakes, too. Even if that someone is a soft-skinned human.

I'm maybe three sun-turns away from the settlement when it all goes to shit. One second, I'm driving back home, thinking of what the cooks might be serving for the end-day meal, and the next, I'm knocked out of my sledge as it flies backward and crashes on its side in an explosion of dirt. I land

hard on my back, the air knocked right out of my tracheae. I manage to flip upright and get a look at the thing that tossed my sledge like a neophyte's toy.

Lo and behold: Gobbler. She's massive, as large as a shuttle with a huge, fang-crammed mouth; two tusks as long as my arms; gleaming claws; and reddish-gray fur bristling with spines. Her eyes are trained on the pod.



Art by: Diana Franco

Well, I think, there goes that plan.

She's already separated the pod from my vehicle, and she's slamming her tusks into its shell like it's deep in gift-debt to her. Kav-made tech is built to last, but the Kav never took Gobbler into account. She'll crack the pod open sooner rather than later, and I certainly don't want to be waiting around once she's done with the human.

You win some, you lose more. That's just how the nutrient cake crumbles in this big, wide, uncaring universe. I scramble over, shove my sledge upright, and scramble on. I get out of there fast as I can.

But as we've established, there's not a lot to see or do out here. Driving around is even more boring than searching for pods. So it's just me and my thoughts and the cold. And I can't stop seeing the human's face, so peaceful and squishy and utterly vulnerable. *How did they end up in a Kav stasis pod, of all places?* Coming across them is the most exciting thing that's ever happened to me, and I left them to get devoured by Gobbler. This isn't like with the seed pods Gobbler stole—I never had a chance once she got her claws in them. And it's not like seed pods are people yet, anyway.

With a snarl, I swing the sledge back around.

Gobbler, surprisingly, hasn't cracked the pod open yet, though there are a few worrying dents in the casing. I've already got my energy pack on and my staff in one hand. With a battle chitter, I leap out of the sledge and direct a shimmering blast of energy right into Gobbler's face. The blow does nothing but piss her off. But at least she abandons the pod—and charges straight at me.



Art by: Brian Valeza

I ... didn't really think this through, either. Story of my life, really.

I hold my ground until the last second and roll to the side, just barely avoiding the glinting point of her right tusk. With a roar, Gobbler whips around faster than she has any right and rushes me again. Another blast isn't going to save me. I can think of only one thing to do, and it's probably going to kill me.

I rip off my energy pack. Just before Gobbler's fangs close around me, I jam my staff between her jaws and toss in the pack. I'm barely three steps away when the staff splinters apart and her teeth sink right into the energy pack's core.

The whole world flashes green as pain engulfs my left hind leg. When I come to, I see that my foot is gone, *again*. It's a smoking black lump, but the mycelial tissue is already growing back. I roll onto my stomach, push myself up, and wobble upright.

In front of me, Gobbler stumbles around a bit, and then crashes to the ground. Her eyes are frantic, but she's only stunned. Unbelievable. Without wasting another breath, I shake out my newly regrown foot, re-hitch the stasis pod to my sledge, and we're gone.

What I don't expect, when we finally reach the enclave, is for Zoritt to knock me over the head with xir fist.

"What is wrong with you?" xe snaps, but xe's swaying in excitement. "Where have you been? You can't just cut off comms like that!"

"I wasn't going to just jump in the recycler!"

"What are you ..." Zoritt's mandibles click together. "That was a joke, you idiot!"

I stare at xir. Xe looks utterly serious.

"A bad one!" I snap, flicking my antennae in irritation.

“How could you honestly believe we were going to *kill* you?” Zoritt demands. “We’re not Kav, Kadrik. We sent ten vanguards to find you! I can’t believe—” Xir gaze snaps down to the pod. “What is *that*?”

By then a small crowd’s formed around the sledge. Orange light spilling from the clustered houses illuminates fabricators, scientists, and vanguards like me. Something thrums in my body at the sight, spreading like sweet sap through my hemolymph. Five seconds back home, and I already feel better. The dense, warm fog; the heavy perfume of flowers and fruit; the humming chatter of my broodmates. These are my people, my family. It seems ridiculous now that I didn’t catch the joke, that I thought they were really going to throw me in the recycler. I can’t believe I was going to leave them behind.

Pabkoh, a vanguard from the first generation, is peering at the pod. “A human!”

“Barely,” says Zoritt, running a hand over a deep dent in the pod. “The life support is about to fail. We need to get them in the med-lab immediately.”

Taking care not to trip over the thick vines sprawling over the ground, Pabkoh and I carry the pod inside. Then Zoritt and xir science friends take over, gently pulling the human out of the battered steel shell and depositing them in a biocradle. There’s a cylindrical thing clenched in one hand, and I swipe it before Zoritt banishes me and Pabkoh outside. I wait by the door with zim and maybe ten other people, doing my best to answer the questions they lob at me. No one else has been this close to a human, either.

At some point, a medic appears and demands that I surrender myself to a full checkup, even though my foot is totally back to normal. On the way to the next free chamber, I inspect the cylinder. It’s mostly some sort of plant-derived material, with a dense dark center and a pointed tip. It can’t be a tool, because it’s not metal or fungus. Obviously, it’s some sort of snack. I pop it in my mouth and crunch down. Bland, but the texture’s not bad.

Zoritt finds me in the mess hall, inhaling my body weight in roasted beetles and mushrooms, shortly after the medic proclaims me healthy and hale.

“The human is awake, and the elders are done questioning it,” xe says. “Do you want to meet it?”

I’m out of my seat and across the hall before xe can say another word.

The human sits up in the biocradle when I burst in. “*Who are you?*”

Ugh, so they can’t speak Eumid.

“*Kadrik is what I am called.*” Psimer is an awful language. The sounds feel too soft and slippery in my mouth, like pre-masticated food. “*You have name?*”

“*I-I’m Noz,*” the Human says. “*He/him.*”

He’s longish—though not nearly as tall as a Eumidian—with what look like eye implants, a tiny dip on one of the flesh pads on his face, lots of thick black poofy stuff on top of his skull, and light brown flesh covering.

“*Kadrik ... You’re the one who saved me?*”

I plop down on the bench beside the bed. The fungus padding curves around me automatically, molding itself perfectly to my body. “*Yes. Had to fight off five megafauna with bare hands. Big, big fight but I is very strong.*”

“*Really?*” The two fluffy lines on the upper half of the human’s face shoot up. “*Well, thank you.*”

Pabkoh steps in alongside Zoritt. "I thought it was three," ze says.

"No, it was five." I scoot over on the bench to make room. "*Why you stuck in Kav pod? Who is you?*"

"*I'm with the Pinnacle's programming division,*" Noz begins.

I have to smother my displeased shiver—the galaxy's self-appointed administrators, Pinnacle claims to pursue peace and prosperity for all, but only as they define it. They're not as bad as the Kav, but they're way too hierarchical. Thankfully, they're not interested in Evendo at all, and our interactions with them have remained minimal.

"*We were on a team-building exercise when the Kav took us captive. They thought we were spies and that Pinnacle was trying to interfere in their plans to take over Evendo.*"

"Oh," says Zoritt, "*they've stopped with all that.*"

"Are you sure?"

Xir antennae wave the affirmative. "*You've been in stasis for a long time now—*"

Noz's shoulders rise and fall, his chest puffing out, but it doesn't look like a show of confidence. Air whooshes out of his mouth. "*Three years, I know. But the Kav declared they wouldn't break the peace two whole years before that, and I can assure you they didn't seem very peaceful when they took us.*"

"*What happen?*" I ask.

"*A great deal,*" says the human. The sides of his mouth tip upward—pretty terrifying, honestly—but there's a strange wobble to his voice now. "*I barely managed to escape with my life. Trust me, the Kav are only biding their time. We were taken by a brand-new warship and held on a station retrofitted for battle. You don't arm yourself if you're not planning to fight.*"

Pabkoh's mandibles grind together anxiously. "*We have to tell the others.*"

Noz swings his legs out of the biocradle. "*I have to report to Pinnacle.*"

"*You stay?*" I ask. "*Rest for small time? We contact them for you.*"

"*I can't. Besides, your medics say I'm fine, as far as they can tell.*"

"*Why you have to go?*"

"*I'm grateful, Kadrik. More than I can say,*" says Noz, his face contorting again. "*But I have a daughter. A family—my sister, my brothers, my wife. I have to get back to them.*" He scrubs at his eyes with one of his five-fingered hands. "*Gods, I hope they're all right.*"

I don't understand half the words he just said, but I comprehend enough to be disappointed. I was looking forward to having a human friend. I kinda also hoped that I'd be able to try eating Noz after he died.

"*We have a few older ships we could spare,*" says Pabkoh, rising to zir feet. "*I'll put in a request for you to borrow one.*"

The forms go through immediately; the whole enclave is buzzing with news of the human and the possibility of an imminent Kav attack. I lead Noz to the landing pad where an engineer is completing the last preflight checks. The ship we're lending is a small, recently repaired one, a hodgepodge of organic and inorganic parts with a classic vine-patterned shell. Sitting there in the green-tinged shade, it looks like any other part of Evendo's rainforest. Noz and I stand side by side in silence for a long moment, then the human turns and looks up at me, baring his teeth. I can't help but stiffen at the expression, which reminds me of Gobbler.

"Kadrik?"

"Yes?"

"Is there any chance you've seen my pencil? I had it with me when I jumped into the pod, but—"

"What is pehn-sill?"

Noz looks around for a moment before picking up a short stick from the dirt. "It's like this, with a sharp end—"

"Oh, your snack. I ate it. Sorry."

"Um." Noz lets out a weird loud huffy sound. "Hah hah hah. That wasn't food. It was an analog writing instrument."

"I see," I say. I don't. "That make sense." It doesn't. What kind of lunatic uses wooden sticks when there are styli for tablets and mycelial pens for paper? "What you write about?"

"I drew, mostly." He makes that huffing noise again, but softer now. "I'm an artist, sort of. An amateur. I started drawing between jobs as a way to keep myself sane, and I fell in love with it."

My antennae twitch. "You fell in love with thing you is not made for?"

"Well, yeah. I guess." Noz rocks back and forth on his flat feet. "Honestly, I think it's easier to fall in love with the things you aren't meant for."

My mandibles clack together nervously. "I not like being vanguard."

One of Noz's shoulders lifts up. "So then don't be a vanguard."

"Not so simple."

Noz tilts his head. "But not all vanguard-form Eumidians are vanguards, right? Your friend—Zoritt, right? Xe looks like you but xe's a med-lab scientist."

Did he hatch yesterday? "Yeah, but xe still serve critical function."

Noz's forehead scrunches together. "I know for a fact that your people have artists."

"Not in first three generations!"

"Maybe you can be the first to change that."

"You is so odd," I tell him. "All humans is like you?"

The skin at the ends of Noz's eyes crinkles. "Are all Eumidians like you?"

Zoritt joins us then. "I'm told your ship is ready."

"Thank you," Noz tells xir, showing his teeth again. He turns to me and sets a hand on my arm. It's very warm and unreasonably soft. "And thank you, Kadrik, for saving my life. I gave the elders' assembly my contact—if you ever need anything and I can be of service, please don't hesitate to reach out. Maybe you can even visit me on Guideline."

You know what? Why not. I've always heard the Pinnacle folk were self-righteous wannabe autocrats, but Noz seems nice enough, even if he's strange. "Already I have more than enough adventure for now, but ... one day."

Noz hands me the stick. "I'll look forward to hosting you on the station, then."

With that, he lifts a hand and waves it from side to side before ducking into the ship. Spinning the twig in my fingers, I watch the vessel slowly lift into the air and rise above the canopy before zipping into the swirling clouds. Then I crouch down, digging one end of the stick into the soft dirt, and begin to draw a pair of tusks.