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In Her Absence

In this Issue:
Part Six: Of Subterfuge
and Suspicion
And
Epilogue

by
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*“She walks in beauty, like the night
Of cloudless climes and starry skies;
And all that’s best of dark and bright
Meet in her aspect and her eyes:
Thus mellow’d to that tender light
Which heaven to gaudy day denies.*

*One shade the more, one ray the less,
Had half impair’d the nameless grace
Which waves in every raven tress,
Or softly lightens o’er her face;
Where thoughts serenely sweet express
How pure, how dear their dwelling-place.*

*And on that cheek, and o’er that brow,
So soft, so calm, yet eloquent,
The smiles that win, the tints that glow,
But tell of days in goodness spent,
A mind at peace with all below,
A heart whose love is innocent.”*

***She Walks in Beauty,
George Gordon, Lord Byron***

The ragged bouncing of the carriage lessened, then slowed, then stopped.

Parker hopped down from his seat and slowly made his way to the carriage door facing the restaurant. He was an insightful man, even if he didn't follow the path his family had laid out so carefully for him as a youth, and there were times he had a feeling his fares might need a few additional moments to compose themselves before exiting.

This was one of those times.

He wasn't judgmental, either; he knew plenty of people would be. His own attitude leaned more toward the *laissez-faire*, live and let live side of things, and that made his life ever so much easier when it came right down to it. Besides, he thought to himself, the two of them seemed pretty happy when he came to pick them up this evening, and if people felt that kind of happiness was wrong, well, that would be one thing he just wouldn't be able to follow. Especially with the things he knew.

He took two more small steps and quietly rapped on the carriage door.

'Madam? Jenny? We've arrived.'

'Oh?' replied Vastra, a decided hint of breathlessness in her voice. 'Yes. Very good then. If you would not mind then, Parker...the door?'

'Yes, madam.'

Parker opened the door and Vastra stepped out. As always, her hood and gloves covered everything her high necked, long sleeved dresses didn't. He held out his hand to assist Jenny from the carriage, but Vastra quickly stepped in front of him to do the deed. He stepped back, knowing that it was never wise to argue with someone who paid as well as Vastra did. Jenny stepped out of the darkness of the carriage into the bright gaslight outside the restaurant, and Parker couldn't help but detect the flush in the girl's cheeks. He quickly averted his eyes in hopes of not getting caught staring, and cleared his throat.

'If you don't mind, madam...I'll just step inside and see if I can arrange a table for you both. Friday nights are typically very busy, but...'

'We'll be quite fine here, Parker...go see what you can arrange.'

Parker bowed, and quickly hustled inside. As he did, Vastra turned and watched Jenny as she gazed, wide eyed, at the lights and opulence.

'What do you think?'

She paused, leaned in, and quietly whispered.

'My dear?'

The flush on Jenny's cheeks bloomed into full flower.

'Madam!' she exclaimed, but her smile belied her argument. 'It's amazing. I've never seen a place like it before.'

Jenny paused, and eyed Vastra carefully.

'Are you sure this is a good idea?'

Vastra took her hand and patted it gently.

'If I did not, do you think I would have suggested it?'

'But...'

One gloved finger pressed itself against Jenny's lips, and she prayed for the willpower not to kiss it in public.

'No arguments, Jennifer.'

Se saw Jenny try to open her mouth to argue another point, and Vastra pressed the finger more firmly against those lips.

‘And yes, before you ask, I can afford it. We,’ she emphasized, ‘can afford it.’

They heard raised voices come from the restaurant, and, caution tossed to the wind, both moved quickly to the opened doors to see what was going on.

What they saw came as a shock to both of them.

Parker...quiet, mild mannered Parker...had his hands pressed hard against the richly dressed shoulders of a man who could possibly only be the owner of the establishment. They withdrew slightly back toward the street, and the crowd that gathered there, and listened.

‘Listen, James...I know you and the rest didn’t like that I went off and did my own thing, but at least I don’t rely on my family to make my way through life. And I have a pair of very well off customers that I have spoken very highly of your restaurant to. Now, if you’d rather I take them somewhere else...’

He caught movement out of the corner of his eye, and turned just in time to see Vastra and Jenny try to fade back into the crowd.

‘Sorry, ladies. Everyone. Just having...’

He turned and glared at the subject of his ire. It did not escape Vastra that the two bore a striking resemblance to each other.

‘A bit of a ‘business discussion.’ Aren’t we, James?’

The man, shorter than Parker by at least half a head, nodded his head vigorously.

‘So...what will it be?’

The man...James...looked to his left and right at all the onlookers, and quietly spoke.

‘Come with me a moment.’

Parker stepped back and allowed James to remove himself from the wall he had been pressed up against. He watched as the man stepped further into the restaurant and turned before following.

‘Sorry, everyone. Entertainment’s done, so you can all just move along.’

He paused, then spoke again.

‘Madam? If you two don’t mind, could you wait just a few more moments? I am awfully sorry, but...’

Vastra waved her hand dismissively.

‘Take your time, Parker. I can assure you that neither of us is in any hurry.’

Parker bowed his head in acknowledgment, and then walked deeper into the restaurant after the man. As the crowd dispersed, Jenny and Vastra waited.

‘What do you think, Jenny?’

Jenny was staring up into the night sky as she thought about the question. After a few moments, she turned.

‘Brothers. Definitely brothers.’

‘You think so?’

‘Definitely. They look almost the same, even if Parker’s taller.’

‘You noticed, did you?’

Jenny’s face dropped in shock.

‘Madam! I...’

Vastra looked around and, seeing no one paying them any attention, took Jenny’s hand, weaving their fingers together.

‘Jenny...if you have not learned by now that I enjoy playing with you, when will you learn?’

Jenny blushed, but a smile began to creep back across her face.

‘Besides,’ continued Vastra as she quickly brushed a gloved finger across Jenny’s jaw line, ‘why ever would I be looking for something...someone else when I found what I never knew I needed right in front of me?’

Jenny opened her lips to speak when a familiar voice broke in.

‘Sorry, ladies,’ Parker said as he nearly burst out through the open doors into the night air. ‘I...’

He regarded the scene quickly.

‘Do you two need...’

Vastra shook her head.

‘No, we are quite fine, Parker. More than fine, actually.’

Parker smiled.

‘Friends of the family was it, Parker?’

This time Parker blushed.

‘It’s a long story...and one that will likely bore you, madam. But the short version is, I decided I was tired of living a certain kind of lifestyle, with certain expectations and so on, and my family, they kind of...let me go. We get along, mostly, but they can’t see why I like doing what I do, and I can’t see how they can sit around stuck in the past.’

‘Some people are like that,’ Vastra replied sympathetically. *I was like that*, she added silently.

‘If you ever felt the need to talk about it, I am certain Jenny and I would be happy to listen. You are slowly becoming more than just a driver for us, I think...’

‘That’s awfully nice of you, madam. Perhaps one day we can talk more about it.’

He paused, caught his breath, and then continued

‘Now, about the restaurant...’

‘They won’t seat us, will they?’ Jenny interjected, her voice tinted with disappointment.

Parker looked at Jenny’s face; the dejection was already beginning to show.

‘Your Jenny is sure a pessimistic one, isn’t she, madam?’

‘Parker...if you had half the life she has had, you would be too.’

He could see it etched on Jenny’s face in subtle ways. It was mostly covered up by happiness, and he had a feeling it was the first true, genuine happiness the girl had ever felt, but even so, and under it all, the faintest patina of sadness was always going to be there.

Parker tilted his head down.

‘I suppose so. Guess we all have stories to tell, don’t we?’

Jenny and Vastra nodded in tandem.

‘In due time, Parker,’ Vastra finally said. ‘In due time.’

He nodded.

‘Anyway, it’s not that simple,’ Parker replied. ‘Like I said, Friday nights are their busiest nights, and I should have thought about that before I even thought about bringing you here. Tables are full up, and all the reservations are booked for the night. With one exception.’

Jenny’s head perked up.

‘Take a deep breath, you two, and tell me what you smell?’

Vastra tipped her head back, and for a second, Parker thought he could make out the slightest silhouette of her face. Just for a second, and then it was gone. He thought...but no. A trick of the shadows and low light, that was all.

They inhaled, held it, and then exhaled.

Parker waited, but the pause was frustrating him.

‘Well? What do you smell?’

Vastra turned to him. ‘I smell rancid fruit and rotting vegetables. I smell sour wine that’s turned to vinegar. I smell dirt and decay that even creeps along the edges of this, possibly one of the wealthiest parts of this city.’

Parker looked at her in shock, but then laughed in spite of himself.

‘Now you know why I got out of here.’

Vastra nodded, chuckling along with Parker.

‘I also smell the river, Parker. I would assume that was what you were hoping I would say.’

He nodded.

‘My family’s owned this place for years, and being along the river, it’s got a lovely view. We’ve...they’ve...got a single private balcony that they reserve for visiting family, or friends of family. It overlooks the river.’

He paused, allowing the image to sink in.

‘It also happens to be open this evening.’

Vastra saw Jenny smile out of the corner of her eye even as she regarded Parker carefully.

‘Go on, Parker. What deal must you strike in order to get use of the balcony?’

‘That was pretty clear, wasn’t it?’ he replied, his voice quiet and not a small bit dejected. ‘At first it wasn’t even a question...my brother James, he didn’t even want to talk to me about it. ‘Out of the question,’ he said. ‘You walked out those doors, you lost the rights and privileges that come with the family name.’

‘I am sorry, Parker,’ Vastra said, reaching out to take his hand. She was worried that Jenny would react possessively, but was surprised and pleased when Jenny did the same.

‘Me too,’ whispered Jenny sadly. ‘That’s so wrong of your family.’

‘Thanks...both of you,’ Parker replied.

His face brightened as he began to smile...a shift that did not go unnoticed by Vastra.

‘There is something you have not yet told us. Continue.’

‘Well,’ Parker replied, his smile widening. ‘After I told James a friend of mine happened to see him being dropped off in front of a hotel...while his wife was away visiting her family in France...’

Vastra tilted her head.

‘A friend?’

‘Fellow driver,’ Parker replied with a laugh. ‘Actually...happened to be driving the carriage that he happened to take that day...’

Jenny started to laugh along with Parker, and Vastra found herself feeling very lost indeed.

‘I am not quite sure I understand. Would one of you kindly explain to me what is so funny here?’

‘Madam...Parker’s tellin’ us his brother’s having an affair on his wife...sleeping with another woman behind her back when she’s away!’

‘Actually,’ Parker said, clearing his throat, ‘that’d be another man. Not that I care of course...that kind of thing don’t bother me at all...but you know, the whole sanctity of vows and being married thing...’

He paused for a few moments, allowing the situation to sink in. He watched as Vastra brought a hand up under her hood.

‘Oh. Oh, I see.’

‘Exactly,’ replied Parker. ‘So, anyway, once I let him know I knew about that, he started singing another song entirely. Now, it’s not going to be cheap...I don’t want to let on otherwise. And if you don’t want to eat here, especially after all this, I understand. But I stand by what I said...the steaks are amazing.’

He paused, and then smiled ruefully.

‘And now at least I know how he gets the best cuts from the butchers.’

Vastra turned to Jenny.

‘Well? It’s up to you. Shall we?’

Jenny smiled.

‘Oh, I do think so. If for no other reason than it’d probably frustrate his brother no end.’

Vastra turned back to Parker, who had been regarding this short exchange with no lack of humor.

‘Then that is settled. While we are dining, what will you do?’

Parker pulled a pocket watch from his jacket and checked the time.

‘Oh, if you don’t mind, I figure I’ll see if I can’t pull a quick fare or two. You’ll be getting the full five course treatment here, so I figure you won’t be ready for me for a good bit. I’ll be waiting out here when you’re done, don’t worry about that.’

He paused, and then added ‘Please don’t worry about how they’ll treat you because you know me. The last thing they need is a bad reputation...it’d stain their impeccable character.’

Beneath her hood, Vastra smiled.

‘Do I detect a hint of sarcasm in your voice, Mister Parker?’

He laughed.

‘All in due time, I believe you said, madam.’

He stepped up onto his carriage and looked down at Jenny and Vastra.

‘Enjoy your meal, ladies.’

‘Oh, we shall,’ replied Vastra. ‘We shall.’

Parker drove his carriage back down the street and away from the restaurant. Jenny and Vastra watched him go, then turned back to face the restaurant’s doors. A nervous looking James Parker regarded them from the safety of that entryway.

‘Erm,’ he began, his voice watery, ‘if you are both ready, I can...seat you...’

Vastra turned to Jenny.

‘Shall we?’

Jenny nodded, smiling widely. They strode toward the door, matching each other subconsciously step for step. As they reached the entryway, however, Vastra paused and turned.

‘Madam?’

Jenny watched as Vastra gazed into the dark. She grew more concerned with each passing moment with no reply.

‘Madam?’

‘Shhh!’

Jenny heard Vastra sniff the air once...twice...three times. She waited a few more moments, and then turned back toward the door.

‘What was that, Jenny?’

‘Is something the matter, madam?’

Mildew. Stale clothes. I smell something else, too. Is it sweat? Fear? What?

Vastra shook her head as she cleared her mind.

No, it's just the mingled scent of all this decay down here. Nothing more.

'No. No, nothing's wrong. It must have just been my imagination running off with me. Come, my dear...let's eat!'

They followed a man in black tie up a flight of stairs, past a quartet of chairs where four musicians were quietly tuning their instruments, and up to a curtained balcony where their seats awaited.



He watched as the carriage pulled up. He'd been waiting here, in the dark, in the dank filth of the alleyway for the better part of twenty minutes. The stench of rotting fruit made him want to wretch, but he dared not make a sound, lest anyone see him.

He watched as the two ladies stepped from the carriage. Wealthy, they were...he could only make out the face on one of them, as the other woman always wore a hood everywhere she went. Of course, ever since the girl came along, not many people caught a glimpse of the woman. The packet he'd gotten, slid under his door one morning just a week or so ago, identified them as Jennifer Flint and Mrs. Vastravosky, no first name. None was needed, anyway...everyone knew about her. He didn't know what rumors to believe, and honestly, he didn't care. All he cared about was the relatively thick stack of notes included in the packet, and the promise of an equal measure if he and an associate of his choosing would simply 'take care' of these two individuals. He was certain it was a job he could do on his own, but...

But that was before the rainstorm just last night, when they decided they had their best shot at the girl. He wasn't sure what the thing was that came out of the darkness, which had knocked his partner against a wall. He knew it was female, at least in voice, but beyond that...

He shuddered.

He listened and watched as some sort of ruckus broke out at the restaurant, and hoped it would not ruin this shot. Already he knew his mysterious benefactor was growing impatient, was expecting him to report with results tonight, or he'd find someone else to take care of the targets...and him. He bit his knuckle, tasting the bitter tang of his own blood as teeth broke skin.

Finally the bustle quieted down and the carriage drove off. He watched as the women began to walk toward the doors. Soon. Almost there, and he could bolt across the street and move events into action.

They paused.

He stopped, frozen to the spot. The wind had shifted, just the slightest bit, but surely...

The hooded woman turned, and for a second, it seemed as if she looked right at him, still hidden in the darkness. Then her head turned, and he could see, even from the distance, that she was scenting the air. She shook her head, said something to her companion, and they walked into the restaurant.

He exhaled, waited a few moments, and then sprinted across the lit street. Within seconds he was bathed in darkness again. His hair hung dank and dripping, while salty sweat fell, burning his eyes. One hand stole furtively into a pocket. He felt the moment growing closer. He never knew how exactly he knew when that moment would come, but he knew the feeling all too well. He stood in the dark, just beyond the light pouring out of the kitchen door.

The stench of rot and decay was far worse on this side of the street, in this alleyway just outside the restaurant, and this caused his eyes to water further still. He willed himself not to wretch, held his breath, waited.

Waited.

The light was broken by a shadow. Male. Moving closer. He pulled his hand from his pocket, a length of rope dangling loosely from one lightly closed hand. He stepped closer to the light, still hidden by the shadow. He watched the man, black trousers, white jacket, polished shoes, walk down the stone steps and away from him, back further into the alleyway. He wondered what was going on, why he was out here, before he heard an all too familiar sound.

In that moment...in the moment...he sprung. Crossed the light, grabbed the rope tightly with both hands, and brought it around the man's throat. He felt the man struggle, felt him try to get his fingers under the rope, felt him try to drive elbows backward into him. He felt the struggles grow weaker with every passing second, heard the man gasping for breath, breath that wouldn't come, that couldn't come. He imagined the man's face, growing red and purple and blotchy as he fought against the inevitable darkness that rushed forward like a train on tracks.

He felt the man go limp against him. He held the rope tight for a few more seconds, felt the warmth wash over him as it had so many times before, felt the inevitable release as the body slumped against him.

Finally he released the rope and dragged the man far enough away from the doorway that he could not be seen. He quickly stripped, a new scent mingling with the rank and rot and decay, and carefully changed into the waiter's uniform. He slicked his hair back and hoped no one would notice...they were close enough in build, the clothes fit reasonably well, and if he was fast enough, no one would be the wiser.

He took a deep breath and walked into the light.



‘Here you are, ladies. I trust the seating is...adequate?’

Vastra detected the hint...more than hint, actually...of sarcasm, tempered with the bitterness of public embarrassment and defeat in James Parker's voice. She could have risen to it; she was, in fact, quite tempted to. A quick glance over to Jenny showed the same battle, and the same self restraint. She smiled and thought to herself Jenny was right...just for the sheer pleasure of making this man squirm, this will certainly be worth it.

‘I suppose it suffices...in a pinch, of course,’ Vastra replied coolly. She smiled as the man’s jowls reddened even more, though she could not tell if it was from anger or further embarrassment. She stepped over to one side and held out Jenny’s chair. After seating Jenny, she walked brusquely past James, who was attempting, in his own clumsy manner, to do the same for her.

She voice dripped heavily with sarcasm as she spoke.

‘Oh, please do not trouble yourself, *sir*. I can manage on my own, thank you.’

She thought she detected the beginnings of a choked off ‘Hrmph!’ from Parker’s brother, and was actually a little surprised that he was able to restrain himself enough to almost carry it off. She looked across the table at Jenny; beneath the table, she tapped Jenny’s foot lightly with the tip of one boot and watched as the girl smiled.

‘Well then...*ladies*...the servers will be up shortly with your soup. My...that is to say...’

He coughed as he tried to compose himself. Vastra could tell he was unused to being on the defensive, and it had him out of his element.

‘Mr. Parker explained to me that, as neither of you were perhaps familiar with *my* establishment...’

There was no denying the emphasis on the word ‘my.’ Even a fool could tell that this man was as much in charge here as the newest dish washer in the back or lowliest member of staff. He’d gotten his position through family and connections...connections it seemed their Mr. Parker had been wise to avoid and escape from.

‘...That perhaps it would be best if we simply eschewed with menus and offered you both a traditional five course meal. I trust that was not too presumptuous of him, was it?’

With every passing moment, it grew harder and harder for Vastra to refrain from calling him what he was; an obnoxious, unctuous lout with more attitude than empathy and insufficient manners to match his means.

Instead she smiled beneath her hood and replied, coolly, ‘Not too presumptuous at all, *sir*. I am certain that my companion and I shall find your selections to be...’

She looked across the table at Jenny again, who was herself barely holding back a laugh.

‘...adequate.’

This time James Parker’s mouth did open slightly at the affront. Jenny and Vastra both turned to see what he would say or do next, and to both of them, it seemed he was on the brink of a most embarrassing outburst. His hands gripped the sides of his jacket so tightly that his knuckles were growing white, and he drew his mouth shut, his lips a pencil thin, trembling line.

‘Very well.’

His words were clipped, cold, cutting. Neither Vastra nor Jenny flinched, and they watched his knuckles grow even whiter.

‘My staff will be up with your soup momentarily. Enjoy your meal.’

He pivoted on his heels and left the balcony. As he walked off, he muttered under his breath, quietly enough that no one could possibly hear him.

‘Bitches.’

Jenny had turned back toward the table and looked across at Vastra. She noted that Vastra’s attention was elsewhere, and reached a hand across to brush against one gloved hand.

‘Are you alright, madam?’

‘I heard that,’ she whispered, her voice tightly wound.

‘Heard what?’

Vastra turned and saw the concern in Jenny’s face. She pulled her other hand from her lap and covered Jenny’s hand, still resting lightly against hers.

‘He called us bitches.’

Jenny’s eyes widened.

‘He did? But I didn’t hear...’

‘No, of course not. She spoke it low enough that no one should have heard it. But I did.’

‘He’s nothing at all like the Parker we know, is he?’

‘Not one bit, my dear. And I can see why Parker was so keen on leaving this behind him. It seems the life he has chosen for himself suits him quite well. Do you agree, Jenny?’

‘I do,’ Jenny replied, nodding.

‘And what about you? Do you feel you have made the right choice in returning?’

Jenny looked at Vastra strangely.

‘Madam? I’m not sure what you mean?’

Vastra was about to reply when a man in a white suit appeared, holding a large silver tray in two hands. Two bowls of soup, steaming hot and in pristine white china, sat atop the tray, and they watched as he deftly removed first one bowl, then the second, and placed them before them.

‘The soup tonight’s just a plain vegetable, but it’s really good,’ the waiter said quietly. He then leaned in ‘Actually, I was told not to even talk to either of you, but me, I can’t stand to see how he walks around all puffed out like a peacock, so I ignore him whenever I can.’

He winked.

‘I’ll be back up shortly with your salads. But if you need anything and see me walk by, don’t hesitate to ask, OK?’

‘Actually,’ Vastra replied, ‘I was wondering if perhaps you’d be kind enough to close those curtains behind you as you go. We do not wish to be too much trouble, and my companion and I have certain things of a ...shall we say, delicate...manner to discuss. If you would simply knock before coming back with any additional dishes...’

The young man nodded.

‘Not a bother at all. Consider it done. I’ll give you two some time to enjoy the soup... and talk...and then I’ll be up with salads.’

He grabbed the serving tray, placed it smartly under one arm, and stepped past the curtains. Vastra watched as he drew them closed and, confident that they offered sufficient privacy, lowered her hood.

‘Madam! What if someone comes in?’

Vastra smiled.

‘I will take that chance. I have faith in him, however...it seems discontent runs high here, and I doubt we will be interrupted so rudely.’

She picked up a spoon, dipped it in her soup, and was bringing it to her lips as she saw Jenny, her head bowed, hands folded in front of her. She was whispering some words...more mouthing them than whispering them, quietly enough that Vastra could not make them out, save for a concluding ‘Amen.’

Jenny looked up at Vastra.

‘Sorry, madam. I just always say grace before I eat. Haven’t you noticed?’

'I suppose I have,' Vastra replied, small wisps of steam still rising from the soup spoon she held half way between bowl and mouth. 'I simply never gave it much thought.'

'Don't suppose it's something you ever really had to think about, madam,' Jenny replied. She moved her silverware from her napkin, spread the napkin on her lap, and picked up the spoon. Vastra watched Jenny ladle up a spoonful of the soup, blow on it to cool it, and bring it to her lips.

'Oh, it really is good! Try it!'

Vastra sipped her own soup and had to agree; while the waiter called it plain, it really was quite delicious. She was tempted to take another spoonful immediately, but instead placed her spoon down and looked at Jenny.

'Madam?'

'We were talking, I believe, before the waiter arrived with our soup,' Vastra quietly spoke. 'I had asked you if you felt you made the right choice in returning to the house.'

She paused, swallowing lightly.

'And to me.'

Jenny placed her spoon down lightly and dabbed her lips with her napkin.

'I'm not sure how you can even ask me that question after this afternoon, madam. After what you've done for me...how many times you've saved me...and then...today...and now you ask me if I feel I've made the right choice? How can you ask that?'

Vastra could tell the girl was on the brink of tears. She wanted to go to her side and hold her, but knew that the restaurant was not the place for that. For that matter, it was perhaps not the place for this discussion, but the words were out there now, and they had to be dealt with.

'Jenny...my dear, sweet Jenny. Please try to look at this from my viewpoint. I know how you feel about me...it is obvious, and has been obvious for such a very long time.'

Jenny looked up, her eyes wet.

'How long have you known?'

Vastra smiled, reached across the table, and wiped a tear away.

'Within your first week.'

Jenny watched Vastra's face carefully.

'How long have you felt...this?'

Vastra sighed, not from frustration but from memory.

'Almost from the beginning. The first day you came to the house looking for employment. When I told you that you were hired, and you hugged me and started crying.'

Jenny smiled weakly.

'I remember. That was the first time you saved me, you know.'

Vastra nodded.

'You talk so often of how I have saved you without realizing that you have, in many ways, done the same for me. A friend of mine...a very old friend, one I hope some day you will get to meet...saved me once. He kept me from making a terrible mistake. And you have, in your own way, saved me...perhaps in a much deeper way, if I might add.'

Her tears stopped, Jenny leaned in to speak more quietly.

'How did I save you?'

Vastra picked her spoon back up and ate some more soup.

'Oh, it is much better now that it has cooled some.'

'You're avoiding my question, madam?'

Vastra looked up.

'No. I am merely suggesting that you eat while I speak. I will not find it rude.'

Vastra watched lovingly as Jenny ate her soup. She took several more spoonfuls herself

before continuing.

‘Despite what my friend did for me, there were things he simply could not do. He gave me this house, he gave me a chance at a life that I never could have possibly known existed. But it was empty. Oh, there were...and are...things I do that make a difference, even if no one knows about some of them.’

She chuckled quietly.

‘Nor should they, in some cases.’

The soup grew steadily cooler in the night air, and Vastra pushed the bowl away from her.

‘However, the life he gave me was empty of anyone to share it with. No friends. No companions.’

Jenny’s face softened with compassion.

‘What about the rest of your people? Are they...?’

‘Dead? Gone?’

Jenny winced at those words.

‘I know those are harsh sounding words, my dear, but they are a part of life. But no, they are not all gone. Most of them are still...sleeping...I suppose might be the best word for it. Sleeping. Deep beneath the ground.’

She paused, thinking of the Doctor’s words to her. She remembered them, as clearly as if they had been just spoken:

‘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?’

‘And they will be for a very long time.’

She felt Jenny’s hand squeeze hers tightly.

‘So it’s just been you?’

Vastra nodded.

‘For how long?’

‘Honestly?’ Vastra asked. ‘Almost two years. Oh, I had another employee before you, but she seemed to feel she could take advantage of certain liberties she felt she had as a result of my privacy.’

‘Liberties? What do you mean?’

‘Well...’

There was a knock from the hallway beyond the balcony’s curtains.

‘Ladies? If you’re done with your soup, I have your salads here.’

Vastra looked over at Jenny. She nodded quietly as Vastra raised her hood back up, covering herself once again. *Oh, how much easier it would be if I could be rid of this silly thing*, she thought sadly. *But even the Doctor says it will be thousands of years before that is possible...*

‘Yes, we are,’ she said quietly. ‘Please, come in.’



It was hard for him to keep tabs on where they were. One thing he had not considered when Providence offered up the waiter to his willing hands was that he'd end up being taken for one of the staff, and as such he found himself from time to time tasked with some mundanity or another. The benefit, if there was one, was that he was able to eyeball the entire dining area without seeming overly suspicious.

They were nowhere to be seen.

He knew they were here. He saw them enter the restaurant; there was no place else they could be. He tried to sneak into what little shadow he could find, tried to find some place he could look and think and figure out what to do, but there was almost no place to do so. He cursed himself under his breath...he knew this was his last possible chance, and he felt it slipping through his fingers like grains of sand.

He caught movement out of the corner of his eye, and turned toward it. He watched another waiter, dressed as he was, walking down a flight of stairs from the second floor. He hadn't been paying attention, didn't notice there was a second floor of dining available to customers. Cautiously, quietly, he walked along the edge of the wall, where there was the least light. His eyes turned up...he followed the stairs as they led to a banister railed hallway, and then...

Nothing.

Some doors on one end, probably to staff rooms or private lodgings, but otherwise nothing.

No.

Wait.

There was an opening in the wall. It was curtained off...even in the dim light, he could see the curtains were rich, red, brocade velvet with gold trim. They reminded him of theatre curtains, and for some reason that thought brought a small giggle forth.

'Oi! You there! Stop standing around and get back to it! You want Parker to see you standing there like some lout and fire you?'

He looked blankly at the man addressing him.

'I swear, the quality of his new hires deteriorates by the day.'

The man tossed him a damp rag. He fumbled it a few times before holding it firmly in his hands.

'If you can't be arsed to wait tables like the rest of us, perhaps you might find yourself of some use wiping down some of the tables over there. God knows they could use it.' He pointed toward the tables nearest the bar area, where partly drunk pints of ale and bitter spilled over in a sticky, soupy mess. 'And if that's beyond you, then you're really in a fix, because you'll be out of here faster than Parker'll be able to say 'You're fired.'"

He stood there, holding the damp rag in his hands. He watched, the blank expression never leaving his face.

'Go on! Get to it already, man!'

He watched the waiter walk off, felt his hands tighten around the cloth, felt a familiar tightness come over him. How easy would it be to take that cloth, to follow the waiter back toward the prep area, and in the darkness...in that blessed darkness. Oh, how easy would it be to...

No.

He couldn't think of those things.

Not now.

He sullenly walked over to the tables and made a half hearted effort to move the soupy mess from one side of the table to the other. At least no one was bothering him here, and as he looked around, he figured no one would. So he kept up appearances, and listened.

And looked.

And waited.

He saw a young man leave the kitchen with a large serving plate. He smelled the rare cooked steak, the roasted potatoes, the fresh vegetables, and his mouth watered. How long had it been since he last ate a meal like this? It didn't matter...once he was done with his job, he'd be able to eat like a king for months, he reasoned. He watched as the man made his way carefully toward the stairs, taking each step carefully. Intuition kicked in, and he followed...at a distance, always at a distance, and stood roughly where the curtained area would be. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a group leave a room at the end of a hall to his right...musicians, by the looks of them. They sat down at a group of chairs just past him, tuned their violins and cello, and began playing something. He didn't recognize it, of course...music was never something that was of any interest to him, and right now he found it especially distracting.

Still, despite the noise, he listened.

There was a knock, and then some murmured words. A request, perhaps? He couldn't tell for certain, only that it was a male voice that spoke.

Silence.

Then a response...this time female. He knew this voice, had heard it ever so well the night before, as she was grabbed. He wanted it over quickly then...if it had been his hands, it would have been over quickly. It never took long for him to find, or to offer, that release. But no, his partner wanted to toy with her like a cat toying with a mouse. He warned him, told him to get it over with so they could move on and finish the job like they were supposed to.

And look what happened.

But now...yes...now the chance had presented itself. He had to take it. He waited for the man to return to the floor, watched him return to the kitchen. He waited as patiently as possible before calmly, evenly walking over to the bar. The bartender eyed him warily.

'New here, ain't ya?'

'Uhh...yeah. First night. Anyway,' he continued, trying to keep his nerves even, 'order from upstairs. Two glasses of house red.'

'New guys don't wait tables. They swab up crap at the tables and, if they're lucky, one day they might aspire to wait tables. If they last that long.'

'Yeah, well...'

He paused.

'The younger guy? Blonde hair, moustache? He asked me to. Said he wasn't feeling well. Said it'd be OK.'

The bartender's eyes narrowed further still.

'That boy's going to get himself fired if he keeps this up.'

Still, he turned to the central island and poured out two glasses of red wine. He placed them on a tray and set it down on the bar.

'Here. And remember...if you spill those drinks, they come out of your pay, not mine. Is that understood?'

He nodded.

'Yeah. I understand.'

He turned and walked toward the stairs, not seeing, or caring, that the bartender was shaking his head in disgust. This was his moment, he could feel it...just like he did in the

alleyway an hour or so ago.

This was his moment, and soon, it'd be all over.



Jenny looked up across the table, a piece of steak impaled on her fork.

'Parker was right...this is fantastic.'

Vastra turned her attention from the plate, swallowed, and then dabbed her lips with her napkin.

'I do believe you are correct. I daresay it surpasses your own cooking, Jenny.'

She smiled as Jenny's face blanched, her mouth opening in a wide o-shape. She moved her lips, trying to say something, but little more than a shocked squeak escaped her tightened throat. Vastra reached across the table and took one of Jenny's hands in hers.

'Jenny, Jenny, Jenny...it is so easy to tease you. You do know I was teasing, don't you?'

Jenny slowly placed her fork beside her plate and wiped her mouth with her napkin.

'Oh, of course, madam,' she replied, her voice still strained. 'Of course, I'll have to get even with you for that later.'

Vastra laughed

'Oh, I have no doubt of that. In fact, I believe I shall find your revenge quite enjoy...'

Her reply was interrupted by a harsh knocking just beyond the curtain. Vastra barely had time to pull her hood up before a somewhat disheveled looking waiter came through, shakily carrying a tray with two glasses of wine on it.

'Ladies? These are for you.'

Jenny reached for a glass, but felt resistance. She looked down to see Vastra's hand holding her wrist firmly.

'We did not order wine, sir. I believe you must be mistaken.'

Deep in her hood, Vastra regarded the man. He put on an air of belonging, but she could smell the fear and uncertainty on him. There was something else too...something she was sure she sensed once before. She couldn't put her finger on it, but there was something familiar about this man, even as she was certain she had never seen him before. She inhaled deeply, putting on a show of sighing, but there was more than that in her action.

'Oh...it's...compliments of the owner. To...'

He paused, swallowed hard, gathered his thoughts.

'Yes?' Vastra's voice was cold, emotionless, cautious.

'To...apologise for how you were treated earlier.'

Jenny smiled and pulled her hand free.

'Oh that's OK, but thank you! Please give him our thanks, alright?'

'Oh, of course. I certainly will. Please, enjoy.'

He smiled, but Vastra could easily tell that the smile never truly reached his eyes. She shot a quick glance across the table to Jenny, who hadn't yet partaken in her wine. Vastra took her glass from the server, who turned awkwardly on his heels and left the balcony. She listened carefully to see if he stopped on the other side of the curtain, or if he carried on down the hall to the stairs.

'That was awfully nice of Mister Parker, wasn't it?'

Jenny reached for her wine. Just as her fingers touched the stem of the glass, Vastra's hand quickly reached out and tapped the glass over and away. The deep claret red spilled out over the white tablecloth, staining it like blood.

'Madam! Why did you do that?'

Vastra looked around carefully before dropping her hood and leaning across the table.

'I must remember your senses aren't as finely tuned as mine. No wonder you did not notice.'

'Notice what, madam?'

Vastra sighed. 'First off, you were not even bothered by the fact that the waiter was not the one who had taken care of us all evening. That should have been a warning to you. Secondly, did you not notice how nervous he was around us?'

'Well, yes, I did,' Jenny replied. 'But maybe our waiter got called away, and he was helping out?'

Vastra shook her head.

'No, Jenny. The proof was all in the glass. You would never notice, of course...and I would presume that he would think I would not either, thinking I was like you. That was his mistake, thinking that I would not notice...'

Jenny blinked as nervousness began to take hold.

'Notice what, madam?'

Vastra's eyes narrowed.

'The wine was poisoned, Jenny. He was clever, picking a wine that was so rich in tannins. It hid most of the smell. The average person would never smell it, never taste it...but there is the subtle hint of almond that rises above the wine's own scent. Too subtle for most. Not for me.'

'Why?' Jenny's face was a mask of fear.

'Why what?' replied Vastra. 'Why was it not too subtle for me, or what did he do this? The first question would take far too long and would likely bore you. As for the second, well... I think he was desperate.'

'Desperate, madam?'

Vastra paused, took a deep breath, and then continued.

'Yes. Desperate. This isn't his way at all. I saw his hands. They were rough. Used to work. He's not a poisoner. But he did this because he didn't have any choice.'

'Madam...you're scaring me.'

Vastra looked across the table at Jenny. Her face was pale, almost ashen, her lower lip trembling. She saw the tears forming in her eyes, and reached out slowly to caress the girl's face.

'Oh Jenny...I never wanted you to be at risk.'

'I don't understand...'

Vastra dropped her hand back in her lap.

'I hate to say that I will explain later, but I will have to. There is, I think, much we shall need to discuss this evening. I knew I sensed something about him when he came in, something familiar. I just could not place it. Now it all comes together. That night, in the rain...you were attacked. Remember?'

Jenny nodded, her lips drawn tight.

'There was a second man. I doubt you ever saw him. He was hiding, deep in the alleyway...I would guess to help in case your attacker could not handle you...or in case I showed up. After you ran...after I...anyway, the second man ran too. I tried to follow him, but I lost his trail.'

Vastra's lips drew closed, and Jenny could see the anger tighten her face.

'Earlier...before we walked in to the restaurant, I thought I felt something. Something familiar. And then just now, when he walked in with the wine...I could never mistake that smell. The scent of fear, and adrenaline, and sweat. I knew. And I am sure he knew as well. He was waiting to finish the job he and his partner failed in before. I should have simply turned with you and gotten Parker's attention, had him bring us back to the house.'

Vastra pounded a closed fist on the table, rattling silverware and china.

'Damn it!'

Jenny gasped in shock...first at Vastra's outburst, then a second time as she quickly pulled her hood back over her head.

'Why are you...' Jenny began, but was interrupted by the rough sound of a clearing throat.

'Somethin' wrong then, ladies?'

Jenny looked over, her face still a frozen mask of shock.

'I...'

'Oh, I see you spilled your wine,' the man said, his voice trembling ever so slightly. 'Please, let me pour you another.'

'That will not be necessary,' Vastra interjected, her voice cold and sharp. The man turned to face her, his smile false and unctuous.

'I was asking your...*partner*,' he replied, his voice oozing sarcasm. 'I am quite certain she can answer for herself.'

'Oh, she certainly can,' Vastra spoke, the chill never leaving her voice. 'That said, considering how sloppy you have been so far, I do not think an answer from her is necessary. What might be, however, is an answer from you as to what exactly you plan on doing now that this ploy has failed?'

The waiter chuckled quietly as he placed the wine bottle on the table.

'I told 'im,' he said. 'We do it my way, and it'll all be nice and clean and easy. But no, he decides he has to play with you.'

He pointed at Jenny, who visibly shivered.

'Then you...it was you, weren't it?'

Vastra nodded, almost imperceptibly.

'You just had to jump in. Course, that means I get all the pay instead of half once I'm done with you both. I'm not a fan of poison, me...I like to be more...hands on. But I thought this would be quieter. Easier.'

He spat.

'But you had to mess this up for me too.'

Vastra chuckled coolly, and Jenny turned to face her, still in shock at how calm she was in the face of such danger.

'So I have,' Vastra spoke, her voice calm, cool, collected. 'But you still have not answered my question. Now that you have failed, yet again, how do you plan to make things...right?'

The waiter smiled, exposing a gnarly row of broken teeth. Jenny watched as he grabbed for a knife on the table, but was unable to move, paralyzed with fear. She knew Vastra saw the move as well...why had she not acted?

'Like this!'

He raised the knife over his head and was about to bring it down in a wild arc when a familiar voice broke the tension.

'What exactly is going on here? Who are you? What is the meaning of this?'

Three heads and three pairs of eyes turned to lock on the shocked face of one Mister

James Parker, who looked upon the scene with a mix of emotions none of them could quite place.

‘You most certainly do not work here! How did you g...ahh...chk...’

Jenny’s eyes widened further still as the waiter...or whoever he really was...drove the knife deep into Parker’s chest. His face, previously red with bluster and anger, went ashen pale as his hands reached up, grasping the teak handle of the knife now lodged between two ribs. A patch of red began to spread through the crisp white linen of his shirt. He weakly tried to pull the knife from his chest, took two steps backward, and fell back, collapsing through the balcony banister to the floor below, where the string quartet was in the midst of navigating the thick contrapuntal lines of Beethoven’s Grosse Fuge. The music came to a sudden halt, the split second of silence then broken by a scream and muffled activity.

The ‘waiter’ turned to face Vastra and Jenny.

‘Two deaths.’

He laughed, his voice broken and rough.

‘Two deaths. Maybe not the ‘pecific ones asked for, but who’ll know the difference, eh?’

With a jump, he leapt up onto the table and almost gracefully dove from the balcony into the river below. As he fell into the darkness, Vastra and Jenny could hear his voice.

‘Your work is done, master...I’m coming for you!’

There was a splash, then silence.

Jenny made a movement to get up, but felt Vastra’s hand grab her wrist and hold her in place.

‘We will be suspected, Jenny. Keep yourself close. There will be questions. Answer when spoken to, but offer nothing more. You and I are innocent, of course, but for all they know right now, one of us held the knife that currently sits in Parker’s chest. Understood?’

Jenny nodded. She tried to speak, but no words could come out.

‘Then let us see what there is to be seen, love.’

As Jenny turned and hurried down through the door back into the restaurant, Vastra noticed a small bundle of papers on the table. It seemed likely, she assumed, that they fell out of the waiter’s jacket when he jumped. She saw the red wax seal, broken, an ornate ‘M’ sunk into the red wax. She quickly flipped through the papers, her eyes widening as she perused as quickly as she could. Quietly she folded the bundle back up and secreted them in her jacket before joining Jenny downstairs.



Nearly 45 minutes passed with the two sitting under the watchful eye of the kitchen staff before their enforced silence was broken.

‘Madame Vastravosky...and Jenny, if I am not mistaken? It seems our paths cross yet again.’

Vastra’s head shot up at the familiar voice.

‘Inspector Danforth? How...?’

Danforth laughed. ‘I would assume by now that you might have figured out that I handled the vast majority of murder cases in this district, especially after our previous meeting. It is, perhaps, a bit serendipitous that I was here when this happened...when I

heard what had happened, I came immediately. Of course,' he continued, 'I had not expected to run into you both here.'

'I trust you will require a statement from us both, Inspector?'

Danforth shook his head. 'Not as such.'

Vastra's eyes widened in shock, hidden behind her cowl. Inspector Danforth took the opportunity the silence provided to continue.

'Oh, I'll ask you both some questions before you go this evening, but unless either of you can explain to me how a waiter was strangled in the outside alley whilst you were both likely partaking in your soup...or identify a set of men's clothing as belonging to either of you, I would wager it safe to say that you are both quite free from incrimination in this case.'

Danforth turned and took several steps toward the door leading to the dining room.

'I'll speak to you one at a time, of course. Just take a few minutes, and then I expect you'll both be free to go.'

As he left, Jenny and Vastra looked at each other. Vastra took Jenny's hands in hers and gave them a reassuring squeeze. She wanted nothing more than to take her in her arms and hold her close right now, but this was not the place, and certainly not the time, even if the staff might presume the action to be nothing more than support in a frightening and stressful situation.

'You go first, Jenny,' Vastra spoke quietly. 'Get it over with. Then we can go home. Sleep won't come easy, I am certain, but at least we will be safe there.'

Jenny nodded, her face still pale. She swallowed once...twice...then strode from the room with a strength that came as a surprise even to Vastra.

Ten minutes passed before Inspector Danforth's head popped back through the door.

'Madame? Madame Vastravosky? If you would be so kind as to join me?'

Vastra stood and walked out into the dining room. It was empty, as she expected. As her eyes darted about the room she saw the overturned crystal, the broken plates, the food cooling, fat congealing. She turned toward the stairs, toward the balcony, and saw the splintered wood, the broken instruments, and the dark patch on the floor that could only be Parker's blood. She shivered unconsciously, an action that did not go unnoticed by the Inspector.

'Jenny reacted the same way, you know.'

Vastra turned to him. 'I rather imagine she did, Inspector. She has been in quite a state of shock since...'

Danforth nodded his head.

'This is all a formality, I hope you know. If what your friend says is true, though, I'd say that the two of you have found yourself in quite a sticky situation.'

He cleared his throat.

'Now, if you could tell me, in your own words, what happened this evening...'

Time passed. Vastra spoke. The inspector took notes, nodded his head at certain descriptions, and finally folded his journal closed.

'I think that will do, Madame Vastravosky. Unless you're leaving anything out?'

Vastra took a deep breath and thought about the bundle of papers in her jacket. She thought for a moment about keeping them secret, but thought better of it. Quietly she withdrew the bundle and handed them over.

'There were these. I found them on our dining table after the attack. I would guess the waiter...or whoever he was...had them on his person. When he jumped, they must have fallen

from a pocket.'

Danforth took the papers wordlessly and began to read them. After a few moments he folded them back up and placed them in a pocket inside his own jacket.

'Well?'

Inspector Danforth shrugged his shoulders. 'What would you like me to say? That your story and Miss Flint's stories matched almost word for word? That I was fairly sure they would before I even began questioning you? That once I saw the body in the alleyway I knew neither of you could be involved?'

'I would say those might be nice for starters, but you already implied as much before you began your interrogation.'

Danforth chuckled.

'The only thing I can add is that all of this was probably for your...I shouldn't use the word benefit, but it's the only one that fits, so...'

'Explain, Inspector.'

Danforth sighed and sat in the closest chair. He motioned Vastra to join him, and she cautiously took the seat across from him.

'You do recall, I trust, our discussion earlier about that murder? You had mentioned that you thought you saw something, but in all the rain and lightning, you were uncertain what it might be?'

Vastra nodded, motioning with one gloved hand to continue.

'If you're asking for my professional opinion...you may not be sure you saw something, but I'm guessing they think you did. And if their intended victim was your Miss Flint, and they figured that out, well...'

'Yes, Inspector?'

'Well, for starters, I'd be crediting them with far more intelligence than the average thug. At the same time...I'd be warning you that neither of you may be exactly safe. And those documents you handed me explain as much. There have been contracts taken out, Madame Vastravosky...primarily on you, though for what reason I cannot tell. Your Miss Flint is, as we say in the business, 'guilty by association,' although we obviously say it for different reasons usually.'

Vastra snorted.

'So I assume we should just prepare to live our lives in the solitude of our home? To fear that any time we might wish to leave that we are at risk of some mindless thug assaulting us? That our own Metropolitan Police cannot protect the common citizen of London from base criminals such as these?'

Inwardly, Vastra smiled, hoping her act would be sufficient to get a rise out of the Inspector.

'Now just a moment, Madame Vastravosky!' Inspector Danforth stood from the chair, the rattle as it fell backward a shocking sound in the otherwise silent room. 'I understand that you are upset, but I will not have you besmirching the reputation of the Met in such a manner. I'm of half a mind to...'

He paused.

'You're having me on, aren't you?'

'Only in part, Inspector.'

Danforth moved to sit. Vastra cleared her throat and pointed at the chair, resting on its back some feet away. He turned, quietly picked it back up, and brought it to the table. He continued as he sat.

'What I am saying is that you two need to keep your eyes open. I can only do so much. The fact that there have been so many murders in your district has the Yard up in arms as it is,

and Chief Inspector Abberline himself is arranging for additional men to be placed on patrol. But if you see anything...anyone...suspicious, for the love of God, get off the street and somewhere safe. Try to remember who or what you see. And get that information to me as quickly as you can.'

'Anything else, Inspector?'

Danforth shook his head.

'No. You're free to go.'

'With those documents, correct?'

Danforth shook his head. 'You know that's not possible. Evidence...not only of two capital crimes this evening, but of intent for at least two further. You know I cannot give these to you.'

Vastra sighed.

'Very well then. I suppose I will just have to call in some favors.'

Danforth swallowed. 'Favors?'

Deep within her hood, Vastra smiled. 'With the number of times you have invoked the name of your beloved Chief Inspector Abberline, I would have assumed you know that he and I have more than a passing acquaintance. Correspondence, of course, but he knows of me... and I of him. I'll simply write him a letter, and...'

'You couldn't possibly do that,' he protested.

'I could.'

'You wouldn't.'

'Oh, but Inspector Danforth...I would. And I will. As soon as you release me from this questioning...'

She deliberately paused.

'...and first thing tomorrow morning, I will ensure that a letter is sent directly to his attention.'

Danforth held up a hand.

'Now...that won't be necessary. I can't give you these, but...will transcripts suffice?'

Vastra smiled. 'Of course they would, Inspector Danforth. I knew you would find some way to be understanding in this situation.'

As Vastra stood from the table and turned toward the exit, Danforth called out to her once more.

'Just be careful. I don't want the next murder I have to inspect to be yours...or Miss Flint's.'

Vastra chuckled quietly as she called back over her shoulder.

'Inspector Danforth, I can assure you that is one thing you need not worry yourself about at all.'



Vastra walked into the darkness of the evening to find Jenny standing beneath a gaslight. A pair of uniformed police stood with her, along with a third man. His back was turned, but she knew from his silhouette that it was 'their' Parker, the driver. She quickly scurried over, seeing Parker's shoulders shaking lightly, Jenny's arm outstretched and rubbing one shoulder in an attempt to comfort him.

‘Parker!’ Vastra exclaimed. ‘I am so very, very sorry!’

He turned to face her, his face wet with tears. He sniffled lightly, and Vastra could tell that what emotion was there was starting to subside.

‘Thank you. We may never have been particularly close, but...’

‘But you were brothers,’ Vastra continued, nodding her head. ‘I understand all too well.’ She looked over to Jenny, noting the concern on her face. ‘I trust Jenny has given you all the particulars.’

Parker nodded. ‘And the police as well. The rest of the family will be here shortly, and I suppose they’ll be making arrangements.’

‘What about you?’ asked Jenny.

‘What about me?’ Parker replied. ‘It’s not as if I’m in the family’s good graces. Oh, I’ll go to the funeral, and they’ll say all the right words to my face, but even if I were in the will... which I’m certain that I’m not...’

Vastra reached out and took one shoulder firmly in her hand. ‘I understand your hurt, Parker. I have lost family too. But right now is not the right time to be making such decisions. I trust between Jenny and the police you have been informed that it might perhaps be best for us to return to our home as quickly as possible, as it seems this evening’s events may have been...’

She paused, unsure of how to continue.

‘Let me just say that neither Jenny nor I may be safe here. I understand if you cannot, but...’

‘Yes, of course. You know that your house is on the way back to my rooms. I can certainly bring you back there.’

Parker looked up to see a trio of carriages moving toward the restaurant at a fairly fast clip.

‘In fact, perhaps we should go now. You’re right, Madame...in my state, I may say things I’ll regret.’

He turned to his carriage and opened the door. Jenny climbed in quickly, followed by Vastra. He fastened the door and climbed up to the driver’s seat. With a snap of the reins the horses took off at a brisk canter. Jenny leaned onto Vastra’s shoulders and her breathing finally took on a more measured, calm tone.

‘This is just the beginning, isn’t it madam?’

Vastra sighed. She was able to see far too little of what the documents had to say, but it was obvious to her that someone knew of her existence...perhaps not of what she was, but who she was...somehow knew of her association with the Doctor, though how they would know that, not even she could tell, and would stop at little to end it. To what end, she could not tell. And as long as the author of those documents walked free, neither of Jenny nor Vastra would be safe. So much had changed in so short a time, and so much had yet to change. She wondered for a moment if it was fair to bring Jenny into this when she had done nothing to deserve such risk.

‘I cannot answer that. It may well be. If it is, though, we shall face it together. Agreed?’

Vastra smiled as she felt Jenny’s hand pat her gently on the knee.

‘Of course, madam. Together.’



*Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.*

***The Second Coming,
William Butler Yeats***

In the stillness of the night, a soaked and bedraggled man stumbled wearily from the dark of an alleyway. Footsteps echoed, moving closer to where he stood. Frozen in fear for just a moment, he still found the will to step back into the darkness, and just in time. He watched as two policemen ran past the alleyway, and if his guess were correct, they were heading toward a restaurant where right now two bodies lay dead. He waited until the echoing footsteps faded from his ears, and then clumsily made his way across the dimly lit street to the gated cemetery opposite him.

The cemetery was huge, with a large hill at the center. Topping this hill was an ostentatiously large mausoleum, columns and patina-crusted copper work dimly glowing in the silvery light of a crescent moon. Stumbling up the gravel covered path, he found the doors slightly ajar, as expected. Looking around cautiously, he grabbed a candle from within the stone building and lit it, offering him just enough illumination to see the barren room beyond the doors. He thought back carefully on what the instructions he had received said, and slowly crept to the far wall of the room. He found, on that wall, a single stone whose color seemed out of place. He pressed on it as instructed, and a grinding sound began to fill the chamber. Suddenly afraid of what was to come, he leapt back just in time to see a section of floor slide open where he once stood. Leaning over, he saw stone stairs leading down into darkness. He tried to bring moisture back to his mouth, swallowing several times, but failed. He took a deep breath and made his way down the stairs.

The stairs seemed endless. He thought to himself that it was such a cliché, but it seemed true. He continued walking for countless minutes, noticing that the air grew chillier, damper, and more fetid with every step. He despaired of ever reaching the bottom, when he found himself presented with a tall wooden door. Banded by metal blackened with age, a large ring was set half way up on the right side. He touched it tentatively, recoiling at the dead chill. *Still, this is where I'm supposed to be*, he thought to himself, and he grabbed the makeshift handle firmly. Pulling with all his might, the door finally began to give way. Hinges stiff with age and disuse screamed as the door slowly swung toward him, revealing a large chamber beyond. Nervous, sweat beading on his brow from exertion and fear, he stepped beyond the door.

The chamber beyond was narrower than it was long. Its walls were hewn stone, with nooks set back in regular intervals along the length. A bench-like riser ran along the base of both walls, while two rows of black pillars stretched back into the darkness. He made his way slowly past a wooden table in the middle of the room, cautiously down the center of the room, half noticing that the light grew dimmer the deeper into the chamber he moved. As he reached the end of the rows of pillars, a voice spoke out of the darkness. It was cold, emotionless, at once aged and ageless.

'You may stop there.'

Even if he wanted to continue to move forward to see who was speaking, he could not. It felt as if his legs had frozen in place. He waited, unsure of what to say or do.

After interminable minutes, the voice spoke again.

'Shall I assume by your presence that your task has been completed successfully?' The voice had begun to pick up some inflection and tone, but the man shivered at it this time. The voice was definitively masculine, but it was also cruel, malicious, and almost bestial despite subtle hints of melodiousness. He swallowed hard, his heart beating hard and fast in his chest, as he replied.

'Yes, m'lord. Two lay dead at my hand this night. The sacrifice has been made...your work can proceed.'

'Excellent.'

The voice in the darkness paused for a moment before continuing.

'I do find it rather odd, however. Two of you I hired for this task, yet only one stands before me this night. Would you have an explanation for this?'

The man began to sweat, trying to compose his thoughts. The longer he stood here, the more it felt as if the voice (for that was all he could think of it as, a voice without form, shadow without substance) was able to read into his very thoughts, knew what he was thinking, knew what had happened. Still, a question was asked, and an answer needed to be given.

'M'lord...my...associate...was the victim of a tragic accident.'

A cold laugh slithered from the darkness.

'An accident? Or did you turn upon him like a common criminal? After all, that is what you are, isn't it?'

'M'lord! I...'

'No matter.'

The voice was cold and brooked no argument.

'I should have expected nothing less. I suppose this means you expect your associate's share of the promised payment as well as yours, for successfully completing the precise task I set before you?'

The man looked at the floor and swallowed hard.

'I hadn't thought about that, m'lord.'

'I see. Hmm...'

There was a quiet rustling in the darkness. It was indescribable or unidentifiable as anything more than that, a sound divorced from any recognition.

'Yet...I somehow sense that you are being less than forward with me.'

The man stood, frozen to the spot, shaking. *How could he know?*

'I...I'm not sure what you mean, m'lord. Your instructions told me to kill two people, and...'

The voice interrupted him. It was cold...stern....forceful.

'Yes. I told you to kill two people. Two very specific individuals. My instructions were concise and to the point with regard to my requirements. It was a simple enough task. And thus I will ask you again. Is...the work...complete?'

'There were...complications, m'lord.'

Silence filled the vacuum of the room for minutes before the voice spoke again.

'Complications. There were...complications. Go on...'

'Well, m'lord...my associate and I watched their house for several days. Three or four days ago the girl went running from the house, and we followed her. In the storm we saw her returning to the house, and thought it our best chance to finish her. Only...'

'Yes?'

'I was waiting in the shadows as my associate was taking care of her. Out of nowhere this...thing...came bursting, and knocked him away. She screamed for the girl to run, and then...'

There was a pause. The room fell silent, and the sound of the man's breathing was almost deafening in that silence.

Then that voice spoke.

'You ran, like the craven, cowardly animal that you are.'

‘M’lord!’

‘No matter,’ intoned the voice in shadow, a light laugh rising, then fading like the rustle of leaves blowing in the distance. ‘Please, do go on...’

‘The next day I saw them leaving the house together. I heard the girl give the driver directions to a restaurant. I followed them and took care of one of the waiters. When the time was right, I went to their table and brought them wine...wine I had prepared with the poisons you provided me. A cunning plan it was, too. I left them to drink, but when I returned...’

‘Yes?’

He swallowed, finding his mouth still dry. ‘When I returned, one of them accused me of poisoning it. She got argumentative with me, and before I knew it, the owner came up and found me. He asked me what I was doing there, as I was not in his employ, and...I panicked.’

‘Of course you did,’ the voice spoke, dripping lugubriously with insincerity. ‘And what did you do then?’

‘I...slashed him across the throat. And then I buried the knife in his chest.’

He gasped for a breath before continuing.

‘And then I jumped off the balcony into the river below. And then I came here, as you required.’

Once again the chamber fell silent. He expected to hear the dripping of water against the floor, but the silence was almost all encompassing. No sound of breathing from the darkness. No voice. The only sound that broke the silence was that of his ragged breathing, harsh and labored. He could feel his heart racing, pounding in his head as he waited for something...anything...to happen.

‘He who was living is now dead...we who were living are now dying with a little patience.’

‘I don’t understand what you mean, m’lord.’

‘Then spoke the thunder...’ A brief pause allowed the man almost enough time to try and reply before the voice came again. A single word, dark and forceful, broke through the silence much like the thunder the voice had just mentioned.

‘Kneel.’

‘M’lord, I...’

‘KNEEL.’

Without a conscious thought the man dropped to his knees. His lower lip trembled, his eyes watered, the pounding in his head grew stronger still. Unable to move from the floor, he ran one hand through his sweat and river water soaked hair.

‘I had rather hoped you would succeed in this simple task. I was hoping I could find future use for you. Instead, like so many potential associates in the past, you have failed me.’

‘I’m sorry, m’lord. I...’

‘Ahh ahh ahh...I didn’t say you could speak yet, did I?’

The man opened his mouth to reply.

‘NO! Simply nod your head yes if I said you could speak. That certainly should be something simple enough for even you to not fail at.’

The man shook his head violently, his head tossing beads of water to the left and right as it snapped out.

‘I didn’t think so.’

The voice paused for a moment before continuing.

‘There is one punishment, and one punishment alone, for failing me. Do you know what that is?’

The man continued to shake his head no, unable to stop it.

‘That punishment is death.’

The man opened his mouth to speak, but no words came out. His whole body trembled as he tried to respond to the threat. He tried to will himself to a standing position, tried to break whatever spell had been cast over him that held him in its thrall, but he remained frozen to the spot.

‘Die.’

His heart pounded as he shook his head back and forth, mouthing the word ‘No’ over and over again.

‘DIE.’

His hands covered his ears, trying to keep that cold, evil voice from continuing its hold over him. His head felt as if it were about to split open. His eyes burned from sweat and tears, his lungs burned as he struggled to breathe.

‘DIE!’

With the third utterance the hold over him broke. He pulled himself to his feet quickly, unsteadily, crying out as he turned dizzily to run from the chamber. He took two steps before a searing pain radiated from his chest. He clutched at it, gasping for air that would not come, before collapsing to the floor. His head bounced off the stone floor with a sickly heavy thud, his eyes wide open and terrified. He shuddered once...twice...then laid there, still.

In the silence, there arose the rustling sound of cloth against stone. In the darkness two eyes opened...yellowed, almost human, yet with a cat-like, feral lack of emotion. That voice rose again, this time sinewy and almost languid.

‘I suppose it is true what they say. If one wants something handled properly, one should attend to it one’s self.’

A rusting sound again, and a body emerged from the darkness. He was slim, almost emaciated, his skin cracked and almost papery looking. Two dark eyes set back in a face that was more skull than head, yet those eyes were alight with life. One hand reached into a pocket and pulled out a small pouch. He tossed it in the air and watched it arc toward the body crumpled on the floor. As it hit, the jingle of coins echoed in the otherwise silent room.

‘Payment in full...don’t spend it all in one place, my good man.’

He slowly walked past the corpse to the table. He sat, tented his hands and rested his chin upon them. He felt the roughness of unshaven stubble against his hands. He considered keeping it, but it never really suited him, even when he was younger. He regarded it now as more an affectation, and in the end, he found subtlety worked far better. It was time to think of a new plan, one that would not fail. It was obvious that he would have to take care of this matter himself. It seemed right, actually...after all, how better to ensure that he would arrive than to handle things personally? Much needed to be done, of course, not least of all finding a way to regain much of the strength he’d lost. That would come in time.

Time.

Even for him, time was a concept that held very little meaning, and with as much of it as he had seen, he still found himself grossly impatient. Impatience, however, would lead to failure, and that was something he would not accept. He needed to organize, to plan, to plot. Everything would fall into place...it always did, when he put his mind to it.

‘Well then...time to begin.’

A sardonic smile curled his lips and he began to laugh quietly, but there was no humor to be found in the laughter. Against the laughter, in subtle counterpoint, came a second

sound.

Tap tap tap tap.

Tap tap tap tap.

Tap tap tap tap.

*The darkness drops again but now I know
That twenty centuries of stony sleep
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?*

***The Second Coming,
William Butler Yeats***