



In Her Absence

In this Issue:
Part Three: Of Daemons
and Flame

by
Julie
Kay



*Autumn wind of eve,
blow away the clouds that mass
over the moon's pure light
and the mists that cloud our mind,
do thou sweep away as well.
Now we disappear,
well, what must we think of it?
From the sky we came.
Now we may go back again.
That's at least one point of view.*

Hôjô Ujimasa

1538-1590

The Doctor and Vastra arrived just as the High Priests ascended the dais. Other than Vastra's green, scaled skin, they fit in perfectly in the sea of black before them, though they did notice their clothes seemed a bit richer than those of the majority. That must be one of the perks of being a friend of the late King's trusted advisor, thought Vastra. She looked on with increasing curiosity as the priests began intoning songs and passages. The words were mostly alien to her, but here and there she would hear a word or phrase she would understand. She wanted to ask the Doctor about this, but when she turned and opened her mouth, he quickly reached over and placed a hand over it, shaking his head no.

She remembered then.

Kichu-fuda

24 hours' silence.

Her questions would have to wait.

She found, much to her surprise, that time passed quickly when there was nothing but silence. She wandered the area, taking in the still new to her building style, the sculptures, the flowers that scented the air with fragrances she'd never experienced before. She noticed that people would bow to her as she walked by, and she took to bowing in return as she passed, not noticing the looks of shock on their faces as she did so.

She walked beyond the city's gates, along an old path, and found a small pool surrounded by a copse of low hanging trees. She carefully hung her robes over a branch and dove into the pool in a single effortless gesture. It felt good to swim again...some of her favorite times before the hibernation were racing her sisters in the underground pools, heated by the earth's hidden energies. Her sleep had not dulled her skills one whit, and she flipped and turned in the cool water, silently reveling at the sensation.

After a while, she felt herself start to slow down. The water was cool, and she knew what that meant. Sadly she pulled herself from the pool and lay out on the grassy bank she dove from. She felt the sun beat against her skin, drying the water and warming her blood once again. She had missed much in her sleep, she thought. So much had changed...including the apes.

Humans, she corrected herself without a thought. *They're humans, and not at all what I remember them being like.*

She heard a rustle across the pool from where she lay. In a flash she grabbed her robe and pulled it over her. She quickly and quietly slid around to the back of the tree, placing it between her and the source of the sound. She waited a few moments, then peeked around the side.

'Are we enjoying ourselves, Vastra?'

She walked out from behind the tree. 'Some warning would have been nice, Doctor,' she said. She tried to look cross, but could not find it in her to remain so. She reached up in the tree, pulled down the black silk sash that had been tied around her waist, and set to recreating that intricate knot. When she finished, she looked up to see him sitting on the opposite bank.

‘This was one of my favorite places to come and sit. And think,’ the Doctor said absently. ‘No one ever comes here, it’s peaceful, and sometimes that’s what you need. Peace.’

Vastra nodded. At one point she would not have understood, would not have believed, but her mind was slowly opening up to many new things.

‘In there...the hall...I started to hear words I knew. How do they know my language?’

The Doctor laughed. ‘It’s actually sort of the other way around. I think. OK, not really. Well, it is, but...’

He paused.

‘Let me start over.’

Vastra nodded. ‘I think you had better, yes.’

‘It’s called the TARDIS translation circuit. It gently modifies your brain’s ability to understand languages. It’s one of the reasons I can speak anything.’

Vastra looked at him. ‘So it is in my head, changing me?’

The Doctor shook his head slightly. ‘Not so much changing you as opening up pathways you always had, but never had to use. Anyone can learn a new language if they really try, but it can be hard. The TARDIS kind of makes it...well...automatic.’

Vastra looked at him, unconvinced.

‘Think of it is a...gift,’ he said, smiling.

‘It is certainly a surprising one,’ Vastra said. She walked around the pool and sat next to the Doctor, gathering her robe beneath her.

‘What are they doing now?’

The Doctor picked up a small, smooth pebble and tossed it into the pool. ‘Right now everything is silent, which is to be expected. King Eisō’s family has gathered, and Taisei has offered his final farewell to his father. He will remain sequestered until the funeral itself, lest he show any untoward emotion.’

Vastra looked at the Doctor in shock. ‘But he was the King’s son? Should he not be sad?’

The Doctor nodded. ‘Of course he should be, and he is. But his people must not see that, or else they may fear that he will be a weak leader for them. They will expect him to be kind, and compassionate...but also strong of mind and body. This is a delicate time for the kingdom, and should someone wish to do these people harm, there would be no better time than now for that to happen.’

Vastra nodded. ‘I certainly can understand that.’

She thought for a moment, and then spoke again. ‘Why are you here, by the way? With how close you seem to be to that advisor, Tsugu, I’d have thought you would remain at the hall.’

The Doctor smiled and waved a hand dismissively. ‘Oh, I’d just be in the way right now. Besides, if I know Tsugu half as well as I think I do, I expect he thinks you have questions that need answering. He’d have expected you to take a walk, and when you left the city gates, he...might have gently nudged me in the right direction.’

He paused for a second, wincing.

‘Nearly ninety years old, that man, and he can still leave a bruise with that walking stick of his.’

Vastra reared her head back and laughed heartily. By the time she finally got her outburst under control, she could see the pout on the Doctor’s face.

‘Enjoy my misery, go ahead,’ he muttered.

Vastra patted him on the shoulder, a move that shocked both of them. ‘Oh, I am sure you will survive, Doctor. Certainly you must have had worse before.’ She turned away before seeing his face drop, sadder than she could possibly have conceived.

‘So? What do we do the rest of the day?’

The Doctor looked up at the sky. ‘It’ll be close to evening soon. We can head back to the hall...I am certain that there’ll be a small repast left for us in our rooms. Sleep, then tomorrow will be much the same as today, except there’ll be a bit less silence. I’ll see if Tsugu can set aside some time so we can catch back up on my *sanshin* lessons, and you can explore to your heart’s content. By this point I think you’re pretty well assured that people will treat you with respect.’

Vastra smiled. ‘I noticed that today, actually.’

She paused, deep in thought, before asking the question that had been burning at her for some time.

‘Doctor?’

He looked over to her. ‘Yes?’

‘You really were not late for a music lesson, were you?’

The Doctor opened his mouth in dramatic surprise. ‘Of course I was! You heard it from Tsugu himself!’

Vastra’s eyes narrowed. ‘But that was not the real reason you brought me here, was it?’

The Doctor smiled as she asked that question, pointed at her and laughed quietly. ‘Now you’re catching on!’

‘So you lied to me.’

The Doctor’s face went from joy to seriousness in a beat. ‘I always lie, Vastra... unless it’s important.’

‘So this is important.’

The Doctor nodded. ‘Yes it is...and when you figure it out, you’ll know why.’

The Doctor stood up, dusted himself off, and started walking around the pool toward the path Vastra took hours earlier. He turned, saw her still standing there, and motioned to her. ‘Come on, Vastra...it’s nearly dinner time and I’m starving!’

Sighing, Vastra lifted her robes (ensuring they didn’t collect any mud or dirt as she walked perilously close to the edge of the pool) and followed the Doctor back toward the city proper.



Vastra clenched her eyes tightly, trying to block out the bright sun that shone through her window. While the Doctor seemed sad that he’d not wake to the sun’s light, she still would have preferred a somewhat less blinding wake up call. Still, she could tell that this day was different than yesterday. For one, she could hear voices outside. They

were subtle, hushed, reverent, but there was not utter silence. She heard activity, and her natural curiosity was getting the better of her. She rose from bed, feeling her muscles ache slightly. The swim had been a good workout yesterday...and if she was lucky, and the day not too busy, she thought she just might steal away to that pool and indulge a second time.

Then she thought about the fact that the Doctor knew about it.

No, perhaps I won't after all, she thought to herself. Though I could always see if I could find someplace else...

Her mind wandered as she dressed. She saw a fresh robe and sash laid on a low table against the far wall, and figured it would be best to continue what seemed to be the custom. The Doctor had used some strange phrase...‘When in Rome,’ he had said, and while she really had no idea what he meant (she sometimes thought he didn’t even know what he meant), she thought it might mean that it was best to try and fit in. So she pulled the robe around her, carefully knotted and laid flat the sash, and cheerfully ignored the footwear that had been left for her. They thought her a dragon, and by their gods she would walk like one.

She drew the curtains aside and saw the Doctor waiting for her.

‘Good morning, sleepyhead! I was wondering when you’d decide to join us!’

Vastra glared at him. ‘And how long exactly have you been there?’

‘There as in here, or there as in awake,’ he replied, the smile not leaving his face for an instant.

‘Either. Or. I want to know if I should be mildly offended or...slightly more than mildly offended, if you must know.’

‘Honestly? Just a few minutes. It’s really quite strange...I’m so used to rushing about, and it’s weird seeing things happen slowly. And in the right order.’

He paused.

‘Anyway,’ he finally said after a few moments’ pause, looking down at the ever present wristwatch, ‘it’s nearly breakfast time. We’ll be eating with the King’s...future King’s advisors, along with Prince Taisei. I hope you’re hungry.’

She could feel her stomach growl, and only hoped that the Doctor did not hear it.

Unfortunately, her hopes were dashed when he laughed quietly and put an arm around her shoulder.

‘And it seems you are. I am, too. Let’s go...we don’t want to miss anything!’

They walked into a small chamber off one side of the great hall. The few attendees voices hushed as the Doctor and Vastra entered. She watched as the Doctor bowed, and figured she should do the same. As she did, she heard a slight gasp from across the room. Looking up, she saw a youngish man of perhaps 20 looking at her in surprise. As she looked around the room, she saw that she was the only female in attendance.

‘I told you,’ spoke a familiar voice. She turned to see Tsugu enter the room behind her. ‘I told you she came to bring you great honor, much as her friend Kyoujyu did for your father.’

Tsugu wrapped one arm around the Doctor's shoulder, and the other around Vastra's. 'Come and join us, friends. I am sure Prince Taisei would like to learn more of you while we eat. The next few days will be busy ones, even for an old man like myself, and we must keep our strength.'

Over breakfast, the Doctor regaled Taisei and the court with his tale of how he met the late King Eisō. There was laughter, gasps of shock and surprise, and in truth, Vastra was not sure how much of this tale was fact and how much was fiction. It didn't seem to matter...with every word the Doctor made more certain their stay would be a safe and pleasant one. In return, they heard from Taisei and his late father's advisors more tales of his rule. She felt as if she were in the center of some contest to see who would tell the most outlandish, yet believable story. Yet she found it fascinating, and learned more about these people, and the Doctor, with every passing moment.

It was a nudge from the Doctor that focused her attention on the fact that the room had grown silent. She looked around, and noticed all eyes were on her. She suddenly felt very self conscious, something she was quite unfamiliar with.

'You will excuse me...I was just so engrossed in your tales.'

The Doctor smiled. 'Prince Taisei was asking how it was that you came here at this time, Vastra.'

She swallowed, not sure how or what to say.

'I...' she began, her single word fading into silence. Still they waited, patient for her to continue. She finally found the words she was looking for, and continued.

'I was woken from a deep sleep...a sleep, apparently, of thousands of years. While I slept, apparently, so much had changed on my...our...planet. This man found me, and offered to show me how humans had changed since I was last awake. In my youth, your kind hunted us, and we them. He told me so much had become different, and asked me to come with him so he could show me.'

She paused, turned, and looked at the Doctor. He nodded his head, almost imperceptibly, and one eyebrow raised just the tiniest bit.

'What he has shown me is almost beyond my capability to understand. I am learning much from my journey with him, and I hope I can use that knowledge to teach others.'

The room fell silent at these words. Vastra felt the silence to be almost unbearable. She was about to speak again when Tsugu finally bowed his head, smiled, and spoke.

'The wisest man is the man who knows he knows nothing, because it means he is open to learning everything. Remember this, Taisei. Never think that you will have all the answers. You will grow, and learn, and as you do you will grow wiser. But never allow yourself to stop learning. That is the sign of a foolish and poor leader.'

Prince Taisei bowed his head. 'Thank you, Tsugu.' He then turned and faced Vastra. 'And thank you as well, for honoring me with your presence and your words. I hope I can learn from them.'

Vastra smiled, and if she could have blushed from the compliment, she would have.

The Prince stood and clapped his hands together once. As he did, a group of servants rushed in and cleared the low table of dishes and plates of food. Cups were brought out, along with pitchers of fresh, cold spring water. They drank slowly, and Vastra noted how the minerals in the water gave it a slight tang. She wondered if the others could taste it like she did.

‘There is much to be done in the next few days, my friends. I will be in my chambers for the day, preparing for tomorrow’s funeral. The rest of you know your appointed tasks, and I trust that they are completed or that you are awaiting contact from the other villages following the announcement of Father’s death..’

He paused, acknowledging his advisor’s nods.

‘Tsugu *sensai*,’ he continued, turning to the old man, ‘You have been granted two special tasks, as you know. One must be done tomorrow, but the other...’

‘The other is no task at all, my Prince. It will be a pleasure to occupy my friends’ time. They will be prepared for tomorrow’s ceremonies, have no fear of that.’

Vastra looked nervously at the Doctor, who waved his hand dismissively, as if saying *don’t worry about it*.

Are you certain? Her face expressed in reply. She couldn’t quite figure out if his smile meant *of course I’m certain* or *of course not, we’re both going to die*.

She’d have to wait to find out, she guessed.

‘If you will all excuse me then,’ Prince Taisei said quietly, ‘I need to attend to Mother and make sure she is alright before making my final arrangements for tomorrow. I suggest you all do the same.’ He bowed once and left through heavy red velvet curtains. As soon as the curtains fell still, his advisors quickly stood and left the room, talking amongst themselves and worrying over their duties. The Doctor, Tsugu and Vastra were the only three remaining.

‘Well, I suppose it is just us three again,’ Tsugu said with a laugh. The Doctor joined him, while Vastra seemed far less amused.

‘Would one of you care to explain to me what ‘being prepared for tomorrow’s ceremony’ means? I do not think I like the sound of this.’

Tsugu walked to her side. ‘My friend...my dear, new friend. You need not worry. I simply will go over a few things with you about the funeral ceremonies tomorrow, and you will be free for the day to do as you wish. Kyoujyu, on the other hand, will be catching up on his music lessons. I expect he has quite a bit to catch up on.’

As they walked to the great doors leading out of the hall, it was Vastra’s turn to smile, while the Doctor looked decidedly uncomfortable. She even caught him run his hand through his hair nervously a time or two. It almost pained her to admit it, but she found enjoyment in that.

They walked through the doors and out into the sunlight. It took a few moments for their eyes to adjust, but they could all see the large pyre being erected in the center of the courtyard. They gazed on it silently, all of them knowing its task the next day.

‘Kyoujyu tells me you are an avid swimmer,’ Tsugu said, breaking the uncomfortable silence. ‘He also tells me that you found the small pool near the hills. If you’d rather something a bit larger, I could direct you to one.’

‘Go on,’ replied Vastra, her enthusiasm quite evident.

‘Travel further down the road you followed yesterday,’ Tsugu said. ‘You will see a tree that looks like an old man, hunched over with age. Follow the direction he is pointing in...you will not miss it.’

‘Thank you, Tsugu. I...’

Her reply was interrupted by a loud bang, almost like a firework going off. All activity stopped as everyone looked to the sky. A bright object, brighter by far than the sun, streaked across the sky toward the west. It arced downward, below the tree line, and faded from view. The path it burnt across the sky, however, remained, like some kind of trail.

‘What was that?’ Vastra asked, quietly.

Almost in response, a worker in the courtyard exclaimed ‘It is an evil omen! A demon surely has come to claim the life of our new king just as they did good King Eisō!’

‘No, no no!’ called out Tsugu, trying to calm the crowd. It is nothing of the sort. We have all seen stars that fall from the sky! This is no different, only that it fell during the day! Pay it no heed!’

His words did little to quiet things, and soon everyone in the courtyard was in a panic, fearing the worst. Vastra looked about in shock...this is what she remembered seeing, back before she slept. Superstitious apes, bickering amongst themselves over scraps of food, unable or unwilling to work together to meet a common goal. She began to wonder, after the days of seeing them at their best, if they really had changed at all.

‘QUIET!’ yelled the Doctor. It was loud enough to be heard over all the squabbling in the courtyard. Even Vastra was taken aback by it. This was something she had never seen, and the firmness and stony look on his face chilled her.

‘King Eisō was an honest man...and he believed in Tsugu enough to make him his most trusted and closest advisor. He own son, Prince Taisei, feels the same way. And you ignore his words so easily?’

The squabbling had dulled to a quiet whisper. All eyes were on the Doctor, including Tsugu, who looked on with a faint smile on his face.

‘And if this is an omen, then it is a good one! Obviously they have come to prepare to take the spirit of King Eisō already to the Heavens, such were his deeds. So stop arguing! Stop fighting! Is this how you would want your late king to see you?’

A few muttered responses of ‘No’ came from the crowd.

‘Is this how you want your future king to see you?’

The crowd replied ‘No’ again, this time more forcefully.

‘Alright then! Stop your worrying, stop your bickering, and let’s give good old King Eisō the best send off we can!’

The crowd looked at him, unsure of what the Doctor meant, but went back to their tasks. Tsugu looked at him quizzically.

‘A bit too far, Tsugu?’

Tsugu held his fingers an inch or so apart. ‘I believe, Kyoujyu, you would say ‘Just a bit.’

He laughed.

‘I will see you in my quarters in a half hour...I hope you are ready to impress.’

The Doctor bowed. ‘I won’t let you down, teacher.’

‘We shall see about that,’ Tsugu said with a quiet laugh. ‘We shall see.’

As he turned and walked back to his quarters, Vastra grabbed the Doctor by the sleeve and pulled him aside.

‘Alright Doctor...what was that?’

He looked up at the trail, still fading from the cloudless sky.

‘It’s really too difficult to say. A daylight meteor certainly isn’t unheard of, and with the pop, not to mention how bright it was, it could have been a bolide.’

He paused, his eyes following the path across the sky.

‘But the trajectory is all wrong. I mean, it could have skipped across the atmosphere, but no, that was too perfect an arc for that.’

‘I didn’t hear an explosion when it hit,’ Vastra said.

‘Might not have,’ the Doctor replied. ‘It might have all burned up in the atmosphere before ever touching the ground, although something that bright...it’d have to have been pretty big to burn so bright. Unless...’

‘Unless what, Doctor?’

Vastra looked at him, jaw firm, eyes locked on his.

‘Seven hundred years from now I’d say it was man made. But it’s not even 1300 yet, so there’s not a single civilization on the planet that has the technology to send anything into space...unless by space you mean the air right above your head and by sending you mean tossing it up by hand. So there’d be no reason for anyone to come here, either...it’s just too early for that.’

‘Then what exactly are you suggesting? That you have no idea?’

The Doctor smiled.

‘That’s exactly what I’m suggesting. Also that we’ll probably find out at the same time. Furthermore, that you should take Tsugu up on his offer...that pond is amazing to swim in. Finally, that I’d better get to his quarters before he finds more pails of water for me to carry. Frankly, the water carrying bit? It’s getting tiring. Literally.’

He turned, took two or three steps towards Tsugu’s quarters, then pivoted on his heels. Vastra hadn’t moved, but he really hadn’t given her much of a chance to.

‘Vastra?’

‘Yes?’

‘If by chance you do see anything odd, you will come back here and tell me, right?’

Vastra waved her arms around. ‘Doctor...everything here is odd to me.’

The Doctor opened his mouth to reply, paused and then raised a finger up. ‘Good point. How about this? If you see anything odder than this...something that doesn’t seem to fit...get back here right away and tell me. Alright?’

‘Do you expect I will?’ Vastra looked concerned.

‘I don’t know what to expect, but right now one king is dead, his only son is about to be crowned king, and if anyone wanted to upset the balance of history, now would be a perfect time to do it.’

Vastra nodded. ‘Understood, Doctor.’

‘Kyoujyu!’ exclaimed a voice from across the courtyard.

The Doctor ran his hand through his hair again. ‘I’d better get going. Remember...if you see anything odd, get back here immediately. Got it?’

Vastra nodded. ‘Good luck with the water pails,’ she added, cheerfully.

The Doctor glared and turned to scurry across the courtyard while Vastra's laughs faded as he ran.



Curiosity very nearly got the better of Vastra.

She figured such would be the case even as she passed the city gates and began heading down the road. The walk was pleasant, the sun gradually heating the air and brightening her spirits. About two miles past the path she had followed to find the pool she swam in yesterday, she saw the tree Tsugu mentioned. She supposed with a little imagination it might just look like an old man, bent over. Even here she could smell the water, cool and clean and with that mineral tang she had tasted before. She could smell the flowers that grew around the pool, fragrant. She judged the pool was maybe a half mile from the road, and she was certain that unless one knew about it, no one would ever find it.

She stood near the tree, mulling over her options. It would be very easy to just continue down the road and search out whatever it was that fell out of the sky. She always had been inquisitive, and she knew that it usually got her in trouble, even from her early childhood. *Still*, she thought to herself, *how would anyone ever know if I did not go swimming?*

She looked up to the sky, trying to judge where the slash of light had passed. The trail it had left behind was faint now, but she made a guess at its course and distance. She'd prepared for an afternoon away from the activity and chaos that would lead to tomorrow's funeral, and the small pack slung over her shoulder with a light lunch and clean robes attested to that. She was thankful she prepared, as it looked to be a fairly long walk. She gazed over toward the east, where it seemed the faint trail arced, and began to walk in that direction.

She'd only taken a few steps when she heard noise up ahead. She thought about the fact that she wasn't exactly human, and while she knew she was more or less accepted back at the city by the people there (or at least the ones that mattered; after all, she was a 'dragon' as proclaimed by the late king's advisors, and obviously an omen of some import), the likelihood was that anyone else seeing her would run in fright, or stop to attack her.

Neither was an option that appealed to her, especially with the bustle at the hall and the Doctor warning her to be careful.

She quickly moved off the road, found some fairly thick underbrush that offered her cover while still allowing her a clean line of sight to the road, and waited. If something suspicious or strange did come her way, she wanted to be able to see it clearly enough to report back. Several groups of people passed, dressed much like the residents

she had been around the previous two or three days, obviously heading to pay their final respects. Nothing seemed unusual or out of the ordinary.

Perhaps investigating isn't the best course of action, she thought to herself. Not at the moment, at least. But soon.

Her stomach growled, and she figured it was as good a time as any to eat. She remained hidden from the road and passers by as she ate, wondering what the Doctor could possibly be worried about. While he didn't look exactly like these humans, he did look human enough, yet she sensed there was something more about him, something hidden. Obviously, the fact that he had a strange blue box that was bigger within than without, which traveled in time (and space, he had said), had something to do with that. No matter what the reason, she believed that he was more worried than he was saying, and she intended if at all possible to find out why.

Her meal finished, she packed her sack and thought for a split second about continuing down the road when the wind picked up the scent of the water and the flowers again. They reminded her so strongly of the springs deep beneath the earth that she had swum in as a child. The draw was too much to resist, and she turned back away from the road and headed toward the spring-fed pool. A few minutes' easy walk later, she stood a few yards from its edge.

'Some pool,' she said aloud. 'This is more like a lake.'

A small island rose up out of the center of the water; a small building rose from the island, gleaming white marble blazing in the sun. The flowers were not random wildflowers either...they seemed to be carefully tended, planted and cultivated flowers. It struck her as odd that such a place would be so hidden, but perhaps there was reason for that. It was beyond her what these humans did...even though some things, like the proper honoring of the dead and the rites associated with it, made sense, others, such as this place, made none whatsoever.

She shook her head. There was no point in trying to understand it. She slipped off her robe and, with a running leap, jumped into the water. It was every bit as cold as it looked, and for a few moments she thought she might not make her way back to the surface. She finally broke free of the water's embrace, her head rising up above the gently waving surface.

'A bit cool,' she said quietly, 'but refreshing!'

She began an easy paced swim to the island at the lake's center. At the very least, she wanted to see what was there. After a few minutes she stopped to see how much further it was, and was surprised to see she was barely half way there. Determined, she picked up her pace, and after a minute or two more she was walking out of the water toward the pillared building. She walked inside, the water dripping off her scales like tiny crystals, and saw the Doctor.

Her eyes grew wide.

'How is that even possible?'

Before her stood a statue of the Doctor, dressed in robes similar to the ones they had worn since their welcome at the court. There were no inscriptions, no carvings, nothing to indicate why such a thing would be here. She walked around it in obvious shock, her eyes wide, her mouth open nearly as wide.

It was too much for her. She quickly left the building, nearly running, and dove back into the lake. Countless questions started running through her head, and she struggled to keep up with them all.

How is this possible? Who is he? How could this statue be here? Why did he bring me here? How long have these people known about him? How old is he? What is he? None of this makes any sense...how can any of this be here? How did he just show up when everything went wrong after I woke up?

She reached the shore where she disrobed and collapsed on the ground, her breathing ragged, her pulse racing. Despite the chill of the water she felt her blood heated inside her as she tried desperately to process what she just saw. She lay there, gasping for air, and let the chaos overtake her long enough to pass into darkness.

When she awoke, she found herself lying on the ground where she came out of the lake, much calmer but with just as many questions racing through her head. She looked up at the sky and tried to gauge how long she had been sleeping. Judging by the angle, she guessed it had to be hours, as the sun was creeping toward the western horizon. If she started back now, she'd make it back before sunset.

Correction, she thought. Even now I'll be lucky to make it back before dark, and that's if I hurry.

She turned and started to head back. What started as a walk turned to a jog as she tried to beat the sun.



As she did, a small group rounded the bend just up the road from where Vastra had stood. Where previous groups had numbered in the dozens, this group counted only nine people. They were silent as well, while the larger groups talked amongst themselves. They also wore armor, very similar in design to that worn by the guards and soldiers back at the city. The armor was lacquered black, gleaming brightly despite the inky blackness of the plates. They marched in two rows of four, with a single individual walking alone at the rear.

Without a word, they suddenly stopped in the middle of the road. The man at the back, taller by at least a head, broke off and headed toward the edge of the road that led toward where Vastra had stepped back onto the road. He bent down and picked up a handful of dirt, allowing it to pass through slightly opened fingers encased in gleaming black metal. Moments passed inexorably slowly until finally he turned back to his regiment and they continued up the road toward the city.



Vastra reached the city gates just as the sun touched the western horizon. There were far more people here than when she left, dressed in countless variants of the same basic dress. *Obviously they are all from different tribes*, she thought to herself, *all ruled by one King. A powerful man he must have been...more powerful than I first thought*. She walked among them, not noticing their wide eyed looks and hushed words as she passed. She briskly walked back toward the main hall, and had just reached the top step when a familiar voice stopped her.

‘Enjoy your swim, Vastra?’

She turned and saw the Doctor, leaning up against a wall, a small smirk on his face.

‘Oh...yes. Yes, it was quite nice. Please thank your friend for recommending that place.’

The Doctor pushed off the wall, the smirk not leaving his face.

‘What did you see?’

She looked at him, her eyes curious.

‘I beg your pardon? What do you think I saw? I saw water, and flowers, and the birds flying around...it really was a lovely pool. It reminded me so much of some of the hot springs I swam in when I was younger.’

‘What about the statues?’

Vastra paused. *He knows. How does he know?*

This was quickly followed by *Of course he knows. How could he not know?*

‘They were...interesting. Would you care to explain at least one of them to me, Doctor?’

The Doctor’s smile widened.

‘In fact, Doctor, would you perhaps care to explain a number of things for me? It seems every time I turn around I have more questions than I have answers. And it is not that it is a difficult position to be in, considering that I have no answers and a great many questions that require those non-existent answers.’

His smile dropped. Just a little.

‘I could do that. Or...’

She swallowed and took a breath. ‘Or?’

‘Or...’

He paused, thinking.

‘Or you really didn’t go swimming at all, and decided to take it on yourself to go see what fell from the sky, possibly putting yourself in huge danger if it was in fact something...dangerous.’

He made motions with his hand as if working out something in his head.

‘Oh, that kind of got away from me a bit, didn’t it?’

‘Doctor, I...’

He reached out and put a hand over her mouth. ‘Hush. Thinking. What was I thinking? Oh yes...I was asking if you went to see if you could find what fell. Did you? What did you find?’

She made a muffled noise.

‘What was that?’

Again she tried to speak, but all that came out was a muffled noise, albeit louder this time, and more frustrated.

‘What...oh!’

He took his hand off her mouth.

‘Sorry...got carried away there. Anyway...what did you see?’

‘I saw many groups of travelers heading here. When I heard them coming, I got off the road to make sure I did not draw any attention.’

‘Good idea,’ said the Doctor. ‘After all, it’s possible not all would be as...enlightened as the citizens here.’

Vastra nodded. ‘Most of them came in groups of twenty or thirty or more, families I would guess, or people from a small camp or village. They talked quietly amongst themselves, but I did not hear much of what they said.’

He looked at her carefully. ‘Anything else?’

She paused, took a deep breath, and decided to try once again. She thought if she used shorter sentences she might be able to keep his attention more easily.

‘And then I went swimming. At the lake. And I saw a statue. In a building on an island. And it happened to look like someone we both know. And we have in fact established this fact, which you seem bound and determined to avoid in lieu of other lines of discussion, and I for one would like to know why!’

He waved his hands dismissively, while his voice dripped annoyance. ‘Yes, yes, I know all about that...but I’m talking about important things. Big things. Big, important things.’

Vastra sighed. Obviously he was not going to address any of this. ‘No, Doctor. I did not see a single thing that seemed out of place. Should I have?’

The Doctor nodded absently. ‘Possibly. Possibly not. I can’t help but think we’re missing something.’

She looked at the Doctor warily. ‘Tell me why you are so curious, Doctor. And tell me why you refuse to answer my questions.’

He looked around, and quickly grabbed Vastra by the sleeve. He pulled her toward a shadow, where they’d be out of sight and out of hearing range from any passers by.

‘Vastra, I never just end up going places out of sheer dumb luck. I always seem to end up showing up in a place when something big and important is about to happen. And think about it...the king has just died, and his only son is about to take the throne.’

He paused, waiting for his words to sink in.

‘If there was any better time to throw the kingdom into chaos, I can’t think of it. Can you?’

Vastra shook her head. She let go of her frustration for a moment, as what the Doctor said made sense.

‘Have you shared your worry with the King’s advisors?’

The Doctor nodded. ‘They’re aware, yes. They have the same concerns I do. And they’ll have soldiers positioned to protect the Prince as best as possible.’

‘Yet you still worry.’

He nodded again. ‘Anything can be a temporal tipping point, and a nudge here or a push there...one thread falls out of place, and all of history can be rewritten. So yes...I always worry, Vastra. It comes with the job.’

Vastra laughed. 'You talk as if you have some kind of control over time!' The Doctor's solemn look cut her laugh short. 'I did...once. Or rather, my people did.' He paused. 'But that's a long time ago now. All I can do now is try to make sure things remain as they should.'

Vastra's eyes narrowed. 'There is much about you I wish to know, Doctor.' He nodded. 'And maybe once all this is passed, we'll have time. Time...'

The Doctor laughed. 'Nine hundred and seven years, and I never have enough time.' Her eyes widened at his statement. 'Nine hundred and...'

'Not now. Later.'

Vastra opened her mouth to argue, but saw it was a futile task. 'I promise you, Vastra....assuming we figure out what is going on here, and assuming that we're able to put a stop to whatever might happen, and assuming once all of that is said and done we're both standing, I'll tell you everything. But for now...'

He paused, took in a deep breath, and then continued as if there had been no break.

'For now we'll go eat with the Prince, and after dinner I'll show you what I learned today on the *sanshin*. I think I finally learned how to hold it right!'

Vastra shook her head in frustration and followed the Doctor out of the shadow and toward the main hall, into its warm, welcoming light.

He is right, she said to herself, much as I loathe to admit that. So much can happen tomorrow, and I suppose it would behoove us to be prepared for any eventuality. Perhaps he will even surprise me with this musical instrument he is so obsessed with...but by the sound of it, I will not get my hopes up.



The morning of the funeral dawned darkly.

Vastra opened her eyes, uncertain if it was actually dawn. The quiet murmur of activity seemed to point in that direction, but a quick look out the window offered a sky filled with dark layered clouds. A light breeze blew, and on a sunny day it might have offered respite, but matched with the overcast day, it felt far less accommodating. She shivered slightly, wrapping the sheet she'd been covered in more tightly around her.

She had no idea what the schedule was for the day, but there didn't seem to me much time to waste. She grabbed her robes and started to dress, then stopped. She thought about how nervous the Doctor had seemed, and how unlike him that was. Even

in the short time she'd been traveling with him, he always seemed confident, in control, almost a step ahead of whatever was going on around him. Last night, even at dinner, he seemed preoccupied, his mind perhaps hundreds of miles away...or hundreds of years away, if his announced age were actually true. This did not seem to be some kind of act put on to impress...he seemed well and truly worried that something was going to happen. And if something did, then she was going to be ready for it. It was impossible to assume that no one would just drop in on her, but most people did seem to have the courtesy of knocking before intruding, and so she pulled her robes back off, instead donning her more familiar and comfortable light armor. She pulled the robes back around her and looked in a mirror on the wall.

'Can hardly tell the armor is under there,' she whispered, and proceeded to tie her sash off around her waist.

She walked out into the hall and saw the Doctor waiting for her, as usual.

'Have you been waiting there long?' she asked, her voice quiet.

'No, not terribly. In fact, I was just coming back to make sure you were awake. The rites will be starting soon.'

'Oh...alright,' she replied. 'Then I suppose we should join the others.'

'Indeed we should,' the Doctor replied. He turned, took a few steps, and then stopped. Vastra nearly ran into him as he turned to face her.

'Are you alright?' he asked, his face suddenly filled with concern.

'Yes. Fine.'

His eyes narrowed.

'Vastra...what's wrong?'

'Nothing,' she replied, more quickly than she had perhaps intended. The Doctor reached out to assure her, but she recoiled slightly, staying out of his reach.

'I said I was fine.'

The Doctor's face showed his hurt, and Vastra felt it too. She did not know how he would react to her decision to wear her armor, but if he was correct in his fears, her worries would be moot. If he were incorrect, well...she'd deal with that when the time came.

He pulled his hand back. 'I suppose this is all about yesterday then?'

She nodded her head, again almost too quickly. 'Yes. I suppose that is it.'

That response at least brought back some semblance of a smile to his face. 'Well, I suppose I deserve that. But a promise is a promise, Vastra...and I'm sure once all of this is done, you and I can find the time to sit down and I can explain some things to you.'

He paused.

'I should warn you...it is a long story.'

She smiled. 'That is quite fine, Doctor. You will find I have a rather good attention span.'

The Doctor's smile widened. 'That's settled then.'

He looked down at his watch.

'And we really should get going...they should be starting any moment now. It wouldn't be polite to be late.'

'What about food? Breakfast, I believe was what you called it?'

The Doctor shook his head.

‘Not today. Today will be fasting, in honor of the deceased. I hope you ate your fill, because there won’t be a thing to eat until tomorrow morning.’

Vastra’s stomach growled in protest. She hoped the Doctor hadn’t heard, but his quiet laugh dashed that hope before it even fully formed.

‘I feel the same way.’

He offered his hand, and she took it without pause.

‘Come on...it’s time to say a final farewell to King Eisō.’

How odd this is, walking together with a human like this, she thought to herself. *How much have I changed? And how much more will I change because of this man?*

Hand in hand, they walked out to the courtyard as the funeral began.



Vastra wasn’t sure what to expect, but what she saw was beyond even her wildest imaginings.

While the courtyard seemed a bustle of activity, filled with people, when they first arrived, she now wondered how anyone could possibly move in that space. Thousands kneeled, all dressed in black with plain white shirts beneath their robes. Here and there she saw tall, vertical flags, which she presumed were markers showing where one group had come from. A tall wooden pyre had been erected at the center of the courtyard, and she could see a body wrapped in ornate robes atop it.

That must be Eisō, she thought to herself.

She looked over at the Doctor, who seemed every bit as amazed as she was.

‘You seem surprised, Doctor,’ she whispered.

He nodded. ‘I’ve never seen anything like this, and that is actually saying something. It’s a memory I’m sure I’ll keep for a very long time.’

They watched together as a small group of men walked toward the pyre. Two she recognized as Tsugu, the Doctor’s friend and close advisor to the late King. The other was Prince Taisei, Eisō’s only son and soon to be King of this land. She assumed the others were advisors or priests of some sort. As the group approached the pyre, Vastra kneeled in respect. The Doctor soon joined her, and the ceremony began.

The Doctor seemed fully engrossed in the rites and ceremonies, but Vastra could not help but dart her eyes around, looking for anything suspicious. Her intuition told her the Doctor’s fears were correct, and if the Doctor’s attentions were going to be drawn elsewhere, she’d keep a close watch on things. She kept being drawn to the sheer number of humans here...never had she seen such a group gathered. In the past, her people would have laughed at the sport of chasing them down, and yet now, despite them looking so different, she thought of them just as she thought of her own people.

Tall torches burned and flickered at the four corners of the pyre, sending sparks flying, caught by the breeze and lifted upward to the dark sky. She half listened to the priests as they intoned their holy words, offering condolence and succor to the family of the dead while offering the King's spirit to the gods in their heaven. As a soldier, she barely ever paid heed to those words, even when similar words were spoken when their own dead were buried, but she knew that they must offer some kind of hope to all these people, who at least respected the late King, if not loved him.

Out of the corner of her eye, she caught movement. She turned toward it, and saw two small children running about, obviously bored or having lost interest in the goings on around them. She definitely understood that, remembering back to the number of times she had been scolded for not paying attention when being taught. There were times she yearned for those more carefree, youthful days, but even she admitted to herself that the discipline she earned (and quite often, deserved) made her a better, stronger soldier.

More movement, this time further past the children.

'Doctor?'

'Shh, Vastra...they're about to entreat for King Eisō to be allowed entrance into *Tengoku*.'

'But Doctor, I...'

'Shh!'

She exhaled in frustration. She turned back to get a better look at what was happening. As the children ran about, they waved wooden swords at each other playfully. From further back in the crowd, a small group of men slowly advanced toward them. They were dressed in what looked to be similar armor to the city's guards, only heavier, black, and shining even in the overcast light. Their helms were almost ornamented, covering their whole face; Vastra did not even see slits for eyes. There were eight of them...no, nine. A ninth joined them, and even from this distance she could tell he was taller by at least a head. They forced their way through the crowd, moving toward the children.

She nudged the Doctor hard in the ribs.

'Doctor!'

'Oww...that hurt! I told you to...'

'Look!'

She pointed. The Doctor followed her outstretched hand until he saw the armored men, and his eyes widened.

'What?'

'That was what I was trying to get your attention for, Doctor!'

'But how...oh. Oh. Oh, I told you we were missing something, Vastra. How could I have been so slow?'

'Doctor, this would be a very good time to tell me very quickly what is going on!'

He said one word.

'Metatraxi.'

‘And that would be?’

‘That would be what came out of the sky. That flash of light was no meteor. It was their ship entering our atmosphere.’

‘Aliens?’

The Doctor looked at her incredulously. ‘You actually have a word for aliens?’

Vastra exhaled in frustration. ‘Another time, Doctor. What are they doing here?’

He ran his hand through his hair. ‘I’ve no idea. But the Metatraxi shouldn’t be any real trouble, as long as no one starts showing any weapons around them.’

Vastra looked down at the children, maybe fifteen or twenty yards away, still waving their wooden swords in mock fight.

‘And why is that?’

‘Well,’ the Doctor replied, ‘the Metatraxi won’t fight unless their opponent has a weapon. They can’t bring themselves to attack an unarmed person. It’s a strange sort of honor, but since there were no weapons allowed here today we should be...’

The Doctor then noticed the two children.

‘Fine?’

He turned to see Vastra gone from his side, running back to the hall just steps behind them. He looked back down; the Metatraxi were moving ever closer. He could see one of them reaching for what appeared to be a gleaming black pommel at his hip. Without thinking, he reached for his sonic screwdriver in his jacket pocket...a jacket pocket that inconveniently was still inside his room in the hall.

He watched as the first soldier came within a few feet of the children. He was about to leap down to stand between them when he felt something knock him aside. He fell to the ground as he heard a keening cry unlike anything he’d heard before.

‘NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!’

He looked up in time to see Vastra flying through the air, swords held in each hand. They looked familiar, those swords, and as he thought about it, he realized they’d come off the wall above the throne room.

The Royal Swords.

The priests stopped their rites as Vastra screamed, and the crowd turned to see her twist in mid air as she lunged down from the top of the stone wall. As the Metatraxi raised its arm, a black sword poised to swipe down at the child, Vastra landed, pivoted on one foot, and swung her blades in a tight arc. She felt metal hitting metal for just a second and then the blades continued their arc. In slow motion, she saw an arm fall to the ground, twitching, and felt something acidic burning at her skin. She hissed as she completed her spin, blades outstretched, standing between the children and the approaching aliens. Somewhere in the distance she heard screams, but they were dulled, her focus fully on the aliens that approached her.

‘You will not harm the little ones!’

She bared her teeth in aggression as the others approached. Soon they encircled her, eight silent armored bodies, all but one holding an identical black blade. She called up to the Doctor.

‘Doctor! Can you get the children away?’

He looked down.

‘No...there’s no way! I’d have to go through them to get the children out of there!’

Vastra smiled.

‘Then I will just have to create a path for you!’

‘No! You can’t, Vastra! It’s too dangerous.’

She took the opportunity to look up briefly at the Doctor before turning her attention back to the Metatraxi. ‘If what you say is true, Doctor, then it is probably already too late. I have weapons...and there is no way I will allow them to harm the children while I live.’

Vastra turned back and watched as the taller of the group walked toward the one she had, quite literally, disarmed. She watched as the wounded one turned to what she now guessed was his superior, and gasped as the leader drew his own sword and ran it through his soldier. The body fell to the ground, dead. The leader withdrew as the others advanced toward her.

With a scream she charged forward, blades crossed in front of her and pointing back in a wedge. She watched as they raised their weapons against her and felt the wind as they flew past her, missing. She slashed left and right, feeling rather than hearing her blades as they struck true. The crowd parted for her as she stopped and spun in time to watch two more fall to the ground, small plumes of smoke rising from the armor where their blood began to eat away.

Three down, she thought. Only five left.

She looked back at the leader, who seemed to be regarding her actions with a distinct lack of interest. She felt her anger flame higher.

Six, then. And that last one should be some pleasure to fell.

They began to charge toward her, swords lowered toward her like spears. She was familiar with such a tactic; it was one of the first she had been taught when she was chosen as a warrior. She was surprised that they bore no shields, though she supposed they never expected to need any.

As they neared her position she crouched. They lowered their blades, and just as they were about to strike she rolled to her left, swinging with a single sword as she did so. She turned to see a fourth body on the ground, struggling to stand as one leg lay several feet behind it. It was no surprise this time to see one of its own kind walk over and almost nonchalantly drive its own sword through its fallen companion’s body, stilling its movement.

‘This hardly seems fair,’ she called out, taunting them. ‘I wound you, and you kill your own instead of me!’

She looked back. The Doctor had already taken advantage of her maneuver to grab the children and pull them away to safety. She smiled as she drew the blades in front of her, the grin widening as one blade scraped against the other. *Oh, it has been far too long since I have fought with a sword,* she thought, her long ago training not

one bit forgotten. *So much more enjoyable than the energy pistols...this way I can see my foe face to face as I kill them.*

She looked at the Metatraxi.

Well, face to helmet at least.

Much of the crowd had moved away, behind the pyre and away from the fighting. She saw the Doctor with the children and their parents, and even from a distance she could tell he was yelling something. All she could hear, though, was the beating of her own heart as she debated her next move. All would hinge on how the remaining four advanced on her...surely by now they must have concluded she was no novice, and would be coming up with some kind of strategy.

That was when she heard the sound.

She heard it before, that much she remembered. She tried to pull from her memory where she had heard the sound before, and finally, in the focus that came with battle, she remembered.

The tunnels.

A green light.

Her energy pistol smoking on the ground.

She looked up and slowly turned her head toward the Doctor. In one hand he held his jacket, in his other outstretched hand he held his...what did he call it? Sonic screwdriver. The end glowed green, as she remembered, and there was the noise.

She turned back and the four Metatraxi convulsed in place, unable to move. She heard the Doctor yelling again, but paid his words no heed. Here was an opening, and she was going to take it. She charged forward, mouth clenched shut, leapt and spun in the air, the blades catching what feeble light the torches let off. This time there wasn't even the feeling of metal on metal as she spun, but she knew the blades struck true.

She landed, both feet firmly planted shoulder width apart, and watched as four bodies collapsed inward toward each other. She stepped back as a pool of thick black ichor oozed from the corpses, leaving small puffs of smoke where it touched grass or scraps of cloth.

She took a deep breath, the burning sensation on her face barely noticeable.

Eight.

She looked up in time to see the leader of the group nearly upon her. This time she did hear the Doctor as he screamed out 'Vastra!' but it was too late. She felt her neck in his hand, felt it closing off as he lifted her easily off the ground. She swung feebly with her arms, but without breath, without leverage to help her propel the blades, her swings were as effective as trying to break a rock with a piece of cloth.

'Most impressive,' she heard the Metatraxi speak, with a deep voice as cold and alien as any she had ever heard. 'I have seen my kind brought down once or twice before, but never by a single soldier...let alone a woman.'

She tried to spit on him, but already her vision was dimming. Still she struggled. 'No matter,' he intoned. 'I will finish with you, and then I alone will eliminate the others where my regiment failed.'

She felt wind and then pain as her back slammed into something hard. What little breath she had left was knocked from her body as she slumped to the ground. One sword was knocked clear from her hand when he hit the wall she had been tossed into; she attempted to grab the other but her hands barely had the energy to close. She looked up as the sky was blotted out by the massive black form above her.

She smiled weakly, and whispered in a harsh voice.

'If you are going to kill me, at least let me see your face so I know who to look for in the afterlife.'

The Metatraxi leader laughed coldly, plunged his sword into the ground, and raised both hands to his helm.

'Look then, at the last thing you will see before I end your life.'

Her eyes widened. The...thing...was insectoid, multifaceted eyes reflecting the ambient light in a dozen dark shades of color. His skin was hard, chitinous, like the head of an ant. Two antennae swept back along its skull, while claw like mandibles moved back and forth slightly, almost in anticipation of victory.

She tried to laugh, but all that came out was a harsh cough.

'No wonder you wear those helmets...I would as well were I that hideous!'

He dropped his helm to the ground and pulled the sword from the earth. He held it over his head in both hands, the tip of the blade pointed downward.

'Die.'

He moved to thrust it down into her when she faintly heard a pinging noise, not unlike the ringing of a small bell. She turned her head weakly to see the Doctor recovering from a hard throw, saw a small rock rolling away from the Metatraxi's back, saw him in turn pivot its head and attention slowly and for just a second toward the Doctor. The Doctor waved, weakly, and smiled.

'You will be next, hu...'

A second was all she needed.

She gathered what little strength she had left, felt the pommel of the sword in her hand, and drove it upward. She felt it hit beneath what must have been his chin, thrust upward and through his skull. Faintly she could see the curved end of the blade protrude from the top of the thing's head. She watched the thing convulse, twitching in place for a few seconds before it fell forward. The momentum drove the rest of the blade into its head, stopped only by the hilt.

The rest was darkness.

