

Surrogates

By

Jonathan E. Hernandez

Kato stooped over the open flame, warming himself and stirring the broth in his pot. He cheated a peek at the gray sky, looking for the planet's third moon. The clouds in the distance across the peninsula rumbled. Occasionally, he thought that he felt a drop of water and tensed, worried that the wet season had arrived early. At that latitude, miscalculating the arrival of the periodic flood was fatal.

He shook off the pesky anxiousness that he always had that time of year, but some of it always lingered like a bad taste. He was having the dreams again, like last wet season. Hard-to-remember dreams that felt like they were trying to tell him something about the planet. Things important yet hidden from human eyes.

He rubbed his stomach, feeling his own skin through layers of waterproof material. Feeling what wasn't there anymore.

The perimeter alarm went off, and Kato jumped. A predator could have tripped it, or a pack of hungry scavengers following their noses. Kato had calibrated the sensors for a human, but could never be too sure. And, in his experience, humans were the worst predators of all.

He unslung his rifle and padded away from camp, sweeping back and forth and scanning the horizon for spotter drones. The tools on his utility belt jingled.

Kato stood on a flat hilltop exposed by wind and rain erosion, its edges frayed into blue, pillar-like boulders—some of them shattered into sharp stones. A formidable barrier to wheels, but not to legs.

He heard the purring of a crawler's engines die and a door with rusty hinges opening and slamming shut. A tall, slender Black woman with long locks grunted up the hill. She wore a gray jumpsuit and heavy all-climate boots. Behind her, at the bottom of the jagged circle of rocks, she had parked a six-wheeled commercial single-seater with amphibious capability right up to the edge of the perimeter. She had only a satchel with her, not one of those large boxy backpacks that some people brought into the field.

She wore her cloak like a shawl and her jumpsuit baggy and loose. Not a settler—too refined. A company woman or scientific researcher. The planet used to be full of the type before the poachers and trophy hunters arrived planet-side.

He slung his rifle and bent over to help her up.

She took his hand, then passed her eyes over his weapon. Her pupils darted back and forth, scanning the landscape. "Hey. It's me," she announced disarmingly. "Is it safe?"

“Safe,” Kato repeated as if it were a foreign word.

“I heard shots,” she said.

Kato grunted. The sound of a rifle round cracking the air and echoing through the crags traveled far. The folks that he scared off might have just been desperate prospectors trying their luck before the storm hit. Still, desperate people were dangerous, and he wasn't keen on company on the best of days. She was a different story.

He tried to get a quick read on her as he helped her up. Her large round eyes looked intelligent, and kind. But—he could have been wrong about her. He had been wrong about so many things before.

“Just some raptids looking for scraps. They were buzzing over my stuff so I scared them off. I've set up camp,” he finally said as she finished clambering up the rocks and dusted herself off.

He knelt by the boiling pot and used a long serrated knife to butcher a slab of marbled meat.

“So... you're Kato,” she timidly said his name aloud as if sampling the way it sounded. She took short pensive steps like she was testing her footing.

Her eyes passed over him suspiciously as he butchered the meat. He was using the knife like a cleaver, hacking up the slab like a barbarian.

He nodded sharply. "Kato Kaburu. You're Doctor Wheeler."

"Call me Sammy."

As she fumbled, her jacket flopped open just enough for Kato to see a short-nosed pistol hanging from a holster.

"I have a few rules," she began, making Kato drop his affable front. Her defenses were up. Good. They would both need them during their trek.

"I won't ask you to do anything that we didn't agree to. I won't ask you to do anything illegal."

He grinned at the irony of their illicit meeting. "Except for this."

She exhaled and went on. "I have lines that I won't cross."

Kato nodded sharply. She had principles. Those were rare on this rock. "That's fair."

"I'm not done." She motioned over her holster. She didn't touch the piece strapped to it, but made sure that he could see it. "I haven't spent long on this planet. Long enough to know that some people will try to take advantage."

"You've just now realized that?"

She ignored his snipe and let the folds of her jacket conceal her weapon, having made her point. "Just as long as we're clear."

“Crystal. I’m glad that you have rules, and I’ll respect them, but I have a few of my own.” It might have made things go smoother if they could be friends, but she was paying him to do a job. “First: do what I say when I say.”

Sammy didn’t like that; Kato could see her eyes smolder.

“I won’t always have the time to explain. Just do what I do and don’t ask. It’s a wild frontier out here and you can live or die because of a bad choice. Two: when we move, we move together. We keep our eyes and ears open. Watch where you step, always. That’s it. That’s all I got.”

She nodded, satisfied. “When do we leave?”

“Soon.” He motioned over the stewing pot in the center and the accoutrements littering his tiny camp: overturned buckets for seats, utensils in steel canteens. He hid most of the perimeter sensors well. They would be a pain to collect when it came time to roll out. “Sit. Eat.”

“We need to leave,” she insisted and scuffed a bit of gravel with her boot. “We have a small window.”

“I know.” It was a long way to the sanctuary by the basalt sea. There were lots of things along the way that could snatch up careless travelers. “I’ll get you there, Sammy.”

He looked up at the darkening sky. He felt the dampness growing in the air. They couldn't miss their window, but they couldn't be premature either. It was always the desperate and impulsive that got caught.

"Make yourself comfortable," he said and waved her towards the pot of boiling stock. "We'll roll out after lunch."

"Getting close now," Kato said to Sammy over the radio.

His rumbling crawler was a ten-wheeled behemoth with an extended cabin and variable-geometry treads for rough terrain. Her crawler, cleaner and sleeker, followed closely.

"How's it looking up there?" she asked. An idle question to help pass the time, Kato guessed.

"I noticed the equipment on your crawler," she pointed out.

His roof was studded with a forest of surveillance and comm antennas that he used to constantly scan the horizon: short and long-range radar. Infra-red and Ladar. Not the kind of gear that most locals rolled out for field work. She probably thought that it was for weather tracking.

"We're good," he muttered into his mic noncommittally. "We're making good time," he added to assuage his client.

Sammy's sounded a little more than impatient to reach sanctuary.

"You don't wanna be stuck this far outside the settlements after dark," he warned her almost as an afterthought.

Especially not before the wet season. Even with amphibious vehicles, the drive back would be treacherous once the heavy rain started. They might not have been able to reach the main settlement. Could they reach the Bluffs? He grumbled just imagining the dingy coastal community with its sketchy dives and shady locals. And he had no idea how the indigens would welcome some clean-cut corporate-looking lady.

"Poachers?" Sammy's tinny voice popped through the speakers.

Kato grunted to himself. "Yeah," he agreed, "but they're not the only ones to worry about."

"You know your way around," Sammy buzzed in his earpiece.

Kato wasn't sure if she was just complimenting him or getting at something, so he gave her another noncommittal grunt of agreement. "I grew up on this rock."

A pause. "What do you do?"

"Driver. Ground transportation section. Labor pool; division fifteen," he rattled off.

“A company man?”

He snorted a laugh. “I didn’t make the cut for the pro guilds. I’m what they used to call an independent contractor.” When the company looked for work-for-cheap types, poolee scabs like him spread across the planet like a blight.

“Do drivers always carry a gun?”

“*You* have a gun,” he threw back with a note of irony.

“For protection.”

No shit, he thought. “You can never be too careful.”

He eased off the control yokes. “Let’s stop here.”

After he halted his ten-wheeler he climbed down the ladder step rungs on his forward cabin, Sammy parked her six-wheeler behind his and hopped out. She stomped up to his crawler, her boots making *clomp clomp* sounds on the wet rocks.

Kato caught her peering into his cabin through the open side hatch. The deck was littered with discarded food containers and random odds and ends: strung up linen and souvenirs from his travels across the planet.

“Why here?” Sammy yelled over the screaming winds. She was hard to read with her goggled helmet on. Her face and mouth were covered by her shawl.

“We can remotely pilot the crawlers and hide them.”

“From poachers.”

“From anyone, yeah. I know a place. We’ll be harder to track on foot.”

They didn’t make it very far before Kato felt something coming up behind them. It took him years to develop that sense, and to learn to trust it. He squeezed the stock of his rifle tighter and wound the sling around his forearm. He slumped against an outcropping of rocks, snatching Sammy to his side. She began to grunt in protest but he pointed up as a disc-shaped drone sailed over them. It looked like a company model; smooth, sleek. Too clean for the field. Its sensor probes and boom arms were extended as it went in circles, getting higher and scanning the horizon like it was looking for vehicles. Good thing they dismounted when they did.

“Did it see us?” Sammy asked.

“I dunno. I think...”

“Can we shoot it down?” Sammy asked and whipped out her pistol.

Kato groaned as she waved it back and forth. “Not with that, no.” It would be a tough shot even with his rifle. And if there were other drones in the air it would give away their position.

“Do you even know how to use that thing?” Kato chuckled.

She holstered her weapon with a satisfied shrug as the drone became a vanishing dot in the sky. “It’s not that complicated.”

“Have you ever fired at a moving target in gale force winds?”

Even with her helmet on, he could feel her scowling in his direction. "Do we need to remind each other who's working for whom? I'm paying you to guide me, not give me a hard time."

"Fair enough," he said and looked down. "Watch it," he said and shot an arm out to block her.

There was a triangle-shaped lump of metal on the ground concealed by wild weeds and loose pebbles.

"A trap," she observed plainly.

"Spring-loaded 'jumpin' Jenny.'" he added. Fancy lady almost got caught by a cheap trap that none of the native life were dumb enough to fall for.

"Does that mean...?"

"It just means that some idiot forgot where he left it. Didn't hide it well. Didn't even arm the damn thing properly. Look." He lifted the trap by its side and turned it to show off the bent arming key.

"You know a lot about traps."

He thought. "Sure," he said and used a multi-tool from his belt to destroy the triggering mechanism.

"Do you often cross paths with poachers?"

He sighed. "You ask a lot of questions."

“You say that like it’s a bad thing. Asking questions is how people learn. Maybe you should ask more and say less. What’s that saying? God gave you two ears and one mouth because you should listen twice as much as you speak.”

She brushed past him. Now she was needling him.

He groaned. “You’ve got book smarts, lady – you don’t know the field. I know shit that you need to grow up here to understand.”

“Like?”

He had to be careful. He’d crossed lines before, with other people. Other clients. He didn’t want to go there again. “I’ll tell you later, Baby Steps.”

“Where are we going?” Sammy screamed over the wind.

Kato pointed ahead, a lost gesture. It was almost impossible to see through the misty air and haze created by the wind-tossed particulate rocks. “There’s a cave entrance not far from here,” he yelled. “Kind of a shortcut. Makes good shelter.”

And best of all, it would take them right to the edge of sanctuary.

Even with her helmet, Sammy looked skeptical.

“Once we get to the caves, we’ll be safe. Use ‘em all the time.”

“All the time?” Her head seemed to move back some.

She wasn’t going into the cave without a little fight, or at least an explanation.

He scanned her jumpsuit again, looking for a sign; a bulge by her stomach. The loose fit and bagginess hid a lot.

"You're a host," he determined. "Surrogate, some people call it. You're carrying a polypod symbiote."

She started to shake her head, denying what Kato already knew.

"I put it together. When you contacted me, asking for a guide to sanctuary. Money in advance, this close to wet season. The fact that you were traveling alone, this far away from a settlement."

"I could have been a poacher."

"I knew that you weren't."

"How could you be so sure?"

"I just knew. I used to be a surrogate, you know."

Her head went down, scanning his waist.

"*Used* to be one. I lost it."

"How?"

He exhaled through his nostrils, starting to share some of her urgency. They needed to get inside before a company drone—or something worse—found them dismantled. "Do you feel it? It's like going downhill. That pull. That draw? It's your symbiote. If you close your eyes and feel you can almost..."

Kato remembered the feeling that his own polypod gave him when the wet season came. An urge to reach the sea and become one with it. It was like feeling an oncoming sneeze but having to hold it for an entire season.

She dipped her head and clutched her satchel closer to her body like it was a shield. "Lead the way."

He took point, instinctively scanning the ground for more traps, and tracks; human and animal. The entrance was a narrow crack too small for the larger carnivores to enter and easy for anyone to miss if they didn't know what to look for.

"Okay," he said and took off his helmet once they slipped inside. Sammy followed his example and shook her head to loosen her locks. The roaring winds outside began dying with distance.

The interior was a chalky red-black color and the air tasted brackish. The slap of their boot soles and constant drip of water echoed.

Kato took eager but measured steps, avoiding slippery rocks and dark pits. Something stronger than instinct had imprinted an ancient map onto his mind. He still felt a lingering attachment to the planet despite every hardship that he had experienced on it.

"Careful with that," Kato warned as Sammy plucked a thin red creature off the wall. "That's a Devil worm..." he began as she put it to her mouth. It hissed, but she

quickly bit off its head before it could extend its spiky defensive quills. She popped the rest of its body into her mouth and chewed. Kato twisted his face up and Sammy covered her face in embarrassment when she saw his reaction.

“Oh my God,” she said. “That was disgusting.”

Kato chuckled. “I’ve had worse.”

“It tasted like...”

“Acrid?”

“How’d you know?”

Kato smirked to himself. “I’ve had one before.”

“The Devil worm has malodorous compounds that makes it distasteful to predators, but...”

Kato wagged his finger at her. “You’ve been getting strange cravings, haven’t you?”

Even with the polypod gone, he remembered the urge to consume exotic plants and critters when he was a host.

Sammy bobbed her head. “Polypods supplement their diet with herbs and roots that grow throughout the basin. Even Devil worms might have some kind of nutrient that my symbiote desires.”

She rubbed her stomach and passed her eyes over him. "You weren't lying when you said you had a symbiote. You know a lot about the wildlife, too."

"For a driver you mean," he shrugged. "I told you, I grew up here. If you wanna live on this rock, you gotta know your way around. Makes me a good guide. What do you do? Research?"

"Exobiology."

"You struck me as the type." The type who wouldn't bother looking down if he was sleeping in a storm ditch and she had to step over him. "Company or university?"

"A non-profit. Biotech research."

Non-profit. Such a novel concept. "Yeah. You look like the lab type."

Kato heard the sound of rushing water and followed it. It wasn't rain. "C'mon. Fresh water," he said cheerily. He found a spring and ducked his head under it to take a series of grateful gulps.

"Clean," he panted and waved her up to the spring between swigs. "Cleaner than that filtered shit in the settlements."

"Heavy in minerals," She bobbed her head in agreement as she breathed in the wet earthy smell. "Good for the symbiote."

She rolled up her sleeves, cupped her hands under the gushing water, and took a few dignified sips. She dumped out the water in her hands and flicked her wrists.

“Have you done this before?”

“Have I been to sanctuary before?” Kato asked. “Or, have I ever brought someone else?”

“Both.”

“Then both. Yes.”

Sammy thought, looking intrigued. “You still remember the way to the sanctuary from when you were a host.”

Kato nodded. “That feeling that I told you about? The closer it gets to wet season, the stronger it feels until it becomes unbearable.” A part of Kato wanted to abandon all caution and run right into the sea.

Sammy bobbed her head. “I have a colleague who’s researching the biochemical link between symbiotes and hosts. We suspect that the polypods have a way of imprinting genetic information.”

Kato wondered if that accounted for the dreams. “Is that what your non-profit is doing in the labs?”

“Some of us, yes. Some of us are studying the polypods for new drugs and treatments. Cures for neurological diseases. Symbiotes use hosts for transportation

across the basin and to extract nutrients, but they also feed us a cocktail of sugars and microbes that bolster our immune systems and energy levels. They have a gland which produces a healing enzyme..."

"The oyster," Kato interrupted.

Sammy gave him an odd look. "Erm...yes. That's a term that other groups might use for it."

Like poachers, she meant.

Kato's eyes flicked away for a moment. "That's what the indigens call it. You said something about a link."

She went on somewhat less enthusiastically. "They also transmit messenger proteins into our bloodstreams, triggering activity in our brains, but no one's really sure how it works.

"I feel it too," she confessed. "The sea. I dream about it. Even now," she licked her lips. "I can almost taste the salt of the sea on my tongue."

Kato pointed at Sammy's waist as she absentmindedly stroked her symbiote through her jumpsuit. "Can I see it?"

She eyed him judiciously.

"Please," Kato whispered, trying to sound sincere. "I just wanna make sure it's alright."

She paused, still eyeing him, but removed her cloak and opened her jumpsuit top, then turned at an angle to show Kato the polypod.

It was about the size and shape of a parsnip. Its gray skin was translucent and oily. The bulbous end was its head with a set of paddle-like arms behind it. Tiny, capillary-like tendrils bonded them together. Its thinner end had rows of webbed tentacles that it wrapped around her.

The symbiote was asleep. Purring softly and shuddering as a bulwark against a cool draft that swept through the cave. Its tentacles coiled tighter around Sammy's waist, bringing it closer to the warmth of her body like a nuzzling pet.

Kato smiled. "Is it, uh...do you know if it's a boy or girl?"

"Their sexual organs won't develop until they reach the sea. They mature and mate within days. And then, they die. None of the ones that we encountered on land or shallow water ever had any sex organs. And of course in the sea they're extremely elusive."

Kato unslung his rifle, but kept his belt on. He pulled off his gloves and rubbed the clammy calluses on his palms and fingers. "Fill up your canteen. Have a seat. Rest. Eat."

As Sammy sat on a slab of stone across from him, she looked him up and down. Kato suddenly felt like a specimen in her labs.

“Can I ask you a question?” Sammy asked while looking at his rugged hands.

“What’s it like?”

“What’s it like for someone who actually works for a living?”

Sammy scrunched up her face. “Why do you have to give me such a hard time?”

Because a part of him despised her for having all the things that he never did. For not having to experience the things that he lived through. For not even having a clue about the reality that normal people contended with just outside of her ivory citadel.

“Lesson one surviving this rock—not some cushy lab but the actual rock—have thick skin.”

“Is that what someone told you growing up?”

“Nope. Had to learn it on my own.”

“So you never had some overbearing adult giving you ‘tough love?’ Sat you down and gave you the talk about the facts of life? You must think I’m so naïve.”

“You are, Baby Steps. You’re damn lucky.”

“You think that I look down on you because you drive a crawler for a living. You’re accusing me of judging you and that’s exactly what you’re doing to me. You don’t know anything about me. You don’t know what I’ve gone through.”

“What *you’ve* been through?” He kept himself from laughing at her. “You have no idea.”

“Educate me.”

He was too damn tired. And, he determined, she didn’t rate to know the things that he knew. Things he didn’t learn from some university but by sleeping in empty cargo containers by the docks, tuning out the muffled cries of the people around him and telling himself that he would do whatever it took to survive.

He exhaled. At too young an age he saw a side of humanity that he could never unsee. “The powerful do what they want. That’s all you need to know.”

“That needs to change.”

“Ain’t nothin’ gonna change and you know that.”

“I don’t know that and I refuse to accept it.”

“Oh, okay. It’s that easy.”

She grunted and stood. Her eyes became small intense circles. Her face and tone were indignant. “You *know* that things are fucked up. And you hate me because despite your salt of the earth working class tough guy *bull crap*, you don’t know what to do about it. You’re waiting for someone else to solve these problems. Someone like *me*.”

She looked dizzy, like she’s stood up too fast. She sat back down with a *whump*. “We need to make a change for the better, and now, before things become unbearable.

The polypod population is declining, and it's not just from the poaching. We're compromising the channels that they use to migrate inland. All the large-scale farm irrigation and construction projects have had a major impact on the planetary ecology and we haven't even been here that long."

Kato bobbed his head sleepily. "It's been a rough year." Some of the coastal settlements got pounded hard during the wet season, and there were severe droughts inland. One wildfire grew so large they could see it from the orbital settlements.

"They'll only get worse. Dry lands will get dryer, storms will get stronger."

It was ironic – they were ruining the very trade that they were exploiting. The planet would have gone dry, literally and figuratively, before the last of the takers arrived planet-side. "Shame."

"That's all you can say?"

"Poachers gonna poach, farmers gonna farm. We all gotta eat."

"Haven't you been listening? Or maybe you don't care – ain't no 'farmers gonna farm' if we make this planet unlivable."

Then the same kind of people who ruined this world would find another one to make unlivable, and bring along people like Kato to do their dirty work for them.

"I can see that this is bothering you," he said with barely-opened eyes. "Lemme give you some advice; don't worry about things that you can't do anything about. This rock will eat you up if you let it," he muttered, feeling drowsy.

Sammy went quiet again. Kato caught her looking at his helmet. She pressed her thick lips together until they became a worried line across her face. Kato glanced down at the crude white skull painted on solid black. Her eyes then skipped from the rusty, dried-blood color of the tools on his belt to the kill tallies on his rifle.

"How?" she demanded of him, didn't ask. Kato knew the difference. "How did it happen?"

Kato sighed and slumped into a cross-legged sitting position, his rifle resting across his lap. "I was in the field; way outside the main settlement. Escorting a research team up in the Northern Badlands. We had to split up to avoid a pack of dagger-backs.

"I fell into a hole," he chuckled. "Clumsy. It was the dry season. There was just a small muddy puddle at the bottom, and a polypod. Would've died in a few days. I felt bad. So, I scooped him up and let him latch on. My little *Buddy*."

"What happened?"

"He died," Kato said curtly.

"How?"

"He got sick. I don't know. I'm not the fucking exobiologist."

"You know a lot about the native life."

"I told you, you have to learn fast out here."

"Then why don't you know...?"

He rolled his eyes. "We don't all go to fancy universities, lady. I told you—I don't know why he died. What about you? Huh?"

Her eyes quickly darted down. "It happened back at the lab. I...made a mistake."

"You didn't have it removed?"

"It's an expensive, difficult procedure. Low success rate. With the bonding, bodily systems get linked at the cellular level. The company that I worked for wouldn't spare the expense and I was dismissed for my carelessness and lack of protocol."

That sounded a little Draconian even for a company.

My little Buddy, Kato thought, remembering his short time with his own polypod.

"Can we talk about something else?"

"What's it like being alone?"

She didn't mean to make it sound so hard, but that was how it hit him. He'd been a lone wolf for so long that he almost forgot what it was like to be around people. What the hell would he spend his money on? Another upgrade on the crawler? What

for? Where was he headed? He would get her and her symbiote to the sanctuary. Then what? She was right about the rock—it would only get harder.

He could sense that she had more than just some passing curiosity. It was like the entire trip was some field study. He wasn't able to articulate the feelings of isolation and alienation. Of missing a community on one hand but being afraid to return to it.

"I need to rest," he muttered. It had been a long trip, and he had been driving for hours. "We'll head back out in a bit."

Sammy answered him with silence. Kato only meant to close his eyes briefly, but they didn't open again.

Kato dreamed of the sea. Of roaring, crashing waves, and the unimaginable beauty beneath it.

He wasn't alone. Thousands of his brethren swam around him. Hungry. So hungry. And, desperate. Giant flying machines and hovering trawlers caught the slowest and least fortunate. And more than a few would end up in the jaws of aquatic beasts. But, enough of them made it beyond the sea. Washed out to the gulf and emptied into the giant ocean that girdled the planet full of fantastic creatures large and small that would never be named.

Deeper they went, towards the bottom of the shelf. Crushing depths and terrible cold, but his body was designed to endure it. Down to a hidden dark cave that humans would never find.

They would eat, and grow. Sharing the experiences that they had during their brief tenure on the land using a language that could never be decoded. Knowledge distilled in their very genes.

And together they locked limbs in a great, swirling dance before settling down to beget the next generation. A brief but intense event that was the culmination of a season-long journey across of thousands of kilometers, through unknown perils and pitfalls.

Kato opened his eyes, the memory of his dream quickly fading. Not a dream, he realized. An imprinted memory. Of what? A show never meant to be seen by humans.

He blinked and looked around. Sammy was gone. He cursed himself and got to his feet, his head swimming with stars and his legs feeling numb.

He tried to pick up her trace, which was hard without tracks to follow. And even if she didn't know the caves as well as he did, there were lots of paths to take and places to hide. And, she had a symbiote. She could probably intuit the way to sanctuary just as he did when he had Buddy. He swore to himself and followed his instincts. The impulse to reach sanctuary was strong. Going towards it was like going downstream.

Kato strained his ears, and picked up a moan amidst the constant *drip-drip* of the caves. Sammy. She had collapsed next to a pile of stones, too weak to stand.

He squatted beside her. "You okay?"

Her eyes regarded him languidly. She had enough strength to level her pistol at him. A short stocky rectangle with rows of barrel holes like a pepperbox. Kato raised his hands.

"You're a fucking poacher," she grunted.

Kato winced as if he'd been slapped.

"What were you going to do? Wait for me to fall sleep and cut it off my belly?"

Her breathing was lethargic and she could barely keep her eyes open.

"It's not what you think," he said weakly.

"I've heard that before," she said and squinted, her eye lined up down the sights.

"Do you deny it?"

He sucked in a breath. He hated the way she looked at him now. It was better when she just thought he was some dumb driver. "I can explain."

"Stay the fuck away from me."

"Please." He motioned, and she cocked the hammer.

"Easy," he whispered and pulled back his jacket sleeve to show her the laser code burned onto his forearm. "I got this when I was ten."

“Is that supposed to mean something?”

“You know what it means when something gets branded? I’m showing you this because I want you to know...I don’t want to make excuses.”

“Sure sounds like you’re making excuses.”

“I wanted you to understand why. No matter what you think of me. There was a time when even I used to be naïve as you.”

Her face still looked hard, but her mouth softened. “Internment camp?”

“Labor. Forced relocation. The colonial administrators started a new settlement. Much farther inland. One of their ‘continental expansion’ campaigns. They needed to liquidate their assets in order to be square with offworld debt collectors. On this rock, people are cheaper than machines.”

The barrel of her gun dropped. Barely, but still. He went on.

“I got away as soon as I could, but there’s not a lot that a kid with minimal training, skills, and education can do,” he explained, not looking for sympathy.

“How’d you become a surrogate?”

He rubbed his stomach as the events of that day came back to him. “I tracked Buddy for days. By the time I caught up to him, he was almost dead. I let him latch on because it was the only way to keep him alive long enough to bring back and trade for

scratch. I made certain arrangements with some...rough dudes. We had an understanding."

"And?"

"I couldn't do it. Something was different. Like a switch got flipped in my head. I just couldn't let them have Buddy.

"I'm okay with hunting, and killing. If there's a call for it. But what I've seen? There's huntin' and then there's pillaging. I always heard that if somethin' doesn't feel right it probably ain't. They don't even bother to kill the polypods when they cut them open. They just gut them while they're still alive to take the oyster.

"When the time came, I ran as long as I could, until they caught up with me. They tried to cut him off. Almost killed us both in the process."

He gestured at her pistol, urging her to lower it. "Please. I just want to help."

"Why?" she asked.

He kept rubbing his stomach, comforting the symbiote that was no longer there. "I have to do this. I feel like, I dunno... like I owe it to Buddy. Does that make sense? Probably not. I might not have much, and I might be a lone wolf, but I feel like I need to earn even that much. I need to earn it."

"You told me that nothing was ever going to change. Do you still think that?"

"Who cares what I think?"

"Just answer the question," she said and wiggled the gun barrel insistently.

He dropped his hands to his sides. "I used to hate this planet. Most of my life, it seemed to take a little bit more away from you. It just takes and takes until you have nothing else to give."

"And now?"

"Now I'm thinking that maybe there's nothing wrong with this place and never was. Maybe it's just the people on it that are taking and never giving back. I hope that you're right, and I hope that I'm wrong. Growing up here, I kinda got used to seeing us at our worst. Maybe things can't change, but you're right that they *need* to. There's a lot that I don't know, but I know that much.

"So... are you gonna shoot me, or are you gonna let me help you?"

She lowered her weapon. Her arm was too weak to keep up anyway. "What the fuck is wrong with me?"

"You're the expert."

"Kato...not a good time and this is getting old."

"Have you been eating enough?"

She reached for her satchel and kept trying to flip it open. Kato helped her filter through the contents. Lots of food; much more than just a few snacks for the road.

Sammy knew that she would be weak after the bond was severed and would need lots

of nutrition along the way: packets of plastic-wrapped processed foods, powdered protein, bone-dry meal bars. It reminded him of the colonial field grade crap that he ate for most of his life.

“No wonder you’re weak. Hang on,” Kato said and stalked around the caves. He dipped his hand into a green, film-covered puddle and wrestled with a slippery cave gupper that thrashed its tail and squealed. Kato cut its head off with a knife from his utility belt then slit it down the middle to gut it. Sammy looked like she was going to vomit. He apologized for the smell and bit into the cave gupper, chewing the rubbery, fatty flesh and wincing at the pungent odor. He fought against a gag reflex and chewed a mouthful of tissue into a paste.

He opened Sammy’s jumpsuit and rested his hand on her polypod. They weren’t slimy, like most people thought. Smooth. Silky. When you touched them, it felt like touching something ancient and wise. Kato wondered if some of that wisdom could be shared.

He tickled her symbiote where a chin should have been. It yawned, opening its feeding orifice, and Kato used his fingers to spoon chewed-up flesh paste into it. He continued chewing and feeding, watching the symbiote’s trunk gradually widen. Finally, it stopped mashing its mouth and chirped as if to say *enough* and buried its face against Sammy’s body.

Sammy slowly recovered, instinctively licking her lips as her body neurosympathetically responded to the feeding. "What..."

"You should drink some water."

She smacked her lips and made a face. "Cave gupper? You fed it raw meat. Directly."

"It's easier on their stomach," Kato said, cleaning off his knife and returning it to his belt. "Gets into their bodies faster, too."

She looked embarrassed. "Polypods are voracious. I thought I'd been eating enough. I guess I was wrong. Thank you."

He helped her stand. She threw her cloak around herself in a dignified manner. "We should probably get moving again."

There was something else to her urgency, he could tell. "You're being followed, aren't you?"

She didn't say anything, but swallowed nervously.

"You stole it from the company," Kato realized. "That's why the drones were after us. After you."

Sammy composed herself. "When I saw what they were doing to them; how they were treated in the labs..."

Kato had seen his share of horrors. Bazaars where black market merchants sold poached polypods. The illicit trade went from the coastal settlements to the mainland and then offworld in his lifetime, attracting more and more trappers hoping to capitalize on the growing trade.

“I’ve been trying to shake them for days,” Sammy continued. “I thought that I lost them a while back, but...”

Kato nodded in understanding. With the bonding came a preternatural sense of danger. A good instinct to have on the planet.

“I can’t go back,” Sammy said. “And I don’t want to go to sanctuary alone. I’m scared, Kato.”

Kato paused for what felt like days. “I can’t go back either. The people that I used to associate with are ruthless, but they have a code. They take this kind of stuff very seriously. They don’t forgive or forget. After our incident... let’s just say that we exchanged more than just a few words.

“They have a kill-on-sight order with my name on it, and I’ve been living out of my crawler for the last cycle, looking for whatever work I can do and avoiding settlements as much as I can. To answer your question, being a lone wolf sucks. Especially on a rock like this. It sucks hard.”

And throughout it all, he couldn't stop thinking about Buddy and his experience. And now that the dreams were coming back he couldn't stop thinking about what his old symbiote was trying to tell him. He could still feel the sea calling him. Maybe there was something special about the polypods. They made him feel oddly connected still to a planet that he learned to despise.

"I knew that your story was bullshit," he said and chuckled. "There's no way that a non-profit could cough up enough scrip to get some researcher on this rock."

She bit her lower lip to conceal a grin. "Just as implausible as finding a polypod in the Badlands during dry season."

He snorted. She was more perceptive than her gave her credit. "You put that together real good."

"I have my moments. Not too bad for some ivory citadel lady with a big head? Did it hurt?"

"What?"

"Giving me a compliment. That sounded painful. Now what?"

"You paid me to do a job. So... let's get to sanctuary. Can you trust me?"

Sammy steeled herself, standing straighter and taller than ever before. She looked ready. "Do I have a choice?"

"You always have a choice."

The planet's second moon, a small, quickly orbiting captured asteroid, was winking across the sky. The much larger third moon was coming behind it, bringing tidal forces that sent massive waves to begin the flood.

Kato felt the feeling of returning to a safe and familiar place as he trundled across the basin. He kept scanning the sky for drones and VSTOL trawlers, then the ground for traps and camouflaged ambush predators.

Sammy was by his side, stepping timidly at first but with more confidence the closer they got. The call was getting stronger.

"Watch your step," he warned Sammy as they passed a massive carcass, then another. Looking ahead through the haze, there were dozens of hulking shapes laying strewn around the rocks.

"It's like a mass burial site," Sammy said, peering down at the scattering of bones of various sizes, most of them with scraps of flesh still attached. "These were all surrogates."

"They come here to drop off their symbiotes," Kato explained, walking slowly and checking for stragglers that might have still been feeding. "When they're done,

they're usually too weak to trek back home and collapse before they can get far. Then they get torn apart by scavengers or drown in the flood."

Suddenly, he stopped.

Sammy squatted next to him, instinctively taking cover behind a triangular wedge of stone. "What?"

He felt something in the mist. Sammy grabbed his arm and dragged him down as four dagger-backs circled around a husk; one large one and three smaller. Their sharp, beak-like mouths were pecking something that made wet, pulpy sounds. The blade-like quills on their backs twitched, and they skittered away on their long, thin legs.

After they cleared, Kato saw the giant carcass of a megafaun.

Sammy reached for her pistol as the dagger-backs galloped away, but Kato waved her off looking nonplussed. "It's okay. Just a momma with her babies," he said. Innocent and pure. Wise in the ways of the land that a part of Kato would always be a little jealous of.

"You look worried," Sammy said, taking Kato out of his meditative mood.

It was the scent of humans that had spooked the dagger-backs.

He squatted inside the empty, tent-like cavity that used to be the megafaun's torso. Its insides had been picked clean by a number of animals judging from the

variety of tracks around it. He almost missed the pair of boot prints. They were laid down in overlapping patterns like they were pacing back and forth. Tracking? Pathfinding. Looking for a way to sanctuary.

Kato smeared some scat over his suit to conceal his scent and walked with caution, occasionally pausing to study tracks and droppings. Sammy was so eager to reach the sea that she was slipping on the wet rocks. The screaming winds were pushing them back and hurling bits of rock at them. They were so close.

They broke through a wall of mist and finally reached a ring of giant, collapsed rocks surrounding the basalt rich sea; a natural impediment to larger predators, and vehicles.

Sammy screamed and sank into Kato's arms.

"What is it?" he yelled and looked over her shoulder.

It was one of the hunters, or used to be. Kato looked to see if there was something identifiable, someone that he knew from his past, but what was left of the poacher was smeared across the rocks like a jam spread.

"Don't look," Kato said and walked with her, nudging her towards the sea. The wind tossed sheets of water over them.

They waded into the violently sloshing water together. It wasn't only buffeted by the winds, but other polypods thrashing as if they sensed Sammy's symbiote and greeted their kin. They whipped the water so hard that it began to foam.

"What now?" Sammy asked when they were waist-deep.

"Follow your instincts."

"I'm not sure..."

"Stop thinking like a researcher. Stop thinking. *Feel.*"

Sammy hesitated. "Will it hurt?"

Yes it would. And she would be weakened. But, she wouldn't be alone.

Kato saw her stiffening as if fighting an impulse, then going loose as she gave in. She opened up her jacket and lowered herself into the freezing water. She let out a scream, and Kato saw her polypod's arms lashing like whips.

Kato screamed and spun around. He felt a round rip through his jacket before he heard the crack of the rifle.

A second hunter was kneeling behind a rock, his rifle shaking as he struggled to get off another shot.

Kato unslung his own rifle and put the stock in the pocket of his shoulder, controlling his breath to relax. He leveled the barrel, took aim, and squeezed the trigger. Nothing. Jammed? Soaked. Fucking amateur mistake.

He ran, reaching for a knife—any of the many knives—hanging from his belt. They kept slipping away from his soaked gloves, and he didn't dare take his eyes off the hunter still fighting his jammed weapon. The hunter gave up and held up his rifle like a club. Kato gave up on a knife and ran to his attacker with a wrench that he managed to pull free. He spear tackled the rifleman to the ground, and for a moment, Kato felt a pang of guilt. It wasn't that long ago that he was singing songs and drinking shots with the others. Swapping tales and making their own way and surviving, together, on a rock that had been so hard on them.

The hunter let out a muffled grunt of pain when he landed and lashed out with wild haymakers as Kato mounted him.

Kato brought the wrench down on the poacher's helmet, clobbering his attacker again and again with heavy axe-chopping strikes. He winced at the numb pain in his shoulder where the bullet struck him and the tool was almost slipping from his cold wet hands. His opponent's cries got lost in the roar of the sea. His body suddenly jerked and stiffened, then floated in a pool of blood. Kato accidentally spiked the poacher on a bed of sharp rocks when he tackled him.

Kato jumped off his victim, feeling light-headed and sick. He ran back to the beach yelling Sammy's name. She was gone, and his voice was swallowed by the roaring winds and waves.

He saw her limp body face-down in the sands. Kato swore and ran to her side, screaming her name. He flipped her over and pulled her on top of him. She was alive, but weak. Her symbiote was missing. Her head rested on Kato's thighs as he looked back out at the sea.

"Look," Kato yelled and pointed at the water. She grunted as he helped her sit up.

The water thrashed. The polypods were celebrating. Arcs of static sparked and charged the air with a feeling like hundreds of invisible arms laying hands. A flicker of lightning flashed in the distance. Beyond the sea, a massive eel-like cetosaur as large as a starship breached the surface and slapped the waves with its spear tip-shaped fluke.

Kato looked up. The second moon was blinking constantly like a signal light. The third moon was an enormous bright crescent. The tidal forces would send a flood to wash the basin clean. The sea would fill, then flow out over the thin isthmus separating the continent's two main land masses. The polypods would reach the ocean, where they belonged. Where the poachers and the company would never reach them.

Kato felt a drop on his hand, then another, then a steady steam.

Sammy woke with a jerk.

“It’s okay,” Kato said across from her. It was just a dream. And without having to ask her to confirm it, he knew that she dreamt of the sea.

“How long was I out?” She blinked and looked around his crawler’s cabin. The sheets of rain dumping on the windshield looked like a waterfall. Her crawler was behind his in auto mode with a nav link.

“Over an hour. Have some more food and water. You need it.”

Sammy nodded absentmindedly as she remembered their trek back to the vehicles. “How’s your shoulder?”

“Fine,” he said, taking one hand off the yokes to gesture with his wounded side. It hurt to raise his right arm above his chest, but he could drive.

“You should let me look at it. Check the sutures and maybe change out the dressing.”

Kato grunted. They didn’t have time for that. “I’m good,” he said nonchalantly and sniffed. It was a clean shot. Bullet went right through—missed his bones and major blood vessels. And if he did develop an infection that the smart drugs couldn’t handle, changing the dressing wouldn’t do a damn thing.

“You really should get it looked at,” Sammy said with a touch of concern.

"I will," he said a little gruffly, not sure when or how he would arrange that. At least now he knew what to spend his money on. "You did a good job with the stitches. Thank you."

She smirked. "One of those things that I learned in school. Part of my biology training. So; now what?"

Kato thought. He had to get his wound looked at, and they both had people to hide from. And that was if they made it before the rains got too heavy. "We might not make it to the main settlement."

"Then?"

He sighed. "The Bluffs."

She pulled her legs up to her chest and rested her chin on her knees. "What's it like?"

"Like the kind of place where I grew up."

Sammy looked tired, too tired to show concern or fear. "I have no regrets," she said and shook her head, making her locks sway.

She suddenly lifted her head. She had a hopeful gleam in her large eyes unlike the naivety that was there when they first met. "Maybe we can teach the others. Pass on something the same way that the polypods do. The relationship between humans and

this planet is symbiotic. We've studied polypods to heal humans. Maybe we can learn how to live with the environment and heal this world back.

"I don't know. I'm babbling."

Kato waited for her to finish. "There's shallow water at the bottom of the Bluffs," he thought out loud. "And river channels that settlers like to fish in. The kinds that polypods use to swim upstream and look for hosts to attach to. There might be others out there like us. Maybe we can start with them."

Sammy smiled and nodded. "That's an idea."

She looked at him. "Does that mean you're ready to start trusting people again?"

Kato's face turned as he muddled it over.

"Big tough guy is scared. I took a huge leap of faith; you can too."

"Do I have a choice?"

"Always."

Kato snorted. "Listen to you."

"Am I still Baby Steps?"

"Nah. Not anymore. Listen...I have no idea what it's gonna be like there."

Sammy cut him off. "It's okay; no one does. At least we won't be alone."

Kato drove in silence, listening to the growing storm around them. He could still hear the sea, and Buddy making content trilling sounds.

About the author

Jonathan E. Hernandez is an author, visual artist, and organizer with the Brooklyn Speculative Fiction Writers. After an honorable discharge from the military, he went back to school to study creative writing and pursue a career better suited to his muse. His debut *Gordian Knot* trilogy is out now with Aethon Books. A Nuyorican originally from the Bronx, he now lives in Astoria, New York with his partner Anita and a cat named Jonesy.

Contact

Twitter: @jhernandez13
Instagram: jonathan.e.hernandez13
jehernandezauthor@gmail.com
Jonathanehernandez.com