



# In Her Absence

*In this Issue:*  
Part Four: Of Recovery  
and Reward

by  
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*Eyes I dare not meet in dreams  
In death's dream kingdom  
These do not appear:  
There, the eyes are  
Sunlight on a broken column  
There, is a tree swinging  
And voices are  
In the wind's singing  
More distant and more solemn  
Than a fading star.*

***The Hollow Men***  
*Thomas Stearns Eliot*

Time passed strangely in the twilight world Vastra found herself in. There were moments of light, hazy, as if something covered her eyes. She heard bits of voices, mostly unfamiliar, but occasionally a few words that she could make out as being Tsugu. Even more occasionally she thought she could hear the Doctor's voice, distant, as if she were hearing him through walls and many rooms away. She struggled most then, and then she'd hear his voice, closer, right next to her.

'Rest...you need your rest, Vastra. Just rest now.'

Usually it was enough to calm her.

She settled back onto her bed and slept.



'You'll have to burn the corpses.'

Tsugu and Prince Taisei looked at the Doctor in shock. It was Tsugu who dared speak first.

'Kyoujyu,' he began, slowly, as if speaking as a teacher would to a particularly recalcitrant student, 'you know our ways. That would only be granting them honor in death, when they intended to act without honor. You saw that they would have killed those children had your dragon...'

'Friend,' interrupted the Doctor, and even Taisei flinched at the cold edge the Doctor's voice had taken on. 'She's my friend, and her name is Vastra.'

Tsugu sighed. 'Vastra, then, as you would prefer it. Had she not risked her life, the children would be dead. Would you call their death honorable? Would you call the action of those...monsters, whatever they are...honorable?'

Tsugu looked at the Doctor with disgust.

'Sometimes I do not think I even know you.'

Taisei leaned closer. 'Explain to me, Kyoujyu, why you feel this is necessary.'

The Doctor sighed.

'If I even tried to explain to you my reasons for this, I doubt you'd understand.'

Taisei leaned back, tenting his fingers together. 'Tsugu may be an old man, but he advised my father well, and I often sat and listened to him as he offered counsel. He spoke very highly of you...said you had arrived out of nowhere in a strange blue shrine, and seemed the wisest man he had even known. 'He had the eyes of a boy, yet the wisdom of an old man,' Tsugu told me.'

He leaned forward again.

'So tell me why I should disregard tradition and counsel now. Show me your wisdom.'

The Doctor sighed.

'You saw what they looked like. You know that they were not from this planet... they weren't even from this solar system! They're alien, and they don't belong here! I'm



not saying that they deserve to be shown honor the way you've honored your father...just that even leaving their bodies here creates questions and paradoxes that your people don't need!

The Doctor looked around, searching for just one set of eyes that believed him.

'Think past yourself, just this once. Think about what may happen in three hundred or four hundred years, if someone were to find the remains of those Metatraxi. Or further on...imagine, six hundred or more years from now, someone finding that armor and those weapons and trying to figure out how it worked. You think your wars are terrible now? Imagine how much more so they would be with weapons and armor like that? Just think! Would there be honor in that?'

The Doctor's shoulders slumped in fatigue, his face openly displaying his frustration and pain.

'Right now my friend lays two rooms away. She risked her life for your people, not because she had to, but because she knew that it was the right thing to do. Because she didn't want to see your children hurt. Would you dishonor her actions by allowing something far worse to happen in the future...even if it does not affect you right here and right now?'

He finally slumped back in his seat, rested his head on his hands, and waited. He could hear the whispers, the recriminations, the arguments. He didn't hear the words, but he knew how hard it would be to break tradition for these people. And he would not blame them, would have to accept it, and would somehow have to find another way to remove all evidence of the Metatraxi presence here, long before they had any reason to find this planet of interest.

He thought, bitterly.

*If only Torchwood were here...Jack would Retcon all of them just as quick as you please, and I wouldn't have any of this mess to worry about.*

He shook his head sadly, his smile not one of happiness but of inevitability. Torchwood was gone. Jack was gone. He was, as seemed so often the case, alone, and would have to handle this on his own. His thoughts continued to wander.

*Once all this is done, what am I going to do with Vastra? I need to get her back to London, but there's no way she'll be able to go back into hibernation. And there's no way the people there will accept her. I'm just lucky we ended up here...at least there'd be some way to excuse how she looked. I suppose...*

'I said, are you still with us, Kyoujyu?'

The Doctor looked up and saw six sets of eyes staring at him quizzically.

'Hmm? Oh, yes. Sorry. I was just thinking for a bit.'

Taisei folded his hands in his lap. 'You know how strongly we hold our traditions, Kyoujyu.'

The Doctor nodded.

'We do this not out of stubbornness, but because our fathers, and our father's fathers, expect us to. They expect us to steward our land and our people for many years to come, and what is a group of people without tradition?'

Taisei did not give the Doctor a chance to respond.

'I will tell you what they are. They are a horde, much like the Mongols who threatened my father's rule all those years ago. I know you know this, because Tsugu tells me you were there when they arrived and demanded our fealty.'

'I know, Taisei, but this...'

Taisei held up one hand, and the Doctor quieted, more out of respect than any real urge to do so. He knew his position was weak and gentle nudging, rather than harsh words, would win this debate.

'However, there is merit in what you speak. I am reminded of a story my father told me in my youth, of a man who died suddenly, leaving his family without anything. The gods saw this and allowed him to be reborn in the form of a swan with golden feathers. He returned to his family and told them that they may pluck from him one feather to sell, so that they may support themselves, and that they may return to him from time to time to do so as their need demanded. The family grew greedy and plucked from him all his feathers. Do you know what happened when they grew back?'

The Doctor smiled.

'They were all plain feathers, weren't they?'

Taisei looked at the Doctor in amazement. 'You know the story?'

'Oh, I know at least two dozen different versions of the story. Nearly every world has its own version, its own...tradition,' the Doctor said, the smile almost reaching his eyes.

Taisei nodded. 'This is why I see some wisdom in what you say. The gods offered the family something to keep them all their days, and they squandered it for comfort in the present. I tell you that my job is to steward the land and its people, but that does not mean just now. It means, as you say, for my people in hundreds of years. I must think of them as well.'

Taisei looked to Tsugu, who nodded almost imperceptibly.

'It will be done under cover of night, and far from the city.'

The Doctor nodded. 'If those are the wishes of the Prince...King...and his court.'

'And what about the remains?'

The Doctor shrugged. 'Let the wind take them, or bury them as you wish.'

'The armor, then.'

'I'll see to that,' the Doctor said. 'I have a place I can keep it and make sure it doesn't fall into the wrong hands.'

Taisei rose.

'Then it is settled. I will summon a half dozen men, along with horses and carts for this nightfall. You will, I trust, accompany us?'

The Doctor looked in the direction of Vastra's room.

'What about...'

Tsugu finally smiled. 'Do not worry about her. I will sit with her. My bones could not take the ride, and I have seen too much these past days. I could use the rest. She will come to no harm.'

The Doctor nodded. 'Thank you, old friend.'

Tsugu laughed. 'No...thank you, for teaching an old man something.'

The Doctor smiled.

'Don't expect it to happen very often...not while you are here, and not while I am still your teacher.'

‘Of course not,’ the Doctor agreed, allowing himself a small, sly smile. ‘I wouldn’t even dream of it.’



‘Where...Doctor...I...’

Vastra winced and groaned as the pain hit. She slumped back against her pillows and tried to slow her breathing.

‘Welcome back, Vastra. You’ve been mostly asleep a while.’

Vastra looked at the Doctor through narrowed eyes, trying to bear the pain. ‘What happened? How long have I been here? The last thing I remember...’

‘Yes?’

Vastra struggled to think through the haze of pain. ‘This...thing...had my throat in its hand, crushing it. Everything was growing darker. I could barely breathe. And I heard a bell.’

She tried to smile and chuckle, but it looked more like a wince and sounded more like a cough. The Doctor waited for her to catch her breath and continue.

‘That is the strangest thing...I heard a bell. And he turned to look where the bell came from, and...’

She exhaled and looked up at the ceiling.

‘It’s all I remember, Doctor.’

The Doctor reached out and took her hand gently. He was initially surprised to see that she didn’t recoil from him, but then through that was most likely because she was too tired and in too much pain to do so. He held it nonetheless.

‘What you did was very, very foolish.’

He paused.

‘Incredibly brave. Madly, impossibly, incredibly brave, but also amazingly foolish. You could have been killed.’

*Really, tell her the truth,* he thought as he waited for her reply. *She should have been killed. No single fighter has gone toe to toe with a Metatraxi general and walked away the victor, not unless they were a...*

‘I could not allow the children to be hurt!’

‘But Vastra...they’re only human.’

He was shocked at the look of hate he got for that response.

‘You speak of a people who took us in, offered us hospitality when their king has died, who showed us kindness and respect in such a way? How dare you!’

She turned her head to face away from the Doctor, missing the smile that spread on his face.

‘You’ve changed, Vastra.’

‘Of course I have!’ She spat the words out as strongly as she could. ‘How could I not have?’

She tried to pull her hand away but the Doctor held it more firmly in his. She struggled but could not find the strength to fight him. She finally turned back to face him.

‘How is it that I am still here?’

The Doctor smiled. ‘You’re a hero to the people of the kingdom...do you really think they would let you die?’

She looked at him, confused.

‘Once the Metatraxi general fell, the people swarmed you. I had to fight my way to your side, along with Tsugu, Taisei, and the priests. We brought you immediately here to your room, and Taisei called for the royal physicians. I guess he felt one doctor wasn’t enough.’

He chuckled at his joke.

‘We’ve been watching over you day and night. They’ve been tending your external wounds, treating your burns...’

‘Burns?’

‘Oh yes,’ replied the Doctor. ‘Burns. Metatraxi blood is notoriously acidic and caustic. You got sprayed, and it burned you.’

He looked around nervously.

‘There will be a few...scars.’

Vastra smiled weakly. ‘I can accept some scars so long as I breathe. Go on.’

‘As I was saying,’ the Doctor continued, ‘they tended your external wounds while I scanned you for internal damage with this.’

He held out his sonic screwdriver.

‘Thankfully, there were no broken bones, no internal bleeding. I’m afraid you’re going to be hurting for a while though...when you got thrown up against the stone wall you hit it hard enough to actually bruise your ribs. It could have been a lot worse.’

Vastra looked at him.

‘How much worse?’

The Doctor tilted his head to the side slightly, asking ‘Do I really have to explain this?’ in as non-verbal a manner as possible. Vastra nodded.

‘How long will I be stuck in this bed...and why do those people keep looking in at me?’

The Doctor smiled.

‘Well, in answer to your second question...like I said, you’re a hero to them. You saved their children and fought with skill that I doubt any of them have seen before.’

Vastra looked directly at the Doctor. ‘And as for my first question?’

‘Of course, you know that no one will be able to tell the story or pass it down. Sadly, Vastra the slayer of giant, black armored insect men won’t be a legend they’ll be telling their children or grandchildren. One of the nice things about humans is their ability to forget things that make absolutely no rational sense whatsoever. Why, once I saw the Loch Ness Monster swimming down the Thames River! Do you think anyone talks about it? Of course not! They all forgot, because it...’

‘Doctor.’

The Doctor looked at Vastra and saw the determination on her face.

‘Do you want a friendly opinion or my opinion as a ‘doctor’?’

‘I want the truth, Doctor.’

He sighed.

‘You should be up and moving around, and in a lot of pain, in maybe another week or two. But considering how much bumping and tossing the TARDIS makes when we’re traveling to take you back to your proper time...we probably won’t be leaving for another month. Just to play it safe.’

‘A MONTH?’

The Doctor laughed. ‘At least you still have some fighting spirit in you! That’ll serve you well as you rest up and heal. Besides, that will ensure we’re here with Prince Taisei takes the throne as King. He’s requested we attend as his special and honored guests...it wouldn’t do to deny him that request, especially after all we’ve done for him. Well, you, mostly, but even you have to admit I had a pretty good aim with that rock. All those years of cricket finally accounted for something!’

His voice trailed off slightly as he thought for a moment, drifting back into the recesses of his memory.

‘Again.’

He was roused from his reminiscing by a very agitated Vastra.

‘But Doctor...you forget my people. By now the humans surely will have returned!’

‘You keep telling me that I forget, yet look at you with all your forgetting!’ The Doctor laughed. ‘TARDIS. Time and Relative Dimension in Space. It’s a time machine. It brought us to the past, it can return us to the future...well, the present, which is the future to the people here, but your present, and my...’

He paused.

‘It’s all really complicated, and I’d love to sit here and explain it, but frankly, I don’t understand all of it myself. Barely passed that test when I took it...the second time.’

He looked around.

‘And speaking of time, I really must head to Tsugu’s. In all the excitement of the funeral...and your little display, my lessons have been ignored. I think today we’ll be going over how to hold the pick. I’m so excited!’

The Doctor jumped up and ran out of the room, giggling quietly to himself.

‘I am sure you are, Doctor,’ Vastra sighed. She rested her head back against the pillow and pulled the sheets back over her, wincing at the pain.

*At least I’ll get some peace and quiet now, she thought.*

She then looked over to the window where a half dozen people gathered, whispering back and forth to each other while looking at her with a mix of awe and reverence.

*Other than the ever changing audience, that is,* she continued. She sighed deeply and closed her eyes. It did not take long for sleep to greet her.





Three weeks after the funeral...three weeks after Vastra had leapt off the main hall landing, swords in hand, and faced down the occupants of a Metatraxi scout ship, she took her first tentative steps from her room. Her whole body ached, and with each breath she could feel the bones and muscles in her chest burn. Still, she hobbled into the main hall, where the Doctor, Taisei and his advisors stood.

The Doctor was the first to notice, and he quickly ran to her, arms outstretched and about to give her a hug. She shied away, wincing at the pain from her sudden movement away. He pulled up short.

‘Oh, sorry...for a second there I forgot that a hug just might hurt.’

Vastra looked at him through narrowed eyes. ‘Right now everything hurts, but I was not going to spend another day in that room being on display for people to view at their leisure.’

She looked up to see Prince Taisei walking over to her. A smile lit up his face.

‘It is good to see you up. We were very worried for quite some time, but the Doctor...’

Vastra looked at him. ‘I thought you called him Kyoujyu.’

Taisei smiled ‘He has informed me that he prefers that only Tsugu call him that. It is not my place to ask questions, as they have known each other longer than I have known your friend.’

Vastra looked at the Doctor, who shrugged and mouthed the words ‘I’ll explain later’ to her. She turned back to the Prince as he continued.

‘He informed me that with time, you would recover. And he was, of course, correct. We watched over you until you showed signs of waking, and he...’

Taisei pointed at the Doctor.

‘...insisted he be called in as soon as it seemed you were going to wake. And here we are.’

He looked at Vastra, and she had a difficult time making out what the look meant.

‘You have done a very honorable and amazing thing for my people, you know.’

Vastra tried to shrug, and once again winced. *I will be so very happy once this blasted pain stops*, she seethed inwardly.

‘I did what was necessary, Prince. I am sure any of your soldiers would have done the same.’

Prince Taisei looked at Vastra, then the Doctor. She could read their body language, and it was easy to tell that neither of them quite believed her. There was little she could do in her condition to argue with them, however.

‘The Doctor tells me that you and he are not from this time. As I look at your clothes, I can certainly see how that would be the case. He also tells me that you are in some hurry to return to your home...something about difficulty with your...people.’

Vastra nodded. At least the Doctor was being honest with them.

‘I do hope, however, that I can convince you to remain with us at least until the coronation. Our religion mandates that there can be no celebration for 49 days after the death of a family member. I know that is some time to wait, but...’

Vastra waved her hand dismissively.

‘Prince...I am in no condition to travel anyplace right now, let alone in that contraption the Doctor calls a ship.’

The Doctor looked at her in shock. ‘You did it again! You’re lucky she wasn’t nearby when you said it, or I doubt very much she’d let you on board!’

Vastra turned and glared at the Doctor, who suddenly found his hands and fingers a far more interesting object to observe. The Prince, meanwhile, smiled wider.

‘Then you will both stay?’

Vastra nodded. ‘I do not have much choice in the matter...but yes. I feel I still have quite a bit to learn about you and your people as it is, so perhaps this is a mixed blessing for me.’

Taisei clapped his hands quietly. ‘Then it is settled. You both shall remain here as my guests. Should you want anything, you need but ask, and it shall be provided for you. Rest...recover your strength...there is much I must attend to and make arrangements for. I fear that places me at the disadvantage, as I shall be an absent host for most of your stay, but...’

He trailed off, not quite sure how to finish.

The Doctor spoke. ‘I’m sure we both know how that can be. Places to go, people to see, things to do...the busy life of a man destined to lead. And I am sure you will do a splendid job of it. Vastra and I will be quite comfortable, I am sure.’

He looked closer at the Prince.

‘You do know, of course, that I will have to leave for a short bit. Things to do and all that.’

Taisei nodded. ‘Of course, Doctor. But you remember, we have discussed this at length.’

Vastra looked at the two of them.

‘Somehow I feel as if I am being left out of things, Doctor.’

The Doctor looked at her and smiled.

‘I’ll explain later.’

‘You always say that,’ Vastra said, scowling. ‘I very much doubt...’

A familiar hand placed itself over her mouth, muffling her argument.

‘I promise you...the very moment I return from what I have to do, you and I will sit down and I will answer everything I can answer that you’ve asked me. Does that sound reasonable?’

‘Mrlphl.’

‘What was that?’

‘Mrlphl.’ Only this time her reply was louder and more agitated.

‘Just nod or shake your head...it’ll be easier that way.’

Vastra nodded her head slowly.

‘Excellent!’

The Doctor removed his hand from her mouth and she took in a deep breath.

‘It would have been easier had you just done that in the first place, Doctor.’

He smiled. ‘True...but where’s the fun in that?’

He looked at Vastra and Taisei.

‘Well...you two...speaking of places to go and things to do, I should really get to the things that I need to do. If you’ll both excuse me...I should be back by...’

He looked down at his wrist watch.

‘Oh, dinner time, I should guess.’

He stopped, paused, and thought.

‘Actually...better not assume that. Make it breakfast tomorrow morning, and if I’m back before then, it’ll be a surprise to us all.’

He smiled, laughed quietly, and turned on his heels. He walked quickly toward the doors leading from the main hall to the courtyard. Vastra and Taisei turned to watch him leave.

‘Your Doctor is a most unique individual, Vastra. Much like you.’

Vastra turned to him.

‘You have no idea how unique.’

She paused.

‘Then again, I do not think I quite know how unique he is either. But I intend to find out.’

Taisei laughed.

‘If you do, then you will have done far better than old Tsugu. He has been trying to figure out his Kyoujyu’s mysteries since he was a young man, and has come no closer than scratching the surface.’

Vastra held up her hand, causing the Prince to pause.

‘Could you please hold on a moment, Taisei? There is something I forgot to ask the Doctor.’

Taisei nodded.

‘Of course.’

He watched as Vastra tried to jog after the Doctor. She took one step then froze as pain shot through her whole body. The prince stepped to steady her, but she held one arm out to the side, waving him off.

‘No. I can do this...even if I have to walk.’

She slowly made her way to the doors and pushed them open. She didn’t remember them being that hard to open previously...then again, previously she wasn’t nursing wounds and recovering from a fight she only two thirds remembered. Still, she pushed her way through the carved dark wooden doors and saw the Doctor halfway across the courtyard talking to...

Who?

Who *was* he talking to?

She couldn’t make out a face from here, but she could tell that he was a big man, actually taller and broader than the Doctor by quite a bit. She could tell they were having an animated conversation, the Doctor vigorously arguing before finally acquiescing and handing over something black and apparently quite heavy to the other man. She took a step and saw the Doctor look back up toward the hall. He saw her, waved nervously, and quickly turned and made his way toward the gates and, she assumed, the TARDIS.

There was no use trying to chase him; she knew she didn’t have the energy to go much further than she already had gone. She turned to walk back toward the Prince and saw him already standing before her, a pair of attendants at his side.

'I hope you will allow me forgiveness for my presumption, Vastra...but I thought you might find their assistance welcome.'

Vastra smiled weakly.

'Do not get accustomed to me giving in so easily, Prince,' she said, a small weak laugh escaping her lips. 'Right now, however, I am tired enough...and in enough pain...that I will accept your offer.'

She looked at him sternly.

'Just this once, however.'

The prince laughed.

'But of course, Vastra.'

She allowed the attendants to support her as they walked her back toward her room. She lay back against the cool sheets and worked to catch her breath. She was shocked by how labored her breathing was, though again, she supposed she should not be surprised. A few minutes controlled breathing, and she felt settled again. Tomorrow she'd work herself harder, walk further, and get back into the kind of condition she expected of herself. For now though, rest and recovery seemed the key words of the day.

She was surprised by a knock outside her curtained door. She turned slowly toward it, recoiling at the expected pain.

'Yes?'

Prince Taisei's voice came from beyond the curtain. 'Might I enter and speak, Vastra?'

She slowly pulled the sheets over her. While she was dressed, she felt more comfortable with the sheet offering one more layer of cover between her and the Prince.

'Yes, certainly.'

She sat up as he entered and took a seat next to her bed. She watched his face, so young and yet already carrying lines of worry. She knew over time those lines would likely only deepen as the weight of rule wore upon him. She could also tell he was deep in thought, and allowed him time to compose himself to speak.

'Before you decided to chase after the Doctor, we spoke of how unique he is.'

Vastra nodded.

'I also happen to know that you were directed by both the Doctor and Tsugu to the royal pools a day before my father's funeral.'

She gasped. She knew what the punishments were among her people when one was found in a place sanctioned for the ruling class. 'I did not know. Prince Taisei, if I have in any way...'

He held up his hand.

'You may relax, Vastra. You have done no wrong.'

He paused collecting his thoughts.

'In part, it was my idea as well, if it must be said. I must also admit that the Doctor was most convincing in suggesting it. He actually assumed you would get curious and seek out what had fallen from the sky that day. When you did not, it was a surprise to all of us...a welcome one, I might add, as the Doctor has promised us a

delicacy from your time he calls 'Yorkshire pudding' as our reward for being correct in wagering you would swim, not search.'

If Vastra could have blushed, she would have. The feeling soon passed, followed by one of light anger. She tried to summon all her strength to speak recriminatingly, but all that came out was weak dissent.

'So I was being sent out as a spy?'

Taisei smiled. 'Not precisely. If you did choose to go looking, of course, any information you brought back would have been most helpful. However, knowing what we do now, it was perhaps best that you did not go looking. After all...'

He paused, and then pointed at the bandages that still wrapped her arms and covered a part of her face. She took his meaning immediately. *Had I gone looking, I would have run into them alone...and we would not be having this conversation right now. In fact, it is likely that after they were finished with me, the entire city would be in danger.*

She shuddered at the thought.

'At the same time,' the Prince continued, 'having you go to the pool was in some ways not quite a good idea...and if I had been thinking of it at the time, I would have denied their suggestion and offered other accommodations. I understand it raised a number of uncomfortable questions for you.'

Vastra nodded. 'That building at the center of the lake...'

The Prince nodded. 'You mean the white shrine on the island, I presume.'

Vastra nodded in agreement. 'And then there is the small matter of the statue. What is a statue of the Doctor doing here?'

Prince Taisei stood and walked slowly to the window. She watched as he looked both ways cautiously and, apparently satisfied with what he saw, closed the window's wooden shutters. He then walked to the doorway, looked out, and finally returned to his seat.

'I hope you will understand my discretion in this matter, but it is at his request.'

Vastra looked at him through narrowed eyes. 'Whose? The Doctor's?'

The Prince nodded.

'Go on.'

'The Doctor is very well known to us. He has come here many times. One thing has always remained the same...that blue shrine he travels in. He has visited many of our kings, back into the depths of our history. Yet no one speaks his name in public. He has forbidden it...he wants no one to know that he has been here. His tales are told in our books, of course, but those are held closely, for the eyes of the King and his advisors only.'

Vastra nodded slowly.

'Then why was he so visible this time?'

The Prince shook his head.

'That I do not know. I suppose had we not been hosts to those...visitors...his silence and privacy would have remained...such as they are, at least.'

He looked at Vastra.

'Then, of course, there is the small matter of your presence here.'

'Me?'

Taisei nodded.

'The Doctor has spoken to me in confidence about you. Unlike my people, I do understand that you are not a dragon. Not as such, at least. Still, I do agree with the Doctor's decision to allow the belief to foster. It gives our people hope that anything might be overcome.'

'That still doesn't say anything about the shrine or the statue.'

Taisei laughed quietly.

'That was Tsugu's idea, of course. Somehow he conceived of it behind the Doctor's back and had it built between visits, in tribute to the advice your friend always offered. He felt it fitting to be placed where it might remind the royal family that someone was always watching over them, and when the need was great, they would return.'

He looked down at Vastra and smiled.

'And so he did. Only this time, he brought help.'

He noticed Vastra's eyes had closed, her breathing slowed. Quietly rising from the simple chair, he slowly left the room, keeping the windows closed to offer his guest some respite from the gazing eyes of his people. For the Prince, there were still many arrangements to be made and things to be organized. For Vastra, a great deal more healing needed to happen. Both, he felt, would be better served if they began sooner rather than later.



Vastra's eyes opened and she found her room slowly darkening as the sun set. She slowly rose from her bed, her body still aching from her earlier exertion, and pulled on fresh robes which had been left for her. She walked gingerly toward the great hall, where the Prince and his advisors sat, preparing to eat. All were silent as she entered the room, found a seat, and carefully lowered herself to sit. The meal was silent, accompanied only by the sound of mugs and plates sat back on the table occasionally. She found the silence to be welcome, which surprised her.

That silence was shattered by the outside doors flying open.

'Couldn't wait for me, could you?'

Everyone turned to see the Doctor standing in the doorway, a half grin on his face. He walked quickly over to the table.

'I told you I might be back tonight!'

He looked at everyone, still silent.

'Oh, well...no matter. What's on the menu tonight?'





The weeks passed slowly.

So it seemed to Vastra, anyway. Part of this, she thought, was due to the fact that she was still in so much pain and was thus far more limited in what she was able to do. There were days she found herself unable to even leave her room, let alone shuffle down to the great hall to eat with everyone. She had a somewhat steady stream of visitors who would check in on her, talk to her, offer to bring her things. All of that was well and good, but what she really wanted was to get out of her room and start feeling like herself again. The Doctor said it would take time, and that was something she was not accustomed to.

About a week and a half after the funeral, the parents of the two children she had saved came to visit her. They were effusive in their thanks, offering her everything they had in repayment for her deeds. She shook her head, telling them that there was no need for repayment in any way, that she was only doing what anyone would have done in the same situation. It took several hours of argument, but they finally were convinced she would accept nothing for what she did, and walked from her room in even more awe of her selflessness and sacrifice. Those words spread quickly through the city, and when she was finally able to get up and outside, she was surprised to see the reverence people looked at her with.

On one of these walks, she turned to the Doctor.

‘Why are they acting like this?’

The Doctor smiled.

‘Well, for one thing, you fought off an entire platoon of warriors single handedly. It’s the stuff of legend, really. For another, you were willing to put yourself between two small children and impending doom without a thought...also the stuff of legend.’

He ran his hand through his hair before continuing.

‘Finally, there’s the small fact that you refused any kind of reward for your actions.’

Vastra turned to look at him.

‘Why should I accept a reward for doing the right thing?’

‘Why indeed!’ The Doctor laughed. ‘But that’s the thing, Vastra...for some people...maybe even a lot of people, or most people, for that matter...the right thing only ever gets done when there’s some kind of personal reward or involvement. Otherwise people are more than willing to just look the other way, even if someone could get hurt. Or worse.’

‘All humans are like this, then?’

The Doctor pointed to a small bench near a well. They walked over in silence and sat.

‘No, Vastra. Not all people are like this. And I would imagine that your people were no different in that regard.’

She looked at him in shock.

‘How dare...’

‘Think about it.’

And so she did. She thought about every thing she had seen growing up and realized that the Doctor was right. And the realization shocked her.

The Doctor wrapped an arm around her shoulders. She stiffened for a moment in surprise, but soon relaxed.

‘Not so different in the end, hmm?’

She shook her head.

‘No, not really.’

They sat there together in silence, watching people pass by, watching children playing in the street, watching families come to the well with buckets to carry water back to their homes.

‘So what happens next, Doctor?’

The Doctor turned on the bench to face her. He took her hands in his and looked her firmly in the eyes.

‘Well, for starters, we stay until the coronation of King Taisei. That will give you enough time to finish healing and recovering. After that, we’ll head back to your time, and we’ll make sure that everything is safe. Then I’ll have to head back to meet up with my friends Amy and Rory, and...’

‘What about me, Doctor?’

The Doctor’s glance dropped for a few moments.

‘Almost all of your systems on the surface have failed. I’m sure once the mainframes deep underground kick back on, you’d be able to get back to your people, but that won’t happen for another...three thousand years? Give or take?’

Vastra looked at him, aghast.

‘Three thousand years.’

The Doctor nodded sadly.

‘Why not have your ship just...take me there? It travels in time, does it not?’

‘It does, but it’s not that simple, Vastra.’

The Doctor let go of her hands and rose to his feet. He walked around the bench as his hands found their way to his hair again. She began to realize that this was a nervous affectation he had, and it began to worry her.

‘I could do that, certainly. But you see...’

He was now standing behind her.

‘If I take you there, there’ll be questions about your platoon mates. Questions you won’t have answers for. Or rather, questions that your answers won’t exactly be satisfying to hear. I know your people, Vastra...and they’re amazing, and advanced...’

He sat back down next to her, shoulders slumped.

‘And if I take you to when they wake up, it’s very likely that they’ll kill you because of what happened. Even though it’s not your fault...even though it could never be your fault.’

She wanted to argue with him, but she knew he was right. Vastra had heard tales where a lone warrior drove off an invading force after her whole platoon had been wiped out, only to be cut down rather than rewarded for her bravery.

‘Then what will I do? Travel with you as well?’

The Doctor shook his head.

‘No. At least not now, anyway.’

Her eyes narrowed.

‘What do you mean by that?’

‘I mean that there may well come a time where you do travel with me, but it’s not now. And I can’t mess with time like that. Well, I can, but it’s not a very good idea. It leads to all kinds of mess and if there’s one thing I don’t care for, it’s a mess. Besides, I still have to pick up Amy and Rory, and...’

‘Amy and Rory?’

The Doctor nodded.

‘Yes. My friends, remember?’

Vastra nodded.

‘So...I am not a friend then. I see.’ Her voice was cold, distant, and emotionless.

The Doctor grabbed her by the shoulders. She winced slightly from the shock and glared at the Doctor, who eased his grip and wordlessly mouthed the words ‘I’m sorry’ to her.

‘It’s not that at all, Vastra...and yes, you are a friend!’

He paused, picking his words carefully.

‘I just...sometimes I know when someone is important, or will be important to me. And something tells me that you will be one of those people...but the time’s not right yet.’

‘And how can you know that, Doctor?’

‘I just know.’

She almost felt him close off toward her, and realized she would get no further this day. She took a breath, held it, and exhaled before replying.

‘So if not traveling with you, then what?’

The Doctor smiled slightly.

‘I have a plan. The plan, in fact, is why I’ve been coming and going so much the past few weeks. And when we get back to your time, I’ll explain it all to you. Until then, well...’

He stood and offered a hand out to her. After a few tense moments she took it and allowed him to help her to her feet. He put his arm around her shoulders again as they began the slow walk back toward the palace.

‘Until then...we’ll enjoy their hospitality, you’ll rest and finish recovering, and we’ll cross the other bridges as we get to them.’



In contrast to the funeral, Vastra awoke on the day of coronation with the sun shining brightly through her windows. She pulled the sheets away and rose from her bed, feeling the heat and warmth sinking into her. She took a deep breath and smiled.

It was a gorgeous day, and she was finally feeling like her old pre-battle self again. She grabbed the ceremonial robes that had been left in her room the night before and pulled them on. They were brightly colored, in massive contrast from the day to day robes or funeral robes she'd grown accustomed to. Thankfully, whoever selected her robes took into consideration the fact that her coloration would clash with certain colors...the rich blues and greens of her robes complemented her particular viridian hue perfectly.

She made her way out of her room and was not at all surprised to see the Doctor waiting for her. She had to stifle a laugh as she took a glance at the oranges and purples that clashed with garish intensity as they hung from his shoulders. He opened his mouth to offer a good morning and then snapped it shut again in indignation.

'Oh, sure...you get robes that actually work for you. Me? I get orange and purple. Is someone blind?'

'Oh come now, Doctor...I think they are rather...'

The Doctor raised a finger to hush her.

'Not another word, Vastra.'

He walked past her, heading toward the great hall. Her smile widened for a second.

'I saw that, you know.'

He pivoted on his heels in time to catch her smile turn to shock.

'Just kidding...but I had you worried there, didn't I?'

She drew her lips closed tightly. The Doctor caught this and took a few steps toward her.

'Vastra...I was playing with you.'

She quickly closed the gap between the two of them and placed her hands firmly on his shoulders. He looked at her, fear and worry in his eyes. She moved even closer, brought her mouth to his ear, and whispered.

'So was I...but I had you worried there, did I not?'

She let go of his shoulders and walked past him, a small smile playing across her lips.

'Yes...yes you did,' the Doctor whispered.

From half way across the great hall, he heard a voice.

'I heard that, Doctor.'



The Coronation itself was, as she expected, immense. There seemed to be as many people in the courtyard as had been there for the funeral, though this day instead of a sea of black, dozens if not hundreds of difference colors vied for primacy and attention. The Doctor and Vastra were both accorded a special place at the front of the audience, and watched as Prince Taisei was granted the robes and crown of his late

father by Tsugu. As the crown was placed on his head, Taisei looked down and caught their eyes. He smiled and nodded his head slightly in recognition.

A cheer went up from the crowd as King Taisei rose to speak.

‘My people, it is with great humility that I stand before you. Dark days we have seen of late, but as the sun shines down on you all today, know this...that same sun rises on a rejuvenated kingdom. I will carry on the work my father began, and ensure that you are kept safe from anyone who would try and harm you or our land.’

The crowd cheered a second time, even louder than the first. Vastra almost had to cover her ears from the volume.

‘We were most fortunate that in our time of need, an old friend returned to us to offer guidance and counsel. Even more fortunate were we that our old friend brought with him a new friend, who risked her own life to protect our people. They are our honored guests this day, and you will treat them with the same respect that you offer to me. Come, my friends...stand with me this day!’

The Doctor and Vastra looked at each other. They both shrugged and walked up the steps to stand next to the King and his court. An even louder cheer erupted from the crowd, and this time both the Doctor and Vastra did cover their ears. As the cheering died down, the King spoke.

‘But enough of talk for now...today belongs to you, the people of this kingdom. Eat...feast...celebrate a new beginning!’

The crowd began to break up as tables of food were brought out. King Taisei, his advisors, the Doctor and Vastra walked back down the steps to mingle with the crowd. Both the Doctor and Vastra found themselves surrounded by throngs of people offering their thanks for protecting the new King and the kingdom, thanks that they tried desperately to brush aside as unnecessary.

The feasting went on until nightfall, and people started to head back to their homes. Taisei sat with the Doctor and Vastra at the top step leading into the great hall and breathed a sigh of relief.

‘I must say, my friends...I feared a repeat of what happened at my father’s funeral.’

The Doctor turned to Taisei.

‘Understandable...but nothing to worry about. I found the ship those soldiers came from, and disabled the homing beacons and communication links. It wasn’t even an interstellar class ship, so how it got here I have no idea...but as far as any more nasties showing up...I think you’ll be safe for a while.’

Taisei looked at the Doctor, confusion painted across his face.

‘Tsugu told me you spoke oddly, but I did not expect to hear you say things I could not understand. What are these words?’

The Doctor laughed.

‘Nothing. Nonsense words, I suppose. All you need to know is that you’re safe from any more of those things attacking you. The hard part is up to you.’

‘What hard part is that?’

‘Being a good leader for your people.’

Taisei nodded. 'That will be difficult. There is much I need to learn still.'

'Life's all about learning, Taisei,' the Doctor said. 'But you have some wise advisors, and I'd suggest you listen to them as your father did. Tsugu especially. He may be old, but he's forgotten more than many people will ever know. Listen to them, and I could guarantee that you'll be a fine successor to your father's legacy.'

Taisei nodded and smiled. He rose from the step and turned back to face the great hall. Torches flickered in his eyes.

'I suppose I could not convince you to stay, then.'

'I'm afraid not, Taisei,' the Doctor replied. He rose to stand next to the king and put a hand on his shoulder. 'This isn't my time...and I have my friend Vastra to return to her time, still.'

Taisei nodded quietly.

'When will you be leaving, then?'

'Tomorrow, actually. I think we've done everything we were meant to do here. It's all in your hands, Taisei.'

'Tsugu tells me that you travel in a strange shrine. Is that true?'

The Doctor nodded.

'I should like to see if before you leave. You would allow me the honor of escorting you back to your shrine tomorrow?'

The Doctor looked past Taisei to Vastra, who nodded.

'Of course, Taisei. The honor would be ours, actually.'

Taisei turned to look at Vastra, still seated on the step. He held out a hand to her, and she took it, rising to stand next to them.

'One more night with us, then. As my guests. And then tomorrow we shall bid each other farewell.'

The Doctor smiled.

'Until the next time.'

Taisei laughed.

'Yes, until the next time.'

The three entered the great hall together for their last evening in the kingdom together.



The sun shone brightly in the sky as the Doctor, Vastra, King Taisei and his advisors left the city. A small group of soldiers joined them as they made their way back to the fields where the Doctor had landed his TARDIS weeks before. Vastra smiled as she saw the looks the soldiers gave each other when ordered to join them; she could almost hear them saying, as they looked at each other, 'What do you need us to come along for? You've got *her*.'



The walk was, as expected, uneventful, and a few hours after passing through the city's gates, the group crested a small rise and the Doctor pointed.

'There she is!'

There, in the middle of the field, stood the TARDIS, none the worse for wear, all things considered. The Doctor broke away from the group and rushed over to it, hugging it like it were some long lost friend. Behind him, King Taisei turned to Vastra with a questioning look in his eyes. Vastra could do little but shrug her shoulders, replying with a non-verbal 'Don't ask me...you know he is rather strange after all.' Taisei nodded at this, and began a brisk pace to the Doctor and his TARDIS.

As he got closer, he could hear the Doctor mumbling.

'Oh look at you...did those cows use you as a scratching post while we were away? Don't worry...I'm sure most of it will come off in the vortex. It's not like I can take you to a car wash, you know...'

Taisei tapped the Doctor on the shoulder. He jumped and spun around.

'Yes...sorry! We were just catching up!'

Taisei looked up at the blue box. 'It is a most impressive looking shrine, Doctor. However, it is rather small, is it not?'

The Doctor smiled.

'It's actually a bit roomier than you'd imagine, Taisei.'

He fumbled in his pocket and produced a key. Quietly he walked over to the doors, inserted the key, and turned the lock. The door cracked open just a small bit, and from inside Taisei could hear the quiet murmurings of the TARDIS engines. The Doctor nodded to Vastra, who broke ranks and joined him at his side.

'So...'

The Doctor paused.

'Taisei...Tsugu...members of the court...I want to thank you for your hospitality these past weeks. It's been an honor to spend so much time with you.'

Vastra nodded and was about to speak when the Doctor's elbow nudged her in the ribs. She turned to look at him, frustration on her face.

'As I was about to say,' she began, turning back to face the small crowd, 'I should thank you as well, for caring for me when I was hurt. You've showed me such kindness, and I have learned so much from you all. Thank you.'

She bowed her head slightly in respect.

Taisei laughed.

'It is we who should be thanking you both, for coming when our need was so great. There is no telling what might have happened had you not arrived when you did.'

The Doctor smiled.

'Yes, well...I seem to have a habit of showing up in times like this. Means I get to skip most of the boring bits.'

He paused.

'So anyway...farewell. I'm sure we'll be back sometime...I wouldn't want to miss another chance to share in your hospitality.'

The Doctor turned back to open the door but was stopped by a hand on his shoulder. He turned around and the look on Taisei's face held him fast.

'You have been with us before, Doctor...you know our traditions.'  
'It's not really necessary, Taisei. You know we only did what we thought was right.' The Doctor shook his head as he spoke.  
'You would deny us our traditions, Doctor?'  
The Doctor sighed.  
'Of course I wouldn't...I'm just saying that...'  
Taisei held up his hand.  
'Then it is settled. Tsugu, come forward.'

The old man was helped off the wagon by two soldiers and slowly walked over to the Doctor. He held something long and somewhat bulky wrapped in cloth and smiled as he handed it to the Doctor.

'Here, Kyoujyu. I feel you would make better use of this than I will now...and your efforts the past few weeks have proven that.'

The Doctor unwrapped the offering and found himself holding Tsugu's own *shamshin*. He looked up, shock clearly evident on his face.

'Tsugu! I can't accept this!'

Tsugu nodded.

'You can and you will.'

'But...'

'No buts, old friend.' Tsugu walked up directly in front of the Doctor. 'I am an old man...we both know this. My hands are not what they used to be, and I think my playing days are slipping further and further behind me. This way you will have something to remember this adventure with us by.'

'You think I'd forget this, Tsugu?'

Tsugu laughed.

'No, of course not. This way, however, a small piece of me can join you on all those journeys you have told me about.'

The Doctor smiled and bowed.

'I'm honored, my old friend. Yes. Of course I'll accept it. Thank you.'

Tsugu turned and slowly walked back to the group. As he did, a taller, heavysset man walked forward carrying a bundle in his hands. He stopped next to Taisei and waited.

'Vastra,' started the king, 'These are for you.'

Vastra stepped forward carefully and took the bundle from the man's hands. She kneeled to the ground and unwrapped the heavy cloth to find three lacquered *saya* gleaming in the sunlight. She grabbed one and slowly, quietly drew a blade from its confines. Unlike the royal swords she'd...appropriated...during that fateful battle during the funeral, this blade had a duller finish. It felt almost impossibly light in her hands, yet even a casual glance showed her the edge was far keener than those she'd ever wielded before. She admired the wavy patterns in the metal as she gripped the *tsuka*, which seemed to fit her hand perfectly.

She looked up at the King.

'They are gorgeous.'

‘I understand they took no small amount of work to finish. My craftsman here tells me that it took many arguments with your Doctor to acquire some of the material he wished to use in the blades’ design.’

Vastra looked up at the Doctor, who was running a hand through his hair.

‘Care to explain, Doctor? Or will I be left without still more explanations?’

‘Well,’ the Doctor began, ‘the smith felt it appropriate to incorporate some of the metal from the Metatraxi armor into the sword, to symbolize your victory over them. I wasn’t sure it was the best possible idea, but I finally relented, and showed him how to forge it into the existing steel. That’s why the blades look duller...and why they’re immeasurably sharper.’

He paused, wiping his brow.

‘That doesn’t mean, however, that you can...’

Vastra smiled and held up a finger to hush the Doctor. He looked at her, taken aback by her brashness. She laughed.

‘Do you know how long I have been waiting to do that?’

The Doctor blushed.

‘I know what they are capable of doing, and you can trust me, Doctor. Of all the lessons I have learned these past weeks, that one is the one I hold closest.’

She turned to face the king and his smith.

‘Thank you. They are very beautiful. I shall certainly cherish them.’

The smith cleared his throat and spoke.

‘The shorter ones are a matched pair...*katana*. But I wanted to offer you something more spectacular as well, and so I spent most of my efforts on the great sword. I rarely have call to craft *ōdachi*, and I wanted to make the most of the chance I had.’

He paused.

‘I hope they serve you well.’

Vastra smiled.

‘I hope I have no need for them. But if I do, I am certain that your work will serve me just fine. Thank you.’

She bowed, and the smith took a few steps back.

The Doctor clapped his hands.

‘Well, if that’s everything, I suppose we’ll be off.’

Taisei held his hand up.

‘Not quite finished, Doctor. Those were gifts from my people. I have one last gift to bestow on each of you. It is something personal, from me and my family.’

Taisei reached into the pockets of his robe and pulled out two small ceramic bottles. Each was sealed closed, and each had a long silk cord binding the bottle’s neck. He held one bottle in each hand, red silk cord to the left, blue silk cord to the right, and motioned for the Doctor and Vastra to come closer. They did, slowly, and looked carefully into the king’s face.

‘My father never left his kingdom when he ruled; he always felt it his duty to be here for his people whenever they needed. Even as a child he strayed very rarely from

the boundaries of the kingdom. I had many more opportunities as I grew up, as he felt it proper that my education included more of the world than he had experienced.'

Taisei paused, catching his breath and carefully choosing his next words.

'Now that his spirit is among those of his fathers in eternity, the greatest gift I could give him, other than trying to live up to his legacy as king, would be to allow him to travel. It is our custom, should the family allow, for small portions of the deceased's ashes be offered to close relatives to be kept in their home shrines in memory of the dead. I am extending that to include you both, for what you have done for my family.'

The Doctor and Vastra looked at each other in shock. It took several moments, but finally the Doctor spoke.

'Taisei...you can't be serious. We aren't family...it'd be breaking all of your traditions in one swoop.'

Taisei smiled.

'And how many times, even just today, have you expected me to break other traditions?'

'That's different and you know it,' the Doctor replied.

'Do I?'

Taisei's hands never dropped to his side.

'I spoke about this at great length with Tsugu. You will remember, Doctor, that you told me to take his advice carefully, as well as the advice of my father's other friends. All of them agreed that, while this was certainly an exceptional situation, it was right and fitting to do this. And so I am. I ask the two of you again, do you accept this gift from me, or do we part in anger?'

Vastra reached out and took Taisei's hand, feeling the cold bottle, cold even against her skin.

'I do, King Taisei, and assure you I will keep it safe the rest of my days.'

The Doctor looked at Vastra and nodded his head.

'Yes, I do.'

He held out his hand and accepted the blue wrapped bottle. It felt cool in his hand as well, and he wrapped the cord around his hand several times to ensure he didn't drop it.

Taisei nodded, the smile creeping back onto his face.

'Then we are settled. I will miss having you both here at the court, I hope you know. I do trust you will come back some time?'

The Doctor smiled. 'I'm sure we will. I have no idea of when...and as much as it always seems I show up places when something dramatic is about to happen, I hope the next time it will be on far calmer terms.'

Taisei laughed.

'That would be my hope as well, Doctor.'

The Doctor walked quickly over to Tsugu. 'And you, old friend...you take care of yourself. I expect to see you here next time I stop by for a visit.'

Tsugu laughed, his voice dry with age.

'I'll do my best, Kyoujyu...but you know, better than anyone, that old age has a way of bringing with it challenges that even a dragon with a pair of swords can't face down.'

The Doctor embraced Tsugu.

'No tears, Kyoujyu...I've seen much in my life. And who knows? Perhaps when you next return I'll still be here. After all, who will carry my water buckets for me?'

The Doctor stepped back and caught the gleam in Tsugu's eyes as the corners of his lips turned up in a hidden smile.

'Go now, Kyoujyu. You have your friend to return to her home...and we must return to the city so Taisei can continue the work his father started.'

'Tsugu is right,' Taisei said from behind the Doctor. 'There is much to be done, for all of us. Thank you again for everything you and your friend have done for us. I am sure it will not be forgotten.'

The Doctor turned.

'Perhaps it would be best if it did.'

'Why is that, Doctor?' His voice was drenched in confusion.

'Think about it, Taisei...I doubt this world is ready for what happened here a few weeks ago. Aliens coming out of the sky, a reptile person killing them all...'

'Dragon, Doctor,' Vastra said with a smile.

'Yes, OK, fine...dragon. Whatever. The point is, strange things happened, things your people, and the people of this world in general, aren't ready for. Perhaps it's best that they forgot. There'd be far too many questions...questions you won't have good answers for.'

Taisei's voice grew slightly hard.

'You expect me to lie to my people, Doctor?'

No, not at all,' the Doctor replied, walking over to put an arm around his shoulder. 'I'm just saying that perhaps it's best to let the story fade, like all stories do. Someday it'll be treated as a myth or a legend, not as fact. And myths and legends are easier to think of as fiction than truth.'

The Doctor looked at Taisei, deep in thought.

'Do you understand what I mean, Taisei?'

After a few moments' pause, Taisei nodded.

'I do...but it is hard to think of the people responsible for the salvation of my kingdom as myths.'

'You don't need to, Taisei. Just...don't go spreading stories. Let it fade. Keep it in your head, and in your heart, where it belongs. That's all you have to do.'

'I see your point, Doctor.'

'Excellent!'

The Doctor jumped over to the TARDIS door and pushed it open. Vastra bowed once more to the king and his advisors and walked inside, the swords in her arms. The Doctor followed, quickly closing the door behind him.

A second later the door opened slightly and he popped his head out.

'You may want to wait and watch this, Taisei...it's pretty awesome, if I do say so myself.'

The door clicked shut and Taisei, Tsugu and the others say and watched. A few moments later a loud, wheezing sound began to erupt from the TARDIS. It sounded like time and space ripping itself apart, though Taisei of course had no idea what those things were really. All he knew was that it was unlike anything he had ever heard before. The light atop the box began to flash on and off in time, and as they watched, the blue box began to shift and fade from view. A wind licked up, blowing the grasses to and fro.

In the distance, one of the cattle looked up, disinterested, and returned its attention to the grass it was eating.

Finally, the TARDIS was gone.

Taisei turned back to face Tsugu.

‘Have you seen this before?’

Tsugu smiled.

‘Once or twice, my King. It still amazes me to this day.’

Taisei shook his head.

‘You heard the Doctor. Not a word of this to anyone. Hold true to the memory, but keep the story secret.’

His advisors all nodded. Taisei wondered how easy it would be to keep such an amazing tale secret, but knew in the end all he could do was keep his secret for himself. The rest, well...that would be up to them. He trusted them, though, and that was a start.

‘Back to the city then, everyone. There is much work to be done.’

Wordlessly the group turned and began the journey back to the palace.



Vastra sat in one of the seats just inside the railing that surrounded the central TARDIS console and watched the Doctor as he moved from control to control. He moved slower, more deliberately than he had when they took their trip to this strange land, and she found it curious that she actually found herself worrying about the man who had ripped her away from the familiar and showed her something new and different. Something, perhaps, better than she had expected for herself.

She leaned forward, rested her head on one closed hand, and spoke.

‘Are you alright, Doctor?’

The Doctor looked up from the console, looked toward her, but she had the distinct feeling he wasn’t exactly seeing her.

‘Hmm? What was that?’

Vastra sighed quietly.

‘I asked if you were alright, Doctor.’



He smiled, slightly vacantly.

'Yes. Quite. Right as rain, me.'

Vastra leaned back.

'I do not think I quite believe you.'

The Doctor looked at her this time, his eyes locking on to hers.

'No, I'm fine. Just...preoccupied.'

'With what?'

The Doctor was about to slam forward the lever that would set the TARDIS in flight, but instead walked over next to her seat. He leaned against the railing and brought his hands up behind his head, almost cradling it from behind. He stood there for a few seconds before looking down at Vastra. She had been watching him the whole time, and he smiled.

'Well, Vastra...we have a situation here where you can't go back to your people, and as big as the TARDIS is, I don't quite think that you'd be completely happy here.'

He paused and collected his thoughts.

'And yet I saw what you did at the funeral...there's so much you could do to help the helpless...men, women and children being taken advantage of.'

Vastra looked at him, confused.

'I do not fully understand, Doctor.'

The Doctor knelt in front of her and placed his hands on her shoulders. She didn't flinch.

'You've changed, Vastra. When we met, nearly two months ago, you were ready to shoot me where I stood. Do you remember that?'

She closed her eyes. *Yes, I remember*, she thought to herself. *I do not wish to remember, but I do.*

She nodded.

'What changed?'

She struggled to answer that question, but no answer came.

'I...I do not know.'

The Doctor smiled.

'I think what changed is the fact that you saw that these people...these humans...are really no different than you are. You and me, we're both different from them, but we both see that they can be so much more. They have the ability for greatness...and that's both good and bad, because some of them can do terrible, horrible...but great...things.'

Vastra leaned back and regarded the Doctor.

'Is this the time we are finally going to discuss who and what you are, then?'

The Doctor rocked back on his heels, then pulled himself to a cross leg seated position on the floor.

'You weren't going to forget about that, were you?'

Vastra shook her head, and the Doctor smiled.

'I didn't think so.'

He took a deep breath.

‘We don’t have a lot of time, so I’ll give you the short version. Maybe sometime in the future we can sit down and I can fill in the blanks, but here’s what you need to know for right now...’

Vastra’s eyes widened as the Doctor started to explain his past...his birth on a planet called Gallifrey, his training as a Time Lord, his adventures across time and space, and all the people he had befriended and who had traveled with him. She covered her mouth as he spoke ever so briefly about the Last Great Time war, how he had unleashed The Moment and locked all combatants, even his own people, in a place that could not be escaped. She didn’t want to believe any of it, but as she looked around the inside of the TARDIS, she knew it had to be true.

‘...and that’s it. I’m the last of my kind. And I keep traveling, and I keep trying to do what’s right.’

He regarded Vastra carefully.

‘And you don’t believe a single word of it.’

Vastra shook her head.

‘I believe every word.’

The Doctor looked at her, surprised.

‘You do?’

Vastra nodded.

‘Among my people, there were legends of an ape who came from the stars and brought wisdom with him. Usually death and destruction followed in his wake as well, or so the stories told. I always thought they were just that...legends.’

The Doctor cringed.

‘I’m not sure I’m keen on the whole ‘death and destruction followed in his wake’ bit, I hope you know.’

Vastra looked at him.

‘Deny that to be true...you saw what happened at the funeral. Can you deny that what I speak is true?’

He wanted to deny it, wanted to deny everything...but he knew he couldn’t.

‘I thought not.’

The Doctor stood and walked back to the console. He continued to fine tune dials and controls as Vastra looked on. She didn’t regret what she said, but thought that perhaps she could have found slightly kinder words to express it. She shook her head, clearing her thoughts, and walked over to his side.

‘So...back to home, Doctor?’

The Doctor looked up into Vastra’s eyes.

‘Yes...back to home. But first...’

Vastra watched as he walked over to a grated off niche in the wall. He pulled the grate off with a hooked piece of wire and pulled out a huge wooden chest. From a distance she watched with curiosity as he opened it and started tossing items out of the crate and all over the floor.

‘No...not that either...yes! Oh wait...no, that wasn’t it...’

‘Doctor,’ Vastra called from her spot at the console, ‘what are you doing?’

‘One moment, Vastra!’

He turned his attention back to the chest. Finally, after a good five to ten minutes of digging, tossing and searching, he found what he was looking for.

‘Here we are!’

He jumped back to the console and handed Vastra a strange looking metal device. It looked something like a metal crown, with a long cord attached to it and extensions that curved over the top and from the back of the device. She held it carefully in her hands and turned it from side to side.

‘And what exactly is this, Doctor?’

He smiled.

‘Well, considering that there’s no way for me to get you to your people, you’re going to be stuck on the surface. You could live out your life hiding in the woods and foraging, but I can’t leave my friends in a state like that! So...this is a cerebral enhancer. I used to use one from time to time when I was in the Academy and forgot to study for my exams. You just plug it in to the appropriate computer, bring up the information you need to know, and the information you need is essentially downloaded right into your brain.’

Vastra looked at him with shock in her eyes.

‘You cannot possibly expect me to use this!’

The Doctor sighed.

‘It’s either this or I spend the next 10 years educating you on traditional British customs of the late Victorian era. Your choice.’

‘How long does this take?’

‘Oh, an hour, give or take,’ the Doctor smiled.

Vastra considered her options. In the end, she decided, there really was no option.

‘Where do I plug it in?’

The Doctor pointed to a port on the console.

‘Right there. I should warn you...there may be a little discomfort. I’m not quite sure how to set it for homo reptilia brainwaves...’

She regarded him coolly.

‘And the worst that could happen then, Doctor, would be...?’

The Doctor shrugged.

‘Bang, maybe?’

‘Me or the device?’

The Doctor shrugged again.

‘Both, maybe? Like I said, I’ve ever had much need to use it on homo reptilian before. To be honest, I haven’t had much need for it in general. Birthday present from some aunt or another on my mother’s side...always gave me the strangest, most useless gifts. Except this time!’

Vastra sighed and placed the device on her head. She adjusted what little she could in order to make it fit even the slightest bit comfortably, and then plugged the connector into the jack.

‘Turn it on, Doctor.’

With a grimace the Doctor flipped a switch. A high pitched, keening noise came from the console's computer banks and Vastra twitched once...twice...three times, before her body relaxed. He could see her eyes moving behind her eyelids, and hoped everything was working as he had expected it would...or should, more appropriately.

He turned back to the console and flipped the lever to send the TARDIS to his intended location...London, 1887.



The TARDIS landed with a quiet thump, and the Doctor looked over at his companion Vastra.

‘Are you alright, Vastra?’

She held her head in her hands.

‘My head hurts, Doctor.’

He moved over to her quickly.

‘How badly?’

She looked up at him, her eyes bloodshot.

‘Like I placed my head in boiling water and tried to cook it.’

The Doctor pulled out his Sonic Screwdriver and flipped it on. He scanned her and then checked the readings.

‘Everything seems to be in order...your brain waves look normal, pulse and oxygen levels within what I guess are norms for your species.’

‘Thank you for that clean bill of health, Doctor,’ Vastra replied sarcastically.

‘And just as caustic as ever. I’d say you’re going to be fine.’

He walked over to the door.

‘Now, for the rest of my plan...’

Vastra stood to follow him. She got as far as the door when the Doctor stopped her.

‘No...not yet. Just wait here, and listen. If we get past this, then everything else will fall into place. Understand?’

Vastra nodded, and stood in the doorway, hidden by shadow. She watched as the Doctor quickly ran over to the cave opening, and it seemed to her that his timing was impeccable, as from the opposite direction she spotted a half dozen or more lights heading toward them. She steeled herself, hoping she’d have no need to protect the Doctor. She knew from watching him that his mind was quick, but she also knew from experience that a quick mind was no match for a sharp blade or a gun.

‘Good evening, gentlemen!’ the Doctor exclaimed.

The head of the group stepped forward. Even from a distance Vastra could see his top hat and long white beard. He had the air of someone not used to having his

authority brooked, and she wondered how he'd take the Doctor. *Not well at all, I imagine*, she thought, chuckling.

'Step aside, man, there's been a death here!'

'Yes, I know, and it all could have been avoided had your men waited for me to show up!'

The older man regarded the Doctor with a mix of suspicion and derision.

'And who exactly might you be then, waltzing around here as if you own the place?'

The Doctor held out a leather bifold.

'Doctor John Smith, head of Her Majesty Queen Victoria's Department of Geology and...Cavey Things,' he said. 'New office, just opened up. I've been sent by order of the Queen herself to survey all of the caves and...things...in all of her kingdom...erm...Queendom. Historical reports suggested that this cave here held some very strange gasses that could cause horrible hallucinations in even the strongest man, and I was hurrying here to try and close it off. Apparently I was too late.'

He turned back to point at the ground behind him. The man Vastra had shot laid on the ground, a blanket covering him from head to foot.

'It's hard to say, but my guess is that one of his men struck the wall with a pick or shovel as the gas took hold. The spark must have ignited some of the gas and...'

The older man took a few steps over to lift the blanket. The Doctor put a hand on his shoulder to stop him.

'I wouldn't, if I were you. It's not pretty.'

The man wheeled and turned on the Doctor.

'What now, then? Do you expect that the wheels of progress can stop because of one small accident?'

The Doctor nodded his head.

'That's exactly what I'm suggesting. At least here, in this place.'

The man scoffed.

'The Underground's expanding, Dr. Smith! Soon this whole stretch of land will be developed with housing and shoppes and industry! London is growing, Dr. Smith, and I won't let you stand in the way of it!'

The Doctor shook his head.

'Well, if you won't listen to me, perhaps this will convince you.'

He flipped the page on his paper and handed it over to the man.

'Read this, and then tell me I can't stop you.'

The man ripped the bifold from the Doctor's hands, adjusted his glasses, and began silently mouthing the words.

'Wha...what?'

The Doctor smiled.

'I do believe you'll see that it bears Her Majesty's signature itself. And it expressly forbids any further excavation here. It's not safe, and if it's not safe for the workers, it certainly would not be safe for any passengers using the Underground, would it?'

The man began to sputter.

'This...this is preposterous!'

The Doctor looked at him in shock.

‘Please don’t ask me to go back to Her Majesty and report that you directly disobeyed one of her commands, Mister...’

‘P...Pearson,’ he finally sputtered out.

‘Mister Pearson. Surely you see how that would end poorly for you, right?’

‘I...I suppose it would.’

The Doctor smiled.

‘And surely you could find other places to build this expansion of the Underground. In fact, I’d be happy to consult my maps and drawings and come up with some suggestions, if I might be so bold as to offer my assistance to someone who obviously shows some wisdom in a time like this.’

Pearson nodded.

‘I...suppose we could arrange something.’

The Doctor smiled and clapped one hand against his shoulder.

‘Excellent! Say, breakfast tomorrow, King’s Cross?’

Pearson nodded.

‘But what about my man here?’

The Doctor looked down, a hint of sadness on his face. He looked back up and saw that they had come with a horse drawn cart. He walked over and checked out the contents. It was bare, save for some basic digging tools and a few small sticks of trinitrotoluene. He took one in each hand and walked back over to Pearson.

‘I’d suggest you and your men take him back to the city so he can be taken care of properly. Make sure his family is notified. Mining accident.’

He paused.

‘I’m very sorry I couldn’t get here before them to stop it, I hope you know.’

Pearson nodded.

‘Yes, well...there’s never enough time, is there?’

The Doctor smiled a sardonic grin.

‘No, there never is.’

Pearson pointed to the trinitrotoluene in the Doctor’s hands.

‘What exactly do you propose to do with that, Dr. Smith?’

The Doctor began walking back to the cave.

‘I intend on sealing the cave off so no one else wanders in there and gets hurt...or worse.’

Pearson nodded.

‘Good idea.’

The Doctor set the sticks down and walked back to the man’s side. He shook his hand firmly, shocking Pearson to the core.

‘You and your men should get going. I’ll take care of this.’

‘Right-o,’ Pearson said, nodding. ‘Tomorrow, then?’

The Doctor smiled.

‘Bright and early, King’s Cross.’

He paused as Pearson began to walk away.

‘Oh, and Mr. Pearson?’

Pearson turned.  
'Yes, Dr. Smith?'  
'You're buying.'

Pearson shook his head and ordered his men around as they loaded the body of their dead coworker on to the cart. The Doctor gave them a good ten minutes before he went back to the cave and positioned the explosives. As he was about to turn, he heard a familiar voice.

'You lied to them.'  
He finished turning and looked at Vastra.  
'Yes. Perhaps I did. Do you think it better that I tell them a reptile woman whose kind ruled these lands a hundred thousand years ago accidentally woke before her time and shot him dead?'  
Vastra winced.  
'I didn't think so.'  
He looked back at the explosives on the ground, then turned back to Vastra.  
'We should stand free of the cave. When I set this off, I doubt you'll have to worry about anyone finding your family and people for a very long time.'

They walked a distance from the cave, and Vastra watched as the Doctor pulled his Sonic Screwdriver from his pocket, pointed it toward the cave, and switched it on. The device increased in pitch until the sound was piercing, hurting Vastra's sensitive ears. Suddenly there was a huge explosion, followed by deep, bassy rumbles. She opened her eyes, and the mouth of the cave was sealed off by rocks and debris. She gave it a few seconds, then walked over to look for herself.

*There is no way back now, Vastra, she thought quietly. For better or for worse, you have placed your life in this mans hands.*

The Doctor walked over and wrapped an arm around her shoulder.  
'Are you OK?'  
She looked over to him.  
'Yes,' she finally said. 'Yes, I think I am.'  
She paused for a moment.  
'Now, as for the rest of your plan...'  
The Doctor smiled, and Vastra realized it was the first real smile she had seen from him in the past two or three days.  
'Oh, you are going to love this, Vastra...just you wait!



‘Explain this to me again, Doctor...I do not quite grasp what it is you are telling me.’

The Doctor smiled as he leaned back into the overstuffed chair in the library.

‘It’s quite simple, Vastra...I don’t see what’s so difficult about this. I nipped back in time to 1694, borrowed a few crowns off a wonderful gentleman named William Patterson, and started up an account in the Bank of England. It kept accruing interest, and then I willed it all to my ‘son’...who was me, of course, and jumped forward in time to take over the account, which I then willed to a cousin of mine...who was, also, amazingly, me...and so on, and so forth, until I lost it all in a game of cards with a certain Russian trading magnate named Alexander Vastravosky. Then...’

‘Wait,’ Vastra said. ‘Vastravosky? Who on Earth is he?’

The Doctor smiled.

‘He’s your husband.’

‘WHAT?’

The Doctor laughed as Vastra looked at him with shock, and no small bit of anger, on her face.

‘Not really, Vastra...but for the sake of making sure I could set you up properly, you had to be married. And so, your husband...’

Vastra glared.

‘OK, your make believe husband, inherited all this money from me through me and so on and so forth, ad infinitum, ad nauseum. And he bought this house here in London for you and him to live in and then, in a horrible twist of fate, his ship sunk as he was returning to London from Riga by way of the Baltic Sea. So sad...he seemed like such a wonderful man. You would have enjoyed him, Vastra...’

‘He was fake, Doctor!’

The Doctor blushed as he replied. ‘Oh yes, he was, wasn’t he? Sorry, got carried away with the story. Anyway, in his last will and testament, he bequeathed all his earthly belongings, including his wealth and this house, to his loving and doting wife.’

Vastra looked at him blankly.

‘Umm...that would be you, Vastra,’ the Doctor prodded.

‘I gathered that, Doctor. So all of this is mine?’

The Doctor nodded.

‘Along with enough money to keep up a good lifestyle for you for the rest of your life,’ he added as a second thought.

Vastra thought for a few moments before replying.

‘And where exactly did you come up with your plan, Doctor?’

‘Well,’ he said, his voice hedging. ‘I can’t take full credit for it. I...well...actually I saw it in a movie from 1986 and filed it away, thinking I might need it some day.’

He paused and smiled.

‘And look, I did! I’d say it worked out far better in real life than it did in the movie, too!’

Vastra rose from her seat and started walking around the room.



‘So this is it, Doctor? Your ‘plan’ is to keep me locked up in a house for the rest of my life, since there’s no way I can leave these rooms without someone calling me a freak or wanting to kill me?’

‘Not at all,’ the Doctor replied. He rose and walked over to her. Standing behind her, he placed his hands on her shoulders. ‘There will be some adjustments, I know...you’ll have to wear gloves and a hood most of the time. But I’m sure someone as smart as you can work around them.’

Vastra looked at him.

‘This will be so hard, Doctor.’

The Doctor held out his arms, not expecting her to walk into them. He was surprised when she did, and she quickly wrapped them around her, hugging her close.

‘I now it will, Vastra...but think of this as a way to continue your education in what makes humans so special. And think of it as a way of continuing to help those who aren’t helped by anyone else.’

Vastra broke the hug and stepped back. The Doctor could almost see a tear forming in her eye as she tried to speak.

‘So...this is it then?’

The Doctor nodded.

‘I will see you again, will I?’

The Doctor nodded his head, more energetically.

‘I still have that breakfast tomorrow morning at King’s Cross Station. I will stop back here before I leave to get Rory and Amy. And...’

He paused, deep in thought.

‘...And I don’t think even that will be the last time we see each other.’

‘What do you mean, Doctor?’ Vastra’s voice broke a little on the last syllable.

‘I don’t exactly know, Vastra...just that I have a feeling our paths will cross again, at least one more time. Besides, there’ll come a time that I’ll need to collect on what you owe me for everything I’ve done for you these past few months.’

Vastra nodded

‘You have changed a lot, Doctor.’

‘Vastra,’ he said, smiling, ‘I only changed what you were willing to have changed.’

He looked at his watch.

‘It’ll be quicker for me to get to King’s Cross with the TARDIS than if I took a carriage. I’m going to head back there, and you can spend the night getting accustomed to your new home. How does that sound?’

Vastra nodded, her eyes betraying her uncertainty.

‘I will see you tomorrow, I promise.’

He walked to the front door and let himself out. Vastra heard the click as the door locked. She sighed and began to examine the library.

Suddenly there was a knock on the door. Nervously she walked over and called out.

‘Who is that?’

Muffled by the wood, the voice was still familiar.

‘Vastra, it’s me.’

She unlocked the door and opened it. The Doctor stood on the front step.  
'I nearly forgot...while I'm out tomorrow, I'll put an advertisement in the newspaper that you're looking for house help. It would do you good to have someone around here to keep you company.'

'House help?' Vastra asked in shock. 'Doctor, I...'

The Doctor held up a finger and pressed it against her lips shushing her.

'Just use your intuition. You'll know when you've found the right one.'

The Doctor turned on his heels quickly and started back toward his TARDIS.  
Vastra watched him disappear into the darkness, then closed the door and latched it.  
She leaned against it heavily, her heart pounding in a mix of fear and excitement.

'A new beginning,' she finally said to the silence in the house. 'A new beginning... now I just need to figure out where and how to start.'

