

Enta Geweorc

by

Nicholas Waller

Wells Cathedral was a broken shell open to the fading stars of pre-dawn. As Peter Collard brought the *Alfred the Great* low over the wreck of the city he murmured *The Ruin* to himself. It might have been written about this place, today, not the remains of Roman Bath in Anglo-Saxon times:

*Wondrous is this stone wall
That doom destroyed.
The city shattered,
The work of giants crumbles*

The rubble, cratered streets were dark and empty. The people - if any still lived - would be hiding from the smartbombs, or each other. Collard wanted to yell at them: Why bother! It's the end of the world! Kill yourselves while it's still your choice!

If they could see his ship's official designation inscribed on her hull, people would hide from her, too. NATUSC S-19. A one-man Symbi hunter-seeker with her fearsome reputation made at Titan, she was an unprecedented flying object in Somerset's sky.

Despite the S-19's stota stealth systems, Collard felt exposed and under threat. Either his former colleagues now in watchful orbit or the relentless intelligent weapons that they'd kept pinned down on Earth might soon be tracking him; he did not know which was worse. Either way, it was time to push on to Cheddar and get it over with. After twelve years in space he was coming home, and today he would leave the *Alfred* and walk openly under home skies one last time.

As he pulled away from Wells he could see the remains of Glastonbury Tor across the moonlit water, its battered lump rising out of the new sea that was reclaiming the levels as the world's icecaps melted. He remembered climbing it with Jillian one crispy Christmas Day, when they were both sixteen. Winter fog blanketed the levels and made the tor a snowy island in a ghost ocean. King Alfred himself might have been standing in the mist, waiting for the Danes with sword in hand and the Men of the West at his side. To make it perfect a full moon rose just as the sun, followed by a brilliant Evening Star, set beyond the sea.

Eala Earendel! Engla beorhtast, ofer middangeard monnum sended! Jill declaimed, her frosted words writhing in the air. That's from *Christ*, she added, in *The Exeter Book*. He knew that: *Hail Venus! Brightest angel, sent over men of middle-earth*. It was hard to avoid Old English poetry at a school named The Kings of Wessex, and he was glad he hadn't even tried.

God only knew what had happened to Jillian in the Cataclysm, but Collard had joined Natu Space Command and was far outsun of Venus when it came. Tensions were high, a system-wide big-bloc war a possibility. He'd been helping monitor Chinasian settlements round Saturn when the first reports came up from Earth of a Pearl Harbor-strike on the North Atlantic Treaty Union. Chinasian bionukes had attacked Frankfurt, Chicago and Bristol, leaving tens of thousands dead. Collard had never felt so angry or powerless, even while pouring destruction into the Titan Chinase colony. He regretted it now. Too late. Thirty thousand deaths his responsibility, and he'd had plenty of time since to think about the crackling domes and the last desperate signals out: cries for help, messages of love, calls for vengeance. With due inevitability the Natu-Chinasia War had followed.

But the initial reports were wrong and Chinasia was not at fault. The original attacks on Bristol and the other cities had been a half-cock sortie by rogue experimental Natu intelliweapons. Probably; though another theory held it had been a secret strategic virtual wargame gone horribly wrong, bursting accidentally into the concrete world with no one admitting to running it. A third said it was a deliberate move by top Natu commanders to provoke the expected conflict on their terms.

In any case, it was the first salvo in what became the Cataclysm.

Even now Collard found it hard to grasp just how misguidedly suicidal the new arms race had been. Aiming to make each of their weapons programmes dominant, both Earth's major treaty blocs had linked hard/soft assets with AII-grids to develop robust, flexible military systems that could not only take real-time battle decisions themselves but also design their own long-term and evolving replication. It sounded plausible, ensuring the survival of a genuine deterrent even in the event of the incapacity of man-manned command and control nets, but there were commentators who had warned that these remote autonomous weapons were close to independence and humankind stood on a precipice. The oldsters were dismissed as the kind of defeatist scaremongers who'd once thought nanotech would turn the world to grey goo.

But when the expected big-bloc war was triggered by the events on Earth and Titan, the protective eneurial sheaths came off - and Earth's uplifted weapons on both sides defected, disappearing into a sentient black hole of their own fabrication. Instead of fighting under human guidance for human goals, the most advanced Natu and Chinasian intelliweapons on Earth coalesced to implement their own strategic agenda: going to war on humanity and its remaining dumb and symbiotic arsenals.

Served us right, perhaps, and the rest is history. The end of history. One saving grace had been that the intelligent weapons were flawed, not fully developed, not ready.

But that grace period was now over, and no one now really knew how the weapons had used it.

Collard forced himself back to the present, and checked his surroundings. There was nothing else in the air. Perhaps the West Country had been overkilled enough, leaving little need for patrols. More likely the smartbombs were consolidating their position, building resources for another attempt to get into space. So far they and their replicatories had not got loose in the solar system, but evidence indicated that strange, inscrutable new machine nurseries were proliferating across Earth.

As he flew along the southern flank of the brooding Mendip Hills, now scraped bare of grass, scrub and trees, Collard kept an eye out for alarms on his hu displays. Deserted villages on the new coastline slid by as smudges in the gloom, still dutifully named by the mapabase: Wookey Hole, Westbury-sub-Mendip, Rodney Stoke. Glimmering in the pale light, the risen sea before him stretched across to Wedmore, isolating Nyland and Brent Knoll again, and on out west to merge with the Bristol Channel and the chill Atlantic. It was mysterious, peaceful, even beautiful. Collard felt he was rolling back the centuries to a fresh and empty natural world, not sliding forward into a desiccated dead future. He was *The Wanderer*, his favourite of the surviving old English poems.

*Where are the horses? Where the men?
Where the treasure-gifters?
So Time passes away
Growing dark under night's shade
As if they never were.*

The ship overflew Draycott on a low descending arc and side-slipped towards Cheddar. Collard had a good idea what to expect now, though it was only hours since he'd returned to Earthspace, avoiding the human lunar establishments and orbital installations.

He'd read up on the conflict, he'd scanned the bands during his descent and got only static, and now he'd seen the effects of four years of Cataclysm in the ruins of cities from Adelaide to Zagreb: the defoliated jungles, the melting ice, the biosphere so out of control that Earth might shortly become a Mars with oceans.

Collard drifted the *Alfred* across the just-familiar landmarks of smashed, flooded Cheddar. Impulse cells ripped the sea into boiling foam as he looked down on the inundated ruins of houses and several pubs, the Bath Street banks and shops, the Kings of Wessex school, the heliport, the swimming pool and ice rink; and before them, the church and 14th century market cross, the Saxon royal palaces and the Roman villa, the Neolithic workings; all wrecked, abandoned and submerged, all gone, all now shells, or craters, memories of post-holes and graves and heaps of rubble, shattered and drowned and broken apart...

*...How unearthlike it will be
When the world's wealth lies waste -
Wind-blasted walls, rime-crusteds ruins.*

Collard knew he could pinpoint the site of his old family house easily enough, but found, unexpectedly, that he did not want to. Besides, there was no one to acknowledge the prodigal Wanderer returned.

The sun was not yet up but it would not be long now. He turned away, floating the *Alfred* over Tweentown and into Cheddar Gorge. He knew both words meant the same thing, throat, but to Collard it had always been more like a deep scar in the Mendips, a cut in the Earth herself. He followed the route of what had been a landscaped tourist walkway that snaked along below the cliffs, overlaying an old metalled road that in turn had been built over a prehistoric river.

The hills bulked ochre-grey against the lightening sky, as familiar to Collard as they must have been to King Alfred and his men, but the gorge itself was not quite as he remembered. Many of the limestone cliffs and the Pinnacles had changed, broken under fierce onslaughts that had formed new slopes of bouldered scree and created new rockfaces no tourist had seen. It was hard to believe this proud but blasted stone had been made by countless generations of ancient tiny sea creatures piling up their dead bodies over thousands of centuries. We've been piling stuff up for generations too, thought Collard, and look where it has got us.

He aimed to climb the steps of Jacob's Ladder onto the southside cliffs and stand up there on what remained of the Pinnacles, those sharp teeth against the sky, perhaps where King Edmund had reined in his horse and averted disaster. Collard had stood there once with Jillian as an old hot-air balloon from Bristol passed by at their level, its flame roaring furiously, the man in the basket shouting for them to take a picture.

And then what? What would he do?

As he drifted the *Alfred* slowly back down the gorge on his informal recce, his thoughts cycling aimlessly, a screen spike caught his eye. A flicker of light. A fire, a flashbeam?

He overlaid a hu-3D map. There was a heat source, with no evidence of mechs. It was at a location he recognised despite the landscape changes: a rising combe on the less steep north side of the valley. It had once been heavily tree-filled, somewhere up from where Lion Rock had stood and part of the round-the-gorge walking route. There'd been a cave up there that could not be far from the source of the spike.

He decided to check it out. It was a project, a minor goal. There could be tens of millions of people still alive on Earth, scattered or in hiding, and it might be informative, or at least interesting, to speak to some of them. Here, there could conceivably be people he had known. Though whether they would want to speak to him... Well, he would find out.

Alfred's limited AI capability soon scoped an ideal landing spot, and sooner than he expected Collard found himself setting her down at a level, sheltered site, a flat-blasted area in the mouth of the Gorge just above the new waterline. Impelled dust streamed outwards, billowing; a gentle touch and the gins whined down to nothing.

So he was here; his first time home in years.

Although Collard was keen to get out, he took the eva procedure steadily. He undressed before unplugging, cleaning and racking the symbolicals that linked him to the ship, and then he showered thoroughly. Under the steaming water he rubbed his hands over his permanently depilated scalp and skin, as if examining his pallid, fleshy body for defects. There was really only one: the NATUSC ID on his forearm; that and a lack of fitness. It would be good to get out of the relentlessly militech environment of the *Alfred* and stand on real earth under a real, naked sun.

As he took his light silvery evasuit out of storage he noticed the COLLARD tag on the chest. He unclipped his multitool from the webbing and carefully sliced off the name. The suit was a tight fit, but weighed little and carried built-in defences on the backpack as

well as other useful survival gear: nectar for energy, a flashlight, a lighter, some cord, a symbiotic pistol, the multitool. No knowing what kind of survivor nuts might be out there with tattoos, shaved heads and heavy weapons.

Once all checks were complete Collard opened the airlock. The blast of warm humidity was a shock after his controlled cool-air cabin, like getting off a plane at a tropical airport. But the smells were different; the atmosphere was rough and heated, a noxious mix of scorched vegetation, burnt rubber and tangy biochemicals. He wanted to gag, he could feel toxins working down his throat, ripping his blood cells...

Or was he just imagining it? He put his helmet on over his bald head anyway, and sealed the visor.

Breathing easier, he stepped through the hatch onto the ramp and took a look around. The sky was a hazy sulphur, getting lighter by the minute as the rising sun lit up the bare upper slopes of the Mendips. Its ancient landscape of trees and pastures and strawberries had been blown away by storms and replaced by a churned moonscape. It was hard to imagine the war coming here: towering concussive explosions, raging hot winds, terrified humans and animals, swirling ash, a hell on earth: a drought followed by a nuclear barrage that had set fire to the air and sucked up the people.

*War ravaged them, took them far off
And so God made an end of the World*

But not everything in the gorge was gone. Collard was glad to see bracken and trees that had managed to cling on in sheltered corners. No doubt there were mosses, lichens, nettles, insects. Maybe no Cheddar Pinks or buzzards remained, but life was persistent and would see out the AIs. Cheddar cockroaches, probably.

He walked down the black ramp and stepped onto the Earth. The surface texture was friable, mud baked crusty but only a couple of centimetres thick. He crunched through it as though it was crisp snow, before turning to get a good look at *Alfred the Great* for the first time in months. Sixty metres long, blackly hard to make out, she was bump-dotted with impulsors, plato units, sensors and weapons, and looked chill as marble. He had mixed emotions as she shut down in discussion with his key protocols and biometric signatures. NATUSC S-Class ships were symbiotic, a guard against viruses and smartbomb cons, and for a moment he felt naked and self-conscious turning away from her, his only true partner.

He also had oddest feeling that he wasn't supposed to park there, and some jobsworth warden would come round the corner and tell him so. But there were no wardens, and suddenly he felt liberated, a weight sliding from his shoulders. He had made it, he was home, and free. He smiled, despite everything.

Tracking the route of the old road up the Gorge was not as simple at ground level as it had seemed from the air. He kept close under the south cliff side but had to work his way around massive boulders, across crater shatter and over awkward heaps of broken rock. The disaster had happened too recently for the detritus to have bedded down properly, and he was wary of even large rocks shifting their balance under his weight. And what was all this he was walking on? The obliterated sites of shops that had once sold scrumpy, ice cream, truckles of Cheddar cheese and froth for tourists. Not far back was the White Hart, where he'd worked in his college breaks serving Butcombe and a ploughman's to the hordes of Midlanders who had poured down the M5 and A38.

And now where were Simon and Kay Kay, the owners, and all their customers and everyone else? Perhaps he was walking on their ashes, kicking their dust to atoms. Had catastrophe had come swiftly, like Pompeii's, or had everybody escaped days before? But where could they have gone? The end of the Earth was everywhere.

It was not all dry and dusty. Collard was glad to see patches of dampness on the ground, indicating the Yeo still trickled, a little fresh water rising from deep under the limestone hills. People could survive on that, and probably there were still fish in the sea. For shelter there were the ancient caves, though big collapses looked to have shut down Gough's and Cox's tourist traps forever, along with Jacob's Ladder. If anyone had sheltered there-

WHAM!

A hefty rock smashed into the ground near Collard's feet; twisting to identify its origin he overbalanced and fell heavily on his back. He peered up a steep slope with rocky outcrops. Bang! - another tumbling rock slammed in, even closer. He rolled and scrabbled away on his knees, ungainly. No accident, then: someone was ranging him. He activated his defences as a small stone hit the side of his helmet with a harsh crack that left him dizzy. Was that from the same place? He rolled again, scanned the outcrops...

There! Movement. A big rock coming. "Go, dart, two!" he shouted. One, two sharp zings as his evasuit fired a pair of tiny missiles he eye-directed through his helmet hud. One blasted the falling rock and the other zipped out in a wide curve; he couldn't see through his raised arm and a pattering hail of stone splinters.

"Wait!" he half-called, too late. Blam! The dart detonated at its target, high up.

Collard pushed to his feet as a small avalanche clattered down the slope towards him, stones and pebbles sliding and bouncing, and with them a scraggy human shape that rolled like an unstrung puppet before thwacking flatly onto the ground, pathetic and lifeless. Collard groaned. The last few pebbles pattered to rest and the silence returned.

Collard knelt by the body with some distaste. Although he had personally caused tens of thousands of deaths he had not seen a fresh corpse close up before. It was definitely dead: bloody, a boy, eleven, or maybe fourteen, his skull crushed. Collard wondered what he'd been living on. Not much, by the look of him: he was thin and barefoot, the ragged remains of some indecipherable football team kit barely covering his sunburnt, scarred skin. He shut the boy's eyes.

Now, had the kid acted alone or did he have friends? Had he been responsible for the entire attack? Had he lit the fire? Was he part of a gang? Collard stood and thought for a moment before deciding to carry on. He might be watched, but if this was the level of threat he faced his systems should have little problem coping.

He noticed he was breathing deeply, and sweating. The attack had fired his adrenalin, his animal survival instinct. Interesting. There was still a difference between deciding to end your life on your terms and having someone else kill you on theirs.

He left the body where it lay and moved out into the open where he would be a less easy target. If he had done that before, the kid would still be alive; the same if he had not come back here at all.

If, if, if. His life was full of ifs and things he should or should not have done.

On the other hand, what was there for the skinny brat to live for? He was better off suddenly dead while still young and healthy and perhaps optimistic, instead of starving and boiling slowly over years in this heat haze.

He checked. The temperature was rising, so he increased the cooling in his suit.

He tried to put the attack out of his mind and concentrate on where he was going. He was almost at the rising combe, which started near the old tourist information office. Collard scrambled up a slope to join the remains of an old footpath once well shaded by trees. He saw no flowers, and there was no sight or sound of any human or animal, not even a bird, as he struggled up the path, slithering and stumbling on well-worn rock, compacted earth and

exposed tree roots. Even the jackdaws that used to call and caw across the wide abyss of the gorge had learnt to shut up, assuming any lived.

For years out in space he had longed to go walking in the Mendips again, or Snowdonia, or the Lake District, striding high across empty heathered hills and rocky outcrops, at one with nature, a stiff breeze full in his face and blast-cleaning his soul. In his imagination it had been easy going, looking down on distant villages as though he was flying. Now he was doing it for real instead of in virtuality, but the uphill going was a slog, hard and physical, that strained his underused muscles and made him know he was in the world, engaged with it, even though his suit made him feel disconnected from his surroundings. His legs soon felt leaden and unresponsive, his lungs burning. The evasuit was not designed for 1G hill-walking, and though cooled and lightweight, it chafed uncomfortably.

He shook his head ruefully. As a child he could never have imagined wearing a protective suit in Cheddar, that all this death, pollution and destruction would come here of all places. It was like Disneyland being atom-bombed: what was the point? And at the same time, why not? Everywhere else was equally unlikely. Why Dresden, why Carthage, why My Lai? Why Titan? Or any other place where people got up and put on their clothes in the morning and suffered maiming, or death, or the ruin of their lives and dreams by nightfall. It was just another map reference.

He stopped, panting, clearly not the nimble eighteen-year old who'd once led Pioneer scout groups here on treks. He took a slug of nectar from his neck nipple, looking out over the landscape as the buzz hit. The sun was well up now and the view was dismal. Beyond the ugly wrack of half-flooded Cheddar water drowned the fields where generations of cows had grazed, inundating centuries of drainage rhynes and ditches and willows. Romantically silver in the predawn moonlight, the shallow new sea now looked harsh, mud-brown and swampy under the blistering sun.

Somewhere out under that grease-slicked surface was the old Cheddar freshwater reservoir, where amateur sailors had tacked their dinghies on Sunday afternoons. Almost certainly they were sunk beneath the rising waves, but it would be nice to think a flotilla of refugee boats had sailed bravely away on *the paths of exile on the sea*. He felt exiled himself, detached.

Here is man, kinsman, friend

*Here is life - All gone
After fleet flowering.
The roots of the world are rotten.*

What the hell was he doing? You can never go home, everyone knew that. With all the people gone, all that remained was rock and water.

Alfred the Great looked tiny from this distance, almost hidden behind the shoulder of the gully, but she was more of a home than this beat-up landscape. He'd spent so many cramped years in her, and yet already he felt an urge to get back on board, plug in and soar out.

Fight that! He had come here to close a circle.

There was a noise, a snap behind him. He turned. Someone tracking him? A crackle in the evasuit systems? A rat? Hard to tell. But as he scanned up the gully he saw his goal above him, about two hundred metres away through the blackened stumps of trees. The cave entrance, a thin black slit in a low escarpment.

Nothing moved near it. That was no surprise, but to be safe, he unholstered his symbi pistol. He would check the place out quickly, and then leave and head up to the high Pinnacles. And then decide what to do.

By the time he had hiked up close to the mouth of the cave, Collard was beginning to hope he would find nothing and no one. But there were signs of life: a large worn area of flattened ash and mud, beaten down by many feet; something that looked like it might once have been an armchair; and a ring of blackened stones, the thinnest tendril of smoke curling up from under the earth heaped in it. Leaning against the rock wall were several sticks - spears? Fishing rods? And sitting by them were rocks and stones; perhaps they were tools, or perhaps they were simply random rocks and stones. A little way down the hill in a scooped hollow was an untidy midden of bones and skins, broken bottles, empty tin cans, pots, wrappers and dirty clothes and who knows what other garbage and excrement.

Somebody had been here until recently, living off the land and raiding old cellars and shops. No doubt an anthropologist could have said how many people the space supported, but Collard had no idea. He glanced down towards where the *Alfred* was parked, but she was out of sight, which made him feel lonely. Suppressing a desire to turn back immediately, he went up to the cave mouth, listening. Nothing.

"Hallo!" he called. The hoarseness of his voice reminded him how long it was since he had spoken to anyone. Was there some

response, or an echo? Perhaps his helmet was not helping. Grimacing, he cracked his visor and sniffed the air. It was not as harshly chemical as he had thought before, though now there was a hint of human waste and dead things.

"Hallo!" he called again, squeaking this time. He realised he was nervous. "Anyone there?"

He heard a groan. Collard shone his chest light into the gloomy, dank interior. It smelt of piss, and there was more rubbish inside: clothes and food and skins and a broken table and clutter, including what looked like some old mattresses on the floor, and filthy sleeping bags.

His gaze was drawn to a rag-clothed shape mixed up in its own set of grubby blankets on a low rock shelf. It was as still as if dead, but Collard sensed he was being watched.

"Are you all right?" he said as he stepped into the chill cave. He reached out his free hand. The shape, whatever it was, seemed to shrink back at first, but then sat up. It was swathed head to knee in torn and knotted rags: clothes or camouflage, or both. It looked less like a live human and more like an excavated mummy, until a thin hand pulled some of the rags apart and revealed a pair of large dark eyes that blinked rapidly.

Collard wondered how he looked: a lit bulked-up silver-shining super-tech silhouetted against the dazzling outdoors, with a gun.

"Hallo," he said, turning off his light and stepping back, hands raised. "Are you all right?"

"Are you a dyk, then?" said a woman's voice from inside the rags. She sounded tired.

"A what?"

"A dyk. D-Y-K, dyk. One of the new smart weapons..."

"I don't understand. Are you OK?"

"He said they'd come in human-form one day..."

That was news to Collard. "Smart weapons in human form? Who said?"

"He's dead now. Aren't they all?"

"Well, I'm alive, and I'm human," he said. To prove it he unclipped his helmet and laid it on the ground. "There. See?" He rubbed a hand over his itchy scalp.

"He said they were called dyks. Dick Dybbuks, short-for, I think," she said. In her left hand Collard saw a sharp little knife, its wavering tip tracing a tiny figure-of-eight in the air. "He *pricked* people to see if they were real or androids, and one day someone *stabbed* him right back."

"And..?"

"And killed him, of course."

"Well, don't attempt to use violence on me," said Collard. "Did he ever discover any, ahh, dyks? Man-form weapons? That's new..."

"No. No. But I thought I heard an explosion..." she said. "A while ago. Was that a tellibomb?"

Collard hesitated. "There've been no intellibombs or exploding androids that I know of," he said, truthfully enough. He coughed; he felt tired and rusty, his voice too raw for talk. He tongued his suit's neck nipple again, the liquid soothing his throat.

"Maybe I was dreaming," she said, hazily. "I dream a lot. Loud bangs, and men with clubs. And food."

Collard was not surprised. Fever, probably, and hunger-induced hallucinations. He glanced round the clammy cave, and outside at the burned woods. Conditions were far worse now than those the first cave-dwellers in Cheddar Gorge had dealt with ten thousand years before, when the air was clean and the forests full of animals and berries.

And now... He had heard reports off the orbital monitors of seething low-tech warfare across the world. Fighting for food and water must have come hard when the globalised economy snapped and unraveled, people suddenly tossed out of their universal cybermarkets into a million local stone ages, without any sophisticated stone age survival skills. Now that he was down here amongst them too, Collard found it surprising anyone at all was able to survive, apart, he supposed, from any unassimilated aboriginals in places like Brazil.

At least there was something he could do for her. One-handed, he fished a nectar bulb out of his first-aid pocket. He popped the top with the multitool blade. "You'll feel better," he said, leaning forward to hand the bulb to her, and trying not to react to her pungent smell.

With her eyes on him and her knife still pointed at his neck, she pulled a rag away from her nose and mouth and sniffed at the syrup suspiciously. "Who *are* you?" she said.

He hesitated, and came up with the first name he could think of. "I'm... Wells. Barton Wells." Damn, not very good. "Here," he said hurriedly. "I'll prove it's safe." He took the bulb from her, sipped it, and handed it back.

She sniffed at it again, and squeezed it into her mouth. Her eyes widened as though she had been electrocuted. Collard could only imagine the hit to someone in her condition. "Amazing!" she said wonderingly. She squashed the bulb to get the last drops. "Any more?"

"Better not," he said. "It's strong stuff."

She sat straight up and pulled away the rest of the rags round her head, revealing cropped dark sweat-matted hair framing a pale face. Collard wondered how old she was. Maybe his age, or more likely a twenty-something who'd had a tough time. She was emaciated and dirty, sallow-skinned with lines of exhaustion at her eyes. Almost absent-mindedly, she slipped her knife back into her rags, her tongue licking round her cracked lips.

"I can feel it burning... You must be from New Zealand!"

"What's in New Zealand?" said Collard, holstering his pistol in turn.

"Sanctuary," she said. Some colour was coming back into her cheeks. "We know they must have escaped all this! They're so... isolated. Have I passed the Test?"

According to Collard's information New Zealand had been as fried as everywhere else on Earth, its disaster compounded by colossal war-triggered earthquakes. He hesitated, before deciding to tell the truth. "There's no sanctuary there that I know of."

She did not seem upset at the news; she leant back against the cave wall, oddly relaxed. "Dykman told us stories about that, too. The silk togas and the spring lamb rolls... And wine from the sun." Her smile reached to her eyes, which were big, dark and shining. He'd always found women with eyes like that attractive. In fact, she looked vaguely familiar...

"Where *did* you come from?" she asked.

He ignored her. It couldn't be, after twenty-odd years... but maybe...

"Jillian?" he said. "Are you Jill Stewart? from Kings of Wessex?"

"No." She looked up and closed her eyes, as if trying to remember something. "I was Kirsty Caylee Mortensen. Back when we needed long names." Her eyes flicked open. "Kings of Wessex? What's that - an estate agent?" She gasped, something like a laugh. "Are you looking for vacant properties? Take your pick! And your shovel!" She started giggling.

"Kings of Wessex was my old school," said Collard, feeling oddly defensive.

"I thought Wessex was fiction," said Kirsty dreamily. "Thomas Hardy and so on. I haven't read him in years. I'm not sure if I ever did. Maybe I saw something on tv. Remember tv?"

"No, you're in Wessex now," said Collard, doggedly. "It was an Anglo-Saxon kingdom, you know, like Mercia, and Northumbria, and they built hunting palaces in Cheddar..."

"Bugger all things to hunt now," Kirsty murmured. "I've tried."

Collard looked closely at her face, concerned. She was sleepy. Nectar was supposed to be a pick-me-up for field operatives, not a

sedative. Perhaps it was too rich; he hoped he hadn't poisoned her.

"It was a thousand years ago and more," he said, talking to hold her attention. "Once King Edmund was nearly killed hunting on the gorge. A stag leapt off the cliffs, the hounds pelting after it, yapping to their deaths. Edmund managed to rein in his horse right at the edge of the precipice. He gave thanks to God by revoking the exile of St Dunstan..."

"And bugger all gods here too. Lots of people died on the cliffs, and everywhere else. You get used to it."

"I suppose so," said Collard, uncertainly. Kirsty opened her eyes and smiled at him, an open, friendly smile. Taken aback, Collard hurried on. "Anyway, when they first built my old school, a millennium later, they dug up the ancient palace foundations. That's about it." He gestured at the path outside the cave, smiling too. "When I was a kid I used to imagine the ghosts of those old kings galloping over the hills on starry nights, their spears glittering under a hunter's moon."

Kirsty glanced dubiously out of the cave into the bright landscape as if she expected some kings to come riding by at that moment. "It's a long time since anyone told me a story. Not Hardy but Tolkien, then?"

"Sort of; but it really happened... And Tolkien was an Anglo-Saxon scholar-"

"I never much liked Tolkien."

"I see," said Collard, reddening. He sat down on a rock. His eyes had by now adjusted to the gloom, and he could see just what a slum the inside of the cave was. It had been a long day, a long week, a long twelve years, and now he was having a surreal conversation he hadn't bargained for.

"Would you like a cup of tea?" said Kirsty, brightly.

"You've got tea?" said Collard, incredulous.

"Joking. Sorry. You'll think I'm mad. It seemed polite to offer." To Collard's surprise, Kirsty suddenly started crying, tears trickling through the dirt on her face. She screwed her eyes up tight and started rocking, like the disturbed psychiatric patients he'd seen on Deimos. "Sometimes I pretend I'm in here for fun and in ten minutes I can go have a Tortelli's with the girls from the office then metro home to get on the grid or watch a soap, you know?" She sniffed loudly, then dragged a raggedy wrist across her nose, smearing tears and snot. "Or just turn it off. But I know I can't. It's all gone. I'm here now and have to deal with it." She took a deep breath. "Onward, Kirse. So who are you, and why are you here?"

Collard felt reluctant to answer. "How do you manage to survive?" he asked instead.

"I've got water." Near her was a jug; she picked it up, looked in it, swirled it around, and grimaced. "And I can get food."

Maybe it was the kid he'd killed who had been helping her, and vice versa; the two a team, bringing water, fish, tins. Scavenging. Damn. Why hadn't she mentioned a helper? Perhaps she didn't trust him and was being cunning, playing her cards close. There might be others, or a gang. They could be listening now, getting closer. Jump him and slit his throat. He had been careless, complacent. The world had changed. This was not home any more.

He picked up his helmet and stood, feeling suddenly cold. "We'd better get you to my ship. Give you a checkup."

"Your ship?" said Kirsty as he took her hand. She did not resist as he helped her to her feet, and she held onto the arm of his evasuit as he led her out of the cave into the crashing sunlight. She shielded her eyes with a hand and looked around. The landscape seemed too bright, and Collard screwed up his eyes. He felt an uncomfortable tickling in his back; was she expecting someone? Maybe an arrow would plunge between his shoulder blades. He turned round, but there was no one there. He felt sweat prickle his face.

"Did you sail over from Wales, then?" she asked, interrupting his thoughts.

"No," he said.

Kirsty stepped carefully, looking down at where her feet were going. "I don't normally go out in the day since the ozone layer was whacked." Blinking in the light, she appeared only now to take note of what Collard was wearing. Her hand explored his arm and chest, silver reflecting brightly in the sun. "Weird material." She touched a small badge on his shoulder, black, with stars and an acronym.

"NATUSC?" she said. "That's Natu-"

"Space Command," said Collard.

"Is this for real?"

Collard nodded. "Though I'm... I'm retired."

Kirsty shook her head, slowly. "But NATUSC was destroyed. Utterly."

"No. Did this, ahh, dykman tell you that, too?"

"Everyone knew it. *After the hammering of Titan by Collard the Barbarian the Chinasian and Natu Space forces fought each other to a standstill, and then both were utterly crushed by the arsenals of AI.*"

"Not yet," said Collard, wearily. "Neither Natu nor the Chinese. Despite... despite Collard. Anyway, Collard didn't start the war, the AIs did." Better get off the subject of himself. "How can you know

anything about anything, living in a cave? Looking at shadows on the wall?" He wiped an arm across his sweaty brow. He breathed deep, calming himself. "Believe me, I know. I've seen reports. Chinasian and Natu together, fighting the joint enemy. They, we, have kept the bombs bottled up on Earth. So far. They're not in space yet."

"You're telling the truth...?"

"Yes. But that day will soon come." Collard squinted at the dirty, hazed sky. The air was getting hotter by the minute as the blazing sun rose higher. Kirsty was silent by his side, presumably slotting the new information into her world view.

"Look, sorry," said Collard. "But come on. I must get back to the ship. I'm not acclimatised like you."

She looked into his pale face, and then allowed him to guide her down the slope, away from the cave.

"If Natters and the Chinkees are still in control in space," she said hesitantly, thinking things out, "then how come we haven't been rescued?"

"We?"

"Us on Earth. We thought up there was empty, everybody dead. But it isn't."

"Quarantine," he said.

"Space is quarantined?"

He smiled. "No, the Earth. Isolated, no traffic allowed. It's a standoff, I guess."

"We were abandoned. Simple as that."

"There isn't that much living-space off-Earth."

"Especially after Titan. So how come you're here?"

Collard turned his face away, no good answer to hand. Besides, war or no war, it would have been an impossible population move. And pointless; Earth still had a thousand times more usable land and air and water than anywhere else in the system. Or maybe a million. If it wasn't for the smartbombs, Earth would be a green and blue and white planet still capable of supporting twelve billion people.

If, if, if.

No use crying about that now. With relief, Collard saw the nose of the *Alfred* emerge from behind the rim of the combe. It was good to see the chunky lines of her powerpods and weapons again. He did not mention it to Kirsty until a few more steps revealed the whole ship standing small but proud and marble-black on the detritus of the gorge floor. She looked as though she had come from a million years away.

"There she is," said Collard. He looked to see Kirsty's reaction, and was gratified. She stared down at the ship, her eyes glistening, even nakedly greedy.

"Wow," she said softly. "I believe you. So manned ships still fly." She swallowed. "What's it called?"

"I call her *Alfred the Great*."

"*She's* called Alfred?" said Kirsty, giggling. "Come on. I never heard NATUSC was whimsical about their ships. What's her official name?"

"King Alfred was a King of Wessex," he said. "It's my name for her."

"Jeez, another king?"

"Alfred. The greatest. See, by 878 AD the seven English kingdoms were overrun by marauding Danes..." He could recite the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle entry as though it was in front of him. "*This year about mid-winter, after twelfth-night, the Danish army stole out of Chippenham, and rode over the land of the West-Saxons; where they settled, and drove many of the people over sea; and of the rest the greatest part they rode down, and subdued to their will; - all but Alfred the King. He, with a little band, uneasily sought the woods and fastnesses of the moors...* He was living hand-to-mouth with his men and they were almost wiped out. If they had been, we wouldn't be speaking English now-"

"Cha! We'd have learned it from the Americans like everyone else."

Collard smiled. It was good to be talking with a real person after so long, someone who could react. By design *Alfred* had extremely constrained AI and you could talk to her as you might a trained dog, but that was hardly the same. "Anyway, the king rallied the men of Somerset and Wiltshire, and defeated the Danes." He pointed out across the water, to a low rising island ridge dotted with ruins a few kilometres away. "They signed the treaty that year at Wedmore. Inside a century Alfred's grandson was the first King of a united England."

And within a thousand years, the British Empire spread across a quarter of the globe, and a hundred years after that the United States of America had hegemony, and a hundred years after that Natu did - and in some way it all turned on what Alfred managed to do right here.

And yet, so what.

In another century from now, or maybe even ten years, all meaning of England and the USA and Natu would be burned away, leaving a dead world patrolled by sentient missiles. He shivered, despite the heat.

"So now I get why you're here," said Kirsty, smiling as if she had just solved a problem. "With this *Alfred*."

Collard shook his head, ruefully. "I doubt it. It's personal."

"I'm not stupid!" said Kirsty whispering loudly, as though half-worried there were hidden spies nearby. "You're the resistance, aren't you! To the smartbombs!"

"No..."

"You don't fool me. Humanity fights back! So what's your strength? More than a little band of men in the woods!"

Collard smiled sadly. "No. I'm afraid it's not that."

"Reconnaissance, then?"

"No."

"Advance planning... strategy, tactics... for some future operation..."

"No. That's impossible." He wished she would not go on about it. He felt hot and uncomfortable, and missed the cool, controllable air of the *Alfred*. How did people ever live like this, out on the surface, subject to the whims of the climate?

"Why?" said Kirsty.

"I don't think you realise the magnitude of the task."

"Then why are you here!" said Kirsty, angrily. "What the hell was that talk about fighting the bloody Danes?"

Collard looked into her eyes. "Don't you want ever to get back to where you're from, Kirsty? Before- Well, before the end?"

"OK, OK." She threw up her arms. "If you won't say, you won't!" She stumbled; the track here was steeper and narrower. They would have to go single file from now on.

"Come on," he said. "Not far now."

"I'm tired," said Kirsty, and she sat down on a flat rock.

After a moment's thought, he sat down beside her, placing his helmet on his knees. They rested, both breathing heavily. Collard gazed at the horizon, blinking away sweat and tasting the bitter, tired breeze. Nothing much left of the lungs of the world, he supposed, and it brought no cooling, only more heat, as though a furnace in the bowels of the hills was brewing up more firestorms.

Many a man sat beset by sorrow.

Misery his future, he often wished

That the kingdom would fall.

That passed over, so may this.

So said the minstrel Deor to console himself in his lamentations. But even old Deor would have given up by now.

"Where are you from?" he asked, when the silence between them had grown too deep.

"Carlisle," said Kirsty, under her breath.

Collard waited, but she stayed quiet, staring ahead. Perhaps he would have been better off not giving her any nectar; allied to her malnutrition and the shock of meeting a complete stranger, it seemed to have caused mood swings. And the heat wasn't making him any more relaxed either. He pulled out a coolcloth from his medikit and wiped his face.

"Did you try getting back?" he asked, feeling only slightly refreshed.

She paused before answering. "I was heading home, when I got stuck here," she said. "Seemed no point going on. Refugees were going all ways at once, fighting like dogs." She shook her head. "I know it's all gone." She lifted an arm with some difficulty, and waved it vaguely across the ruined landscape. "But if I stay here I can kid myself the North avoided the cataclysm, see?"

"Life's still going on in a parallel world..."

Kirsty's eyes shone. "Exactly! My family and friends are..." Her voice trailed off, then rallied. "Living in another country! I got lost, but they're OK." Her expression turned harder. "I don't want to see Carlisle now. I saw my dad in his coffin and for years I could only remember him that way. But at least he missed all this."

Bad things are only bad if you see them... Well, it's a philosophy, thought Collard. Happy pig or unhappy Socrates. Or maybe Many Worlds. Perhaps in some alternative Cheddar they were even now selling scrumpy and telling the grockles about stalactites and stalagmites.

"I did want to come back," he said, picking up a handful of stones. "I had a great childhood here. Strawberry-picking, school. Cider. Pubs. Pioneers. Friends. It was perfect."

"Because it's wrapped up in a pretty bundle, and you can look at it from all sides," said Kirsty decisively. Perhaps she had been sitting in her cave thinking about this, for years. "While you were embedded in it, the future was unknown. But now you know you survived it, it looks like a golden age."

"I wanted to come back once last time. See my old stamping grounds..."

Kirsty looked at him, eyes narrowed. "Did you think it would be like before?"

"No! Of course not-"

"Of course? Your school, the scouts, dead kings - it's all ancient history you talk about. What about the last twenty or thirty years!

You must have done other things since you were a kid." She seemed to be studying his face for signs of adult experiences.

"I've made some big mistakes." Collard grimaced. "And I've had enough of being out front. Exposed."

"What do you mean?"

What did he mean? He tossed a stone down the hill, watched it bounce away, gathering speed as the narrow path steepened. The sense of being out of control, events coming too fast, everything speeding up, no chance to sit back, go back and do it right the next time because there is no next time. On on on, an accelerating, plunging dive. And when you do make a mistake, the consequences are utterly catastrophic.

"Time," he said. "The future comes too fast. I want a rest. Let someone else be in front."

He scooped up another handful of small stones and dropped them one by one at his feet. How long had those stones sat here on the surface of the Earth? Ten years? Ten thousand? Getting on with being inanimate rocks while the animate world went mad.

Kirsty was thoughtful. "There's no way to stand back and... build a buffer against it. We all arrive in the future at the same time... Barton. No way to avoid that."

Collard grunted. Had she seen through his name?

"There's always death," he said.

"Death..?"

"If everything won't slow down..."

Kirsty stared at him. "What do you mean?"

It was getting to be a refrain of hers. Collard threw his remaining stones down the steep path, picked up his helmet and stood up.

"I was planning to climb up the Gorge and jump off the Pinnacles," he said, taking Kirsty's arm. He pulled her to her feet and almost pushed her into continuing the descent.

"What the hell for?"

"It's a great view. I loved it as a kid."

"You think you can take your memories with you?" She sounded contemptuous, glancing at him over her shoulder. "You came all this way in a fancy spaceship to kill yourself? When people who didn't want to die have died in their millions? How dare you?" Kirsty rubbed her hands on her rags nervously, as if trying to clean them. Some hope.

They descended in silence, feet crunching in the dead earth.

"Listen," she said eventually. "You said that *was* your plan. So what are you going to do now?"

"I don't know. I really don't know," he said.

"Are you taking the piss?"

In some ways she still reminded Collard of Jillian, his first unrequited love. Her scornful tone, for one. He felt awkward. Kirsty had obviously clung to life in tough conditions, her only consolation daft fantasies of a saviour taking her to New Zealand where everyone would be clothed in honey. And what do you know? The miracle happened; he had sailed in from the stars on a black charger, and he could indeed take her to New Zealand, or anywhere. But all he had done was tell her she was wasting her time.

Well, sod it, she almost certainly was.

"The Earth is finished," he said, bitterly. "We're finished. What's the point carrying on? The smartbombs will get us in the end. They'll get off Earth. Their brain breeder nests and component factories are already going underwater, in the mountains. They're proliferating, evolving: nano, mammoth, medium, specialised, multiple, broad. You said there were man-shapes... who knows; if that's true, I should report it. But then why not cat-shapes, fern-shapes? Locusts? Rocks? Bacteria? Makes more sense. They'll be filling every niche and soon they'll find a route into space. And then humanity will be wiped out everywhere."

"How did we get here?" she said, tears in her eyes.

"Here?" echoed Collard. They were down by Lion Rock, almost at the end of the main descent. He gazed along the bottom of the Gorge at the *Alfred*. It would be good to get back on board, turn up the air conditioning, plug in the links and fly away somewhere and leave all this behind. Take Jillian with him.

Sorry. Kirsty.

"The Cataclysm. The smartbombs. The whole shit," she was saying.

"How?" He turned his attention back to her. "How? I'll tell you how!" He was shouting. "By going AI instead of Symbi; by thinking battlespace management was too much for human control; by taking humans out of weapons platforms and turning critical ops over to the AI supergrids; by giving weapons the ability to evolve their own lifecycle modes from raw material extraction to deployment using nanotech..."

"OK, I didn't mean-"

"By allowing the monster bastard of von Neuman machines and WMD to be born, midwived by AII, and thinking we could retire to watch it on tv while the machines fought our robot wars cleanly for us. Well, they were never going to, were they? We knew it a thousand years ago -

*Greedy weapons seeking slaughter
Curshed mankind - a dazzling doom!
A storm-surge on these stony slopes*

Well we sowed the wind all right. Frankenstein's monster, Prometheus - We can't turn it off! We might as well just piss off out of the way!"

Kirsty nodded. "Okay, okay. But if we do, all that stuff will go too."

Collard was breathing hard, almost panting, like a dog. He wiped his face again. "What stuff?"

"Prometheus. Frankenstein. All those stories. Your kings and their swords. All culture and art and myths and history and science and songs and books and tavidis and everything everyone has ever done and thought!"

"Well for God's sake look around you! Feel the heat! It's gone already. By the time the bombs have finished sterilising the Earth, all the effort we made over thousands of years to build civilisation will be rubble... pointless."

"Bollocks," said Kirsty, tapping her forehead. "It's not stone buildings, it's in here. World three. Off the planet, in data storage as well, even books, papers..."

Collard shook his head, looking at the detritus of the ruined tourist shops. They were down now, at ground level and on the old roadway, picking their way over the rubble.

"For how long? In the long run, it's all over."

"In the long run we're all dead, I know. We live with death here, every day."

"Not just that," said Collard. "They'll scrape the Earth and eradicate everything. They'll churn it all up, plough it in and salt it and nothing will grow again, except new weapons, and when they've defeated us they'll fight each other, for want of anything else to do. It's the military imperative. Three billion years of evolution ends in you and me."

How long could they carry on? He did not know. Perhaps, hundreds of years into the future, an Earth as bare as the Moon would still be subject to the whine and crump of evolving weapons battling it out. Maybe they would fight on in the solar system, and then interstellar space. Maybe in millions of years mankind's weapons will be fighting on the shores of distant galaxies, harvesting great swathes of resources to continue the war. What was it Aldous Huxley had said? Man is alone among the animals in that he kills for a principle, for an idea, whereas animals live by instinct alone and survive, unworried about ancient slights. And

now we have impressed our psychological flaws of memory and planning on our machines along with life's natural yen for expansion, and they have gone beyond us, failing to take restraint and sense with them.

He looked at the sky, and threw an arm up.

"And in a billion years," he said, "maybe an alien starfaring race will come through this system looking for the source of the virulent menace and there will be nothing to show that there was ever life on Earth except - except what? Some pitted old structures on a dead Moon. That will be our legacy."

He stopped alongside a cracked boulder and slapped it hard. The sound echoed around them, bouncing from the cliffs. He looked up. To his surprise, Kirsty laughed, harshly.

"You're the most miserable pessimist I've heard in the last four years! And there've been plenty."

He couldn't help it; he grinned as he took the opportunity for another rest and a chance to survey the best route ahead. Beyond the ship, the seawater was flat, hazy and shining. Unnatural. He would not be immersed in this heat trap much longer, and could feel his dry mouth start to salivate at the thought of a cool lemonade from the ship.

"Why not look on the bright side," said Kirsty. "Perhaps the smartbombs are the next stage of our evolution."

Collard glanced at her. There was a sheen on her face. Was she burning with fever? There was a twinkle in her eye, too.

"How?" he said.

"The universe starts with nothing; maybe pure information. The Big Bang comes - pure energy. That cools to become particles and stars. Stars explode to produce heavy elements, matter. Matter produces life. Life produces thought, thought creates information, which requires machines to handle properly. Eventually, all energy and matter is converted to information. And then it starts over again."

Despite himself, he smiled. "Hmmm. And this cosmology is the bright side?"

Kirsty smiled, thinly. "You could call it progress, of sorts. Things moving on... But for me, I go with life. Where there's life... you know."

"Where there's life, you can always kill yourself later." He stretched, easing his aching back and leg muscles. He was so unfit for surface operations it would have meant a reprimand, if he had not been in utter disgrace already. So what now for the future?

"Come on," he said. "Only a short way to the ship. Perhaps I can show you New Zealand after all. Why not?"

And again there was that unguarded gleam in her eyes. Well, she would be excited, wouldn't she? The comfort, the power, the unthinking control over nature for a change, instead of being subject to its whims. Why not make use of it?

"I'll go first," he said, turning his back on her. "Some of these rocks and boulders down at the bottom are shaky. We don't want you to break your leg."

You only get one life. Perhaps she was right, he should not just give up because of some self-indulgent guilt trip. Why not give it a go, and fight back? What if Alfred the Great had sat around in the marshes of Somerset, moaning that the Danes were too powerful, how could he fight them with a few beggared guerillas and peasant farmers? But he did not. He came out of the shadow of the woods and fought, took back huge chunks of the land, built a navy, founded a nation.

Maybe it is not hopeless. There must be some chink in the smartbombs' armour, a way into their systems. A virus someone could build, a weapon that would fry them. Sure, he would not be the one to discover it. Probably some researcher or soldier or teenhack out in orbit. But he could help. They could pull together. A band of men and women hiding in the marshes, fighting the machines.

"The Bishop of Bath and Wells!" Kirsty said suddenly, behind him. "That's where I heard that name before. You're not Barton Wells, you're Collard!"

Collard turned and stared at her. "Why do you say that?"

She stepped closer to him, pale and wide-eyed. "It's the name on your backpack."

Damn. He had removed it from his front but not there. Well, so what? "Backpacks are swappable," he said.

"You *are* Peter Collard?" she said, touching his chest lightly, as if wondering if he was real. "Collard the Barbarian, Hammer of Titan?"

"Yes," said Collard, warily. "I didn't want to alarm anyone." He was not sure what else to say, so he turned and carried on walking towards the *Alfred*. Kirsty kept pace. Collard made a mental note to steer her away from where he had killed the young kid, somewhere to the front and left of them, under the south side wall. Best not introduce complications, or confirmation. Barbarian...

"Why the Barbarian?" he said, casually moving to her right and trying to keep Kirsty looking his way. "Why not Collard the Killer? Collard the Cataclysm Catalyst?"

"Barbarian seemed to sum it up well enough, I guess." She looked him over as if for the first time, as if inspecting his bland face

for signs of psychopathy. "What happened, after Titan? We lost the news. It was rumoured Collard was dead. Or in jail. Or had taken command of a pirate red legion of planet-killers and was threatening vengeance on anyone who stood in his way."

Collard grimaced. He would have preferred not to deal with all this right now. "None of that. When I realised my... mistake, my war crime... I could have given myself up. To Natu. Or even the Chinase." He looked up at the bright sky, squinting as if the answer lay in the shimmering boiled air. "Expiated my guilt. Sought... I don't know. But I didn't look for justice or all that. I just deserted." He paused, then recited:

*"How cruel a companion sorrow is
To one now friendless in the world:
The road of exile is his.
No shower of gold, no earthly joy
Only the cold cave of a lone heart."*

"What was that?"

"It's from *The Wanderer*. Anyway. I disappeared and planned to do what I had to do in my own way at my own time."

He looked around. It was somewhere near here, he thought, that the kid had attacked him. He glanced to the left, trying to recall exactly where, and saw the body, lying as he had left it, about twenty metres off.

"I used you as a bogeyman," Kirsty was saying. "For my son. Behave, or Collard the... Well, Collard will come and kill you. Chop off your hands, blow up your belly, suck out your lungs, freeze your brain... the usual stuff you scare children with. But it is hard to make that work in times like these."

Collard was looking down, checking his footholds. He felt a chill. Her son? "You have a son? Where is he?"

She hesitated, then shook her head. "He's dead."

Collard relaxed, and only just avoided saying *Thank God*. Instead he said, "I'm sorry."

"Yeah. Me too."

"It happened here, mum," a new voice behind them said. "Ludo's just there."

Collard whirled.

He'd been right. Followed. Caught a glimpse: a solid girl, a throwing arm. A full rock flat-slammed into his temple. Dazed, he let his helmet fall and he dropped to his knees. Twice in a day! Another rock hit him sharp in the jaw and he sat back. He had a brief sight of brown legs and arms all over him, and heard Kirsty shout

"Maira!" and suddenly he was out and then it was a few seconds later and he was lying on the ground, and Kirsty was yelling at a thirteen-year old savage who had his pistol in her hand, pointing it at him.

"Put his gun down, Maira! Put it away!" shouted Kirsty.

"No! Mum! He killed Ludo! I saw it!" said the girl. She was a little like the boy: feral, brown and dirty, wearing some ancient clothes. Collard shook his head, trying to clear the muzziness.

"But he's got a ship! We can fight! We can escape!"

"Where!" cried the girl. "We live here!"

Kirsty laughed, sourly. "Maira! This isn't our home. Home was Carlisle or London, home was years ago, home is gone, we have no home. Remember? We were stuck, now we can go! Don't you see?"

"To New Zealand? The Moon?" Maira almost spat. "London? I dunno them, they're not real." She pointed a stubby finger at the gorge wall. "I know here. We can live here!"

"Maira, but we're dying!"

Collard groaned and tried to sit up. He could feel blood in his eyes and trickling behind his left ear, mingling with the sweat. He felt shivery and overheated at the same time.

"We live! We're fine!" Maira faced Collard head on. "Until you came, you bastard! Who asked you?"

"He's going to fight the bombs!"

Collard swallowed. "This is *my* home too, Maira," he said carefully, his cheek swollen. "I was born right here, 40-odd years ago."

Maira sneered. "Yeah? Good. You can die right here too!" and as Kirsty shouted "No!" the wild wolf cub Maira aimed the gun straight at Collard's flushed, blotchy face and pulled the trigger.

Nothing happened.

Maira scampered back as she looked down to see if there was a safety catch she'd missed.

"It's symbiotic," said Collard, wearily. "Coded to me. Like the ship itself. Only I can use it."

"Thank God," said Kirsty with relief, as Collard struggled to his knees.

"Traitor!" shouted Maira and ran at Collard, knocking him on his back. She smashed the butt of the pistol into his head, and again, and again, a hard hammering. "Get her off! Get her off!" Collard shouted, and Kirsty was shouting too, "Maira, stop! Stop!" and brandishing her own knife. Collard felt weak, he had to do something. He fumbled for his multitool and popped the largest blade. He was sinking into a tunnel of whirring flies, no time. He lashed out, hard. Missed. Again. He felt the blade cut deep. He

wrenched it out. Hands covered in her blood, slippery. But Maira dropped her useless gun and made a grab for his blade. Collard dropped it, stretched for the pistol, his fingers clutching at soil, dirt, ash, rock. He felt a shock as Maira jabbed him in the chest. The suit held. She pulled back, aimed a stab at his neck, hit the neck ring, tried again, panting, sweaty. His free hand found the gun, fumbled for the grip, got it. Maira got one good jab at his neck, pushing deep. The pain was hot but secondary, he had to act, blood gushing. He twisted the gun and fired, got Maira in the chest. She grunted and tried to knife him again but her strength was ebbing fast. Her eyes blazed with a last flare of animal hate, and she collapsed on top of him, her rattly last breath flecked with blood foam. She seemed to be looking at something else over the sea as her eyes closed, and she died, coughing.

Maira had probably caused him some serious damage. Collard the Barbarian, almost undone by a thirteen-year old girl. He heaved her hefty bloody body off before turning warily to Kirsty. His breath came in sharp jolts, a taste of blood in his mouth, a bubbling sensation at his neck. He felt exhausted, utterly drained by the swamp heat and the exertion.

Kirsty stared. "For someone who came here to kill himself," she said, "you have a great sense of self-preservation."

Through his pain, Collard thought: that's an odd thing to say.

"We better get to the ship," said Kirsty. "We mustn't stay out in the open. The noise. They'll notice."

"Who'll?" He had difficulty speaking.

She waved vaguely at the air. "Patrols. And anyway," she said, "got to get you medical attention. Get to your ship... Got to get away!"

Collard looked down at silent Maira and then beyond, to the corpse of the boy they had called Ludo. He blinked away sweat. "You don't seem... too bothered."

"There's no time for this!" shrieked Jillian.

She'd looked so beautiful on the top of Glastonbury Tor on that frosty day, her hair haloed in sunset gold above the misty wisps, the moon rising in her eyes. Bright Venus diamond bright. They'd shared warm sharp slugs from a bottle of Stone's Ginger Wine. The only thing missing was a choir, singing. God Rest You Merry, Gentlemen.

No, Kirsty.

He shook his head to clear the fog. She was saying they should get to the ship, that he was losing blood. She was trying to lead him there. She was holding one hand against his wounds. Her

mouth was moving, her eyes shining like a Morning Star and an Evening Star. She led him forward, step by step.

Must concentrate. This was important. Why wasn't Kirsty worried about the death of her children? Seemed kind of unnatural. Inhuman. Unfeeling.

"But your kids..." he said. Inhuman, had he thought that?

"They're not really my kids," said Kirsty, as if from a distance. "Truth is, I was scared of them. Didn't believe in the old days. Or me and my stories."

"They called you mum."

"We sort of adopted each other. Allies. Our territory. Kind of a tribe, we were. And others. They're gone now, or scattered. Dykman, the Fisherwoman. Ballsup. People are always dying, or going mad. Kids, adults. Happens all the time. You get used to it." She shook her head. "Maira should have come with us. She could have adapted to... whatever. If she'd tried. But..."

"But you," said Collard, energy slipping from him. Was it normal for her to be so casual? "You believe... You can adapt... You want to get out."

"Yes. And you? Still a deathwish? Or - fight. Fight the smartbombs?"

That was it, he thought. Of course. That's what I had resolved to do. Fight the smartbombs. Those cunning weapons, always looking for sneaky niches to attack us from. Pitiless. Devil spawn of evil Man.

"Yes," said, thickly. "Hunt them down. Do my bit. For Alfred the Great!"

And who knows what pace of change they'd set themselves, what goals. Who knows what they'd look like now, how they'd work. Disguising themselves as real people, then blooie! Up goes all.

He noticed a large shadow on the ground, artificial, curved. He looked up. The *Alfred* was just a few metres off, looming above him. Big, powerful. A sanctuary. A way into space. A funnel to the sky. He had to think but his head felt sluggish.

"How do you open the hatch? How do you get in?" said Kirsty, sounding as though she was a long way back, back inside her cave. There was a roaring in his ears. He had the symbiotic key, of course, and she did not. And she wanted it, to get away.

The bastards! How could he have been so blind? And she had banged on about his strength, what he was doing, his ship name... Pumping him for info all the time. He suddenly pulled away from her, stumbled a few steps backwards.

"What are you doing?" she said. "You need surgery... You need your ship."

He backed off, raised his pistol. Its tip wavered a little, drawing, he noticed, a small figure of eight in the air.

"I get it now," he said, hoarsely. He was getting weaker, had to act. "You're not human! You're the bitch android smartbomb vanguard!"

"Don't be stupid!" said Kirsty, but he could see she was worried. He had found her out!

"Get your machine men replicating in space? Take over the universe? Well, I'm here to stop you!"

"Collard... Peter..." said Kirsty, taking a step forward. "Look, you're delirious. Let me get you on board... You're sick."

"That's what you want me to think!"

"If I was a gynoid, I could overpower you. But I can't..."

He shook his head. "You need me alive. For the controls and the symbilicals." He fired, hit her in the leg. She screamed.

"You were good, but you don't fool me!" he shouted, and aimed again.

"Peter," she yelled, cringing, trying to get out of the way, crying.

He fired again, missed. "Stand still, dammit!" he shouted.

Kirsty took a chance by rushing at him, her knife aimed at his gun hand. But she was hurt badly and as she closed in she was easier to hit and he fired again, blasting a hole in her side and knocking her down in a spattercloud of dust.

"For King Alfred!" he yelled, exultant, as she lay at his feet, "and St George!"

Kirsty turned over and looked up at him, pain in her eyes. "I'm not a weapon, you idiot," she whispered.

Collard shot her in the head, screaming. "Take that you robot!"

Kirsty's shattered body lay broken and bloody in the dirt. Collard limped forward and looked down on it, feeling pumped up and relieved. Very realistic. Clever. Almost human. Nearly got him. Good blood.

He knelt down, weary. Those shots, and explosions. And the ship. Bound to attract some of her friends. Allies. He should get going. And his own blood. He was losing it.

But he was very tired. He needed to rest here, here on the good Earth, before he could face opening the ship and clambering up the hatch and getting into his couch and letting *Alfred* take him away somewhere cool and black and speckled with stars where he could dream for a month and be made whole again.

And he had real news to tell, of the new walking smartbombs, something useful for his eternally vigilant colleagues to take on board in their high stations. He was sure no report had got out before about these human-form weapons. So much for sigint analysis and computer monitoring. See? Nothing beats a human in the loop, boots on the ground.

He had done well. Even if he did nothing else, he had redeemed himself for Titan. Perhaps they would sing about him in the drinking halls in the sky, as the rime-cruled *Seafarer* had contemplated on his lonely ocean journey through icy winds and snow:

*The best fame of all is the praise
Given a man on his death.
It must be earned in life
By work against the evil of monsters
And deeds against the Devil himself.
Then he shall be forever exalted
And live in glory with the brightest of angels.*

Hail Earendel!

This was better than committing suicide, a sin as well. That's a point - do smartbombs know sin? Are they descendants of man, or creatures of the Devil? Something to chat about in the ready room.

He noticed that the shadows seemed to have moved. He wondered if he had drifted off to sleep. Better not do that. Maybe his vision was wrong. He shook his head.

Something had changed. He tried to analyse it.

Among the rocks and boulders and heaps of stone there were several new objects. Some of them shiny gold, some of them matt black and some red and blue, and most he could see were lifted up on legs, like crabs or cockroaches. They all seemed to have cam eyes, sensors. Plato units for self-repair, like the *Alfred*. Shells of armour chitin and plasteel. Not like the *Alfred*. They were watching. What?

A movement near his hand attracted his attention. A little silver centipede the size of his glove was dragging his gun away, out of reach. He made an effort to grab it but it was already too far from him, and he was weak.

"Hey," he said. "What's going on?"

When the bigger crabs saw he was disarmed, two of them started to scuttle in.

"Shit!" He called launch-go: "Go, dart, three!" but his helmet was too far away, lying on the ground, useless; he was disconnected from his defence dart system.

The crabs reached out and using manipulative pincers they carefully took hold of his arms and legs and head, even though he was struggling, flapping feebly at them. The things seemed to be working cooperatively as part of some networked link-mind, and they took great care not to damage his hands or his eyes. Carefully, they cut away his evasuit and cooling johns and held him naked on the ground. The air was warm, he felt like a new-born baby. Were they surgeons, come to fix him? But he knew they were more than that, even as they gave him some calming anaesthetic and probed his symbilical link points.

He stared up at the yellow dome of the sky. Up there, the remnants of free humanity were vigilant on their ancient star wars platforms, trying to ensure no intelligent weapons got off Earth. But if they got a human ship the smartbombs could do it, build a bridge to the solar system and beyond.

What Kirsty had been trying to do.

Or maybe not, after all.

He groaned and turned his head, looked over to where the Pinnacles used to be. He should have gone up there on the cliff top as soon as he landed, and jumped off, as he had planned for so many long years. 120 metres, straight down. To atone for his crimes on Titan. And he would have done, if it hadn't been for Kirsty. And those kids.

As if anyone would know how he had died. Maybe he should have flown instead into the heart of the sun, left not even a single atom as memorial to himself.

Could have, should have, but didn't.

He was lifted gently and carried towards the *Alfred the Great*, like a great warrior king on his shield, maybe Beowulf himself. It would be good to be buried in a ship, with gold, wine, jewels and weapons piled around and a fiery flame to lift him once more into the sky, Jillian leading the mourners with an oil lamp, or maybe coming along with him, sacrificed to join him on a trip to the Dog Star. He was barely aware as his palms and retinal patterns and DNA signature were placed against the door sensors and cross-calibrated with his code key as required, and the *Alfred's* hatch opened and the ramp came out.

As the two doctor crabs lifted him into the ship Collard caught a glimpse of a pair of small broken non-dyk human bodies lying bloody in the dust a few metres off.

"Sorry, Jillian," he said. "I did it for you. And all of us." He wondered what smartbombs fought for. Fundamentalist mechanics? Kernel ex programa? And did they have machine poetry, and jokes? 1001101000, ha ha, heard it.

After him, following up the black ramp, walked a small army of determined intelligent machines, of all shapes and sizes, down to just visible, and beyond for all he knew. Nanobot carriers and military von Neumann machines, bionukes and chemikazes, planners and coordinators, medics and mechanics. Maybe one was a machine poet, thinking about exile, and wandering, and ruin. Dear, lamenting.

*Thirty years Theodric held tight
To the Maring's land
It was known by all, and yet
That passed over, and so may this.*

Titan seemed a long time ago. It had happened to a different man, who had gone now. The two docbots wound this one up in wire, like spiders with a fly, and gagged him so he would only be able to buzz, not move or set off any alarms or self-destruct systems.

That passed over, and so may this.

The hatch of the *Alfred* closed, and Collard waited for the lifting whine.