

Doctor Who

MENACE OF THE MALITRONNE

A Fourth Doctor short story
by
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“Oh, *Doctor!*” exclaimed Sarah Jane Smith in a tone of extreme exasperation. “Where’s *this?*”

“I don’t know – yet.” The Doctor’s voice came floating cheerfully out through the TARDIS’s doorway from where he was still fiddling with the TARDIS console controls. “Why? Is it important?”

“Only if you really were intending to respond to the Brigadier’s emergency summons,” said Sarah pointedly. “Because we’d have to be back on Earth to do that!”

“And aren’t we?” the Doctor enquired with interest, raising his eyebrows at Harry Sullivan, who was just on the point of following Sarah outside.

Harry peered out, then looked back at the Doctor and shook his head resignedly. “Afraid not, Doctor.”

The Doctor raised his eyebrows, then scooped up his hat, clapped it onto his unruly curls, and swept through the door, past both Sarah and Harry. Once outside, he halted and surveyed their surroundings.

They were in an arched tunnel, just inside its entrance. The TARDIS had materialized in a small alcove, only just large enough to house it; the tunnel itself was about fifteen feet high and twelve wide, lined with bricks, and indented at irregular intervals, on the left wall only, by similar alcoves as it curved away to the right, fading out of sight in an increasing dimness. By contrast the Doctor was brightly illuminated by the light falling in through the entrance, but it was not the yellow sunlight from the blue sky of Earth; such sky as could be seen through the arched opening was a dusky pink, and the light that came from it was tinged accordingly.

The narrow window of vision afforded by the doorway showed a surface of grey, dead-looking soil outside, stretching out for what the Doctor estimated to be half a mile until it was terminated by a thick, encircling jungle of vegetation that displayed every possible variation on the red part of the spectrum – a view that could only be obtained through the sturdy bars of the metal grille door erected across the entrance. In the course of her professional activities as a journalist Sarah had on a few occasions visited people in prison, and this grille reminded her very much of the many barred doors through which she’d had to be escorted by guards when traversing prison corridors.

The Doctor tried to open it, but it wouldn’t move.

“Hmm. Locked,” he commented thoughtfully.

“Not Earth, no Brigadier, no idea where we are,” Sarah summarized sourly.

“Ah, yes. What you might call a triple whammy,” agreed the Doctor, awarding her a grin which she considered to contain a misplaced amount of delight. He studied the view again for a few moments.

“Pink sky, pink sky,” he muttered to himself. “Now, where have I seen a sky this shade of pink before...?”

“Look, Doctor,” said Harry suddenly, breaking across his ruminations. “There, outside!”

The Doctor followed the direction of his pointing finger. A few hundred yards away two figures had come into view, mounted on small vehicles that hovered above the ground. They appeared to be human, wearing identical dark uniforms and with rifles of some sort slung across their backs. Their measured pace of progress was that of men who were on patrol, and at that moment their attention was directed away from the tunnel, being focused instead on the space between whatever structure housed it and the jungle beyond. Within seconds they had moved out of sight.

“That’s very interesting,” said the Doctor thoughtfully. “I think the presence of those gentlemen means we should explore this tunnel, don’t you?”

“Not *another* tunnel!” Sarah protested. “Weren’t there enough tunnels for you on Voga?”

The Doctor dismissed her complaint with an airy wave of his hand. “Oh, this is a completely different sort of tunnel.”

“How do you know?” Sarah challenged instantly.

“The tunnels on Voga weren’t lined with bricks,” the Doctor pointed out. “You wouldn’t have had the Planet of Gold lined with plain old bricks, now would you? Unless they were gold ones, of course...” He looked at the brickwork more closely. “You know, these bricks are many thousands of years old. Don’t you want to know what might be at the end of a tunnel built of bricks many thousands of years old?”

“But what about the Brigadier’s emergency?” Sarah demanded.

“Oh, I think we can incorporate a quick diversion and still keep our appointment with the Brigadier,” said the Doctor slyly.

Harry had been pursuing a different line of thought. “Doctor, why did you say that those chaps being there meant we should explore the tunnel? What’ve they got to do with it?”

The Doctor unleashed one of those rather unnerving stares of his. “Where a perimeter’s being guarded, it means one of two things. Either someone or something might get in – or someone or something might get out...” He grinned suddenly. “I wonder which one it is? Let’s find out, shall we?”

Whereupon he briskly set off along the tunnel, flinging one end of his scarf back over his shoulder with a characteristically cavalier gesture.

“Looks as if we’d better hope it’s not because there’s something that might get out,” Harry said resignedly. He caught Sarah’s expression, and suppressed a smile; she was scowling fiercely at the Doctor’s retreating back, her lower lip thrust out mutinously. “Come on, old girl,” he said peaceably. “The mood is clearly upon him, and we’d better stay together, don’t you think?”

“Oh, I suppose so,” Sarah conceded crossly. “But I really, *really* hope – just for once! – there’s nothing worth investigating here. The Brigadier wouldn’t be using the space-time telegraph if whatever it is wasn’t urgent!”

Harry considered the likelihood of her wish being fulfilled in the context of his personal experiences of travelling with the Doctor thus far, and decided he’d better not air his conclusions in public.

“Well, whether there is or there isn’t, we’d better get a move on,” he advised. “He tells *us* not to wander off, so we’d better not let *him* wander off, had we?”

He set off along the tunnel; Sarah, still pouting, followed.

Once the curve of the tunnel had taken them out of sight of the entrance they found that someone had installed a series of artificial lights, suspended from the domed ceiling, that were not overly bright but sufficient for the purpose of traversing the tunnel. Also, rather fortunately, for the purpose of showing them the briskly moving figure of the Doctor, some way ahead of them. Even more fortunately, he came to a stop, allowing them to catch up with him. Having done so, they found themselves standing at a T-junction in the tunnel, both arms of which curved, as had the original tunnel, so they were unable to see more than about ten yards in each direction despite the fact that lights had been installed leading both ways.

“Which breadcrumb trail now, Doctor?” Sarah challenged.

“I was just trying to decide that.” The Doctor tapped a forefinger against his chin. “I think I may have to consult a computer...”

“What computer?” Harry asked, puzzled. “Don’t tell me you’ve got a computer in your pocket, Doctor!”

“Oh, but I do, Harry,” the Doctor assured him. “One of the oldest computers in the world. Your world, anyway. Though similar systems have been independently invented on thousands of other planets over the course of history. One of the universe’s original binary systems, you might say. Responsible for countless decisions over millions of years.” He held out a small, gleaming flat object on his palm.

“Heads or tails?” he enquired brightly.

As the pitch of the Summoner sank from a scream to a hum to a whisper and finally died away, Vark tore his eyes away from the disc of the interface screen and looked quickly over to where Xantel was scanning the readouts.

“Well?” he demanded impatiently.

Xantel studied the screen in front of him for a few moments, then shook his head.

“No improvement,” he said, careful to keep his voice uninflected. In his late fifties, he was twenty years older than Vark, and had had long experience of dealing with the younger man’s emotional extremes. He bore with them because they were the price that had to be paid for Vark’s brilliant flashes of insight, but even so, he didn’t want to set off one of his project leader’s notorious explosions of temper if it was avoidable.

Vark scowled, and brought his fist down on the panel as an evidence of his frustration.

“You and your precious daughter have got to do better!” he raged. “There’s *got* to be a way of increasing the power ratio! Three points! That’s all I need! *Three points!* It *must* be possible!”

Xantel sighed. “If you’d only explain how this apparatus works in more detail, we might be able to give you better results...” he ventured. In spite of his neutral tone, Vark reacted as he always did at anything approaching that suggestion.

“No!” he shouted. “The Summoner is *my* invention, and I’m not revealing its secrets to anyone! Not to *anyone*, do you hear? Not even to this team. And that’s the way it’s going to stay until we’ve proved that I’m right. And we’re not to going prove that until *you* get me those three power ratio points!” he ended savagely.

“We’re starting to get fairly good visual definition even at this level,” Elonda ventured, making what she knew was probably a vain attempt to placate him. Like her father, she had schooled her tone to ‘neutral’, and reflections of light in the somewhat anachronistic spectacles she wore – a slight affectation in a woman still in her twenties, perhaps? – were often useful in masking her eyes from closer examination. She threw a quick glance at Demerai, who was straightening up from the imaging console with a quizzical look on her face.

“Fairly good?” repeated Vark, with growing indignation. “*Fairly* good? I don’t want *fairly* good! I want *EXCELLENT!* I want the highest visual definition achievable! And those three points will give it to me! So we’re going to find them!” His voice was rising. “Do you hear me? We’re going to *find* them!”

Xantel and Elonda exchanged glances; their faces were expressionless, but their eyes weren’t. Demerai’s customary expression of suppressed wry amusement remained intact, despite Vark’s fervour. He, fortunately, didn’t notice.

“Xantel, come with me,” he ordered. “We’re going to take another look at the feedlines. Elonda, you log the data from this run and set things up for the next one. Demerai, take the exciter over to the workshop and double-check it. We’ll try again in an hour’s time. And this time” – his eyes bored into theirs – “this time, *we are going to succeed!*”

He gathered Xantel up with an abrupt gesture and swept out of the Chamber. Elonda looked helplessly at Demerai. “He seems to think that if he shouts something loudly enough, it’ll make it come true,” she said irritably.

“Well, if it makes him happy...” Demerai said equably.

“But it doesn’t, that’s the trouble! Nothing does! As if we weren’t already trying as hard as we can,” Elonda grumbled, her eyes flashing mutinously behind her spectacles. “And he obviously doesn’t *trust* us,” she went on, aggrieved. “Otherwise he could explain his precious secret apparatus to us and, like Dad said, we’d be better able to do what he wants us to do. As it is, it’s like knowing how to drive an air skimmer but not knowing how it’s been engineered. If you don’t know that, how can you fix it if it doesn’t work properly?” Then her shoulders rose and fell to accompany a small but eloquent sigh as she removed the data log cartridge from her own console. “Oh, well, I suppose I’d

better get on with it," she muttered, moving towards the Chamber's exit; one couldn't call it a doorway, because there was no door, just a stone archway.

As she reached it, Demerai looked up from the imaging console from which she was about to remove the exciter, and spoke very quietly. "Did you feel it?"

Elonda turned back; Demerai's tone was matched by the uncharacteristic gravity of her expression. "The temperature drop? Yes, of course I did! And so did Dad, I could tell. But what would have been the point of saying anything? We all know they keep happening, even if they do only last a few seconds, but every time we try to bring up the subject, Vark either blows his top or else dismisses it as just a particularly strong air current coming through the tunnels and tells us to concentrate on what we're doing. Another example of the principle that if he says it not only loudly but also often enough, that'll make it true. And I don't know about you, but I can do without triggering another of his meltdowns!"

"Mmm..." said Demerai again, her brows contracting into a slight frown. "I wish I could dismiss it as easily as he does..."

The two women exchanged a look as eloquent as a shrug. Then Elonda turned and left.

Demerai turned her eyes toward the bland blankness of the interface screen, thinking – as she often did – that it was like a huge closed eye. An eye that she was working to help open. An eye that Vark was desperate to see through, so it could show them – what...?

She studied the screen, trying to dismiss the sense of unease that was troubling her; she wasn't normally subject to that sort of feeling. Then she shrugged, and bent over the imaging console once again.

Which meant she didn't see that, just for a few seconds, the surface of the interface screen was distorted by a bulge on its surface. No, not a bulge, for that would have been smooth. This came out in a point, as if something sharp had been tentatively poked from behind the screen, like an extended claw exploring the texture of a tightly stretched sheet of rubber. Then the distortion slowly withdrew again, leaving the surface once more a smooth and featureless plane.

Harry had decided that Sarah's description of the lights as a breadcrumb trail was a pretty good one; though it seemed someone had taken extra precautions to prevent straying from the proper route. Every time they came to a T-junction and the lights only led in one direction, the unlit tunnels had been blocked off with barred doors like the one they'd encountered at the entrance.

"Bit of a maze, isn't it?" he observed. "I wouldn't fancy our chances of finding our way back out without having these lights to follow, even if the doors weren't there."

"Oh, I don't think you need to worry about that," said the Doctor comfortably. "After all, I do have an excellent sense of direction. You know," he mused conversationally, "the last time I was in a maze, it was with Ariadne. This time it's with 'Arry Sullivan. I have to say she was much prettier than..." He broke off, stopped unexpectedly, and spun round to face them. "Did you feel that?" he demanded.

"Feel what, Doctor?" Harry enquired.

“That temperature drop. Just for a couple of seconds or so,” said the Doctor.

“I – suppose so...” Sarah said. “I thought it was just a draught, or something. Why?”

“Because it wasn’t a draught. It felt more like...” The Doctor stared at them both, then abandoned whatever he had been going to say, and instead turned back to examine the latest in the series of recesses that punctuated the walls. “I wonder what these were for?” he mused whimsically. “Passing places, do you think? Sentry boxes? Alcoves for floral decorations...?”

Sarah was still feeling rather grumpy about the whole proceedings. “If we got on and found whoever put these lights up, perhaps you could ask *them*,” she suggested pointedly.

“Now, there’s a thought,” agreed the Doctor, straightening up and gesturing at the corridor beyond her. “Come on, then!”

“What do you mean, ‘come on’? You’re behind me!” Sarah objected pedantically.

“Do what a cat does,” said the Doctor, with an air of stating the obvious. “Follow from in front!”

Fifteen minutes and quite a distance later, Sarah was feeling less and less disposed to follow anybody anywhere.

“Oh, come, Doctor, this is pointless! Just tunnel after tunnel. None of them seem to lead anywhere,” she complained.

“A maze always has a centre,” the Doctor riposted, with undiminished optimism.

Sarah rolled her eyes and set off again at a speed fuelled by her growing irritation. Harry was right behind, until he was suddenly brought up short against her when she abruptly stopped.

“Sorry –” he began, then broke off, as he saw what she had seen. Just ahead of them was a T-junction, one with lights running in both directions, not just one. But they weren’t going to be able to follow either route, because their way was blocked by another of the barred doors. Harry pushed at it experimentally, but, like the one they’d encountered at the entrance, it was locked.

“Ah!” said the Doctor, pushing past to examine the door. “The traffic lights have gone red, have they? Somebody doesn’t want unexpected visitors proceeding past this point. I wonder if that means we’re getting close to our destination?”

“Well, if we can’t go any further, we’d better go back, and not keep the Brigadier waiting any longer,” said Sarah tartly.

“What a girl you are for fixating on a single idea,” said the Doctor reprovingly. “I’m sure I can find a way to open this...”

His hand was just going to his coat pocket when it suddenly diverted upwards and instead raised his hat in polite greeting to the person who had suddenly appeared on the other side of the bars.

“Hello,” he said expansively, with an enormous smile. “And who might you be?”

The expression of the woman who had halted abruptly after emerging from around the left-hand arm of the T-junction, cradling some kind of device against her chest with both hands, was morphing from slightly alarmed surprise to growing interest. She was probably in her mid-forties, with shoulder-length fair hair and shrewd grey eyes that were now studying the Doctor with a gleam that

indicated firstly that there was a probably formidable intelligence in the brain behind them, and secondly that she was reacting to this unexpected development with admirable equanimity.

"Two minds with but a single thought," she said with dry humour, a half-smile quirking one corner of her mouth. "That's exactly the question I was going to ask *you*."

"Oh, that's an easy one," said the Doctor. "I'm the Doctor, and this is Sarah and Harry."

"I'm Demerai, and I'm very pleased to meet you. Though I'd be even more pleased if I knew how you got here, and why. Nobody's supposed to be in here except our research team. And I can't help thinking," she added pointedly, "that if you were a member of our team, I would have remembered you, Doctor whoever-you-are."

"Of course you would," the Doctor agreed vigorously. "I'm a memorable fellow."

"So how did you get past the perimeter patrol, and what are you doing here?" she persisted, tipping her head slightly to one side in a manner that clearly disclosed how intrigued she was.

"We-e-ell, I suppose you could say –" the Doctor began, but then his attention fastened on the device she was cradling against herself. "Wait a minute! That's a veon exciter you've got there. Now, what might you be doing with that, I wonder?"

Demerai looked at him with renewed interest. "You're familiar with veonic technology?"

"Oh, I've come across people making attempts to use it from time to time," the Doctor said casually.

Sarah was no longer prepared to be left out of the conversation. "What's veonic technology, Doctor?"

"There's a hypothesis – Veon Theory – that posits the existence of particles of time called veons," the Doctor explained. "The theory is that events of great violence or emotional tensions leave an imprint on veon particles, which embed themselves in the physical locations of those events. Exciting the veons at the right frequency in the right location can cause the imprints to become visible. Enabling you to see the past happening, right in front of your eyes."

"Is that really possible, Doctor?" Harry asked. To someone who had, perforce, become accustomed to physically travelling into the past, the concept didn't excite him as much as it might have at one time, but it was still an intriguing idea.

The Doctor shrugged. "As far as I know, it's never been more than a theory. I certainly don't know of anyone who's come up with a way to put it into practice."

Demerai regarded him shrewdly. "You seem to know a lot about it," she observed thoughtfully.

"Oh, I do, I do," agreed the Doctor genially. "The study of time is a speciality of mine, you might say."

Demerai studied him closely for a few moments, as if debating with herself whether she trusted this complete stranger who was where he had no apparent right to be. The Doctor gazed back at her with wide, innocent eyes. Then the corner of her mouth quirked again, and it was obvious which way the decision had gone.

"Then I think Vark might want to speak with you," she said, putting a hand – the one that she wasn't using to carry the veon exciter – into a pocket and withdrawing a key with which she opened the door to allow them through.

"Ah, but do *I* want to speak with *him*?" the Doctor countered mischievously. "Who's Vark?"

"Someone who's found a way to put the theory into practice," Demerai said with an intentionally casual flick of her hand, relocking the door behind them. "He's created a veon quantifier. He calls it the Summoner. He's in the Central Chamber, if you'd like me to show you the way...?"

The Doctor beamed at her. "At this very moment I can't think of anywhere I'd rather be."

"I can," Sarah muttered, *sotto voce*.

Vark stared in astonishment as a tall, flamboyantly dressed man sporting the longest scarf he had ever seen suddenly swept into the Central Chamber, followed by Demerai and two other people he had never seen in his life before.

"What's going on?" he snapped. "Who are you?"

"Ah, you must be Vark," said the tall man enthusiastically. "So this must be Sarah, this must be Harry, I must be the Doctor, and – this must be your veon quantifier."

Vark blinked at the abrupt change of subject, and for a moment seemed lost for words.

The pause gave Sarah a quick chance to look around the Chamber. It was a large circular space that rose to a domed ceiling, built of the same bricks as the tunnels. Whatever the Chamber might have contained originally, most of the wall area was now lined with workbenches covered with complicated-looking electronic equipment. The one exception was a space containing a large, spherical screen of semi-transparent material about ten feet in diameter, linked by a sturdy-looking cable to a large, complex unit that stood in the very centre of the floor. It was to this that the Doctor had gone, straight as an arrow, ignoring the bemused gaze of the other two people in the room.

Judging from the expression on his face, Vark had apparently gone from being lost for words to choking from so many crowding onto his tongue at once. He rounded on Demerai furiously.

"Who *is* this man?" he demanded. "What's he doing here?"

Demerai smiled serenely. "The Doctor's an expert in the study of time, so he tells me. He recognized the veon exciter the moment he saw it." She walked over to the other two occupants of the Chamber and held the device out to one of them, a middle-aged man, who accepted it from her almost absently; his attention, like that of the young woman beside him, was focused alternately on Vark and the Doctor.

"So," Demerai continued, turning back to Vark, "I thought you might like a word with him. Perhaps he might be able to help with the power ratio problem...?" She quirked an eyebrow at the Doctor, with the air of a prompter delivering a cue.

The Doctor was more than willing to respond. "Power ratio?" he repeated swiftly, straightening up from his examination of the veon quantifier. "I take it you've hit the same wall most other people have. The disparity between the eltonic throughput and the exciter yield is insufficient for image formulation, yes?"

Vark's mouth dropped open for a moment; then he regrouped. "How did you – ?" he began, then broke off, clearly reassessing the value of this intruder's presence.

"Yes," said the young woman, almost eagerly, as if scenting that a solution might be available. "We need another three power ratio points, and we don't know how to get them."

"Elonda's our junior technician," Demerai interjected tranquilly, completing the introductions. "Xantel – her father – is the senior technician. Vark, of course, is our project leader."

The Doctor nodded. "Of course he is..." he agreed amiably. "Just out of interest, what's *your* specialism?"

Demerai shrugged self-deprecatingly. "I've had some success applying Vark's theory in the area of image formulation."

"Then I expect you're rather good at it," the Doctor observed cheerfully. "I can't imagine Vark would accept anything but the best of the best on any project he was leading."

"No, I wouldn't," Vark snapped instantly. "Only the best get results. The doubters say veon theory can't be applied in practice, just because nobody ever has. Well, *I'm* going to get a result that'll leave all the sceptics confounded! Then they'll all have to eat their words, because *I* will have proved them wrong!"

I bet he's fun to work for, thought Sarah with irony. *There's definitely an 'I' in this team...* She looked at Harry with raised eyebrows, and found him looking back at her with an expression that told her he was thinking the same thing. Not once had Vark said 'we', recognizing the contribution of his team; he was focused purely on himself. There was something about the whole speech that smacked of the desperate boast of a child in the playground. She glanced at the Doctor; the very blandness with which he was regarding Vark told her that none of this had escaped him, either.

Then another of those grins of his widened across his face. "Then it's lucky for you that I'm the *best* of the best of the best, wouldn't you say?"

Vark seemed to feel challenged by this remark. "*I,*" he declared almost angrily, "am a genius!"

"Are you? Oh, good! Then with two of us in the room, that should be more than enough, wouldn't you say?" the Doctor suggested impishly.

"Why – do you think you can do it?" asked Elonda eagerly, before Vark could respond. "Get us those last three points?"

"Well, if you'll let me just have a look at the trionic couplings, I'll be happy to see what I can do," said the Doctor magnanimously, pulling his sonic screwdriver out of his pocket. He raised his eyebrows in Vark's direction, awaiting his consent.

Vark hesitated for a moment, as if tempted to refuse. But he needed those three power ratio points, and if this stranger could get them for him... He nodded abruptly.

"Very well. Try. If you make any progress, report to me immediately," he snapped. "In the meantime, I'm going to summon Commander Morvig and some of his men. This is supposed to be a top secret project, and I want to know why the perimeter guard allowed unauthorized visitors into the Mound! It'll take them a while to get here, and until they do, I'm holding you responsible for

these people, Demerai. *You* allowed them in here, *you* will face the consequences if anything they do results in damage to the project. None of them leaves here unsupervised. Understood?"

Demerai nodded calmly. "Understood."

Vark's eyes swept around the Chamber, treating everyone in it to what was almost a glare. Then he turned on his heel and left.

"Well, now," said the Doctor, gathering up Xantel and Elonda with his eyes, "would you like to talk me through where you think the problem lies...?"

Whereupon the three of them clustered round the Summoner and engaged in a conversation so laced with incomprehensible technical terminology that Sarah gave up trying to follow it after the first thirty seconds. She turned to Demerai, and found herself being studied intently by the clear grey eyes. She smiled wryly.

"I suppose you're wondering who we are and where we come from," she said.

Demerai returned the smile. "The question has been suggesting itself," she admitted cheerfully.

"The Doctor's a traveller," Sarah said. "He's always looking for new planets to explore. Harry and I travel with him, but things don't always go according to plan."

"We hardly ever know where we're going to end up," Harry confirmed. "So, if you don't mind my asking, where exactly is this?"

Demerai's eyebrows were lifted, as if thrust upward by the number of points she'd have liked to pursue following their extremely sketchy explanation, but she visibly confined herself to answering the question that had been posed. "This planet, or this specific place?"

"Both, really," said Harry cheerfully.

"In which case" – Demerai's eyebrows continued to signal how intrigued she was – "this is Uilonna, one of the last planets to be taken into the empire that was once ruled over by the Duumvirate of Kanwai."

Harry looked blank, but Sarah nodded. "A duumvirate is a government headed by two people, isn't it?"

"Siblings, in this case," Demerai confirmed. "Mehmenra Kanwai and her brother Mananan Kanwai. We don't know much about them, and they lived so long ago – four thousand years – that what we do know is largely apocryphal. Though one thing we do know was that in their heyday they ruled over more than a thousand planets. But the empire collapsed very swiftly, because of something that happened here. On Uilonna. In this very place, the Mound of Kanwai."

"And what did happen?" Sarah pursued.

"Mehmenra and Mananan both died in mysterious circumstances. Nobody knows the exact truth of what happened. There are many accounts, most of which contradict each another. What they do agree on is that Mehmenra and Mananan entered the Mound, and that they died. Supposedly in this very chamber."

Her tone was matter-of-fact, but Sarah couldn't help making an instinctive scan of the Chamber, or suppress the slight shiver she experienced as she did it. "How did they die?" she asked.

Demerai's default expression of suppressed amusement became more marked.

“All the accounts attribute their deaths to some sort of mysterious guardian of the Mound. The old texts contain a word which translates as ‘Malitronne’, but none give any kind of description of it. It’s come to mean some kind of bogeyman. I suppose it’s only to be expected that in the absence of any detail, the popular imagination would supply a superstitious reason. Without even apocryphal evidence, effectively we have no real explanation of what killed them. We know the Mound was very old – many thousands of years old, even back then, though it was only from that point on that it began to be called the Mound of Kanwai. Perhaps it was being explored for the first time, as we’re exploring it now. It turns out the Mound itself is just the very top of an absolutely vast structure. It covers many miles in area, but we’ve only recently discovered that in addition there are who knows how many levels of passages below this one, and they go very deep underground; there must be hundreds of miles of tunnels that we haven’t even begun to investigate yet. You probably noticed we’ve sealed off all the side tunnels to the route here. If somebody took the wrong turn, they might never find the way back again; the place is a complete maze.”

“And nobody else has investigated, for four thousand years?” Sarah probed, with some surprise.

Demerai shook her head. “Whatever happened, it must have had quite an effect. Uilonna only has a tiny population now, and they have a strict interdict on the Mound to this day. In fact, there’s not another soul on this entire continent. So as far as we can tell, the Mound was never entered again until...” She broke off, and looked slightly uncomfortable. “That is, not until Vark mounted this expedition. But in summary – we know who, and where, and even, approximately, when. But not how, or why.”

“You said this veon thing means you can theoretically summon up images from the past,” Harry said. “You’re trying to find out what happened to them?”

“The collapse of the Empire affected hundreds of planets, billions of lives. Not knowing the reason is a wound in the collective consciousness that remains raw and painful. It might heal many scars, if only we knew why it happened. We’re not sure whether veon technology at its current level of development can go back that far – not yet, anyway – but that’s what we’re hoping for,” Demerai agreed. She looked across at the Doctor and her two colleagues; their discussion seemed to have become more intense. “If you’ll excuse me, I think I’ll just see how they’re getting on...”

Sarah was about to follow, but Harry stopped her.

“I say, old girl,” he said quietly, “Did you notice what she said? Or, rather, what she *didn’t* say? If the locals really have put a prohibition on this place, what are these people doing here at all? She was quick to gloss over that aspect, don’t you think? If you want to know what *I* think, no-one else knows they’re here. Sounds pretty unlikely they’d’ve got official permission for it.”

Sarah thought about it. “You know, you might be right,” she said slowly. “But why would they risk it?”

“That Vark strikes me as the sort of chap who wants to make the maximum impact,” Harry shrugged. “Show everyone that he can do what no-one else can do. And do it in the most spectacular way. If no-one else is even allowed near this place, he’d see it as tailor-made for his big reveal of how much cleverer he’s been than everyone else.”

Sarah was impressed; Harry wasn't usually given to this degree of insight. "How did you work all that out?"

"I've run across one or two senior officers like him in the Royal Navy," he said, with a wryness which Sarah couldn't help smiling at.

"I hope the Doctor really has upped that thing's performance," Harry went on. "Here without permission or not, Vark obviously isn't someone who takes failure well. Mind you, neither does the Doctor," he added, and chuckled. "Immovable object meets irresistible force." An image that had Sarah smiling again as she turned her attention back to the centre of the room, until she saw that the Doctor was frowning.

"Is something the matter, Doctor?" she asked, raising her voice slightly. "Having trouble with your three extra points?"

"No, no," said the Doctor. "I think the next test will prove positive." He looked up from the screen at which he was directing his frown. "But there's something very odd about these readings."

Sarah and Harry immediately went over to join the group clustered around the Summoner.

"They look normal enough, don't they?" Xantel said, but in a tone that somehow lacked conviction.

"Ah, but I've seen veonic readouts before," said the Doctor. "See these irregular spikes in the exciter output? They shouldn't be there. And do you know what's really interesting about this last one?"

"Not a clue, Doctor," said Harry cheerfully. "Why don't you tell us?"

"Two things," said the Doctor. "Firstly, the spikes have been increasing progressively, and this one was by far the biggest. Secondly, the timing coincides with the temperature drop we felt in the tunnel."

"Did you feel that, too?" said Elonda quickly. "We've felt one every time we've done a test run in the last few days."

"Yes," Xantel said slowly. "And the timings match the other graph spikes, too. But our esteemed leader brushes it off as unimportant, of course," he added resignedly. "Whatever happens, if it's not to do with achieving the project goal, it's always unimportant."

"I think it's very important," the Doctor demurred. "Because a temperature drop like that indicates that a great deal of energy was being withdrawn from the environment in some way. Over quite a large area, from what you tell me. And it only happens when the Summoner's powered up for a full test. Now, I wonder what the reason for that might be, hmm...?" His eyes were suddenly quite unsettlingly round and intent as he stared at each of them in turn. There was an uncomfortable silence.

"And that's not the only thing," the Doctor went on. "There are some components of this machine that I've never seen before, even in other attempts at veonic technology. They don't seem to have anything to do with veon detection or excitation. I can't help wondering what they might be for..."

Xantel cleared his throat diffidently. "Only Vark would be able to tell you that, Doctor. He's the only one who'll know what those components do. He refuses to explain them to us. Perhaps it would be a good idea if you were to speak to him yourself. If this is as important as you say, he might listen to you where he wouldn't listen to us."

"Oh, do you think so?" enquired the Doctor innocently.

"Come on, Doctor, you know so," Sarah interposed robustly. "If Vark doesn't listen to *you*, he isn't going to listen to *anyone!*"

"Do you know, I think you may be right," the Doctor agreed. "I'll just have a quick word with him, then, shall I?"

"Well, since none of you are supposed to leave without supervision, I'd better come with you," Demerai volunteered. "It *was* a direct order from Vark, so we'd better obey it." She caught Sarah's expression, and smiled resignedly. "We know he's difficult, all of us do. But we also know it's worth putting up with. Because he does get results. And that's what counts, in the end."

"Hmm. Well, I suppose I do know what you mean," Sarah conceded, directing a meaningful look at the Doctor, who gave her a slightly indignant "*Who can you possibly be talking about?*" look in return.

"If it'll help, you could tell him we're ready for the next test run," Elonda suggested. "If the Doctor's succeeded, that'll help placate him."

"She's right," Xantel confirmed.

"Well, then, why don't you get things set up while we're gone, and then when we come back, you'll be all ready to impress him," the Doctor suggested.

"I'm coming, too," Sarah announced. "Demerai's been telling us some very interesting things about this place, which I think you need to know. Don't you?" She directed the last two words at Demerai, along with a level look. Demerai glanced at the Doctor, then back at Sarah, and nodded.

The Doctor was already on the move. "On the way, Sarah! Tell me on the way!" he said over his shoulder, sweeping them both into his wake with an all-encompassing gesture as he strode out of the Chamber.

Commander Morvig and the four men with him had almost completed their long journey from the portal into the Mound to the sub-chamber in which Vark had set up his personal quarters and workspace. Morvig didn't like having to bring two-thirds of his entire complement of operatives to answer Vark's summons, and he didn't care for the atmosphere of the Mound and its seemingly endless tunnels. He always felt a sense of oppression when inside it; not that he would ever have admitted as much to anyone else. However, as he marched, he was aware of the familiar sensation weighing heavily on him once again.

The only thing that was distracting him from its effect was the knowledge that there were three strangers inside the Mound that should in no way have been there. How had they got in without any of his men seeing them? When confronted with the strange blue box just inside the portal, one of his men had suggested that they must have come from inside that. When challenged

with some sarcasm on Morvig's part to explain how, in that case, something that size could have got inside without anyone seeing it, he'd retreated into a confused silence. He probably hadn't been very fair to the man, Morvig now privately conceded to himself, but an explanation would nevertheless have to be found.

And the quickest way to do it was to submit those strangers to some fairly robust questioning. Unaware that he was doing so, Morvig increased his pace and gripped his hand weapon more tightly as he envisioned that forthcoming encounter.

"Keep up!" he barked at his men. "Not far now!"

Harry had been beginning to feel very bored. He'd watched while Xantel and Elonda had run what seemed like an endless number of checks, a process to which he could contribute nothing but an uncomprehending gaze. But now, at last, they were finally powering up the Summoner.

"You know, we could run a sort of pre-test test," Elonda was saying. "If the Doctor *has* got the power ratio up to the right level, knowing that might put Vark in a better mood before we run the official test."

Xantel looked wary. "I'm not sure he'd want us to try anything without him being here."

"It wouldn't take long to find out," Elonda persisted. "If it works, brilliant. If it doesn't, we'll have time to brace ourselves before Vark discovers it for himself. What harm can it do? Either it'll work, or it won't. Either way, we'll have a chance to prepare ourselves for whatever reaction it's going to provoke."

"I'm still not sure it's a good idea..."

"Oh, come on, Dad! Where's the harm in trying?" Without waiting for an answer, Elonda began pressing switches. "I'll only run it for a few seconds. You check the readouts."

Somewhat reluctantly, Xantel went over to his workstation and operated the relevant controls. "Ready," he said.

Careful not to get in his way, Harry moved behind him so as to have a better view of the screen on which the readouts were displayed.

Sarah kept her account of what Demerai had imparted to her and Harry to a succinct *précis*, omitting all but the barest essentials. Even so, the Doctor began to slow and even to stop in order to give her his full attention.

"...And nobody knows what killed them. So Vark's team are trying to find out what really happened," Sarah concluded.

The Doctor gave Demerai a thoughtful look. "So you're here without permission, experimenting with time, experiencing side effects which you can't explain, and without any real idea of what you're going to discover," he summarized, and flashed a brief grin at Sarah. "Well, I'd be rather hypocritical to criticize you on those grounds." He ignored Sarah's grimace and returned his attention to Demerai. "I'm rather more concerned about the fact that Vark is the only one who knows how the Summoner is designed and constructed to work. If anything happens to him,

no-one else will be able to take his place. And if it malfunctions, no-one else will know what to do about it.” He rubbed his nose thoughtfully. “Not even me.”

“Presumably the worst that could happen is that nothing happens,” Demerai said tentatively, as if unconvinced by her own words.

The Doctor looked at her with raised eyebrows. “Oh, I wouldn’t say that! Would *you* say that? I wouldn’t say that.”

She frowned at him, slightly irritated. “Then what *would* you say?”

“That when you’re meddling with time, nothing is *not* the worst that can happen,” said the Doctor, fixing her with a disquieting stare. “I *definitely* need to talk to Vark...” he added ominously, before whirling on his heel and setting off again along the tunnel.

In the centre of the Chamber, Elonda gripped the power control on the Summoner. “Here goes, then,” she said, and began to turn it.

On Xantel’s screen, the readout lines began to move slowly upward. As they rose toward the top of the scale, he began to count out loud. “Eighty-five... ninety... ninety-two...”

“Look! Look! The Doctor must have done it! It’s beginning to work!” Elonda crowed triumphantly. The semi-transparency of the interface screen was changing; growing darker, as if looking at somewhere where it was night, or else an unlit interior.

Xantel was torn between the screen and his readouts, but he continued to count off the latter. “Ninety-seven... ninety-eight... ninety-nine...”

He never made it to “one hundred”. Just as he drew breath to say it, the interface screen rippled, and a shape became visible – and then more than visible.

Elonda’s scream of terror reverberated across the Chamber and out into the tunnels...

Predictably, Vark was deploying his tactic of dismissing out of hand what he categorized as an unimportant side issue.

“I don’t deny the temperature drops have happened,” he maintained crisply. “I do deny that they’re relevant to what we’re on the cusp of achieving. The power usage of the Summoner hasn’t been affected, and that’s what matters.”

The Doctor subjected him to an uncomfortably penetrating gaze.

“A proven pattern of correlation between the testing regime and the temperature variations, and you’re trying to tell me that that’s of no importance? And here was I thinking you were a *serious* scientist.”

Vark flushed at his tone. “A serious scientist stays focused on his objective!” he snapped.

“A serious scientist takes account of, and explores the cause of, everything that relates to or results from his experiments,” the Doctor contradicted. “Those temperature drops indicate a sequence of increasingly intensive power drains from an expanding area within the Mound. Which rather begs the question, doesn’t it – why is it that every time you run a test, that energy registers as a spike in the exciter output?” He subjected Vark to one of his more disconcerting gazes.

“What is it about the operation of the Summoner that causes that? Is it something to do with those components of yours that you won’t explain to anyone else, I wonder? A *serious* scientist would either be able to explain it, or would want to find out why. You know, Vark, playing with the past can be very dangerous. I’m beginning to think that if I were you, I wouldn’t do it.”

Sarah couldn’t resist saying it. “Really, Doctor? You do it all the time!”

“I said, ‘if I were *him*,’” said the Doctor pointedly. “But I’m not him, am I? I’m me. I *know* what I’m doing. And, you know, I’m really beginning to think Vark doesn’t.”

Vark’s face darkened. “Yes, I do! I *do* know what I’m doing!” He sounded like a sulky child lashing out, Sarah thought. “And I’m telling you, the temperature drops aren’t important!”

“Your team have all expressed concerns about it,” Sarah retorted. “They’re all sensible, level-headed people. Why won’t you listen to them?”

“Because I haven’t got time to listen to the fairy tales of the over-imaginative!” Vark snarled.

“Fairy tales?” Sarah pounced on the phrase. “What fairy tales?”

There was an uncomfortable pause. Then Demerai said, “Elonda said that once, during a test run, she saw a slight bulge on the interface screen when she was standing alongside it.” Both her voice and her face were carefully expressionless.

But Vark’s weren’t. A momentary look of something close to panic crossed his face, and his voice rose harshly. “A malfunction of peripheral vision!” he snapped. “She was attention-seeking! Making it up!”

At that Demerai was driven to take up battle, outraged on her friend’s behalf. “Making it up? She’s not that sort of person, and you know it, Vark! How can you say something like that? You wouldn’t have got as close to finding out whether the legend of the Malitronne is true if it wasn’t for what she’s done for you!”

She would have gone on, but the Doctor interrupted.

“Malitronne?” he exclaimed. “Did you say Malitronne?” He threw one hand up in the air in a gesture of recollection, then smacked his forehead with it. “Of course! Pink sky! Uilonna! I should have remembered that name. Uilonna! And the Malitronne!” Sarah was startled to see the look of alarm in his abruptly widened eyes.

Demerai looked at him in perplexity. “Yes. According to the legend, it’s supposed to have killed the Kanwais.”

“You didn’t say anything about a Malitronne!” said the Doctor accusingly, rounding on Sarah.

“Why should she? It’s just another fairy tale,” said Vark dismissively.

“Wait a minute!” said Demerai sharply. “Doctor, are you telling us the Malitronne isn’t just a legend? It really existed?”

“Oh, yes,” said the Doctor grimly. “I’ve been to Uilonna before. Once. Not this area, or I’d have recognized where we are. But the thing is, I met one. A Malitronne. In person.”

“That’s impossible!” Vark exploded. “That legend is thousands of years old!”

“At some point you and I really ought to have an in-depth discussion about what’s impossible and what isn’t,” said the Doctor scathingly. “But right now what you need to know about a

Malitronne is that it's not intelligent, but it *is* one of the most aggressive, savage, instinctive killers that I've ever come across. Combine that with the danger presented by your Summoner, and it could have been fatal!"

"What do you mean, fatal? How could the Summoner be dangerous?" Demerai demanded.

"He's talking nonsense," Vark interjected instantly. "Because the Summoner *isn't* dangerous." But Sarah saw how his eyes slid away from the Doctor as he spoke.

"Doctor, what did you mean by '*could* have been fatal'?" she asked.

"I've just worked out what the Summoner can do," the Doctor. "What it's been trying to do every time it's been tested. I'd hoped you were acting in ignorance, Vark, but you weren't, were you? You're the only one who knows how the Summoner works, and you know what it can do. You've known all along."

"Why? What *can* it do?" Sarah persisted.

"Apply the principle of $E=mc^2$," said the Doctor. "Energy converted into matter. Those temperature drops were warning signals. If you'd had those extra three power ratio points, your machine would have been able to do what I think you've been planning on all along. If the Summoner works at all, it won't just summon up images from the past. It'll give those images reality in this dimension."

Sarah and Demerai turned to stare at Vark, who stared back, his face stony.

"Then... if we *had* seen the Malitronne..." she said slowly. She looked at Vark with growing horror as the implications began to become clear. "But that's – terrifying..."

Vark snorted superciliously. "Nonsense! It's wonderful! Think of the possibilities! There's nothing to be afraid of. "

The Doctor studied him keenly. "You aren't afraid?"

"Of course not!"

"Let's hope," said the Doctor darkly, "you don't have to reconsider your position."

Demerai was still struggling to comprehend Vark's attitude. "If that's what you were working to achieve, why keep it a secret? Why wouldn't you tell the rest of us?"

He met her gaze defiantly. "Because it's *my* invention. *My* achievement. And I wasn't going to risk any of you making it known to anyone else, even by accident. I had no intention of risking my rightful place in history!"

It was then that the terrible truth about the thing they were all overlooking dawned on Sarah. "But, Doctor, he *does* have those three extra points! You've just given them to him!"

The Doctor's eyes widened in realization, but he didn't have the chance to answer, because Demerai cut across him. "Wait! Can you feel that?"

He could. They all could. Even Vark couldn't deny it this time.

The temperature had just dropped.

The Doctor, Sarah and Demerai looked at each other in horror. But before any of them could take a single step, a terrified scream reverberated along the tunnel toward them.

"That's Elonda!" Demerai exclaimed.

“Come on!” the Doctor yelled, and took to his heels, hurtling back toward the Central Chamber at a speed that had the ends of his scarf flying back toward the others as they pursued him along the tunnel.

Commander Morvig was just re-locking the door which gave final access to the central area of the Mound – the one through which, had he but known it, Demerai had admitted the Doctor’s party earlier – when Elonda’s scream came echoing down the tunnel toward them. Everyone froze; the men looked at each other and then at Morvig.

“Sir – that scream...” said one of them uncertainly, gripping his weapon more tightly.

“And did you feel the way it went cold all of a sudden?” said another, equally ill at ease.

Inwardly, Morvig found himself feeling just as perturbed as they were. But as commander, he couldn’t afford to let it show.

“We’ve almost reached the Central Chamber,” he said robustly. “Vark must be there. Obviously he needs our help. That’s what we were hired to do. So let’s do it.”

He removed the key from the lock, pocketed it, then turned and waved his hand in a forward gesture to indicate they were to follow him. But as he hurried onward, he found that, like his subordinates, he too was gripping his weapon with extra intensity.

By the time they reached the Chamber, Sarah found herself last in the queue to get through the archway. Just as she reached it, some flash of instinct made her stop, and she found herself staring along the other fork of the tunnel – not the one they’d just come along, but the one that led back to the entrance into the Mound. Had she just heard something in that part of the tunnel, out of sight? A sort of scraping, scuttling sound?

Then she looked into the Chamber, and what she saw put everything else out of her head.

Elonda lay on her back beside the Summoner, her broken spectacles askew across her face, her eyes staring sightlessly upward. There was a large puncture wound in her neck; a skein of lurid yellow and red lines, like engorged blood vessels, radiated out from it on the skin of her neck and face. She was clearly dead. Like much of the other equipment in the Chamber, Xantel’s workbench had been overturned, and he and Harry lay in a heap beneath it. Were they dead, too?

Vark was blocking her way; she pushed him unceremoniously aside, and joined the Doctor and Demerai in pulling the wreckage off the two men. The Doctor knelt and felt for Harry’s pulse, as did Demerai for Xantel’s.

“He’s alive!” she announced with relief.

“What about Harry?” Sarah demanded.

Not looking at her, the Doctor held his forefinger in the air for silence. Then he looked round at her and smiled. “Thanks to the legendary thickness of the Sullivan skull, he’ll be all right. Knocked out when he hit the floor, that’s all. Come on; let’s get Xantel off him.”

He and Demerai carefully moved Xantel, who was beginning to show signs of consciousness despite the long, bleeding slash that ran across the side of his head. The Doctor looked at the wound intently.

“That looks as if it was done by something very thin and sharp,” he observed.

“There’s nothing like that here,” said Demerai, looking round the Chamber..

“Not now,” agreed the Doctor. “I think you’ll find that what inflicted that wound left the Chamber before we arrived.”

Vark’s eyebrows drew together. “What do you mean?”

The Doctor locked eyes with him. “You know what I mean,” he said flatly.

At that point they were interrupted by Harry groaning as he opened his eyes and painfully sat up.

“Ow! That’s sore!” he complained, rubbing the back of his head.

Sarah put down a hand to help him to his feet, then gave him a huge hug.

“Thank goodness you’re all right!” she said.

“Well, I wouldn’t go that far – yet,” he said ruefully, still holding his head, but smiling down at her. Then recollection hit him. “Doctor! There was a thing – !”

“I’m sure there was,” said the Doctor grimly.

“It came through the screen!” That was Xantel, now also conscious and levering himself up off the floor with Demerai’s assistance. “It was monstrous!”

“Well, now, monstrosity’s a very subjective concept, you know,” the Doctor began to demur, but broke off as he caught Sarah’s ‘*this is NOT the time!*’ expression.

“Monstrous!” Xantel repeated, with increasing vigour. “That thing –”

Then his eye fell on Elonda, dead on the floor in the centre of the Chamber. Within seconds he was his knees beside her, cradling her in his arms and emitting a low keening wail. Sarah felt a lump in her throat.

“Xantel...” said Demerai gently. “We’re so sorry...”

“That thing killed her.” Xantel spoke in a low but savage monotone. “Attacked her on sight, and killed her. It came through the screen.”

Everyone looked at the screen, but it was the same featureless grey surface it always displayed when the Summoner wasn’t operating.

“That’s nonsense!” Vark snapped. “It isn’t even on!”

“It was,” said Xantel implacably. “We were running a pre-test. The screen focused in on – something... And then that – *thing* – appeared. Collided with the Summoner when it burst through. It must have impacted the power control. Or else damaged it.”

Vark instantly rushed to the Summoner and began checking it over.

The Doctor looked at him disdainfully. “Is that really all you care about?” he enquired acidly.

“This is my life’s work,” said Vark through clenched teeth. “My legacy to history!”

“Of course it is,” said the Doctor ironically. “Though of course you do realize that that legacy is going to include transporting one of the most savage creatures in the universe from its proper temporal environment into this one, don’t you?”

“What are you talking about, Doctor?” Harry asked, uneasily. “What’s going on?”

Vark forestalled any reply the Doctor might have made with an exclamation of triumph. “It’s all right! It’s unharmed!” he crowed, and reached for the switch that would power the Summoner back on.

“Vark! Don’t!” the Doctor shouted. He was about to leap toward the switch himself, to turn it off again, but in a flash Vark had pulled a hand weapon from inside his tunic and levelled it menacingly in the Doctor’s direction.

“Haven’t you done enough damage already?” the Doctor demanded furiously. “Turn that thing off!”

“Never!” Vark snapped. “And I’m going to make sure *you* can’t!” He closed another couple of switches, then unexpectedly pointed his weapon at the control board. There was a brief burst of light, then a small explosion and a puff of smoke.

“Are you mad?” Xantel shouted.

“What’s he done?” Sarah demanded.

“Fused the power switch in the ‘on’ position. Nobody can turn it off now, not even me. Certainly not you, Doctor,” said Vark triumphantly. “And look! It still works! The focus is reconfiguring!”

The interface screen had turned from grey to dark, the darkness of an unlit interior.

“You know what we’re looking at, don’t you?” Vark demanded exultantly. “That’s this Chamber, four thousand years ago! Veonic technology *does* work! My Summoner works! I’ve done it!”

“But you can’t see anything!” Demerai protested. “How do you know that’s what we’re looking at?”

“Because it’s focused on this chamber, you stupid woman! It always has been,” said Vark contemptuously. “There are no lights because there’s no-one there at this moment – this moment some four thousand years ago. But there will be! All I have to do is keep adjusting the temporal verniers until I hit the right window, the one when there *are* people inside the Mound! Just think” – Vark looked round at all of them, his eyes glittering – “I could even locate the Kanwais in time, and then bring them here! Speak to them in person! What an achievement! I’d go down in history forever!”

Xantel gaped at him. “What are you talking about? How could that happen? The thing that killed Elonda – what is it, and how did it get here?” His voice was rising dangerously. “*How* could something come through the screen?” He looked at Vark with mounting fury. “*What have you done?*” Laying his dead daughter gently down again, he scrambled to his feet to confront the man who he was evidently realizing was in some way responsible for her death.

“Those temperature drops you were so rightly worried about,” said the Doctor. “They were the work of those mysterious components in the Summoner. They didn’t work until it was operating at

full capacity. When you and Elonda ran that last test, they were finally able to do what Vark designed them to do.”

“Which was what?” Xantel grated, never taking his eyes off Vark, who sneered silently at him, though Sarah couldn’t help noticing that of them all, it was now Xantel at whom he was levelling his weapon, as if he sensed that was where the greatest danger lay.

“Take energy from the surrounding environment and the target location to convert the image of what’s on the other side of the interface to physical form on this side of it!” Vark declaimed triumphantly. “No-one else has ever been able to excite veons enough even to achieve image formulation. I’ve taken the concept to a new level! One that will ensure I’m remembered forever!”

There was a horrified silence as the full extent of Vark’s egotism and its consequences was realized by his audience. Xantel and Demerai stared, frozen, but Sarah saw the Doctor and Harry look at one another and nod slightly.

Unfortunately, so did Vark, and he instantly brandished his weapon at them menacingly.

“Don’t even think about – ” he began. But he didn’t get to complete his warning.

Morvig suddenly slowed, and held up his hand to bring his men to a halt behind him.

“What is it, sir?” one of them asked, keeping his voice low.

“Quiet!” Morvig snapped. “I thought I heard something...”

He had. Now they could all hear it. A scuttling, rasping sound, as of something moving quickly toward them. Because of the curve of the tunnel at this point they couldn’t yet see it, but within moments they would. Every weapon was swiftly levelled towards the point where the source of the sound would appear.

Then it did.

Morvig was momentarily frozen with horror. His scream of “Fire!” was a purely instinctive reaction to what confronted them, but a superfluous one. Equally instinctively, every man was already shooting. The barrage of shots reverberated deafeningly within the tunnel. And so did the screams that followed.

But within seconds the screaming had stopped, leaving only the terrible echoes of the voices of the dead to race along the tunnel toward the centre of the Mound.

The combination of shots and screams resounding into the Central Chamber was all it took. Vark couldn’t stop himself glancing toward the archway, and that instant of distraction was enough. Forestalling any intentions the Doctor and Harry might have had, it was Xantel who moved first, launching himself at Vark with an incoherent roar of pure rage. Vark had no time to react. Xantel’s weight carried him backward to collide with the Summoner. Instantly he thrust himself back up; his momentum in turn pushed Xantel backward, and the two men went down together. As they fell, there came the sound of the weapon discharging, muffled between their bodies, combining with the crack of a head striking the sharp corner of one of the workstation benches.

It was all over in seconds. The Doctor and Harry leapt forward and dragged Xantel and Vark apart, and the Doctor made a hurried examination. But even before he looked up and sadly shook his head, Sarah could see the blood spreading from the wound in Xantel's chest and from the back of Vark's head. The eyes of both were glazing over in blank, unfocused stares.

"Vark shot him!" Demerai gasped.

"It happened as they fell. It was probably accidental," Sarah said, looking at the two dead men with regret. She couldn't mourn Vark, but Xantel hadn't deserved what had happened to him. Or to Elonda...

"Talking of shooting, where were those other shots coming from?" said Harry. "I thought we were the only ones in here."

"That must have been Commander Morvig," said Demerai. "He's responsible for the perimeter guard. Vark sent for him as soon as you arrived, remember?" She bit her lip. "I wonder how many men he brought with him..."

"However many there were, they'll all be dead," said the Doctor grimly. "And that's what we'll be if we don't think up a way to get the Malitronne back through that interface. Malitronnes are, I'm afraid to say, very hard to kill."

Demerai stared at him. "Malitronnes? The legend only mentions one."

The Doctor looked at her pityingly. "A living creature doesn't exist in isolation. It doesn't just pop out of thin air, you know! If there's one, there has to be more than one, a group from which it's come. A whole species. Whenever that Malitronne came from, there'll be more of them. Living in the depths of the Mound. Probably in all those unexplored tunnels you were telling us about." He leaned forward and looked at her with huge, rounded eyes. "They might still be there, for all we know. Somewhere down there in the dark..."

Demerai's face was a picture of horrified comprehension as she realized the truth of the Doctor's logic. Harry, however, was still doggedly pursuing his own line of thought.

"Even if you're right, and the Malitronne has killed that chap Morvig and his men, that still means it's trapped in here, doesn't it? I mean, all the passages that weren't in use've all been closed off with those barred doors. So there's only so far it can go."

"Which means" – Sarah looked at the Doctor apprehensively – "which means it's trapped in here with *us*."

"And sooner or later it'll find us," the Doctor concurred. "So we need to find it first."

"You can't seriously be suggesting we go out and look for it!" Demerai protested. "If Morvig didn't have time to relock the second door, it could be anywhere between here and the entrance!" She looked at him with widening eyes. "How are we going to get out of here?"

"We aren't," said the Doctor flatly. Then he corrected himself. "We can't."

"What do you mean, we can't?" said Sarah, halfway between surprise and dismay.

"You heard what it did to armed, professional fighters," said the Doctor. "We've got nothing to fight it with. If it caught us anywhere in the tunnels, we wouldn't stand a chance."

“Then what are we going to do, Doctor? We can’t just sit here and do nothing!” Harry protested.

“Do nothing?” The Doctor pulled himself to his full height. “Did you say ‘do nothing?’”

“Yes...” said Harry, confused.

“That’s what I thought you said.” He fixed Harry with one of his looks. “But it isn’t what I said.”

“Then what do you say?” Sarah prompted impatiently.

“What I say is that nobody’s going to be safe unless we can return the Malitronne to where it came from. Its proper place in time. Which means luring it in here and back through the interface. It’s our only chance of making it out of here alive.”

Sarah, Harry and Demerai looked at each other in dismay, but the flatness of the Doctor’s tone carried conviction.

“So what do we do?” Sarah said, accepting the inevitable.

The Doctor drew himself up in a manner that reminded Harry of a general deploying his troops. “Sarah, you keep watch,” he said, indicating the archway. “If you see the slightest movement, shout.” Sarah nodded and positioned herself where she could peer out into the tunnel. “Harry, Demerai – turn those workbenches into a barricade to hide behind.” This time the Doctor pointed at the wall opposite the interface screen. “If the Malitronne doesn’t see you, it won’t be distracted into attacking you first – I’m going to make sure it has other things to think about. So I’ll need all of you – including you, Sarah – to get out of sight behind the barricade as quickly as you can when the time comes.”

“What exactly are you going to do, Doctor?” Harry asked.

“We-e-ell, first I need to reconfigure the Summoner so that the process that brought the Malitronne from its own time will be reversed,” said the Doctor. “Then I thought I might wait with bated breath. That is, I’m going to *be* bait with breath.” He suddenly flashed one of his enormous grins at them. “Something I hope to maintain for as long as possible, you understand. Breath, that is,” he clarified, as an afterthought.

“You better had,” said Sarah severely, “or I might have to be very cross with you.”

“Which would you prefer to face, Doctor? The Malitronne, or Sarah when she’s angry?” Harry enquired mischievously, grinning as Sarah scowled at him. Demerai, however, wasn’t smiling. She was looking sombrely at the bodies of her dead colleagues.

“Eyes front, Sarah,” the Doctor directed abruptly. “We can’t afford to get taken by surprise. I’m as fond of repartee as the next man, but even I don’t want to die laughing.”

Within five minutes the bodies of Elonda, Xantel and Vark had been moved to one side of the Chamber and the barricade of benches constructed. Not a very solid construction, but, as the Doctor had said, its purpose wasn’t protection but concealment. If the Malitronne did decide to attack it, it wouldn’t hold for long. It was a grim thought.

Sarah had kept strict watch throughout; so far, the Malitronne hadn’t put in an appearance, but that state of affairs was unlikely to last much longer. Her eyes ached with staring; the overhead

lights were bright enough when you were directly under them, but their illumination diminished the further away they were, and in the far distance the tunnel was positively shrouded in gloom. Much nearer, about twenty-five yards away, was the entrance to the side tunnel that went to Vark's quarters. If the Malitronne emerged from there, there wouldn't be much time for a warning. Sarah swallowed, and focused on her task with renewed concentration.

Inside the Chamber, Demerai and Harry were standing silently by the barricade while the Doctor continued reconfiguring the Summoner. Everything seemed to be properly functional, apart from the fact that it couldn't be switched off. Not that he'd have done that, even if he could; he daren't risk not having it working at the moment the Malitronne turned up, as it inevitably would. At last he straightened up.

"Well, that seems to be ready for action," he said, returning the sonic screwdriver to his pocket.

He hadn't expected the reaction to that remark being Demerai stifling a gasp, and looked at her quickly. She was wordlessly pointing beyond him, at the interface screen. Harry was staring in the same direction.

"Doctor, look!" he exclaimed.

Quickly, the Doctor did so. The interface screen was no longer dark. Instead, it was showing what was recognizably the Central Chamber, but now illuminated – by what means, he couldn't tell. No-one was visible, but someone must now be there, centuries in the past.

"Ah, the lights are on," he observed. "I wonder if that means somebody's home?"

"There must be!" Demerai said, her face filled with awe. "Do you realize what this means? We're looking at the past! Vark was right – veon theory *can* be made to work in practice. He –"

It was at that moment that Sarah screamed. The Malitronne had suddenly burst out of the side tunnel into full view.

Xantel had used the word 'monstrous.' Sarah had seen quite a few creatures to which humans would apply that word, but for this one it seemed more appropriate than most. Its six-legged, three-segmented body most resembled that of a huge insect, like an ant or a hornet. From the largest, hind part protruded not a hornet's barb but a long, slender, flexible tail, covered in sharp thorn-like triangular spikes and terminating in a small, whip-like stinger dripping a fluid whose repulsive yellow colour shouted 'poison'. Clearly that was what had killed Elonda. Two of the black-haired, ant-like legs emerged from the smallest, middle segment of the body, the other four from the front segment. Both segments were horrible, glistening sacs of semi-opaque reddish flesh, with crimson veins branching obscenely just under the surface. From its chest extended two snake-like arms equipped with savagely serrated pincers. Above them a long, sinuous, tentacle-like neck extended upward from the front segment of the body, with more veins providing a repellent crimson tracery on a surface the same horrible yellow colour as the poison stinger on the tail. The head was not dissimilar to the 'T' shape of a hammerhead shark's; the front of the 'T', stretching from side to side, was purely and simply a mouth – but a mouth filled with long, interlocking, bladed incisors that emitted a scraping sound when the thing opened its maw to emit the spitting, snarling

hiss with which it was now threatening its surroundings – surroundings that it clearly had an alternative kind of sensory ability to perceive, because it had no external eyes of any sort.

Sarah couldn't help herself. "Doctor!" she screamed.

The Doctor instantly straightened to his full height, hurled his hat away from his head in the direction of the barricade, and shouted, "*Now*, everyone! And whatever you do, don't make a sound!"

All three were already on the move; a rasping, scuttling sound swiftly rising in volume was heralding the Malitronne's approach. Harry, the last one in, had only just got behind the barricade when the creature appeared in the archway, the eyeless head held predatorily motionless despite the constant looping and curving of the neck that supported it.

"Ah, hello!" said the Doctor expansively. "There you are! I've been waiting for you!"

The problem he had was that the Malitronne was sideways on to the interface screen, so he needed to get it from where it was to in front of the screen, and without the Malitronne getting to him first. But all the benches had been used for the barricade, so he had no cover; the only thing he could keep between himself and the Malitronne was the Summoner, and he daren't risk it being damaged. He'd have to rely on his own agility and speed, against a creature with even greater agility and speed.

The Malitronne was still standing in the archway, unmoving apart from the ceaseless, serpent-like movements of its neck, as if it was assessing his threat potential.

"What's the matter?" enquired the Doctor. "Don't tell me you're shy! Don't you want to come in? Oh, but you must! I insist!" He grabbed each end of his scarf and spread his arms wide, making flapping gestures, making sure the Malitronne stayed focused on him. There was no sound or movement from behind the barricade, but through a gap between the benches he could see three pairs of eyes, focused on him with agonized anxiety; Sarah's were the nearest.

The Malitronne seemed to have made up its mind, but fortunately was not attacking at speed, as the Doctor had feared it might. Instead, sensing its prey was trapped, it crept forward almost in slow motion, stalking him implacably, circling the Summoner to the Doctor's right. Just as slowly, the Doctor moved to his left, keeping the Summoner between them, edging with infinite care towards the interface screen.

Suddenly the Malitronne rushed forward and lashed its long, spiked tail with the poison stinger on its tip at the Doctor, so fast he only just managed to evade it with a frantic twist of his body. The movement took him even nearer to the interface. The Malitronne scuttled back a few paces, then resumed its slow stalk, clacking its serrated pincers together in a threatening rhythm. A few seconds later it attacked again, with a snarl, a double-pronged attack this time. Again the tail came sweeping towards him, but also the head, blind, but with its gaping mouth filled with the deadly incisors, darting at him. He could only avoid both by throwing himself to the floor and rolling to his left. As he completed the movement by rising to his feet again, he realized he was now directly in front of the interface.

The Malitronne had responded by instantly scuttling back to the other side of the Summoner. Where it had now positioned itself, there was nothing between it and its prey. With a roar of rage, the creature gathered itself and leapt bodily through the air at the Doctor – who at the last possible moment threw himself to one side, just as the snapping jaws were about to touch him. Even as he fell, he turned his head to see the Malitronne vanishing into the interface, carried through by its own momentum. The poison-tipped stinger was the last thing to disappear.

Immediately Harry, Sarah and Demerai emerged from behind the barricade.

“Doctor, you did it!” Sarah crowed, but the Doctor was not yet ready for congratulations.

“Quick!” he snapped, scrambling to his feet. “We’ve got to stop it turning round and coming back again!”

Sarah gaped at him. “How? You still can’t turn the Summoner off!”

“Disconnect the interface screen!” said the Doctor instantly. He seized the cable that ran from the Summoner to the screen and gave it an energetic yank, but with little effect. “Harry!” he yelled.

Harry ran forward and grabbed the cable just behind where the Doctor was holding it. Both men combined their efforts to produce an almighty jerk.

“It’s coming!” the Doctor panted. “Again, Harry!”

“Doctor!” Sarah shouted. “Look! Look at the screen!”

Alarmed in case the Malitronne was on its way back after all, the Doctor and Harry paused to look at the interface screen. The power supply reaching it was obviously beginning to fail, because it was riddled with jagged white lines and spots. But the remnants of the image were still, just barely, visible.

“Doctor!” Demerai echoed with dismay. “There are – there are *people* there!”

And there were. Two people. A man and a woman, of similar build and features. And facing them, its tail lashing and pincers waving, was the Malitronne. Just then, the image wavered, the jagged white lines intensified, and then the image was gone. Silently, the Doctor gave one last, savage pull at the cable. The end came free of the Summoner, and he dropped it on the floor like a dead snake.

There was a long silence.

At last Demerai said, in a low voice, “It was us. We killed them.”

Harry’s brow creased into a frown. “What do you mean? Killed who?”

“Mehmenra Kanwai. Mananan Kanwai. We came here to find out how they were killed. And it was us.” Demerai sounded numb. “All the time it was us.”

Harry looked at the Doctor, seeking clarification.

“The Malitronne was brought through the interface from its proper time and place,” said the Doctor soberly. “The target location was unaltered, but the precise temporal settings must have been changed when it came through and collided with the Summoner. When it went back, it was to when the Kanwais were in this Chamber, four thousand years ago. And the Malitronne killed them. Just as the legend says.”

“And that brought down the Empire,” said Demerai dully. “We did it. We’re to blame.”

“Actually, I think you’ll find Vark is the one who should take the blame,” said the Doctor matter-of-factly. “The Summoner was his creation. He deliberately intended that it could be used to materialize objects or beings from the past into the present. None of the rest of you knew that. He’s to blame, Demerai. Not you, not Elonda, not Xantel. Vark, and Vark alone,” he concluded, and his voice was that of a judge passing final sentence.

His words were followed by a silence. Nobody moved as he walked across to the barricade and retrieved his hat from where he’d thrown it earlier. He put it back onto his head, then turned to regard Demerai, who was staring at the Summoner.

“What are we going to do now?” asked Sarah awkwardly.

“Oh, I think that’s for Demerai to say, don’t you?” said the Doctor. He reached out and put a hand on Demerai’s shoulder. She raised her eyes, and they shared a look; the Doctor nodded, and patted her as if with approval before withdrawing his hand.

“Vark proved that veon theory was sound,” said Demerai slowly. “That it *could* be used to see images from the past. Even that it could be used to convert those images into present reality. And you’ve proved, Doctor, that the process can be reversed.”

“And what do you think about that?” the Doctor prompted softly.

“I think,” said Demerai, “that that machine” – she gave the Summoner a look of revulsion – “should be destroyed so thoroughly that no-one will ever be able to reconstruct it from the pieces. I think all of Vark’s work should be destroyed along with it. I think that no-one should ever enter the Mound of Kanwai again. Never. And I think no-one else should ever know that any of what happened here today ever happened.” The muscles of her jaw convulsed as she looked at the Doctor. “That’s what I think.”

“And that’s what I think, too,” the Doctor concurred.

“Can you make that happen?”

“Oh, I think so. I should be able to make the Summoner draw enough energy from its surroundings to cause sufficient feedback for an explosion that’ll reduce an enormous portion of the Mound to its constituent atoms. A funeral pyre for your lost friends that’ll destroy any hope of anyone ever being able to enter the Mound in the future.”

“And then?” Sarah probed.

Demerai looked at her.

“I’ve got to die,” she said bleakly.

The only two men who remained of Morvig’s contingent – though they were unaware of that, as they dutifully patrolled the perimeter around the Mound of Kanwai – were gradually becoming aware that something, somewhere, wasn’t right.

“What’s up?” Yallaner asked, as his colleague slowed his air skimmer to a halt. He circled back to pull up beside him.

“Can you feel that?” said Tormis, putting up a hand to rub the region of his skull just behind his ear. “That sort of – vibration...?”

Yallaner nodded. "Yeah," he said, looking around. Nothing was moving on the expanse of dead grey soil that surrounded the Mound, nor on the verge of the jungle that enclosed the area. "A sort of hum... Wonder what's making it?" he added uneasily. "D'you suppose they're up to something in there?" He nodded at the Mound.

Tormis turned to regard the great circular knoll, not overly high, but so vast in area that it stretched for miles in either direction from where they stood.

"Of course they're up to something," he said with mild sarcasm. "Or we wouldn't be here making sure no-one else gets in!"

"But what?" Yallaner said darkly. "That's the question."

"Are you suggesting we should take a look? I still can't get the Commander on the com unit, and the entrance is only just there." Tormis pointed at the thin sliver of dark alcove with its grey barred grille that indicated the only way into the Mound. Then, suddenly, he shivered.

"Did you feel that? It's gone cold. The temperature's just dropped like a stone!"

"I think –" Yallaner began, but broke off. He raised one forefinger into the air. "Listen! What's that?"

Tormis could hear it, too. A peculiar fluctuating wheezing, groaning noise. "Where's it coming from?" He concentrated, and realized. "Yall, it's coming from inside! From just inside the doorway, sounds like."

"Yeah, but it's dying away," said Yallaner. "That vibration isn't, though. It's getting more intense." He looked at Tormis. "I think maybe we *should* go and take a look. What do you think?"

Tormis never answered that particular question. All acknowledgement, all memory of it was blown away by the massive explosion that suddenly rocked the Mound and its surrounds. Yallaner never remembered being blown bodily off his skimmer, or hitting the ground, or even breaking his arm when he did. But he never forgot the sight of the entire top of the Mound, as if in slow motion, lifting up into the air before collapsing back onto itself, the cloud of thick, choking dust that erupted from the doorway at a speed that betrayed the immense pressure that propelled it, the low rumbling sound that only gradually died away into silence.

"No-one could've survived that," said Tormis with an objective detachment that he was obviously using to mask his shock.

Yallaner moved his head slightly to indicate agreement. "But – what the hell happened?" He obviously didn't expect a meaningful answer.

"We're never going to know," said Tormis. He turned his head slowly to look at Yallaner. "You all right?"

Yallaner started to move, then caught his breath. He felt tenderly at his left forearm. "Think it's broken. Must've landed awkwardly."

"I'm not in favour of 'awkward'," said Tormis. "Especially if it precedes the word 'questions'. And that's what we'll face if anyone ever finds out we were here when this happened. Especially since we weren't supposed to be here in the first place. So we're going to get back to the ship and

get off this planet, now. And if anyone ever does ask questions” – he paused for emphasis – “we were never here, and this never happened.”

The Doctor and Sarah looked up as Harry came back into the control room of the TARDIS.

“How’s your patient, Doctor Sullivan?” Sarah asked. She kept her tone light, but mentally she was comparing the expression of wry amusement Demerai had habitually worn when they’d first met her with the hag-ridden anguish now looking out of her eyes.

“As well as can be expected,” said Harry. “I made her down a hot drink and a pill to help her sleep. Disturbed consciences aren’t conducive to helping their owners to sleep. A bit of artificial assistance was required.”

“Oh, she’ll be all right,” said the Doctor, with a casual flick of his hand. “Eventually. Human beings are very resilient, you know. Though I do think – I do think,” he repeated, in a slightly aggrieved tone, “she might have been more impressed by the principle of dimensional transcendentalism.”

“Look here, give her a break, Doctor,” said Harry, his voice tinged with disapproval. “Her life’s just been turned upside down. Hardly surprising if she forgot to say ‘it’s bigger on the inside’, in the circumstances. Don’t forget, as far as anyone who’s ever known her is concerned – from now on, she’s dead.”

“It’s going to take her a long time to come to terms with what’s happened, you know,” Sarah supported him, looking at the Doctor reproachfully.

“Well, humans will be humans, I suppose,” the Doctor conceded, a trifle grudgingly.

“Where are you going to take her, to start her new life?” Harry enquired.

“Oh, I’m going to drop her off on this nice little planet I know in the Aquan system. Lovely little world, very accepting of strangers, never ask about where you come from. Very content to let you decide how much to say about yourself. Somewhere where it’s easy to keep secrets. I think that’s just the sort of place she needs right now, don’t you, hmmm?”

Sarah could read the look in his eyes with ease. “Doctor!” she reproved. “You’ve been putting it on! You *do* understand Demerai’s situation. And this is how you’re going to help her, isn’t it?”

“We-e-ell, being around humans so much, you can’t help picking up on some of the nuances occasionally,” said the Doctor, with a self-deprecating shrug. Then, with a complete change of mood, he said briskly, “And now, I think – I really do think – we’d better get a move on.”

Harry blinked. “Why? What’s the urgency?”

“Oh, do keep up, Harry,” the Doctor chided. “The Brigadier’s sent us an emergency summons.” He gestured at the space-time telegraph. “Therefore an emergency is implied. We mustn’t keep him waiting any longer, must we?”

“At last!” said Sarah indignantly. Then she added, with emphasis, “And I don’t care what you say, Doctor – the Malitronne *was* a monster. So whatever the Brigadier’s problem is, I just hope it doesn’t involve any more monsters. I’ve had enough of monsters to be going on with, for the moment.”

The Doctor gave her a quick look, then shrugged. “One can always live in hope,” he said casually, studying the coordinates the Brigadier had sent. After all, with Demerai to be transported to her new home, they really had better be on their way. So, he decided, perhaps it wasn’t the time to tell Sarah that the place the coordinates related to was somewhere in the vicinity of the Great Glen of Scotland.

Which was, of course, well known as the location of a large body of water believed by many to contain – a monster...



April 2023

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