

Doctor Who

THE SENTINELS OF TESPERON

A Second Doctor short story
by
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The old man put his head slightly to one side as he regarded the woman seated opposite him with a quizzical look on his face, a face lined by many years of experience of life and hints of old griefs.

“I assume you’re already familiar with the facts of my discoveries on Tesperon,” he said shrewdly. “So what is it you can possibly want to know that isn’t already on record?”

“The part of the story that isn’t on record,” said the woman with a bluntness that somehow managed to be utterly charming at the same time. “I’ve been talking to your son. He’s been telling me some of the things that haven’t made it into the public domain.”

Emeritus Research Leader Symon Lezerau raised his eyebrows, but there was a faint smile on his lips as he studied the blue eyes that were so steadily regarding him. “Has he, indeed? My compliments. He doesn’t confide in everyone on that particular subject. Now, I wonder why he’d open up to you?”

“Because he realized I knew that the passages in your book that contain somewhat cryptic references to a certain unnamed person are in fact describing... the Doctor.”

“The Doctor!” Lezerau leaned forward, suddenly intent. “What do you know of the Doctor?”

The woman smiled noncommittally. “I know there are many people who are interested in piecing together an archive of everything he’s done. From what your son’s told me, the full story of what happened on Tesperon would be worth adding to that archive. He told me what happened from his viewpoint, then suggested I ask you if you’d be prepared to do the same.”

“Yes...” The old man leaned back in his chair and brooded for some moments. Then he nodded. “Yes,” he said again. “My book contains only the truth. But not, perhaps, the whole truth. It would, I agree, be only right for the story to be told in its entirety now. So” – he sat up straighter, and met his interlocutor’s eye directly – “as I have great faith in Steffon’s judgement, I will, indeed, as he has suggested, tell you the story – the whole story – from my viewpoint.”

She smiled, and waited for him to collect his thoughts.

“As you know,” he began at last, “my wife and I mounted our expedition to Tesperon before Steffon was even born. We were seeking the fabled Vault of Tesperon, reputed to hold all the knowledge of the now-vanished race that had once inhabited the planet. And we were close – so close!” He sighed. “But then it happened...”

“A mauve sky!” exclaimed Jamie McCrimmon almost indignantly, as he followed the Doctor out of the TARDIS. “What kind of a planet has a mauve sky?”

“Oh, one not so very different from your own,” said the Doctor, rubbing his hands together briskly as he looked around. The TARDIS was surrounded by outcrops of dark grey rock around which clustered various kinds of shrubs and rather striking short, black-trunked trees with pure white leaves. “Mauve isn’t very far from blue on the spectrum, you know.”

“Mebbe so, but I’ll warrant that wherever this is, it’s not where you were meaning us to be,” said Jamie shrewdly, sliding a sly look at the Doctor, who sniffed dismissively.

“Well, it won’t do any harm to take a look round, now that we *are* here.”

“Oh, aye? And which way would you be wanting to go? It – Urgh!” Jamie yelled, startled by an unexpected movement on one of the nearby rocks. He and the Doctor both stared at the culprit. It was an insect some six inches long, clinging to the surface of the rock with hooked feet. It looked like a cross between a grasshopper and a praying mantis, though black rather than green, and its head was more like that of a bird, with a long, slim beak that narrowed to a needle-like point.

“What kind of a creature is *that*?” Jamie demanded.

“The sort that likes to live under a mauve sky, I daresay,” the Doctor said slyly. He studied the creature with interest as it reared the forepart of its body upwards, still clinging to the rock with its four back feet, its two forelegs drawn in toward itself, looking up as if it was studying him in return. “Don’t worry. It’ll probably leave you alone, as long as you leave it alone. A principle I sometimes wish more people would live by...” He sighed and shook his head, then assumed a more business-like tone. “Come along, Jamie. I think we may be on high ground here, so let’s try that way.” He gestured toward a gap in the rocks. “Hopefully we’ll get a better view of where we are.”

“Aye, right,” said Jamie, still looking askance at the insect; save for an occasional twitch of the four slender antennae that adorned the top of its head, it had not moved again.

He soon realized that the Doctor had been correct in his assessment. When they emerged from the gap in the rocks they found themselves looking down into a valley, its slopes generally covered with the same kinds of vegetation they had already seen. But there was one notable exception.

“Hey! What’s that?” Jamie pointed at an area of the opposite side of the valley where there was a small, almost vertical smooth rock face. In its centre was a dark, square opening, on either side of which lay piles of earth and broken blocks of stone, the latter manifestly the remains of a slab that had once covered the opening before someone or something had broken it apart. Not far from the entrance was a small encampment of tents. There was no apparent sign of life.

The Doctor regarded the scene thoughtfully. “I don’t know...” Then his eye caught something else. “But I’d be interested to know whether *that’s* what I think it is...”

Jamie followed the direction of his pointing finger to a rock outcrop halfway down the slope.

“Doctor, that looks like – ” He broke off.

“Yes, it does, doesn’t it?” the Doctor agreed. “Let’s go and see.”

They made their way down the slope, slowing as they neared the place that the Doctor had been indicating. One face of the outcrop was sheer, about ten feet high, and two of the black-trunked

trees were growing tight against it, about fifteen feet apart, creating an arch of white leaves from each side that met above the mound of earth beneath. A mound that was a foot or so high, about three feet wide, and not quite six feet long. Even had it not so obviously been what it was, confirmation was provided by the words that had been chiselled into the rock face.

"Myreena Lezerau," the Doctor read aloud. "*Beloved wife and mother. She died doing what she loved.*"

"It's a grave, Doctor," Jamie said, superfluously.

The Doctor regarded the carving thoughtfully. "One that's not been here very long, by the look of it. I wonder –"

An unexpected voice broke in on him. "Who are you?"

They turned to see a young man, perhaps twenty years of age, regarding them with a perplexed expression. He had dark eyes, tight-curling black hair, skin the colour of dark coffee, and wore a long-sleeved grey tunic over brown trousers, both garments well-worn and somewhat dusty, bearing witness to long and hard use.

"Oh, hello!" said the Doctor brightly. "I'm the Doctor, and this is Jamie. Who might you be?"

"I'm Steffon Lezerau," said the young man, looking from one to the other in evident puzzlement.

"Ah!" The Doctor nodded gravely, and cast a quick glance at the mound of earth behind him.

"Then, this would be...?" He paused delicately.

"This is my mother's grave," said Steffon flatly. "She died two months ago. What are you doing here? Where have you come from?"

"Oh, we're just visiting," said the Doctor. "Briefly," he added, as an afterthought.

"Why? I didn't think anyone took any interest in Tesperon anymore." Now the young man's tone was distinctly surly.

"Oh, I wouldn't go that far," said the Doctor amiably. "After all, Jamie and I are here, aren't we? Why would you think no-one was taking any interest?"

Jamie suppressed a smile. He knew by now when the Doctor was fishing for information, trying to gain as much knowledge as possible without giving away the fact that he was totally ignorant of the situation – and he really was quite good at it. It was definitely working this time.

"Because everyone else gave up long ago on trying to find the Vault," said Steffon bitterly. "Especially since Sulna Ourana started pouring scorn on anyone who still believed it existed. She's such a hypocrite! She used to be as keen as anyone on finding it. She led quite a number of expeditions here herself. But she *didn't* find it, and the obvious conclusion, as far as she was concerned, was that if *she* couldn't find it, it clearly couldn't possibly exist, and it followed that anyone who was still looking for it when *she* hadn't been able to find it must be a deluded crackpot!"

The Doctor studied him with interest. Steffon Lezerau was clearly a young man with a grievance, and one of such intensity that he was prepared to spill it out even to complete strangers.

"Who's this Sulna Ourana person?" Jamie asked.

Steffon gaped at him. "You don't know?"

“Well, we’re not from Tesperon, you know,” the Doctor pointed out. “Just passing through, you might say.”

“I can tell you’re not from Alleron, either, or you’d have heard of Principal Researcher Sulna Ourana, one of our leading academics and publicly acclaimed media darling!” Steffon’s tone was sour.

“You don’t appear to have a high opinion of her,” the Doctor observed mildly.

“She doesn’t need *my* opinion, she’s got a high enough opinion of herself,” said Steffon tartly. “And why *would* I have a high opinion of her? When she’s conducted such a campaign of scorn against my parents – and still is, against my father – that she’s made it virtually impossible for anyone who cares about their career prospects to remain associated with him.” The degree of understatement that had been employed was obvious. “There are still six of us left, but *only* six, because the professional pressure she’s applied to anyone thinking of working with him has frightened most people away. Apharon and Mananda have been with him for years and stayed loyal, and Pettron couldn’t care less what other people think. And of course my father never lost faith, and neither did my mother. They came here from Alleron before I was born. Back in the days when there were regular expeditions here. But they were the only ones who kept looking. The only ones who didn’t give up.” His voice contained implicit scorn for those who had.

“Quite right, too!” the Doctor applauded. “One should never give up if one has faith.”

Steffon looked at him in surprise; then a hint of warmth began to glimmer on his face. “That’s... good of you to say,” he said, more cordially. “Because we didn’t. And” – suddenly animated, he trembled on the verge of disclosure, then made up his mind – “we’ve succeeded! Only two days ago...” He turned to regard his mother’s grave with suddenly over-bright eyes. “She would’ve been so happy. I wish she could’ve still been here to see it.”

“Succeeded at what?” Jamie asked.

“The Portal. The Portal to the Vault of Tesperon,” said Steffon, as if the answer should have been obvious. “We’ve found it! After almost twenty-five years, we’ve found it! And you’re the first people other than ourselves to know it.”

“Oh, I say! How wonderful!” the Doctor said warmly. “My heartiest congratulations!”

“Thank you,” said Steffon, and for the first time his face relaxed towards a smile. “Look, why don’t you come down to the camp and meet Father? I’m sure he’d be happy to let you see the excavation.”

“Oh, yes, we’d be delighted,” the Doctor agreed promptly. “It sounds fascinating!”

“Then – please – let me escort you.” Steffon turned and began to lead the way.

The Doctor started to follow, but Jamie grabbed him by the sleeve. “Doctor, he said *‘the excavation’*,” he hissed. “Does that mean what I think it means?”

“That rather depends on what you think it means,” said the Doctor. “What *I* think it means is that this is fairly obviously an archaeological expedition of some kind.”

“Oh, *no!*” Jamie exclaimed, dismayed. The Doctor had evidently just confirmed what he feared. “Not *another* bunch of archaeologists!”

“The universe is a big place, you know,” the Doctor pointed out blithely. “I daresay quite a decent percentage of its population are archaeologists of some sort or another. It’s hardly surprising if we’ve run into another expedition. After all, we do get around a bit, don’t we?”

“Oh, aye – but remember what the last lot were doing?”

“Now, now, Jamie!” said the Doctor reprovingly. “Not *all* archaeologists are engaged in digging up frozen Cybermen!¹ Now, do come along, or we’ll never catch up!”

“And you say you aren’t archaeologists yourselves?” Symon Lezerau regarded his unexpected visitors through narrowed eyes; even the dark shade of his skin couldn’t hide the even darker circles under those eyes. It was clear that Steffon wasn’t the only one who had been grieving that Myreena Lezerau was no longer there to share the triumph of discovery.

“Oh, goodness gracious me, no!” The Doctor smiled amiably. “No, I think it would be more accurate to call me a historian, if anything. But that’s merely an interest of mine. A hobby, you might say...”

Lezerau studied him for another few moments. There was something very disarming about this unusual little man with his cap of black hair and baggy trousers; something in the blue eyes that somehow encouraged trust. He decided to accept the Doctor’s assurances.

“Forgive me, Doctor,” he apologized. “It’s just that I’ve been searching for the Vault for so long – with scoffers and doubters deriding my resolve as an obsession – that it’s hard not to wonder if it’s more than coincidence that someone should arrive just at the moment of success.”

“Oh, indeed,” the Doctor agreed. “Though it’s worth remembering that the word ‘coincidence’ had to be invented to describe something that actually does happen from time to time,” he added as an afterthought.

Lezerau acknowledged the point with a smile. “You aren’t afraid of the curse, then,” he observed somewhat drily.

“Curse?” said Jamie quickly. “What curse?”

Lezerau shrugged. “Oh, you know how it is. Over the centuries quite a few setbacks and problems have been encountered by the various expeditions that have come here. The superstitious and the uninformed are quick to attribute them to... well, to less rational causes, shall we say? So there started to be talk of a curse.”

“Oh, yes, well, there would be,” the Doctor agreed, dismissively. “When it comes to ancient tombs, there always is.”

Lezerau awarded him a smile of approval. “Well, of course the Vault isn’t a tomb in the usual sense. But doubtless you’d like to actually see our discovery, instead of just hearing about it?”

“Indeed I would!” the Doctor nodded enthusiastically. “It all sounds very exciting!”

¹ Jamie’s unease about the activities of archaeologists relates to the events recounted in *The Tomb of the Cybermen*, first broadcast by the BBC in 1967.

As Lezerau ushered them toward the rock face, the Doctor studied the piles of shattered rock on either side of the entrance. "It looks as if you had quite a job getting inside," he observed, sounding suitably impressed.

"We did," Lezerau agreed. "And had there not been an earth slip I don't know if we would ever have found this place at all. It was a real stroke of luck. Enough soil fell to uncover the top edge of what turned out to be an enormous plate of rock sealing the entrance. It was perfectly squared, which showed us that it had clearly been deliberately crafted by intelligent beings, and ones who must have had the ability to move something that weighed hundreds of tons into position. Sadly, as you see, we had to break it up in order to find out what lay behind it."

The tunnel into which they walked was lit by torches set into brackets along its length, torches of black wood which Jamie assumed came from the same sort of tree as the ones that had been growing further up the hill.

"Forgive such a primitive means of illumination, but our power generation capacity is limited, so we confine its use to the camp," Lezerau explained. "Tesperon fortunately has many woods and forests, and the wood of the maron tree is impregnated with a natural oil that creates a generous amount of light when burned, so it seemed only sensible to make use of such a renewable resource. Please, follow me."

With Steffon bringing up the rear, the Doctor and Jamie followed Lezerau along the passage to where it expanded into a larger cavern.

"Oh, I say!" the Doctor exclaimed with enthusiasm as they stepped out of the tunnel. "This is rather splendid, isn't it? *Very impressive!*"

The chamber in which they now stood was roughly twenty-five feet square, with the native rock forming three of its walls. Many torches had been bracketed on them, and the light they cast fell by evident design on the fourth wall, the one that faced them as they emerged from the tunnel. Three men and a woman were there, all activity arrested as they stared at the unexpected newcomers, but neither the Doctor nor Jamie had attention to spare for them at that moment. They were too busy looking at the structure beyond.

The back wall was very different from the rough-hewn dark rock of the other three. It was a smooth, sand-coloured stone surface, totally vertical and exactly square, with a rectangular dais, flat and smooth like the wall itself, extending some fifteen feet in front of it. In the centre of the wall, slightly recessed, was what could only be a door of some kind, bordered by a massive rectangular lintel atop squared pillars. The door itself it was a gleaming black, featureless square with no obvious means of opening. On either side of the door, in front of the pillars, stood identical statues, stylized representations of a living creature, all formed from the same black material. The statues themselves were not positioned with their backs at right angles to the wall, but were each slightly angled inwards, deliberately directed so that their gazes would intersect at the centre of a large square of the black material that was set into the sand-coloured stone of the dais directly in front of the door. Its dimensions were such that there was no way the door could be reached without treading on the square.

“Symon? Who are these people?” the woman asked swiftly. She was in her early forties, with the same dark eyes and skin as the rest of the group; her hair, unlike that of the men, grew not in tight curls against the skull but in thick, heavy waves that swept back from her forehead to fall below her shoulders.

“Everyone, this is the Doctor, and this is Jamie,” said Lezerau. “They’ve come to visit us. I’ve brought them to see the Portal.”

“Are they archaeologists?” she enquired suspiciously.

“No, no, madam, not at all,” the Doctor assured her. “Simply interested observers, I can assure you.”

She nodded stiffly, but her dark eyes still harboured a smouldering distrust.

“Let me introduce you to my team, Doctor,” said Lezerau, conscious of the slightly awkward atmosphere she was generating. “These gentlemen are Mananda Mataralay” – a man in his forties with an affable expression and a naturally wry twist to one corner of his mouth – “Pettron Ganonalie” – a short, stocky individual somewhere in his late twenties, with a positively mischievous gleam in his eyes – “and Apharon Soolinder” – middle-aged and solid, with greying hair and beard and a gleaming smile of welcome. “This” – Lezerau gestured at the woman – “is Irinna Kerelon, who only joined us recently. She was a friend of my wife’s, back before I knew Myreena. When she heard of her death, Irinna very kindly decided to come and offer her services...”

For some reason Jamie found himself glancing at Steffon at that moment, and was surprised at the expression of dislike the younger man was directing at Irinna. Although he’d mentioned there were six of them remaining in the expedition, hers was the one name he’d omitted when he’d been listing its members. Jamie briefly wondered why.

“And this,” Lezerau concluded triumphantly, with an expansive wave of his arm, “is the Portal Chamber of the Vault of Tesperon!”

Jamie looked back at the dais, and realized something. “Doctor!” he exclaimed. “Those statues – they’re the same as that thing we saw up on the hill!”

“Yes, I *had* already spotted that, Jamie,” the Doctor agreed, with the air of a man having the obvious pointed out to him.

“They’re called zelaara,” said Steffon, with a smile at Jamie’s reaction. “You find them everywhere. Although these are rather larger than the one you’ll have seen!”

“Mmm,” agreed the Doctor absently. He was studying the two statues with interest. The zelaara had been depicted in the same stance as the one they had already seen, four of their legs planted on the ground, their upper bodies raised erect, their remaining two legs drawn up and back like those of a praying mantis. And, as Steffon had said, larger than life – nearer to six feet than six inches.

“Those,” said Lezerau, with almost proprietorial pride, “are the Sentinels of Tesperon!”

“What are those things they’re holding?” Jamie asked.

Each zelaara held in front of it, between its forefeet, a rectangular white tablet with black characters incised into the surface – but not the same characters. The ones on the tablet held by

the zelaara on the left were groups of square and triangular outlines of differing size and orientation, often overlapping. Those displayed by the zelaara on the right were quite different; a series of geometric patterns, all symmetrical about two axes, each one contained inside a square outline. In some cases there was only one instance of a particular pattern; others were sometimes repeated.

“We don’t know – yet,” said Lezerau. “That is, we know the one on the left is written in the ancient language of the Tesperona, who once populated this planet, but we haven’t had the time to translate it yet. The other one” – he indicated the tablet bearing the geometric shapes – “is unlike anything any of us have seen before. We assume it to be another language of the Tesperona, one that no-one has ever uncovered any examples of before.”

“You say these Tesperona *once* inhabited this planet. What happened to them?” the Doctor enquired.

“Nobody knows,” said Lezerau. “There are no intelligent native species on Tesperon anymore – no-one knows why – but at one time the Tesperona were a race capable of creating a place such as this. More than that, of space travel, or they would never have reached us. If we can decode those tablets, who knows what they might tell us!”

“So you’re not from Tesperon yourselves?” Jamie queried, trying to get it all clear in his head.

“Sorry to interrupt,” Pettron interjected, before Lezerau could answer, “but – Symon, is it all right to carry on while you – ah – educate our visitors?” He flashed a smile full of charm at the Doctor and Jamie, but, with the impatience of youth, he was clearly bored with listening to a commentary he’d probably heard on many previous occasions.

“Yes, yes, of course,” said Lezerau, with a wave of his hand; then he returned to Jamie’s question. “No, we come from Tesperon’s sister planet, Alleron. All except Steffon, of course! He was born here on Tesperon, so technically he can claim to be the only living Tesperonian!” He exchanged a brief smile with his son; it was clearly a family joke. “But” – he returned to his explanation – “we know there must have been contact between the two planets millennia ago, because of our own legends, which contain mention of the Tesperona going right back into our early history.”

“It’s frustrating,” said Steffon bluntly. “There’s not one description of the Tesperona’s physical appearance, so we have no idea what they looked like. But there are frequent references to their immense knowledge, their wisdom, the peaceful civilization of great wealth and prosperity they’re reputed to have created. Then – nothing. Suddenly, thousands of years ago, the record goes blank. No mention of any further interaction between their planet and ours, and no explanation why.”

“When we finally reached a level of technology that enabled us to leave our own planet and come to Tesperon, we found many examples of the engineering and architectural skills of the Tesperona,” his father said, resuming the narrative, “but no clue has ever been found as to their fate. But there was always the legend of the fabled Vault of Tesperon, guarded by the Sentinels of Tesperon, reputed to be a repository of all the wealth and knowledge of the Tesperona. For more than two hundred years expeditions from Alleron have been searching for it.”

“Though Steffon tells me yours is now the only one,” the Doctor remarked.

Lezerau nodded, his eyes suddenly burning. “The record of failure was so long that many scholars started to claim that the legends were just that – legends, with no basis in fact. Expeditions ceased to come. Myreena and I were ridiculed by our peers and by the public for persisting in the search. But we never gave up. Never! And now we’ve found it!”

“You certainly have,” agreed the Doctor, who was watching Pettron. Irinna, Apharon and Mananda had continued to listen as Lezerau had been talking, but Pettron had returned to what he had been doing when they arrived – recording the dimensions of the black square. Perhaps because he was by far the youngest of the team, there was something about the way he carried himself, the expression on his face, that conveyed not only the impression that he was of a somewhat impetuous nature, but also that he had a more light-hearted approach to his work than did his more mature colleagues. And what had caught the Doctor’s attention, as Pettron straightened up from where he had been crouching alongside the black square to measure it, was the look on his face as he now regarded the shape at his feet. The look of suppressed amusement you might see on a schoolboy’s face as he contemplated some prank in the presence of his teacher.

Quite without warning, he suddenly jumped onto the square and strode to its exact centre, facing the door. Conscious that everyone had noticed what he had done and was now staring at him with emotions that varied between surprise and disapproval, he grinned and spread his arms wide, enjoying the sensation of being the centre of attention.

“Oh, wise and kind Sentinels of Tesperon!” he declaimed dramatically, addressing the two zelaara. “Grant me, I pray thee, entrance to the Vault of Tesperon!”

“Pettron!” Lezerau thundered, incensed at such irreverence. “What do you think you’re playing at? Get off there at once!”

“I thought if I asked them nicely, they might let us in,” Pettron grinned unrepentantly, without moving. “After all, this is obviously where you’re supposed to stand if you’re going to –”

“Oh, my giddy aunt! What’s happening?” The sudden alarm in the Doctor’s voice startled them all. Everyone – including Pettron – followed the direction of his urgently pointing forefinger, and saw what he had seen. The two white tablets that the zelaara were holding had begun to glow, a pulsing glow that was speedily rising in power. Within moments it had reached a level of intensity that was starting to make it hard to see the black characters on the tablets.

“Pettron! Get away from there!” Lezerau bellowed, but it was too late. Before Pettron could move, a flare of piercing white light suddenly enveloped him, as if it had erupted from the centre of his body. For a second or two it hung there, pulsing, bright enough to make everyone shrink back and try to cover their eyes from its painful dazzle. Then the flare of light abruptly contracted into a ball that fled through the air from the square to the door, vanishing into its black surface as if it had been sucked in by some irresistible force.

It was gone. And so was Pettron.

There was an instant of complete, shocked silence, as everyone stared at the spot where he had been standing. Then Irinna, her eyes filled with horror, abruptly raised her hand to cover her mouth, and the movement seemed to break the spell that was holding everyone else motionless. Mananda

and Apharon turned to look at Lezerau, as if looking to him for guidance on how to react. Steffon reached out and clutched his father's arm, but whether to give or to seek reassurance was unclear. Lezerau himself simply stared, too shocked for words.

Jamie turned to look at the Doctor, who was wringing his hands agitatedly, muttering, "Oh, dear, oh, dear, oh dear..." and looking extremely perturbed.

"Doctor, what happened?" he demanded, but the Doctor just shook his head. Jamie pursed his lips and instinctively took a pace forward, intending to go to where Pettron had vanished, but the Doctor's hand abruptly shot out and restrained him.

"I really wouldn't, if I were you, Jamie. I don't think it would be a good idea to put yourself on that surface."

"Why not?" Jamie demanded.

"Because we don't yet understand what just happened," said the Doctor.

"That's what we've got to find out, then!" Jamie expostulated.

"We *know* what's happened! Pettron's *dead!*" Irinna choked, glaring at the Doctor as if it was somehow all his fault.

"All the more reason not to take any chances until we know how, and why," the Doctor pointed out promptly. "Because *he did* put himself on that surface. Has anyone else done that since you've been in here?"

Although they were still wrestling with shock, the others were beginning to follow his reasoning.

"No," said Apharon slowly. "No, I... don't think so." He looked at Mananda, who hesitantly nodded his confirmation. "We spent most of yesterday setting up the torch brackets and recording images of the Vault. We didn't start measuring until today. Today's the first time we've touched the dais in any way."

"But we've been *on* the dais!" Irinna said angrily. "And nothing happened!"

"But not on the black square," Mananda pointed out. "Nobody stood on that until Pettron – " He broke off, and swallowed hard.

Irinna glared at him rebelliously. "Well, I think it's very strange that nothing like this had shown any sign of happening. *Not,*" she said, suddenly rounding on the Doctor, "until *you* arrived..."

Lezerau roused himself at that. "Irinna!" he exclaimed. "That is a completely outrageous and entirely unfounded accusation, and I insist you apologize to our visitors! At once!"

"The Doctor's only just arrived on Tesperon!" Steffon seconded his father in indignation. "This is the first time he's been in here! How could he possibly have done anything with it? And *why*? What *possible* motive do you think he could have for killing Pettron?"

Even in the face of such unanimity, Irinna continued to stare mutinously. Then she seemed to remember that these were her employers, and she was dependent on their goodwill.

"I'm upset," she muttered ungraciously. "It's just – the shock of seeing Pettron die, right in front of us... I'm – I'm not..." She fell silent, and dropped her eyes to stare at the floor, so no-one could see her expression.

Lezerau stared at her in frustration, then turned to the Doctor. "Since Irinna does not seem disposed to offer you the apology I have asked for, Doctor, allow me do so," he said stiffly.

"Oh, no, please – think nothing of it!" said the Doctor, dismissing the matter with a wave of his hand. "It's all been very distressing, I can see that. And we often say things we don't mean when we're upset, don't we? Really, don't give it another thought."

"But – what are we to do now?" Mananda asked, with a helpless gesture of both hands. "What about the Vault? Is it safe for us to be here?"

"We're not going to take any chances," said Lezerau. "Everyone is to leave here at once, and no-one is to return without my express permission. Is that understood?"

"Oh, yes, indeed, very clear. And if I might make a suggestion," said the Doctor diffidently, "perhaps we should all go and have a hot drink. That's always a good thing to do when one's had a shock. Then we can talk it over. It's never a good idea trying to make important decisions when one's upset, is it? Then, when we've all calmed down, we can come up with some sort of strategy for what to do next, can't we?"

It was about half an hour later that Jamie realized that the Doctor was no longer in the main tent with the others, who were clustered around a large central table on which were scattered photographs of the two tablets held by the zelaara, still talking out their shock and distress. He must have slipped out when no-one was looking. But when Jamie went outside, there was no sign of him. Which meant, of course, there was only one place he was likely to be. Drawing a deep breath, Jamie plunged into the tunnel.

As he suspected, the Doctor was in the Chamber, standing in front of the dais and regarding the Vault with a brooding look. He had interlaced his fingers in front of him and was absently tapping the balls of his thumbs together, deep in thought.

"Doctor, there you are! Are you sure it's safe to be in here?" Jamie demanded.

"Oh, yes, I think so," said the Doctor, somewhat absently, his gaze still fixed on the black door.

"They're all still talking about what to do next. That Irinna doesnae like your being here one bit," Jamie said bluntly.

"No..." the Doctor agreed thoughtfully. "No, she doesn't, does she? I wonder why not?"

"Aye, well, I know somebody who doesnae like *her*, either!"

"Oh?" The Doctor stopped his thumb-tapping and turned to look at Jamie keenly. "Who?"

"Steffon! Did you no' see his face when Lezerau was introducing her to us? No love lost there, I can tell you!"

"Really?" said the Doctor again, but with a different intonation this time. "Well, that *is* interesting. I wonder why...?"

"No idea, but it's no' just that he doesnae like her. He doesnae trust her, either!" said Jamie bluntly. "Mebbe he thinks *she* killed Pettron somehow."

"Oh, I don't see how." The Doctor had resumed both his thumb-tapping and his regard of the Vault, a frown pulling his eyebrows down over his eyes. "She won't have been alone in here at any

time, I shouldn't think. In the excitement of discovery they'll all have been in here for as much of the time as possible. And in any case, Lezerau's question would still apply. Why? What would it achieve? And" – the Doctor paused a moment, pensively – "is what we *think* happened, what *actually* happened, I wonder?"

Jamie stared at him. "What d'you mean? You were here! You saw what happened! Pettron was killed by – by something!"

"Yes... Well, you're probably right," the Doctor acquiesced, still looking thoughtful. He was now gazing at the right-hand zelaara and the tablet it held with the look of a man trying to pin down something that was eluding him. "You know, there's something familiar about those symbols. I'm sure I've seen them somewhere before..."

"Never mind yon pretty patterns!" Jamie said impatiently. "What're we going to do about finding out what happened to Pettron?"

"I think," said the Doctor, suddenly brisk as he turned back toward the tunnel, "I might go and slip a suggestion or two into the conversation..."

Jamie followed him back to the encampment and into the tent, where the others were still in intense debate. They appeared hardly to have noticed the absence of their visitors; Steffon was the only one who seemed to register their return.

"What do *you* think, Doctor?" he asked.

"Me?" said the Doctor ingenuously.

"About what we should do."

"Oh, well, it's not really for me to say, is it?" The Doctor's eyebrows rose innocently. "I can only tell you what I'd do if I were in your place..."

"What's that?" Steffon demanded.

"I think I'd concentrate on deciphering those tablets. They might well hold the key to the door, so to speak. Perhaps there are instructions on them. Perhaps the one you do know how to translate contains an explanation of the one you don't."

"But even if it does, is it safe to be in the Portal Chamber at all?" asked Lezerau. "How can we know?" He faltered for a moment. "I can't... There mustn't be any more deaths..."

"Oh, I think it's probably safe enough, generally speaking," said the Doctor, with an airy wave of his hand. "After all, you'd been in there for two whole days without anything unusual happening, hadn't you? I think that, just as long as you don't step on that square, you'll be perfectly all right."

"What *about* that square?" Mananda challenged him. "What is it? What does it do?"

"Oh, I imagine it gives some sort of proximity alert when someone approaches the door," said the Doctor. "Perhaps it's a pressure pad of some sort. Or maybe there's a motion sensor that reacts when something enters its range. Whatever it is, I think your best chance of finding out how to approach that door safely is to translate those tablets!" He leaned over the table and picked up one of the photographs of the right-hand tablet and frowned at it. "You know, I'm *sure* I've seen these patterns somewhere before... But *where*?"

Lezerau looked at him with sudden hope. “Do you think you might be able to help us decipher the tablets?”

“I don’t think you should involve him!” Irinna snapped as she shot to her feet, her eyes baleful. “In fact, I don’t think you should be letting him anywhere near the Vault! We don’t know who he is, or where he comes from! He might be a spy! Or pretending to help, only to steal the credit which should rightfully be ours!”

“Hey! The Doctor would never do that...!” Jamie began to protest angrily, but subsided, albeit rather rebelliously, as the Doctor made a ‘shushing’ motion with his hands.

“Irinna! Whatever’s come over you?” Lezerau demanded, both irritated and mystified. “Why are you so hostile to the Doctor’s presence here? I don’t understand you!”

Irinna’s face was a mixture of emotions – anger... frustration... and was that a tinge of fear, for some inexplicable reason? Then she seemed to realize how much of herself she was revealing, and visibly fought to control herself.

“I’m sorry, Symon,” she managed to say, more calmly. “It’s just that I don’t want to see everything that you and Myreena worked for, for so many years, put at risk. I’m sorry if I’m being over-protective, but... you do see, don’t you? I’m just worried, that’s all.”

Lezerau’s face cleared. “Of course,” he said soothingly. “But I really think your fears are misplaced. If the Doctor does know something about what’s on the tablets, he can only be of help, and I for one am not too proud to accept it.” He paused, then suggested with elaborate care, “Perhaps you should go to your quarters and get some rest? You’ve had a nasty shock, and you’ll be all the better for a night’s sleep. There’ll be plenty for you to do tomorrow.”

Irinna was silent for a moment, her face unreadable. Then she nodded. “Yes... Yes, perhaps I will. Thank you,” she said, suddenly sounding uncharacteristically subdued, and left the tent.

Lezerau looked after her with a puzzled shake of his head, then turned back to the Doctor.

“Well, Doctor, as I was asking – do you think you can help?”

“Well, it’s difficult to be sure,” the Doctor prevaricated, “but if I could just *remember*...!” He screwed up his face in frustration.

“What about this other one?” Jamie said, picking up a photo of the left hand tablet and waving it at Lezerau. “You said you knew this language. Why not make a start on this one?”

Lezerau smiled, but instead of answering directly, he directed a look of enquiry at Apharon, who nodded confidently. “You and I together, Symon – I don’t think it should take us too long.”

In point of fact it only took about half an hour, during which time Jamie, Steffon and Mananda installed themselves in chairs against the back wall of the tent and limited themselves to whispered conversation while they waited for Lezerau and Apharon, who conferred in low voices over the translation. For a while the Doctor stood in a corner, studying a photograph of the other tablet with a scowl of frustration. Then a couple of objects lying on a nearby chair caught his eye. He stuffed the photograph into his pocket, picked them up, and brought them across to Mananda.

“What’s this, if you don’t mind my asking?”

“Looks like a fiddle, and a bow to play it with,” Jamie observed. And it did, save that it had only three strings rather than four.

Steffon and Mananda looked at it soberly. “That’s Pettron’s karrana,” Mananda said. He paused, then added, “He could be very irritating at times, but I’m going to miss him. He was a good musician, you know. I enjoyed listening to him play...”

“Really? I’m something of a musician myself, you know,” the Doctor offered, examining the instrument with interest. “I prefer the recorder, of course, but I can get a tune out of quite a few things...”

“Right now you’re supposed to be getting some sense out of that tablet,” Jamie reminded him sternly.

“Yes, you’re quite right. Mustn’t get distracted from the real task at hand,” the Doctor conceded slightly reluctantly, laying the karrana and its bow aside. Pulling the photograph back out of his pocket, he resumed his perusal of the symbols on the tablet with a frown of concentration.

A few minutes later Jamie’s head jerked sharply and he stared at the wall of the tent opposite, a movement that roused the Doctor out of his contemplation once more. “What is it, Jamie?” he whispered.

“Och, it’s nothing,” said Jamie, though he still continued to stare. “I just thought I saw movement outside, that’s all. Mebbe I imagined it...”

The Doctor examined the opposite wall for a few moments through narrowed eyes. “Best to make sure, perhaps...” He rose from his chair and stuck his head outside the tent flap for a few moments, then beckoned urgently. “Jamie, come and listen to this!”

Mananda declined to move, but Steffon followed Jamie and the Doctor outside. Dusk had fallen, and the mauve sky had darkened to something closer to indigo. The valley was now shrouded in gloom, but not in silence. From all around came a chorus of almost musical sounds, in various keys and rhythms, not unlike an orchestra performing its warm-up before the main performance. The Doctor was craning his neck, trying to make out the source of the noises.

“Zelaara, Doctor,” Steffon explained. “They always sing at dusk.”

“Really? Well, I must say it’s a very pleasant sound. Is it really singing?”

“In a way, I suppose. Did you see how their carapace is made up of segments? They vibrate the segments against each other, and it produces different sounds at different pitches and speeds, depending on what they want to communicate. They have different songs for different things. But at nightfall, as you can hear, they all sing the same song.”

“Hmmm... Singing...” the Doctor repeated thoughtfully, squinting out into the gathering darkness.

“My mother used to love listening to them,” Steffon observed sadly. The Doctor peered at him in the thickening gloom.

“You know, Jamie was telling me he doesn’t think you like Irinna very much,” he commented conversationally. Steffon looked quickly at Jamie, but shrugged, unable to refute the charge. “Why not?” the Doctor persisted.

"I don't know," said Steffon grimly. "I just – don't trust her. Mananda thinks I'm biased, because we know she tried to join Ourana's staff not long ago, before she came to us. So perhaps I am. But it's not just that. She's not a good archaeologist, either. She wants to get results quickly, and she's willing to take short-cuts to do it. Not that Father'll let her, of course! I'm surprised Ourana didn't take her on. That's just the kind of approach she'd go for."

"What makes you say that?"

"Oh, the public love her – she can't do any wrong as far as they're concerned – but in professional circles there're rumours that she takes the credit for discoveries that aren't her own, though nobody's ever spoken out openly. But there's no smoke without fire, Doctor. And that's how I feel about Irinna, too. There's got to be some reason, beyond the one she gave, why she wanted to join Father's team in spite of everything. It wouldn't do her any good with Ourana, that's for sure."

"But isn't the fact that she was a friend of your mother's a valid reason?" the Doctor enquired.

Steffon snorted sceptically. "I don't know that she *was* a friend of my mother's."

The Doctor was surprised by such a blunt declaration. "Why ever not?"

"Because Mother never mentioned her. Not once. Not to me, and not to my father. So we've only got her word for it. Father's accepted her story, but I'm not so sure. I've got no evidence, Doctor. I just – don't trust her," he repeated, with a shrug. Then he added, "Any more than *she* trusts *you*!"

"Oh, you'd noticed that, had you?" said the Doctor noncommittally.

"Don't worry, Doctor. *I* trust you," Steffon assured him in a tone that could only be accompanied by a smile, even if the latter was barely visible in the darkness. "If only because *she* doesn't! Come on – let's go back inside."

Just as they did, Lezerau straightened up and announced, "That's it! We've done it."

Immediately everyone clustered round the table, their eyes on the piece of paper in his hand.

"What does it say?" Steffon demanded, with the impatience of youth.

Lezerau smiled at his son. "I'll let Apharon tell you. It was mostly his expertise that got us there." He passed the paper across.

"As far as we can tell," Apharon said cautiously, "this is what it says." He held up the paper, and read aloud: "*Take your stand before the Vault of Tesperon with knowledge and understanding and wisdom. Sing the song of the Sentinels, that all may be revealed to you.*"

"What does that mean?" Jamie asked, mystified. "What's the song of the Sentinels?" As he spoke he could have sworn he saw movement through the wall of the tent again, but this time dismissed it from his mind.

"We're not sure," Lezerau admitted. "I can't remember coming across that phrase before. But that doesn't mean it isn't in our reference library somewhere! Who was the last to use that memory cube?"

Mananda raised his hand. "That would be me. It's in my quarters. Somewhere..." He cast a slightly shamefaced look at Steffon, who grinned, and explained to Jamie, "Mananda's not the tidiest person in the world. I never know how he finds anything in that tent of his!"

"And he never passes up the chance to comment on it!" Mananda grinned back tolerantly. "Never mind – hopefully it won't take me too long...!" He winked at Jamie and left the tent.

For once it took him very little time to locate what he was looking for, since it happened to be lying in full view on top of a heap of discarded clothing on his bed. He scooped it up, turned off the light, and emerged back into the now swiftly falling darkness.

As he did so, his peripheral vision picked up a furtive movement near the entrance to the tunnel. He stopped and peered intently. What was that? Or, rather, *who* was it? Because it was clearly a moving human figure, and it was about to enter the tunnel. Who could it be? And why were they going to the Chamber, when Lezerau had forbidden it? This would bear investigation.

The memory cube still in his hand, he followed in the wake of the dark-shrouded figure that had by now vanished into the tunnel, instinctively moving with a similar degree of stealth. As he neared the entrance to the Portal Chamber, moving as silently as he knew how, he heard a low voice speaking, though he couldn't make out the words at this distance. But whoever it was, who could they be talking to in the Chamber? The rest of the team, and their two visitors, were all in the main tent, weren't they? Then he remembered. There was one who wasn't. That was the only person it could be...

He crept up to the Chamber entrance, keeping in the shadows, and halted, listening intently. He was right. It was Irinna.

"...they've translated one of the tablets," she was saying urgently. "And there are two strangers here! I don't know who they are, or where they've come from, but what if they're rivals? What if someone found out you were coming here and managed to get ahead of you?"

When the reply came, the sound quality clearly told him that the conversation was taking place via a long-range communicator. He recognized the other voice, too, and because it was who it was, he knew this could only be betrayal. Instant anger welled up in him and he couldn't contain himself. He thrust himself out of the tunnel and into the full light of the maron-wood torches, glaring with contempt into Irinna's startled eyes as she whirled to face him.

They stared at each other for no more than a couple of seconds. Then Mananda emitted a snort of disgust and began to turn back toward the tunnel.

"Mananda!" Irinna sounded panicky. "What are you going to do?"

Boiling with anger and indignation, Mananda rounded aggressively on her, and she instinctively retreated, stumbling as her heels met the edge of the dais. She fell backwards onto it, landing mere inches away from the black square.

"I," Mananda informed her through clenched teeth, "am going to tell Symon Lezerau exactly what you are and what you've done. And I'm going to do it *now!*"

"No!" Irinna screamed. As she scrambled to her feet Mananda had already turned his back on her and taken his first stride back towards the tunnel mouth. With a strength born of desperation,

she grabbed one of his arms and swung him back toward the dais. Taken by surprise, he dropped the memory cube, which rolled into the shadows of the tunnel as he fought for balance and only just in time managed to stop himself from stepping onto the black square. But even as he turned to face Irinna, his back to the Vault door, her face contorted into an ugly combination of fear and determination, and she lunged forward. So swiftly that he had no time to avoid her, she planted both hands on his chest and pushed with all her might, almost launching him backwards. Before he had realized what was happening, he had fallen heavily into the centre of the black square. A sharp crack and his own gasp of pain audibly disclosed the fracturing of his right arm as his full weight came down on it.

Irinna didn't move to help him. She was not even looking at him, but at something beyond, her eyes flicking urgently from one side to another. With horror, Mananda suddenly realized what she was looking at. Unable to get up quickly with only one sound arm to lever on, he rolled onto his back instead, and saw the two tablets, gripped in the claws of the Sentinels of Tesperon, starting to glow. Frantic with realization, he did then try to get up, despite the agony of his shattered arm, but he couldn't move fast enough. He turned to look at Irinna, and his wide, accusing eyes were the last thing she saw of him before, like Pettron before him, he was gone in a flare of light.

When more than ten minutes had passed and Mananda still hadn't returned, Steffon began to get edgy.

"It *can't* be taking him this long!" he muttered impatiently. "I'm going to find out what's keeping him." Lezerau looked up from where he was still conferring with Apharon on the finer details of the translation and shrugged slightly, then returned to his work. Jamie glanced at the Doctor, but he was still glowering at the patterns, frustrated they weren't giving up their secrets to him.

"I'll come with you," he offered, and the two young men left the tent together.

It was after another five minutes had elapsed that the three who had remained in the tent became aware there was some sort of disturbance taking place somewhere outside. A voice – no, two voices – were calling out. Steffon and Jamie, shouting a single word, repeatedly. And within moments it became clear that what they were shouting was Mananda's name.

The Doctor, Lezerau and Apharon exchanged looks of mystification, but before any of them could speak, Jamie came bursting back in.

"Mananda – he's gone!" he exclaimed.

"But he only went to his tent, didn't he?" Lezerau asked blankly.

"Aye, but he's no' there, and we cannae find him anywhere else!" He turned as Steffon strode in behind him. "Was Irinna in her tent?"

"Yes, but she says she hasn't seen him," Steffon said shortly. "Where can he be?"

The Doctor pursed his lips thoughtfully. "Have you looked in the Portal Chamber?"

Lezerau looked at him, astonished. "He won't be in *there*! I made it clear that no-one was to go in there without my permission."

“Even so, perhaps we should take a look,” the Doctor suggested. “If only to eliminate it as a possibility. Jamie and I’ll do it, if you like.”

“If you’re willing to take the risk, Doctor,” Lezerau agreed reluctantly. “But be careful! Don’t go any further than the end of the tunnel. Don’t go into the Chamber itself. The rest of us will continue looking in and around the camp.”

“Oh, we’ll be very careful indeed, I promise,” the Doctor assured him. “Come on, Jamie!”

“D’you seriously think he’ll have gone into the Chamber, after what happened to Pettron?” Jamie asked incredulously, as he and the Doctor hurried toward the rock face.

“If he has, it would have to be for an overwhelmingly important reason, don’t you think?” the Doctor returned as they plunged into the tunnel.

“So you think we’re going to find him in there?”

“No, Jamie, I’m afraid I don’t.” The Doctor sounded unusually sombre.

“Then what *do* you think we’re going to find?”

“Nothing,” said the Doctor flatly. “Nothing at all...”

He was almost right. When they stopped at the entrance to the Chamber and looked in, it was silent and still; there was no-one there. But as the Doctor moved his feet, one of them made contact with something small and hard that skittered across the floor of the tunnel.

“What’s that?” Jamie asked, as the Doctor bent down and picked up the offending object, and carried it over to the nearest torch for closer inspection. Silently he held it up where it could be clearly seen.

Jamie frowned at it. “What is it?”

“That,” said the Doctor soberly, “is a memory cube.”

“Then he *was* here!” Jamie exclaimed.

“And now he isn’t,” said the Doctor, taking the torch out of its bracket and scanning the floor more closely. “But neither is he in the camp...” He gave Jamie a significant look.

“Doctor!” Jamie suddenly realized what he was getting at, and his eyes went in to the Portal Chamber, to the black square. “You don’t mean...?”

“I’m afraid I do mean,” said the Doctor sadly. “The real question is – why? Why did he come in here? And why would he have stepped onto the square? Unless...” His eyes suddenly widened. “Oh, my word...!” he exclaimed, bringing his suddenly clasped hands up to cover his mouth.

“What? What is it, Doctor?” Jamie pressed.

“A very unpleasant possibility has just occurred to me,” said the Doctor, visibly suppressing his obvious agitation. “But I think I’d better not say anything more about it until I’m certain...” He stood in thought for a moment longer, then sighed. “Oh, dear! Well, I suppose we’d better report back and tell the others what we’ve found. But they’re not going to like it...”

There had been a great deal of talk as everyone responded to the Doctor’s shouted summons and returned to the main tent, but now, following his revelation, complete silence had fallen.

The Doctor's eyes travelled over the remaining members of the expedition, assessing their reactions. Lezerau sat silent and haggard. Steffon was in no better case than his father, his face almost blank with shock. Apharon, with his greater experience of life, was no stranger to death and loss, but was nevertheless struggling to deal with the blow of losing his long-time colleague and friend. Irinna had returned and was there, too, silent and dark-eyed.

"What – what are we going to do?" Steffon said hoarsely, at last.

The Doctor steepled his fingers and considered the question. "Well, I think perhaps everyone should go back to their quarters and give themselves a bit of time to come to terms with this. Get some sleep, if you can," he added kindly. "I don't think there's much more we can usefully do tonight in any case."

Steffon stood up slowly and put a hand on his father's shoulder. "The Doctor's right," he said quietly. "We won't achieve anything tonight. Let's do what he says."

Lezerau, his eyes bright with unshed tears, obeyed mechanically, his head bowed with the burden of the responsibility he was evidently, if not justifiably, feeling for the loss of lives. He made no protest as Steffon ushered him out of the tent. Irinna, still silent, followed them.

Apharon looked at the Doctor. "What about you and Jamie, Doctor? What will you do?"

"Oh, I think if you could rustle up a bit of spare bedding Jamie and I will be quite comfortable in here for tonight," said the Doctor. "By the way," he added, apparently as an afterthought, "can you tell me something – how long does it take for a ship to get from Alleron to Tesperon?"

Apharon gave him an odd look. "Just under four days," he said quizzically. "Why? What's that got to do with anything?"

"Oh, I was just wondering..." said the Doctor, half to himself.

Some hours later Jamie was roused by a hand energetically shaking his shoulder. He blinked, trying to gather his wits, while the face above him came into focus. It was the Doctor, looking immensely pleased with himself.

"Wake up, Jamie! Mustn't waste time!"

"What is it? What's happened?" Jamie asked blearily, levering himself out of the makeshift bed to which he had eventually retreated while the Doctor had continued to study the symbols long into the night.

"Nothing yet, but it's about to!" the Doctor said gleefully.

Jamie, still sleepy, was annoyed at not getting a straight answer. "What are you talking about?"

"I've got something to tell everyone, but I just need to rustle up a quick bit of apparatus first. Oh, and I need you to get something for me."

"Oh, aye? What's that?"

"Some sand," said the Doctor, and smiled mischievously at the surprise on Jamie's face.

A short while later he was studying the expressions on the faces of the others, too. The team were still evidently struggling to come to terms with Mananda's disappearance, but they were all watching him curiously in spite of their preoccupations, wondering why he'd summoned them.

“Thank you for coming, everyone. I have an announcement to make,” said the Doctor happily.

“What announcement is that?” Lezerau asked. He looked tired but, like the others, intrigued by the Doctor’s manner.

“Oh, just that I’ve translated the other tablet,” said the Doctor nonchalantly.

That definitely got everyone’s attention. Lezerau stiffened; Steffon and Irinna stared; Apharon simply smiled, evidently unsurprised.

“What does it say?” Steffon demanded impatiently. “How did you do it?”

“I knew I’d seen patterns like that somewhere before,” the Doctor explained, “but I just couldn’t remember where! Very annoying. But then I did remember, after all. I’ll show you, shall I?”

First, inexplicably, he picked up the bow for the karrana. Then he reached down under the table straightened up with an object in his other hand which he placed on the floor where everyone could see it.

“What’s that?” Lezerau asked, mystified.

“Oh, just a simple apparatus I put together from some odds and ends in your supply tent,” said the Doctor, with an airy wave of the bow. The thing consisted of a small square metal plate, sitting flat and attached by a bolt to the top of a slim metal pole rising vertically some two to three feet from a larger metal plate that acted as a base. Irinna looked at it scornfully, tempted to give voice to her opinion that it looked like a stand for a cheap ornament, but she suppressed the urge.

“Now then,” said the Doctor, picking up the photograph of the right hand tablet that he had been perusing so intently the night before, and displaying it for everyone’s inspection, “what exactly do you see there?”

“Just a lot of squares, with patterns and shapes inside them,” said Steffon. “What about them?”

“The interesting thing about those patterns is how they’re made,” said the Doctor, with the smugness of someone who knows something no-one else does, but is about to reveal it. “Take some of that sand you collected and sprinkle it in a thin layer on the metal square, will you, Jamie?”

As puzzled as everyone else, Jamie obeyed.

“Now, watch – and listen! – to this,” the Doctor said, and setting the bowstring against the edge of the metal plate, he dragged the bow downward with a steady, unhurried movement.

There was a collective gasp of surprise as two things happened simultaneously: a high-pitched musical note sounded in response to the movement of the bow, and the sand Jamie had scattered on the metal plate rearranged itself into a geometric pattern of lines, symmetrical about two axes, just like the ones on the tablet.

“And again,” said the Doctor, this time drawing the bow at a different angle. A note of a different pitch resulted this time, and the wavy lines of sand redistributed themselves into an eight-pointed star.

“How are you doing that?” Jamie demanded, almost indignantly. “Is it magic?”

“It does look rather like it, doesn’t it?” the Doctor agreed, his eyes twinkling gleefully. “But actually it’s a branch of science called cymatics. You put an excitatory medium – such as sand – onto a flat surface – such as a metal plate – and then vibrate the surface – for example, with a violin bow

or something very similar, such as a karrana bow, in this instance – and different patterns will form depending on the driving frequency. Changing the frequency changes the sound – the musical note, if you will – and that changes the pattern.”

Lezerau stared at the metal plate, then picked up the photograph of the right-hand tablet and compared the two. There! There on the photograph, one of the patterns on the tablet was the same as the one on the metal plate. The light began to dawn, and he looked at the Doctor, who was waiting with evident enjoyment for him to arrive at the obvious conclusion.

“Then... those patterns – they’re music? That’s a tune of some sort?” he ventured incredulously. Steffon snatched the photograph out of his father’s hand and shared it with Apharon and Irinna as they made the same correlation.

The Doctor smiled happily. “Indeed it is! That’s why the other tablet talks about singing the song of the Sentinels.”

“But what does it all mean?” Jamie was struggling to understand.

The Doctor picked up the paper bearing the translation. “*Take your stand before the Vault of Tesperon with knowledge and understanding and wisdom. Sing the song of the Sentinels, that all may be revealed to you,*” he repeated, as if the explanation should be obvious.

“What’s knowledge and understanding and wisdom got to do with it? Anyway, aren’t they all the same thing?” Jamie asked, confused.

“Oh, no, no, no, no, no!” the Doctor scolded. “Wisdom is *applied* knowledge, you know. Seeing an avalanche coming towards you, that’s knowledge. Realizing that if you stay where you are you’ll be buried, that’s understanding. Getting out of the way, that’s wisdom! And in this case, we now *know* the Vault is operated by the correct series of musical notes, we *understand* that that series of notes is shown on the right-hand tablet, and so we’ve become *wise* enough to be able to open the door.”

“Then we can get into the Vault!” Lezerau exclaimed jubilantly.

“But” – Steffon’s animation abated momentarily as he realized something – “none of us are musicians, and in any case we don’t know what notes these symbols stand for.”

“Oh, I’ve already worked that out,” said the Doctor cheerfully. He fished in his pocket and pulled out a couple of pieces of paper, which he waved about animatedly. “Here you are – one copy of the transcription for your records, and one for taking into the Vault with us. Irinna” – he singled her out with a curiously intent look – “perhaps you’d like to just file this copy safely away first, before we do that?”

Irinna reached out eagerly and almost snatched it out of his hand, then looked at Lezerau.

“Where shall I put it, Symon? In the Miscellany?”

“Yes,” Lezerau nodded. “Yes, that would probably be the safest place.”

As soon as Irinna had gone Jamie, his brow furrowed, turned to Steffon. “What’s the Miscellany?”

Steffon smiled at his confusion. “That was Pettron’s idea. It’s the tent where all our finds and records are stored, so it’s an obvious name for it, really.”

"It's no' obvious to me!" Jamie contradicted him, and looked at the Doctor. "What's a miscellany?"

"A miscellany is a collection of miscellanea," explained the Doctor obligingly.

"Not helpful, Doctor!" Jamie scowled. "What's miscellanea, when it's at home?"

"Miscellanea is an assortment of odds and ends." The Doctor beamed at him; Jamie sighed inwardly and decided not to press the matter further.

Irinna was some time in returning; it seemed to take her an inexplicably long time to complete such a simple task. At last, however, she rejoined them. The Doctor eyed her thoughtfully; her dark eyes were gleaming excitedly, and she seemed to be suppressing a high degree of emotion, which everyone else, caught up as they were in the anticipation of the next move, signally failed to notice.

"Oh, dear, oh, dear, oh, dear," he muttered to himself, and followed the others as Lezerau led them out of the tent and toward the tunnel.

"This is a great moment, Symon," he heard Apharon saying, as they approached the entrance to the Portal Chamber.

"The greatest moment of my life –" Lezerau was beginning, but then broke off short, abruptly halting in the mouth of the Chamber as if suddenly frozen into immobility. Everyone else did likewise, as they saw what he saw.

Standing in front of the dais, facing them, were three men. Two of them, younger men, wore dark grey robes and held themselves in the unmistakable stance of subordinates or acolytes; the third was a tall, spare, elderly man with the face of an ascetic, wearing a pale grey robe underneath a black chasuble.

"Research Leader Lezerau, I am Principal Academist Oram Varanuel," he said in a dry, level voice. "We have not met, but you may know me to be the serving Head of the Academy of Culture on Alleron."

Lezerau groped for words. "I'm honoured, Principal Academist... But – how do you come to be here? When did you arrive?"

The merest hint of a smile touched Varanuel's eyes. "My dear Lezerau, I simply had to come! The Vault of Tesperon? How could I not? Once I heard of your discovery, I immediately came as the representative of the Academy to confirm it. Forgive me for not making our arrival known – we've only just landed – but we were too impatient to see the Vault for ourselves."

"But – but – I don't understand," Lezerau stuttered. "How did you know? I haven't been in communication with anyone on Alleron yet. I was waiting until we'd completed recording our finds. *How* did you know?"

"Because, my dear Symon, I told him," said a new voice, casually. Everyone looked to the left, from where a figure previously hidden from their view now emerged to face them. A slim, elegant woman in her early fifties, wearing the same grey robe and black chasuble as Varanuel, her luxuriant black hair caught up atop her head and held in its complex styling by a network of ornate silver clips. Her glittering eyes were fastened on Lezerau's face, all too clearly enjoying his reaction.

There was a momentary silence before he spoke.

“Sulna Ourana,” he said slowly, his voice low and level. “Now, why am I not surprised to see you here?” The very constraint of his tone spoke volumes.

“Why’s *she* here?” Steffon’s first astonishment had also subsided, to be replaced by swiftly building anger, and he addressed his words to his father, not to Ourana. Lezerau didn’t reply. Probably he already had only too clear an idea why.

“When word of the discovery was brought to my attention, of course I had to notify Principal Academist Varanuel – immediately.” Ourana oozed sweet reasonableness. “The finding of the Vault of Tesperon had to be properly substantiated at an official level as soon as possible, didn’t it? It would have been a failure of duty on my part to conceal the fact once it became known to me.”

“But *how* did you know?” Steffon demanded furiously. “*How? Who* told you?”

“That is of no importance,” Ourana said decisively, with a dismissive gesture of one elegant, be-ringed hand. “What *is* important is that the Vault of Tesperon has been discovered! We are standing in the Portal Chamber itself!” Now both hands were employed, sweeping dramatically outwards to encompass the whole of the Chamber in one movement as she swivelled to face the dais. “Standing on the very brink of history!”

A slow, ironic clapping interrupted her. “A beautiful performance,” said Symon Lezerau dryly, lowering his hands. “Because a performance it is. For the benefit of Principal Academist Varanuel, of course. How very clever you are, Sulna.”

Her eyes flashed momentary fire before she remembered to paint a charming smile back onto her face. “I’m simply celebrating the moment, my dear Symon,” she returned sweetly. “The moment when the Vault of Tesperon is finally opened. All we need now is the key that will open the door of the Vault itself. And that” – her voice hardened slightly – “is easily supplied.”

“What do you mean?” Steffon snapped.

“Because I now have it,” said Ourana, flicking a disparaging glance in his direction before turning to Varanuel. “I’ve been studying the tablets since we entered the Chamber, Principal Academist, and I’ve translated them.”

“You can’t have done!” Steffon protested furiously. “It took us all night! You can’t have done it in just a few minutes!”

“You, young man, are not a Principal Researcher,” Ourana said witheringly. “I am. Which means I have knowledge and abilities beyond any that you, or any of your colleagues, might possess. Including your father!” she added with a snap. “And I will now prove it to you by telling you what the tablets say.” She swung abruptly back to face the statues of the zelaara, and invited Varanuel’s attention to the left-hand one with a brief gesture. “This one says: *Take your stand before the Vault of Tesperon with knowledge and understanding and wisdom. Sing the song of the Sentinels, that all may be revealed to you.*”

Varanuel was evidently suitably impressed, but looked round with urbane surprise when Apharon stepped forward, his fists clenched at his sides.

“Sir, I protest!” he said indignantly. “That’s the exact wording of the translation Symon and I achieved last night!”

Jamie had been fighting his rising indignation throughout all of this, and was about to step forward and add his voice to Apharon's, but suddenly felt the Doctor's hand on his arm. He looked round in surprise. Far from being angry, the Doctor looked both calm and unsurprised. He stared meaningfully into Jamie's eyes and raised a finger to his lips.

"But, Doctor, d'you not see what's going on?" Jamie hissed in protest.

"I know, I know, but let's wait a little longer, shall we?" the Doctor whispered back. Clearly he had some good reason for keeping quiet. Jamie seethed, but acquiesced, though somewhat rebelliously. He turned his attention back to Varanuel, who was replying to Apharon.

"...I will be happy to see such proof as you can supply me with," he was saying. "But it's not impossible for both you and Principal Researcher Ourana to have obtained the same result independently. After all, the written language of the Tesperona is familiar to many academics, is it not?"

"Those symbols on the other tablet aren't," growled Steffon.

Ourana emitted a brittle, tinkling laugh. "My dear boy, you underestimate me! I know exactly what those symbols are! They are the song of the Sentinels. Each symbol represents a musical note, and if you 'sing' that song, the door to the Vault will be opened."

Steffon stared at her, momentarily speechless with rage. "We only found that out about an hour ago!" he shouted. "And only because the Doctor helped us! I don't believe you can have decoded that tablet so quickly!" He rounded on his father, who had stood silent all this while, watching Ourana's face as she usurped his achievement and made it her own. "Tell him, Father!" He gesticulated in Varanuel's direction. "Tell him it was the Doctor who did it!"

Lezerau had the look of a beaten man. He couldn't meet his son's furious eyes; his shoulders sagged slightly. Steffon stared at him aghast, then whirled round to face Varanuel again.

"We've got proof!" he shouted. "Proof! There's a copy of the Doctor's translation in our camp! He put it down on paper and we archived it. Doctor, tell him!"

"Please calm down, young man, and control yourself," said the Principal Academist with frigid civility. "You do your father no credit with such displays of emotion. Now, who is this Doctor to whom you refer?"

"That would be me, Principal Academist," said the Doctor politely, stepping forward and bobbing his head in greeting. "And this is my friend, Jamie. How do you do?" He offered his hand; after a momentary hesitation Varanuel accepted it, and they shook.

"Very well," said Varanuel. "I would like to see the proof of which young Lezerau speaks. Perhaps you will be so kind as to provide it, Doctor?"

"Oh, I think a matter of such importance should have independent verification," said the Doctor. "I think Irinna should go – after all, she was the one who archived it – with one of your attendants as a witness. Don't you agree?"

"A sound suggestion," Varanuel approved. "Irinna...?" He raised his eyebrows enquiringly.

Irinna stepped forward, her face impassive. "Irinna Kerelon, Principal Academist," she said, meeting his eyes steadily.

“Thank you, Miss Kerelon.” Varanuel turned to one of his attendants. “Student Foranor, will you accompany Miss Kerelon to provide the independent witness the Doctor has so wisely advocated? Principal Researcher Ourana, I trust you have no objections?”

Sulna Ourana was studying the Doctor’s face with a puzzled expression, as if she couldn’t understand either his attitude or his suggestion. The Doctor looked back at her innocently.

“No... no, of course not,” she agreed, still staring at him.

“Very well, then,” said Varanuel. “Miss Kerelon, we will await your return.”

When Irinna and Foranor had left the Chamber, Steffon rounded on his father and the Doctor.

“What’s the matter with you?” he spat, trying hard to keep his voice low enough for Varanuel and Ourana not to hear, but barely able to contain himself. “Can’t you see what she’s doing? She’s going to take *your* triumph and turn it into *hers*! She’s got Varanuel eating out of her hand, and you aren’t doing anything to fight her!”

“How *can* I fight her?” Lezerau said quietly. “She’s the insider, I’m the outsider. She’ll have the media on her side, which means she’ll have the public on her side. They’ll believe her, not us. Because they’ll *want* to believe her. Oh, I’ll probably be on record as the one who found the Vault. I don’t think she could manipulate the record enough to change that. But she’ll be the one who opens it. And that’s what people will remember. She’s got the power to make sure of that.” He shook his head hopelessly. “It almost makes me glad that Myreena isn’t here to see this.”

“Mother would have fought this!” Steffon said accusingly.

“Yes, she would,” Lezerau admitted. “But without her, I’m not sure I have the strength.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t give up just yet, if I were you,” the Doctor advised, with a strange significance in his tone. “I think you’ll find that things aren’t going to work out quite as Principal Researcher Ourana expects.”

Everyone looked at him. They had all come to trust this strange little man, with his eccentric costume and his expressive features and perceptive blue eyes, but what did he mean?

“Doctor, what’s going on? What are you up to?” Jamie demanded.

“Me?” The Doctor raised his eyebrows. “Up to something? Whatever gave you that idea?”

“All the other times I’ve seen you up to something and wearing that same face!”

The Doctor was saved from the necessity of replying by the return of Irinna and Foranor. Everyone turned to watch her as she advanced toward Varanuel and Ourana.

“Well, Miss Kerelon?” Varanuel enquired. “Have you brought the paper in question?”

“I’m afraid not, Principal Academist,” said Irinna steadily. “It was not there.”

Varanuel frowned. “Student Foranor, do you corroborate this?”

“Yes, Principal Academist,” Foranor said respectfully. “I watched Miss Kerelon conduct a thorough search. She found no paper such as the one described.”

“But it must be!” Steffon protested. “The Doctor gave it to her only just before we came here! It can’t have vanished! Irinna? Irinna!” His tone changed from astonishment to accusation. “What did you do with it?”

“I took it to the Miscellany – the storage tent – as directed,” Irinna said, looking not at him but at Varanuel as she spoke. “When I returned, it was not there.”

Steffon, Lezerau and Apharon all looked at each other in consternation. Behind Varanuel, where he could not see her, Ourana allowed herself one brief, triumphant smile.

“Both Miss Kerelon and Student Foranor have attested to the fact that it is not where you told us it would be. So there is no actual proof of your claim, Steffon Lezerau,” she said, coming forward to stand alongside Varanuel. “Whereas I can prove *my* claim here and now!” She turned to the other Student, and held out her hand with a peremptory movement. “Student Omroza, the music board, please.”

Silently the young man proffered a hand-sized rectangular device with two rows of coloured circles running along its length.

“What’s that thing?” Jamie asked Apharon.

“It’s a music board,” Apharon said heavily. “You play it by touching the circles to sound the notes.”

Ourana approached the dais with a stately tread, halting at its edge. “I will now do as the Sentinels instruct,” she said, once again in her ‘I am speaking to history’ voice. Everyone watched spellbound as, with deliberate movements, she played a sequence of notes on the music board.

Nothing happened.

Ourana frowned, half puzzled, half angry, well aware of the sense of anti-climax that had been generated. “Perhaps I misplayed a note,” she said, with more haste than was quite concomitant with dignity. “Omroza, where’s that notation?”

Swiftly the young man went to her. Because their backs were turned it wasn’t possible to see what they were doing, but it looked to Jamie as if they were consulting over a piece of paper. She seemed to be asking him to double-check her, and he was nodding in a confirmatory fashion. She frowned, then waved him back.

“I will make a second attempt,” she said, and did so, again without effect.

She cast an anxious glance at Varanuel. “I don’t understand,” she said, her anxiety unmistakable. “These are the right notes!”

Suddenly the Doctor intervened. “*Take your stand before the Sentinels of Tesperon,*” he quoted, raising his voice slightly. “I think you’ll find you have to be at the centre of the square for the procedure to work properly.”

“Doctor! What are you saying? Why are you helping her?” Steffon hissed incredulously, but the Doctor made a calming gesture with one hand.

“Don’t worry, Steffon. I know what I’m doing,” he returned in a low voice, then returned his gaze to Ourana – a gaze that looked rather like a challenge, Jamie thought.

“If your translation is correct, Principal Researcher, the Doctor’s deduction would appear to be correct,” Varanuel said in a considered tone.

Ourana swallowed. “Yes, Principal Academist.” She turned toward Lezerau’s party and singled out the Doctor with her eyes; she was clearly both puzzled and uneasy. But she had created her own

constraints, and she couldn't back down now. Slowly, she stepped up onto the dais, hesitated, and then with desperate haste moved into the centre of the black square, where she raised the music board and once again played the sequence of notes she had played before.

A long pause. Silence.

Then the tablets of the Sentinels began to glow.

"NO-O-O...!" Ourana screamed, but it was too late. The pulsing, piercing flare of light enveloped her, shrank, and fled through the surface of the door to the Vault, just as it had before. Sulna Ourana, like Pettron Ganonalie and Mananda Mataralay before her, was gone.

There was complete silence; everyone was shocked into stillness by what had happened.

Everyone, that is, except the Doctor.

"Oh, dear, oh, dear. What a pity," he remarked with regret. Everyone looked at him blankly.

"What a *pity*...?" Varanuel's shock had metamorphosed into incredulous indignation by the time he had uttered the words. "A woman has just died, and all you can say is 'what a *pity*'?"

"Yes," said the Doctor, with a shrug. "It's always a pity when pride and ambition lead people to try to take shortcuts, isn't it? If Ourana hadn't tried to take a shortcut, she would have realized she wasn't playing the right tune, after all."

"Not the right tune?" Varanuel, like everyone else, was staring at him. "What do you mean? How can you possibly know that?"

"Because," said the Doctor casually, "I know what the right tune is."

Before anyone could stop him, he'd walked forward and stepped onto the dais.

"Doctor! Don't! It's no' safe!" Jamie exclaimed, starting after him.

"Don't worry, Jamie. I know what I'm doing," the Doctor said to him, just as he had to Steffon, and before Jamie could reach him he'd stepped onto the dais, pulling something out of his pocket as he did so.

"As I said, I can get a tune out of quite a lot of things, but this is my favourite," he said, waving his recorder in the air like a conductor with a baton. "Now, let's see..."

He settled his fingers on the holes of the recorder, put the mouthpiece between his lips, and stepped into the centre of the square. Jamie watched with his heart in his mouth, aware of the tension that quivered throughout the Portal Chamber, as the Doctor began to play.

And what was instantly obvious, even to Jamie's untrained ear, was that the Doctor was playing a slightly different tune to the one Ourana had played. Most of it was identical, but there was a difference of one repeated note. The difference between life and death...?

The Doctor lowered his recorder, and everyone stared wide-eyed at the tablets held by the Sentinels of Tesperon, set there by their long-vanished creators to guard the entrance to the Vault of Tesperon.

Nothing. The tablets did not glow.

Instead, the door slid smoothly sideways, revealing a small, dimly-lit chamber, and beyond it the entrance to a tunnel or corridor whose walls receded into darkness; clearly the primary contents of the Vault lay further inside, not yet visible to the onlookers.

“Doctor!” Jamie yelled triumphantly. “Doctor, you’ve done it!” He was the first to reach the Doctor and start thumping him in congratulation, but Steffon and Apharon weren’t far behind. Like a man in a dream, Lezerau came forward slowly to stand at the edge of the dais, staring in wonderment at the open door, before he turned to the Doctor and offered his hand. The Doctor took it in one of his – the other was still holding his recorder – and gripped tightly, shaking it enthusiastically.

“My sincere congratulations, Research Leader Lezerau!” he beamed, ignoring the continuing exuberance of the others.

“I shall never be able to thank you for this, Doctor,” said Lezerau, his throat tight. “My work, my life –and Myreena’s – have been vindicated. And it’s all down to you.”

“Oh, that’s not true at all!” the Doctor demurred. “It’s your leadership, your sticking to what you believed to be true, that’s been so inspiring. It’s *your* triumph really, you know.”

“The Doctor is right.” Varanuel joined the group by the dais; his presence caused Steffon and the others to fall back slightly, but their celebrations continued. Even the two Students were joining in the animated conversation. “You are to be congratulated, Research Leader. You’ve been completely vindicated. There are many,” he added, “who will, I think, owe you an apology. Though I agree that it would seem that the Doctor has been of invaluable assistance to you.”

“Assistance? He’s a *murderer*! That what *he* is!” The shrill accusation jarred the atmosphere and silenced everyone, who turned to look at the source. Irinna was staring at the Doctor with wide, burning eyes. “You *knew* Ourana didn’t have the right transcription! You *knew* what would happen if she stood in front of the Vault door! And yet *you* suggested she do it! And she died, just like the others! She died because of *you*!” Her outstretched forefinger pointed rigid condemnation at him.

There was a momentary hush, as the others realized there was some foundation to her charge. But when they looked at the Doctor, he seemed quite untroubled by the accusation.

“Ah, but did she?” he asked rhetorically, with a whimsical air. “Well, let’s just see, shall we?” He gestured to Lezerau to join him in front of the entrance to the Vault. “Come along, my dear fellow! I really do think it should be your privilege to be the first one to go in, you know!”

Elation fighting with confusion on his face, Lezerau walked forward like a man in a dream. He looked at the Doctor for a moment, who nodded encouragingly. Then he walked through the open door into the Chamber beyond. Only a pace or two in, he halted abruptly, staring at something on the right that was out of sight to the others. The Doctor followed him in and bobbed his head in a gesture that said ‘*I thought so!*’ almost as clearly as if he’d said the words aloud.

“Father?” Steffon enquired uncertainly. “What is it?”

“Come...” Lezerau’s voice was husky. “Come and see...”

They all crowded into the chamber, and a murmur of collective astonishment filled the air. Irinna, the last one in, gasped aloud, one hand flying up to cover her mouth, her eyes wide with shock.

On the right hand side of the chamber was a large cube of transparent material, with a small pillar of the same material alongside supporting a pad bearing a small number of controls. It was what was inside the cube that had everyone's attention – or, rather, who.

Behind the translucent surface were Pettron, Mananda and Sulna Ourana, each standing – or, in Mananda's case, lying – in exactly the pose in which they had been when the light had swallowed them, each of their faces bearing the same expression of fear that they had worn at the moment the unknown had overtaken them.

"Doctor! What's happened to them? What *is* that thing?" Jamie could hardly get his questions out fast enough.

"Oh, I think you might very well describe it as a holding cell," said the Doctor, coming forward to study the controls on the top of the pillar.

"A *holding* cell?" Lezerau queried, his forehead creased in bafflement.

"Oh, yes," the Doctor confirmed. "A stasis chamber, I'd say, from the look of it. I was expecting something of the sort. You see, when you described the Tesperona to me, you said they were wise and peaceful. *Not* the sort of people to summarily *execute* someone just for trying to access the legacy they'd created! That would be pointlessly savage, which the Tesperona clearly were not. *And* it would defeat the whole object of the exercise, as well! What would be the point of creating an archive in the first place, if they didn't intend anyone to be able to make use of it? But they did try to make sure that only someone with a reasonable amount of intelligence would be able to do so. So they provided the necessary clues, while protecting the Vault against anyone trying to enter it without the right – well... qualifications, shall we say? If you stood in front of the Vault door without having being able to provide the correct shibboleths, all that would happen to you was you'd be transported into stasis until somebody else who *did* know, or else was clever enough to work it all out, came along to release you."

"Then – what happened to them – it's reversible?" Varanuel sounded almost dazed.

"Oh, yes, I think so," said the Doctor, still studying the controls. "Which means, of course, that we'll be able to find out exactly why Mananda was lying on the floor with a broken arm when it happened, won't we? And what he was doing in the Portal Chamber in the first place, of course. Won't we?" He turned, and his eyes swept round the faces surrounding him with suddenly uncomfortable intensity.

"Doctor, what is you know that you're not telling us?" Jamie said shrewdly.

Lezerau took up the theme. "Why *do* you think he was here, when I'd expressly forbidden it without my prior permission?"

The Doctor pursed his lips. "I think Mananda came into the Portal Chamber because he knew someone else had, and there was some kind of confrontation. And that someone knew what would happen if he set foot on the black square, so..." He made a most expressive pushing gesture, and shrugged regretfully.

Jamie's mouth dropped open. "But – who would've done a thing like that?"

“I’m afraid there was only one person who could have done it,” said the Doctor. “Because there was only one other person who wasn’t in the main tent at the time.”

Jamie thought back, frowning. “Irinna wasnae in the tent with the rest of us...” he said slowly. “But she’d gone to bed, hadn’t she?”

All eyes had turned to Irinna, who stood frozen in her own stasis – a stasis of guilt, of shame, of the realization of her inability to refute the facts that spoke so eloquently against her. Lezerau and the others were all staring at her with varying degrees of horror dawning on their faces.

“That’s where she was told to go,” agreed the Doctor, “but the evidence shows otherwise, I’m afraid. I think she was outside the tent, eavesdropping, when you thought you saw something moving – remember?”

Jamie looked flabbergasted. “Is this that ‘unpleasant possibility’ you were telling me about?”

The Doctor sighed. “Up to a point, yes, I’m afraid it is. But I’m afraid there’s a bit more to it than that. You see, we have to ask ourselves, what was she doing in the Chamber in the first place, for Mananda to discover her there?”

“Doctor, what are you saying?” Lezerau’s voice was that of a man in pain; he could already see where the Doctor was taking them.

“I’m rather afraid the answer is closely connected to your own question earlier. How did Ourana know to come to Tesperon, when you hadn’t contacted anyone on Alleron? Apharon tells me it takes just under four days to get from Alleron to Tesperon. You discovered the Portal Chamber four days ago. Four days later, here’s Ourana, bringing Principal Academist Varanuel with her. For official verification, if the report she’d received was true, and to be a witness against you if it wasn’t. But how could she have known to come here unless somebody was reporting back to her? Somebody who was part of your team?”

Steffon was on the same track, now. “And who was the last person to join the team? Who tried to join Ourana’s staff not long ago, and was turned down? Or” – a new idea occurred to him, and he gave Irinna a hard stare – “were you? Or was that just for a cover story, when in fact you’d agreed to monitor what we were doing, and let her know if we discovered anything?” He scowled, as if the vindication of his own scepticism about her was a source of pain. “You didn’t know my mother at all, did you? You just made that up to exploit my father’s grief for your own ends! *Didn’t you?*”

Irinna visibly winced, and made a defensive gesture with both hands as if warding off the reality of her own duplicity.

Varanuel’s eyes were equally hard as he gauged Irinna’s reaction. “Is this true, Miss Kerelon? Were you really working for Principal Researcher Ourana all along?”

“She promised me if I did what she told me, she’d accept me onto her staff!” Irinna cried out, desperate to justify herself. “So when we found the Portal Chamber, I told her. When Pettron vanished, that’s what I was telling her when Mananda overheard me. He was going to tell Symon, so I *had* to stop him!”

“So you killed him – as you thought, that is,” said Lezerau slowly. “And the translation of the tablets... You passed that on to her, too. That’s how she knew the key to the door was a musical

one. I suppose you contacted her when you were supposed to be putting the written record into the Miscellany. That's why you were so long coming back. And then you pretended for the benefit of the Principal Academist that it wasn't there, after all. Ourana would have taken all the credit that belonged to this team – to me, and my colleagues, and my son, and *my wife* – Irinna flinched at his tone – “and the only thing that prevented her was that the Doctor had worked out what was happening and laid a trap by giving you an incorrect version of the transcription to pass on to her.” He turned to the Doctor. “Doctor, thank you. Thank you. I'm forever indebted to you.”

“Oh, yes, well... I'll, er...” – the Doctor flapped his hands agitatedly, a little flustered by the intensity of Lezerau's emotion – “I'll get on with releasing Mananda and the others from their stasis, shall I? I think I've worked out the right sequence of buttons to press...”

“Do, please, Doctor,” Varanuel requested. “I shall send for a medical team to attend to Mr Mataralay's broken arm, and my security officer to escort Principal Researcher Ourana back to my ship. She will have to answer to the Academy for her actions. As will Miss Kerelon. I think it quite likely the Academy will be making charges of the most serious misconduct.” His tone did not bode well for either of them. But then it changed, as he looked at Lezerau. “Then, when all such secondary matters have been dealt with, Research Leader Lezerau, I think you should take your rightful place in Alleron's history by being the first man to enter the Vault of Tesperon.”

Much activity ensued once the Doctor had released the stasis. Mananda and Pettron had been taken in hand by the medics, and along with Irinna, a shamefaced, cringing Sulna Ourana had been escorted back to the ship in the knowledge that her professional reputation had been tarnished forever.

Steffon, standing with his father at the entrance to the tunnel, watched her exit in disgrace with a complex combination of triumph and wretchedness. Then, with a sigh that released all his long-held frustrations, he straightened his shoulders.

“Time to take a proper look, Father?” he suggested.

Lezerau smiled. “More than time, Steffon. But I think, in the circumstances, we should wait for the Principal Academist and Apharon, don't you? And certainly for the Doctor and Jamie. So much of this was the Doctor's doing. Where is he, by the way?”

Steffon frowned. “I don't know. He's not in the Chamber.”

“Then where can he have gone?” Lezerau asked, bemused. “He can't have just vanished!”

Steffon, remembering, abruptly fixed his gaze on the hill on the opposite side of the valley. “I think I know somewhere he might have gone,” he said. “Wait till I get back!”

He ran as quickly as he could, halting when he reached his mother's grave. No-one was in sight, but he could just about hear voices if he held his breath so as to stifle his heavy panting.

“...but it would have been *fascinating*,” he heard the Doctor protesting. “The legacy of an entire civilization...!”

“Aye, but I know you! If I let you go in there you'd no' be wanting to come out again anytime soon!” Jamie was being firm.

"Oh – oh, well – I suppose you're right... But –"

"No buts, Doctor! Come on – in you go!"

There was a sound like a door shutting, and the voices fell silent. Steffon began to run again, but came to an abrupt halt as a new sound met his ears. A strange wheezing, groaning noise, like a malfunctioning machine, that swelled in volume for a few moments and then faded away... And when he reached the clearing where it had been coming from, there was nothing to be seen. Only a lone zelaara, standing sentinel on a rock, preening its antennae.

"...And that's the story. That, all of it, is what really happened." Lezerau leaned back in his chair and studied his interviewer quizzically. "So now that you have it, what are you going to do with it?"

She smiled. "I told you earlier there are people who collect stories about the Doctor. Stories that haven't been told before. Stories that ought to be told. I'll make sure this gets to one of those people."

"But it's a story that's incomplete. Because there are still things I myself don't know. To this day I still don't know anything more about the Doctor than the bare facts of the events I've recounted to you. Who is the Doctor?"

The enigmatic blue eyes gleamed brightly. "The most wonderful discovery of them all, Mr Lezerau. The most wonderful discovery anyone, anywhere, ever makes."

She rose, and before he realized her intention, had headed for the door. The interview was over.

"Wait!" he protested. "Can't you tell me anything more than that?"

She paused in the doorway; her spectacular tumble of golden curls quivered as she shook her head.

"I'm afraid I don't do spoilers, Mr Lezerau," she said gently, with a tinge of mischief in her voice. "But thank you for your time. It's been a pleasure to meet you."

Symon Lezerau sighed, recognizing finality when he heard it, and inclined his head courteously. "The pleasure was all mine, Professor Song," he assured her, as he watched her go.



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