

ME-TOPIA, by Adam Roberts

"He thinks the moon is a small hole at the top of the sky"—Elizabeth Bishop

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The first day and the first night.

They had come down in the high ground, an immense plateau many thousands of miles square. "The highlands," said Murphy. "I claim the highlands. I'll call them Murphyland." Over an hour or so he changed his mind several times: Murphtopia, Murphia. "No," he said, glee bubbling out in a little dance, a shimmy of the feet, a flourish of the hands. "Just Murphy, Murphy. Think of it! *Where do you come from? I come from Murphy. I'm a Murphyite. I was born in Murphy.*" And the sky paled, and then the sun appeared over the mountain tops and everything was covered with a tide of light. The dew was so thick it looked like the aftermath of a heavy rainstorm.

Sinclair, wading out from the shuttle's wreckage through waist-high grass, drew a dark trail after him marking his path, like the photographic negative of a comet.

"I don't understand what you're so happy about," said Edwards. It was as if he could not *see* the new land, this world that had popped out of nowhere. As if all he could see was the damage to the ship. But that was how Edwards's mind worked. He had a practical mind.

"And are you sad for your ship," sang Murphy, with deliberately overplayed oirishry, "all buckled and collapsed as it is?" Of course Murphy was a *homo neanderthalis*. The real deal. All four of these crewmen were. Of course you know what that means.

"You should be sad too, Murphy," said Edwards, speaking in a level voice. "It's your ship too. I don't see how we are to get home without it."

"But *this* is my home," declared Murphy. And then sang his own name, or perhaps the name of his newly made land, over and over: 'Murphy! Murphy! Murphy!'

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The sun moved through the sky. The swift light went everywhere. It spilled over everything and washed back. The expanse of grassland shimmered in the breeze like cellophane.

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Edwards climbed to the top of the buckled craft. The plasmetal was oily with dew, and his feet slipped several times. At the top he stood as upright as he dared, and surveyed the world. Mountains away to the west, grass steppes in every direction, north south and east, flowing downhill eastward towards smudges of massive forestation and the metallic inlaid sparkle of rivers, lakes, seas. That was some view, eastward.

The sun was rising from the west, which was an unusual feature. What strange world rotated like that? There were no earth-sized planets in the solar system that rotated like that.

Did that mean they were no longer in the solar system? That was impossible. There was no means by which they could have travelled so far. Physics repudiated the very notion.

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The air tasted fresh in his mouth, in his throat. Grass-scent. Rainwater and ozone.

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And for long minutes there was no sound except the hushing of the grasses in the wind, and the distant

febrile twitter of birds high in the sky. The sky gleamed, as full of the wonder of light as a glass brimful of bright water. Vins called up, "There are insects, I've got insects here, though they seem to be torpid." He paused, and repeated the word, torpid." When the dew evaporates a little they'll surely come to life."

Edwards grunted in reply, but his eye was on the sky. Spherical clouds, perfect as eggs, drifted in the zenith. Six of them. Seven. Eight. Edwards counted, turning his head. Ten.

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Twelve.

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And the air, moist with dew and fragrant with possibility, slid past him. And light all about. Silence, stained only by the swishing of the breeze.

Murphy was dancing below, kicking his feet through the wet grass. "Maybe *Murphy* isn't such a good idea, by itself," he called, to nobody in particular. "As a name, by itself. How about the Murphy Territories? How about the *Land* of Murphy?" And then, after half a minute when neither Edwards nor Vins replied, he added: "Don't be sore, Vins. You can name some other place."

Vins, went into the body of the shuttle to fetch out some killing jars for the insects.

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Sinclair was away for hours. The sun rose, and the dew steamed away in wreathy barricades of mist. The grass dried out, and paled, and then bristled with dryness. It was a yellow, tawny sort of grass. By mid-day the sky was hot as a hot-plate, and Murphy had stripped off his chemise.

Sinclair returned, sweating. "It goes on and on," he says. "Exactly the same. Steppe, and more steppe."

The sun dropped over the eastern horizon. It quickly became cold.

The night sky was cloudless; stars like lit dewdrops on black. Breath petalled out of their mouths in transient, ghostly puffs. Edwards slept in the shuttle. Sinclair and Vins chatted, their voices subdued underneath the enormity of night sky. Murphy had a nicotine inhaler, and lay on the cooling roof of the crashed shuttle looking up at the stars puffing intermittently. Later they all joined Edwards in the shuttle and slept. Over their thoughtless, slumbering heads the stars glistened and prickled in the black clarity. Hours passed. The the sky cataracted to white with the coming dawn. Ivory-coloured clouds bubbled into the sky from behind the peaks of the highlands and swept down upon them. Before dawn rain started falling. Edwards woke at the drumroll sound of rain against the body of the crashed ship, sat up disoriented for a moment, then lay down again and went back to sleep.

"We're dead, we've died, we're dead," said Murphy, perhaps speaking in his sleep.

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The second day and the second night.

At breakfast, after dawn, it was still raining. The four of them ate inside the shuttle, with the door open. "Ah," said Edwards, looking through the hatch at the shimmering lines of water. "The universal solvent."

"But I should hate you," said Murphy. "Because you can look at water and say *ah the universal solvent*."

Edwards cocked his head on one side. "I don't see your point," he said.

"No, no," said Murphy. "That's not it. Oh, water, oh? This beautiful thing, this spiritual thing, purity and

the power to cleanse, to baptise even. Light on water, is there a more beautiful thing? And all you can say when you see it is *ah the universal solvent*."

Edwards put his mouth in a straight line. "But it *is* the universal solvent," he said. "That's one of its functions. Why do you say *oh water oh*?"

The rain outside was greeting their conversational interchanges with sustained and rapturous applause. The colour through the hatch was grey. The air looked like metal scored and overscored with myriad slant lines. It was chill.

"Can we lift off?" asked Sinclair. "Is there a way off-of this place?"

"Feel that," Edwards instructed. He was not talking about any particular object, not instructing any of the crew to lift any particular object. What he meant was: feel how heavy we are. "That's a full g. That's what is to be overcome. We came down hard."

"Hard," confirmed Murphy.

"We weren't expecting," said Sinclair, "a whole world to pop out of the void. Nothing, nothing, nothing, then *a whole world*. We snapped our spine on this rock."

"Let's get one thing straight," said Edwards, in his brusque and matter-of-fact voice. "This world did not pop out of nowhere. Worlds don't *pop out* of nowhere." He looked at his colleagues in turn. "That's not what happened."

"Turn it up, *captain*," said Murphy. He applied the title sarcastically. It was the nature of this ship that its crew worked without ranks such as captain, second-in-command, all that bag-and-baggage of hierarchy. No military ship, this. This was not a merchant vessel either. They hadn't been sliding along the frictionless thread of Earth-Mars or Earth-Moon hauling goods or transporting soldiery or anything like that. This was science. Science isn't structured to recognise hierarchy.

"I'm only saying," said Edwards, sheepishly. "I'm not wanting to suggest that I'm in charge."

They were silent for a while, and the rain spattered and clattered enormously all about them. Encore! Encore!

It occurred to Edwards, belatedly, that Murphy might have been saying *eau, water, eau*.

"Right," said Vins. "We're all in a kind of intellectual shock, that's what I think. We've been here two days now, and we haven't even formulated a plausible hypothesis of what's going on. We haven't even tried." He looked around at his colleagues. "Let's review what happened."

Murphy had his stumpy arms folded over his little chest. "Review, by all means," he said. But then, when Vins opened his mouth to speak again, he interrupted immediately: "*I've* formed a hypothesis. It's called Murphy. This is prime land, and I claim it. When we get back, or when we at least contact help and they come get us, I shall set up a private limited company to promote the settlement of Murphy. I'll make a fortune. I'll be mayor. I'll be the *alpha* male."

"Why you think," said Edwards, thinking literally, "that such a contract would have any legal force upon Earth is beyond me."

"Let's review," said Vins, in a loud voice.

Everybody looked at him.

"We're flying. We drop below the ecliptic plane, no more than a hundred thousand klms. More than that?"

None of the others say anything. Then Sinclair says, "It was about that."

"We saw a winking star," Vins said. He did not stop talking, he continued on, even though Murphy tried to interrupt him with a sneering "Winking star, oh, that's good on my mother's health that's good." Vins wasn't to be distracted when he got going. "It was out of the position of variable star 699, which is what we might have thought it otherwise. Except it wasn't where 699 should've been. As we flew it grew in size, indicating a very reflective asteroid, or perhaps comet, out of the ecliptic. You," Vins nodded at Sinclair, "argued it was a parti-coloured object rotating diurnally. But it was a fair way south of the ecliptic. *Then* what happened?"

"We all know what happened," said Murphy. They may all have been *homo neanderthalis*, but they were bright. They all had their scientific educations. The real deal.

"Let's review," said Vins. "We need to *know* what's happened. Act like scientists, people."

"I'm a scientist no longer," cried Murphy, with a flourish of his arm. "I'm the king of Murphtopia."

"What happened," said Edwards, slowly, thinking linearly and literally, "was we were tracking the curious wobble of the asteroid. Or whatever it was. We flew close, and suddenly there was a world, a whole world, and—we came down. We re-entered sideways, and there was heat-damage to the craft, and then there was collision damage, and now it's broken. And we're sitting inside it."

"Now," said Vins. "Here's a premise. Worlds don't appear out of nowhere. Do we agree?"

Nobody disagreed.

"It's a mountain and mohammed thing," offered Sinclair. "Put it this way, which is more likely? That a whole Earth-sized planet pops out of nowhere in front of us? Or that we, for some reason, have popped into a *new* place?"

"I say we're back on Earth," said Murphy. "It looks like a duck, and it smells like a duck and it, uh, pulls the gravity of a duck, *then* it's a duck."

"The sun is rising," Sinclair pointed out, "in the *west*. It is setting in the *east*."

"Oh. And the asteroid was the beacon of a dimensional *sffy* gateway through time and space," mocked Murphy: "and we fell through, like in a *sffy* film, and now we're on the far side of the galaxy?" He pronounced "SF-y" as a two-syllable word, with a ludicrous and prolonged emphasis on the central "f" sound.

"That can't be true," said Edwards. "Our first night, the stars were very clear. All the constellations were there. Familiar constellations."

"Which's what we'd expect if we were back on Earth," said Murphy.

"But the sun *rises* in the *west*..." said Sinclair again.

"Maybe the compasses are broken, somehow. Distorted. Maybe you *think* west is east and versy-vice-a."

"All of them? All the compasses? And besides, at night you can see the pole star, great bear, all very

clearly. Oh there's no doubt where the sun's rising."

"Well let's look at another hypothesis," said Murphy. "There is a whole, a *whole* Earth-sized planet, about a hundred thousand kilometres south of the ecliptic between Earth and Venus. And nobody on earth for six centuries of dedicated astronomy has noticed it. Nobody saw a whole planet, waxing and waning, between us and the sun? No southern hemisphere observatory happened to see it? Is *that* what you're saying?"

"That is," Vins conceded, "hard to credit."

"So," said Murphy. He got up, and stepped to the hatch, and looked out at the hissing and rapturous rainfall. "Here's what I think happened. We were off investigating your *winking* star, Vins, and then we all suffered some sort of group epilepsy, or mass hysteria, or loss of consciousness, and without realising it we piloted the ship back up and towards earth."

"We were days away," Vins pointed out.

"So perhaps we were in a fugue state for days. Anyway, we weren't shaken out of it until we slammed into the atmosphere, and now we've crashed in the highlands in Peru, or Africa maybe."

"There's nowhere on earth," Vins pointed out, "as lovely as this. Where is there anywhere as mild, or balmy, as this? Peru, you say?"

"You ever *been* to Peru?" asked Edwards.

"I been a lot of places, and there's ice wherever *I've* been."

"Never mind the climate," said Edwards. "What about the sunrises?"

"How is it," agreed Vins, "that the sunrise is in the west if this is Peru?"

"I don't know. But the advantage of my hypothesis is that it's occam's razor on all the stuff about planets appearing from nowhere, and it reduces all that to a single, simple problem. The sunrise."

"And another problem," Edwards pointed out, "which is the lack of radio traffic."

"The radio's broken," said Murphy. "I'm not happy about it."

"The radio?"

"No, not happy about the *Murphy*, the Murphy-topia. I'm not happy about the status of my kingdom. I was looking forward to claiming the highlands as my personal kingdom. But if it's, you know, Peru, then there'll be some other alpha male who's already claimed these highlands."

"The radio's not broken," said Edwards. "We can pick up background chatter. Bits and pieces. We just can't seem to locate any—to get a fix upon—"

"Vins," said Murphy, sitting himself down again. "Vins, Vins. What's your theory? You haven't told us your theory."

"I think we've landed upon a banned world," said Vins. He said this in a bright voice, but his mouth was angled downwards as he spoke. "A forbidden planet. *That's* SF-y, isn't it?" He pronounced each of the letters in sfy separately, trisyllabic.

"A banned world," said Murphy, as if savouring the idea. "What an interesting notion. What a fanciful

notion. What a dark horse you are, to be sure, Vins."

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The rain stopped sometime in the afternoon, and the clouds rolled away, leaving the landscape washed and gleaming under the low sun as if glazed with strawberry and peach. The long stretch of grassland directly beneath them retained some of its yellow, and moved slowly, like the pelt of a lion. In the distance they could see a long inlaid band of bronze, curved and kinked like the marginal illustration in a celtic manuscript: open water, glittering in the sun. And the sun went down and the stars came out.

Edwards, trying to identify where the Earth should be from their last known position, noticed something they should all have seen on the first night: that the stars hardly moved through the sky. He woke the others up.

"Earth," he said, "is just below the horizon." He pointed. "There. Mars, I think, is over there."

"Send them a signal."

"I did. But why should they be listening for a signal from this stretch of space? It's not even on the ecliptic. It's not as if there are any astronomers on Mars. And if there were, if there were any, you know, amateurs, why should they be looking down here? No, that's not what I woke you up to show you."

"What then?"

"The stars aren't moving. I've been watching for an hour. I was waiting to see Earth come up over the horizon so I could send them a message. But it's not coming up."

"You thought it was an hour," said Murphy, crossly. "Clearly it *wasn't* an hour. You probably sat there for five minutes and got impatient."

So they settled down together, and all checked their watches, and looked east to where the sun had set, where familiar stars pebbled the sky. And an hour passed, and another, and the stars did not move.

Nobody said anything for a long time.

"Somebody has stopped the stars in their courses," said Murphy. "We're dead, we're all in the afterlife. Is that what happened? We crashed the ship and died, and this is the land of the dead."

"I thought you were the one, Murphy, who wanted to apply occam's razor?" chided Edwards. "That's a pretty elaborated explanation for the facts, don't you think? I don't feel dead. Do you? You feel that way?"

"Certainly not," said Vins.

"But we've no idea what it feels like to feel dead," Murphy pointed out.

"Exactly. It's a null hypothesis. Let's not go there. There must be another explanation."

"The other explanation is that we're not rotating."

"Except we saw the sun go round and set, so we *are* rotating. An earth-sized world, pulling an earth-strength gravity rotates for half a day and then *stops* rotating? That makes no sense."

"I'll tell you what makes sense," said Murphy, hugging himself against the cold. "This is a banned world. We are not supposed to be here. That's what makes sense."

"Of course we're not supposed to be here," agreed Vins. "Supposed to be Venus, that's where. That's where we're supposed to be orbiting. Not here. But that's not to say it's a forbidden planet."

"You were the one who said so!" Murphy objected.

"I was joking," said Vins.

"Your joke may be coming true," said Murphy. He coughed, loud and long. Then he said, "the sun rises in the west and the stars don't move. You know what that is? That's things that the human eye was not supposed to see. That's a realm of magic—faery, that's where we are, and the faery queen is probably gathering her hounds to hunt us down for seeing this forbidden place."

"Amusing, Murphy," said Edwards, in a bland voice. "Very fanciful and imaginative. Your fancy and your imagination, I find them amusing."

"I'm going to sleep," Murphy sulked, picking himself up and going back inside the ship. "I'll meet my fate tomorrow with a clear head at least."

The other stayed outside under the splendid, chilly, glittering stars and under that silkily-cold black sky. They talked, and reduced the possibilities to an order of plausibility. They discussed what to do. They discussed the possibility of making the ship whole again; perhaps by dismantling one of the thirty-six thrust engines and reassembling it as a sort of welding torch, so as to make good the breaches in the plasmal hull. Nobody could think how to launch into space, though: the craft had not been built to achieve escape velocity unaided. They had not been planning on *landing* on Venus, after all. (The very idea!) Finally the sky started to pale and ease, as if the arc of the western horizon were a heated element thawing the black into rose and pearl and then into blushed tones of white.

The sun lifted itself into the sky.

"Well," said Vins, with a tone of finality, "that settles it. Clearly we *are* rotating. The lack of movement of the stars and the apparent movement of the sun: these data contradict one another. Seem to. It's hard to advance a coherent explanation that includes both of these pieces of observational data. Are we agreed?"

"I can't think what else," said Edwards. "We assume the sky is a simulation of some sort. Do we assume that?"

"We do," said Sinclair.

"One of two explanations, then," said Vins. "Either the sky is a total simulation, upon which is projected a moving sun by day and motionless stars by night. Or else the sky is a real feature but some peculiarity of optics distorts the actual motion of the stars in some way."

"It's hard to think what sort of phenomenon..." began Sinclair. But he stopped talking. He wasn't sure what he was going to say; and—anyway—the dawn was so very beautiful. They all sat looking down, all distracted by the loveliness of the view from their highland vantage-point: down across sloping grasslands and marsh and the beaming seas and gleaming channels of water. And, woken by the light, the first birds were up; in nimble flight and giving voice to agile birdsong, bouncing their tenor and soprano trills off the blue ceiling of the sky—or, whatever it was.

They were all tired. They'd been up all night. Eventually they went inside the spaceship and slept.

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The third day and the third night.

Vins, Sinclair and Edwards woke sometime in the afternoon, the sun already declining towards the east. Murphy had gone.

They searched for him, in a slightly desultory manner, round and about the ship; but it was clear enough where he had gone: a trail scuffed, slightly kinked but more-or-less straight, through the wet grasses and downwards. Clambering onto the top of the ship Edwards could follow this with his eye, and with binoculars, down and down, a wobbly ladder in the sheen tights-material of the fields all the way to where forest drew a dark line.

"He's gone into a forest. Down there, kilometres away." He wanted to say something like: imagine a stretch of gold velvet, all brushed one way to smoothness, and a finger dragged through the velvet against the grain of the brushing—that's what his path looks like. But he couldn't find the words to say that. "Should we go after him?" he called. "Should we go?"

"He knows where we are," said Sinclair. "He knows how to get back here. He's probably just exploring."

"And if he gets into trouble?"

"It's his look-out. He must take responsibility for himself," said Vins. "We all must shift for ourselves, after all."

The three of them breakfasted on ship's-supplies, sitting in the warm air and listening to the meagre, distant chimes of the birds and watching the flow and glitter of wind upon the grass. "I could sit here forever," said Edwards, in a relaxed voice.

The other two were silent, but it was a silent agreement.

"We need to get on," said Vins, as if dragging the sentence up from great depths. "We need to explore. To fix the ship. That's what we need to do."

They did nothing. After breakfast they dozed in the sun. Murphy did not return. Who knew where he had gone?

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The one thing so obvious that none of them bothered to point it out was that this world was paradisaical compared to the wrecked and wasted landscapes of home. And that because it was paradisaical it was very obviously not a real place. They were dead, and had gone to a material heaven, perhaps on account of some sort of oversight. They had died in the crash. Or they had been transported through a different sort of spatial-discontinuity, one that translated them from real to mythic space. They were to feed forever amongst the mild-eyed melancholy lotos-eaters now.

The land of the sirens, in which Odysseus's crew had languished so pleasantly and purposelessly. Was *that* a forbidden world? Was it banned to subsequent explorers? Why else was it never again discovered?

It may still be there, some island or stretch of coast in the Mediterranean protected by a cloak of invisibility, some magic zone or curtain through which only a few, select and lucky mariners stumble. Who knows?

All this culture and learning bounced around their heads: Vins, Sinclair and Edwards. They knew all about Homer and Mohammed, and they knew all about Shakespeare and Proust, even though these people about whom they were so knowledgeable were a completely different sort of creature to

themselves. These Homers and Van Goghs were all super-beings, elevated, godlike; and the residue of their golden-age achievements in the minds of our scientists has the paradoxical effect of shrinking *us* by comparison. Don't you think?

Best not think about it. What and if they *are* in the land of the Lotos? Maybe they're lucky, that's all. Don't you wish *you* could go there?

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The sun set in the east. Colour and brightness drained out of the western sky, out of the zenith flowing down to the east with osmotic slowness, and leaving behind a purply black dotted with perfectly motionless stars. The last of the day was a broad stretch of white-yellow sky over the eastern horizon, patched with skinny horizontal clouds of golden brown. For long minutes the last of the sunlight, coming up over the horizon, touched the bottom line of these clouds with fierce and molten light, so that it looked as if several sinuous heating elements, glowing bright and hot with the electricity passing through them, had been fixed to the matter of the sky. Then the light faded away from the clouds, and they browned and blackened against a compressing layer of sunset lights: a sky honey and marmalade, and then a grey-orange, and finally blue, and after that black.

It was night again.

Something agitated Vins enough to get him up and huffing around. "The stars have moved a little," he said. "There—that's the arc of the corona australis. Say what you like but *don't* tell me I don't know my constellations."

"So?"

"It's higher. Yesterday the lowest star was right on the horizon, on that little hill silhouetted there. Today it's a fraction above."

"So we're rotating real slow," said Sinclair. "I can't say I care. I can't say I'm bothered. I'm going to sleep."

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The fourth day and the fourth night.

In the morning Vins left the ship. He set off in the opposite direction to Murphy; not down the slope towards the forest and the long shining stretches of open water; but up, higher into the highlands. He had no idea where Murphy had gone, or what he had been after; but something inside him prompted him to go higher. Go up, Moses. He had a vision of himself climbing and climbing until he reached the summit of some snow-clenched mountain top at the very heart of the world from which the whole planet—or at least this whole hemisphere—would be visible. Like Mount Purgatory, he thought, from Dante. As if he had anything to do with Dante! Godlike figures from the golden age.

Vins didn't creep away as Murphy had done. He prepared a pack, some supplies, some tools, a couple of scientific instruments. Then he woke the other two. He told them what he wanted to do; and they sat, looking stupidly at him from under their overhanging foreheads, and didn't say anything. "You sure you don't want to come with me?" he said. He felt an obscure and disabling fear deep inside him, a terror that if he stayed at the crash site he'd slide into torpor and that would be the end of him. Who was it had said that word? Torpor, torpor. Oh, he had to get out and away. He had to move.

"Do what you like," said Sinclair.

"It makes no sense to me," said Edwards, "to go marching off without any sort of objective. Shouldn't

you have an objective? As a scientist?"

"My objective is to explore. What's more scientific than exploration?"

Edwards looked at him, blinked, looked again. "We should stay here," he said, slowly. He turned to look at the buckled ship. "We should mend the ship."

"We should," agreed Vins. "But we don't. You *notice* that? There's something here that's rendering us idle. Idleness doesn't suit us."

Sinclair laughed at this. "Let him go," he said, stretching himself on a broad boulder with a westward-facing facet to warm himself in the new sunlight. "He's the hairiest of us all."

Vins winced at this insult. "Don't be like that. What is this, school?"

"It's true," said Sinclair. "Murphy *was* the hairiest, but he's gone God-knows-where. You're the hairiest now, and you'll go, and good riddance. Go after Murphy. Go pick fleas from his pelt. I'm the smoothest of the lot of you and I'll stay here and *thank* you."

"I'm not going after Murphy, I'm going higher, into the highlands."

"Go where you like."

Edwards wouldn't meet Vins' gaze, so Vins shouldered his pack and marched off, striding westward into the setting sun. He could feel Sinclair's eyes upon his back as he went, almost a heat, like a ray; Sinclair just lounging there like a lazy great ape, watching him go. The hairiest indeed!

Then Vins had a second thought. He wanted to get up high, didn't he? He could lift himself clean off the ground.

It surprised him how much courage it took to turn about and stomp back down to the ship again. Sinclair was still there on his rock, watching him with lazy insolence. Edwards had taken off his shoes and climbed to the top of the wreckage, clinging to the dew-wet surface with his toes and the palms of his feet. He was gazing east, down, away.

Vins didn't say anything to either of them. Instead he went into the ship and retrieved a bundle of gossamer-fabric and plastic cord and tied it to the top of his backpack. Then he pulled out a small cylinder of helium, no longer or thicker than a forearm though densely heavy. He tied a grapple-rope to this and dragged it after him.

There were no more goodbyes. He stomped away.

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Something was bugging Vins, preying on his mind. It was as if he'd caught a glimpse of something out of the corner of his eye without exactly noticing it, such that it had registered only in his subconscious (that gift of the gods, the unconscious mind). He felt he should have understood by now. Something was wrong, or else something was profoundly and obviously right and he couldn't see it.

What?

He marched on, the cylinder dragging through the turf behind him and occasionally clanging on the upcrops of rock that poked through the grass. It was an effort with every step to haul the damn thing, but Vins had found in stubbornness and ill-temper a substitute for willpower. He marched on. He didn't know where he was going. He had, as Edwards might say, no objective. But on he went.

The grass grew shorter the higher he went, and the wind became fresher. The sun was directly above him, and then it was behind him, and he was chasing his own waggish shadow, marching up and up. His field of view was taken up with the pale-green and yellow grass sloping up directly in front of him. Each strand moved with slightly separate motion in the burly wind, like agitated worms, or the fronds of some impossibly massive underwater polypus.

He stopped, sat on a stool of bare rock and drank from his water bottle. Looking back the direction he had come he could see the ship now, very distant. Edwards was no longer standing on its back. Nor could he see Sinclair. From this eagle's vantage point, the path the crashing ship had gouged in the soil was very visible, a mottled painterly scar through the grasslands culminating in the broken-backed hourglass of the ship itself. It seemed unlikely, Vins thought, that in crashing they had not simply dashed themselves to atoms.

Beyond the wreck that the grasslands stretched away. Vins could see a great deal more of the terrain from up here. They had come-down directly above a broad hilly spit of land that lay between what looked like two spreading estuaries, north and south. Each of these estuaries widened and spilled into what Vins took to be separate seas—one reaching as far north as he could see and one as far south. It wasn't possible to see whether these seas were connected; whether, in other words, the two estuaries were inlets into one enormous ocean.

The sun setting threw a broadcast spread of lights across these two bodies of water, and they glowed ferociously, beautifully. As he sat there looking down on this landscape Vins felt the disabling intensity of it all. As if its loveliness might just drain all his willpower and leave him just sitting here, on this saddle of bare rock, sitting in the afternoon warmth gazing down upon it.

He shook himself. He couldn't allow this place to suck out his strength of purpose. Maybe he was a *homo neanderthalis*, but he was a scientist. He flew spacecraft between the planets.

He picked himself up and marched on, uphill all the way, until the light had thickened and blackened around him. Eventually, exhausted, he stopped and ate some food and rolled himself into his sleeping bag and tried to sleep on the grass. But, tired as he was, he was awake a long time. Something nagging at him. Something about the perspective downhill—those two broad estuaries draining into whatever wide sea, hidden in distance, in haze and clouds and the curve of the world's horizon. What about it? Why did it seem familiar? He couldn't think why.

* * * *

The fifth day.

He was woken by something crawling on his face, a lacy caterpillar or beetle with legs like twitching eyelashes. He sat up, rubbing his cheeks with the back of his hand, he brushed it away.

It was light.

The sun was up over the crown of the hill westward and shining straight in his eyes.

He wiped his face with a dampee, and munched some rations and drank a tab of coffee. The wind stirred around him. The landscape below him was, in material terms, the same one before which he had gone to sleep; but under the different orientation of sunlight, under white morning illumination instead of rosy sunset, it seemed somehow radically different. The two estuaries were still there, kinked and coastlined in that maddeningly familiar way, but now their waters were gunmetal- and broccoli-coloured, a hard and almost tangible mass of colour upon which waves could not be made out. The grassland was dark with dew, hazed over in stretches by a sort of blue blur. The ship was still there, black as a nut, but Vins couldn't make out either of his shipmates.

"So," he said to himself. "Let's get a proper look."

He unrolled the balloon fabric and fitted the helium cylinder into its inflation tube. Then he untangled the harness, and manoeuvred himself into it, knotting the rest of his backpack to a strap so that it would dangle beneath him as ballast. Then, steadily, he inflated the balloon.

It took only a few minutes, the flop of fabric swelling and then popping up, like a featureless cartoon head of prodigious size, to loll and nod above him. Soon the material was taut and the breeze was pushing Vins down the hill and across. His feet danced over the turf, keeping up with the movement for a while with a series of balletic leaps, and dragging the pack behind him. Then he was up, the cylinder in his lap and his bag a pendulum below.

He rose quickly through the dawn air. The breeze was taking him diagonally down the hill, but only slowly. At first he looked behind himself, straining over his shoulder to see what was over the brow of the hill. But the upwards sloping land didn't seem to come to a peak; or at least not one over which Vins could peek.

He turned his attention to the eastward landscape. To his right he could see, as he rose higher, that there was a vast north-south coastline, a tremendous beach bordering an ocean that reached all the way to the horizon. To his left he could see the more northern of the two estuaries; its north shoreline revealed itself to be in fact a long, skinny neck of land. There was a third estuary, even further to the north. The shape of these arrangements of land and water seemed so familiar to Vins, naggingly so, but he couldn't place it.

He fixed his gaze on the easternmost horizon, but even though he was getting higher and higher he didn't seem to be seeing over the curve of it. In fact, by some peculiar optical illusion or other it appeared to be rising as he rose. That wasn't right.

Vins tried looking up, but the balloon obscured his vision. He thought again about the peculiarities of this world. Was the sky really nothing but a huge blue-painted dome? Would he bump into it momentarily? Perhaps not a physical barrier, but some sort of forcefield, or holographic medium, upon which the motionless stars and the hurtling sun could be projected? Were they in some private high-tech parkland?

The air was thin. It had gotten thin surprisingly rapidly.

Maybe I *am* the hairiest, Vins thought to himself; but I'm a scientist for all that.

Chill. And blue-grey.

Looking down, looking eastward, Vins knew he had risen high enough. He stared. He gawped. Then, with automatic hand, he began venting gas from his balloon. He commenced his descent. He started coming down. The landscape below him had finally clicked with his memory. It was the map of Europe rendered in some impossible geographical form of photographic-negative: the green land coloured blue for sea, the blue sea coloured green for land.

The ship had come down onto the broad grasslands that would, in a normal map of Europe, have been the Atlantic ocean. The two wide seas he could see from his vantage point were shaped exactly like England, to the north, and like France, to the south. Impossible of course, but there you were. The estuaries that had nagged at his memory had done so because they were shaped like Cornwall and like Normandy. The English Channel was a broad corridor of land, with sea to the north and sea to the south, that widened in the distance into a pleasant meadowland where the North Sea should have been.

Recognising the familiar contours of the European mainland had impressed itself upon Vins' consciousness so powerfully that it had dizzied him. It must be hallucination. He stared, he gawked. It

was like the visual rebus of the duckrabbit, which you can see *either* as a duck *or* as a rabbit, and, then, as you get used to it, you find that you can flip your vision from one to the other at will. Vins had the heady sense that the broad bodies of water were *in fact land* (an impossibly flat and desert land), and the variegated stretches of landscape were *in fact water* (upon which light played a myriad of fantastical mirages). But of course that wasn't it. The visual image flipped round again. The land was land and the sea was sea. It was an impossible, inverted geography. The Atlantic highlands. The Sea of England. The Sea of France. He was in no real place. He didn't know where he was. He was dreaming. He could make no sense of this.

The land rushed up towards him. He had vented too much gas from his balloon, he'd done it too fast, he was coming down too quickly. But his mind wasn't working terribly well.

His feet went pummelling into the turf and he felt something twang in his right ankle. Pain thrummed up his leg, and his face went hard onto the grass. The wind was still pushing the balloon onwards, and dragging him awkwardly along. He fumbled with his harness and with a burly sense of release the balloon broke free and bobbed off over the landscape.

Vins pulled himself over and sat up. His ankle throbbed. Pain slithered up and down his shin. He watched the balloon recede, ludicrously flexible and bubblelike as it rolled and tumbled down the slope.

This crazy place.

He hauled his pack in by pulling on the cord, hand over hand and the pack dancing and bouncing over the turf towards him. From its innards he took out a medipack. The compress felt hot and slimy as he ripped it from its cover, but it did its job as he twined it around his leg. The pain dulled.

As soon as the compress had stiffened sufficiently to bear weight, he pulled himself up and started the hopalong trek back down the slope. At least, he told himself, it's downhill. At least it's not *uphill*. Downhill across the Atlantic.

He laughed.

* * * *

He anticipated the reaction of the others when he told them his discovery. To be precise, he rehearsed the possibilities: from galvanising amazement to indifference, or even hostility. So what they were living in an impossible landscape? The sun rose in the west and the stars did not move. Maybe they were indeed dead; in which case, why bother? Why bother about anything?

But when he arrived at the ship it was deserted: both Sinclair and Edwards had gone. They had taken few or no supplies with them, and at first Vins assumed that they were just scouting out the locality. But after a while of fruitlessly calling their names, and several hours of waiting, he came to the conclusion that they must have wandered permanently away, like Murphy. Which would be just like them.

If he saw them again—no.

When he saw them again he ought to grab them by their necks and shake them. Was this any way to run a scientific spaceship? He ought to plunge his hands in between their chins and chestbones and squeeze. Squee-eeze.

When he saw them.

His fury was tiring. And what with the long trek (downhill, sure, but even so) and the ache in his bungled-up ankle, Vins felt sleepy. He ate, he drank some, and then he lay down in one of the bunks and

fell into dream-free sleep.

* * * *

The fifth night.

He awoke with a little yelp, and it took him a moment before he was aware that he was inside a blacked-out ship, crashed onto a world itself plunged into the chasm of night. "Though," he said to himself, aloud (to hearten his spirits in all this darkness), "how we're plunged into the chasm of the night when the world don't seem to rotate, not a tittle, not a jot, that's beyond me."

His ankle was sore, and seemed sorer for being ignored. It was a resentful and selfish pain. Analgesic, that was the needful.

"Sinclair," he called. Then he remembered. "I'm going to wrestle your *neck* you deserter," he hooted. "Sinclair, you hear? I ought to stamp on your chest."

He had gone to sleep without leaving a torch nearby, so he had to fumble about. But in the perfect blackness he couldn't orient himself at all; couldn't get a mental picture on his location. He came through a bent-out-of-shape hatchway, running his fingers round the rim, and into another black room. No idea where he was. He ranged about, hopeless. Then, through another opening, he saw a rectangle of grey-black gleam, and it smelt clean, and it was the main hatch leading outside.

He stepped through, into the glimmer of starlight to get his bearings. He could turn and take in the bulk of the ship, and only then the mental map snapped into focus. First aid box would be back inside and over to the left. *He* was the hairiest? He was the only one not to have abandoned ship! For the mother of love and all begorrah, as Murphy would have said if he'd been in one of his quaint moods, they'd *all* abandoned ship. *They* were the hairiest, damn them.

His ankle was giving him sour hell, and the first aid box would be back in through the hatch, over to the left. He could find it with his fingers-ends. But he didn't go back inside.

The hair at the back of his neck tingled and stood up like grass as the wind passes through it.

"I," he said, to the starlit landscape, but his voice was half-cracked, so he cleared his throat and spoke out loudly and clearly: "I know you're there. Whoever you are."

He turned, there was nobody.

He turned again, nobody.

"Come out from where you're hiding," he said. "Is that you, Murphy? That would be *like* your idea of practical japery, you hairy old fool."

He turned, and there was a silhouette against the blackness. Too tall to be Murphy, much too tall to be Edwards or Sinclair. Taller than any person in fact.

Vins stood. The sound of his own breathing was ratchety and intrusive, like something had malfunctioned somewhere. "Who are you?" he asked. "What do you want? Who are you?"

The silhouette shifted, and moved. It hummed a little, a surprisingly high-pitched noise—surprising because of its height. It was a person, clearly; tall but oddly thin, like a putty person stretched between long-boned head and flipperlike feet. Oh, *too* tall.

"What are you doing?" Vins repeated.

"You're not supposed to be here," said the figure: a man, though one with a voice high-pitched enough almost to sound womanly.

"We're not supposed to—we *crashed*," returned Vins, his ankle biting at the base of his leg a little. He had to sit down. He could see a little more now, as his eye dark-adapted; but with no moon, and with no moonlight, it was still a meagre sort of seeing. Vins moved towards where a rock stood, its occasional embedded spots of mica glinting in the light. This was the same rock Sinclair had been laying upon when Vins had last seen him.

"I got to sit down," he said, by way of explanation.

He could see that this long thin person was carrying something in his right hand, but he couldn't see what.

"Sit down, OK? Do you mind if I sit down, OK? Is that OK?"

"Sure," said the stranger.

Vins sat, heavily, and lifted his frozen-sore ankle, and picked at the dressing. He needed a new one. This one wasn't giving him any benefit any more. The first aid box would be in through the hatch and to the left.

"You're trespassing," said the stranger. "You've no right to be here. This world is forbidden to you."

"Is it death?" said Vins, feeling a spurt of fear-adrenalin, which is also recklessness-adrenalin, in his chest at the words. Did he dare say such a thing? What if this stranger were the King of the Land of the Dead, and what if he, Vins, were disrespecting him? "Are we all dead? That was one theory we had, as to why the sun rises awry, and why the stars don't move—and—and," he added, hurriedly, remembering the previous day, "why the map is so wrong."

"Wrong?"

"An England-shaped sea where England-land should be. An Atlantic-shaped landmass where the ocean should be. *You* know what I'm talking about."

"Of course I do. This is my world. Of course I do."

"My ankle is hurting fit to scream," said Vins.

The stranger moved his arm in the darkness. "This," he said, "will have to go." Vins assumed he was pointing at the shuttle. "You've no right to dump this junk here. I'll have it moved, I tell you. And you—you are trespassing on a forbidden world. You, sir, have incurred the penalty for trespassing."

"You can see pretty well for such a dark night," said Vins.

"You can't?" said the stranger, and he sounded puzzled. "Old eyes, is it?"

"I'm thirty-three," said Vins, bristling.

"I didn't mean *old* in that sense."

There was a silence. The quiet between them was devoid of cricket noise; no blackbird sang. The air was blank and perfectly dark and only the meanest dribble of starlight illuminated it. Then with a new warmth, as if he had finally understood, the stranger said: "You're a *homo neanderthalis*?"

"And I suppose," replied Vins, as if jesting, "that you're a *homo sapiens*?" But even as he gave the

words their sarcastic playground spin he knew they were true. Of course true. A creature from the *spiritus mundi* and from dream and childhood game, standing right here in front of him.

"You're from Earth, of course," the sapiens was saying. "You recognised the map of Europe. You steered this craft here. I don't understand why you came here. You boys aren't supposed to know this place even exists."

Vins felt a hard knot of something in his chest, like an elbow trying to come out from inside his ribs. It was intensely uncomfortable. This being from myth and legend, and the race of Homer and Shakespeare and Mohammed and Jesus, and *standing right in front of him now*. He didn't know what to say. There wasn't anything for him to say.

"You want," the human prompted, "to answer my question?"

"You're *actually* a homo sapiens?"

"You never met one?"

"Not in the flesh."

"I lose track of time," said the homo sapiens. "It's probably been, I don't know. Centuries. It's like that, out here. The time—drifts. You got a name?"

"Vins," said Vins.

"Well, you're a handsome fellow, Vins. My name is Ramon Harburg Guthrie, a fine old human name, a thousand years old, like me. As I am myself. And no older." He chuckled, though Vins couldn't see what was funny.

"A thousand years?" Vins repeated.

"Give or take. It's been half that time since your lot were shaped, I'll tell you that."

"The last human removed herself four centuries ago," said Vins, feeling foolish that he had to speak such kindergarten sentences.

Ramon Harburg Guthrie laughed. "Shouldn't you be worshipping me as a god?" he asked. "Or something along those lines?"

"Worship you as a god? Why would I want to be doing a thing like that? You're species *homo* and I'm species *homo*. What's to worship?"

"We uplifted you," Ramon Harburg Guthrie pointed out. "Recombined you and backed you out of the evolutionary cul-de-sac, and primed you with—" He stopped. "Listen to *me!*" he said. "I'm probably giving entirely the wrong impression. I don't want to be worshipped as a god."

"I'm glad to hear it," said Vins. "There's nothing sub-capacity about *my* brain pan. I speak from experience, but also from scientific research into the matter, using some of the many *homo sapiens* skulls that have been dug out of the soil of the Earth. I've spent twelve years studying science."

"Our science," said Ramon Harburg Guthrie.

"Science is science, and who cares who discovered it? And if you care who discovered it, then it's not *your* science, Ramon Harburg Guthrie, it's Newton's and Einstein's."

But his tone had wandered the wrong side of angry. The *homo sapiens* lifted whatever it was he was holding in his right hand. When he spoke again, his high voice was harder-edged. "I built this place," he said. "It's mine. It's a private world, and visitors are not allowed. I don't care about your brain pan, or about my brain pan, I only care about my privacy. Are there others?"

"We crashed," said Vins, feeling a sense of panic growing now, though he wasn't sure exactly why. It was more than just the mysterious *something* the man was holding in his right hand. It was another thing, he wasn't sure what.

"I don't care how you came here. You're trespassing. Not welcome."

"It's hardly fair. It's not as if you put up a sign saying no entry."

He scoffed. "That'd be tantamount to shouting aloud to the whole system, *here I am!* That's be like putting a parsec-wide neon arrow pointing at my home. And why would I want to do that? I built my world away from the ecliptic and down, it's as flat as a coin and its slender edge is angled towards Earth. You can't see me, you inheritors. Nobody on that polluted old world. You *don't know* I'm here. There are similar ruses used all about this solar system, and eyries and haunts, radio-blanked bubbles and curves of habitable landscape tucked away. A thousand baubles and twists of landscape. Built by the old guard, the last of the *truly* wealthy and *truly* well-bred. Who'd trade-in true breeding for a mere enhanced physical strength and endurance?" He spoke these last five words with a mocking intonation, as if the very idea were absurd. "And, yes, I know your brain pans are the same size. But size isn't everything, my dearie."

Vins was shivering, or perhaps trembling with fear, but he summoned his courage. "I'm no dearie of yours," he said. "What's that in your hand anyway? A weapon, is it?"

"How many were there in your crew?"

Of course Vins couldn't lie, not when asked a direct question like that. He tried one more wriggle. "A severely spoken and impolite question," he said.

"How many in your *crew*?"

"Four," he said. "Including me."

"Inside?"

"Are *they* inside? The ship?"

"Are they inside, yes."

"No. They wandered off. They were seduced by this world, I think. It's a beautiful place, especially when you've been tanked up in a spaceship for three months. It's a beautiful, beautiful place"

"Thank you!" said the *homo sapiens* Ramon Harburg Guthrie. And, do you know what? There was genuine pleasure in his voice. He was actually flattered. "It's my big dumb object. Big and dumb but *I* like it."

The sky, minutely and almost imperceptibly, was starting to pale over to the west. The silhouette had taken on the intimations of solidity; more than just a 2D gap in the blackness, it was starting to bulk. Dark grey face propped on dark grey body, but there was a perceptible difference in tone between the two things, one smooth and one the rougher texture of fabric.

"You didn't build this," said Vins. "I'm not being disrespectful, but I'm not. Only—who can build a whole world? You're not a god. Sure the legacy of homo sapiens is a wonderful thing, the language and the culture and so on. But *build* a whole world?"

"Indeed, I did build it," said Ramon Harburg Guthrie levelly.

"How many trillions of tonnes of matter, to pull one g?" said Vins. "And how do you hide an Earth-sized object from observation by..."

"You've done well," said Ramon Harburg Guthrie, "if you've taken the science with which we left you and built space craft capable of coming all the way out here." He sounded indulgent. "But that's not to say that you've caught up with us. We've been at it millennia. You've only been independent a handful of centuries. Left to your own devices for a handful of centuries."

The light was growing away behind the western horizon. The human's face was still indistinct. The object he held in his right hand was still indistinct. But in a moment it would be clearer. Vins was shivering hard now. It was very cold.

"That's no explanation, if you don't mind me saying so," he said, with little heaves of mis-emphasis on account of his shivering chest and his chattering teeth. The human didn't seem in the least incommoded by the cold.

"It's not a globe," he said. "It's my world, and I built it as I liked. It's not for you. It's *me*-topia. You're not supposed to be here."

"It's beautiful and it's empty, it's void. There aren't even deer or antelope or cows. How is that utopia?"

He was expecting the human to say *each to his own*, or *I prefer solitude* or something like that. But he didn't. He said: "Oh, my dearie, it's void on *this* side. I haven't got round to doing anything with this side. There's world enough and time for that. But on the *other* side of the coin, it's crowded with fun and interest."

"The other side," said Vins.

"It's a little over a thousand miles across," said Ramon Harburg Guthrie. "So it's pretty much the biggest coin ever minted. But it's not trillions of tonnes of matter; it's a thin circular sheet of dense-stuff, threaded with gravity wiring. There's some distortion. You know, it appears to go up at the rim, highlands in all directions, and on both sides, which is odd."

"Which is odd," repeated Vins. He didn't know why it was odd.

"It's odd because it's a gravitational effect. It's not that the *rim* is any thicker than any other place on the disc. But the gravitational bias helps keep the atmosphere from spilling over the sides, I suppose. I lost interest in that a while ago. And the central territories are flat enough to preserve the landscape almost exactly."

"Preserve the landscape," chattered Vins.

"I had it pressed into the underlying matter: the countries of my youth. That's on the other side. On *this* side is the reverse of the recto. It's the anti-Europe. But landscaped, of course. Water and biomass and air added; not just nude to space. No, no. It's ready. Sometime soon I'll live over this side for a while."

"The anti-Europe," said Vins. The cold seemed to be slowing his thought processes. He couldn't work it out.

"Stamp an R in a sheet of gold, and the other side will have a little—standing proud," he said. "You know that. Stamp a valley in one side of a sheet and you get a mountain on the other side."

The light was almost strong enough to see. That grey predawn light, so cool and fine and satiny.

"Stamp a *homo neanderthalis* out of the hominid base matter," Ramon Harburg Guthrie said, as if talking to himself, "and you stamp out a backwards-facing *homo sapiens* on the verso." This seemed to amuse him. He laughed, at any rate.

Vins put a knuckle to his eyes, and rubbed away some of the chill of the night. His features were—just—visible in the grey of the pre-dawn: a long nose, small eyes, a sawn-off forehead and eggshell cranium above it. Like a cartoon-drawing of a sapiens. Like a caricature from a schoolbook. A stretched out, elfin figure. A porcelain and anorexic giant.

"You're not welcome," Guthrie said, one final time. "This world is forbidden to you and your sort. I'll find your crewmates, and give them the sad news. But I'll deal with you first, and I'm sorry to say it, because I'm not a bloodthirsty sort of fellow. But what can I do? But—trespassers—will be—" and he raised his right hand.

This was the moment when Vins found out for sure what that right hand contained. It was a weapon, of course; and Vins was already ahead of the action. He pushed forward on his muscular neanderthal legs, moving straight for the human: but then he jinked hard as his sore ankle permitted him, ninety-degrees right. The lurch forward was to frighten Ramon Harburg Guthrie into firing before he was quite ready; the jink to the right was to make sure the projectile missed, and give him a chance of making it to the long grass.

But Ramon Harburg Guthrie was more level-headed than that. It's true he cried out, a little yelp of fear as the bulky neanderthal loomed up at him, but he kept his aim reasonably steady. The weapon discharged with a booming noise and Vins' head rang like a gong. There was a disorienting slash of pain across his left temple and he span and tumbled, his bad ankle folding underneath him. There was a great deal of pain, suddenly, out of nowhere, and his eyes weren't working. The sky had been folded up and propped on its side. It was grey, drained of life, drained of colour. But it wasn't on its side; Vins was lying on the turf beside the rock, and it was the angle at which he was looking at it.

There was a throb. This was more than a mere knock. It was a powerful, skull-clenching *throb*.

Nevertheless when Ramon Harburg Guthrie's leg appeared in Vins' line of sight, at the same right-angle as the sky, he knew what it meant. This was no time to be lying about, lounging on the floor, waiting for the coup-de-grace of another projectile in the—

He was up. He put all his muscular strength into the leap, and it was certainly enough to surprise Ramon Harburg Guthrie. Vins' shoulder, coming up like a piston upstroke, caught him under the chin, or against the chest, or somewhere (it wasn't easy to see); and there was an *ooph* sound in Vins' left ear. He brought his heavy right arm round as quick as he could, and there was a soggy impact of fist on flesh. Not sure which part of flesh; but it was a softer flesh than Vins's thick-skin-pelt. It was a more fragile bone than the thick stuff that constituted Vins's brain pan. Although, as he had said, the thickness didn't mean that there was any compromise in size.

The next thing that happened was that Vins heard a rushing noise. He looked where Ramon Harburg Guthrie had been, and there was only a thread, string wet and heavy with black phlegm, and it wobbled as if blown in the dawn breeze, and when Vins looked up he saw this string attached to the shape of a flying human male. The string broke and then another spooled down, angling now because the flying man (propelled by whatever powerpack he was wearing, whatever device it was that lifted him away from the

pull of the artificial gravity) was flying away to the north.

Stunned by his grazed head it took Vins a second to figure out what he was seeing. The string was a drool of blood falling from a wound he, Vins, had inflicted on the head of Ramon Harburg Guthrie. "Clearly," he said aloud, as he put a finger to his own head-wound, "clearly he's still conscious enough to be operating whatever fancy equipment is helping him fly away." His fingers came away jammy with red.

"Clearly I didn't hit him hard enough."

The sun was up now. In the new light Vins found the gun that, in his pain and shock, and in his hurry to get away, Ramon Harburg Guthrie had dropped.

* * * *

The sixth morning

Whilst the figure of the sapiens was still visible, just, in the northern sky Vins hurried inside the shuttle; he pulled out some food, the first aid pack, some netting. It all went into a pack, together with the gun.

When he came out the sapiens was nowhere to be seen.

His head was hurting. His ankle was hurting.

He hurried away through the long grass, following the path that Murphy had originally made. He didn't want to leave a new trail, one that would (of course!) be obvious from the air; but he didn't want to loiter by the shuttle. Who knew what powers of explosive destruction Ramon Harburg Guthrie could bring screaming out of the sky? It was his world, after all.

There were a number of lone trees growing high out of the grass before the forest proper began, and Murphy's old track passed by one of these. Vins let the first go, stopped at the second. He clambered into the lower branches, and shuffled along the bough to ensure that the leaves were giving him cover. He scanned the sky, but there was nothing.

There was time, now, to tend to himself. He pulled a pure-pad from the first aid and stuck it to the side of his head, feeling with his finger first. A hole, elliptically shaped, like the mouth of a hollow reed cut slantways across. Blood was pulsing out of it. Blood had gone over the left of his face, glued itself into his six-day-beard, made a plasticky mat over his cheek. He must look a sight. But he was alive.

He ate some food, and drank more than he wanted; but it wouldn't do to dehydrate. Exsanguinations provoke dehydration. He knew that. He was a scientist.

The leaves on the tree were plump, dark-green, cinque-foil. There were very many of them, and they rubbed up against one another and trembled and buzzed in the breeze. The sky was a high blue, clear and pure.

* * * *

The sixth afternoon

He dozed. The day moved on.

He heard somebody approaching, tramping lustily out of the forest. Presumably not Ramon Harburg Guthrie then.

It was Murphy. He could hardly have been making a bigger racket. Vins' strong fingers pulled up a chunk of bark from the bough upon which he rested, and when Murphy came underneath the tree he

threw it down upon him.

"Quiet," he hissed. "You want to get us killed?"

"No call to throw pebbles at me," said Murphy, in a hurt voice, his head back.

"It was bark, and it was called for. Come up here and be quick and be *quiet*."

* * * *

When he was up, and when Murphy had gotten past the point of repeating "What happened to your head? What did you do to your head? There's blood all over your head"—Vins explained.

Murphy thought about this. "It makes sense."

"Where did you get to, anyway?"

"I was exploring!" cried Murphy, in a large, self-justifying voice.

"Keep quiet!"

"You're not the captain, and neither you aren't," said Murphy. "You're not the one to tell me don't go exploring. Are we scientists? I've been down to the sea, to where the surf grinds thunder out of the beach. All manner of shells and..." He stopped. "This feller shot you?"

"It's his world."

He peered close at Vins' head. "That's some trepanning he's worked on you. That's some hole."

"He made it, and he says we're not allowed here. He'll kill all four of us. We can't afford to be blundering about."

"He's threatening murder. That would be murder."

"It surely is."

"And is he," asked Murphy, "not *concerned* to be committing murder upon us?"

"He's *homo sapiens*," said Vins. "I told you."

"And so you did. It's hard to take in. But it explains..." He trailed off.

"What does it explain?"

"This is an artefact, of course it is. That'll be the strange sky, that'll explain it. The stars don't move, or hardly, because it doesn't rotate. The sun—that'll be an orbiting device; flying its way around and about. Maybe a mirror—maybe a crystal globe refracting sunlight to produce a variety of effects." He seemed pleased with himself. "That explains a lot."

"You sound like Edwards," said Vins.

"Don't you be insulting my family name in suchwise fashion!"

"It's a thousand miles across," said Vins. "It's a flat disc. I don't know how he generates the gravity. It's clearly not by mass."

"So you met an actual breathing *homo sapiens*?" asked Murphy, as one might ask *you met a unicorn?*

you met a cyclops?

"I think," said Vins, "that he was expecting me to ... I don't know. To worship him as a god."

Murphy hooped with laughter, and then swallowed the noise before Vins could shush him. "Why on sweet wide water would he want such a thing?"

"He said that he—he said that *they*—uplifted us," said Vins. "Brought us out of the evolutionary dustbin, that sort of thing. Taught us the language. Left us their culture, save us the bother of spending thousands of years making our own. He was implying, I think, that we *owed* them."

"Did you ever read Frankenstein's monster's story? That's a *homo sapiens* way of thinking," said Murphy. "There's something alien in all that duty, indebtedness, belatedness, *you-owe-me* rubbish. But what you should've said to *him*, what you *should* have said, is: my right and respectfulness, sir, didn't Shakespeare uplift *you* out of the aesthetic blankness of the middle ages? Didn't Newton uplift you out of the ignorance of the dark ages, give you the power to fly the spaceways? Do you worship Newton as a god? Course you don't—you say thank you and tap at your brow with your knuckles and you *move on*."

"It's all a dim age," agreed Vins. He was referring to the elder age. It was something in the past, like the invention of the wheel or the smelting of iron, but only a few cranks spent too much time bothering about it. Too much to do.

"How could you fail to move on? What sort of a person would you be? An ancestor-worshipper, or something like that."

"They withdrew from the world," said Vins. "It's vacant possession. It's ours, now. All the rainy, stony spaces of it."

"And I say this is the same, this place we've stumbled into. I say this murphytopia is the same case—it's vacant possession."

He was quiet for a while. Vins was scanning the sky through the branches, looking for devices in the sky. Planes and such.

"I say it's ours and I say the hell with him," said Murphy, rolling his fist through the air .

"Here," repeated Vins. "It's forbidden us. He says it's forbidden to us."

"*He* says?" boomed Murphy, climbing up on his legs on the bough to shout the phrase at the manufactured sky. "And who's *he* to stop us?"

"Will you *hush*?" snapped Vins.

The sky was a clear watercolour wash from high dark blue to the pink of the low eastern sky. There were a few thready horizontal clouds, like loose strands of straw. The sun itself; or whatever device it was that circled the world to reflect sunlight upon it, was a small circle of chilli-pepper red.

"It is beautiful here," said Murphy, sitting down again on the turf.

"It's mild," agreed Vins.

"Does that mean that those old children's stories are true?" Murphy asked. "About them, and messing up the climate, and just walking away?"

"Who knows?"

"But this is what bugs me," said Murphy. "If they had the—if they *have* the capacity to build whole new worlds, like this one, and provide it with a beautiful climate, you know, *why* not simply sort out the climate on Earth? Why not reach their godlike fingers into the ocean flow and the air-stream and dabble a bit and return the Earth to a temperate climate?"

Vins didn't answer this at first; didn't think it was really addressed to him. But Murphy wouldn't let it go.

"Left the mess and just ran away. Cold and snow and rain and deserts of broken rock. That's downright irresponsible. Why *not* mend the mess they'd made? Why not?"

"I suppose," said Vins, reluctantly, "it's easier to manage a model like this one. Even a largescale model, like this one. The climate of the whole Earth—that's a chaotic system, isn't it? That's not a simple circular body of air a thousand miles across, that's a three-dimensional vortex tends of thousands of miles arc by arc. Big dumb object, he called it."

"He?"

"Maybe they can't crack the problem of controlling chaotic systems, any more than we can. *He* is the *homo sapiens* I met. When I said *he* called it that, I meant Ramon Harburg Guthrie called it that."

"Doesn't sound very godlike at all."

"No."

"And doesn't excuse them from fleeing their mess."

"I wasn't suggesting that it did."

"And what *were* you suggesting?"

Vins coughed. "I'll tell you—I'll say what I'm suggesting. Ramon Harburg Guthrie said that the elder *sapiens*, the wealthiest thousands, fled throughout the system. They built themselves little private utopias of all shapes and sizes. They're living there now, or their descendents are. But these should be *our* lands. Why would we struggle on with the wastelands and the ice—or," and he threw his hands up, "or Mars, for crying-in-the-wilderness, Mars?" He spoke as an individual who had lived two full terms on Mars: once during his compulsory military training and once during his scientific education. He knew whereof he spoke: the extraordinary cold, the barrenness, the slow and stubborn progress of colonisation. "Why would we be trying to bully a life out of Mars, of all places, if the system is littered with private paradises like this one?"

"I like the cut of your jib, the shape of your thinking, young Vins," said Murphy, saluting him and then shaking his hand. "But what of the man who scratched your head, there? What of that bold *sapiens* -fellow himself?"

"He thinks he's hunting us," said Vins. There was something nearly sadness in his voice, a species of regret. "He doesn't yet realise." He pulled the gun out of the bag.

* * * *

They sat for a while in silence. From time to time Murphy would go "Remind me what we're waiting for, here?" and Vins would explain it again. "He'll come back," he said. "He'll get his skull bandaged, or get it healed-up with some high-tech magic-ray, I don't know. But he'll be back. He has to eliminate all four of us before we can put a message where others can hear it."

"And shouldn't we be doing that? Putting the message out there for others to know where we are—to

know that such a place as *here* even exists?"

"That would require us to stay..." prompted Vins.

"Stay in the shuttle," said Murphy. "I see. So you reckon he'll? You think he'll?"

"What would *you* do? He came before with some sort of personal flying harness, like a skyhook. And a handgun. He'll come back heavier. He'll hit the ship first, to shut that door firm."

"But I guess we already tried the radio. Broadcast, I mean. But who'd be listening? Who'd be monitoring this piece of sky? Nobody." He picked some bark from the bough and crumpled it to papery shards between his strong fingers. "I suppose," he continued, "that this *homo sapiens* feller, he's not to know how long we've been here. For all he knows we just crashed here, this morning. Or we've been here a month."

"He'll have to take his chances," agreed Vins. "He'll come back and hammer the ship, smash and dint it into the dirt."

"Then what?"

"There are several ways it could go. If he's smart, if he were as smart as me, he'd lay waste to the whole area. I'd scorch the whole thousand square mile area."

"But he lives here!"

"He lives on the other side. He don't need here. But he won't do that. He's attached to it, he's sentimentally connected with the landscape. Its beauty. With its vacuity and its possibility. He won't do that. So, *if* he's smart, he'll do the second best option."

"Which is what?"

"He'll wait until dark, and then overfly the area with the highest-power infrared detection he can muster. He'd pick out our body heat. Or, at least, it would be hard for us to disguise that."

"You think he'll do that?"

Vins bared his teeth, and then sealed his lips again. "No, I don't think so. He'll want to hunt us straight down. He'll blow the ship and then come galloping down these paths we've trailed through the long grass. He'll try and hunt us down. He'll have armour on, probably. Big guns. He'll have big guns with fat barrels."

"Other people? Other *sapiens*?"

"That," said Vins, "is the real question. That's the crucial thing. He called this world *me* topia. Does that suggest to you, Murphy, a solitary individual, living perhaps with a few upgraded cats and dogs, maybe a metal-mickey or two?"

"I've no notion."

"Or does it suggest a population of a thousand *sapiens*, or a hundred thousand, living in the clean open spaces on the far side of this disc—living a medieval Europe, perhaps? Riding around dressed in silk and hunting the white stag?"

"I've really no notion."

"And neither have I. That'll be what we find out."

"You're a regular strategos," said Murphy, and he whistled through his two front teeth. "A real strategic thinker. You're wasted in the sciences, you are. And then?"

"Then?"

"Then what?"

"Well," said Vins. "That'll depend, of course. If it's just him, I don't see why we don't take the whole place to ourselves. There's a lot of fertile ground here, a lot of settlement potential for people back home. And if it's more than just him—"

"Maybe the far side is crawling with *homo sapiens*."

"Maybe it is. But *this* side isn't. We could pile our own people onto this side of the world and see what happens. See if we can arrive at an understanding. Who knows? That's a long way in the future." He peered through the leaves at the lustre of the meadows, the beaming waters, the warm blue sky.

* * * *

Murphy dozed, and was not woken by the brittle sound of something scratching along the sky. But he was awoken by the great basso profundo *whumph* of the shuttle exploding; a monstrous booming; a squat eggshaped mass of fire that mottled and clouded almost at once with its own smoke, and pushed a stalk of black up and out into an umbrella-shape in the sky. Some moments later the tree shook heartily. After that there was the random percussion and thud of bits of wreckage slamming back to earth.

Murphy almost fell out of the tree. Vins had to grab him.

Their ship was a crater now, and a scattering pattern of gobbets of plasmetal flowing into the sky at forty-five degrees and crashing down again to earth at forty-five degrees, the petal-pattern all around the central destruction.

"Look," Vins hissed.

A ship, shaped like the sleek head of a greyhound, flew through, banked, and landed a hundred yards from the crater. It ejected a single figure, and lifted off again.

The sound of the explosion was still rumbling in the air.

"Was that our ship?" said Murphy, stupidly. "Did he just destroy our—"

"Shush, now," said Vins, in a low voice. "That's him."

"Then who's flying the ship?"

"It'll be another *sapiens*, or else an automatic system, that hardly matters. The ship will circle back there, in case Edwards or Sinclair are nearby and come running out to see what the noise is. But *he'll* come after us. He knows I won't be fooled by—" And even as Vins was speaking the figure, armoured like an inflated figure, like a man made of tyres, turned its head, and selected one of the trails through the grass and starting trotting along it.

"That's a big gun he's carrying," Murphy pointed out. "He's coming this way with a very big gun."

"He's coming this way," said Vins, taking the pistol out of his sack and prepping it, "with his eggshell skull and his sluggish reactions."

"What are you going to do?" asked Murphy.

"Do you think he'll look upwards as he comes under this tree?"

"I don't know."

"Don't you?"

"And if you kill him, what then?"

"I hope not to kill him, not to kill him straight off," said Vins, in a scientific voice. "I'll need him to get that plane to come down so we can use it."

He was coming down the path. Vins and Murphy waited in the tree, waiting for him to pass beneath them—or for him to notice them, the two of them, in the tree and shoot them down.

He was armoured, of course. He came closer.

Maybe that's the way it goes. It's hard for me to be, from this perspective, sure. Indeed it's hard, sometimes, to tell the difference between the two different sorts of human. These neanderthals, after all, are not created *ex nihilo* via some genetically engineered miracle. They were ordinary sapiens adapted and enhanced, strengthened, given more endurance, the better to carry on living on their home world. Wouldn't you like greater strength, more endurance? Of course you would. You stay-at-home, you. Sentimentally attached to where you happen to be, that's you. The same people as the *sapiens*. Does it matter if they come swarming all over Guthrie's bubblewrapped world? Is that a better, or a worse, eventuality to that place remaining the rich man's private fiefdom?

It's all lots.

* * * *

The seventh day

The sun rose in the west, as it did. Clouds clung about the lower reaches of the sky like the froth on the lip of a gigantic ceramic bowl: white and frothy and stained hither and thither with touches of cappuccino brown.

The grasslands rejoiced in the touch of the sun. I say *rejoiced* in the strong sense of the word. Light passed through reality filters. Wind passed *over* the shafts of grass, moving them, pausing, moving again; but light passed *through* them. Wind made a lullaby song of hushes, and then paused to make even more eloquent moments of silence. But the light shone right through. Light passed through *two* profound reality filters. This is photons. These are photons. Photons were always already rushing faster than mass from the surface of the sun. They were passing through a hunk of crystal in the sky, modified with various other minerals and smart-patches, and were deflected onto the surface of the world. This globe served the world as its illumination. The photons passed again through the slender sheathes of green and yellow, those trillions of close-fitting rubber bricks we call cells; cells stacked multiply-layered and rippled out in all directions, gathered into superstructures of magnificent length and fragility; and in every single cell the light chanced through matter and came alive, alive, with the most vibrant and exhilarating and ecstatic thrumming of the spirit. That's where it's at. The light, the translucence of matter, the inflection of the photons, the grass singing, and just after.