

GARY GIBSON

Echogenesis

*First published by Brain in a Jar Books 2021*

*Copyright © 2021 by Gary Gibson*

*All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, scanning, or otherwise without written permission from the publisher. It is illegal to copy this book, post it to a website, or distribute it by any other means without permission.*

*This novel is entirely a work of fiction. The names, characters and incidents portrayed in it are the work of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or localities is entirely coincidental.*

*Gary Gibson asserts the moral right to be identified as the author of this work.*

*First edition*

*This book was professionally typeset on Reedsy.*

*Find out more at [reedsy.com](https://reedsy.com)*

“The universe is not for man alone, but is a theatre of evolution for all living beings. Live and let live is its guiding principle.”

- Virchand Rhagavji Gandhi



# Contents

1	THE LANDER	1
2	THE POOL	15
3	THE INTERFACE	24
4	THE STARS	36
5	THE STREAM	46
6	THE BAY DOOR	52
7	THE COMMAND DECK	60
8	THE TRUCK	69
9	THE LOVERS	76
10	THE VOTE	82
11	THE RIVER	91
12	THE CAMERA	98
13	THE HOWLING	110
14	THE HERD	117
15	THE SEARCH	128
16	THE FOREST	139
17	THE MANIFEST	146
18	THE SIEGE	157
19	THE AFTERMATH	167
20	THE BONES	174
21	THE CASING	181
22	THE BUILDING	192
23	THE BRIEFING	202
24	THE OLD MAN	210
25	THE CANOPY	219
26	THE ORBITER	228

27	THE MESA	236
28	THE CONFLAGRATION	247
29	THE INTERROGATION	254
30	THE DRAWBRIDGE	264
31	THE TSIOLKOVSKY	273
32	THE LAST EXPEDITION	279
	<i>About the Author</i>	284

# 1

## THE LANDER

Sam opened his eyes, then squeezed them shut again, overwhelmed by painfully bright light. He waited a few seconds then opened them more cautiously, peering upwards through slitted eyelids to see that the light came through a small, square window set barely an inch or two above his nose.

Waking felt like surfacing from a long, deep dive into an ocean, as if he'd slept a thousand years. He discerned somewhat groggily that the window was set into a flat expanse of burnished metal.

He tried to lift a hand and press it against the glass, only to feel it bump against the same metal ceiling into which the window was set. Twisting his head from side to side revealed walls made from that same, silver-grey metal pressing in close against his shoulders.

It was unpleasantly like being trapped inside a coffin. Or maybe, Sam thought with a lurch of terror, it *was* a coffin.

And that raised the question of how he'd wound up here when he'd been... Where *had* he been?

The last thing he remembered, he had been walking through a crowded street market in some Asian city composed of slab-like conurbs, their rooftops obscured by low clouds. The air had smelled of kimchi and spiced tofu, and he recalled how close and warm and humid the air had been, and how his shirt stuck to the small of his back in the sweltering late evening heat.

And now he was here, wherever the hell *here* was, without any clear sense of how he had got from one place to the other. And if not for the—sunlight?—streaming through that tiny window, he'd have had every reason to think he'd been buried alive.

The thought filled him with a kind of despair he'd never before experienced. Sam pushed his hands hard against the lid of the coffin—if coffin it was—in his desperation to escape.

The lid felt cool and hard and utterly unmovable.

*This can't be happening.*

It had to be a dream, if an unpleasantly vivid one. Who, after all, could possibly want to put him through such a terrifying ordeal? He had made enemies back in the refugee camps—it would have been hard not to. But to do this to him...? This was insane.

Then he tried to swallow, only to discover that something was jammed deep into his throat, forcing his jaws apart. He started to hyperventilate, but managed, with some considerable effort and a lot of twisting around, to worm one hand up between his chest and the lid of the coffin to his mouth. His fingertips brushed what felt like a corrugated tube extending from between his jaws before curling, so far as he could judge, around the back of his head.

He came very close, then, to losing himself entirely to panic. He gagged as if he were choking. Managing to hook two fingers around the tube, he violently twisted his head from side to side, working the tube free. Its rough texture scraped against his tongue and the roof of his mouth as he kept tugging at it.

At last, coughing and gasping and his heart pounding so furiously he feared it might burst from his ribcage, the tube slid all the way out and fell to one side. For a few moments, Sam lost himself to a coughing fit.

Was the air getting warmer, he wondered? How long did he have before it ran out? How—?

The fingers of his other hand found something that felt like a latch or switch set into one wall of the coffin. As soon as he touched it, the lid swung upwards along one side with a faint hiss of hydraulics.

Strange, alien smells rushed in on Sam, carried on a wave of humid heat.



He sat upright with a lurch, greedily sucking at air that tasted warm and sticky and blinking furiously in brilliant sunlight. Looking down, he saw that he was naked, a catheter clipped to his penis, while further investigation revealed a second catheter snaking out from between his buttocks.

He pulled both of them free, one after the other, swearing under his breath at the discomfort. Then he levered himself over the side of the coffin and onto the ground, stalks of grass pressing against his naked flesh.

His panic slowly subsided, replaced by short-lived elation. He was free... but where was he?

Licking lips that were dry and gummy, Sam looked up to see smoke trailing overhead. He swallowed, his throat still painfully raw from the breathing tube, and tasted gritty ash carried on a breeze.

Looking around revealed that he was in a wooded glade. Except the trees all around him were quite unlike any trees he'd seen before: they resembled trees insofar as they had upright trunks and branches that spread horizontally, but starting from a point a few meters above the ground their trunks bristled with sharp-looking spines. And the colours of the leaves were...wrong, somehow.

Nor, he now discovered, was the grass on which he sprawled any kind of grass he had seen before. In texture and appearance, it looked and felt more like woven matting.

The surprises didn't stop there. He stared, baffled, at his hands. They were pink and baby-soft, the hands of a teenager or a man in his early twenties—not a man approaching middle-age. His belly was flat and firm in a way it hadn't been since at least his mid-twenties. Newly youthful skin stretched over smooth musculature.

Then another memory came to him and with it a vague fragment of purpose: he had been looking for someone in that city of conurbs. But as to who, he had no idea. All he knew was that nothing mattered more than finding them... whoever they were.

An insect—or rather, some hallucinatory abstraction of an insect—buzzed past him on wide gossamer wings. Sam stared after it, watching as it darted between the weird-looking trees and out of sight.

Then he tried and failed to stand upright. He felt as weak as a newborn, as if his muscles were unused to the simplest of tasks. It took three consecutive attempts before he was finally able to stand upright, albeit somewhat unsteadily, and black dots edged his vision for several minutes after.

He became aware of the harsh whine of a drill and the clatter of what sounded like machinery from somewhere out of sight amidst the trees. Looking around, he saw more coffin-like boxes identical to his own scattered all across the glade. Including his own, Sam counted fifteen. All but one stood open and empty.

Hearing a metallic click, Sam glanced down in time to see a drawer slide out from one side of the coffin from which he had emerged. It contained what looked like clothing. Shaking it out, he found underwear, soft but durable-looking slip-on shoes, and a light brown jumpsuit.

After a moment's hesitation, he pulled the clothes on. His hands shook as he pulled up the zip on the front of the jumpsuit. It was enough to calm his nerves a little.

Turning in an unsteady circle, Sam tried to figure out from which direction the sound of machinery came. Then he glimpsed one corner of what might be a building past some bushes that appeared blackened by fire: their branches dripped with foam, while the column of black smoke he had earlier seen rose up above the trees from some point beyond them.

Sam made to move towards the building, hoping he might find someone there who could tell him where he was, and why. Then he hesitated, catching sight of a face through the window of the only coffin that remained sealed.

It occurred to him that *coffin* probably wasn't the right word for them: they looked more like emergency medical pods of the type used to evacuate critical patients from war zones, their exteriors partly hidden beneath a myriad of tubes and life-support mechanisms.

Peering through the unopened pod's window, Sam saw the face of a young Asian woman, a ribbed plastic tube extending from between her jaws. Her eyes were closed as if in sleep.

He tried banging on the lid. Her eyelids flickered, but she showed no signs of awakening. He tried feeling around the edges of the lid, hoping he might

find some way to open it from the outside, but without success.

In that instant, Sam became sure he was being watched. Looking over his shoulder, back in the direction of the half-burned bushes, he was startled to see a young man—a boy, really—wearing a jumpsuit identical to his own. The boy leaned out from behind a fire-blackened tree trunk and started when he saw Sam looking his way.

‘Hey!’ Sam yelled, raising a hand.

The boy turned without a word and darted back towards the building and out of sight.

Sam set off after him. He couldn’t manage much more than a weak, stumbling jog that set the blood roaring in his ears. Rounding the smouldering remains of a bush, he very nearly collided with a construction robot similar to the ones he’d once used to build refugee camps.

The machine stood almost two meters tall, with half a dozen flexible limbs that gave it the appearance of a mechanized octopus. Several of its limbs grasped a canister and hose, from which it sprayed chemical foam onto blackened trees.

Sam backed away, not wanting to get hit by the foam spray, and stumbled up against a tree.

He caught movement from out of the corner of one eye and turned to see a spider the size of his hand clinging to the trunk, just inches from his face. He stumbled away from the tree with a yell, then stopped to stare at the thing.

It wasn’t a spider, he saw now...but what it might be was a lot harder to say. It resembled a starfish more than anything else. Except, so far as Sam knew, starfish didn’t climb trees.

He turned, hearing voices from the direction of the building. The boy Sam had seen moments before reappeared, now accompanied by four others, none of them looking older than their late teens or early twenties. All wore the same style and colour of jumpsuit.

Was it possible, Sam wondered, that they were the ones responsible for locking him inside a medical pod?

In which case, he thought, maybe they were coming to put him back inside it.

He backed away, wondering if he had the strength to make a run for it. Perhaps if he could find his way to a road he could flag down a car. Or—

Turning to flee, he crashed straight into a young Asian woman coming the other way. She let out a scream, her eyes wide and terrified.

He saw then it was the girl from the last unopened pod. It seemed he had managed to wake her after all. She had been in the act of zipping up her jumpsuit when he had very nearly knocked her to the ground.

‘Please,’ she asked in heavily accented English, her voice trembling so hard she could hardly get the words out, ‘where am I?’

‘You’re the last two,’ said a voice from behind them.

Sam turned. The first boy—the same one he’d seen watching him—had come to a halt a few paces short of them. He was short, with pale, straw-coloured hair, and eyes that darted here and there as if never quite sure where to settle. His companions hung back a little, regarding both Sam and the girl with a mixture of curiosity and fear.

‘Who the hell are you?’ demanded Sam.

‘Joshua Fuchs,’ said the first boy. ‘And you?’

‘I...Sam Newman.’ He regarded Joshua with uncertainty. ‘What am I doing here, Joshua?’

‘Jesus,’ said one of the other boys, his tone reproachful. ‘Doesn’t anybody know a damned thing?’

Joshua shrugged. ‘Can’t tell you, Sam. We were all kind of hoping maybe you could tell us why we’re here.’

Sam looked at the girl by his side, then back at Joshua. ‘Why would you think I’d know?’

‘Because you’re the last to wake up,’ Joshua explained. ‘And none of the rest of us knows why any of us are here.’ He nodded to the girl. ‘What’s your name?’

‘Sun Ae Sok,’ the girl replied, her voice still trembling and her arms wrapped tight around her shoulders despite the heat. She didn’t look older than twenty or twenty-one.

‘How about you, Sun?’ Joshua asked. ‘Can you tell us where we are? And why?’

She shook her head. 'The last thing I remember, I was asleep on a long-haul flight to Vancouver.'

Joshua grimaced. 'Join the club. The last thing I remember until a couple of hours ago was sitting in my office in Geneva.'

Sam swallowed. 'So there were people in the other coff—I mean, the other pods? Who are they?'

Joshua shrugged. 'Sure. They're all sorts. And as far as any of us know we're supposed to be anywhere but here.' He cast a look around and shrugged. 'Wherever the hell this is.'

'How many people?' asked Sun.

'Fifteen altogether,' Joshua said to her, 'including you two, now you're awake.'

No, thought Sam. It had to be some kind of trick. He pushed a hand through hair that was thicker than it had any right to be. 'There has to be—'

'An explanation?' Joshua finished for him. 'I'm sure there is. But we haven't found it yet.'

'All right,' said Sam, 'in that case, do any of you have a phone? Online access? Or even some idea what part of the world we're in?'

'Nope,' said one of the others, stepping closer. 'No phones, and no damn idea.'

'What about that building back there?' asked Sam, nodding past them. 'What's in there?'

Joshua frowned. 'Building...?'

'I think he means the lander,' said one of the others.

'Right.' Joshua nodded. 'Easy mistake to make, I guess.' He turned back the way he'd come, signalling to Sam and Sun to follow. 'Come see.'

Sam hesitated at first, then followed Joshua past the blackened trees, Sun trailing behind. When he glanced back at her, he saw that her lips were compressed into a thin line, her gaze constantly darting around like she was utterly terrified.

Which, on reflection, she had every right to be.

They passed out of the trees and into a wide clearing in the forest. Sam saw, at last, that what he'd taken for the corner of a building was instead part of a

huge, fat-bellied aircraft with oddly stubby wings. It was easily forty meters in length, its wingspan casting long shadows over the not-quite-grass.

And judging by the black smoke billowing up from its rear, it had suffered a very bad landing. Foam had been liberally sprayed all over its fuselage as well as most of the nearest trees.

Then Sam looked again and realized it wasn't precisely an aircraft after all.

'What is it?' he asked. 'It looks like—'

'A spaceship,' said one of the two boys who had accompanied Joshua. 'Specifically, an orbit-to-ground lander, but not of a kind I've seen before. We think something went wrong when it tried to land, and it crashed against some boulders over on its far side.'

'The fire had mostly burnt itself out by the time I woke up in my own pod,' said Joshua. 'But it must have been pretty hairy when it first got going.'

Sam nodded, too numb at the sight to think of anything much to say. A couple more construction robots, identical to the first but armed with cutting torches, clambered around a part of the craft's upper hull, where a long gash had been torn.

Sam felt an insistent pressure building up somewhere behind his eyes and pressed one hand to the side of his head. Dizziness washed over him.

'Are you all right?' asked Sun, sounding concerned.

'I'm fine. I just...' He shook his head.

'Feeling okay?' asked Joshua.

'All this is just a little...overwhelming.'

Joshua nodded, his expression sympathetic. 'Trust me when I say I know exactly what you mean.'

Sam stumbled after him, and they made their way past the lander and over to the far side of the clearing. A number of other boys and a few girls sat or stood together on the not-grass. They all wore the same brown jumpsuits. He wondered if they were as young as they looked, or if like him they had woken up to find themselves staring at smooth-skinned hands and unexpectedly flat bellies...

One, a round-faced girl with blond hair and skin so pale it was almost translucent, sat red-eyed and sobbing, while others had the faraway blank

expressions of people dealing with varying levels of shock. A few sat together in a tight cluster separate from the rest, facing each other and talking quietly but animatedly.

All of them turned to look at Sam and Sun as they approached, and the conversation gave way to silence.

‘Hey!’ A broad-shouldered boy with light bronze skin and a panicked expression stood up quickly, his face full of desperate hope. ‘Do they know anything?’

‘Not a thing,’ Joshua replied with a wry shake of the head. The boy—if boy he was—sat back down with a defeated look on his face.

They came to a halt. ‘Who are you people?’ asked Sun, her voice quivering. ‘Did you bring us here?’

A thin-faced blond kid with deep-set eyes laughed sourly.

‘All I can tell you is my commanding officer’s gonna kill me when he finds out I’m AWOL,’ said another boy, tall and muscled with dark hair, squatting on the ground and pulling up the not-grass with his fingers.

‘So you’re military?’ Sam asked the boy. ‘US?’

The kid nodded. ‘I was driving back to base in Wichita and stopped at a motel for the night. Next thing I know I’m in one of those fucking boxes back there.’ He squinted at Sam. ‘You?’

‘Civilian,’ said Sam. ‘But I worked with the US Army from time to time, mostly in Korea after the war.’ Some of the tension in his chest loosened: it was good to talk about something real and familiar, like the words were anchors in a sea of unreality.

‘Korea?’ asked one of Wichita’s companions. ‘You fought in the war?’

Sam shook his head. ‘Civilian. Admin stuff, after the North surrendered.’

‘Admin stuff?’ the same kid asked. ‘What does that even mean?’

‘The UN put me in charge of North Pyongyang province following the surrender,’ Sam replied.

‘Seriously?’ said Joshua, looking back at him. ‘How did you wind up doing that?’

‘I used to work as an advisor in conflict resolution,’ Sam explained, once again relieved to talk about something real. ‘I helped set up refugee camps

in Malaysia and elsewhere, and that led to them giving me the job after the war ended. It was temporary, until the new government was in place.'

'I have a more important question,' said a gangly-limbed Asian boy who had stood at Sam's approach. 'What's the last thing you remember before you woke in your pod?' The boy nodded to Sun. 'I'd like to ask you the same question, Miss.'

'I was on a plane to Canada,' said Sun.

'I was in...'. At last, the memory floated up from the depths of Sam's memory. 'Taipei.'

'Taipei? As in Taiwan?' said the kid with deep-set eyes. 'That's where I was, too. Last I remember, anyway.'

Sam regarded him with curiosity. Maybe there was a connection there, something that might explain how the two of them had wound up in this place. 'What's your name?' he asked.

The kid's expression grew suddenly wary. 'Who wants to know?'

'Sam Newman.'

The kid shrugged in acknowledgement. 'Vic Traynor.'

*Vic Traynor.*

Like a sluice gate opening, the rest of Sam's memories came flooding back, including the fact he'd taken a sabbatical from work just when they needed him the most—and all so he could find a man with that very name.

But this couldn't possibly be the same Vic Traynor who'd been behind Jahaar's murder. This was some kid barely out of his teens, if even—

Sam looked down again at his smooth and unblemished hands.

'What's the matter with you?' Traynor scowled.

'Sorry,' said Sam, dropping his hands back to his sides. 'I'm...a little disoriented.'

Traynor eyeballed him, then turned to the girl on his left, muttering something Sam didn't catch.

'As are we all,' said the Asian boy.

Sam turned to him. 'Excuse me?'

'Disoriented,' he explained, extending one hand with a nervous smile. 'It's hardly surprising given our circumstances.'



Sam reached out tentatively and shook his hand. Probably he wasn't really a kid, after all, but how could he be sure?

'Kim Hanh Banh.' The Asian maybe-kid took his hand back and pressed it against his chest. 'I've been speaking to everyone as soon as they wake up. I'm hoping I can find some causative correlation to explain how we all came to be here.'

He talked, thought Sam, as if the fact of them being stranded in the middle of nowhere next to a burning wreck constituted little more than an intellectual puzzle to be solved. 'So you're looking for some connection between us all?'

Kim nodded. 'If one exists, I haven't found it yet.' He flashed another nervous smile, as if afraid Sam might somehow blame him for their predicament.

'And what about that thing?' Sam gestured towards the lander. With the robots crawling all over the gash in its hull like so many mechanized scavengers, it resembled the gutted corpse of some forest behemoth. 'Did we come here aboard that?'

'Presumably,' said Kim.

Sam looked at him. 'You mean you don't know?'

'We all woke up in those pods, same as you did. We know as much as you do.'

'What about inside the lander?' Sam asked in a rush of agitation. 'Maybe there's information on its flight deck we can use.'

'We haven't been able to get very far inside it,' said a girl sitting next to the kid who might, or might not, be the same Vic Traynor he'd been looking for. 'If there's a crew in there, they haven't shown their faces.'

'I still don't think there is a crew,' said someone else. 'A bird like that can probably fly on automatic.'

'There's a lowered ramp that leads inside a cargo bay,' Kim explained, 'but that's as far inside as anyone's been able to get. There's a door leading further in, but nobody's been able to find a way through it.'

'Yeah, but where are we?' someone else shouted. 'How about that for the biggest fucking question of the day?'

Kim ignored the question. 'Can you tell me the date?' he asked Sam.

Sam stared at him, puzzled. '28th of August. Why?'

'And the year?'

'Oh, come *on*—!'

'Please,' said Kim. 'Humour me.'

'2050. Happy?'

Kim nodded thoughtfully. 'Yes, thank you.'

Something about the question unnerved Sam. 'How about the rest of you?' he asked, looking around at them all. 'How long has it been since you woke up?'

'I was the first,' replied a tall, fragile-looking Indian man who sat cross-legged next to a rock. His accent was American, with a slight Californian lilt. 'I'd estimate that was half a day ago, judging by the sun's movement. The day as it's locally measured, of course.'

'What's your name?' asked Sam.

'Amit.'

*Half a day.* Had they really all been sitting around that long without doing anything? 'How about getting something organized,' Sam asked, 'so we can at least figure out some answers?'

'We're taking care of that,' said Traynor, indicating the half-dozen men and women clustered around him.

Sam regarded him with unease. 'Don't take this the wrong way,' he said, 'but nobody looks like they're doing a great deal of anything.'

'You only just woke up,' Traynor replied. 'You don't know what we've been doing.'

'Fine,' said Sam, 'then what about shelter, water and food? If we don't know where we are, those are going to be our main priorities, in that order. I used to run refugee camps, so believe me when I say I've got a pretty good idea how to—'

'I already told you not to worry about it,' said Traynor, cutting him off.

A skinny black kid, with a wary, unsettled expression and grey, piercing eyes, listened to all of this with an angry scowl. 'You know what,' he said, stepping closer to Traynor, 'I am sick and tired of hearing you say how you'll

take care of everything like someone put you in charge!’

‘I didn’t see you doing much,’ Traynor shot back.

‘I agree with Ethan,’ said the broad-shouldered boy. ‘You’ve been shooting your mouth off from the moment you climbed out of your damn pod, Vic, but I’m not seeing much happening.’

The black kid stepped closer to Traynor, his hands curling into fists at his sides. Sam quickly moved towards him and extended a hand. ‘Ethan, right?’

Ethan blinked, taken aback. ‘Uh...yeah.’

‘Good to meet you, Ethan.’

Ethan glared past Sam’s shoulder at Traynor, then shook his head, the fight clearly gone out of him. ‘Same,’ he replied, grasping Sam’s hand.

‘Look,’ Traynor grouched, ‘somebody has to figure out what the hell’s going on with the rest of you running around like headless chickens. And that’s what I’ve been doing.’

Sam turned to look back at him. ‘So what *have* you figured out?’

‘Me and Vic and a couple of others scouted out the terrain,’ said another girl with messy blonde hair sitting close by Traynor. Her accent sounded Midwestern, most likely Texas. ‘Did a circular sweep out to a couple of kilometres around the lander, but we didn’t see or find any signs of civilisation. We didn’t even see any contrails or nothing.’

Sam shook his head. ‘Look,’ he said, ‘I’ve got experience dealing with... well, not exactly things like this, but emergencies, yes. I can help figure some way out of this.’

Somebody laughed, low and derisive.

‘Shit,’ said the round-faced girl. ‘He doesn’t know. He thinks we’re just a bunch of kids.’

‘I know you’re not,’ Sam said quickly. He realised he’d been talking to them like they were kids when they might very well not be. ‘I mean, I assume you’re not kids any more than I am.’ He pushed a trembling hand through his hair. ‘It’s just that—’

‘It’s just that none of this makes sense, you mean,’ said Joshua.

Sam licked suddenly dry lips. ‘So just to be clear,’ he asked, ‘you’re all older than you look...?’

## ECHOGENESIS

Joshua nodded. 'Most of us. Did you get to wondering what you look like now?'

Sam reached up to touch his face again. Suddenly, he wasn't sure if he wanted to know the answer to Joshua's question. 'Yes.'

'C'mon,' said Joshua, nodding to both Sam and Sun and then gesturing towards the lander. 'You might as well find out and get it over with.'

## 2

### THE POOL

‘What’s the deal with you and that guy Traynor, exactly?’ Joshua asked Sam as they made their way back across the clearing.

Sam gave him a sideways look. ‘What are you talking about?’

Joshua laughed. ‘The way you looked at him when he told you his name. Like he’d grown a pair of fangs or something.’ Joshua studied him frankly, and Sam looked away. ‘You sure you’re not familiar with him?’

‘No,’ Sam lied.

‘It’s just that if you were,’ Joshua continued, ‘it would have been nice to know whether he’s always been such a presumptuous asshole. I figured maybe it was the shock of finding himself here along with the rest of us, but maybe he’s always been that way.’

‘Did I hear you say you used to work in the relief camps?’ Sun asked Sam. ‘The ones in South-East Asia?’

Sam nodded, grateful for the change of subject. ‘I was still running a camp in Indonesia until two years ago.’

She raised her eyebrows. ‘Really? I visited several such camps not so long ago.’

‘Yeah?’ Sam looked at her. ‘What took you there?’

‘I was part of a UN delegation,’ she explained. ‘I’m a senior epidemiologist with the Seoul CDPP, heading up a study of toxic shock syndrome.’

‘What’s that?’ asked Joshua.

‘The Indonesians depend heavily on fishing,’ said Sun. ‘The algal blooms off of their coast are poisoning all their fish, so when they eat the fish, they get poisoned too. It’s a serious problem.’

*Understatement of the century*, thought Sam. He was more than a little familiar with the toxic blooms: they’d turned half of South-East Asia into a disaster zone by the time he’d got involved, building camps to house those fleeing the disaster. Nothing gave you a fresh perspective on life, he had found, like taking delivery of tractors to dig mass graves large enough for all the bodies waiting to be buried.

‘If you don’t mind me asking,’ he asked Sun, ‘how old are you, really?’

She hesitated a moment, then said: ‘Forty-nine.’

Sam blinked and shook his head. ‘How about you?’ he asked Joshua.

‘Don’t even ask. Older than either of you, put it that way.’

Sam looked again at his hands. ‘Are we supposed to be grateful for this?’

‘Mostly,’ said Joshua, ‘I’m just scared.’

They passed under the shadow of one of the lander’s wings before coming to a halt next to a cluster of enormous boulders against which the lander’s rear fuselage had been crushed. The soil underfoot felt muddy, and Sam saw that a thin stream emerged from amongst the boulders before meandering off into the forest.

Joshua stepped towards a small pool adjacent to the stream and hunkered down next to it, a few flecks of fire-retardant foam floating on its still, flat surface. ‘Take a look,’ he said, gesturing at the water.

The strength seemed to have gone out of Sam’s legs, but he forced himself to walk up beside Joshua. A cramp seemed to be building in his stomach, like some great black insect was trapped under his skin, probing at the soft tissues of his organs.

He knelt by the pool and stared down at the reflection of a face he hadn’t seen in nearly two decades. But it was, at least, a face he recognised. He remained quite still for several seconds, then sat back, wondering if everything he had experienced from the moment of waking might be nothing more than some kind of psychotic break or mental breakdown. Perhaps he was tucked up in his room in the Taipei Hilton, suffering a stroke, his mind

granting him this last, brief fantasy before he slipped into a coma and, finally, death.

But even as he knelt on the not-grass, staring down at the wide-eyed boy looking back up at him, he felt the wind in his hair, and a slight ache from a stubbed toe, and knew that whatever was happening, it was real. Very, very real.

And yet...

'It's not possible,' he said, looking over at Joshua.

'How old are you, Sam?' asked Joshua. 'Or how old do you *remember* being?'

'Thirty-seven.' Sam stood and let Sun take his place. She held her hair out of the way as she peered down at her own reflection in the dank water.

Joshua chuckled. 'About half my age. Last I remember I had grey hair, I was twenty kilos too heavy, and I got tired walking down a flight of stairs. Now I feel like I could run rings around this whole damn forest and still have energy...hey, are you okay?'

Sam's heart beat wildly, his throat feeling as if it were stuffed with cotton balls, making it hard to breathe. He stepped past Sun, still kneeling over the pool, and sat on a grey boulder slick with moss.

'I'm not sure,' said Sam, clutching at his chest.

'Can you breathe?' asked Joshua with evident concern.

'A little. It's just...'

Past Joshua's shoulder, Sun looked over at them, her skin turned winter-pale.

'I can fetch Ethan,' said Joshua. 'He's a doctor, but in my opinion, you're having a panic attack. Try to take it easy for a minute.'

Sam nodded, and the pounding in his heart gradually abated. 'I could do with some water,' he said and looked over at the pool. 'Think that's drinkable?'

The other man shook his head. 'I wouldn't risk it. It's probably contaminated all to hell from that foam. How are you feeling now?'

'Better,' said Sam. 'I don't know what happened.'

'You're not the first to freak out, you know. Things are a lot calmer now

than they were a couple of hours ago.'

Sam glanced over at Sun, who had perched on the edge of another boulder, her hands locked tightly on top of her knees. He could see her arms were trembling.

Joshua followed his gaze and took a step towards Sun. 'You okay?' Joshua asked her.

'I...I think so.' She pushed the heel of one hand against an eye. 'I just... need a minute.'

Focus, thought Sam, listening to their exchange. He pushed himself back upright, filled with a sudden determination to take action, to take control of this...this situation, or whatever it was.

Everything would be better, he thought, if he could concentrate on *doing* something.

'So to be clear,' asked Sam, 'we don't have any drinkable water?'

Joshua looked back over at him and shook his head. 'Not that anyone's found yet, no.'

'What about following the stream back towards its source? That way we could find water that isn't contaminated.'

Joshua raised his eyebrows. 'Sounds like a good idea.'

'I'm surprised someone didn't already think of that,' said Sam. 'Especially if a few of them have already done some scouting.'

'Well,' said Joshua, 'maybe someone could have suggested it to them if the ones doing the scouting had bothered to tell anyone where they were going.'

Sam picked up on the note of irritation in Joshua's voice. 'Traynor and some of those others seem to be sticking pretty close together,' he said.

'I noticed that too,' said Sun, from where she sat nearby.

Joshua glanced towards the far end of the clearing and back. 'Those are the ones who all have military backgrounds. Traynor too, or at least that's the vibe I get from him.'

Sam recalled Ethan's outburst at Traynor. 'How many of them are there? Vic Traynor and the others with military backgrounds, I mean?'

'Seven, according to Kim,' Joshua replied. 'He's been finding out everyone's names and occupations and where they last remember being before



they woke up here.'

Sam made a mental note to talk to Kim as soon as he had the chance. 'And the rest?'

'All civilians,' said Joshua. 'Ethan's a doctor, and we've got two engineers, a geologist, a biologist, and a shrink—that's me. Plus you two.'

*Scientists, engineers, and soldiers.* Sam wondered if that was significant.

'One thing I've picked up,' said Joshua, stepping closer to Sam, 'is that most of them—the military types, I mean—are nearly as young as they look. I don't think any of them are older than their mid-twenties back in the real world, with the possible exception of Traynor. He acts like he's older.'

'About water,' said Sun, her face still pale with shock. 'Maybe there's some inside the ship?'

'Maybe,' said Joshua, 'except there's no way inside it.'

'Kim mentioned something about a bay being accessible,' said Sam.

Joshua nodded. 'Inside the bay, there's a door that won't open.' He nodded along the underside of the lander. 'You can take a look yourself if you like.'

Sam followed the direction of Joshua's gaze towards a lowered metal ramp that led inside the lander's lower fuselage. At that moment, one of the construction robots appeared at the top of the ramp, laden with what looked to him like sliced-up sections of the fire-damaged hull.

'So if there's a door in there that won't open,' asked Sam, nodding towards the robot, 'how did that machine get through it? Because I'm guessing all that junk it's carrying came from somewhere further inside the ship.'

Joshua stared after the robot as it slowly lumbered the rest of the way down the ramp. 'Well, shit,' he said under his breath.

'Maybe I will take a look inside,' said Sam. He looked at Sun, then back at Joshua. 'You coming?'

They both nodded, and Sam made his way towards the ramp, giving the construction robot a wide berth as he passed it by. Then he noticed something floating to one side of the machine and keeping pace with it: a softly glowing ball of ruby light about the same size as his thumb.

He reached out to touch it without thinking. He was startled when the ball of light suddenly expanded into a flat panel featuring the outline of a hand.

The robot meanwhile came to a sudden and jarring halt.

‘Sam?’ asked Joshua. ‘What is it?’

‘Can you see that?’ asked Sam, nodding at the panel.

Joshua shook his head. ‘See what?’

Sam reached out and laid his hand on the panel, which was clearly a virtual projection of some kind. The panel flared an angry red before shrinking back into a tiny sphere.

Sam blinked and drew his hand back. The machine heaved back into life and resumed lumbering away from him.

‘You didn’t see that?’ asked Sam, staring after the machine.

‘All I see is a mechanical octopus thing,’ said Sun.

‘No.’ Sam shook his head. ‘There was a...a projection, like an AR display, floating right next to it.’

‘What did it look like, exactly?’ asked Sun.

‘Like a security panel. The kind with handprint identification. I touched it, but nothing happened.’

‘You must be wearing live contacts,’ she suggested.

‘I haven’t used live contacts in years,’ said Sam. Even so, he reached up and tried to pinch out a contact lens he was pretty sure wasn’t there. It didn’t *feel* like there was anything there, at any rate.

‘All right,’ said Joshua, staring at him, ‘file it under weird and inexplicable, along with pretty much everything else I’ve seen and heard today, and we can worry about what it means some other time.’ He nodded up at the top of the ramp and the dim interior of the lander beyond. ‘Shall we?’

\* \* \*

The ramp terminated inside a cramped cargo hold about the size of a domestic garage and filled with empty metal shelving. A single, featureless door, surrounded on both sides by more shelving, was set into a bulkhead at the rear of the hold. The door had no handle or visible means of opening it, although Sam saw another virtual projection floating next to it, about level with his shoulder. It looked the same as the one he’d seen floating along

beside the robot.

‘I guess you don’t see that either?’ Sam asked.

They both shook their heads. Sam described what he could see.

‘Try seeing what happens when you touch it,’ suggested Joshua. He hung back near the top of the ramp, as if afraid to come any further inside.

The ruby ball expanded into another hand identification panel. Sam laid his fingers and palm against it and got the same result: it flashed once, then shrank back into its original state.

Sam shook his head. ‘The same thing happened.’

He tried pushing at the door, in case he’d triggered some hidden switch without knowing it. It didn’t move, even when he put his shoulder to it; it felt solid enough to withstand a battering ram. He pushed at it again anyway, feeling a growing sense of frustration. There could be a radio inside, or something else that could tell them why they were here.

‘Okay,’ said Joshua, sounding tired. ‘At least that’s something we didn’t know before.’

The robot they’d passed earlier reappeared at the top of the ramp behind Joshua, clanking noisily, having apparently divested itself of its cargo of junked metal. Joshua moved to one side, but instead of continuing the rest of the way inside the bay, the machine remained where it was.

‘What now?’ asked Sam, his frustration flowering into anger.

‘Maybe,’ said Joshua, speaking slowly as if thinking out loud, ‘it’s waiting for you to move away from that door.’

*Or maybe someone’s controlling it and laughing their socks off, watching us get all worked up,* thought Sam. But he did as Joshua suggested and stepped back.

The machine moved the rest of the way inside the bay, but stopped just short of the door.

‘Damn it,’ Sam shouted. ‘What the hell’s wrong with the thing?’

‘I give up,’ said Joshua, turning to make his way back outside. ‘Let someone else try and figure it out.’

Sam resisted the urge to kick the machine and followed Joshua and Sun back down the ramp. As soon as their feet touched the ground, they all heard

the machine whir back into life.

Sam raced back up the ramp in time to see the machine pass through the door. He briefly glimpsed a corridor on the other side in the instant before the door slid back into place from a hidden recess within the bulkhead.

He pressed his hands against the surface of the door. It would be so easy, he knew, to give into his anger. All his emotions felt wound up almost beyond control, rage shifting into despondency, then back again like the throw of a switch.

He pushed at the door, trying to get it to go back into its recess, but it didn't move. He leaned forward until his forehead rested against the cool metal, feeling a faint vibration that spoke of active systems. The ship was alive, however badly damaged it might be.

'I've been thinking,' he said carefully, 'about where we are.'

'And?' said Joshua from behind him.

'It's going to sound stupid.'

Joshua waited a moment before replying. 'The kind of thing you don't want to say out loud?'

Sam turned to see both of them standing at the top of the ramp. 'When I look at what's out there,' said Sam, 'I see trees that look like they were made by somebody who tried to invent a tree from scratch without ever having actually seen one. It's the same with that matted stuff that looks a little like grass, but isn't. I started to wonder if maybe...' The words stalled in his throat.

'That maybe,' said Joshua, 'we're a lot further away from home than you want to admit to yourself.'

'What are you suggesting?' Sun snapped, her face twisted up in an angry scowl. 'That this isn't Earth? Because if you are, you're both out of your minds.'

'I'm not saying that's what it is,' Sam said quickly. 'There's got to be some explanation for all this that makes more sense, but then we have these... these bodies, and there's this lander, and...'

'Here's an idea,' suggested Joshua. 'Maybe we're in some private reserve for genetic experiments. Some place they kept out of the news, some place

## THE POOL

nobody knows about.'

'Is that what you think this is?' asked Sun.

'It's a lot better than finding out we're lost on some alien world, doesn't it?'

'Or perhaps we're all dead,' said Sun, her voice low and flat. 'Perhaps I died mid-flight in my sleep, and I woke up here with the rest of you in Hell.' She looked between them. 'Or didn't you think of that?'