

**Convergence**  
*By Alexander Saxton*

I craned my neck, as if there would be anything to see beyond the endless, tossing grey: some shimmering rainbow, some sunburst from a younger world.

But there was only the cold Pacific, stretching away to some aleutian point of inaccessibility.

"I wonder what caused it," I said.

Tang looked up at me, with a mean sort of smile. He said,

"You mean, was there nuclear testing there, something like that?"

I didn't say anything. The idea had presented itself to me as one with a certain logic behind it.

"No," he said. "No nuclear test, no downed satellite, no cursed shipwreck, nothing."

"So why is it there?"

He shook his head and looked over the ocean. It was hard to hear him over the wind, but I don't think he cared much if I heard him.

"You're overlooking the most obvious explanation," he said.

"What's that?"

"That it just is. That it's there for no reason, because the universe is chaos, and sometimes that randomness just spits things up."

And at that exact moment, as if to illustrate his point, the Research Vessel *Njord* hit a pocket in the ocean and plunged unexpectedly. Spray arced overhead, and my stomach dropped.

"I can't believe that," I said. "I'm a scientist. I believe in a universe that makes sense."

"Then turn to religion," he said. "Science doesn't order the universe. It maps a small part of the chaos, for a short time. It doesn't calm the seas. It just lets you string together a raft."

By then, the rest of the team was on deck, their arms wrapped around themselves against the cold. Grey skies darkened to black, and something wavered over the surface of the water. It wasn't the 'coruscating luminosity' or 'eldritch radiance' that the sci fi pulps had prepared me for.

It was disappointing: a visual distortion, like a crack in the glass, a bit of scarring on the surface of the eye.

“That’s it?” I said.

“That’s it,” said Tang.

“And we just sail through?”

His fingers whitened on the cold railing.

“We just sail through.”

And so, without ceremony, we did. No flash, no psychedelic effects, it was just like walking through a door. On one side, we left behind the world’s largest ocean; on the other, we entered a body of water nearly twice the size.

The world went silent; the white noise of waves and wind vanished. It was like having a pair of hands clapped over your ears. I nearly lost my balance as the heaving deck suddenly stilled beneath my feet, and the RV *Njord* settled onto a thick, flat sea.

I blinked in the sudden sunlight, though there was a haze in the cloudless sky that somewhat dulled the sun. The air tasted bad, like downtown on a summer day. It was incredibly hot, though my climate suit began to compensate almost immediately, oozing delectable coolant through vesicles next to my skin.

“Well,” said Tang. “We’re here.”

Halfhearted applause broke out from the rest of the team. By an unbelievable order of magnitude, we had just travelled further in time than any human being ever, yet the entire feeling was one of anticlimax. Nearly a quarter billion years, just to slide into a stagnant ocean.

“Temperature: 43 celsius, hot, but not too-too fatal,” Tang said. “Air quality: bad, which is surprisingly good. Shanghai in the summer, not office during a Carbon Monoxide leak.”

“Do we need the oxygen tanks?” said Professor Adebayo.

“Only if you start getting a headache,” said Tang. “It looks like the rift spat us out late enough for oxygen levels to be back on the upswing. Probably forests up at the poles. Here, I’m launching the drone.”

With a bright hum, the ship's drone leaped from its dock on the vessel's roof, and into the air. A fraction of a second, and it had dwindled to a blue dot in the hazy sky. Tang clicked his tongue, watching its progress on the tablet.

I knew we had a few moments before it reached cruising altitude, so I leaned over the railing, gazing down into the sea.

The water looked thick. I'd never seen such a still ocean surface before. Sailing the Pacific, when you looked down, you imagined sharks and other monsters in the deep. Here, on Panthalassa, the world sea, the currents had oozed into stagnancy, creating doldrums and horse latitudes that spread for thousands of miles. Staring down into that water, warm as broth, I knew it was dead, anoxic, acidic, all the way down.

"We can't put Hermann into this," I said.

"Why," said Tang. "It's not like some sea serpent's gonna come up and grab him."

"It's probably poisonous."

"Sure, if he was a fish, he'd suffocate," said Tang. "But he breathes air; he'll be fine. Ah. Finally."

His tablet had chimed. The drone had reached upper atmosphere, and was transmitting.

"Looks like it won't matter, anyway. We're closer to land than I thought. I was afraid we were out in the middle, weeks of sailing from the continent. But look."

His finger traced a brownish coast on the screen. With a tap of the digit, a filter changed, and an area by the shore turned light blue.

"There," he said. "Oxygenated currents along the continental shelf. We're just on the edge of this dead zone. A few hours, and we'll have something nicer for your little friend to swim in."

If we'd been in a proper sailing ship, we'd have been stuck. It might have taken decades for a wind to come along that was strong enough to drift our mummified bodies out of there. As it was, the deck rumbled as *Njord's* engines fired up, and the thick water began to peel apart on either side of the hull. A silence which had stretched from horizon to horizon was broken; the engine was intrusively loud.

With nothing to look at but sludgy sea and sludgy sky, we spent the next few hours belowdecks. I woke Hermann from his tank of hibernation gel, and the others played cards. The first wave came as a surprise when it rocked the ship, and with a shared, brightening glance, we boiled up the ladder and on deck. A handful of thin, distant clouds wisped over the distant horizon. I was

surprised how relieved I was to see them. I hadn't realized how unnerving I'd found that empty, doldrum sky.

"Look," said Professor Adebayo. "We're over the shelf."

In thin waters below us, a dead coral reef spread through the shallows, petrified and white.

"How's the water quality here?" I asked.

"Bad enough to kill the corals," said Tang, consulting a readout. "But it is back in our time, too. Everything acceptable. Let's get Hermann in the water."

Two hours later, the dolphin was surfing our bow-wave, having collected good underwater footage of the reef, and collected samples using the basic apparatus he'd been trained to use. We'd seen no sign of any large predators, only some unknown fish and squid.

"I could have gone for some Calamari," I said.

"Don't be so sure," said Professor Adebayo, who'd sent a zap through Hermann's headset, when he tried to eat one. "They may be toxic from the environment. Also, there's this."

She paused some footage on her tablet, and then zoomed in on the frame. Squid writhed against a sapphire background. Instead of suckers, all their tentacles seemed to end in black, vicious little hooks.

"Tasty," I said.

But that thought trailed off as someone shouted from the bow lookout.

"Look!"

It was Jensen, our former marine, his arm was flung out over the waves, pointing in the direction of shore. Following his gesture, I saw something flash on the distant crest of a roller, and then plunge back underwater. It was followed by a second animal, and a third.

For an impossible moment, my brain told me I was looking at a pod of dolphins.

But there would be no dolphins for well over 200 million years. Hermann was the only mammal who would live in this or any ocean for almost another ten million of his lifetimes.

"Ichthyosaurs!" said Professor Adebayo.

And they were; flashing toward us over the waves, hurtled a small pod of them: dolphin-sized, dolphin-shaped, coloured like dolphins, dolphin-toothed, viviparous like dolphins, but reptiles, and separated from dolphins by ages of the earth.

It's a phenomenon called 'convergent evolution'. It's like how a turkey vulture isn't actually a vulture, it's just some bird that started eating carcasses and ended up looking like one. Or how the skull of a wolf is identical to that of a tasmanian tiger, even though it's more closely related to a camel, blue whale, or a human. Evolution finds certain forms in certain circumstances, again, and again, and again.

Hermann made a chatter of echolocation, and then bounded away from the ship, heading toward what he must have thought were strangers of his own kind.

But that wasn't what he found.

I saw the moment of realization hit. I had been working with Hermann since grad school, and had come to recognize his moods. One moment, he was leaping over the waves, crackling with sounds that I recognized as social: the next, he was silent, had whirled a hundred eighty degrees midair, and was hurtling underwater back towards the bulk of the ship. He dove underneath and surfaced on the far side, chattering, and as I looked down, I saw his eyes were rolling with panic and fear.

I rushed back to the other side, where the Ichthyosaurs now coasted parallel to the ship. They had made no aggressive move, but there was something uncanny about them; unsettling. After a moment, I realized it was what they *weren't* doing that upset me. I was used to creatures like this trying to surf the waves created by a ship. But these animals, with their huge, flat, disk-shaped eyes, just cruised alongside.

I realized why. Though their long, thin snouts were like those of a dolphin, they never bulged into a dolphin's domed head. Their skulls remained needle-like all the way back to the neck. No sonar organ; they didn't talk to each other. No large brains. I realized that these animals were stupid; their black, lacquered eyes had none of Hermann's depth, character and emotion. For all their shape, I realized that these swimming things were reptiles. They weren't like Hermann. They had more in common with a snake.

Not a "pod" of ichthyosaurs, then. Pods were for mammals. The proper collective noun was, 'A Nest'.

A loud 'thunk' drew our attention back to the other side of the boat. I didn't realize what had caused the sound until I saw the pink thread of blood streaming from Hermann's head. *Thunk*; he bashed his skull into the side of the boat again, throwing all his three hundred kilos into the impact.

“Hermann, no!” I shouted. “Get him out of the water!”

But then came the third crash, louder than the other two, and I heard, or felt through the ship’s hull, the soft bones of the dolphin’s neck break. Hermann went limp in the water, and drifted away behind the ship as I screamed for Tang to bring us about. The wake sent his body spinning like a pool toy, and by the time we came around, the Ichthyosaurs were already trying to scavenge him, and a small bite trailed blood from his fin.

It took most of the morning to get him out of the water, and wrestled into the walk-in cooler. I was beside myself.

“Why did he do it?” I kept asking anybody who would listen. “Why did he do it?”

Tang said he wasn’t a dolphin psychologist.

But I think he knew why the dolphin had done it. I certainly do. Now.

Without Hermann, we decided to land and spend the rest of the mission gathering terrestrial specimens. After tagging one of the Ichthyosaurs for a DNA sample, we headed into a sheltered cove, and brought down the drone to scan our immediate surroundings.

“No large predators nearby,” said Tang, as we climbed ashore from the zodiac. “A couple of small life-forms in burrows, and a few medium sized creatures moving quickly at the edge of the range.”

“The burrowing creatures are probably early mammals, or mammal-like reptiles,” said Professor Adebayo. “The fast movers could be *Coelophysis*, or other early dinosaurs.”

I wasn’t paying attention to any of this conversation. Something had caught my eye. Something impossible.

“Raptors?” said Tang.

“Tens of millions of years in the future,” said Adebayo. “These animals are probably the size of a small cassowary.”

“What’s a cassowary,” said Tang.

“It’s like a tiny ostrich, or giant kiwi,” said Jensen.

“I hate birds,” said Tang. “Everybody stay close. The drone will give us plenty of warning if something big heads our way, but no unnecessary risks, alright?”

But by this point, nobody was paying attention to him. They had all seen what I was starting at, and a deep, sick silence had descended.

There was something half-buried in the sand; something that shouldn't have been there.

A human skull.

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"It's not old," said Professor Adebayo, flipping it over in the sand with the butt of a mechanical pencil. "The teeth have been knocked out, and scavengers have stripped the soft tissues, but I'd say this hasn't been here more than six months."

"This shouldn't be possible," I said. "We were the first people to come through."

"That we know of," said Tang. "But that's speculation. The rift could have opened before. This could be the skull of some Aleut fisherman from the 1400s who got coughed up last week. Most likely, though, it's the skull of someone who's going to come through after us."

"What?" I said.

Tang gave me that mean smile again.

"The rift exit shifts around in time. The next group might show up ten million years from now, or last month. God plays dice with the universe."

He thought for a moment, and then corrected himself.

"Actually, no. What I should have said was, 'Dice play God with the universe'."

"If somebody came after us, they would probably make landfall at the same place," said Professor Adebayo. "But why would they leave someone behind?"

"Something must have gone wrong," I said.

"Maybe *they* found a mysterious skull, and tried to figure out what happened," said Tang.

Even though it was a cynical joke, even though the heat of the Triassic day was unbearable, the thought sent a shiver up my spine.

"Don't say that," I said.

“Look,” said Tang. “This is a preliminary mission. Let’s stun one of these bird things, bring it back to the present for vivisection, and leave, whatever *this* is, well enough alone.”

“What if there are survivors,” said Professor Adebayo, quietly.

Tang rolled his eyes.

“Survivors of *what*? We don’t know there was any kind of accident. And if this skull is from six months ago, nobody could have survived in this desert that long. So why waste time with questions like that, Professor?”

“Because,” she said. “Of that.”

There were impressions in the sand over by where she crouched. Though the footing was soft, the outline vague, the general shape was undeniable. A human footprint.

“Shit,” said Tang. “*Shit*.”

The footprints led up the bank, and out across the desert.

“Is there anywhere out there where someone could conceivably set up camp?” said Professor Adebayo.

I could tell Tang wanted to say ‘no’, but even so, he sent the drone whizzing across the erg.

“A rock formation couple clicks away,” he said. “It’s riddled with crevasses, maybe caves. Hm. Evidence of seasonal flooding, which means someone might be able to dig water from the base of the stones, even in the dry season.”

“We have to go check,” said Doctor Adebayo.

Tang shook his head.

“That’s a bad idea. If I were looking for a large predator, that’s where I’d find it.”

There was a click. Jensen was checking his sidearm.

“Are we a research team,” said Tang. “Or are we Turok: Dinosaur Hunter?”

“Pseudosuchian,” said Professor Adebayo. “Most large predators in this era are more closely related to crocodiles than dinosaurs.”

“What a comfort.”



“Tang,” I said. “If there’s someone here, we’re their only hope they’ve got. We have to help.”

“No we don’t,” said Tang. “Just because somebody happens to be the same species as you, doesn’t mean you owe them shit.”

We all fell silent at that, and looked at him.

“I think,” said Professor Adebayo, a chill in her normally warm voice. “That everybody here disagrees with you.”

“Fine,” said Tang. “We’ll go. But we’re turning back at the first sign of trouble. This mission came with a limited mandate. Nobody was supposed to enter any risky situations.”

We set out across the desert. Without our climate suits, I don’t think anybody could have made it. Atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> focused the sun like a magnifying glass above an anthill. The heat was unbearable, oppressive, somehow dry and thick at the same time. I developed a headache; repeated pulls from the oxygen tank did nothing to disperse it.

The day had relaxed into late afternoon, and the sun was dipping by the time we arrived at the rock formation. A polluted sky made vibrant, violent colours out of the sunset. Above, ahead, and behind, Tang had the drone zipping tirelessly, searching for any sign of threat.

But there was nothing. It was a dead and quiet age of this world.

“Hello?” shouted the Professor. Her voice echoed, flat against the red, rising rocks. Nothing. “Can anybody hear me?”

“Nothing,” said Tang. “Let’s go back.”

“No,” said the Professor. “Look.”

More footprints at the base of the stones, making their way up into a labyrinth of wind-carved rock.

I heard a crackle beside me, and half-turned to see Jensen had drawn his shock baton.

“If we’re going in,” he said. “We should take precautions.”

We followed suit. Calling out, we entered the rock formation, with the deterrents in our hands, and the drone buzzing overhead.

It must still have been north of forty degrees in there, but it felt cool by comparison with the sun-baked plain outside. Thin insects flitted through the shadows of the rocks, unnamed species that took the rough shapes of those that would evolve again in later eons. A slow wind moaned through the stones, and as the sun dipped, flooding the chasms with red light, I felt the hairs rise on the back of my neck.

Something rustled from the darkness of a nearby chasm.

And then, for what the drone recording later told me was five and a half seconds, the order of the world was torn open, and chaos rushed in from without.

The first thing I knew was that I was knocked off my feet; my head hit the rock, and consciousness stuttered. Then I was on my back, slumped against the stones, and the sound of screaming was barely audible over the pounding in my head. I was covered in something hot and sticky, and Professor Adebayo was looking up at me, though at the strangest angle, because her head had been sliced almost entirely from the strap of skin still connecting it with her shoulders. I stopped being able to breathe. There were more screams, and a loud hissing noise, a series of cracks and pops, and a loud flat crunch. Then a gun went off five times in quick succession.

Silence fell, except for some low moans that might have come from me. I dropped Professor Adebayo's head, and staggered to my feet, darkness still hugging the edges of my vision. A huge animal lay dead across the ragdoll bodies of my team. Something like an alligator, but with the posture of a bear, and the huge, fanged skull of a tyrannosaur. Maybe seven hundred pounds of muscle, bone and armour, with three inch canines, and a mouth that opened wide enough to have crushed Jensens' ribcage like a hand crushing a cigarette box.

Later analysis of the footage would reveal the thing to be a type of animal called *Rauisuchus*, as if it mattered what its name was.

Tang was still alive, though one of his arms was mangled and bleeding freely. He held the gun in his other hand; and it was still pointed at the monster's obliterated brainpan.

"I told you," he said, his voice trembling. "I told all of you we should have just gone back."

It seemed like he was building up hysterical steam, but a noise behind him distracted us both. Tang whirled, panning back and forth with the gun as he backed toward me. The sound filled our terrified silence, and I think we recognized what it was at the same time.

Footsteps in the gravel of the chasm floor.

Human footsteps.

With a light tread, somebody leaped up onto a boulder, to be silhouetted perfectly against the glowing red Triassic sky. I My body flooded with relief.

“Thank God,” I started to say. “Thank God you’re-”

And then the person skipped down from the stone. No longer framed against the sky, the sunset now revealed their features in a bloody glow. My relief curdled into something else; into a horror and revulsion I have never experienced before or since.

Because the thing that faced us was *not* a person.

It had the shape of one; the arms and legs, the domed skull, the brownish-tan skin. But it had no thumbs: only five, stubby, clawed fingers, and it had no nose: only a pair of vertical slits between its wide, staring black eyes. Its face was bare, but a pelage of thin, dark feathers matted the back of its head like hair.

Convergent evolution. A thing like us, but not like us. A reptile twin. So this was what Hermann had felt. It was sickening.

I fell silent. For a moment, the inhuman stared at us, betraying no curiosity, emotion, or intelligence. I raised my hand. It did not mimic the gesture. I let my hand drift back toward my side.

It flicked out a black and pointed tongue, tasting the air.

Its attention drawn by the smell, and clearly having decided Tang and I were no threat, it turned to squat beside Jensen’s broken body.

Lips parted, revealing chillingly human teeth, though slightly curved and sharp. Without a second thought, it buried its face into our dead friend’s mangled belly, and began to chew and slurp.

Tang started to laugh quietly.

“Look at that,” he said. “Just like us. Distance runners. Scavengers bred to run from carcass to carcass over the desert.”

He laughed again.

“Do you think they’re made in God’s image, like we’re supposed to be?”

He raised the gun again, aiming it at the inhuman’s head. I wanted to say something, to stop him, but everything still seemed so far away, so unreal, and I could not find the words.

After a moment, he lowered the pistol with a rattling sigh.

“God, what would be the fucking point.”

The sound of Tang’s sigh caused the inhuman to jerk its head out of Jensen’s body and look around. But seeing no danger, it thrust itself back in, gorging indiscriminately on the *Rauisuchis*, then Jensen, then Adebayo, until its stomach distended, and its black, hairy feathers became webbed with congealing blood.

“Come on,” said Tang. He turned, and began to walk toward the ship.

I followed him. I don’t know what else I could have done.

The inhuman spared me a glance as I left the crevasse. I didn’t say farewell. Neither did it.

When we arrived at the shore, that skull still lay where we had found it. Almost human, though it came from an animal more closely related to a salamander, or crow, or snake. The tide had ebbed, and we were able to walk all the way out to our beached ship

The Triassic moon loomed larger than in our time, and fresh, dark craters gave it the look of some inhuman skull.

With dawn and the resurgent tide, Tang set the autopilot, and a few silent hours returned us through the rift. I can’t tell you what a relief it was to feel waves, wind and cold, and to hear the cry of gulls.

And that’s where my story ends. Tang works in the private sector now, running logistics for resource trusts, mercenary firms, and the Religious Right. I’ve run into him since, and though we went through the unthinkable together, we have nothing to talk about: no common ground. It’s like speaking to a thing that looks human, but isn’t. A reptile twin.

For my part, that skull I brought back has made me somewhat famous, by Palaeontology standards. I got the naming rights. *Androsuchus Hermannii*. As if it matters what its name is.

There’s something about the coincidence scratches at my mind. Two eras of greenhouse-driven climate change: two occurrences of the humanoid shape. But you can’t read too much into these things. There have been other climate crises, and *Androsuchus* certainly never burned fossil fuels.

No, Tang would say I’m overlooking the obvious answer, which is that there is no meaning to any of it, that it just happened, because the universe is chaos, and chaos spits things up.

But I can't bring myself to believe it. I have to believe science still means something, and that if I just think hard enough, study long enough, some insight, some meaningful truth will present itself to me.

Maybe it's a doomed project, but it's mine. It's a little raft of order to cling to, strung together on the endless, dying ocean.