

Doctor Who

RAMPAGE OF THE MYRMINAI

A Sixth Doctor short story
by
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“There you are, Professor,” the Doctor announced with satisfaction as the TARDIS landed. “Back in Oxford, safe and sound, as promised. In 2001, the end of your personal space odyssey.” He operated the doors with a flourish and beamed at his passenger. “Back to your butterflies and beetles.”

Professor of Entomology Geoffrey Randolph, a tall, spare man in his fifties who looked exactly like the academic he was, gently readjusted the position of his glasses on the bridge of his nose and smiled as he slid the handheld digital voice recorder that went with him everywhere back into its customary place in the breast pocket of his jacket.

“I’m forced to confess to a certain regret that our time together is over,” he said. “To have become caught up in events that have forced me to reassess what I regarded as immutable certainties, to discover that there are intelligent extra-terrestrial races – even if not all of them are benevolent towards the Earth – and that travel in both time and space exists within the realm of the actual and not merely the theoretical... It’s been extremely – enlightening.”

“Don’t get nostalgic too soon, Professor,” Peri advised him from the doorway. “Wherever this is, it’s not Oxford.”

The Doctor looked up sharply. “Not Oxford?” he repeated indignantly. “Of course it is! I’ve got the navigation working perfectly!”

“Sorry to break it to you, Doctor, but from where I’m standing, looks like a decimal point’s got misplaced somewhere,” Peri said. “See for yourself.”

“I’m afraid I must agree with Peri,” Professor Randolph observed with the dry humour they had learned was so characteristic of him, as the Doctor marched across to join them in the doorway. “Definitely not Oxford.”

The Doctor glowered at the forest surrounding the TARDIS, a forest manifestly composed of completely alien plant species.

“Come on, Doctor, admit it,” Peri grinned. “Either your repairs’ve left the navigation on the blink again, or it’s that decimal point. Either way, you got it wrong again.”

“Wrong? *Wrong?* I don’t get things *wrong!*” the Doctor declaimed, with extreme hauteur. “I simply test alternative possibilities before deciding on my preferred option! Anyway,” he added, trying to shrug it off, “it could have happened to anyone!”

“Not just *anyone,*” Peri contradicted. “Not just *anyone* has a time and space machine like the TARDIS.”

“Yes – well – thank you for that, Peri!” the Doctor responded, with a haste that was probably rather less dignified than he would have hoped.

“You’re welcome,” Peri told him, exchanging a conspiratorial grin with the Professor. “I guess you want us to take a look at this particular ‘possibility’, now we’re here?”

“Of course!” said the Doctor, as if that had been the plan all along. “How else am I going to arrive at an informed decision on what to do next?”

As they started to explore the forest it quickly became apparent to Peri that bringing an entomologist into this environment might have been a mistake. The Professor kept stopping every few paces to exclaim over some insect or other on the alien foliage through which they were walking, and to excitedly – for him – document the details on his digital recorder. Surrounded by such a profusion of fascinating and beautiful plants, the botanist in her empathized with his professional enthusiasm, but she couldn’t help feeling there were more pressing concerns. Okay, he was having the time of his life – great! – but it meant they weren’t progressing at anything near the pace she would have liked. And for some reason that she couldn’t explain, she had a strong feeling that it was vitally important to find out more about this planet, and as quickly as possible.

“Look at this, Doctor!” the Professor enthused for the tenth time in as many minutes. The two of them bent over the twig the Professor was indicating, around which a small creature like a winged violet millipede was wound into a spiral. Peri rolled her eyes. They were never going to get anywhere at this rate.

“I’m going to see what’s over there,” she announced impatiently, gesturing randomly toward a stand of enormously tall trees whose intertwined lower branches almost touched the ground, their huge leaves so thick it was impossible to see what lay beyond.

“Mmm, you do that...” the Doctor acknowledged absently, not so much as glancing up to see where she was going.

Peri snorted and stamped off, disappearing into the wall of greenery. Seconds later her voice rang out from behind it.

“Doctor! Professor! Come see this!” She sounded both excited and awed.

There was something in her tone that compelled immediate attention. The Doctor and Professor Randolph followed the direction of her voice; as soon as they had emerged from the bushes into the clearing beyond they halted, just as she had, staring at what lay before them.

“*What,*” the Professor wondered calmly, but with decided emphasis, “*is that?*”

“A colony ship,” said the Doctor, eyes narrowing in concentration. “Abandoned quite some time ago, by the look of it.”

He studied the huge vessel intently. It was pale grey, a slightly flattened ellipse in shape, nestling among the surrounding trees and undergrowth like a vast egg – except that in this instance the nest had clearly grown up around the egg after its arrival, embracing its sides with a riot of climbing plants, flower-laden lianas tightly entwined around the four massive supporting legs that kept it upright. There were no viewports other than for what was evidently the flight deck, but there were several sizeable hatchways, all open, their ramps extended. An invitation that the plants had accepted with great vigour, covering the sloping surfaces to clog the entrances and invade the interior of the ship.

“I wonder what happened to ‘last one out shut the doors’?” he speculated thoughtfully.

“Definitely suggestive of a rather hasty abandonment,” Randolph agreed.

“You don’t suppose there’s anyone... still inside?” Peri suggested hesitantly. She evidently did not mean ‘anyone still alive’.

“Absolutely correct. I don’t suppose anything of the sort,” the Doctor agreed. “Whatever happened here happened a long time ago. But it’s worth taking a look inside for clues.”

“It’s gonna be dark in there,” said Peri, a little nervously. “No windows. No lights.”

“Fortunately for you, I – like a good Boy Scout – am always prepared.” The Doctor put a hand into his coat pocket and unexpectedly withdrew a hand torch, which he flourished at her triumphantly.

Peri blinked. “Are you telling me you always carry that with you?”

“Oh, you’d be surprised what I’ve got in these pockets,” the Doctor informed her loftily.

“Maybe, maybe not!” she retorted.

Professor Randolph’s voice broke in on them. “Doctor, I think you might find this interesting...”

Unnoticed by either of them, he had already climbed the nearest ramp and was standing just inside the hatchway, gazing intently into the ship. As they joined him, he pointed. “Look at that.”

They were standing at the junction of three corridors, one each to right and left following the line of the hull, one leading straight ahead. The lianas which had covered the ramp had invaded in all directions as far as the light from outside penetrated, their last exploring fingers lost in the darkness beyond. But it was not the corridors Randolph was indicating, it was the walls. Huge gashes scarred the surfaces; in many places they had been brutally punctured. The lianas and other plants had grown in and around to disguise the damage, but the jagged blades and spikes of shredded metal around the edges of the gashes were still disturbingly clear to see.

The Doctor frowned. “Interesting indeed,” he agreed.

“Because...?” Peri prompted uneasily. There was an implied savagery about those gashes that she found distinctly unsettling.

“Because there’s no damage to the exterior of the hull or the ramp. Only the interior. Whatever did this didn’t break in, or there’d be damage to the hatchway. It was already inside the ship when it did this. Therefore, either it came with the ship, or else it entered through the open hatch after landing.”

“So what was it?”

The Doctor stepped across to the nearest wall and pulled vegetation clear of the torn metal. “Not an explosion, or an energy weapon,” he stated after peering at the cleared surface for a few moments. “This sort of penetration is more like something caused by a sharp edge. A very hard sharp edge.”

Peri caught the look on Randolph’s face as he, too, scrutinized the edges of the gash that the Doctor was looking at. “So what do you think, Professor? You look like you’ve got a different idea.”

“Well, possibly,” Randolph said cautiously, suppressing a smile as his peripheral vision caught the Doctor stiffening indignantly at the idea of contradiction. “It does look rather similar to a type of damage the cause of which I am familiar with. Though it seems incredible that this might have the same origin...” He peered more closely at the torn metal. “Definitely punctured by something very hard, with a sharp point. And – as you say, Doctor – a sharp edge,” he added thoughtfully, fingering one of the jagged protrusions with care. “Pierced by something that then clamped and pulled outward, I think. Like a pair of enormous pincers. Or, perhaps, jaws...”

He left it there, but the implications were not lost on the Doctor, who took a second, and closer, look. When he straightened up again he said nothing, but his expression indicated his concurrence.

“Bite marks?” Peri said incredulously, and shuddered. “If that was done by an animal, it’s one I definitely don’t wanna meet!”

“If I’m correct, it’s not an animal,” said Randolph. “Those marks bear a remarkable resemblance to those made by the jaws of –”

The Doctor suddenly cut across him with a loud “Sssh!” and a raised hand indicating the need to listen. After a couple of seconds Peri and Randolph picked up what his keener hearing had already detected. The sound of someone – or was it *something*? – pushing through the undergrowth toward the ship.

The three of them turned back to stand at the top of the ramp, staring toward the approaching sounds. They were coming from the same direction they themselves had come, from behind the wall of leaves dangling from those enormous trees. Nearer... nearer... Had something picked up their trail, tracked them from the TARDIS to here? Peri swallowed nervously.

Then the leaves parted slowly, to reveal...

...a man. Who stepped through the curtain of leaves and came to an abrupt halt as soon as he saw them. A man of perhaps forty years of age, dark-haired and bearded, wearing a tunic and leggings cross-gartered with strips of leather that wouldn’t have looked amiss on a 12th century English peasant, yet carrying a futuristic-looking weapon not unlike a rifle. Peri wondered which of the two was the real anachronism. His expression was not hostile, more a combination of curiosity and fear.

“Who are you?” the man demanded sharply. “What are you doing here?”

“I’m the Doctor,” announced the Doctor. “This is Peri, and this is Professor Randolph. We were taking a stroll through the forest and came on this ship. You wouldn’t expect us to walk past something like this and not take a look, would you?”

The man frowned. “This is not a safe place in which to wander unprotected,” he said urgently. “Why not?” the Doctor enquired.

The man ignored the question; he was studying them with some perplexity. “Where do you come from? Are you here with the ‘Ngarnah?”

“Uhn-garner?” Peri repeated. “Never heard of ‘em.”

The man visibly suppressed his own curiosity, and gestured urgently with the weapon he was carrying. “Come with me. I’ll take you somewhere safer, and answer your questions there.”

“Interesting... Not somewhere safe – just somewhere ‘safer’,” the Doctor noted, studying the anxiety on the other’s face. “Very well. But since we’ve already introduced ourselves, it’s your turn, wouldn’t you say?” he prompted.

“My name is Arvoth,” said the man brusquely. “Follow me, and keep silent. Your lives may depend on it! There may be Myrminai about...”

The Doctor’s mouth opened around his next question, but Peri, sensitive to the degree of Arvoth’s anxiety, realized it would be a good idea to distract him. “Could be in trouble here, Doctor,” she observed quickly, keeping her voice down. “Keeping silent’s not your strong point.”

“I can do silent!” the Doctor protested – at full volume, of course – sounding injured. “I just choose not to, most of the time.”

“Choose it now!” Arvoth snapped, and gestured abruptly that they should follow him. The Professor indicated to Peri that she should precede him; the Doctor brought up the rear. His shoulders tense, head constantly turning from side to side to scan the forest around them, Arvoth led them away from the ship at a pace that was eloquent of both caution and urgency.

Arvoth’s home proved to be a hut-like construction of roughly carpentered tree trunks and branches and roofed by overlapping tiles of bark – yet, anachronistically, the windows were made of a clear, durable plastic. Inside, the same contradictions were evident – the furniture was also made of wood, yet many of the household implements were made of metal or ceramics, though showing evidence of long years of use, such as the smooth-sided metal cooking pot suspended over a wood-fuelled fire. Everywhere, there were examples of artefacts that did not match the environment in which they were housed.

Seated between Randolph and the Doctor at the family-sized wooden table in the main living area, Peri was at first very conscious of being stared at; Arvoth’s two children sat opposite her, alongside their mother, Sharay, while their father talked. The son, Sorren, was a sturdy boy of about fifteen; his sister, Ayara, was about five years his junior.

Momentarily, Peri caught Ayara’s eye, and grinned as she recollected the ten-year-old’s first words to the Doctor.

“Your *clothes*,” she’d announced, breaking across her father’s words, with the totally unself-conscious directness of which some children are possessed. “They’re *strange*.”

Arvoth had broken off to award his daughter a brief admonitory glance, but Peri's eyes had instinctively slid along the table to the Doctor's colourful attire, seeing him for a moment through Ayara's eyes, and she hadn't been able to suppress a grin.

"Yeah, that's one way of putting it," she'd muttered mischievously, *sotto voce*. The Professor had smiled at that, and so had Sorren. Even Sharay, making a 'shush!' gesture to her daughter, had had a suspiciously bright gleam in her eye.

The Doctor, on the other hand, had scowled disapprovingly and then chosen to behave as if he hadn't heard, exhorting Arvoth to continue his tale.

Summarized, it was this: during one of the periodic waves of human colonization further out across the universe, the planet Leptannila had been surveyed and pronounced suitable for human habitation about a century before. The colony ship had had all the latest technology of the time, and had carried every resource the colonists – one hundred of them – had expected to need.

But within only a few days of landing, disaster had struck. The ship had been attacked and damaged beyond repair, as had much of its contents and – crucially – its communication system. For no reason that was ever known, no-one ever came to check on the status of the colony after communication with their home planet was lost. They had had no choice but to fend for themselves.

At first the colonists had tried to remain together, but this had made them too vulnerable to further attack and had resulted in further destruction of the few precious resources rescued from the ship. In the end they had decided that their best survival strategy was to spread out into isolated units, so that even if one was attacked, the others might survive.

The lifeforms responsible for the attacks were the Myrminai; non-intelligent colony-dwelling creatures that, as the human colonists eventually and bitterly learned, spent much of their life cycle underground, but for certain periods of the planetary year emerged to swarm to new nesting locations, before remaining underground again until the next emergence.

The timing and brevity of the planetary survey had, unluckily, meant that the survey team hadn't discovered the presence of the creatures before approval for colonization had been granted. The first the colonists had known of their existence was when a swarm of them attacked and irretrievably damaged the colony ship. Not from malice, but because when they were swarming they knew only one direction – straight ahead – and the ship had happened to lie directly in their path.

It had been catastrophic. Human society had become so totally reliant on being able to access knowledge electronically that they no longer carried it within themselves. Why memorize anything when you could summon it up with the pressure of your fingertip? When the ship's computers, containing all the records and information the colonists had expected to be able to rely on, had been damaged beyond repair, they found themselves to be helpless without them. They had been relying on being able to access data and educational films to educate them in any practical skills that they might need. Without those facilities, and with much of the physical cargo of the ship also having been destroyed, they were virtually bereft of assets. Things that they had taken for granted would

be available to cover the transition period in which they would become self-sufficient from Leptannila's own resources were suddenly gone, or rendered useless. They had only their own memories of how things might be made or constructed to rely on. Even something as simple as the manufacture of paper on which to record the segments of knowledge they could recall had had to be painstakingly achieved by trial and error based on a collective pooling of partial and imperfect recollections of the process.

It had taken only three or four generations for their society to regress from the technological level at the time of their arrival to the current state of affairs.

"Now something has changed, and I don't understand why," Arvoth muttered. "This year the Myrminai migrations were happening normally, and then, suddenly..." He frowned. "There've never been so many Myrminai attacks as there have been in the last couple of months. Twice, three times the normal number. And several families killed, every single person, man, woman and child. There were only just over five hundred of us – now there are even less. We've always had to be wary, but losses on this scale are unprecedented. If only the Myrminai hadn't been here in the first place!" he digressed suddenly, bitterly. "We should have *progressed*. Instead we've gone backwards. We've lost too much, and with every passing year we lose more. More equipment, more knowledge. With each generation, more and more will be gone forever."

The Doctor nodded gravely. "If you have to concentrate on nothing but survival, there's no leisure left for developmental thinking, for learning anything more than the most rudimentary of practical skills. Knowledge can only increase if the people who can do the necessary thinking don't have to be productive themselves but can be supported by the rest of their society."

Peri felt Professor Randolph stir slightly beside her. *Of course*, she thought. *The Doctor's talking about people like him. Someone who's the product of an institution that could only exist in a culture that can afford to support people not to do anything other than think, theorize, research, experiment.* She wondered what he felt about being thus described.

"...In a society broken up into small units, spread apart from each other, there's no opportunity to invest in the future in that way," the Doctor was saying. "Even if it succeeds in continuing to exist, such a society can only ever decline. Reversion to barbarism is inevitable."

That last word was sounded with all the finality of a death knell, and Arvoth winced. The Doctor was, of course, making what was to him an objective assessment, but Peri found herself wishing he'd had sufficient empathy to realize the distress he'd cause by voicing it so frankly. No chance of that, of course – he was the Doctor, and this version of him seldom did empathy. Though – no, that wasn't being quite fair to him. He *did* do empathy; it was just sometimes kind of hard to tell, the way he *said* things.

But then Arvoth's story took an unexpected turn. Because, recently, the 'Ngarnah had come.

"And who," enquired the Doctor, his face alight with interest, "are the 'Ngarnah?"

A race of explorers, according to their own account of themselves, who had developed interstellar travel and were now engaged in a survey of the planets in the Leptannilan system. The discovery of the human colony had been a great surprise, and on learning of their predicament the

'Ngarnah had expressed a desire to help in any way they could. The Doctor's arrival, it transpired, had coincided almost exactly with the assembling of a mass convention of everyone on the planet that was due to take place in two days' time, a gathering that the Leptannilan Council had called at the request of Veemon, the captain of the 'Ngarnan survey ship.

Sorren's face kindled with enthusiasm. "They're going to help us! Aren't they, Father? Father's the Head of the Council," he added proudly.

Arvoth made a deprecatory gesture. "That they will help us," he said guardedly, "is our *hope*." To Peri's ears his reservations were obvious, but the rest of his family evidently harboured no qualms about Sorren's declaration.

Sharay awarded a half-impatient glance at her husband, clearly unable to understand his attitude. "We *need* help," she declared. "Why not theirs? So many settlements have been destroyed, so many lives lost..." She looked down at Ayara, saw the trembling of her daughter's lips, and put an arm around the girl's shoulders. "The family nearest to us – Pyan, Wennda, the children – they were all killed, only a week ago."

Ayara's eyes were filling with tears. "I miss Yando and Sollio," she quavered. "They were my friends..."

Her mother gave her shoulders another squeeze, and looked almost defiantly at her visitors. "We've got to have help! We're in danger of being overwhelmed. We've got to do *something!*"

"The 'Ngarnah *are* going to do something," Sorren maintained. "We just don't know what, yet. But we'll find out the day after tomorrow – won't we, Father?"

Before Arvoth could reply, Ayara, tears abruptly forgotten, suddenly cocked her head as if to listen, then ran to the door of the hut and opened it.

"What is it, Ayara?" Sharay asked quickly, getting up and joining her daughter in the doorway.

"I can hear someone coming," she said.

"But who would be –" Sharay began, then gasped. She swung round to look at her husband. "Arvoth, it's the 'Ngarnah! It's Veemon!"

"Is it? Excellent!" declared the Doctor emphatically, bolting upright out of his chair and rubbing his hands with relish. "No day on which you meet a new race is wasted, that's what I always say."

Outside, his attention was immediately focused on the approaching party of 'Ngarnah. They were humanoid, well over six feet tall, with pale blue skin of a thickness and texture that almost qualified it as hide, and hands that consisted of two separate pairs of thick, stubby fingers plus two slender, tentacle-like digits. Their intense, almost luminous blue eyes had narrow oval pupils that narrowed to sharp points at top and bottom, like black slits. The entire party was clothed in dark grey one-piece coveralls, belted with strips of a flexible metallic material; all save the 'Ngarnan in the lead, whose uniform bore a complicated design of white lines in the centre of the chest, and the two closest to him, both wearing similar designs, though less complicated and smaller.

"Leader Veemon," said Arvoth, ultra-courteously. "We weren't expecting to see you until the day after tomorrow. What can I do for you?"

“Councillor Arvoth,” responded Veemon warmly, his arms spread in a gesture of greeting that, to Peri’s eyes, was effusive to the point of being patronizing. “I have come only to enquire whether all arrangements are proceeding smoothly for the convention. No hitches, no problems? No doubt your people have been sending the appropriate confirmations with those drums you use. One of these days I really must take the time to learn how you convey meaningful information using such a quaint medium! I –” He broke off as his eye fell on the tall, colourfully dressed stranger and his unknown companions standing behind the family. The black slitted pupils expanded in surprise, then contracted to narrow slashes within the almost fluorescent blue orbs. The tone of his voice changed, became sharper. “Forgive me, I was unaware you were entertaining visitors. Visitors I do not know...” His voice trailed off with an interrogatory lift.

“No reason why you should,” said the Doctor equably. “After all, you can’t expect to know everyone on the planet on such short acquaintance, can you?”

“Perhaps not,” Veemon conceded. Despite having resumed the smooth tones of a professional diplomat, he was studying the Doctor very intently. “But I have met enough of the humans on Leptannila to see that you are not like anyone else I have encountered here.”

“Very true,” the Doctor agreed complacently. “In fact, I venture to suggest you will never again encounter anybody like me, Leader Veemon.”

“A large claim,” Veemon observed neutrally. He flicked a look at Arvoth. “Will you not introduce your friends to me, Councillor?”

“This is the Doctor,” Arvoth obliged. “This is Peri, and this, Professor Randolph.”

Veemon laughed aloud. “Doctor? Professor? Large claims indeed, since there can be no such persons in Leptannilan society at this time!”

“And yet here we are,” said the Doctor sweetly – but there was something in his voice that cut the ‘Ngarnan’s laughter short.

“Yes, here...” Veemon said, after an awkward pause. “On which point, may I enquire where *your* home settlement lies?” His tone implied that he attached some significance to the answer.

“Oh, I move around a great deal,” said the Doctor airily. “You know – here today, gone tomorrow!”

“Yet at this moment you are here with Arvoth,” Veemon observed. For some reason he glanced behind him at the two ‘Ngarnans who bore similar but less complex designs on their coveralls, one of whom briefly inclined his head as if in response to some unspoken message.

“But then, of course, you’re explorers yourselves,” the Doctor went on, ignoring the apparent digression. “So you’d be familiar with the concept of ‘here today, gone tomorrow’. Looking a planet over today, gone on to the next one tomorrow. Unless, of course...” He paused meaningfully.

“Unless, of course...?” Veemon prompted him politely.

“Unless, of course, you *weren’t* gone tomorrow. For instance, if you were colonizers as well as explorers. You wouldn’t be gone tomorrow if that were the case, would you?”

“Oh, but we couldn’t possibly colonize a planet that was already inhabited, Doctor,” said Veemon smoothly. “That would never work.”

“You know, somehow that’s what I thought you’d say,” said the Doctor, with a significance that Peri couldn’t quite account for. What was he thinking behind those suddenly – and most uncharacteristically – bland blue eyes...?

“Well,” said Veemon heartily, suddenly expanding his words to address the whole group, “fascinating though this exchange has been, it was hardly the purpose of my visit.” He turned back to Arvoth, who had been studying the two of them like a man watching duellists. “Forgive me, Councillor Arvoth, I have allowed myself to become distracted. So, since you can assure me all is in hand, I shall take up no more of your time today, and say only that I shall look forward to seeing you all at the Place of Rocks two days from now. All of you! And especially *you*, Doctor...” The words sounded innocent enough, but there was a slight edge to them that for some reason made Peri shiver.

“Oh, I’ll be there,” the Doctor assured him, with saccharine politeness. “You may rely upon it! I shall be very interested to hear what you intend to do.”

“I intend, *Doctor*” – Veemon gave the word an unmistakably derogatory emphasis – “to implement a solution that will end the conflict between the colony and the Myrminai once and for all. A final solution!”

The Doctor’s head jerked at the phrase, and he regarded Veemon through suddenly narrowed eyes. In his peripheral vision he saw Peri and Professor Randolph stiffen and look at each other almost with alarm, as the words registered with them.

“Indeed?” he said. “A *final* solution? How interesting! How very, very interesting...”

“Oh, I can promise you that, Doctor.” Veemon inclined his head briefly to Arvoth, then made an abrupt gesture at his seconds-in-command; there was a sudden snap in his voice. “Sub-Leader Drayon” – that was the one who had nodded when Veemon had looked at him – “Sub-Leader Guron, we will return to our ship.” The whole party turned sharply and marched away until they were out of sight among the trees.

The Doctor’s eyes followed them broodingly until they were gone. Then he turned to Arvoth, his face suddenly wreathed in a disarming smile. “I seem to have invited myself to your convention, Arvoth. But you don’t mind that, do you?”

Peri snorted inwardly. *Mind*, indeed! Being the Doctor, he had no expectation whatsoever that anyone would mind. And, of course, he was right; Arvoth instantly nodded his agreement. Peri had the impression that, in spite of the brevity of their acquaintance, he trusted the Doctor more than the ’Ngarnah. “Of course not. You’ll be very welcome, Doctor.” He looked at the Doctor keenly. “That phrase, *final solution*. That means something to you, doesn’t it?”

“Yes, I’ve heard it before,” said the Doctor grimly. “I only hope it’s not being used in the same context here...”

Arvoth had noted the look he had exchanged with Peri and the Professor, but something in the Doctor’s face decided him against making further enquiry. He turned to his son. “Sorren, send a drum message. To be relayed to everyone. Say that I’ll be bringing guests with us to the convention.”

Sorren grinned and vanished behind the hut. Sharay watched him go with fond pride.

“He loves using the drums,” she said. “He’s always happy to do our messaging for us.”

“Drums,” Professor Randolph repeated, clearly intrigued. “Are those the drums Leader Veemon referred to? That’s how you communicate over long distances?”

“Yes,” Arvoth interjected, somewhat sourly. “That’s how far our level of technology has fallen...”

“But it works very well,” his wife persisted, determined to focus on the positive. “If you hollow out the trunk of a wannwo tree and cut it to the right length, and use the right weight of beater, it makes a sound that carries for miles. Messages can be passed between neighbours or else relayed on if the person you want to contact lives further away – “

Peri jumped as a reverberating boom filled the air, followed by a further series of syncopated beats that rolled almost like thunder.

“There,” Sharay said, smiling at her. “The message is on its way. Now everyone’ll know you’re coming.”

“Jungle drums,” said the Professor, a gleam of approbation lighting up his eyes. “Such a simple, yet inventive solution to a very specific problem...”

“Oh, humans are endlessly inventive, Professor,” observed the Doctor airily. “You can always trust them for that.”

Some five miles away, Ezlon and his wife Riesha were standing outside their dwelling, staring uneasily at the forest beyond the small area they had managed to clear for growing crops for themselves. They were not long married, so as yet only had to support themselves. Later, when their hoped-for children started to come, they might need to clear more ground. If they were given the time...

But they were not thinking about such things right now. They were more concerned with the faint sound they had heard, somewhere in the distance, somewhere behind the masking wall of the forest edge.

“What was it?” Riesha asked nervously.

Her husband put an arm around her shoulders in a gesture that was meant to be comforting, but only succeeded in communicating his own apprehension to her through the tenseness of his muscles.

“I’m not sure,” he said, trying to sound calmer than he felt. In his own mind, even though the sound had been very faint, he was only too sure. “Perhaps I should go and have a look – “

He broke off and cocked his head to one side as the distant boom of a drum message reached his ears. The opening identification code identified Arvoth as the originator. Riesha moved closer to her husband as they both listened. Eventually the drum fell silent, and they looked at each other.

“Guests?” Riesha’s brow was furrowed. “What can he mean? He obviously doesn’t mean the ‘Ngarnah. But where could more strangers have come from?”

Ezlon shrugged. “Looks as if we’ll have to wait until the convention to find out. I’ll send an acknowledgement and then relay.”

“All right,” Riesha agreed, casting an uncertain glance toward the forest. Then, as her husband turned to go, “Ezlon...”

He turned back.

“I think you should tell Arvoth. About the sound. Just in case. After what happened to Pyan’s family last week...” Her voice trailed off.

Ezlon frowned, instinctively wanting to dismiss the connection she was making. But Riesha was a level-headed, sensible person. He knew she was right.

“I will,” he nodded. “But don’t worry. We’re probably being over-imaginative. It won’t turn out to be anything important...”

He’d hoped he’d been quieting his wife’s fears, but as he turned away, toward their message drum, he was aware of the unconvinced expression on her face.

He hadn’t finished beating out his reply when, behind him, Riesha screamed – and screamed – and went on screaming...

“Something’s wrong,” Arvoth was saying decisively, a couple of minutes later. “You heard how that reply was cut off short. And if Ezlon was still able to respond, he would have by now.”

“But if something’s happened to him, Riesha would let us know,” Sharay protested. She had a protective arm around Ayara’s shoulders, aware of her daughter’s trembling lower lip; Sorren, looking troubled, stood alongside Peri and Randolph.

“If she could,” said Arvoth ominously. “And by now, she would. If she could,” he repeated grimly.

“Mummy...” Ayara’s voice quavered. “Has what happened to Yando and Sollio happened to Ezlon and Riesha, too...?”

Sharay embraced her daughter, but couldn’t bring herself to reply.

“I’d like to know what sort of sound he was talking about,” the Doctor declared. “How far away is their house?” His expression showed that he was in agreement with Arvoth’s summary of the situation, but his voice was brisk and decisive.

Arvoth snorted derisively. “We don’t build *houses*, Doctor. That would imply some kind of permanency. We don’t have that. You’ve seen what the Myrminai did to the colony ship. It’d be pointless trying to building any kind of permanent structure. Why do you think we live in huts made of wood, that can easily be rebuilt?” he finished bitterly.

“Then I’ll rephrase,” said the Doctor evenly. “How long would it take to get to where they are? Find out what’s happened, rather than theorizing?”

Arvoth was about to reply when everyone’s attention was arrested by a sudden movement from Professor Randolph. He had raised his arm in an imperative gesture demanding silence.

“Listen!” he said. “Do you hear that?”

Peri stared at the surrounding jungle, straining to hear whatever it was that he had evidently heard. Then she heard it, too. A shrill, repetitive, rasping noise, coming from some way off.

“What’s that?” Peri asked nervously. She looked quickly at the family, and saw how they stood frozen – frozen with fear. Was this the same sound that Ezlon and Riesha had heard...?

Professor Randolph met her eyes gravely.

“A sound I’ve heard back on Earth,” he said slowly. “But never on such a scale...” He glanced at the Doctor, who nodded in agreement.

“Yes. I fear we’re thinking of the same source, Professor. But, as you say, on a much bigger scale. If so, we’re in imminent danger, and the hut will be no protection. Arvoth, is there – ?”

Sorren cut him off with an urgent shout. “Look! It’s coming! Over there!” Like the rest of his family, he was staring past the Doctor at the jungle beyond. In exactly the opposite direction, the Doctor noted, to the rasping noise still emanating from the trees beyond the hut.

Peri saw the Doctor exchange a grim look with Professor Randolph. They looked like men whose worst fears were about to be realized. Just what was it they were expecting to emerge from the forest?

A few moments later she found out, her own sharply indrawn breath drowned out by a shrill scream from Ayara that was immediately muffled as her mother flung her arms around her in a panicked embrace. Arvoth and Sorren both took an instinctive step backward. The Doctor and Professor Randolph both tensed, but neither of them looked surprised. A brief memory flashed through Peri’s mind: the Professor, at the colony ship, saying, “*It does look rather similar to a type of damage the cause of which I am familiar with... Those marks bear a remarkable resemblance to the jaws of –*”

Yes, he’d worked it out even then. But had he really known to expect *this*?

It was huge! Massive! Three or four metres high and at least twice as many in length. Six multi-segmented legs terminated not in feet but in single hooked claws. The body consisted of three sections, all covered in an iridescent purple exoskeletal casing. A triangular head bore compound eyes and two roughly L-shaped antennae – and two enormous, brutally serrated mandibles.

Peri knew what it was, but never in her worst nightmares had she imagined that what on Earth was a tiny creature only millimetres long could possibly exist on this scale.

But to all intents and purposes it was – an ant. Leptannila’s version of an ant. But that version was a huge, grotesque, monstrous creature, towering above them with those terrifying mandibles constantly widening apart and cracking back together again, as if in a ceaseless search for prey.

They were face to face with a Myrminai.

“Sorren! Torches!” Arvoth yelled. “Everyone else, *run!*”

He and his son vanished into the hut. Sharay, still clasping Ayara to her, looked around wildly for somewhere – *anywhere* – that might conceivably offer any hope of refuge. Peri, doing the same, grabbed her arm.

“There!” she yelled, pointing at a huge, fallen tree several metres away, whose trunk had been hollowed out by insects and the passage of time. Jaws that could inflict such damage on the metal of the colony ship would probably make short work of organic matter, but if they were out of sight, maybe they’d be out of mind. “In there! Come *on!*” She snatched one of Ayara’s hands and ran,

almost dragging her and her mother behind her. The three of them darted toward the open maw of the trunk and scrambled inside, panting furiously. It was only when they had done so that Peri realized the Professor and the Doctor weren't with them. A single glance told her they had done no more than duck behind a nearby tree, but were effectively still out in the open. With one corner of her mind she noted that even at a time like this, the Professor had his digital recorder out and was talking into it in a low, hurried murmur, describing the huge insect hesitating on the verge of attack.

Peri started to scramble out of her refuge. "Doctor! Take cover!" she yelled.

"Stay there, Peri! I know what I'm doing!" the Doctor shouted back. Peri wavered, but he reinforced the instruction with an imperative gesture of his hand.

"You'd better!" she growled – but obeyed, retreating back into the trunk.

The Myrminai still stood motionless, save for slight scanning movements of its antennae and the continual clacking of its mandibles. It seemed almost confused, as if unable to choose which of the scurrying creatures it had seen it should pursue, or whether to ignore them all and head toward the distant sound in the forest.

Then the deadlock was broken. Arvoth and Sorren reappeared from inside the hut, each holding a flaming brand and thrusting another into the hands of the Doctor and Randolph.

"Fire!" gasped Arvoth. "They don't like fire!"

The Myrminai seemed to have made up its mind – to attack. It had even taken a couple of paces forward. Then it detected the flames, reared up in alarm, and began to scurry away – but on a course that took it directly toward the tree trunk in which Peri, Sharay and Ayara were crouched.

Yelling, the four defenders ran towards the Myrminai, brandishing their torches in a desperate effort to change its course, but they only succeeded in increasing its speed toward the fallen tree. Peri, nearest to the open end of the trunk, couldn't restrain a shriek as a gigantic hooked claw thudded into the ground only an arm's-length away from her face.

Then, mercifully, it was past, gone, vanishing into the forest in the direction of the sound that still emanated from somewhere in the trees.

The Doctor put out a hand and helped Peri haul herself out of her bolthole, then stood aside to allow Arvoth to do the same for his wife and daughter.

"That was close – !" Peri began, but the Doctor cut her off.

"No time for chit-chat, Peri!" He turned to Randolph. "Professor, I want you to come with me. We're going to follow that Myrminai and see why it thinks it's so urgent to locate that sound."

Randolph nodded in immediate acquiescence. "Everyone else, stay here until we come back."

"Are you crazy?" Peri expostulated. "That thing could kill you with a single bite!"

"It could," agreed the Doctor, "but I don't think it will. I think it's got other things on its mind."

"But – but – what *is* that sound? Why's it so important?" Peri demanded.

"The Professor knows all about the 'what', and I have a nasty idea about the 'why'," said the Doctor, "and we'll tell you all about it when we get back. But right now, we need to *go*."

"I'll come with you, Doctor," said Sorren quickly. "I know the forest, and you don't."

“Sorren, no!” his mother protested. But Arvoth, with one brief, emphatic dip of his head, signalled his approval.

“He’s not a boy any longer,” he said decisively. “And the Doctor might need him. Go on, all of you, before that Myrminai outdistances you entirely.”

Into the moment of silence that followed his words, everyone’s head turned in the direction of the vanished Myrminai as a series of unexpected sounds came to their ears, distant but clear. The crash of a falling tree, a cry of unmistakable terror cut off short, and the abrupt cessation of the shrill rasping sound.

Without another word the Doctor took to his heels and vanished among the trees, Randolph and Sorren drawn along in his wake like leaves in a whirlwind.

It took no more than five minutes of following the distinctive tracks of the Myrminai for them to discover the source of the disturbance. An old, rotting tree, heavy with the burden of some kind of parasitic creeper, had fallen, probably tipped beyond its endurance point by sudden contact with the bulk of the stampeding insect. And protruding from underneath the shattered trunk, crushed by its weight, lay a body.

A body that was, in the light of recent events, all too recognizable. There was no mistaking the small design of white lines in the centre of the chest of the grey coverall.

“But – but – that’s Sub-Leader Drayon!” Sorren stuttered, his face a picture of consternation. “Veemon’s party went off in the opposite direction! What’s he doing *here*?”

“I have an idea about that,” said the Doctor gravely. “I hope I’m wrong, but” – he paused, then went on, with the shrug of one stating a self-evident fact – “I rarely am.” He looked more closely at the dead ’Ngarnan, and suddenly pounced. “Aha! What’s this?” He reached under the fallen tree and pulled out a soft pouch-like receptacle that, from the way it gave under the pressure of his fingers, seemed to contain some kind of liquid. There was a nozzle at the top of the pouch, evidently designed to disseminate the contents in a spray, and the Doctor sniffed warily at it. His eyes widened momentarily, then he turned to offer it to Randolph.

“With your specialist knowledge, I assume you recognize this?” he asked.

Randolph inhaled. Normally this substance would be undetectable by a human nose, but in this quantity, in this concentration, the faintest of scents was indeed identifiable. He nodded in confirmation, and frowned. “But why would an alien visitor to this planet be carrying this?”

“I’m afraid it fits in only too well with that nasty idea I’ve had,” said the Doctor grimly. He started to examine the ground around the body intently.

Randolph studied him. This was no haphazard, purposeless scan; the Doctor was clearly expecting to find something very specific. “What are we looking for?” he enquired, coming forward with the evident intention of assisting in the search.

“Something that shouldn’t be here,” said the Doctor. “Some kind of artefact.”

“How do you know?” asked Sorren, his brows drawn together in a puzzled frown as he, too, began to look around.

The Doctor looked up from his scrutiny of the forest floor for a moment. “Your father said that the Myrminai attacks had unexpectedly stepped up about two months ago, yes?”

Sorren paused, thought. “Yes, that’s about right...”

“And how long ago did the ’Ngarnah arrive?”

“Just over a month ago. I know that because we couldn’t arrange for the convention before tomorrow because it would take the people furthest out just over three weeks to get here. We can only travel on foot and there aren’t many real trails through the forest. We have to relocate so often because of the Myrminai, you see...”

“Yes, yes, I see that,” said the Doctor with a note of impatience, before focusing on what was, to him, the key point. “So the *ostensible* advent of the ’Ngarnah occurred *after* the number of attacks rose so uncharacteristically, hmm? I have a feeling the real timetable might be rather different to the one you’ve been given. Tell me, where exactly is this convention of yours going to take place? What’s the topography of the site?”

“Four generations of lost vocabulary, Doctor,” Randolph reminded him, seeing Sorren’s blank look. “He means,” he explained to the boy gently, “what does the land look like there?”

Sorren’s face cleared. “Oh, the Place of Rocks, you mean? Father says his grandfather told him it was once a huge flat area of rock, but probably a” – he struggled for the word for a moment – “a meterite – whatever that is – hit it, long ago, and made a big hole in it.”

Randolph saw the Doctor draw in breath to speak, but got there ahead of him. “The right word is meteorite, Sorren,” he said, pronouncing the word with care. “It’s a rock that’s travelling through space but gets pulled into a planet’s atmosphere and hits the surface. They tend to leave a deep, circular hole in the ground.”

“That’s just what the Place of Rocks looks like,” Sorren confirmed. “It’s like a big bowl, with a sort of corridor that goes through the rock into the centre. It’s the only way in or out. The Big River curves right round it. Father says the river used to flow much closer to the rock wall, but now it’s changed course so there’s a narrow beach you can walk along to get to the entrance.”

“Only one way in and out? Mmmm... I wonder...” The Doctor suddenly fixed him with a penetrating look. “Would I be right in suggesting that it was Veemon who suggested it as the meeting place?”

“Yes. But how did you know that?” Sorren looked at him with perplexity.

“Aha!” exclaimed the Doctor triumphantly. “Then I’m right! That’s exactly what I thought you’d say.”

Randolph regarded him thoughtfully, an interrogative eyebrow raised. “You’ve evidently formulated a theory that would explain the sequence of events, Doctor.”

“Indeed I have, Professor, and I only need one last piece of evidence to confirm it.”

“This – thing – we’re looking for, I take it?”

“Yes.” The Doctor frowned at the undergrowth around him. “It can’t be far away...”

Sorren suddenly bent down, then straightened up, holding something he had pulled from under the foliage of a nearby bush only a few feet from the outflung hand of the dead ’Ngarnan.

“Is this it?” He had in his hand a square silver box, just too large for him to hold comfortably with one hand only. But as he adjusted his grip to use both hands, the box suddenly began to emit, at a piercingly loud volume, the shrill rasping sound they had heard earlier.

“Turn that thing off!” the Doctor yelled.

“How?” Sorren yelled back in a panic. “I don’t even know how I turned it on!”

“If you don’t, we’re all dead!” the Doctor bellowed, snatching it unceremoniously out of Sorren’s hands. Randolph had to agree with the Doctor; knowing what that sound was, he knew what would ensue if it wasn’t silenced.

Within seconds, his fears were realized. Not far away, the leaves of a thick stand of tall bushes began to thrash about as something thrust at them from behind. Then the Myrminai burst out, scuttling toward them as quickly as the impeding undergrowth allowed its six legs to move. The box abruptly ceased to emit its piercing signal as the Doctor somehow succeeded in silencing it, but it was too late. The Myrminai was now focused on its prey, and nothing was going to distract it from its hunt.

“Run!” yelled the Doctor, leading by example.

The forest here was quite dense, with lots of large trees growing close together, which hindered the Myrminai in its pursuit; the Doctor and the others could duck through spaces that hindered the larger creature’s speed. But even so, it was beginning to gain on them.

Sorren threw a terrified glance over his shoulder. The Myrminai was nearer than he’d realized, and it was closing fast. They weren’t going to make it...

Still on the Doctor’s heels, he abruptly found himself plunging into a stand of densely leaved waist-high bushes. Now they were certainly doomed. The foliage was so thick it would hinder their speed. Death must be only moments away... He threw one last, hopeless look over his shoulder.

And stopped, staring in amazement for two or three seconds, before shouting as loud as his breathless lungs would allow.

“Doctor! Professor! It’s *stopped!*”

The Doctor halted and swung round to look, his face a picture of astonishment. Randolph, chest heaving desperately for air, also turned to take in the unexpected scene.

The Myrminai, evidently agitated, had stopped at the edge of the stand of bushes. It kept taking a step forward, as if desperate to continue its pursuit, but then recoiling. Its head swung from side to side, the mandibles clicking as if in distress, the entire creature rearing up in protest, but still not coming any nearer.

“It can’t follow us,” panted the Doctor, brows furrowed in puzzlement. “Something’s stopping it. What, though?”

Randolph turned his attention to the bushes among which they stood. The wide, flat, soft leaves had evidently once been green, but had now all but turned completely a shade of milky brown. Among the leaves grew clusters of orange berries, some of which were already so ripe that they had fallen to the ground in soft, juicy splats of colour pooled in amber liquid. One eye on the still agitated Myrminai, now restlessly patrolling up and down the edge of the stand as if trying to find

a way past whatever was repelling it, Randolph picked a leaf and sniffed at it cautiously, then crouched down to do the same to a few of the berries.

"I think this is your answer, Doctor," he said, straightening up to extend the berries toward the Doctor. The Doctor looked at him quizzically, then inhaled the scent of the decaying fruit. A look of realization spread across his face.

"Of course!" he crowed triumphantly. "That explains it!"

Sorren frowned, perplexed. "What? What do you mean?" he asked, then grabbed at the Doctor's sleeve and pointed. "Look! It's giving up! It's leaving!"

And it was. Abruptly abandoning its efforts, the Myrminai had swung around and was hurrying away in the direction from which it had come. Within seconds it was lost to sight.

"*I charge thee, hence, and do not haunt me thus!*" shouted the Doctor to the retreating creature, by way of a parting shot. "Dear old Will! A phrase for every occasion," he added happily. Then he turned and surveyed the stand of bushes in which they stood with an air of immense satisfaction. "What's this shrub called?" he demanded of Sorren.

"Asetum," said the boy, flinging his fringe back out of his eyes with a jerk of his head. "These are asetum bushes."

The Doctor looked at him sharply, then smiled broadly. "For all that the humans on this planet may collectively have forgotten, I rather think – given that name – that one of your ancestors remembered one particular thing very well indeed."

"What do you mean?"

"I'll explain later," said the Doctor with a dismissive wave of his hand. "For now, suffice it to say that our luck was definitely in. These asetum bushes of yours saved our lives!"

"But how?" Sorren stared around him. "Asetum isn't good for anything. It's useless! The berries taste awful!"

"Indeed they do," agreed the Doctor. "And not just to you, fortunately! Well, time to get back. I need to talk to your father, young Sorren! Get him to enlist some help. Which means we'll need to visit this place again just as soon as possible. / –" he announced grandly – "have an idea! And it means your useless asetum bushes are going to be *very* useful indeed!"

Safely back at the hut, with everyone gathered around the table as before, the Doctor had provided a brief, purely factual account of what had happened.

In the silence that followed, Peri turned to Professor Randolph. "You *knew* that Myrminai was going to be a giant ant, didn't you? How did you know? Was it those gashes in the colony ship? You said they looked like the jaws of something you recognized."

"Indeed," Randolph agreed succinctly. "Markedly similar to the mandibles of a bull ant."

"So what about that sound?" Peri persisted. "The Doctor said you knew what that was, too."

"Ah, yes," Randolph nodded. "The term for that is 'stridulation'. It's produced by the mandibles and the abdomen. Ants on Earth use it as a means of communication both between themselves and with other insects."

“Then” – Peri groped for comprehension – “that guy Draymon was *signalling* to that Myrminai? *Calling* it?”

“Not necessarily that specific individual,” Randolph demurred. “But all the evidence suggests that he was attempting to attract the attention of any Myrminai in the area. Of which there were likely to be more than one,” he added. “When ants migrate, they send out individuals as scouts, who mark their route with pheromones.” He saw the lack of understanding on the faces of Arvoth and his family and explained, “A pheromone is a chemical signal, the molecules of which are dispersed either in a secretion – a liquid,” he amended, remembering how limited their vocabulary had become – “or by being carried through the air. The following ants can detect the molecules and therefore know which way to go.”

“Like following signposts,” Peri nodded. “Or a trail of breadcrumbs, maybe.” Suddenly she realized something. “Hey! Doesn’t that mean more Myrminai’ll be heading this way? And soon?”

“The scout always precedes the main body of the swarm by one day,” Arvoth said heavily. “But, yes, they will come. We must be gone by the time they do.” He looked at his wife, who returned the look resignedly.

“We’ll start to pack,” she said, rising from the table. Sorren and Ayara followed her example; it was only too clear that this was something they were well accustomed to.

“But where will you go?” Peri asked Arvoth, troubled.

“Somewhere else,” he shrugged. “It doesn’t matter where. Wherever we go, sooner or later they’ll come again. They always come again...”

“Just for the moment, let’s stick to the fact that Drayon was calling a Myrminai scout *here*, to your home, knowing what the result would be, shall we?” said the Doctor a little testily.

“But why would the ‘Ngarnah want to lure a Myrminai here?” Arvoth frowned. “Veemon told us they wanted to help us. How would doing that help us?”

“It wouldn’t,” said the Doctor shortly. “And we know that because we also found this.” He placed onto the table, beside the silver box that Peri now thought of as a stridulator, the spray pouch of liquid. It should have looked quite innocent, but the Doctor’s tone somehow endowed it with a sinister quality.

“What’s that?” Sharay asked, stopping what she was doing for a moment to stare at it.

“Ants don’t just use pheromones for marking their paths,” said the Doctor darkly, exchanging a look with Randolph, who took up the explanation.

“An ant that’s been attacked or injured emits an alarm pheromone,” he said. “Any other ants that detect it are immediately driven into an attack frenzy and head for the location of the injured ant. Any creature they find there is liable to be destroyed.”

“And that, I fear, was all part of the plan,” said the Doctor.

“Doctor, what are you saying?” Arvoth demanded bluntly. “That Sub-Leader Drayon deliberately summoned that Myrminai here so that it would attack us? Why?”

“Not ‘us’,” said the Doctor gravely. “*Me*. The rest of you would, unfortunately, merely have been collateral damage. Innocent bystanders. *I* was the target of that attack.”

He caught Peri eyeing him; her look couldn't have been more eloquent if she'd spoken her thoughts aloud. *It's always about you, isn't it, Doctor? Always about you...!*

Arvoth's brows drew together in a frown. "You? But why?"

"Because Veemon's realized I know what he's doing. Therefore he decided I was a danger to his plans, and I had to be silenced. So as soon as they're out of sight, he sends Drayon to circle round behind us and use the stridulator to lure a Myrminai toward us. Drayon was probably waiting to see if he'd been successful, and then he was going to use the attack pheromone to send it into a killing frenzy. But he didn't take into account the possibility that us chasing it off with fire would send it right at him in a panic and bring that tree down on him. *Before*, I'm happy to say, he had the chance to use the pheromone. Or the outcome might have been very different."

"You're saying that Veemon would have been quite happy for me and my family to be slaughtered, just as long as *you* died?" Arvoth was grappling with the concept. "But – *why*? You said you know what he's doing? *What* is he doing?"

Whereupon the Doctor went on to explain – at some length – what he had surmised about the purpose that lay behind what was happening.

The silence that followed was more expressive of horror than anything that Arvoth or his family might have said aloud. Sharay stood frozen, arrested in mid-movement; the children likewise. Randolph just nodded; with a complete lack of surprise, Peri noted. She looked at the Doctor.

"I know you said you had a nasty idea about this," she said heavily, "but I had no idea just *how* nasty..."

Professor Randolph's eyes were resting on the shocked family thoughtfully. Suddenly he rose to his feet and walked over to the children. He put a hand on Sorren's shoulder.

"I can see you've got a lot to get through," he said. "Peri and I will help – won't we, Peri?" He looked at her meaningfully.

"Huh? Oh... yeah, sure... of course..." Peri realized what he was doing. "Glad to."

"And we can still listen to the Doctor while we're doing it," Randolph said. He unexpectedly crouched down in front of Ayara and smiled reassuringly at her. "Come on, Ayara – you show me what to do. I expect you take your windows with you to every new home, don't you? Shall I start with them?" The child stared at him blankly, then began to smile back. Slowly responding to Randolph and Peri's implicit encouragement, the family resumed what they had been doing.

"But " – Arvoth was struggling for words to get past his shock – "but – if what you say is true – we must warn everyone! Stop the convention!"

"No, I think not. I've had another idea. An even better one," said the Doctor with a self-satisfied smirk. "And it involves poetic justice – and this." He dug into his pocket and pulled out a handful of aseetum leaves and berries, and put them on the table alongside the other items. "We need more of this. Lots of it, and as quickly as possible!"

Peri looked over at the leaves blankly, her nose wrinkling as the acrid scent of the squashed berries reached her. "Why? What is it? What're you gonna do?"

"I, Perpugilliam Brown," announced the Doctor with a flourish, "am going to save the day!"

“With what?” Peri demanded.

“Vinegar and brown paper, my dear Peri,” said the Doctor smugly. “Vinegar and brown paper!”

Confused, Peri looked from him to the Professor, and saw that Randolph’s eyes were bright with amusement. Clearly he understood the Doctor’s intentions, whatever they were...

“Now,” the Doctor went on, “Veemon knows you communicate by drum, but doesn’t understand the actual messages – am I correct?” He looked at Arvoth for confirmation, and received a nod in return. “Yes, I really can’t say I’m surprised. Someone as intelligent as he is *could*, easily, if he took the trouble, but has he even bothered? No, he hasn’t. Because he thinks he’s *so* much cleverer than people who use such a simple method of talking to each other. He really was rather dismissive about it, wasn’t he? Not to say patronizing!”

“Two things you’d never be, I suppose,” interjected Peri snidely.

The Doctor awarded her a brief glare, then carried on as if she hadn’t spoken. “Well, he’s shortly going to discover that in this instance it *is what* you say, not the way you say it! In mistaking simplicity for stupidity he will, I think, find he’s made an enormous blunder. And this is how we’re going to demonstrate it to him...”

A short while later the forest was reverberating in all directions to the insistent beat of Arvoth’s message drum as an urgent request was broadcast to every human within earshot. And soon after that, the faint but distinct sound of more drums could be heard, relaying the message onwards and outwards across the endless forests of Leptannila.

As he and his escort approached the Place of Rocks at the appointed time, Leader Veemon of the ‘Ngarnah was feeling excessively pleased with himself.

The final phase of the Leptannilan project was about to be completed, and with virtually no problems in its execution overall. The loss of Drayon had been unfortunate, but the crew members he had sent to find out what had happened to his second-in-command had, besides finding the body, reported that Arvoth’s home had been found burned to the ground, and no survivors had been found. Clearly the Myrminai had attacked the hut and its inhabitants, and there was no difficulty in deducing that the fire in the primitive hearth that he had seen on his first visit to Arvoth must, as a result of the destruction caused by the attack, have spread to engulf the entire structure.

As had been Veemon’s intention. That stranger, that Doctor, had obviously guessed the ‘Ngarnans’ intentions. Because of it he had presented a clear and obvious threat that it had been imperative to eliminate. And any race that was so backward as to use naked flames as their means of heating and food preparation deserved everything they got, in Veemon’s opinion. Savages – *ignorant savages!* That was all they were.

The death of Arvoth as a corollary to the Doctor’s removal was, of course, of no real importance; another member of the Leptannilan Council would by now, Veemon was sure, have taken his place. How unfortunate for that person, he mused internally, that their tenure of the position would be of such short duration...

As the 'Ngarnan party emerged from the forest onto the extensive stretch of sandy beach that ran alongside the Big River at the Place of Rocks Veemon saw a small delegation of three humans waiting to greet him. He gave them only a cursory glance; his attention was taken by the tossed and trampled sand of the beach and, more importantly, of the passageway into the Place of Rocks itself. Good, very good! Evidently large numbers of humans had been here, and, by implication, must now be inside the central bowl, surrounded by its impenetrable and unclimbable rock faces. Everything was just as he had planned it.

As he walked slowly toward the waiting humans he unobtrusively got out his communicator and spoke into it quietly. "Sub-Leader Guron, is everything proceeding according to plan?"

"Yes, Leader Veemon," came the reply.

"How many Myrminai in the swarm?"

"About fifty, sir. They're following the sound of the stridulators, as you said. We are now no more than three time units away from your location."

"Excellent," purred Veemon. "Fifty Myrminai against five hundred defenceless humans. You've done well, Guron. I await your arrival with great anticipation."

He hastily put his communicator away; he was now closing on the delegation which was, he saw, headed by a middle-aged woman of dignified bearing, her face grave with an underlying sadness. Grieving for her predecessor, no doubt, Veemon thought. Well, let her do so, while she may...

"Leader Veemon," said the woman with a gesture of welcome. "I am Marralla, Leader of the Council. These" – she indicated the two men flanking her – "are Arvonen and Kimara, my fellow Councillors. Welcome."

"My thanks, Councillor Marralla. May I offer my condolences for the unfortunate loss of Councillor Arvoth," said Veemon, simulating what he felt was a most becoming gravity.

Marralla inclined her head in acknowledgement. "I think we will only recognize the scale of that loss with the passage of time. But I know he would want us to proceed with the convention. The future of the population of Leptannila was his prime concern. It is a cause of much sadness that he is not here to hear in person how you propose to assist us."

"For me also," Veemon agreed in a funereal tone. "You will see that those of my crew who have accompanied me all carry flaming torches as a mark of respect for his loss. I understand this is a human custom for showing honour to the dead?"

Marralla surveyed the dual line of 'Ngarnans who had taken up their station on the sloping beach between the entrance into the rocks and the edge of the river, and once again inclined her head.

"Will you now come with me into the Place of Rocks?" she queried, with an invitational sweep of her hand.

"I await only the arrival of my Sub-Leader," Veemon said. "He is no more than a few of your minutes away. Please, go ahead of me and announce our arrival to your people. They must be wondering what's happening. Assure them I will be there in mere moments."

Marralla inclined her head gravely and, accompanied by Arvonon and Kimara, walked calmly into the rock-walled passageway, vanishing a few seconds later around the slight curve in the pathway that led to the main bowl inside the Place of Rocks.

A pathway that Veemon himself had traversed only recently, just prior to his last visit to Arvoth. A pathway in which he had planted, in a crevice in the rocks near the entrance into the bowl, a canister of liquid attached to the explosive device operated by the detonator that was in the pocket of his coverall...

Just to make sure, he surreptitiously went as far as the start of the curve and peered cautiously around it. No sign of Marralla and her fellow Councillors, so they must now be inside the bowl with the rest of the humans. Rather oddly, though, a carpet of brown leaves had been scattered on the surface of the pathway since he had last been there, and the sides of the rock walls were lined with heaped branches of the same vegetation. The humans must have done it, but why? Perhaps it was another of their strange customs, some further mark of mourning for the loss of Arvoth.

Veemon mentally shrugged and dismissed it as he turned back and re-emerged from the passageway. After all, it could be of no importance. What *was* important was that every human on Leptannila was now inside the Place of Rocks, that Guron and his crew were leading a swarm of Myrminai towards them – and that, as he had promised, the problem the humans were having with the Myrminai would soon be resolved, once and for all. Very soon.

In fact, the chorus of stridulators that Guron's team were using to lure the swarm was now clearly audible. It was time.

Veemon ordered his crew to retreat along the narrow strip of beach between the outer rock wall and the river, making a defensive wall of their torches to dissuade any Myrminai from diverting toward them instead of entering the passageway. Then he activated his communicator.

"Sub-Leader Guron, get your team clear. I am about to detonate the canister."

"Immediately, Leader Veemon!"

The sounds of stridulation ceased. Veemon waited for a few moments, then took the detonator out, the black pupils of his eyes mere slits of excitement and anticipation. Gripping the small rectangle of metal with his tentacles, he poised one of his blunt fingers over the activation control, savouring the moment. Then he pressed the control, and smiled. The small detonation had been too muffled by the density of the rocks for him to hear anything, but he knew that the contents of the canister would now be spreading through the air, and would reach the Myrminai within moments. When it did, they would come. Oh, yes, they would come!

And there they were, running toward the Place of Rocks at a frenzied pace, their serrated mandibles clicking in a delirious syncopation of aggression, following the imperative of their kind to react to the chemical signal they were receiving. Veemon, now safe behind the wall of torches, watched gleefully as the entire swarm raced frenetically into the passageway. Within moments, he would hear the screams that signalled the death of every human on Leptannila!

But no screams came.

Veemon was confounded. What was happening? Why were there no sounds of the massacre that must be happening as unarmed, unprotected humans were faced with the savagery of enraged Myrminai responding to the attack alarm pheromone of their species? He hesitated, then stepped forward between two of his crew, who held their torches aside for him to do so, and walked cautiously to the mouth of the passageway.

For a moment he could neither see nor hear anything. But then a strange scrabbling sound reached him, intermixed with a cacophony of savage clicks, a sound that grew abruptly louder. Almost before he had time to realize what was happening, the Myrminai reappeared from around the curve in the passageway. They were wildly fighting among themselves as they raced back between the rock walls in a confusion of legs and antennae and wildly clicking mandibles, moving faster than he could have any hope of doing.

He tried, of course. But there was no time, and he staggered and fell backwards onto the soft sand. The leading Myrminai reared above him, its forelegs waving, the huge, serrated mandibles opening and closing like enormous scissor blades. Veemon had time for one terrified shriek only. Then, in a swift, predatory swoop, the mandibles arrowed downwards...

Sub-Leader Guron, the rest of his team in his wake, hurried towards the Place of Rocks, his mind in turmoil. That scream he had heard – it hadn't been one of the humans; that had been the scream of a dying 'Ngarnan. Something must have gone wrong. But what?

He and his followers emerged from the trees, now able to see the Place of Rocks, the beach, and the encircling river. And now able to see the terrible sight that greeted them. Veemon's dead body being brandished high in the air, gripped in the mandibles of a Myrminai. Other Myrminai pursuing those of Veemon's guards who weren't, like their leader, already dead. The ones who were fleeing into the forest had no hope of escape; the ones who had, in their panic, jumped into the river, where the Myrminai would not follow them, had either swept away or were clinging desperately to rocks.

Almost before the new arrivals had time to take in this scene, those of the Myrminai who were still fighting among themselves detected their presence and were racing towards them. Guron, like some of his team, succeeded in taking refuge behind a tree and avoiding the mad rush of the enraged insects. Further screams and cries told him, however, that not all had been so lucky.

Suddenly, evidently reacting to some signal amongst themselves that Guron could not detect, the Myrminai still on the beach abandoned their attack and raced after their fellows. Guron cowered behind his tree again as they rushed past, but he was ignored. Within moments, the last of the Myrminai had vanished into the forest.

Dazed, he left the protection of his tree and stumbled towards the Place of Rocks, dimly aware of the remaining members of his team following him, of those who had taken refuge in the river struggling out of the water and onto the beach. But what had happened? What had gone wrong with Veemon's plan? What had become of the humans?

The surviving 'Ngarnans gathered in a loose assembly on the beach, all staring at each other blankly, groping for comprehension. Then they heard movement behind them, and turned to look.

Out of the mouth of the passageway emerged a group of the humans, some twenty-five or so, most of them bearing flaming torches – and Guron’s mouth fell open in astonishment. At their head was a colourful figure that he recognized only too well.

“But – you’re dead!” he exclaimed.

“I beg to differ!” retorted the Doctor sarcastically. “Though I can understand why you might have been under that impression. My friends, too, no doubt? And Arvoth and his family? Indeed, all the humans on this planet? I very much fear you’ve been acting on a great misapprehension, Sub-Leader Guron. Isn’t that so, Arvoth?”

Guron stared as everyone parted to allow the man who had been standing anonymously at the back of the group to make his way through and take his stand beside the Doctor, returning the stare of the dumbfounded ‘Ngarnan with every step.

“It seems our ploy of burning down my home was as convincing as we intended, Doctor,” Arvoth agreed.

“And as for everyone else...” said the Doctor, turning to point to the forest beyond the Place of Rocks.

Out of the trees, hundreds of people were emerging. Men, women, children, all staring at the bewildered ‘Ngarnans. Among them were Peri, Professor Randolph with Ayara’s small hand in his, Sharay and Sorren alongside them. Gradually everyone closed in, clustering round so as to hear what was being said. The pressure of nearly five hundred pairs of eyes on the group of ‘Ngarnans was almost palpable. Guron flinched, and turned back to face the Doctor.

“I don’t understand...” he began.

“*Don’t you? Really?*” the Doctor enquired with exaggerated scepticism. “Then let me explain it to you!” He noted without comment the arrival of Peri and the Professor, who had left the surrounding crowd to join him.

“But, Doctor, how did you know what Veemon planned to do?” Marralla enquired. “Arvoth told us you only arrived on Leptannila a few days ago. How could you know?”

“I have the dubious benefit of having run into people who think like Veemon before,” said the Doctor grimly. “I think you’ll find that when his survey ship discovered Leptannila, he decided he liked the look of it so much that he wanted to keep it. To colonize it, exploit it. I expect he found a certain allure in the idea of going down in the history books of ‘Ngarnah as the founding father of a new world. Whatever his motivation, there was just one small obstacle to his plan. Leptannila had already been colonized! But because of the misfortune that had accompanied that colonization the population was still a very small one. So, how to get rid of them? He could have just massacred them himself, of course. Or, rather, got Guron and the rest of the crew to do it for him. The kind of people who order massacres seldom trouble to get their own hands bloody if they can get others to do their dirty work for them. But I suspect what really held him back is that organizations like the Shadow Proclamation take a very dim view of the slaughter of entire planetary populations, whatever the numbers involved.”

“Shadow Proclamation?” Professor Randolph enquired.

“A sort of inter-galactic police force,” the Doctor explained. “And they have a nasty habit of holding people accountable for behaviour of that sort. He couldn’t afford to have anyone like that finding out what he was up to. So he had to come up with another solution. A final solution.”

“You mentioned those words before, Doctor,” said Arvoth. “They seemed to have a special meaning for you. For Peri and the Professor, too.”

“That’s because Peri and the Professor come from a world where someone else coined that term.” The Doctor’s voice was as grim as before. “It was used as a euphemism for the eradication of an entire people. The slaughter of millions, in that case. Here Veemon only needed to eradicate a few hundreds, but his thinking was the same, and his ‘final solution’ was the same. Have them all killed. But not by the ‘Ngarnah themselves. No – by the Myrminai! Genocide by proxy! Innocent creatures manipulated through their own natural behaviour into being inadvertent killers; it really was quite ingenious, I’ll give him that. I don’t know how long he’d been studying the planet before he made his presence known, but it was certainly long enough for him to become familiar with the characteristics of the Myrminai and realize how he could use them to his advantage.”

“Use them how?” asked Marralla.

“First, by using them to making random attacks on single settlements. Have one of his crew locate a Myrminai scout on the move, draw it in the desired direction by use of the stridulator, then release a whiff of the attack alarm pheromone. To have it in the quantities he evidently did, I assume he’d found a way to synthesize it. How am I doing so far, Sub-Leader Guron?” the Doctor digressed momentarily.

Guron’s silence was eloquent.

“So,” the Doctor continued, aware that every eye, both human and ‘Ngarnan, was on him as he spoke, “a number of individual attacks, just enough to make every human on the planet aware they were potentially all in danger. Then, and only then, do the ‘Ngarnah make their presence known, pretending they’ve only just discovered Leptannila, and full of assurances that they have a solution to the problem and they’ll be happy to help. We’ll tell you all about it, they say, if you all come to the Place of Rocks to hear what we propose. A place Veemon has selected as the perfect trap because he knows there’s only one way in or out. And there you’d be, all of you, trapped inside with a swarm of Myrminai that he’s stirred into their highest state of aggression with his synthesized pheromone, knowing they’ll rush to the source of the chemical signal and kill whatever they find there. Everyone dead, without so much as one ‘Ngarnan hand being laid on any of you. And it might have worked, too – had it not been for me, of course!” the Doctor concluded, with a self-congratulatory toss of his head.

“But – the footmarks in the sand, leading in...?” Guron’s confusion was utter.

“Five hundred people walking in, carrying the foliage of the aseetum bush, and almost five hundred coming out again, to get clear before either the ‘Ngarnah or the Myrminai arrived!”

“But – but – this bush you speak of... What – how...?” Guron stuttered.

“Vinegar and brown paper, huh, Doctor?” Peri interposed, with a grin.

“Indeed!” the Doctor agreed. “The aseptum bush. So named, presumably, by one of the original colonists who had somehow retained the knowledge that, in one of Earth’s most ancient languages, the Latin word ‘acetum’ was their word for vinegar. Acetic acid. By which, like other species of ant, the Myrminai are repelled, and of which the brown papery leaves and the berries of the aseptum bush contain an abundance. So all I needed to do, through one of those drum messages that Veemon was so dismissive of and never took the trouble to learn to decode, was make sure that everyone who was coming to this gathering brought with them a hefty supply of aseptum foliage, both the leaves and the berries, so we could line the passageway with it, as well as put up a great barricade of the stuff at the entrance into the inner bowl behind which were a few valiant volunteers – myself among them, of course – with torches. Vinegar and brown paper *and* fire! Maddened by the pheromone the Myrminai might have been, but they were even more repelled by all that acetic acid surrounding them, plus the threat of fire. So they got confused between the two imperatives, to fight or to flee, and back out they came. At which point, I imagine,” the Doctor concluded with unmistakable satisfaction, “Veemon discovered that standing in their way wasn’t the brightest thing he could have done...”

There was an outbreak of muttering among the crowd that graduated from astonishment toward anger. The ‘Ngarnah heard the menace in it, and began to shift nervously.

“What are we going to do with them?” came a shout from the crowd. It was followed by others.

“They tried to kill us!”

“They deserve to die!”

“Let’s feed *them* to the Myrminai and see how *they* like it!”

Hearing the rising hostility in the increasing clamour, Arvoth took a decisive step forward and raised his arms, scanning the surrounding faces with an authoritative glare. Gradually the shouting subsided to silence, as the colonists waited for him to speak.

“You’re angry, and you have reason to be.” Arvoth spoke loudly but calmly. “Some of us have died because of what Veemon did. But to become the killers rather than the killed would make us no better than him. And we *are* better than him. So we’ll let these ‘Ngarnans leave this planet alive, nursing their shame, knowing that we know them for what they are and that we would be justified in defending ourselves against them if they ever tried to return.”

“And now we know how to use the Myrminai to protect ourselves!” shouted Sorren, his hands protectively on his sister’s shoulders. “Because *you’ve* showed us how! So go away and don’t come back! NEVER come back!”

The colonists gave a roar of approval, and took up his last words as a chant while the thoroughly demoralized ‘Ngarnans slunk away and out of sight into the forests of Leptannila.

“*Never come back! Never come back! NEVER COME BACK...!*”

“*Therefore hence, be gone!*” the Doctor quoted triumphantly, dusting his hands with an air of great emphasis as the last of the ‘Ngarnah vanished from view and the crowd began to disperse, talking animatedly among themselves. He turned to Peri and the Professor. “Speaking of which,

I think we ourselves should 'therefore hence and be gone'! We've still got to get you back to Oxford, Professor."

"Ye-e-es..." said the Professor, slowly. A small furrow appeared between his eyebrows, as if his agreement was given only reluctantly. For some reason he turned to look at Ayara. Peri followed his gaze and saw the little girl staring back at him with sad, enormous eyes. Slowly she came forward and they stood, she looking up at him, he down at her. Then she slipped her hand into his.

"Are you really going away now?" she whispered.

Randolph went down on one knee, so that his eyes were level with hers, and gazed at her for long moments. Then he smiled.

"Not if your father says I can stay," he said. He got to his feet, still holding her hand, and looked at Arvoth. "Would you mind? I think I might be of some use here."

"Professor – !" Peri protested.

Randolph smiled at her. "I know, Peri. But think of how much I can do here, if I stay. I'm an educator. It's my job, my life. On Earth I make only a minor contribution to the education of the total population. But here I can make a *real* difference. Remember what the Doctor said? A society can only advance if that society can invest the time and resources necessary to allow some of their number to be spared from the task of simple survival to engage in progressive education and research. They couldn't do that before. But now, thanks to the Doctor, they know that the Myrminai won't come near a barrier of aseetum. They can afford to come together in larger settlements and plant hedges of aseetum around them to protect themselves. They'll be working together, and there'll be the time needed for a more expanded education for the children" – he glanced at Ayara – "a pooling of knowledge, the means of recording it for future generations. If I stay, I can help them with all that. And, besides" – his eyes suddenly flashed with mischief – "think of it! As an entomologist, the chance to catalogue the insect life of an entire planet! How can I resist?"

"How, indeed!" agreed the Doctor with characteristic grandiloquence, beaming his approval.

"I guess..." Peri conceded, reluctantly. Then, sharply, "But don't you have any family? Won't they miss you?"

"I am, alas, bereft of relatives of all sorts – ascendant, descendant, and collateral – save for one exception," Randolph told her. "A distant – I use the word advisedly – cousin. But," he went on, "I would appreciate it if you would convey this to her, when the opportunity arises." He took an object out of the breast pocket of his jacket and held it up.

"Your recorder? But – won't you need that?"

"I don't think so," he said gently. "I'm not going to have any way to recharge the battery. And I've largely recorded everything that's happened since we arrived here – I'm recording even now, if you notice? – so it will explain to my cousin where I am, and why. As I said, we're not particularly close, but we are friends to an extent, and I'd like to think she'll understand."

“Sure, Professor, I’ll make sure she gets it,” Peri said, trying hard not to let the lump in her throat stop her speaking. “Assuming we ever get to the right planet in the right century, of course!” she added, with a sidelong look at the Doctor.

“O, ye of little faith!” said the Doctor, shaking his head sadly. “Of *course* we’ll get there!”

“Oh, yeah, sure!” Peri agreed sceptically. “*Eventually...!*”

“And in the meantime, Professor...” The Doctor was rummaging energetically in his pockets. “Give me a minute... It’s in here somewhere...” Then, with a triumphant smile, he wrestled out a small rectangular object and gave it to Randolph. “An old scientific encyclopaedia someone gave me once. Superfluous to *my* requirements, naturally! But *you* might find it useful. It’s a solar-powered electronic database of science and engineering. Everything from how to build a waterwheel to how to launch a rocket. Not that I imagine you’ll be needing *that* information for a while! It won’t last forever, of course, but hopefully long enough to enable some of the founding achievements of the new Leptannilan society.” He slid a sidelong smile in Peri’s direction. “I told you you might be surprised what I had in these pockets!”

“And there was me thinking you were giving him *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*,” Peri retorted drily, earning herself an indignant frown for her facetiousness.

Ayara had been looking from one face to another throughout the whole exchange, but now she couldn’t keep quiet any longer. None of these adults was talking about the most important thing of all! She tugged at Randolph’s hand.

“You’re *not* going away, are you?” she persisted, then turned to her father. “He’s not going away, is he?”

“No,” said Arvoth, consulting his fellow Councillors with his eyes and receiving their nods of agreement. He held out his hand to shake Randolph’s. “He’s not going away. He’s going to stay with us, here on Leptannila.”

As the TARDIS doors closed behind her, Peri looked down at the recorder in her hand for a few moments, then at the Doctor, who was already busy at the controls.

“Okay, we’ve promised we’re going to deliver this to the Professor’s cousin. So how do we make sure this gets to where it’s supposed to go?” she asked.

“Oh, that’s easy enough,” said the Doctor nonchalantly, watching the time rotor getting into its rhythm. “We’ll just pop back to Oxford and leave it in the Professor’s study. On his desk, in an envelope marked ‘For the attention of Marjorie Emmeline Randolph-Bon’. That should do it.”

“So how long’s it going to be before we get back not just to Oxford but to 2001 as well?” Peri enquired.

“How long? How *long*? Oh, how it grieves me to see one so young, yet so cynical!” The Doctor shook his head with mock sadness. “*Because* I have fixed the navigation system, and *because* of my flawless piloting skills, we *are*, in point of fact, already there!”

“Seriously?” said Peri incredulously, realizing that the TARDIS was, indeed, landing.

“Of course seriously!” the Doctor retorted. “You know me – once I know where a problem lies, it doesn’t take me long to get to grips with it! Perhaps we shouldn’t have left Leptannila so precipitately,” he mused regretfully, as he operated the control that opened the doors. “I could have spared the time to look round a little more...”

Peri took a look outside, then turned back to regard the Doctor with a quizzical expression. He looked at her with sudden suspicion.

“What?” he demanded. “What are you looking at me like that for?”

“Uh – remember that decimal point you were having trouble with?” Peri said innocently. “Like I said before – don’t get nostalgic too soon, Doctor. Wherever this is, it’s not Oxford.”



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