

# BRIEF ENCOUNTERS

The Secrets of Bone Island



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Edmund Leigh raised his wet and sand-caked head, opened his sore eyes and focused them with some difficulty. He beheld a decidedly over-bright but undeniably beautiful panorama of sun, sky, beach and restless, glittering sea, the crashing waves driven by a strong wind.

His body beset by aches and pains, he struggled manfully to his feet, but almost immediately a swirling gust caused him to lose his balance and he fell back into the foaming tide.

“Oh, God,” he croaked, for his mouth felt as dry as a sun-scorched bone.

He made another effort and achieved a kneeling position in the water. Hoping desperately that he wasn't going to be alone on the island, he stared out to sea and strained his eyes in a search for any signs of human life.

There were none, as he had more than half feared and expected.

Frantically, he twisted round and scanned the area to his left. He didn't see a single soul but briefly registered the presence of a tall blue box about halfway down the beach. Dismissing it as some object washed up by the sea, he switched his scrutiny to the scene on his right. Again he saw no-one.

There was a tight knot of fear in his stomach. Tears welled up in his eyes. He was twenty-six years old and his life as he had known it was over. He would spend the rest of his days in solitary despair, here on what was surely the supposedly infamous Bone Island.

He had never heard the name until the day before yesterday, when Captain Horace Corcoran, master of the topsail schooner *Miss Miles*, a Grenville Line ship, had shown him an old chart book with a worn leather cover. The volume had seemed to be old Corcoran's pride and joy, for he had opened it with obvious pleasure and turned the big, yellowed pages with considerable satisfaction.

“Ah, yes, this is the one,” he had announced, before placing a forefinger on the double-paged chart now before them. “We're about here at the moment, I should say, well on course for Bandiras. Will it take you long to transact your aunt's business?”

Edmund had shrugged. “It will depend on how amenable El Markez proves to be.” He had studied the chart with interest. “What's that lonely-looking little rock?” he had asked curiously, indicating a location many miles from any other land and a little way off their own projected route.

“It's a bit more than a rock. That's Bone Island, that is. You won't find a sailor who'll willingly venture anywhere near that place.”

Edmund had smiled. “I suppose there are tales about it?”

“Tales aplenty.”

“Ah, but is there any truth in them?”

“I won’t say there is and I won’t say there isn’t,” Corcoran had responded non-committally. “But I shan’t be paying a visit there.”

So saying, he had closed the chart book decisively.

Only hours later a very strong northerly gale had sprung up, accompanied by heavy rain. *Miss Miles* fought the storm for two days. Comparably sized ships had survived such weather, but the timbers of *Miss Miles* had needed recaulking and the ship began to leak. All hands had been applied to bailing, but water continued to rise in the hold. Part of the cargo of slates had been jettisoned to raise her buoyancy. The top-gallant masts had snapped and landed on the deck. Other rigging had followed. The water in the hold rose to ten feet and the crew, plus Edmund who had slaved alongside them, had been driven to the point of exhaustion. Mr Gunn, the Second Mate, had lit flares on Captain Corcoran’s orders to signal their desperate situation but the hope of another ship being present in those lonely waters had been virtually non-existent.

The wind had increased to hurricane strength. Old Corcoran, who had remained determinedly at the helm, stubbornly refused to order the cutting away of the broken masts, despite strong arguments from the surgeon, Dr Keldyce. The *Miss Miles*, helpless before the furious wind and tumultuous seas, had suddenly heeled over on her side. Edmund and most of the others had been thrown into the churning sea. The battered ship, full of water, sank rapidly into the dark and hungry depths.

All but he had drowned, then: Mrs Mulwaney, the only other passenger, a rich, childless, flint-faced widow who had been on her way to join relatives in Bandiras; Captain Corcoran; Dr Keldyce; Mr Gunn; Mr Trew, the self-important Chief Mate; Mr Eyeless, the odious Third Mate; Mr Tomhill, the cheerful boatswain; the sailmaker; the carpenter; and the other crew.

Part of a mast was floating a little way out to sea, he noticed. A couple of grey and white birds had settled on it. The timbers of the *Miss Miles* had, of course, been rotten and in an unseaworthy condition, thanks to that parsimonious pinchpenny, his Aunt Caroline, owner of the Grenville Line. She, of course, was quite safe and sound back in Liverpool, at her spacious residence on exclusive Greenheys Road, while he would be lucky to set eyes on the Mersey again.

The beach was strewn with shells, some of which distracted him a little from his predicament when they caught his attention, for they were of vivid colours that he had never come across before. That was quite extraordinary, surely?

After a few moments of contemplation he dismissed the shells and despondency enveloped him again. Moodily and without really thinking, he kicked away a tangle of seaweed cast up by the azure sea, then winced, for his shoes were gone and his feet had only the scant protection of his socks.

“Damn!” he exclaimed.

The wind picked up the word and swept it away to oblivion. His eyes fell on the tall box again and he trudged along the beach towards it. He pushed hard at the side that had a keyhole but the door was locked and didn’t budge. What was a ‘*Police Public Call Box*’ anyway? ‘*Officers and cars respond to urgent calls.*’ Not here in this godforsaken place, surely, and what were cars anyway? In any case, he had no access to the ‘*Police Telephone*’, whatever that might be and presumably to be found within.

He looked up the beach, towards a high sandbank. Was there any civilisation beyond it? He had no way of knowing. With a heartfelt sigh he began a weary walk

towards it.

The human skeleton was a nasty shock when he came across it at the foot of the sandbank. The skull seemed to be grinning hideously and some of the teeth were broken. On the end of a thin chain that must once have hung around the neck was a small silver coin. Edmund knelt down to examine it closely. It was a fourpenny piece, or groat, and bore the head of the queen's predecessor, King William IV. This unfortunate fellow had probably been an Englishman. Perhaps he, too, was from a wrecked ship. What had happened to him, though? Had his dead body simply been washed ashore? Did the tide advance this far? Or had he survived a wreck but only to perish later? The sandbank was high, of course. A fall from the top could easily have resulted in a broken neck. Ah, well, it mattered little now.

There was long, leathery grass and other growth all over the sandbank. The grass would be quite useful as a handhold, if he could summon the energy to make use of it. He began to scramble up the bank, drawing on strength he was barely aware he still possessed in order to haul himself on to the top. His shirt was sticky with sweat and he took it off. He lay on his back, inert, his eyes closed against the brassy glare of the sun. His intention was simply to rest for a few minutes and get his breath back, but he was utterly bone-weary and inevitably drifted off to sleep. He hadn't even glanced at the new landscape ahead.

When he awoke the sun was significantly lower in the sky. He hauled himself to his feet. His face felt sunburnt and his shoulders certainly were. Before him were sand dunes, which gave way to a large expanse of grass, dotted here and there with patches of long-stemmed wild flowers. The various colours included a yellow of sorts and a red, plus something approaching a purple, but the other shades were again completely unknown to him. The grassy plain eventually sloped steeply upwards, this higher ground preventing him from seeing anything more distant. He did, however, notice the remains of a small building on a ridge about halfway up the slope.

After removing his socks and pushing them into his pocket he traversed the sand dunes and began to cross the plain. The wind continued to buffet the headland. He was feeling a little chilly now, but found the sight of the swaying grass invigorating.

As he neared the higher ground he was able to see that the walls of the modest little ruin had patches of moss and lichen. He felt a quickening of interest and curiosity, despite his generally dire situation. His pace increased as he approached the incline.

When he reached the ruin he saw that it had been a dwelling of the simplest type. He had thought there might be a carving or an inscription. The building material resembled stone, but had an odd bluish tinge. He peered into the abandoned structure and found the interior to be partly choked with verdant growth.

With a sigh, and in the absence of any other options, he moved on. What lay beyond the rise? Probably more grass or sand, he thought dispiritedly.

This time, however, his eyes widened as his gaze fell upon the ruins of what must once surely have been a great city, situated less than half a mile away. Some way beyond it was a broken line of grey mountains, one of which dwarfed all the rest.

He headed for the ruins, a stark and apparently deserted monument to a bygone heyday. There could be something to engage his attention there, for he could see the remains of buildings many times larger than the more functional one he had just passed.

On reaching the city he wandered from one edifice to the other, carefully

studying the style of the crumbling blue-toned architecture. It definitely possessed strong elements of the Gothic, he decided. Some of the decorative sculptures and friezes did include classically beautiful images reminiscent of subtler styles, but most of them were dominated by carvings depicting grotesque animals and grinning gargoyles. Each further indication of the art of the sculptor that he assimilated seemed to be more striking than the last. The city must once have been truly breathtaking.

By the time he stood viewing the battered yet still grandiose exterior of what had to be a palace, he had still met not a living soul. Had whatever disaster that had occurred here caused the total extinction of all life then?

After he had passed through a broken archway into the palace, a series of carvings on a wall to the right attracted his attention. They seemed to tell a story. In the first picture a group of people dressed in robes quailed in terror before a malevolent-looking, cadaverous figure. Edmund's eyes flicked through the sculpted frames to the final one, in which a heroic, bearded figure in a cloak, depicted in profile, stood with one sandalled foot on the now fallen enemy.

Edmund looked away uneasily. Surely that had to be a symbolic interpretation of events, or possibly an illustrated myth? He did not care to believe that what looked like a living corpse had once existed on the island, terrorising its populace.

Glancing absently towards a sizeable pile of rubble in one corner, he was about to move on when he noticed something that glittered. A couple of minutes later he extracted a splendidly bejewelled, three-row necklace from the debris. Was it made of gold? He examined it closely and decided it wasn't, for there was a strangely translucent quality about the metal. Interesting. His eyes wandered over the heap of pulverised building material and spotted another object lying in a patch of fine dust. He picked up an extremely beautiful, many faceted red jewel, studded with smaller, dark green gems. He stood there admiring it for a few moments, then, still holding both the jewel and the necklace, he resumed his exploration.

He stopped again to stare into an enormous room with three reasonably intact walls but no roof. In the centre of the back wall was a carved canopy topped with a representation of an eagle-like bird. One wing was missing. There wasn't much left of the flooring and the leathery grass was now in the ascendant.

About to turn away, he suddenly froze. What was that? A note or two of music? In the middle of a deserted city? After a minute or two he heard further notes. It *was* music, incredibly, continuing this time, and rising in volume. As it developed into a beautifully played, hauntingly evocative piece, the scene before him seemed to shiver and was gradually replaced by a vision that was all the more startling for its sharpness and clarity.

In the vision the bird on the canopy was complete once more, glossy black, with some details picked out in gilding. Beneath the canopy stood a large, high-backed, intricately carved black chair. A complicated dance was being performed before the throne's occupant, perfectly in time with the music, the dancers collectively creating a spiral pattern. He could see no musicians. They would be in a part of the room beyond the edges of the vision. In a flash of inspiration the idea came to him that it was more a type of echo. An echo that was visible and might possibly repeat itself any number of times.

On the other hand, he could be losing his mind. The thought of an echo you

could see was hardly a rational one, after all. This vision had to be the product of a fevered brain. Yes, he was probably on the right track there. He had gone insane. The thought of spending the rest of his life on Bone Island had sent him over the edge of reason.

It was almost a relief to understand that.

Why didn't he feel mad, though? He felt quite normal, really, given the circumstances.

The sight before him reclaimed his attention. Each female courtier was clad in a yellow robe, gathered in above the waist by a tied belt of the same material, and wore over her hair a knotted arrangement of yellow net, the trailing ends of which hung on each side of, and sometimes over, her face, from the centre of which painted black lines radiated. The males were also dressed in robes, but theirs were of various colours. A number of courtiers stood watching those participating in the dance. Some of the watchers were drinking a purple liquid from small cut-glass dishes, the facets of which caught the light from the torches on the wall.

The dance terminated. A tall, white-haired, dignified elderly lady, dressed in purple and black, wearing a sparkling necklace and carrying a green and purple fan, rose from the throne, inclined her head fractionally towards the dancers in appreciation of their performance, smiled slightly, then began to make her way from the room via a pathway that opened up through the robed figures as she approached them. She faced her court again, who fell to their knees as one. Then she turned once more and swept away to her left, vanishing thus from his sight. He looked down at the necklace he held, which, he was positive, was the one she had been wearing. Had this singular-looking red jewel been hers too?

He switched his attention back to the echo, or whatever it was. The courtiers had risen following their ruler's departure and some now took up positions for dancing again as the music recommenced, while others refilled their dishes with the purple juice as they conversed with each other.

Abruptly, the music and the burble of conversation distorted wildly into a hideous, meaningless cacophony of sound that made him wince. The scene before him fractured, twisted, began to turn in on itself. Soon it was a maelstrom of swirling colours. He watched, entranced, unable now to look away. Some colours vanished, others were introduced and gradually a new scene started to form. He waited in a fever of impatience for its details to resolve.

When the new scenario became clear he saw the same room, though the black throne was now occupied by a figure he recognised at once, for he was an older version of the heroic-looking, bearded vanquisher of the robed cadaver shown on the wall plaque. He was looking rather less triumphant here, for his face was turned to one side, away from the figures standing before him, and everything about him suggested stubbornness mingled with guilt. Two of the robed males stood on either side of a woman, holding her by the arms, but very gently, as if extremely reluctant to do it. The woman was strikingly attired in black and a deep pink. She wore an elaborate head-dress. Her face was attractive but worn, with strong character.

He became aware that the woman was speaking in a firm, confident voice:

"Am I, Galaxia, your loving wife, to be banished because you fear I am more greatly loved than you? Is that how King Varan, he whom his people call the Great, the

Heroic, the Just, will treat his dutiful queen, who bore him the princesses who shall hereafter rule Aranthea together?" She turned her head towards two identical dark-haired girls, on whose shoulders another woman, standing behind them, had laid her hands as if to offer comfort on this distressing occasion. Edmund realised then that this event chronologically preceded the other one he had seen, for the woman with the children was a somewhat younger-looking version of the old lady who had been on the throne in the first echo.

King Varan was still quite unable to meet his wife's eyes. "I have no choice. Your...conspiracy against me has been uncovered. My decision cannot be..."

At this point the scene shimmered and vanished. Edmund sat down on what was left of a wall and laid the jewellery items beside him. It was obvious that the queen had been on the point of being exiled on a fabricated charge. King Varan, conquering hero or not, certainly had a dark side to his personality.

He sighed, suddenly feeling rather lonely again now that silence was restored. His stomach rumbled. Where was he to find something to eat?

Glancing up, he gave a start. A sharp-eyed old fellow stood watching him from a shadowy archway that faced the ruined throne room. He wore a white wing-collar, a black cravat, a patterned grey waistcoat, a black jacket edged with matching silk, narrow black-and-white check trousers and black boots below grey spats. A brass key hung around his neck from a piece of thin black tape. He held a silver-topped walking cane.

"Well, young man, I suppose you've seen those remarkable visions, h'mm?"

Edmund rose to his feet. "The echoes? Yes, I have."

"Echoes, eh? That's very perceptive of you, I must say." The old man paused. "I heard the unfortunate queen making her speech and returned to see who was listening to it on this occasion," he explained.

Edmund nodded in understanding. "So every time someone new passes by..."

"...the scenes are re-enacted. Quite."

"I'm Edmund Leigh." He offered a hand.

Dr. Who took it. "You may address me as 'Doctor'."

"Er – thank you."

"You shouldn't walk around in here barefoot. There are many sharp fragments."

"I lost my shoes in a shipwreck. Everyone else on the *Miss Miles* lost their lives."

The Doctor nodded sombrely, then wagged a finger. "Come with me."

Edmund put his shirt back on, retrieved the jewellery and followed Dr. Who through the shady archway into an area where a number of bushes had grown between remaining sections of wall and spread their green-leafed branches, visually softening the raw edges of the deteriorating masonry. Various items, most of them broken jugs and dishes, lay around amidst chunks of the blue stone. Dr. Who bent and picked up a dusty, lattice-work sandal. A short search and he held a pair, which were handed to his young acquaintance. Edmund donned them and flexed his feet experimentally. They fitted reasonably well.

"Good gracious!" exclaimed the Doctor. "We have company, my boy."

Edmund followed the ancient old man's gaze and his mouth fell open.

The pair of young females standing in front of a large clump of greenery, one of them taller than the other, both wore the yellow robes and headdresses he had seen in the first vision. These girls were, he felt sure, physically present. They were looking straight at him and the Doctor, very solemnly, which seemed fitting in this ruined place

that was haunted by the past.

Dr. Who offered them a friendly smile. “I am a visitor here. My ship is down on the beach.”

Edmund’s heart skipped a beat. The Doctor had a ship. But how could it be *on* the beach?

The taller child spoke in a high, clipped voice. “I am Patrexa, and this is Icanthe.” She waved a hand towards her darker-haired companion. “We are Arantheans - perhaps all that remains of them.”

Edmund stared, horrified. “Only two of you?”

Icanthe smiled at him bravely. “That may be so.”

“What happened to the rest of your people?” the Doctor enquired.

“Slaughtered pitilessly by the daughters of darkness,” Patrexa responded. “Once, life here on Aranthea was truly wonderful. Culture and learning were all the Arantheans lived for. For generations it was so. Then the crones of evil came and the work of innumerable years was reduced to dust and rubble in a day.”

“Dreadful, dreadful,” Dr. Who murmured sympathetically, reflecting simultaneously that these two children seemed wise and knowledgeable well beyond their years. “Who were these – er – crones you mentioned?” he enquired.

“Ruthless hags with fearsome powers,” replied Patrexa, bitterness very evident in her tone. “They virtually annihilated our people and left our fine city as you see it now. Perhaps, even as we speak, they are decimating another civilisation elsewhere.”

“But where did they come from?” queried Edmund.

Patrexa spread her hands and shook her head. “From near, or far. We know not.”

“There may yet be other survivors of your race,” the Doctor reminded her, trying to look on the bright side.

“It is possible,” she agreed. “Our island is large and we can always hope.”

He told the two young Arantheans about the visions he and Edmund had witnessed.

“In one of them there was a King Varan, whose queen was about to be banished, and in the other a different queen, old and white-haired...”

“Queen Nera,” Icanthe said quietly.

“She was sister to Varan the Great,” added Patrexa. “Once, when they were but children, Varan and Nera were hunted fugitives.”

“Why was that?” enquired the Doctor, his interest caught by this new strand of Aranthea’s history.

Patrexa did not answer immediately. She stared past him towards the shadowy archway, but he felt that she wasn’t really seeing it. Her eyes seemed to glaze over. When she spoke her voice sounded deeper and more expressive as she recited:

*“Aranthea lies ruined, though in a safe nook,  
The past survives, contained in a book.  
A treasured tome, but with leaves thin and worn,  
Adorned with faded pictures, now a sight so forlorn.  
Yet the power of words, untouched by decay,  
Resurrects bygone days in a miraculous way.  
In language so vivid, new life of a kind,*

*A gift to the dead in a tapestry of the mind.  
 What a cavalcade of heroes; such a battle being fought;  
 Wondrously restored by the power of thought.  
 Grass stained with blood, Aranthea lay,  
 Condemned to the curse of a tyrant's sway.  
 A malignant shadow, with a devil's hiss,  
 Was the cruel usurper, Hikatiss,  
 Whose flesh had gone, but still he lived on,  
 Black-garbed bones and evil one.  
 Hikatiss had consumed, to Aranthea's cost,  
 The isle's true king; for all time was he lost.  
 Issue of the vanquished still drew breath;  
 To them the cadaver promised death.  
 Varan and Nera, son and daughter,  
 Destiny's chosen, not meant for slaughter.  
 Flee did they through mountain range,  
 Succoured by a force whose ways are strange.  
 Much time did pass, much evil was done,  
 'Fore Varan fought the usurper and won;  
 A victory decreed long before the years of strife,  
 When Destiny wove the Diagram of Life."*

Dr. Who and Edmund watched as the strange, detached, poetic vein passed away from Patrexa and her eyes became focused again. The minds of both men dwelt on the fearful creature named Hikatiss, obviously the skeletal figure they had seen depicted on the carvings. The Doctor's thoughts then turned to the Aranthean history book that Patrexa had mentioned, which sounded fascinating. He certainly wouldn't mind having a look at that. It would place those echoes into context.

Edmund suddenly remembered Queen Nera's necklace. He moved a few paces forward and offered it to Patrexa, but to his surprise she made no move to take it.

"We have come across many other trinkets," she told him. "They are worthless now."

Icanthe did take it, and handled it, thought Edmund, with a certain reverence. He then held out the striking red jewel, studded with little green gems. The effect of this on Patrexa was startlingly different, for she accepted the jewel from him with surprising eagerness. Her eyes were wide and her features shone with obvious excitement.

"This day is a truly significant one in the annals of Aranthea," she declared, "for here, surely, is the lost talisman of Varan."

Unnoticed by Dr. Who, Edmund and Patrexa, Icanthe's face momentarily assumed an expression of the utmost horror. She wondered quickly whether she should speak out, or if it might be wiser to keep her own counsel and act alone, as another had before her.

The Doctor was the personification of curiosity. "Why is the jewel of such importance?"

Patrexa did not reply to him at once. She looked thoughtfully at Icanthe. "I wonder... this I never thought of before... could Seronique the prophetess, in her abode

under the great mountain, have survived the onslaughts of those invading hags? We must find out. If she lives, we can ask for guidance.” She turned to Edmund and the Doctor. “We shall waste no words in attempting even a brief explanation now, for Seronique will, if luck is with us, speak of the past far more knowledgably than us. If you accompany us, that is. Do you wish to do so?”

Dr. Who could not have foregone the opportunity if he had tried. He looked enquiringly at Edmund.

“Why not?” the young man replied. If the Doctor had a ship, he thought, it would be wise to remain at his side.

“Then let us prepare for a journey,” Patrexa urged. “Come.”

Icanthe did not move. “What need of such haste? The matter is one for more thought, I warrant.”

“Seronique is wise.”

“Or dead.”

“She may live, and her wisdom was boundless.”

“*Was* boundless, certainly, until her vanity and arrogance led her to preen herself once too often and she was sent a false prophecy as a punishment. She would now be an ancient harridan indeed, perhaps without a trace of her gifts left to her.”

“You forget that our choices are but few,” reproved Patrexa. “We must harness such resources as may remain to us.”

She turned away dismissively. Dr. Who looked thoughtfully at Icanthe for a moment. She had an expression of... was it desperation? ... on her features. Then she noticed him watching her and quickly produced a dissembling smile. “Patrexa is right,” she said simply, in an abrupt *volte face*, and the two Arantheans began to move away, now ostensibly in agreement, their yellow robes billowing as the wind swirled through the ruins. He followed them, harbouring his growing suspicion that Icanthe’s seeming capitulation with regard to Patrexa’s plan masked a determination to pursue some secret course of her own. Edmund, merely surprised by the unexpected resolution of the disagreement, brought up the rear.

The Doctor, as they made their way through the battered city, asked Patrexa about the extraordinary visions he and Edmund had seen. Were they indeed like echoes?

“They are largely repetitions of the past,” Patrexa confirmed, “but occasionally a different type of vision has manifested itself. Instead of a reiterated historical event there is an attempt at communication between past and present.”

Edmund, who was listening, stared, frankly amazed at the notion.

The four came to a large statue on a plinth. A majestic-looking, seated woman, dark-haired and robed in pink, her right hand on an elaborately decorated golden staff, stared impassively ahead. The sculpture was marked and also chipped, revealing blue stone in places. Small patches of moss clung to the very top of the figure.

“Queen Galaxia,” said Patrexa.

“Strange that Varan allowed it to remain after she was banished,” Icanthe commented.

“He may have been jealous of her popularity but that doesn’t necessarily mean that he no longer cared for her,” Edmund pointed out.

“Quite so, my boy,” agreed the Doctor.

When they arrived at the living quarters occupied by Patrexa and Icanthe, a very

basic little unit, the two Arantheans quickly pulled together a selection of blankets from one corner, some of them finely decorated, others plain and rough. They had obviously been garnered from very diverse dwellings. Icanthe picked up a chipped crystalline jug filled with what looked like the purple drink Dr. Who and Edmund had seen in one of the echoes and poured the liquid into a flask of plain pottery, which she then stoppered with a piece of wood carved to the necessary shape. She then consigned the flask to a small, coarsely-woven brown sack, together with a pile of dry-looking white wafers of irregular size. She caught Edmund's eye. "Juice from antlo berries and dried fish," she explained.

"I wouldn't mind a sip of the juice now," he admitted.

She smiled suddenly, retrieved the flask and handed it to him. He found the drink wonderfully refreshing and could have finished the lot, though he confined himself, with difficulty, to three swallows.

The four set off, moving further inland across the open grassland. They eventually ascended a steep hill dotted with bushes and plants, then came to the towering great mountain, the summit of which seemed to pierce the sky. At its foot was the roughly circular entrance to Seronique's cave, partly concealed by greenery and vines. The Doctor pulled the growth aside, touched the rock and studied it intently.

"Volcanic," he pronounced.

Edmund was interested. "So this 'great mountain' here could actually be..." He broke off and looked up, towards the top of it.

Dr. Who's eyes met his. "...a volcano. Yes," he confirmed, a trifle impatiently.

Inside, the cave was rendered most disquieting by grinning skulls placed in apertures here and there. Jewels glinted in some of the eye sockets and these substitute eyeballs seemed to follow them as they passed into the body of the cave.

A grubby woman with long hair, clad in a tattered, flame-coloured robe, rose slowly from a rudimentary chair that had been carved from a huge chunk of rock and was draped with filthy-looking animal skins. Large, mournful eyes took in the four visitors at a glance. As they watched, the all-seeing orbs glazed over as Seronique, in a harsh, cracked voice, broke into verse:

*"I, Seronique, once known as the wise,  
Had many a vision vouchsafed to my eyes.  
On Aranthea, this isle, with cautious tread,  
Many came to me, to be filled with dread.  
Their fates I foretold, my gift seemed sure,  
Destiny was, I knew, without cure.  
Some did doubt, as some did say,  
Comfort they found in talking that way.  
When their ends drew near, their lives wasted by time,  
They saw approaching the fates I foretold in their prime.  
Powers with which I was blessed, or cursed,  
Fame to me gave, as a seer I was first.  
Admiration turned to worship, thus a goddess I became,  
Never didst I think myself a victim of the game.  
The Arantheans, mine own people, their servitude I sought,*

*For power doth corrupt, and that I never fought.  
 Creeping retribution brought my punishment near,  
 At me the fates would laugh and jeer.  
 The future of Aranthea, of this was I asked,  
 The words I spake a prophetess unmasked.  
 Visions came to me, but conveyed no fears;  
 Our great city would endure for countless years.  
 Culture, learning, wisdom, calm,  
 These treasures of our race would never suffer harm.  
 A wondrous mystery conferred on me a gift,  
 Now drawn away, through my fingers did it sift.  
 Those visions proved false; in truth Aranthea was fated,  
 Evil ones swooped and malevolence was sated.  
 Pride truly rebuked, vanity's cost did I pay,  
 When the city was ruined in a single day.  
 Reproached by its remains, I hereby confess,  
 That in this cavern dwells a ruined prophetess."*

"We come to ask ..." Patrexa began.

The Sibyl held up a dirty hand for silence. "Speak not!" Her tone was belligerent. "Your presence here is no mystery to me!" She eyed them piercingly. "My gift returned some time ago... or was it only yesterday?" Unexpectedly the creature cackled with mirth. "I do believe my mind has become a little fogged upon the point. But I need not thee to apprise me why both old and young hath trod a path to this place, my dwelling, and, on the day Aranthea is scorched by the fires of nature, perhaps my tomb."

Patrexa and Icanthe, each standing with cupped hands held back to back in what seemed to be an attitude of their race, exchanged glances.

"Scorched?" queried Patrexa.

"Consumed, perhaps," Seronique responded sombrely.

"This island will exist no longer?"

"The future is hung with some veils impenetrable even by such as I."

"So apocalypse approaches," Patrexa cried despairingly.

"Doom!" said Icanthe, rather mockingly, thought Edmund.

"Choices must be made, meantime," Seronique told them. "Destiny is firm and fixed, but more than a single path wends towards it."

Dr. Who spoke up. "What can you tell us about these paths?"

"It can surely be naught to you, stranger."

"It is of interest, at the very least."

Seronique's eyes bored into his, then she relaxed. "You speak sincerely. Curiosity drives you, I perceive."

The Doctor smiled, but merely said: "About those paths?"

Seronique began to wander about the cave, stopping now and then to stroke the walls in a wondering way, as if they were about to yield up secrets, or to stare into the eye sockets of a skull as if meeting the gaze of an old friend.

"Galaxia," she began suddenly, in a faraway, casual, almost disinterested tone of

voice, “queen of Varan the Great, was banished to the ancient tower on the isle of Pandos, a tiny speck of rock in the immensity of the ocean. Also in the tower, in a casket of scarlet, lies the key to the final destiny of the Arantheans. But is it yet time to seek it? Is that a quest for now, or later?”

Dr. Who, Edmund, Patrexa and Icanthe stared at her, bemused. When the mischievous harridan spoke again, she failed to resolve the question left hanging in the air: “Great Varan had twin daughters, Valadria the Benevolent and Zoria the She-Wolf. Greatly he loved them both, and with his last breath declared that if ever one harmed the other, the aggressor would suffer a terrible punishment. Not long did the sister queens rule ere the wicked excesses of Zoria brought her to a prison cell, and soon a great multitude surrounded the palace, crying out for her execution. Only Queen Valadria, in law, might despatch her, but she heeded not the people, nor her advisers, nor Yenta the High Priest, for she was mindful of Varan’s dying words. At this her own throne became unsteady, so presently she grasped her father’s dagger and betook herself to Zoria. Much rejoicing there was at word of Zoria’s demise, but in its wake came woe as Valadria the Benevolent crystallised into rock. The statue that had once lived and breathed was carried, amidst manifold lamentations, to the Crystal Cavern, for Varan’s talisman, so it was avowed, should restore her one glorious day. Legend tells that the talisman was entrusted to a guardian, that a stricken daughter might yet live, but her deed against her sister had first to be considered justified by that guardian. Nera, sister to Varan, now queen of Aranthea, many thought to be the holder secretly appointed, but to this notion Nera gave the lie. Many believed her not, even after years, for by her concealment of the wondrous gem was she not, they said, assuredly queen, unrivalled by her stricken niece?”

Seronique’s grey-green eyes held an unfathomable wisdom in their bottomless depths as she regarded in turn each of the four who faced her. “A noble quest to restore a stricken queen whom all did love is but another track that twists and turns through trial and tribulation towards the light or darkness of impassive destiny. Choice lies with you and I will meddle not. The outcome is written even now and nought may negate it. Let it suffice now for me to warn that an ancient evil stirs. With one of you that stand before me is the knowledge that may evil vanquish. That is all, and depart now my presence without further words, for they would be as dust in the wind, since not one word further shall Seronique utter.”

When they stood again by the swaying growth outside the dank cave, Patrexa declared her purpose of setting off at once across the island to rescue Queen Valadria.

“The finding of the talisman was a sign that the time has come,” she said positively. “With Valadria restored to lead us again, we could trust her to decide on what we and any other surviving Arantheans should do next.”

“Your prophetic spoke of Queen Galaxia, a tower on another island, and a scarlet casket,” said Edmund, in a thoughtful voice.

“She also said that the time to seek our final destiny may not yet have come,” Patrexa reminded him.

“Her talk of Queen Valadria went on for longer and was a great deal more detailed,” the Doctor contributed. “Was that a hint concerning the path to be taken, h’mm?”

“Perhaps we give too much credence to the foolish ramblings of that witless bag

of bones,” Icanthe said sharply. “No doubt she laughs at us at this very moment in that filthy hole of hers. I say we should ignore the fanciful tale about that ridiculous bauble and occupy ourselves with practical matters, such as searching the island to find others of our kind.”

Again Dr. Who regarded her with interest. Just why was the child so set against Patrexa’s enthusiasm about the red talisman?

“If I must undertake this quest alone, then so be it,” stated Patrexa, though the expression in her eyes was a perplexed one. She, too, the Doctor realised, wondered greatly at Icanthe’s renewed opposition.

But now, as before, Icanthe immediately changed her attitude and spoke in favour of the plan, and ended by declaring that she could not possibly allow Patrexa to undertake such a mission alone.

Dr. Who decided to introduce a little test. “I will gladly accompany Patrexa, if she will allow me. I’m sure Mr Leigh will too.” He beamed at Icanthe. “We shall save you the trouble, my dear.”

Icanthe stared coldly at the two men. “You are most generous, *strangers*, but I shall go with her.”

The Doctor bridled at her tone, though he was mollified by the success of his ploy. He felt certain now that Icanthe had her own agenda.

Patrexa smiled ironically. “Now I am gratified by the amount of support I am offered. You shall all come with me, then. Four of us will be preferable, as we may encounter danger.”

“Danger from what?” queried the Doctor. “The ancient evil Seronique referred to?”

“Perhaps, but my thoughts were on the Rabidians,” Patrexa informed him. “They are grey-skinned, flesh-eating creatures.”

Icanthe tendered Dr. Who a smile etched in acid. “There is still time to draw back, if your heart shrinks at the thought of them,” she told him.

The Doctor inserted his thumbs beneath the lapels of his black frock coat and gave her a withering look. “I have encountered many forms of life during my travels. I doubt you will ever come face to face with a mere fraction of the number, child,” he riposted, patronisingly.

They commenced the journey, but conversation was strained, to say the least, and Edmund was soon concentrating on enjoying the scenery instead.

At one point they came to a large, though very plain, square block of what seemed to the Doctor to be black marble. It stood in the centre of a shadowy clearing. He looked enquiringly at Patrexa.

“The grave of Hikatiss,” she told him, sombrely.

Edmund was puzzled. “Why raise so large a monument to such a villain?”

“Why commemorate him at all, h’mm?” Dr. Who chimed in.

Patrexa smiled, though rather thinly, at their curiosity. “Hikatiss swore just before his despatch by Varan that no grave would ever confine him,” she informed them. “This great block over his cursed remains was an effort, though perhaps a simple-minded one, of our forebears to ensure that he remained in the ground. Come, let us press on. Even the air surrounding it is tainted with evil.”

With the light fading, Patrexa proposed food, drink and sleep as they came upon

an appropriate spot, partly protected from the wind by a semicircle of tall bushes.

“Well, we shall have a modicum of shelter here, I suppose,” the Doctor commented, reluctantly conveying half-hearted approval.

They ate a small quantity of the fish, which Edmund thought virtually tasteless, and took a sip or two of the antlo juice, which he found wonderfully refreshing.

Afterwards the two men wandered a little way beyond the swaying bushes and it was there, just as they were about to return to Patrexa and Icanthe, that another of the remarkable visions of the past shimmered into existence before their fascinated eyes. They beheld a tall, handsome, black-bearded young man, unmistakably the legendary Varan. He wore an impressive white plume on his copper-coloured helmet, a red cloak slung across his bare shoulder, held a spear, a sword and a red and black shield and on his bare feet were strikingly decorated sandals. Otherwise he was completely naked, displaying a smooth chest, his genitals below the patch of black hair, long well-shaped legs and chiselled ankles. Around him his soldiers, equipped with their own weapons and shields, emulated their leader by preparing themselves for imminent combat.

“This place must be the site of his confrontation with Hikatis,” said the Doctor, half to himself.

Edmund stared disbelievingly at Varan. “Why on earth did he go into battle in a state of undress?”

“H’mmm? Oh, I imagine it was meant to convey fearlessness and that he was confident of victory.”

Just before the vision disappeared, Edmund saw Varan glance fleetingly in the Doctor’s direction. Had he heard, and approved of, the old man’s words?

Back at the campsite the four wrapped themselves in the blankets and settled down to sleep as best they could.

Edmund dreamt of Hikatis. The black monument was pushed easily to one side and the ground disgorged its grisly occupant, who looked up at him and unaccountably had the face of his Aunt Caroline. He awoke with a start, his heart beating fast, then sat up and looked around him, only to see, to his further confusion, Patrexa and Icanthe struggling with each other a few yards away. They were both standing and facing away from him. Patrexa had her arms around Icanthe from behind.

The Doctor, returning from a walk, stopped dead in his tracks and stared at them in dismay, though not surprise. “What is this all about, pray?” he demanded to know.

“I awoke and caught her stealing the red talisman from my robes!” Patrexa gasped.

She eventually succeeded in wrenching the jewel from the other’s grasp. Edmund had a notion that Icanthe had suddenly allowed her to do it.

“Why?” Patrexa asked breathlessly. “Tell me why!”

Icanthe looked from Patrexa to Dr. Who to Edmund. A whole range of different emotions passed across her features. She seemed about to speak, but doubt obviously asserted itself and her expression became fixed and inscrutable. She picked up her blanket from the ground, turned abruptly and hurried away, eventually becoming lost to view.

Patrexa was stunned by what Icanthe had done and could barely take it in. She managed to collect herself after some long moments of silence.

“Come, we must continue the journey and fulfil our quest. Her action affects our

purpose not, for we have the jewel, plus our warm coverings and our provisions.”

When they reached the edge of a forest, Patrexa paused and faced Dr. Who and Edmund. “This is the Forest of Borram, an especial haunt of the Rabidian creatures I spoke of, for it has always afforded them much concealment, where they lurked in wait for unwary travellers. Since the decimation of our race, they have naturally become even more voracious for prey, for how many travel now?”

They plunged into the forest, for there was no way to avoid passing through it, since, as Patrexa explained, it stretched almost from one side of the island to the other. It was heavily atmospheric and very dim in there, for a multiplicity of branches interlaced high above them and their thick coatings of leaves blotted out most of the light. The formation of the greenish bark on the trees fascinated the Doctor.

At one point he and Edmund, both scanning the area before them, suddenly had a brief impression of a hooded old woman, who turned away quickly before they could fully assimilate her features and vanished into either the greenery or thin air. They asked Patrexa about her.

“That is Ganasta, Dame of the Trees,” Patrexa told them. “She is a manifestation of the forest’s spirit.”

There was, thought Dr. Who, seemingly no end to the wonders of this strange island. What would he see next?

The answer was not long in coming, though when it came he felt little inclination to view the new sight as a wonder. They had paused momentarily to allow Patrexa to consider the question of direction when the foliage parted in several places.

Patrexa paled. “Rabidians!”

They were covered with tough-looking grey scales. Their stubby fingers and toes had filthy, razor-sharp nails. Glowing, expressionless red eyes regarded the intruders unblinkingly. They had no nose or ears, the Doctor noted; perhaps the two strange circular organs, one on each side of a black-lipped slash of a mouth, each with a number of small holes in it, combined the functions of both. That mouth! Vivid purple gums had hideously discoloured, wickedly jagged teeth embedded in them, and there were rivulets of thick, frothy green saliva.

These monstrosities quickly hemmed them in on three sides, so they fled in the remaining direction. The Rabidians darted after them and found, as they had anticipated, the fugitives staring in dismay at a sheer rock face.

The hideous flesh-eaters closed in.

“There’s no escape,” said the Doctor. “I fear nothing can save us!”

Patrexa, despite her terror as the Rabidians approached, exclaimed: “The ground begins to tremble!”

Even as she spoke, the disturbance escalated rapidly, accompanied by a deep subterranean rumble. Dr. Who, Edmund, Patrexa and the scaly creatures facing them were thrown to the ground.

“The end is nigh,” Patrexa shouted above the noise. “It is written.”

The patch of ground beneath the Doctor and his friends suddenly disappeared and they fell headlong after the grass, soil and rocks that were sent cascading underground. They didn’t, fortunately, tumble as far as Edmund, for one, had feared they might, though they landed on a mound of the crumbled, fallen surface with a force that ejected the breath from their bodies.

The tremor was over, Dr. Who realised after a moment or two. He glanced up to see the Rabidians gathered around the new hole in the ground above, staring down at them. Then they began to descend, their enthusiasm unaffected and their appetites still unsatisfied.

“A rather drastic escape for us, but better than nothing,” he panted. “We’re not home and dry yet, though, as you can see. I suggest we gain a head start on the Rabidians. Come along.”

He led the way along the damp tunnel into which they had been precipitated. Edmund and Patrexa, after another quick glance at the relentless flesh-eaters, followed him with alacrity.

They hurried, often stumbling on the uneven ground. It wasn’t long before they perceived that the Rabidians were very close behind them, despite their own initial advantage and strenuous efforts.

There would soon be no gap at all.

“They’re far more agile than we are,” gasped Edmund, despairingly.

Then Patrexa saw the first slavering Rabidian. “They are almost upon us,” she said, her eyes wide with terror.

“Please let them kill us quickly!” Edmund prayed.

The words were barely out of his mouth when the second earth tremor came and brought down a large portion of the roof. The earsplitting noise from the crashing rock resounded along the tunnel.

Patrexa peered through the dust with streaming eyes. “The debris has completely divided us from the Rabidians,” she announced.

“A most fortuitous occurrence,” the Doctor managed to comment, before giving way to a fit of choking. When he had recovered he touched Patrexa on the shoulder. “This rubble may have saved us from those odious creatures, but it’s imperative now that we find another way out. Let us get clear of this wretched dust.”

Wearily, they traversed a further length of tunnel.

“At least air is coming in,” Patrexa said thankfully.

Dr. Who nodded. “We may find an exit, then. But first let us rest for a while.”

“Good idea,” Edmund put in. “I’m exhausted.”

“The Rabidians may know another route by which to reach us,” Patrexa fretted.

“Perhaps. Perhaps not,” the Doctor responded, “but we need to recover our strength in any case.”

So they wrapped themselves in the blankets and settled down in a rocky niche. They ate a wafer or two of the dried fish and drank a little of the antlo juice, the container having miraculously survived. Edmund and Patrexa listened anxiously for any indication of the Rabidians. The Doctor, more used to aggressive alien entities, was more philosophical and therefore more relaxed.

Edmund, his exertions on Aranthea having immediately followed his efforts to reach land after the shipwreck, and with only a few short hours of rest having come his way during that time, actually fell asleep quite quickly despite his worries.

Patrexa, though tired, found rest more elusive.

“We seem to have become hunted fugitives, don’t we?” said Dr. Who, giving Patrexa an encouraging smile. “Rather like Varan and Nera when they were children. Well, that ended well enough, did it not? Varan survived and became king.”

“That is true,” acknowledged Patrexa.

There had been a dark side to King Varan, the Doctor reminded himself. He saw again in his mind’s eye a shifty-looking Varan condemning his wife to perpetual banishment. Queen Galaxia, when he had seen her in that vision, had reminded him very much of an actress he had once seen playing Lady Capulet in *Romeo and Juliet*.

After some moments of silence Patrexa spoke again: “Why do you think Icanthe acted as she did?”

“It’s you who know her well, child, not I.”

“Know her well? She and I met only after the destruction of the city. There is much that we do not know about each other.”

Dr. Who looked thoughtful. “The reasons behind her actions might be good ones, you know.”

“Then why did she not share them?”

The Doctor shrugged. “There are those who prefer to keep their own counsel.”

Patrexa considered his words, then told him earnestly: “I would like to think the best of her, as I used to, but it is not easy now to relinquish all suspicion.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Icanthe was greatly dispirited by the confrontation between herself and Patrexa, and by her own subsequent flight. She climbed a massive tree and selected a small niche at the conjunction of several of its thick, gnarled branches. She wrapped herself in her blanket and tried to sleep, for she had remained awake for most of the night, trying, and then ultimately failing, to judge the best moment to take the red talisman from Patrexa.

But sleep refused to come. Resignedly she opened her eyes and at once perceived, amidst the leafy boughs above her, a rippling blur. An image appeared, depicting an elderly woman with snowy hair and dark eyes that were bottomless pools of wisdom and painful experience.

Queen Nera, her calm gaze resting on Icanthe, nodded several times before a gust of wind swirled through the greenery and seemingly dispersed her worn features.

Icanthe’s confidence and commitment were instantly reinforced. She relaxed now, cradled in the arms of the enormous and ancient tree, and thought of Patrexa and the two strangers, no doubt continuing their quest; of the infamous Zoria, devilish and black of soul; of Valadria, left with little choice but to execute her evil-hearted sister...

Determinedly, Icanthe cleared her mind and closed her eyes. She needed to rest, renew her strength and sharpen her wits, for a hazardous trek lay ahead. At the end of it she would experience victory or defeat.

She slept soundly this time.

\* \* \* \* \*

Patrexa lay on her blanket, as completely in the arms of Morpheus as Icanthe was in her tree. Dr. Who had slept a little but was now fully awake, pondering the situation. What was to be the outcome of this quest? If Queen Valadria was restored to the Aranthians, how many of them still existed for her to rule? Even if others had survived elsewhere on the island it would surely be long before their civilisation could begin to be re-

established, though everything had to start somewhere, of course. Then there was the matter of Seronique's prophecy. Her powers had been doubted at one time, it seemed, but if it was fulfilled how much, if any, of Aranthea would survive the threatened cataclysm? There were so many questions.

His mind considered another query: Did the red talisman really possess the restorative properties attributed to it? If so, how had Varan come to know of them? Or had he somehow imbued the jewel with those qualities himself?

The Doctor closed his eyes. He didn't sleep again, but allowed his thoughts to wander, not only far and wide, but also back into the past and forwards into the future, to draw upon all he could remember of things seen and learnt...

What had the talisman reminded him of, albeit more than a little dimly, from the first moment he had set eyes on it?

It was just as he was about to abandon the effort at recollection that he clutched at a stray wisp of memory and elicited from it the information he wanted.

*The Ruby of Amal.* A jewel surrounded by many unsolved mysteries, rather like old Amal himself. Why, for instance, had he chosen to hide himself away in that tumbledown house in London during the years before the Great Fire?

What a strange, enigmatic fellow he had been.

If the red talisman was indeed the Ruby of Amal, which he now thought very probable, how had it come to be here on Aranthea, or Bone Island as Edmund had once called it? Perhaps another shipwreck survivor, or a curious adventurer, having acquired it at some point, had ingratiatingly presented it to King Varan as a gift. Possibly Amal himself had brought it here much earlier, for his whereabouts after the Great Fire had never been established. Did his bones lie somewhere in this ruined kingdom?

It occurred to Dr. Who how highly likely it was that Amal, with the depth of knowledge he almost certainly possessed, had endowed the jewel with far greater power than the remedial capability. Patrexa, Icanthe and any other surviving Arantheans would, he felt sure, be far better off if they never suspected that. Power so very often corrupted those who wielded it.

What an unearthly place Aranthea was, with its echoing visions, dark legends and rival queens. It evoked his memories of reading, more than once, *She* and *Allan Quatermain*, in which Rider Haggard had informed the world of other hitherto unknown civilisations.

He pushed aside his blanket. It was time to awaken Edmund and Patrexa, and for them to press on.

\* \* \* \* \*

Edmund stopped walking abruptly. "What was that noise?"

They were in an exceptionally narrow passage now, their shadows distorted on the uneven wall in the light from two of the Doctor's everlasting matches, held by his companions.

"It sounded like a growl," replied Patrexa, her eyes wide with apprehension.

Edmund looked at Dr. Who. "It must be the Rabidians," he whispered.

The Doctor shook his head. "I think not, my boy."

"What makes you say that?"

"The Rabidians, when we encountered them, made no sound that resembled a growl."

Patrexa cast her mind back. "You are right," she confirmed.

"Of course I am, my child."

Modest too, thought Edmund, a little irritated because he hadn't thought it through properly himself.

They heard the noise again; grumbling, threatening.

"I can see something moving," Patrexa said shakily.

A menacing shape emerged from the darkness ahead. It was black, with four legs, curled horns, a pair of sharp fangs and eyes that glowed redly as it stared at them.

"Black Varkis!" declared Patrexa, in utter disbelief.

"You know of this creature?" asked Dr. Who.

"There are a few brief references to the beast in the old history book I referred to. It is said to have set upon many unfortunate victims. But how can it be here to threaten us now? No animal lives so long."

Black Varkis growled once more and began to move forward slowly. Patrexa backed away.

"I wonder..." mused the Doctor.

He suddenly moved towards the forbidding and hostile entity.

"Come back, Doctor," Edmund cried. "It's sure to attack you."

"Perhaps not," the old man said calmly.

"Look at it. There's no doubt at all."

"Edmund is right!" affirmed Patrexa. "Keep away from it, please."

But Dr. Who paid no heed and moments later he was standing very close indeed to Black Varkis. He took another two steps... and vanished.

Patrexa gaped incredulously. "Has the Doctor been... absorbed by the creature?"

Edmund's mouth had fallen open. He spread his hands in a helpless gesture. A savage onslaught on the Doctor he had braced himself for, but this was a total surprise. Even Black Varkis seemed nonplussed, but soon recovered and directed a basilisk-like glare at the prey who remained available.

"Get away if you can," Edmund told Patrexa.

"I cannot desert you to save myself," she said firmly, though she was trembling.

He gave her a determined look. "There's no need for both of us to be victims. Go now."

Something caught her eye then. "There is no need for either of us to be," she told him slowly. "Look again at Black Varkis."

Edmund was only just in time to do so, for the beast had already more than half faded away.

"It was another of those visions," he said, relief coursing through his body.

"As I suspected," announced Dr. Who, becoming fully visible again as the last signs of it disappeared.

"So you passed through the image and became concealed by it," Patrexa contributed.

"Quite so, my dear."

He beamed at the pair of them.

"Shall we proceed?"

\* \* \* \* \*

At the end of a curved, upward-sloping passage they came upon a roughly-hewn entrance, passed through it and unexpectedly found themselves standing in an atmospheric amalgamation of sparkling crystal, multiple shades of green and trailing white cobwebs.

Patrexa's eyes shone as she looked at Dr. Who. "The Crystal Cavern!"

She gazed in wonder at the glittering walls and roof of the chamber.

"I never once thought that the tunnels might be linked with it," she added.

Dr. Who gestured across the cavern towards another opening in the wall. "That might be where we would have entered had we not been sidetracked by the Rabidians and the earth tremor."

"Yes." Patrexa moved forward a few paces, then stopped abruptly. The Doctor and Edmund caught up, followed her awestruck stare and took in the still figure that stood some yards to their right, where the cave broadened out.

After several moments of silence Patrexa smiled.

"Queen Valadria!" she almost whispered.

They crossed the cavern to stand before the statue that had once been a living person. It was more than a little unnerving, for the features had been frozen in an expression of wide-eyed horror. The slender arms and well-shaped hands were held out pleadingly.

Edmund swallowed uneasily. "She realised, then, what was happening to her."

Patrexa was drawing forth the talisman from the voluminous folds of her yellow robe.

Dr. Who stood motionless and silent. This moment did not belong to Edmund or himself.

Unhesitatingly, Patrexa placed the jewel in the palm of one outstretched hand, then stepped back to wait breathlessly for Valadria's return to life.

It seemed for a time that nothing was going to happen. Then, gradually, the transformation that had taken place years before was reversed and the imprisoned ruler of Aranthea once more became flesh and blood.

Her lips curved into a smile.

Patrexa, overjoyed, smiled back.

The smile developed into a laugh.

Edmund experienced an urge to laugh with her, to share in her obvious exhilaration.

The laugh, rising in volume and assuming an increasingly strident, harsh quality, echoed and re-echoed around the Crystal Cavern.

Edmund and Patrexa looked at each other, suddenly doubtful and confused.

The Doctor's face was a mask of wariness, for the sound, which was almost enough to freeze the blood, conveyed not only malicious triumph but sheer, undiluted evil, and had left him with no illusions as to the situation, unpalatable though it undoubtedly was.

The laugh ceased abruptly, then the first words from the resurrected monarch sliced through the sudden silence: "Zoria thanks you for her liberation."

Patrexa gaped at her. "Zoria?"

Hard-looking eyes blazed exultantly. "Yes!"

"But how can you be Zoria? She was sentenced to death and executed."

"Sentenced, yes. Executed, no."

Dr. Who nodded slowly. "You murdered Valadria," he stated.

"Yes, when she came to my cell that day. Then I took her place." Zoria laughed again. "How could anyone have believed that a fool like her could have got the better of *me*?"

The Doctor gave her a severe stare. "So, madam, what do you intend to do now, may I ask?"

Zoria's eyes narrowed. "I shall rule Aranthea, naturally. Alone this time, with total power. It is my right, as the only surviving daughter of Varan. Again my presence shall be felt – only more so. Those who urged my condemnation will quake with fear – for the short time I shall allow them to live. That old witch Nera, who withheld the talisman, shall be the first to experience my wrath!"

"Nera rests in her grave, and is beyond your reach," Patrexa told her, defiantly.

"Then I curse the place where she lies," spat Zoria, venomously.

Dr. Who looked at her almost pityingly. "Time has passed. Most of your people are gone as well. Slaughtered by invaders. The city is in ruins."

She glared at him. "You lie, old man, and you shall be punished for your temerity in attempting to deceive me."

"He's telling the truth," Edmund insisted.

"Silence!" ordered Zoria. She glowered malevolently at the trio. "You will regret your insolence, I promise... promise... promise..."

"What's the matter with her?" Edmund asked the Doctor, in an undertone.

"I've no idea, my boy."

Patrexa looked equally bemused.

Zoria let out a piercing shriek. Her face contorted and her eyes dilated in a panic-stricken gape as she shouted: "Leave me... leave me, you devil, and begone!" She screamed in terror and even looked pleadingly towards the Doctor, Edmund and Patrexa. "Help me... you shall have anything you desire if you help me..."

"What is happening?" the Doctor demanded to know.

"The fiend consumes me..."

Zoria's voice was cut off when her body seemed to be pulled in on itself, as if it was being dragged through an opening that was too small for it.

She was gone.

Dr. Who's expression was grim. "An evil woman, but no match for the fiend she referred to."

Edmund thought for a moment. Then, "You don't mean..."

"Almost certainly."

"Something else is occurring," Patrexa interposed.

A figure began to appear on the spot where Zoria had stood.

"No!" exclaimed Patrexa, looking even more rigid with horror now than when Zoria had returned.

The humanoid form, bent and twisted, was robed and cowed in layers of threadbare, decaying garb and its skull was barely covered with thin, wizened flesh. Ancient, hideously dilated eyes that were windows into nightmarish scenarios of cruelty and terror stared dementedly at the Doctor and his two friends.

"Hikatiss!" Patrexa confirmed, her face white with fear. She began to shake, and Dr. Who drew her close to him.

"But what in the name of sanity...?" Edmund began.

"The evil in Zoria made it easy for Hikatiss to absorb the substance of her body," Patrexa managed to say.

"Ah," said the Doctor, who understood fully now. He looked at Edmund and explained: "His original body is trapped in the grave we saw, so he has constituted a replacement by reworking Zoria's."

Edmund shuddered; then his attention returned to Hikatisss and he gasped.

“I don’t think it’s over yet. Look!”

The desiccated horror facing them was itself beginning to give way to a transformation. Different features formed and clarified.

Patrexa was taken aback. “It isn’t Hikatisss any longer!”

“Oh, I think it is,” contradicted Dr. Who. “This is Hikatisss as he was before he became the monstrosity of your history book.”

The legendary tyrant of Aranthea, despite having been restored to his original humanoid appearance, still had a decidedly cadaverous look, for his long face was lean and the taut skin had a deathly pallor. His other features did nothing to offset the atmosphere of doom that hung about his saturnine presence: not the small, thin-lipped mouth, nor the aquiline nose, or the sharply defined, receding hair, thin and greying, and certainly not the deep-set eyes, dark as night beneath bushy black brows and still conveying, if more subtly, the demented animosity that had been so evident in the glaring orbs of the animated corpse he had been for so long.

He smiled. It was like a crack appearing in ice, thought the Doctor.

“At last!” exulted Hikatisss. “Often have I doubted, during the long years of my imprisonment, that this day would ever come. I know not how I have endured being confined in that echoing void between life and death. My only consolation has been the hatred that held at bay the curse of mortality and prevented my fall into the great abyss. It warmed me like a cloak as I languished in the chill of the all-enveloping dark. No-one feels or understands hatred as I do. I embraced it as a friend. I allowed it to seep into my bones and become part of my being. It surges through me and intensifies my strength. All shall grovel before me and acknowledge my power. Those who scorned me will pay. How they will pay! They will beg for the release of death, but long it shall be ere I grant it. You three who stand before me, why are you not on your knees, insignificant nonentities that you are? How dare you remain on your feet in the presence of Hikatisss - the King, the Emperor, the very *God* of Aranthea?”

As Dr. Who, Edmund and Patrexa hesitated, a firm, clear voice called out from behind them:

“A fine speech stirringly delivered, Hikatisss, though I fear it erred greatly on the side of pretension, for your grandiloquent dreams will come to nothing. Nothing at all.”

Icanthe emerged from the shadows. She had come into the Crystal Cavern by the other entrance and was now regarding Hikatisss, a worse foe than she had anticipated, with contempt. The Doctor wondered, fleetingly, how long she had been present.

Hikatisss scrutinised her and his cruel features registered incredulity. “Do not venture to threaten me, you puny scrap of a child. One touch from my hand can reduce you to dust.”

Icanthe smiled provokingly, then beckoned. “Come, then. Demonstrate the ability you boast of.”

Dr. Who moved quickly to join Icanthe. “My dear child, I admire your courage, but it is foolish to invite annihilation like this.”

“There is no cause for concern,” she replied, her voice lowered now, “for he remains as much a prisoner as Zoria would have been, had he not dispersed her.”

The Doctor noticed, however, that despite her confident statement there was still a measure of apprehension in her eyes.

Hikatisss attempted to move towards Icanthe, failed to do so, looked down and then gave vent to an earsplitting roar of boundless rage that reverberated around the cavern.

Edmund, who had been watching him, also realised what the problem was. No wonder Hikatisss was so incensed, he thought.

The Doctor had perceived the situation as well and was chuckling to himself.

Patrexa, who had been looking at Dr. Who and Icanthe until she heard the furious cry, looked mystified.

“Why is Hikatisss suddenly so furious?” she asked Edmund.

“Because,” he told her, “his feet are still solidified. Why didn’t we notice before?”

Patrexa, having confirmed his assertion with her own eyes, glanced perceptively at Icanthe and replied: “I think one of us did.”

Icanthe was also alone in having registered the ominous crack, a reaction to the cacophony from Hikatisss, that had zigzagged between pointed stalactites and across the crystalline roof. Her agile mind wasted no time in weaving it into a further plan that just might provide a finishing touch to the proceedings.

“The talisman restored the woman’s body!” shouted Hikatisss. His penetrating eyes were suddenly fixed upon Icanthe. “What have you done, you meddling little wretch?”

To his further fury, Icanthe pointedly turned to the Doctor as she answered: “I prised two of the small green gems from the red stone before I allowed Patrexa to take it back from me. The restorative power of the talisman was consequently rendered less effective.”

Dr. Who stared at her, then smiled before he looked at Hikatisss. “It seems your new body will be remaining where you stand.”

“You have had a very long wait, but in vain,” Icanthe added, taunting him. She stretched out a hand, then looked at the others and declaimed mockingly: “Behold the great Hikatisss, God of Aranthea!”

Another resounding cry of impotent anger came from Hikatisss. The snapping sounds from above as the crystalline roof responded to the noise were missed by no-one but him. If Icanthe continued with her provocation, the Doctor thought with concern, the whole cave would almost certainly... He looked at her with increased respect. What a clever, conniving, positively cunning little minx she was.

Fine, sparkling green powder began to fall.

The ominous splintering abruptly became extremely audible.

“Everyone to the exit, quickly,” Dr. Who urged his companions, realising that no more rantings from Hikatisss were required to achieve the desired effect.

The four of them fled.

Hikatisss gazed upwards, his black eyes wide. He seemed to be in a trance.

With a deafening crack, the multi-hued roof shattered and a multiplicity of razor-sharp crystal shards came cascading down amidst a thick cloud of the glittering powder, precipitating the complete disintegration of the Crystal Cavern...

As they stood once more in the fresh air, some distance from the cavern entrance but still able to see it, the Doctor, Edmund, Patrexa and Icanthe watched as a cataclysmic convulsion sent a cloud of white dust swirling across the rock-strewn hillside.

“I can taste it,” said Patrexa, after only a few brief moments.

She began to cough and splutter, as did the others.

When the dust began to clear, Edmund pointed towards the cave mouth. “The entrance is totally blocked now. The cavern is sealed forever, I should say.”

They all stared at it for a while, then, almost as one, began to rub their smarting eyes.

“Let us move further away,” Patrexa croaked, before giving way to another bout of coughing.

When they were clear of the dust, Dr. Who, curious as always, addressed Icanthe:

“How did you know that the power of the talisman would be affected if any of the small stones were missing? After all, the green gems seemed merely decorative.”

“Queen Nera told me,” Icanthe answered simply.

“Why you in particular, h’mm?”

She smiled. “I am her granddaughter.”

Patrexa, hearing this, could barely take it in. Never once had Icanthe even hinted at this relationship.

“It was on the same occasion,” Icanthe continued, “that my grandmother related the full story of Zoria’s supposed execution. She had followed Valadria to Zoria’s cell and seen Zoria assuming Valadria’s robes. That was why she denied having possession of the talisman afterwards.”

The Doctor nodded. He looked exhausted now. So did Edmund, who felt rather at a loss following the unexpected turn that events had taken.

Patrexa was the picture of despondency. Icanthe, who had never expected anything good to come of their quest, appeared less than philosophical.

For what future could there be for the Arantheans now?

\* \* \* \* \*

Having decided, as they rested, to retrace Icanthe’s route and hopefully avoid the ravenous Rabidians, they had left the rugged hillside some way behind them when they became aware of her presence.

Seronique looked quite as ancient as she had before, but the tattered clothing was no longer to be seen and it was an impressive figure in a padded headdress and a dark gown enlivened by purple who stood by a patch of greenery, regarding the four with an enigmatic expression on her wizened countenance.

“Your quest ended not as you did hope,” she pronounced, with a trace of malicious satisfaction. Her large eyes assumed the sombre air of a midwinter sea as her gaze turned inwards to focus upon her own disquieting thoughts. “Hope is a delicate, white-winged creature, eternally beautiful but tragically fragile; oftentimes blasted by the screaming and destructive winds of adversity or trodden underfoot by the stonehearted, she lieth afterwards in the aspect of death. Despair not as you gaze at those poor remains, for a spark of life doth ever surviveth in her.”

Icanthe rolled her eyes. “As ever, you speak in riddles, sly crone.”

Dr. Who felt rather inclined, after all their struggles, to agree with the child. “It is certainly true, Madam, that had you been somewhat more forthcoming at our last meeting about what it now appears you already knew, we would have been spared a great deal of trouble.”

“My calling is that of prophetess, old man, not loose-tongued gossipmonger,” snapped the mischievous old harridan. She darted a piercing look at Icanthe. “I have not been alone in my reticence, as you well know, impudent chit, so you might do well to curb that overused tongue of yours.”

“I crave your pardon, O wise Seronique,” Icanthe responded, in a manner that conveyed quite the opposite.

Patrexa interposed hastily: "I am sure the guidance you offered us was well considered and wisely given," she told the prophetess soothingly, "and I doubt not that your presence here now is for the purpose of dispensing a further measure of advice for our benefit."

Somewhat mollified, Seronique pointedly ignored Icanthe now and addressed Patrexa directly: "The final catastrophe approaches. You saw and heard the sign, I presume?"

Patrexa cast her mind back. Did she mean...?

"The earth tremor?" inserted the Doctor.

"Naturally."

Edmund's eyes met Dr. Who's. "Do you believe the volcano is actually going to erupt?"

The Doctor hesitated.

Seronique cackled. "So, white-maned stranger from amongst the very stars, you still doubt my words?"

He drew himself up. "Did I say so?"

"You wish to avoid committing yourself. Like me, you want to be proved right every time, do you not?"

Dr. Who's lips tightened indignantly.

"I like that. I admire a good dissembler," she confided. "Would that I had been evasive on a certain occasion."

Was the Doctor suppressing a smile now? Edmund wasn't sure.

"It would have proved less...damaging," the old man conceded.

Abruptly, Seronique became impatient. "Enough of this...repartee!" she snapped. "The sands of time are running out. You must be fleet of foot and take the alternative path I alluded to."

Dr. Who and his friends exchanged glances.

A moment later Icanthe noticed that Seronique had gone and pointed this out to the others.

"Why did she look so different?" Patrexa wondered.

"That was not Seronique herself, but a projection generated by her mind," Icanthe stated in her matter-of-fact way. "As vain as ever, she was unable to resist improving her appearance."

Edmund laughed.

\* \* \* \* \*

Having called at Patrexa and Icanthe's simple dwelling for all the remaining food and drink they had, they were approaching the beach when another, stronger earth tremor occurred and threw all four of them to the ground.

It looked increasingly likely, thought the Doctor, that Seronique might be proved right. If she was, molten lava would soon be engulfing everything in its path. Would the flow reach this grass-covered plain, which they had now almost crossed? How quickly would it be surging forward? How much of the island would it ultimately cover?

Increasingly alarmed by this stage, he urged Edmund, Patrexa and Icanthe to their feet and they all trudged on. When they reached the steep bank covered with the leathery long grass they scrambled down it both hastily and perilously.

The tide was out, Dr. Who was pleased to note. He glanced along the beach and saw *Tardis*. The blue police telephone box had sunk into the sand a few inches on one side, the result

of tidal movement since he had left the craft. He began to hurry towards his ship, then looked back and stopped. Edmund was just behind him, but Patrexa and Icanthe had not followed.

“Come,” he called to them. “We must get under way while there is still time.”

The pair did join him where he stood, but then Patrexa told him firmly: “We cannot come with you.”

“You will be very welcome aboard *Tardis*,” he assured them, gesturing towards it.

Edmund, gazing in disbelief and utter disappointment at the tall blue box he had seen the day before, broke in.

“*Tardis*?”

“My ship, young man, my ship.”

“That’s your ship?”

“It most certainly is, as you shall see.” The Doctor beckoned to him and the two Arantheans.

“We belong here,” Icanthe stated, resolutely. She offered him a little smile and added: “It is time for us to part now.”

“But you cannot remain here. The island may be totally destroyed!”

“The time of destruction is indeed very close, I fear,” Patrexa said calmly, “but you need not fear for us. A small sea craft, which we built and use for fishing, lies ready. It is concealed in a small clump of bushes at the foot of the sandbank, a short distance along the beach from here. Why do you not sail with us as well? Our craft is not large but would take the four of us.” She glanced at *Tardis*. “There would at least be more room than your strange box would provide, I think.”

He had to smile at that, but assured them that he could never abandon *Tardis*, his only home. If he left the machine where it was it might be buried in lava forever.

Patrexa smiled too, understandingly. “As you could not do that, we cannot forsake Aranthea, the homeland we love, whatever its fate. We shall follow now that other path, of which Seronique reminded us, and seek the island of Pandos, that we may learn the final destiny of the Arantheans.”

In truth, Dr. Who was torn. He would dearly have liked to accompany them on this new quest, but old habit was strong. His travels in *Tardis* were his life. The remaining path would be taken by Patrexa and Icanthe only, and perhaps that was as it should be.

\* \* \* \* \*

Edmund stood beside the Doctor and they both saw them off. Their wooden boat was roughly constructed but quite adequate. The yellow-garbed survivors of lost Aranthea wielded the sturdy branches they had selected for oars and the ‘sea craft’ grew smaller and smaller as it left the island behind.

“Well,” Dr. Who said rather sadly, “that’s that.”

“I hardly knew them, but I shall still miss them,” said Edmund.

The Doctor patted him on the shoulder.

The two men began the short walk back to *Tardis*.

They were nearly there when the volcano erupted in an explosion of violence that utterly dwarfed the tremors they had experienced. A cloud of sterile black ash was propelled high into the air and quickly obscured a good deal of the light.

“Quickly, my boy. Quickly,” exhorted Dr. Who, increasing his pace.

Edmund needed no telling.

Glowing lava rolled over the high bank with alarming suddenness and every blade of the long grass was obliterated. Even if the island itself survived there would be no greenery in this area for many years, thought the Doctor, as he reached his ship and hurriedly inserted his electronic key into the lock. He pushed open the door and ushered Edmund inside. After a swift look at the rapidly encroaching lava he entered *Tardis* himself.

Edmund was mesmerised by the room he was standing in, which was many times larger than the blue box. He felt as if he had strayed into a Jules Verne story. The six-sided control panel with the round column of glass in the centre fascinated him.

With the great doors safely closed Dr. Who looked around him with satisfaction. He had reduced the interior of *Tardis* to the control room only, and a smaller version of that, the walls lined with equipment previously located elsewhere. Over there was his laboratory workbench, with its test tubes and chemical jars, and in a corner was the food machine. Shelves held his microfilm files of past journeys. The door which had led to other rooms was gone. It was so much cosier now, with less traipsing about to do, which allowed him to reserve his energies for exploration.

“This is quite incredible,” Edmund commented, still studying his new surroundings in an awestruck manner.

The Doctor was pleased by the young man’s admiration of the marvellous craft.

“Let’s have a look at the scanner-screen,” he said briskly.

The screen showed, to Edmund’s horror, that the lava had reached *Tardis*. Nothing else was visible.

Dr. Who began to study it with interest, then glanced away and saw his companion’s expression.

“Don’t worry, my boy,” he said reassuringly. “My ship will not be affected.”

Edmund found that difficult to believe. “But we might be completely buried in it by now!”

“That’s true, but *Tardis* is indestructible.”

Edmund still looked worried.

The Doctor, realising that the young fellow wouldn’t rest until the situation was resolved, moved to the main control panel and ran his hands over the controls, initiating the familiar sequence that would effect their departure. It was, of course, about time to move on anyway.

Soon *Tardis* was traversing the nothingness of the inter-dimensional flux. He stifled a yawn. The events on Aranthea, coming straight after his somewhat exhausting adventure on the planet of the Ethereals, had sapped his energies a good deal. A rest was indicated. Young Edmund would benefit from one too.

Dr. Who sank into his tall-backed chair, which was well padded with worn but comfortable cushions.

“We are on our way now,” he told Edmund, who had seated himself on the Victorian *chaise longue*.

He paused.

“I should explain that the space and time locator mechanism does have one or two persistent faults...”

“Space and time?” interrupted Edmund.

“Yes indeed. *Tardis* journeys through both, you see.”

Edmund wondered if he could take in any more astounding revelations. How many had now been forced upon him over a mere two days?

“I have set the controls for Liverpool in the year 1865,” the Doctor resumed, “but I cannot promise that we shall arrive there.”

Edmund nodded slowly. It could be worse, he supposed.

“If we don’t, we can make another attempt,” Dr. Who added, remembering how often he had used those words, or others like them, in the past.

“Thank you for trying, Doctor... and for rescuing me from Bone Island.”

“Oh, that was nothing, my boy.”

It was pleasant to have some company in *Tardis* again, thought Dr. Who, for he sometimes experienced an acute sense of isolation during his lone voyages and would sadly recall the former travelling companions he would in all likelihood never see again: Ian and Barbara, and that argumentative young fellow Steven, and most of all his grandchildren. He invariably pulled himself together, of course. There was, after all, the hope of coming across congenial company at his next destination, or perhaps at the subsequent one, bearing in mind the countless beings that were scattered across infinity. His sojourn on Aranthea had again justified that conviction.

As *Tardis* sped on its way, he pondered once again upon that fascinating kingdom. There was so much more he wanted to know about it and now that would be denied him. He thought with especial regret of the Aranthean history book, which had probably been destroyed by the tide of molten rock.

Edmund was now stretched out on the *chaise longue* and had already drifted off to sleep. Dr. Who began to teeter on the brink of slumber himself. Just before he allowed himself to fall into that deep and welcoming pit, he hoped that Patrexa and Icanthe would find the answers they sought.

\* \* \* \* \*

The boat ground upon the shingly shore of Pandos. The island was little more than a large rock, dominated by the old, pitted tower of blue tantanite stone. It had a number of small windows. There was a door frame but the door itself was missing.

Patrexa and Icanthe entered the storm-battered edifice. The lower compartment had many patches of green mould and smelt strongly of seaweed and decay.

“This chamber must often be flooded,” Patrexa observed.

She was proved right when they found that the deteriorating steps to the upper rooms were covered in slippery weed to a point above the level of the stinking vestibule’s fungus-blotched ceiling.

As they ascended they passed a window crusted with guano, then another and another.

The door to the highest room was thick, sturdy and tightly closed. There was a simple metal handle, heavily tarnished, but no lock.

Their combined strength was needed to shift the door sufficiently for them to enter the chamber.

This room had a square, stained-glass window. The walls were covered in crimson cloth, now much faded. An ornately carved chair had two beautifully embroidered cushions on it and a thick, rust-coloured blanket edged with golden tassels,

neatly folded, hung over its high back. A large wooden desk was much embellished with engraved swirls and curlicues and on its surface, beside a collection of rolled-up parchments and a big, worn-looking book, was a casket, painted a vivid scarlet and ornamented with delicately-worked gold.

Patrexia studied the casket for some moments, then became distracted by the book, which she opened at random.

“Surely this is the history book that was said to be safely hidden somewhere in the city. When we heard the explosion I thought it lost to us forever.”

“When the city was invaded it was sent here,” said Icanthe.

Patrexia looked askance at her. “Something else you knew but saw fit to keep to yourself,” she commented, with unusual asperity.

They became aware of movement behind them and quickly turned as one.

A dignified figure had emerged from a shadowy corner. She wore an all-enveloping black robe. Its collar was pink and matched her close-fitting headdress.

“Queen Galaxia,” said Icanthe, in a whisper to Patrexia.

“But she ought to look far older than she does,” Patrexia whispered back.

Galaxia gave them a welcoming smile, which was reassuring. Then her face assumed the distant look that suffused the features of all Arantheans before they broke into verse. Her voice was sad and regretful as she recited:

*“Alone am I, and too aware,  
Of bleak isolation, in the very air.  
Birds, such precious friends to me,  
Soar above the waves of restless sea.  
By day, to ease my endless plight,  
Such comfort from their graceful flight,  
A sight to make my spirit lift,  
Such freedom seems a priceless gift,  
To me, here in this ancient tower,  
Confined, escape beyond my power.  
But when bright day doth later flee,  
Is consolation not to be?  
With the failing of the light,  
Will I be tortured by the night?  
Nay, for blessed dark doth tend  
To soothe my heart much like a friend.  
For me, night comforts more than day;  
Swathed in black, pain has less sway.  
My lonely fate, how circumvent,  
To leave eternal banishment?”*

Her face cleared. She regarded Patrexia and Icanthe enquiringly.

Patrexia took a step towards her. “We would know the final destiny of the Arantheans.”

There was a pause. Then, “I, Galaxia, one-time queen of Varan, have long been expecting both your arrival and your question. The Keeper of the Diagram of Life,

appointed by Destiny, entrusted me with the scarlet casket and decreed that, when you came, its secret should be revealed to you.”

She gestured towards the casket.

“There, contained until the glorious day doth dawn, is the future.”

Icanthe, having endured quite enough circumlocutory pontificating from that tiresome old harridan Seronique, curbed her impatience with an effort.

“What, then, does the casket hold?” she enquired.

“Nothing less than the minds of departed Arantheans, who will roam Aranthea once more.”

Patrexa stared at the casket.

“How so?”

“Their new existence will be elemental,” announced Galaxia, her voice conveying not a shred of doubt. “They will be as free as the wind and the sea, yet dwell on Aranthea forever.”





The topsail schooner *Miss Miesis* wrecked and Edmund Leigh, the only survivor, finds himself stranded on Bone Island, a place avoided by superstitious sailors.

Edmund Leigh encounters the Doctor and they accompany two of the Aranthean race, Icanthe and Patrexa, on a quest to rescue their lost queen, Valadria.

Unknown to them all, an ancient horror awaits them at the end of their expedition.

In the meantime, the prophetess Seronique warns of a forthcoming cataclysm that may destroy the island.

Can the four adventurers possibly survive?

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