

DAN DARE IN SOMERSET

(part 2) by Anthony Appleyard

NB. This story is fiction set in the well-known Dan Dare fictional world which was invented originally in the 1950's, where the planet Venus under its cloud layer is described as being Earth-type and inhabited. Readers who know from space probe findings that the real Venus is otherwise should bear with this. The places in Somerset named here are mostly fictional. ~ after a vowel means 'long vowel'.

On leave I and Digby again stayed with his cousin Stephen Digby in the village of Raudicket in Somerset, known for its monthly cattle market. The area around still echoed to the sensation of archaeological discovery (including Anglo-Saxon manuscripts in a buried waterproof compartment) that it had been occupied by Treens in the 8th century AD as a remote secret work base. The village church was being rebuilt on a new site; on its old site was now visible to all the broken subsided ancient alien reinforced concrete floor of a Treen 'raldikita' (= repair-shop) which, after the Treens left and all memory of them had faded into legend and magic-tale, had broken under the weight of the church built in the 13th century on what was thought in error to be bedrock, after mediaeval grave-diggers cut through it and exposed reinforcing rods to wet and rust. We arrived and unpacked, hoping this time to get away from space and space kit for a while. We talked about local history. One of their children had left a book of nursery rhymes on the sofa: a line in its contents list caught my attention.

"Hark hark, the dogs do back, the beggars are coming to town!", I read from it, "A bit of old times that I'm thankful is gone. The police stopped those big aggressive bands of beggars long ago, here on the ground, but in space it still happens from time to time." I said, "Peoples driven from their lands or planets by war or natural disaster are to be pitied, but if they turn to wandering and robbing for a living they must be stopped: settled people need their stuff and lives for themselves. We've already had the Red Moon spacebees from Xi Volantis in 1999, and those Pescods from Theta Serpentinis in 2013 trying to take over our seas after their own world dried up. I bet the Fenx'll turn out to be the same sort of thing". The hostile predatory nomadic Fenx plague the edge of currently Known Space in the Cygnus and Lyra direction; we ran into them in 2031.

"Yes, the Red Moon was one narrow scrape." said Stephen, "I reckon it was that that set the church here into that last bad subsidence bout. What you said reminds me of a set-to we had round here back in 1821. A big wandering band of vagrants, turned away by Bristol's part-time militia, came from the east looking for somewhere where they were not well known. East of Lont a man called John Skimming who was going to Barlompston on business saw them and got away by the speed of his horse; they hoped he'd 'keep 'is nose out and not make trouble' so they could tell the usual lies by daytime, steal what they could, and move on before local men could retaliate. He rode on, determined to spread a warning. He heard hunting horns, turned towards them, and found Lord Lont's hunt stalled and the hounds 'at a loss' where the fox had rolled in Vaudot farm's manure heap and then run through sheep. He rode into the assembled riders and told them what he had seen. Before he could finish, Lord Lont thanked him and told the whipper-in to take the hounds home, for he was fed up of roaming thieving bands. He told the riders to spread out and bring in what men and guns they could and to bring in on pillion all they could who were too far away to come on foot; illegal guns would be

ignored. The fox was safe that day. It didn't take long. The vagrants, planning to strip gardens at night and while everybody was in church next day, were surrounded in their camp, and in a running fight all captured. Some tried to flee across a ford, but pursuing horsemen crossed as easily. They were carted to Bristol and sentenced to transportation, overdue good riddance."

So it ended, at a ford on the river Sloy within sound of Maslet church bells - and none knew that the village's name was in Treen and commemorated thankfully a more drastic cleanup of 34 wandering thieves at the same ford eleven centuries before. Peter Saunderson, one of the men who had answered the call, went home to Vaudot farm and back to his interrupted cowhouse mucking-out, thankful of its ancient easily-cleaned hard floor. 'Stone' he called it in his farming life mode which had not changed as long as tradition told, except the change from oxen to horses for hauling; but those who had made that floor long before had called the place 'Valdagta', meaning 'Impulse-engine place', where under their command his 37th-generation ancestor had serviced transport craft far faster and farther travelling than the cart that he sometimes drove to Raudicket monthly market.

Soon after that, technology at last came again, not suddenly from the sky, but slowly, native-bred, creeping along the ground. A branch of the Great Western Railway came, with stations at Skalton and Raudicket and Deerham and then down a steep-sided wooded valley to the fishing village of Trimborough; at first it seemed an alien intrusion, but people got used to it. It helped the cattle and corn trades; but it also brought from the north ever more cloth sold so cheap that local handloom weavers could get no living, and the area cursed Crompton who had started mechanical cloth-making. Lord Lont got restive about unpaid rents as the slump bit deeper. He talked of bailiffs; the tenants anticipated that, and brought goods of theirs including the unsold cloth to Lont Hall estate office, valuing it at traditional handmade prices; but Lord Lont assessed it at what machine-weaving had forced the price down to, much too little to pay what was owed. At first he sympathized; but as handloom weavers blockaded Raudicket and Skalton stations, and the main road that runs in round the foot of Sanget Hill, against outside cloth to save at least the local market, it got violent, and criminal types not in the cloth trade found excuses to steal and demand supplies, until militia came from Bristol and Bridgwater. The troublemakers dispersed when they saw the uniforms or partway through the sergeant's orders to load and aim the first volley, while ringleaders called in vain for them to stay and show some courage. The area adjusted to the new conditions.

Skalton village smithy grew into an engineering works supplied by the railway. Eleven centuries before powered machines were there for a while, when it had the mixed-language name Xaltetu~n, Xalto's Enclosure. 'Xalto' means 'Rising Sun' in the alien tongue which the area forgot long ago, but the threshing machines that the place made as industry returned after the millennium shutdown were no welcome dawn for the area; many have written of the suffering that massive loss of hand threshing work pay caused to farm workers. Gangs smashed threshing machines; militia were called; over the years police gradually spread from cities via towns to the whole country, and law and order became much more reliable.

"This book of our son's looks relevant." said Stephen. I wondered what he was talking about, for the book was about railway accidents. I found the contents list and turned to a chapter 'Raudicket 1931: cattle on the line'. It went at length into mechanical and bovine (and luckily not much human) carnage, and blamed the limited intelligence of Menksley farm's cow man; but what interested me was an appendix to the chapter. It described what looked like the bed of a light railway, from Deerham in the west, via Sandringham and Raudicket and Lont, up the edge of the wide flat-topped hill of Sanget through Mistfallow farm's farmyard, ending near

Sanget Abbey ruins. From Lont a branch ran south via Barlompston to Skalton. Often it is marked by a plough-scattered band of ballast-sized Carboniferous limestone that likely had come from Sanget Hill. Farm tracks sometimes follow it. It is much too well engineered to be an ordinary old road; but there is no record of such a railway, and where it crosses it makes no attempt to join the modern railway; and two 17th-century paintings in Lont Hall that showed some of its earthworks seemed to scotch that idea; men guessed that perhaps it was a very ambitious all-weather road to get supplies from local farms to Sanget Abbey. But a railway once ran along that route - over twelve centuries ago, and the men who worked on it spoke Anglo-Saxon, with many Treen words mixed in.

I found myself looking out of a window at Sanget yet again. Something seemed different about it. Annoyed at the distraction I went into the back garden and swept my binoculars across the wide flat hilltop and identified the features. The broken-toothed ruins of Sanget Abbey, much robbed of stone to build Lont Hall and other big houses. The bell tower. The windmill. Mistfallow Copse on the hill edge. The microwave mast. The tall isolated exotic Sequoia tree that a previous Lord Lont planted in 1883. And one more upstanding feature, that should not have been there. Then I realized. For the first time in twelve centuries a spaceship stood on the long-closed base's 'Sangita': Treen for 'landing ground'. We got in our car and went to investigate, across the quiet summer countryside; Stephen came with us. Beyond Lont the land started to rise. We passed Mistfallow part way up the hill without delay, for over twelve centuries had passed since Treens guarded a landing field entry gate called Mistagpalgin there; the ancient railway bed climbs past at an angle to the slope and turns towards Sanget Abbey.

We went up the modern road, and past the recent memorial to Aelfmasel. We saw the Sanget Cross, long thought to be only a legend, but the archaeologists found it recently and re-erected it. It was buried during the Reformation to keep it safe, and the local men kept it so tight a secret that it was forgotten about. It is a typical Anglo-Saxon stone cross put up instead of a church for people to worship round, with religious scenes in the usual somewhat rough style of men who did most stone carving with a pickaxe, not knowing the stone-chisel; but the text round the pictures is in Treen, a reminder of the long-ago alien presence and men's persistence in trying to keep their faiths in adverse conditions. While the ancient space base was in use, the Sangita area was security fenced off tightly from the rest, and by the end of the old occupation the native workmen in the Sangita had forgotten their Anglo-Saxon and only knew Treen. Several field-names and the like on Sanget come from Treen, and there is Church matter in Treen in the Raudicket Manuscripts.

We reached the spaceship; it was a typically unattractively functional bulky space-work craft. Some of its crew were resting on the ground. I could tell all too well what they were: few things smell quite so dead-too-long as an asteroid miner who has unsuited or opened his spacesuit recently for the first time in weeks. Their suits were not the handy light Spacefleet issue suits but a new version of something I see from time to time. A holiday was not a preferred time and place to get to know yet another sort of space kit, unconcealed Treen-type reinforcing rings, bulky long-trip survival pack including an undisguised sewage destructor, nuclear powerpack, non-detachable helmet with lifting faceplate, and backpack propulsor including a mini impulse engine that could run off power beamed from an impulse wave generator on their spaceship.

"It looks like takes some time to get in or out of one of those." Digby said, "I can't say I'd care to be fastened up in one for weeks on end in vacuum with a lot of spaceship kit bolted to

me, getting staler and staler inside it. Their ship doesn't look like it gets pressurised much or often."

"Well, it's handier out there than endless airlocking and carting a lot of oxy about." said one of them who seemed to be their leader; his suit had various exotic decorations on, and the name 'Red Dog' on his helmet forehead, a typical asteroid miner type nickname that they use for all purposes. Asteroid miners had a well-armed rough reputation, and this shipful seemed to fit the image.

"When you're through staring at us, we'll get back to what we were doing." said another in a strong Treen accent although he was human, "I heard of a posh geezer in a fancy business suit came up to one lot of us when they were landed and pushed into their ship and kept trying to sell financial advice in a posh voice and wouldn't go away when they told 'im to 'cos they were busy; one of them got a PG pistol at 'im and 'e woke in space in one of their spacesuits."

"Why did you lot come just here, anyway?" I asked.

"Why do you want to know?" Red Dog replied.

"Oi, that's not some tripper, that's Colonel Dare." another of them said, and then to us, "Sorry about him not recognizing you. If you want to know, we needed somewhere to unsuit and rest away from crowds and people wanting money off us, and when we 'eard what 'ad turned up 'ere Habdab 'ere wanted to come and look."

"I've never have believed it:" Stephen said, "Menksley, and Meckingborough farm near Lont, were named after the Mekon, that long ago."

"My name's Kabdag. My people here held ceremonies in honour of him there. We call such a place a Mekonbalag." said another of them, standing 7 feet tall. Yet again work was leaking into a holiday, for when he turned towards us I saw he was a Treen. His face under his raised helmet faceplate was vaguely familiar, but I could not place it. The rest of them were Earthmen. "I went with them to get away from orders and the same work in the same places all the time." he said, "I thought I'd had the last of it when the Mekon went, but then he came back for nearly ten more years. I was out on a space base in 2002 when it happened; the Mekon sent for us all to report for orders, so I went off with this lot instead."

"We don't need telling about Mekonbalags." said Stephen feelingly, "They set one up in each main town. Once every three months from 2002 to 2011 while they were here we had to drop everything and go to the one in Taunton for their ceremonies and bowing Treen-fashion to that statue of him they put up there."

The Treens who occupied Earth from 2002 to 2011 showed no sign of knowing that they had been in this area before; on their maps 'Raudicket' was transcribed phonetically as 'Rodikit', and likewise the other local placenames that later proved to be of Treen origin. Still, Kabdag's manner was very unusual for a Treen, and his spacesuit was as ornate as the rest. We had heard of the ways of asteroid miners, including a rumour of cases of them making replacement ship and spacesuit kit parts out of plutonium metal fuel-rod when no other strong metal of the right shape was available out in the wilds, and even of one sporting suit ornaments made out of it.

"If you trade metals while you're down here, the authorities need to know of it." I said, feeling thankful for our Spacefleet issue PG stun-gas pistols which we are ordered to keep with us at all times.

"And want fees for it and keep us waiting on excuses while they have meetings and do other paperwork first wasting our time so we end up with next to nothing for the trip, for nothing more'n statistics collecting and nosiness." Red Dog said, "If I 'ad a new fuel-rod for

every polite little By Order notification from office wallahs that know @#% all about what it's like out 'ere, that's gone straight in my suit's kapudan along with my @&% - talking about which, it's getting towards time some of our ship's fuel went in one."

'Kapudan' is a Treen word for a type of very efficient somewhat fuel-cell-like refuse destructor / metals separator / oxidation energy recoverer that we use. There was a little one in each of their spacesuits, and a bigger one onboard.

"There wouldn't have been far to go for one once here." Kabdag said, pointing to a distant church spire among trees, "That's Barlompston, but the Treens here called it Hablagkapudta - that's 'fuel reprocessing place'."

"The name seems to show that, when the Treens left and their native workmen went back to farming, a native foreman called Beornlagam took over and the natives renamed the place Beornlagamestu~n, that's 'Warrior-Blowtorch's Enclosure'." I said, "His name was mixed-language, like some others of the native names recorded in this area at the time."

"Treen lagams." said Digby, "All too often with go-anywhere backpack cylinders and a flamethrower attachment. I don't fancy facing one of those close-up."

If the trees had been leafless, near Barlompston binoculars would have shown Cubzet farm where we had bought food several times when we were here before. A name that told of something far more foreboding than the prosaic fox cubs that local folk-etymology had guessed at. The recent discoveries had had other effects in the area: Lont's new village banner which was displayed at cricket matches and the like showed a lagam laid out with backpack straps spread, and at the top 'Lont', and at the bottom its old forms 'Lawmette' in mediaeval writing and 'Lagamita' in Anglo-Saxon writing and even in Treen writing also. One record even listed the native workmen at Raldikita, including Aethelgils son of E~adgils, whose grave we had seen near the church.

"They're coming." Red Dog called, interrupting my thoughts. Some vehicles were coming up the hill. "It's two of Langfords's lorries, that's the works at Skalton, and that garage and workshop man Jameson from Raudicket in his van, likely to buy metal off them." Stephen said. The vehicles stopped and the men in them got out. "As I thought, here's Jameson with his lagam on as if it had grown there." he added; the sun reflected off its backpack gas cylinders. The sooner away from here and back to our holiday, the better; I had better things to do on leave than raise issue over asteroid miners hit-and-run metal trading when they had likely been given away-from-base landing clearance only to buy supplies and meet relatives and rest; many say that men who take to remote places to get away from crowds have a right to freedom: in 2011 two men stranded in space who had taken the names Crusoe and Friday gave us vital help so we could start the general rebellion against the Treen Occupation; and in 2013 the space scientist Galileo McHoo and his clansmen who had set up secretly and unauthorizedly in an asteroid base gave us our faster-than-light spaceship drive. The spacemen worked quickly, swopping asteroid metals for food and other supplies and cash. They knew the Treen language to varying amounts, and sometimes switched to it when strangers came in earshot. I and Digby went in and helped them to load and unload, as the best way to find what we could of what was going on in their ship. The last metal came out. Three sheep went in, I knew what for; frozen vegetables followed them. Another lot with their own opinion of Spacefleet issue food tablets.

Over the ship's radio a Treen voice suddenly called "Amegdokit! Zogal!", and hatches shut. Kabdag, who had gone on radar watch, had seen something. I know Treen: 'amegd-' means "be much the reverse of wanted" or the like. Some of the ground men did not like

hearing the Treen language after nine years of it during the Occupation. Red Dog ran up in with the last crateful, which was tungsten carbide for tool heads, and his men followed him and threw the last of the asteroid diggings out. The ground men slung themselves and their stuff in their vehicles and bolted off down the hill to the junction to lose themselves in main road traffic. Faulkner the farmer at Mistfallow had wisely delayed driving his cows back up the lane from milking, for he knew what heavy lorries in a hurry can do. We kept on working with them instead of going out while we could, for among the urgent action in space kit our spaceman training got the better of us, and we who often use metal in space were minded to help a source of metals that don't have to be fuel-greedily rocket-blasted up out of planet gravity wells, rather than desk regulations, since we saw no sign of harmful illegal items. As we, later than we should have, ran down to the exit door, Kabdag became more urgent; his loud warnings in his own language seemed uncomfortably familiar, but in a way that seemed unlikely. Below us the doors suddenly bumped shut and we lay on the floor as the ship lifted fast, leaving Stephen to take the car quickly to the Abbey ruins among the staring tourists. We were in space again.

"You two!" said one of the asteroid miners, with 'Dragline' written on his helmet forehead, "I didn't know you'd come with us! Quick, get these on!" he said, pulling us towards a locker and dragging two spare spacesuits out to us. Trying to be more the masters of the situation, while Dragline's hands were full we suddenly drew our PG pistols, but with a quick bowing action he as quickly shook his helmet faceplate down and shut. Something we can't do in Spacefleet issue suits where we have to take the helmet off. In the fast-thinning air as the unpressurized ship soared we frantically undressed and suited up. It was our first time in asteroid miner spacesuits, with propulsor and navigation kit fastened directly to us as if we were missiles, and the intimate intrusions of the suits' waste-destructors' collection pipes. The 'amegdok' passed below us, only one despite Kabdag's plural suffix, but fast and well armed and bearing Spacefleet patrol symbols; the other two echoes were supersonic airliners. After some fencing with radioed orders and quoting laws, and letting weapon-readying noises go out on his radio, the near-planet patrol craft left us; experienced asteroid miners are valuable and hard to replace and it wanted to get back to base and get serviced.

Somerset and our holiday fell away and shrank to nothing beneath us as Earth changed fast from ground below us to a sky object. We were far from sure to get a court charge of space-abduction to stick, for it was us who had decided to go onboard unnoticed just then, and so Red Dog said, in a rough annoyed manner. We decided to stay with them; it would be some use finding what asteroid miners get up to. Later in a small pressurized room we and the crew had a better meal than expected of workmen's cooking, of lamb shot with a raygun and cut up and cooked by spacemen, as an occasional change from food-synthesizer output; our booked formal dinner at Les Vaux d'Hote restaurant at Vaudot farm near Lont had gone where our leave on Venus in 2013 went when the McHoo's turned up. Kabdag ate with us, not liking food tablets any more than the rest; I wondered why he had not tried to rig up a space version of a Treen food-bath. The ship's destructor digested the bones and the butchery waste. After that, as the ship sped through the emptiness I had little to do except reflect that a few hours ago we were exploring the Somerset countryside with outer space of no concern for us except as remote sky-objects, and here we were yet again in spacesuits in a spaceship. How far would he go? Did he or his ship have an undeclared interstellar drive unit, as there are rumours of? Such things are told of among asteroid miners, for they are an independent-minded lot.

Getting interstellar spaceship drives has in one way put us back several centuries. On

Earth long ago the east and west limits of geographical knowledge met and there were no more unknown continents. After getting space travel around 1960 we found all other Solar System peoples by 2001 (except a small Japetan Saturnian colony on Triton which we found in 2020), and again we reached a natural limit; but now we have FTL (= faster than light) drive we can easily cross hundreds of light years, but not thousands, and again, like in the Middle Ages and before when sailing ships routinely sailed hundreds of miles but not thousands, beyond known contacted worlds and peoples there are others only known of by indirect tales among peoples we know, and beyond those others, and yet more, and only the unlikely event of getting hyperspace jumpers routinely safe and reliable will put much more of our galaxy within our reach.

Many things long hoped for were anticlimaxes when found. While we explored the Solar System, fictional characters in impossible craft still as since the 1930's fought with weird aliens freely across the light years as each author guessed; but when the McHoo's made faster-than-light ships and took me and four other Spacefleet men to Epsilon Ophiuchi Q3 (Terra Nova) in reality, we walked into alien jungle and met Earth-type biochemistry and humans. Micro-organisms and spores and small tough resting-stage eggs can be carried about within a solar system on matter thrown off worlds by asteroid impacts; but why does the well-known native moss of as far away as Gamma Crucis Q3 (Terra Secunda) have the same biochemistry as Earth life, so men can eat it safely? Only on Cryptos and Phantos, so far away that even at Cryptosian Tengam drive speed the journey took 5 years, their coordinates unknown to us, have we found native biochemistry incompatible with Earth's. Why also are eight (two of them extinct) known alien races genetically nearly human, even 3583 light years away on 154 Cygni Q4 (Thella)?

The compatible biochemistry is easy to explain. Some races have long records of spacefaring; but before that, over thousands of millions of years, on one or another planet animals must have evolved to sentience and then technology, and spacefaring, as much as planet and asteroid geology could slowly re-accumulate metal ores to make spacecraft, and supernovas could make fresh nuclear fuel for them. Even if each young habitable planet is visited by aliens only once every fifty million years, that would be enough to seed it with fully developed micro-organisms from afar before native life could develop from scratch.

No present-day spaceman is a first explorer: always others have been there before, even if so long ago that no trace remains of hardy far-travelling craft or crew. On what forgotten alien's unsterilized space kit may have come to an oxygenless pre-Cambrian Earth a chemotrophic bacterium to be the ancestor of all Earth life, so long ago that the time cannot be counted in years? Where is any trace of his body and spacesuit and ship after so long? What were his deeds?

Wherever we look in Known Space we endlessly find Earth-type biochemistry. Isolated on different planets it evolved by strange routes into strange forms, which tell strange stories. The Mercurian foetus's octopus stage (which long before birth turns into the well-known elongated humanoid) tells of open water which vanished geological ages ago, and crawling onto wet land along the cooler permanent twilight belt among far more vegetation than the scanty chasm-lurking 'fay-saw' which is their only surviving crop plant and nearly the only Mercurian plant. The various Saturnian Thork races, one per moon, tell another story, for their pre-scientific and pre-sentient ancestors could not have crossed space unaided; of known Thork history before Vora came too little survives, but only on Titan are fossil ancestors found, and it is too likely that chronic racial trouble lasted on Titan until space travel let the races

migrate to a moon each and at last eliminate routine contact and thus friction.

(A note: Mercurian has vowels only. The initial consonant letters denote pitch as the sol-fa scale. For 'fay-saw' the later and closer spelling is 'fayr-sawn': final 'r' means 'rising tone' and final 'n' means 'circumflex tone'.)

Man evolved on Earth. That is known: we have many fossils of our subhuman ancestors and back through the Miocene monkey *Ramapithecus* to early mammals. But what elsewhere? It is a very long shot for a planet animal species to reach sentience, and the later stages run into obstacles nearly beyond hope: a big brain is cumbersome and vulnerable among predators and competitors; egg-laying or life mode often limits too much the size of the brain of newborn young. On some worlds animals struggled separately through to sentience, and so Mercurians and Thorks arose, and near the edge of Known Space other species; but Man was nearly the only native arising of sentience for hundreds of light years around. After sentience, technology may have to wait thousands of years for all the right conditions: a need to mechanise, plus necessary fuel and metals, plus enough educated class to make the root scientific discoveries, plus a long and good enough window without religious fundamentalist purges to knock everything back to blind worship of gods and holy-books and all too effective enforced self-brainwashing by daily ritual and a tightly controlling priest class.

During 2002-2011 the Treens deported 716378 Earth people to Mars as settlement workers; in the 8th century they used Anglo-Saxon natives of Somerset in England as base-workers; how they took the ancestors of the Atlantines from Earth to Venus is well known. Likewise over a million years ago far-ranging aliens may have loaded up with Earth subhumans as easily managed labour for remote bases, and on pulling out abandoned them far from home in many places, where they later evolved slowly to full sentience in exile as on Earth. The Therons have no fossil ancestors on Venus, nor Terra Novans on Terra Nova, and by their DNA they are related to native animals no closer than to native plants; and so there, and later on Zyl (Zeta Herculis Q3) and Platina (71 Ceti Q4) and Teh (Upsilon Draconis system), we sought a First Contact but only met lost kin. The Therons' somewhat superior attitude is understandable: on Venus in absence of obvious living or fossil relatives such as apes the old religious idea of having been created separately survived much longer into their scientific age.

In a children's fiction series started in 1984 a sentient robot civilization arose on a planet of Alpha Centauri, and later we found a real one there; but again reality was a let-down, this time dangerous. They do not transform. They show little sign of the deeper emotions. Their first action on meeting us was to trap us and order us to tell them how to copy our ship's hyperdrive, and we had to trick and shoot our way out, which as expected made them hostile. When my ancestor De Are stood with William the Conqueror at Hastings that world still had a population of exiled humans, who would have welcomed us; but the Red Moon consumed them soon after, leaving only their servant sentient robots to a hard struggle to make more of themselves in a world badly stripped of water and air and surface organic matter and metals, and to take at any cost an unexpected chance to get a means to cross interstellar space to find easier life elsewhere.

"I hope we don't run into some bunch of stray Treens." Dragline said suddenly, as I was thinking about this as the Earth shrank all too quickly to a dot behind us. "The Mekon's still out there somewhere. They say the radar'll spot him if he comes near [into the inner Solar System] again, but I don't trust he won't get past by attaching his ship to the next comet or something. Those things are ice and snow stuff, easy to dig into."

"The last lot of Treens that I heard of wanting the old system back," said Kabdag, "most of them were for looking for the Next Mekon, that's the young one we were getting ready for when this one gets too old."

"The Next Mekon? Why not try to put the old one back in power?" I said.

"The Mekon always claimed above all his race to be free of letting emotion interfere with cold logic, but I say he isn't." said Red Dog, "After he escaped and caused that business in Mekonta in 2019, and the Chambers of the Last Three were found and destroyed in the fighting, there was no good reason for him to kill the last of the Last Three like that instead of trying to rescue him: that was just blind anger coming out. Impatience as well, judging by some of his petty and sometimes plain silly nuisance attacks after that, showing us where he was and losing yet another refuge base, instead of taking the time to build up a really good big attack fleet out of sight of us. During the 2020's he was likely using up ships and weapons that Treens built and hid in remote space bases over the centuries, but now he's run out of them and out of allies. In 1996 he was already nearish to the end of his reign; even he won't last for ever. That's likely why some Treens say 'forget him, it's a better bet looking for the Next Mekon', wherever he is. In 1996 he was much too young to rule, and it's anyone's guess how he's got after 2011 in hiding without a proper training setup."

"That is, *the Mekon is faulty*." said Kabdag, "I'm glad I got away from him in time that time, me stuck at one job in one room so long."

"They'd no way to find out before." Digby said, "Mekons before 1996 had things go wrong and plans thwarted from time to time, but never before had one been driven off Venus to wander in exile with nowhere to rule or defeated so often."

"All those fleabite nuisance attacks of his," another added, "he's got to slip up some time. 'Every pitcher goes to the well once too often', it is said. Last news of him, he was down to one ship, but it had long-trip life support. Those old Treen remote hoards have caused other trouble as well at least once when space undesirables find them: 'there are other Mekons than the green one', it is said, like when that man Schweiller found that old plutonium hoard on Mars and tried selling it to that Iraqi dictator Hassem, until Colonel Dare here stopped him, back in 1988 it was. No prizes guessing who put it there: plute-239 decays much too fast for it to have been there from the old Martians before they fell back from industrial to like the Middle Ages and then the Red Moon got them."

"How did Kabdag come to join you lot?" I asked.

Red Dog replied: "In 2002 we were on that big space station MEK-1 for a while to unload and buy stores. Kabdag ran a storeroom there that we'd been to for spacesuit parts and suchlike. I could tell his mind wasn't on his job properly, and he kept suggesting ideas how to do things different. He kept reading old Earth space stories; unusual that, for a Treen. Some of us had heard other Treens saying he was faulty. OK, he was, if you go by the Mekon's rules, which we don't. Anyway, a lot of big traffic was coming through from Venus to Earth, and suddenly Kabdag rushes into our ship waving a gun and warns us that a lot of Treens are plotting big trouble and it ain't food's in those big ships and he wasn't going to go back to being under the Mekon and we better scarper at max burn and take him with us, which we did. Then when we were well away we heard the Treens had chucked the Earthmen off Venus and taken over Earth. We roamed about keeping away from things and warning what loose traffic we could. A ship with 'Cosmic' on it sold us supplies, didn't say where from, and bought a lot of metals off us down the years after; Dragline reckons the metals ended up at McHoo's. Its crew had magenta spacesuits with round helmets with lifting faceplates. Kabdag's been with us ever

since. He sure doesn't like any idea of having to go back to some big organization. I've never known a Treen to be such a non-fitter-in and independent minded. He's stuck with us through a lot of scrapes and shortages."

Treens have tried expansionist plans before. In the 8th century when they had the base in Somerset in England, they used a Somerset Anglo-Saxon native repair shop workman called Aelfmasel as a space-worker, and a poem in the Raudicket Manuscripts records his wonder and dread in a Treen spacesuit helping to build a space station so far away that Earth was only a bright star. More alarmingly, a scared church confession by one Wulfhelm of Barlompston recorded what might have been a ride in a Treen prototype faster-than-light ship; the Treens called its drive Kubzath, a name that we knew before from old Treen records on Venus but not what it was. Luckily what evidence we have says that the Therons got wind of the Kubzath project and in an uncharacteristically hard space attack in 978 AD destroyed every part and record of it, and likely of much else: for example the amount of decay products in the Schweiller plutonium shows it had last been purified about the 8th century AD. Otherwise the Treens would have spread and multiplied across the light-years and made alliances until they could come back and mop up Theronland and Earth as easily as describing it, and the Therons knew it. I thought of such thug-minded groups as the Gaz nation of Terra Nova, who we found at the tank and early jet fighter stage and quickly drove them out of lands that they had overrun, given Kubzath FTL space travel and Treen weapons and training, helping to garrison an occupied Earth, and was very thankful.

We lived off what our suits' life-support packs synthesized, and passed the time as we could. We reached work sites sooner than I expected, for we were not going to the well-known asteroid belt but to look for metals in various Apollos (asteroids which cross Earth's orbit) and Atens (asteroids which orbit inside Earth's orbit). The first that we tried was a potato-shaped stony-iron two miles long with only an astronomers' catalog number; there was a fair concentration of manganese and vanadium in parts of it, but also another ship moored to it. As we went to them to ask for news, a Treen-type anti-ship space missile came at us from behind the asteroid. Red Dog and Kabdag manned guns, but the missile aimed to one side of us, and as it got nearer it slowed and a bulge on it proved to be a man riding it. The converted missile stopped, and the man left it and flew to our open hatch with a large backpack propulsor; he stayed tethered to it.

"Oh, it's only Pagdil's lot," said Red Dog, "and that's him come over to see what we want. That lot've learned to be wary."

I looked at Pagdil, as long as I needed to. He was unattractively bulky with an olive-drab deformed-looking face. Through his dirty patched spacesuit's faceplate I saw all too clearly why he had run away to space when he could, for never before outside photographs in restricted-issue reports of Treen Occupation experiment crimes and trials for them had I seen a Treen and Theron halfbreed. Whatever I and Digby had gone to Raudicket for, it was not to end up in asteroid miner spacesuits seeing such a reminder of the cold-bloodedness of Mekonism, and not as a foetus in a formalin jar but living, adult, and commanding a spaceship. His crew were all Earthmen; some other time and place would have to serve for checking who they were. Still, he could not help his ancestry. He had no hope of progeny except by cloning, even more so than with mules. As we watched, he took from his belt a bulky and very unauthorized-looking raygun and turned and fired at the asteroid. One of his men aimed at the vaporized patch what was presumably a spectrograph. Perhaps merely surveying. Pagdil asked us what we had in the way of news. Metals prices and warnings of risks from security

enforcements and political upsets were what he was after, but general news was welcome also.

"We saw a bunch poking round asteroids two weeks ago." he said, "They were trying to act like ordinary miners, but they weren't very good at it, and they ignored a lot of good metal patches. When we asked them about things they talked as if they were trying to hide an officialese manner, same as I've known cops let interrogationese get into their ordinary talk."

"I smell secret agency." Red Dog said, "I get sick of secret agencies and their eternal bloody coverings-up and special powers and no bloody way to make them answerable. *Now* what do some lot want!?, and we'll end up underneath it all and put to restrictions and nuisance."

"You speak all too truly." I said, "When we and McHoo came back from Terra Nova in 2013, a nameless group of officials pushed in with orders to keep everything secret 'because it'd create too many unknown possibilities' and the like, and we had to go public in breach of orders to make the trouble stop."

"Very likely it scared some people," Digby said, "FTL suddenly jumping from fiction and the realm of the impossible into reality, opening out our horizon that far."

"Ditto some committee that nobody ever had the authority to say who they were, keeping me in the Venus Rehabilitation Centre along with such scum as criminals and the Mekon's top staff from 2011 on." said Pagdil, "They used me as a kapo and to mend their spacecraft but never let me out. Not my fault I look like this. Then in 2019 I was sent out under guard to mend something secret near Mekonta and we got caught up in that big disorder that blew up there and I got away and ran away with some asteroid miners that I found."

'Kapo' is a German word used formerly to mean an inmate who helps the guards to keep order; slang uses of the word for more recent events irritate me, but I had to put up with it. But he was right. Secret agencies all too often end up the same way, drifting away from their original purposes and using more and more of their effort on suppressing opposition and leaks, enforcement for its own sake. We left such matters and went back to work. Our ship and Pagdil's set off together. I and Digby decided to do our share of the mining work while we were living off their supplies. Two small chondrite Atens contained a useful amount of metal oxides worth mining, which kept us busy for three weeks.

Two days later we came to an iron asteroid that had been dug out and made into a small Treen-style space base that now had Spacefleet symbols on, but had been built about the 8th century AD judging by micrometeorite pitting on its outside. Its correct name is XJ-4, but its small and thoroughly bored garrison now called it Base Aelfmasel, for it is likely that he helped to build it; his bones now lie under the modern memorial and statue to him on Sanget Hill where yet again my leave had suddenly ended short. They let us look round, and were glad of someone new to talk to for a while. The base clearly had been merely a raiding and asteroid mining base, and old Treen notices and Atlantine graffiti confirmed this. The Mekon had pulled its Treen garrison out as part of his first recent attempt to invade Earth, and never re-manned it after. I and Digby had been through too much and seen and heard of too much to do more than sigh tiredly at its abandoned Treen 'interrogation facility', which its modern human garrison had no intention whatever of using. I left a message about where I and Digby were, for them to pass on. We found nothing relevant there, and moved on.

We thought briefly of salvaging 40 million miles almost due galactic north of the Sun where there had been a violent space battle between Treens and Therons in 978 AD, but thought again, as that area had already been gone over thoroughly down the centuries since, and the Red Moon, passing through the area, had swept up much of the wreckage to add to the

'Sargasso Sea of Space' that we found around its surviving propulsor core in 2011. Opinions varied, and our two ships separated. Red Dog moved on, nearer and nearer the Sun. We were about to turn back because of the sun heat when our radar found something.

"Look at that!" Red Dog exclaimed. It was no asteroid but a thoroughly wrecked ancient Treen space base. We made fast to the shot-up remains of a landing area and started to search the long-deserted base. It had clearly been taken over in a violent spaceship battle followed by savage small-arms and hand-to-hand fighting for every room and corridor, over a thousand years ago judging by the micrometeorite pitting on exposed fused patches. Laboratories and storerooms had been turned into furnaces by blasting ship-engines into them. In the base's Mekonbalag room the image of the Mekon on his flying platform had been smashed into bits thrown far and wide - as at many places on Earth and Theronland at the 2011 Liberation. The Therons clearly had won, as we found no trace of bodies: Treens were not so respectful of enemy dead or even often their own dead. "Ye gods, the Therons must've seen something bad coming here, to go in this hard. They're not usually like this." Digby said. In some places administrative notices and files had survived, but nothing scientific remained.

We passed a Treen wall map. Raygun and lagam burns crisscrossed it, and one end ran off into a blast hole, but much of it was legible. 'Likely somewhere on Venus' I thought, and quickly photographed it. We started to poke about in a stripped and wrecked secure storeroom, but just then an alarm came over my suit radio: outside a navigation instrument had suddenly detected small moving objects. We bolted back to our entry point and looked into monoculars built into our helmets. In several places faint stars were moving unnaturally, and new lights appeared among them. "Cloaked Elektrobots!" Digby exclaimed in alarm. We remembered all too well the armoured robots that the Treens had used as enforcers during the Occupation. Whether someone was re-using some for his own purposes, whether some had hidden here in 2011 and were obeying the Mekon's orders over twenty years too late, our ship and its guns heavy enough to damage such enemies were too far for us to reach in time.

"Cloaked, as in those stories?" Red Dog said, "Not in the real world, thank God - I think -"

They approached. Details becoming visible showed they were not those Treen robots, then that they were men. They were clearly no Spacefleet men or ordinary spacemen. They did not have some so-far-unreal light-warping 'cloaker', but something nearly as effective, for their hard articulated constant-volume spacesuits were highly polished and reflective. On land that much chrome plating is merely an expensive showoff, but out there it made them nearly invisible except as patches of distorted reflections of star fields around them, and a few identifying lights, and eyes through small eyeholes above hard breathing masks in helmets so close fitting that their heads were a much smaller target than ours. Their backpack propulsors' back-flares were hidden from front view by side baffles whose unstreamlined shape did not matter in airless space. Many sorts of energy weapon ray would reflect off them, no more lethal than flashlights.

We were cornered in the long-deserted remote base. The squad approached. Our suit radios found their frequency and gave us splutters of undecodable scramble. One of them looked at me and radioed the rest, who stopped and started to back off; but one with shoulder lights different coloured from the rest gave another order and his men returned to plan. The highly-trained hard efficient squad behind the patches of distorted reflections of star fields and parts of the base aimed bulky guns at us. Design and training made sure that as rarely as possible was any part of their armour flat-on ahead to show us that giveaway, ourselves

reflected in it. Kabdag's voice giving urgent orders again sounded unplaceably and inappropriately familiar. They ignored our hails. We scattered and tried to hide behind things as a volley of entangling net flew out at us, and guns, also invisibly mirror-cased, were ready to destroy any gun we drew. Some secret agencies have no respect for even the highest if the deed and its leftovers can be hidden. I wished for that normally laughable weapon, a war-game paint-ball gun: it would splatter on their armour and show us better where they were. Sun reflections off them dazzled us sometimes. Digby protested about "net result" as he and two of Red Dog's men struggled like trespassing sport scuba divers in an inshore patrol boat's diver-catching gear; the end was near.

Two of the hard-squad twitched and started to tumble at random like damaged satellites, jetting blood. Others of them took out another sort of gun, and we saw that by resisting we had made our end quicker - perhaps thankfully. But they put the muzzles of the new guns over the damage holes: they were merely powered emergency suit-hole-sealers. A raygun beam from behind something swept over Digby, scorching his spacesuit but melting through the netting, and now he could reach his propulsor's controls. "Catch these!" said a radio voice that I thought I had heard before, and a shower of long objects with curved side projections flew at us as more of the mirror-suited attackers turned to face the new enemy. I looked quickly to see where the objects were coming from. A deformed olive-drab face looked through a fused hole that a Theron ship's gun had made when my ancestors still remembered the deeds of Ceolhelm who had founded my family's ancestral village of Chelmstead near Huntington in England which I felt much more likely to be able to return to than I felt a minute before. It was Pagdil.

The objects that were thrown to us were rifles, and often their bullets went through shiny plating and did not want to know about reflection laws. The attackers saw a limit to how much they were willing to risk themselves for someone's power plans, aimed at us not now guns but their backpack propulsors' nozzles, and fled, towing their casualties, driven off just in time by the good old crude, pre-space-age, pre-energy-weapon-age, non-electronic AK47. But we wondered what they may have taken away with them, for some of them had gone into the base by other holes. We also left, and got away just in time before three large ships with Earth Government but not Spacefleet symbols arrived, and stayed there an alarmingly long time searching and loading up.

"So you're glad this misshapen mongrel decided to stay with you after all?" Pagdil said to me as we set off to Venus to sell our metals, "Well, that seems to be the end of that. I wonder what that lot were after? I don't think I'll land there - I've got things to do onboard." I knew the real reason, and no wonder, of Venus blood but a monster derived from both parts but not fitting either, neither one thing nor the other, torn between two totally different sets of instinctive mental drives until he ran away to space to try to leave his past and troubles behind. He looked at Kabdag's face, and looked afraid and angry for a moment, but it then passed, and he could not make out what he had seen wrong.

Venus gradually got nearer and turned from a bright dot to a white globe and then a cloud-sheathed world below us. We radioed Mekonta and were allowed to land. As our ship came in through the cloud layer, the giant electromagnets on mountains round Mekonta caught us and lowered us in, saving our fuel. We saw Mekonta below us, built of many metal islands on a lake. Long ago Wulfhelm of Barlompston saw it from above, before his long flight in a type of craft which had been for a while a huge risk to other worlds, and I found myself thinking for a moment of the map that I had photographed in the wrecked base.

We landed. I wondered which of the Treen staff would stay loyal if the Mekon turned up

again. Blue faces in the ground crowds were fewer than in past years, for the Atlantines had started emigrating to Gamma Crucis Q3 to get away from Treens while they could, not trusting how long Earth rule over Venus would last. All but one of us got through the security checks without trouble. Each of us's DNA profile was tested routinely; then it was the turn of Kabdag, who was eager to walk on his home world among his own people for the first time since 2002. The tester's operator looked puzzledly at his screen, tested Kabdag again, and again, then on two other DNA-tester machines, and finally called the guards and ordered us to be disarmed and locked up awaiting enquiries. They recognised me and Digby, and offered to board us in a hotel, but we chose to stay with Red Dog's men, after the common danger we had been through. They interrogated us about Kabdag; Red Dog told them what he had told us before.

"That machine worked all right on the rest of you." an official said.

"And we don't deny it. All I know is that with Kabdag it acted like it did."

"Likely some funny trick or bad joke, however he managed it. We don't like that sort of thing here." said a guard to another in his own language, "And he sounds like a very 'faulty Treen': he wouldn't have lasted long under the Mekon. Things have gone down since the Earthmen took over: no weeding, Treens misled by Earth publications even trying to breed naturally with no attempt at selecting a suitable partner, and sometimes succeeding, for example the flying school here being expected to make a shuttle pilot out of a stray-hatched Mechanic-B cross Admin-D, not much good *that* sort of crossbreed turned out to be."

"If he's that paranoid about the results of ad-lib pairing even among Treens, what on earth would they say about Pagdil?!" I thought, but did not say so.

"OK, so Kabdag had a mutation in the egg." Digby put in, "happens sometimes. Not his fault, same as it isn't my fault my hair's been white from birth."

"It's more serious than just a few wrong genes!"

"He's committed no offense against Earth law." I said, "OK, he'd be guilty of desertion under Mekon law, but we don't recognise Mekon law any more."

The matter ended up so serious that Governor Sondar himself was called, surrounded by his well-armed bodyguard. He looked somewhat elderly, and had tried to retire but could not, as no good successor to him had been found. The processing started again. I knew of Treen methods, and was thankful that Earth still had top control there.

"That DNA analyser security check:" said Red Dog directly, "they say Treen science is top-notch, but is it? Their DNA-checkers checked us humans OK, but three of them in a row said Kabdag 'ere was the Mekon."

Sondar, although friendly to Earthmen and particularly to me and Digby, disliked as much as most other Treens imputations on their science, and said so.

"All I know's it did." Red Dog said.

Sondar called for his personal portable DNA-analyser. The miners walked up to it and let themselves be tested without resistance. And for Kabdag it gave the same answer as before, whatever part of his body the sample was taken from.

Sondar sent the others away, looking as much affected by strong emotion as any Treen ever is likely to. He knew much about the breeding technology that the Mekons had developed, but what he realized was rarely spoken of even then. "How many centuries is it since one of *those* has been outside the chambers of the Last Three?" he said hesitantly and in some shock, "A Mekonak. Now I know."

"What's a Mekonak?" Red Dog asked.

"A Treen of the Mekon clone stock but in incubation not given the special treatment

needed to make his brain grow Mekon-fashion." Sondar said, "Unwilling to take orders, but not superintelligent and not wanting to dominate. Neither one thing nor the other. There was no use for Mekonaks, they were not raised, the few that ever were bred grow up as rogue loners hard to bring into line. Kabdag's personal file says he is Mechanic-A clone stock. Some old mishap or unauthorized experiment covered up, likely. Now I know he is not. No wonder he wouldn't settle as a base spacesuit and engine repairer and ended up running away with a bunch of dirty rough Earthmen as an asteroid miner. A Mekonak loose again after so long. How did he end up with you lot, anyway?"

Red Dog explained as before, and then: "He's even less likely than me to ever want the Mekon back. This is the first I've heard of that sort of thing. I thought Mekons grew Mekon-shaped naturally. His ID said he was Mechanic-A, and I trusted it. This is rather a shock."

"I've heard surprised Earthmen sometimes say 'Well, I'll be a Mekon's uncle'," said Kabdag, "and it seems I actually am one! I don't really care for the idea. I can't turn into a Mekon now, and I certainly don't want one cloning off me to order me and everybody else about and experiment on people like before."

It was clearly not Red Dog's crew's fault, nor mine, nor Kabdag's, and while Earth controlled Venus I and Digby were too well known for them to casually hold, and he let us all go, perhaps reckoning that an asteroid miner spaceship millions of miles away from the usual spaceship routes was a safer place for a stray Mekonak than shut in a prison or institution on planet where it would only need one guard or staff member to be a secret supporter of Mekonism for a clone-sample to be sneaked from him to raise a new Mekon in secret.

We sold our metals and bought supplies as fast as we could and left, before anything covert could cause trouble. We rode the Magnets up, then blasted away, and Pagdil's ship came with us. As Venus shrank behind us, a radio signal with an Earthman voice asked us to return 'to discuss some new very profitable business'. We ignored it and carried on.

We warily searched the ship for anything missing or new. We found a package in a recess in the airlock. We examined it remotely with various instruments, but it proved to be only papers. It was a copy of some old Treen records; the front page had a photocopy of a 'secret' stamp on. It said among other things that, after the Treens abandoned the Somerset base, they sent craft there secretly from time to time, treating it as an experiment to see how the technologized natives would cope; sometimes they would take a native away and question him. Sometimes their craft were seen remotely, and native chronicles reported 'flying dragons' and the like. I know the Treen language well. Much of it was scientific report type matter and interrogator talk, like I had read a weariness of in Mekonta and elsewhere when helping to investigate Treen methods, but among it were verbatim reports of what captured natives had said, and personal matter in them; thus I read of much that happened in the area after the abandonment that Earth memory long ago forgot or distorted.

It spoke of Cynegifu daughter of Lagamzom, an old woman of Sanget village, the last speaker of Treen, and of Maselheard son of Maselbeorn, the last but one. Before he died they had talked endlessly in 'the old language' which the area was fast forgetting as Anglo-Saxon returned. If they had married each other, they might have carried on the Treen language one more generation; but what after that? Lagamzom was the last, and the first for some time, to have a fully Treen name, for the Church discouraged such names. In her time spacefaring was fading to magic-tales. 'Borlath', Treen for 'nuclear reactor', was merely a name sometimes given to a work ox, and likewise 'vabag', meaning 'spaceship', to a fast horse. Once Sanget had been solidly Treen-speaking and a patch of Treen speech had developed around Lont. When

they loaded the oxcart and went to Raldikita for the cattle market and public hundred-moot, the proceedings had to be in both languages until long after the base was abandoned.

Technology was in the past, but when she was 9 she had seen a 'masel', a Treen raygun, fired. Aelfbeorht of Langton had it, a family inheritance from a native base-guard who had managed to keep it. Once such base-guards were many, but now Aelfbeorht was one alone, and with no superior or base to report to and get orders and supplies, only a crude water-powered electric generator that native base-technicians had made at Alorta (now Allert) on the river Sloy in a brief futile attempt to start to rebuild their powered live-mode; there he recharged his gun. That time the target was merely a thief seen driving off sheep, but native poets still sung of how he had used it to stop a horde of Vikings at the ascent of Mistagpalgin and so saved the abbey that had been built on Sangita after the abandonment: the hot beam pierced the pirates' wooden-board shields and foul sea-waterproofs, and behind him down rushed sons and grandsons of landing field personnel now returned to ox-drawn farming but shouting in the space-language which was now their own language 'Mistagpalgin gat valkuno!' ("Mistag's Guardhouse is again manned!"). Arrows bounced harmless off the Treen uniform and helmet that he had inherited with the gun. That saved Sanget Abbey, and the next Vikings to come had to be content with being allowed to settle and rename two villages in the area. At last the gun stopped working; when he died aged 83 it was buried with him. Memory of these deeds survived on Earth long enough for a brief unclear mention in an early Norman church homily about the transitoriness of human achievement.

Technology was in the past. What good was it 'sure knowing the way round with a wrench' when there was nothing with a screw thread in the county any more? Some natives who had been used as frogmen with Treen kit were left looking at grey waves which they could not go below any more. One such was Aethelmaer, who moved to Langton to get away from the sea and its memories, until he heard a Treen ground vehicle again not in a dream but real. A shipload had landed on Sanget and sped to Trimborough, then called Trinaburh, 'the Treens' fort', to recover various monitoring equipment that they had left in the sea. He called to them in their language, and went with them, for they could use another man. He and his family went back to Venus with them, and a lifetime's hard work diving, but he preferred it to primitive farming in that time of murderous Vikings and bad winters and famines; and on Earth his hide of land went to his neighbour Wulfhelm who came from Barlompston and had seen alien worlds and a sun far away.

While the base was active, the Treens also ordered Cynebeorn of Trinaburh, a native inshore fisherman, to become a frogman. They trained him, and he took to it. Under them he learned some of their language and married and raised two sons with the mixed-language names Zavbanbeorn and Cynezavbok, 'Scuba-warrior' and 'Kingly Frogman'; they followed his trade. Between diving jobs they fished like their ancestors, and to that life they had to return after the Treens left, regretting the lost weightless freedom of diving, away at sea and so missing their chance when Treens briefly came back and took Aethelmaer, telling stories of their old dives as the only way to recover the feel of those times, and less and less able even to sail and fish as old age came on; one of the Raudicket Manuscripts says that on Fridays and Lent they sent fish to Sanget Abbey.

After the base was abandoned Cynezavbok's wife E~adburg had a son. She wanted to call him E~adzavbok, 'Fortunate Frogman', following a tendency to keep one part of the father's name in the son, but Cynezavbok was unwilling: "I feel lost enough knowing I'll never dive with a *zavban* again, now the sky-aliens have gone, without seeing my son as well as me

named after something that I long to do and will never be able to do again, and he never will be able to do. The *Tri-nas* have gone, their time and skills have gone, and, as that monk Aelfmasel says when he goes round preaching, holding onto bits and words of it and tales longing for its return is no more useful than hoarding pieces of a broken plate. E~adwulf. That is a good natural name of our people. And as for pure-Treen names!, like that man Vabagzom and his son Valdagzom who came from Lagamita [= Lont] one Lent to buy fish for the Church when their usual man at Raldikita was ill: they always spoke Treen among themselves, and the son knew about enough Anglo-Saxon for simple market trading: well, they'll have to learn the proper language of the land some time, and the sooner to start the better. I went to Sangita Abbey once, and from Lagamita on hardly anyone except the old people knew Anglo-Saxon properly. Treen, Treen, Treen: is *anywhere* between here and Sangita named in our language any more!?" He did not make his son's name alliterate with his own, as his name already alliterated with his father's, to make it easier to recite a genealogy in native alliterative verse.

One day in their 70's the sea was quiet, so they sailed to fish again with E~adwulf. But a total calm and a fog came, and a tide-current took them, and they hailed in vain. To land no word of them came any more, and a priest said memorial for them; but they had been rescued by a sort of ship that they least expected, a small Treen saucer spacecraft coming in secret looking for someone to pick up unnoticed, one of the last few such visitations before interest in the area slid below the cost in spaceship time. They told what they knew - no reason not to - and when their old skill was found they were kept and put to such work on Venus as they could do, and so beyond hope they dived again for a while. And E~adwulf beyond hope felt the bulk of a *zavban* solid real on his own back, which he had known only in stories, and got a career diving.

Other documents showed that the difficulties of understanding alien cultures and not causing offence are not new. A Treen chronicle entry said as an aside that in AD817 a native in smelly unwashed sheepskin rushed up to a guard house on a horse and Treen-saluted inaccurately and said in ungrammatical hesitant Treen that he had looked up in a glossary: "Ejberkhit mekon of West Saxons, he come with many men, he wish speak with kalag [= base-commander]". He was sent by Ecgbeorht, usually called Egbert nowadays, king of Wessex from 803 to 839; he got a sharp reminder of the correct use of the Great One's title. Also in there was a Treen photocopy of a parchment that a native had brought to a gate in June 842 headed 'from Aethelwulf king of the West Saxons [son of Egbert] to Mekon king of the Treens' wanting to meet him and 'our two peoples to give each other hostages and trade and be at peace'; among Anglo-Saxons giving hostages had slid from a hard practicality to often a diplomatic courtesy and the word sometimes meant more like 'representative', while among Treens hostage holding was for much the same purposes as is among humans now.

We pulled our attention away from the various big and small purposes of the old base that the Treens seem to have been using as a remote secret support for various space projects, to current practicalities. We found afterwards that the ships that chased us off the wrecked base took much away including the map; but I still had the photograph of it, for I had left the camera in a hidden compartment in our ship. I looked at the small image, trying to reconstruct the whole from the parts between the old burns. Treen repair shops, welding shops, etc, are many, and the Treen words for them specify no particular area; but I noticed something else.

"Jumping jets! We've been there!" I exclaimed. Two of the names were not Treen but undeniable Treen spellings of the names Langtun and Deorham, the Anglo-Saxon originals of Langton and Deerham in the Raudicket area in Somerset in England. I looked again at the

Treen names. A large ray-gun burn had deleted most of the Sangita, but Raldikita (Raudicket), Lagamita, Xindavargin ('Stores #2', later renamed Askettlesby by Viking settlers), Valdagta, Hablagkapudta, and others, all were in the right layout. Trimborough was named Lanagta, 'sea-boat place', there at least four natives had work dived regularly in Treen frogman's gear, and afterwards spoke of the wonders of the undersea world in Anglo-Saxon twelve centuries before scuba came again to England. Further west on the Bristol Channel coast on the map 'Vakibta' is Treen for 'piston place', but was clearly a Treenized distortion of an old native form of the English placename Watchet.

Below were some enlargements of individual sites. The Raldikita map marked much including a road to the Kalagta (base-commander's office, now Callot farm), and store and machinery rooms, and a symbol in the right place to mean the underfloor safe where the Raudicket Manuscripts were found. And one other map had the same symbol - a map titled Kubzathta. A length of railway and a road direction to the Lagamita were in the right places. It was worth trying. Perhaps what perished in the 978 AD disaster was not all remote backup copies of the Project Kubzath technical information but all personnel and records that knew that those copies existed and where they were. We feinted towards Mars, where agency men then laid plans, then turned sharply towards Earth as we neared its orbit, a fuel-expensive manoeuvre but worth it.

Landing a large spaceship is a noisy affair, and we needed quiet. That is why we used our space-plane; we got in it, radioed for permission to land near Barlompston in Somerset "to buy supplies and meet relatives", and undocked from the ship and set off. We took our encumbering spacesuits off. The asteroid miners laughed roughly as we recoiled at the noxious wave of undersuit smell. As we glided in silently on our landing run over the Somerset coast, Digby was glad to see again his relatives' familiar villages, although their comfortably English-looking names often had a far from native origin. Lont passed below us on our radar screens, with Lord Lont's noble Hall and the half-timbered houses which have stood since local men used oxen for hauling: but the village's name came from no Anglo-Saxon or Norman French but from Treen 'Lagamita', "place of blowtorching". Near it is Boarlet farm, from 'Borlathta', "nuclear reactor place", where the ancient railway bed forks, and Vaudot and Meckingham. Around were many other names that spoke of technology long gone. Knowing what we had come for reminded us sharply of this as we left Lont behind us and steered towards a wide low open grass field north of Barlompston. We landed, and got out and set off for Cubzet farm, leaving Red Dog and another in charge of the plane. We were glad to be back in Somerset, although briefly by night and armed and in asteroid miner spacesuit undersuits instead of our holiday casuals.

Our infra-red night-vision gear guided us easily through the moonless night as we approached the place upwind. I and Digby had gone there before many times, openly by day to buy milk and eggs when we were here before, but now we had to come in secret like a night fox. We knew the farmer there - too well to trust him not to tell all and sundry about it next time drink loosened his tongue or to take what short-sighted short-term financial advantage of it he could and cause complications, if we told him what we had come for. A woken blackbird made loud metallic alarm noises in the night. Our PG pistols silenced quickly and efficiently three dogs and nine geese before they could bark or honk as we crossed the muddy manury farmyard, long ago a place where many armed Treen ground vehicles had stood guarding a building that could have decided the fate of many planets. The farm's people still slept. We went into the cowshed, picking up some shovels and manure forks that we found inside its

door. It was summer and the cows were out.

The size and shape and orientation of the main farm outbuilding area matched the building in the old Treen map from the space base. In it the area that we were after including error allowance round it was still visible; there were no walls across it. But our hearts missed a beat as a large pregnant sow lying against a steel stall partition across it stood up on its filthy trotters and oinked at us. Pigs rarely endure coercion silently; one shrill porcine squeal as we shifted it aside would bring people on us, and then police, and publicity, and news spreading far where we and Spacefleet would not want it to, and endless complications. Again my PG pistol settled the matter, but how long would its gas tank last? We swore silently at the delay and its petty cause as we dragged two hundred kilograms of dirty overfed comatose pork aside. We dug aside a thick layer of manure and foul straw and below that seven inches of packed earth, and reached a hard floor; farm muckshifting was not what we became spacemen for. Digby, burdened by body fat, sweated, made worse by having to keep his undersuit hood up to cover his white hair, which would show brightly in any light suddenly shone in. The floor was tiled, but the tiles and the lime mortar fixing them had broken up under a century of heavy hobnailed boots and overloaded cloven hooves and we easily shifted them, thankful for the common farm men's habit of not getting around to repairs unless compelled to. Below it was still the ancient concrete workshop floor laid by aliens when the native king ruled from not Westminster but Winchester and the place we were trespassing in was called Kubzathta. The Treen-made inset concrete hatch cover was still there, thankfully, at last, fully exposed at the place expected, once we had wasted time and raygun powerpack cutting parts of two cow stalls away.

The hatch had not been moved for 12 centuries. We found and ray-burnt out the locks, to a dirty smell of fried cow filth. They had been made burn-proof, but engineers' rayguns had been improved since then. Stray PG gas started to affect us, a hazard of firing it in confined windless places. A stall partition leg had been fastened to the hatch cover. At least that saved us having to fit a lifting handle. We lifted, frantic in urgency. My vertebrae complained as masonry bolts that the present farmer's grandfather put in strained and came loose but held, but we got the cover out - with a loud boom of concrete against hollow concrete and a cracking of breaking 12 centuries old Treen airtight sealing. It was the same sort of underfloor safe as archaeologists found earlier under Raudicket church, except that the Treens had left the Raudicket safe unlocked and empty, and the Church used it later to hide records and valuables safe from Viking raids. The files and records in the secret cavity had not seen light since the local people spoke Anglo-Saxon. In the house a sheepdog yammered. Hens woke and squawked. Lights came on and an outside door opened as I jumped into the hatch hollow and frantically scooped its bulky miscellaneous contents into our packs. A portable instrument had shown no more hidden cavities. We ran for it, out of the door and across the farmyard and past the house, with many noisy splashes through puddles of filth. Warnings and a shotgun blast flew above our heads, suspecting thieves or fox. Through a window in a room Digby saw two helirigs (backpack helicopter motor and rotor sets), but thankfully their users would be grounded by the blind dark - unless they had their own infrared vision kit, in which our warm bodies would show like lighthouses; and they could quickly raise help by phone or radio.

We ran, past the last outbuilding and across a field. As we came out of a copse, the thing that we feared came: the rotor clatter and exhaust noise of two helirigs coming towards us, and pump-action shotguns being cocked in the dark above us, and a voice warning us to stop. On the ground a strong workman type can run nearly as fast and far with a helirig on as without,

so we had no hope of drawing them away from a flying craft and looping back to grab it. I have read of a case when a helirig each of a make designed to be nearly silent gave a squad of waterfront thugs a frightening mobility across walls and water to reach targets supposed safe from attack by such people. We ran, unable to spare the time to look back at the pursuers. If they caught us, if they were indeed just the farm's men and not yet another covert squad, they would soon have to let us go when they found who we were, but that would not get the secrecy back. Just in time we got in sight of our plane, and the helirig men backed off with alarmed exclamations, not liking whatever heavy mounted guns or official backing it may have had. We threw ourselves and our loads in, and suited up as we blasted off noisily back up to space with the airlock still both doors open.

As we set off, information again caught up with us, and three pursuit craft without Spacefleet symbols chased us, ordering us to accompany them to Warton near Preston 'for special investigation'. We obeyed them for a while, but over Liverpool dropped out of formation. They threatened to fire, but knew that us crashing there would risk heavy ground casualties causing a hue-and-cry and people breaking secrecy not liking what was going on. At last it was thankfully easy to take our load to Formby Spaceport. We dropped through the atmosphere to my base, with its semicircular bulge of reclaimed land which has a somewhat indelicate effect on the shape of the south Lancashire coast. As Spacefleet guards and unidentified uniformed men disputed each other's authority and confronted each other to the verge of shooting at one of the gates, we unloaded and carried our load inside to secure storage, where at last secret agencies and interests Earth-based and other could 'bark down the fox's earth' and throw minister's writs and influential covert connections and the like about in vain like balked hounds. The three pursuers landed at Warton and lay low, and the matter ended in a big row at the World Government's next meeting and political upsets and revelations that there is little point describing here in detail.

All the matter was there, and quickly Spacefleet translated it from Treen and copied it. They sent safety backup copies of it to many places, not trusting any given person not to have undeclared connections. The latest matter is dated the Treen equivalent of 976 AD, long after the base was abandoned; perhaps during their last secret trip to the old base they went to Kubzathta by night and left an update backup in the safe, doing what was needed to stop natives from knowing what was done and remaining to tell of it. As suspected, it proved that Kubzath was a hyperspace jumper, as described in Wulfhelm of Hablagkapudta's frightened report long ago to the bishop Wulfgar who agreed with him that his journey in a Kubzath-powered Treen prototype spaceship to a place where the sky star patterns were different was a demon-induced hallucination. Before the Therons interfered the 8th- to 10th-century Treens in a succession of remote bases had got a lot further than we ever had in trying to cure that disastrous pest of hyperspace jumping, the Hersbian twist.

If the hyper jump field stays well-formed, it works as it should. But all too often, with us as with all alien races who we have met or heard of who tried such a drive, the field twists and causes uncontrolled random space and time travel with no reliable way back to the crew's own time, such as when my retired superior Sir Hubert Guest in his old age was lost in the 'Star Strider' in 2024, the incident that drove Spacefleet to ban all further research into hyperspace jumpers. The only Earth hyperspace jumper ship which went Hersbian and managed to return was the 'Tempus Frangit' in 2019, and returning it brought back a powerful alien leader called Xel, who caused trouble enough and allied himself with the exiled Mekon. But before 978 AD the Treens seem to have cured the Hersbian effect, or nearly so, or so their recovered reports

say; the future will show if Spacefleet restarts work on hyperspace jump ships, and if that work succeeds, and the quick access to remote star systems that that would give us, and the thankfulness that the Treens did not get it into production first.