

Survival

A life-changing experience.

Graeme Wistow

He survived the crash.

It was almost a miracle. After the engines blew, the escape pod had missed safe orbit and took a barely controlled plunge into the atmosphere. Down to Lem.

It had come to rest wedged in a hillside at the end of the long scar it had carved in the landscape, a scar that was already healing. The pod itself was in bad shape. Air tanks were ruptured, coms were out, power draining away. He could tell something was broken in his leg and he could feel sticky wetness inside his suit. It was already hard to breathe. Rescue would be on the way, but it wouldn't get there in time. There was an oxygen atmosphere out there, but it might as well have been chlorine. He knew he mustn't emerge, but if he didn't he was going to die very soon, suffocating in the metal coffin.

The planet Lem contained, or perhaps was contained by, the only biosphere discovered outside the Solar System. This was Gaia to the *n*th degree: a mass of reproducing, recombining single-celled organisms like living nanobots, infinitely adaptable polyps that assembled and exchanged in complex forms, filling the air, the sea, even the planetary crust. Sealed unmanned landing probes from the orbiting starship had been infiltrated and absorbed in hours. Snatched samples had been studied in orbit but rapidly died like severed body parts cut off from the bloodstream.

A manned landing was out of the question, but now it had happened anyway.

He knew they wouldn't abandon him. A rescue ship could attempt to hover, grab the pod and haul it back to space. It was probably already on the way, but it would take time. He was choking and bleeding now. Just a few lungfuls of air and maybe he would survive long enough to be rescued.

He opened the hatch.

The scenery blazed with colour and movement. The horizon heaved slowly and the hills in which he had landed rippled gently like waves in a viscous ocean. Rainbow clouds drifted over forests of purple and red trees with writhing sea-anemone arms. Something like a huge dragonfly

hummingbird zipped past, stopped and splintered into a swarm of bright iridescent motes that swirled away over a bank of 'flowers' darting in and out of their rippling patterns.

The air in his lungs was metallically bad, stale, hot and bubbled ominously with each, increasingly painful, breath. He cracked the seal and removed his helmet. He had to breathe; he had to take the gamble, to stay alive until help came, he had to survive.

distance, still watching. It didn't seem dangerous.

He winced as he opened his suit to check the damage. Amazingly, the gash in his side was healing before his eyes, just like the scar in the landscape. He should have been alarmed at this decidedly mixed blessing, but he felt fine, better than fine in fact, and he was still alive. He was going to survive.

All at once he realized that the sounds of the biosphere were actually songs, ranging in scale from humpback whale to nightingale and beyond. They called and answered. The forests sang to the moving hills that responded with variations on the same theme in their own timbre. Even the clouds murmured to the flowers. It was beautiful, natural.

A sonic boom cracked across the sky, a harsh dissonance clashing with the music of Lem.

A blunt cone descended towards him on a tail of fire. He knew it was rescue, but something felt terribly wrong. The cone nearly touched down, an amazingly risky manoeuvre, as his colleagues tried to reach him. The fire of the landing jets burned away the encroaching biosphere. Revulsion washed through him at the sight. He rotated away from the pod and the fire and noise of the spacecraft.

A hatch opened and a hideous, stiff but oddly familiar figure emerged waving frantically and directing waldos that reached out towards the already dissolving escape pod.

A speaker boomed urgently. "Blurg!" said the man.

Frightened, he flinched away on bright new limbs. The decapod came closer and extruded a helping pseudopod.

"Come," it said, a word orchestrated with fugues and arpeggios of information and reassurance. As the wrecked pod disintegrated and was absorbed into the ground, the ugly cone and its jarring inhabitants gave up and roared away, briefly marring the sky. As the echoes faded, the two Lemoids smiled in relief and cart-wheeled away together across the rippling meadows and blended with the forest. ■

Graeme Wistow is a scientist who adapts to survive in the Washington suburbs.



Even though he was desperate for fresh air, he tried not to gasp and gulp in the forbidden, dangerous atmosphere. He took one cautious, shallow breath: the air was sweet and he started to feel better at once. Now that his ears were open to the new world, he was immersed in an incredibly complex, almost musical, hubbub that matched the riot of colours about him.

He started in surprise as, quite suddenly, a decapod Lemoid appeared nearby and pirouetted on one leg like a cartoon starfish. Had it crept up on him unnoticed or had it materialized from the living masses around the wrecked escape pod? A disconcertingly human-looking blue eye in the centre of the body blinked and regarded him deliberately.

"Blurg," said the Lemoid. It waited a few heartbeats and then skipped away a short