

The Mystery of the Black Chapel

By Neil Murrell

Transcribed from interviews with concerned parties by Neil Murrell Esq.

'Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.'

Isaiah, 41:10

The young Lord whimpered in the dark like a wounded animal. Coarse ropes chafed his wrists, while his thick sobs rang mockingly off stone walls slicked with mould and moss. He was blindfolded, gagged, and very, very far away from home.

Behind him, a wrought iron door swung reluctantly inwards, shrieking its complaint on hinges corroded by decades of rust. The captive strained against his bonds, and the wooden chair groaned, but would not yield.

"Now, now young Master, we'll 'ave no such petulance 'ere." The voice, roughened by age and strong tobacco, was kindly, but brooked no argument. The Lordling slumped forward in defeat and let his jailer go about his ministrations. Presently, the fetid cloth was yanked from his mouth, and a bowl of soup brought to his lips. It was lukewarm and tasted foul, like ditch water.

"Please," the young lord begged, sounding far younger than his twenty-five years, "my father is one of the richest men in the empire. He'll pay..."

The jailer slapped him.

"We've 'eard quite enough about your father this morning, young master. We don't need 'is money, or 'is favour. Nah, young master, we need you. *Reverend Brandeheim* needs you. We 'ave a kingdom to build. Now, you finished wiv your broth?"

The Lordling made no reply.

Taking that for assent, the guard picked up the bowl and walked to the door.

"Won't be long now, young master. The appointed hour is almost on us," He paused. "Say, 'ere, 'ow does it feel? Knowin' that you ain't *nothin'* wiv'out your daddy?"

His cackle resounded off the stone walls. The cell door screeched as he pulled it closed.

Time passed. How much time, the Lordling could not say. It was a meaningless concept, here in the dark. Seconds turned to minutes, which turned inexorably to hours, which bled into one another without distinction or incident. But the appointed time was approaching. He didn't dare think about what that could mean. Instead, he thought about his father at his writing desk with his stovepipe hat by his side, his mother in her Sunday skirts playing Für Elise on the pianoforte, his tittering trio of younger sisters, and the palatial estates he knew as home. He thought of how the dewy grass caught the morning sun, leaping flower beds and paths and a single slate-grey stream, stuttering to a halt as it reached the woodlands, clambering the tree trunks in curling, deciduous vines, as if carried by the relentless momentum of its run.

The heavy sound of tumblers falling jolted him from his reverie. Someone grabbed his chair and pulled him backwards through the door. The chair groaned against the stone floor. He cried for help but got no answer. He may as well have screamed against the turning of the earth.

He was dragged to the end of a long corridor and then, to his surprise, his bonds were cut and the chair upended, sending him tumbling to the floor. Those same rough hands yanked him to his feet and shoved him into the wall, knocking the wind from him. They ripped his blindfold off and threw it to the floor. And for the first time, he saw the face of his jailer, his expression part way between a smile and a snarl. He was an elderly, nay, an *old* man, though hale and sinewy, with rat-tails of greasy hair scurrying down his neck. His skin was pockmarked, his eyes jaundiced. Warm, stinking breath wafted from a mouth near devoid of teeth.

"Nearly time now, young master," he wheezed. "Bon voyage, heh, heh."

The old man pushed him into another cell and shut the door. What did he mean, "Bon voyage"? The room was nearly empty. There was a weather-beaten old statue in

the corner, and a few vines snaking along the floor, but nothing else. It was an odd thing, that statue. There was something mournful, elegiac about it. The way its hands covered its face...

He turned and hammered on the door.

"Hello! Let me out of here! You'll be rewarded! I am Basil Hardacre! My father is Lucien Hardacre and I say you'll be re..."

Silence fell like the blade of a guillotine.

The jailer opened the door. It was empty, apart from the vines, and, of course, the statue, now standing in the centre of the room, face uncovered, but utterly inscrutable. The jailer grunted in satisfaction and slammed the door.

"It's done! Let's go get the next one."



The day broke dull and dismal, cloaked in the kind of misty miasma that Madame Vastra had come to associate with London even more readily than Hansom cabs, bootblacks, and chimney sweeps. She pulled on a pair of fine moleskin gloves with black lace accoutrements, and made her way to the dining room, coinciding with her butler, the erstwhile Commander Strax.

"Ah, Madame Vastra!" he said in an ebullient bark. "Glad to see you up and about. Here is your breakfast, and here is your daily chronicle of human sewage."

"I do wish you wouldn't call it that, Strax," she said, sitting down with the newspaper and quickly scanning the front page. There was nothing to pique her interest - which, in itself, piqued her interest. For the twelfth consecutive day there had been no fresh disappearances reported, or any reappearances either, for that matter. A most perplexing case indeed, it made a mockery of the very definition of 'Inscrutable'. Lord Cambridge, Bishop Montmorency, Lady Jane Westermont, Sir James Neville-Boothroyd, all had simply vanished, spirited away like whispers in the wind, only to return a few days later, jaunty and chipper ...and completely unable to account for their whereabouts. But there was more. Lady Jane had been so famously acid-tongued she was commonly known (albeit *always* out of earshot) as "Lady Disdain." Yet now she was, by all accounts, the very soul of warmth. The servants she'd belittled and abused found themselves on paid holidays with three times as many shillings in their purses.

Similarly, James Neville-Boothroyd, one of the great eccentrics of the age, who drank enough Glenmorangie daily to stun the average mule, who shot grouse in his pyjamas at four in the morning, and who never ate anything with the letter O in the name, had magically discovered sobriety and temperance and now spent his days painting water colours and balancing his pocketbook. "He's almost boring now," one acquaintance had confided to Vastra. "Poor old cock."

It was hardly a deductive leap to presume their disappearances were connected, but the nature of that connection had eluded Vastra, and the sharpest minds of Scotland Yard, for over two months. Furthermore, the circumstances of their disappearances confounded even the most obvious parallels. They were all abundantly wealthy, yet no discernible moves had been made on their estates. They were hugely influential, yet they had assiduously avoided any taint of corruption (all except the Bishop, of course, whose associations with the Freemasonry, dalliances with the occult, and propensity for

outlandish lasciviousness were the subject of much salacious doss-house gossip). At first, Vastra had suspected some kind of mesmeric influence at play, but cursory interviews with the victims (if, indeed, that was even what they were) showed no hint of such manipulation. It was truly baffling, and Vastra had a profound distaste for bafflement.

The latest to disappear was an elderly peer named Sir Oswald Hawthorne. Reclusive by nature, and stupendously wealthy, with an astonishing multiplicity of heirs, there was no shortage of people who might have had motive to murder the old man. Vastra, on the other hand, along with Inspector George Docherty, the one Detective at the Yard who had yet to abandon the case, was waiting patiently for what she saw as his inevitable return.

She was jolted from her ruminations by the airy chiming of the antique doorbell. Before she could intervene she heard, in quick succession, the heavy clomp of booted feet, the creak of the front door, and an ear-splitting shriek of unbridled panic. When she entered the foyer, she saw Strax, looking as apologetic as one can with a face built for a perpetual scowl.

"It was one of those... *little* ones," he sneered. "You'd think he'd never seen a butler before."

Vastra lowered her veil and peered outside. Cowering behind a gas-lamp, a young urchin, barefoot and bedraggled, muttered oaths and crossed himself fervently. She beckoned him to her. Hesitantly, he approached.

"What was that fing?" he trembled.

"Just a friend," she replied as gently as she could, "he may look a little strange but he's very friendly and kind. Nothing to be afraid of."

"*Perfidious human scum!*" Strax bellowed from somewhere behind her.

She cleared her throat harshly, and cast a venomous look over her shoulder.

"How may I help you, young man?"

"Inspector Dofferty asked me to deliver you this, Miss."

Vastra took a brown envelope from the urchin's hand and slit it open with a bone-handle paper knife with gold filigree. Inside was a newspaper article with a handwritten note pinned to it.

Madame Vastra,

I trust you will look with interest on the enclosed, purloined from tomorrow's edition of the 'Standard'. On the advice of the chief superintendent, as well as the influence of Sir Michael Stark, whose gentle intimations of familiarity with the Royal Executioner proved most persuasive, the paper has agreed to postpone publication for 24 hours to give us an opportunity to investigate the obvious implications of their findings. Locating the group's headquarters was a trivial matter, and I'll endeavour to call on them today. With the slightest fortuity I may chance upon a knowledgeable acolyte with some memory of seeing the poor fellow prior to his disappearance. I shall, of course, keep you fully apprised of any developments. Your assistance thus far has proven invaluable.

I remain, as ever, your faithful servant,

G. H. Docherty, Scotland Yard.

Vastra frowned. Group? It was the first she'd heard mention of any "group", in any capacity. She tore off the note and turned her attention to the article. It was a brief piece, scarcely two hundred words. But as she read, her eyes widened as she considered its implications.

DISBURSEMENT DEBACLE IN DOWER STREET

The offices of Brooks & McCauley were today the scene of an extraordinary confrontation between the friends, relatives, and associates of Sir Oswald Hawthorne concerning the settlement of the late peer's Last Will and Testament. The death of Sir Oswald, confirmed in a handwritten suicide note delivered to Brooks & McCauley (feat. article page 1) precipitated a reading of the Will in the offices of the aforementioned, attended by all concerned parties. To the gravest consternation of the assembled descendants, Sir Oswald's solicitor, Mr. Granville P.

Chambers Esq., adumbrated that the conditions of the Will specified the vast bulk of the late peer's estate be donated to the Church of Christ of the Unrequited Heart, a little known Presbyterian congregation spearheaded by the Reverend Josiah Brandeheim of West Riding of Yorkshire. The Church, established just ten years ago, has attracted a considerable degree of interest from certain segments of the aristocracy, with the Lady Margery Corbray, and Lord Basil Hardacre known affiliates.

On that dry, actuarial note the article drew to a close. 'Church of Christ of the Unrequited Heart' had been underlined, while the name 'Basil Hardacre' had been circled in red ink and beside it lay scrawled in the margin:

Missing - Thirty-six hours!

Vastra's frown deepened. To lose one blue-blooded Presbyterian may be regarded as a misfortune. To lose two...

She pressed a silver shilling into the urchin's hand and lifted a sable cloak from a hook by the door.

"Strax, when Jenny returns from the market, tell her I've gone to meet with Inspector Docherty at the Yard. I'll be back for supper."

"Ma'am," Strax grunted in reply.

"And remember Strax, what's our rule?"

"Always wear gauntlets when handling anthrax harpoons?"

"The *other* rule."

"Crush the lesser races and win glory for Sontar?"

"Always the telephone, *never* the door."

"Ah yes, that one." Strax muttered. As he lurched back toward the parlour, Vastra swept past the gobsmacked urchin still standing in the doorway, clutching the silver shilling like a holy relic, and began the long walk to Scotland Yard.



As Vastra strode into the street, a man in a hansom cab opened the door and prepared to follow. He was astonishingly tall; he had to kneel on the floor of the hansom to safely disembark. Despite his conspicuousness, he wouldn't have entrusted this task to anyone else. As he walked, a beggar tugged at the hem of his cloak, and reached toward him, palms outstretched, in a gesture of pitiful supplication.

"Spare a farthing for a wounded soldier, sir?"

The tall man turned and smiled benignly. He reached into his wallet and handed the beggar a crisp pound note, and then another besides.

"Find yourself somewhere warm, my friend," he said, gently. "No man should have to endure this bitter cold. Godspeed!"

"Sir," the beggar whispered "It's...it's too much."

"Nonsense," the tall man replied. "Go, eat something hot. Buy yourself a haircut and a shave, and some new clothes. Find some board, if only for a short while. I hear there's an excellent new magician from the Orient playing at the Palace Theatre."

With that, he turned on his heel and hurried after his mark.

"God bless you, sir!" the beggar cried. But the tall man gave no indication of having heard.

Hansoms barrelled along muddy roads, traders hawked their wares in foghorn bellows, urchins kicked at puddles while milk-eyed vagrants begged alms from passers by; bootblacks buffed and polished, barrow-boys ran with heaving carts, three street corner fiddlers played 'The Ballad of Bloody Mary', and through it all Vastra cut a regal swathe, sweeping through the furious bustle of this alien world like a phantom, her cloak passing so low she almost seemed to glide.

London. Living, breathing, glorious, terrible London! Jewel of an Empire, and capital of the world. What a magnificent place! A thriving hub of dynamism, commerce, and ceaseless humanity! There were times when it could almost be too much. There were days – rare, though they were – when she felt like nothing more than a lonely cell, tumbling through the veins and arteries of the city, swept up in the delirious pulse of London life. At times, the anonymity suited her. At others, it made her feel profoundly insignificant. It exposed a darkness in her. At those rare times, she wanted nothing more than to cast her veil into the mud, snarl in the faces of these apish primitives, and carve out a pedestal for herself with fire and blood. She was Vastra, last of the great Silurian warrior caste. She ought to be respected, *feared* even. Surely it was only right.

But then she would remember the Doctor's warning.

"They're so young, Vastra. They're not ready yet. One day they will be. And on that day your races will lock arms and conquer time and space together, and it will be magnificent! But that day will never come if you reveal who you really are."

Given her experience of human avarice, myopia, and cruelty, she doubted she would ever live to see that day herself. But she had faith that it would come, and she knew better than to argue determinism with a Time Lord.

And then, she had experienced love and acceptance as well. She had Jenny, impetuous, headstrong, and beautiful as a desert sunrise. As long as she had Jenny, did it really matter if she veiled herself from others? Did anyone else *need* to see her?

Lost in these ruminations, she almost walked straight past the Yard, but the imposing shadow of the spiked iron gates brought her back to the present. She strode to the main entrance, nodding curtly to a pair of detectives who doffed their hats to her as she passed. When inside, she put in a request to see Inspector Docherty. The constable returned a few minutes later.

"I'm sorry Madame Vastra, Inspector Docherty is indisposed at present. However, he did anticipate your calling and left you this." He passed over a plain white card, with an address scrawled on it in red ink. *Clarence Church, 156 Grayson's Place.*

"He asked if you could meet him there at twelve noon. He said he'd wait an hour, but that if you were unable to attend to return home and wait on him to call on you at about five."

Vastra smiled. "Presumptuous little peeler, isn't he?"

The constable grinned.

"He anticipated you'd say that too, Miss. Said to apologise for the impertinence, but that it was imperative he talk with you tonight. By his manner I'd not be surprised to hear he's had a bit of luck with that case of yours."

"Very well, constable. Thank you for the message. Do you happen to have the time?"

"Eleven forty, ma'am. Don't worry. This place is just round the corner. Just take the second left out of here and keep going 'til you see an old stone Church. That's Clarence Church. You can't miss it."

She thanked the constable again and headed back into the fog.

The church was a crumbling ruin. Mould festered between the black stones, and spectral tongues of morning mist had left them shiny and slick. Creeping ivy tendrils covered the place like swollen veins, and the heavy oak door was black with rot. If this church held any sway with the aristocracy, they certainly hid it well.

She rapped on the door and waited. With any luck Docherty would be concluding a productive interview, and the two could escape this dismal little place and discuss his findings in the warmth of a tavern. When the door eventually creaked open, she was somewhat disappointed, but hardly surprised, to find someone other than Docherty staring back at her. His hair was long, thin, slathered in grease, and snaked down his neck like a fistful of rat-tails. He had hardly a tooth in his head, and an odious miasma of sweat and bacon grease hung about him so thickly one could almost chew it. Vastra found herself fighting a transient urge to step back a pace.

"Good afternoon, sir," she said. "I am Madame Vastra, and I have arranged to meet a friend of mine here, an Inspector..."

"Aven't seen 'im," said the man; his voice had the grainy consistency of sandpaper. He motioned to close the door, but Vastra jammed her foot in front of it.

"Inspector George Docherty, sir! Would you perchance happen to know if he is currently residing in your church?"

"I would perchance 'appen to know nuffin' of the sort," he snapped. "Now, sling yer 'ook!" He gave Vastra a short, sharp, shove, and slammed the door in her face.

Vastra stared in stunned amazement, and hissed furiously at the door. She supposed she could break it down and acquire the answers she sought through less salubrious means, but she knew that doing so might jeopardise any leads the church may hold for her. Besides, it took more than one slovenly prole to make her lose *her* head. She headed back towards Paternoster row, opting to wait for Docherty's call.

On the other side of the door, the old man cracked his knuckles with relish and descended a spiral staircase. The stairs led to a windowless stone room, the walls studded with torches. They burned with alacrity, yet the room was still unaccountably dim. The cold stone seemed to leech the torchlight straight out of the air. The old man sighed.

"Could do with some light bulbs down 'ere, couldn't we?" he said.

His companion made no reply.

"I'm just sayin'," the old man continued "'lectricity's the bloody wonder of the age, and look at us. I can 'ardly see what I'm doin'." He walked to a table strewn with implements, picked one up, and scrutinised it in the half-light. It was three feet of cold steel, with a wooden handle, tapering to a curved point with a serrated edge. It was a tool for which no innocent purpose could possibly exist. He turned back to his companion.

"And you of all people, I'm sure, would be 'appier if I could see what I was doing." The other muttered something unintelligible.

"S'cuse me?" the old man said, running a hand through his greasy hair. "I'm gettin' on, son. Yer gonna need to speak up."

With a titanic effort, the other lifted his head to look his tormentor in the eye.

"I *said*, that when I get out of here – And I will get out – I'm going to take every inch of that steel and drive it through your eye." From his vantage point, chained six feet above the ground, he spat. A gelatinous parcel of spittle and half-clotted blood slapped against the old man's face.

Before he could retaliate, a shadow darkened the bottom of the stairs, and the cell resounded with the staccato rhythm of booted footsteps. What little colour remained in the prisoner's face drained away as the tall man filled the doorway. The old man touched his forelock respectfully.

"Sir," he said.

"O'Boyle?" the tall man replied. It was both a greeting and a question.

"Nothin' yet, sir. But gimme a little time."

"Who was at the door?"

"It was like you said, sir. The one we been watching. That detective woman, or whatever the hell it is."

"A *Silurian*, O'Boyle. An ancient and dignified species, I'll thank you to remember. Although rather incongruous in this era."

"Sir?"

"Never mind. Don't worry about her. Worry about him."

The tall man turned to the prisoner. "So, Inspector Docherty. Are you enjoying our hospit..."

The blow, when it came, split the tall man's face from ear to chin. He roared in pain and fell to his knees. The fastenings of Docherty's manacles had crumbled with age. In an explosive burst of strength, he'd wrenched one out of the wall entirely, and flung it into the tall man's face. The remaining manacle buckled under the sudden extra burden and Docherty fell to the floor. He struggled to his feet. He'd tapped the very last of his reserves. O'Boyle slashed at him but was out of reach. Docherty struggled up the stairs. He could hear the old man gaining on him. He launched a booted foot behind him in a savage mule kick and heard a sickening crunch, an anguished howl, and the square sound of a body slumping to the floor.

He emerged into muted daylight, filtered by cloud and glass thickened by age. He saw the door ahead and staggered toward it. He bled from a multiplicity of wounds on

his chest and legs. He reached the door and dared a glance behind him. The hall was clear. His captors were nowhere to be seen. He allowed himself a spark of hope as his hand closed around the wrought iron ring on the door and he pulled with all his might.

No sooner had he tasted daylight than he felt himself falling. Like a discarded puppet he hit the ground in an ungainly heap. He shook his head and tried to stand but it was no use. A shadow fell. Above him, the tall man stood brandishing a gun unlike any he'd ever seen before. His mouth was firm and hard-set, but a red smile played over the side of his face.

"O'Boyle!" he shouted, keeping his eyes on Docherty. "Take him away. He's more trouble than he's worth. Give him to the creature."



She slid her key into the lock, and shivered pleasantly as she stepped into the warmth of the lobby. In the lounge, serpentine tongues of bright red flame flashed up the chimney, and as Vastra pulled up a chair beside it she shrugged off the chill as one would a damp cloak.

"Is that you, ma'am?" a cheerful voice called from the kitchen.

Her heart rose a little.

"Yes, my love," she answered.

A booted foot nudged the door ajar, and Jenny breezed into the room carrying a tray laden with cups, saucers, milk, and a gently steaming teapot. There was a brisk and business-like efficiency to her movements, but genuine warmth to her smile. She set the tray down on the table between them and poured Vastra a cup.

"Please, join me, Jenny. We have much to talk about."

"Don't mind if I do, ma'am," Jenny replied, pulling a nearby chaise longue to the table.

"Where's Strax?"

"Upstairs, alphabetising his grenades."

"Would you kindly fetch him here? What I'm about to tell you may concern him, too."

Commander Strax entered presently, his face animating a particularly virulent strain of scorn.

"What is the meaning of this, *boy*?" he growled at Jenny. "I was assessing our fortifications for strategic weaknesses!"

Jenny sighed. "Why?"

Strax leaned back in his chair. "I have declared war, on *rain*."

"Rain?"

"Rain! For too long, we have tolerated a never-ending series of ceaseless aerial bombardments of this perfidious precipitation! With every assault, our defences weaken further! Also, it's wet!"

"It's just water."

The Sontaran's eyes narrowed. "For now..."

Vastra cleared her throat. "If we could get back to the *matter at hand*? Thank you. Now, this morning I was presented with an intriguing missive directing me toward a parish called the Church of Christ of the Unrequited Heart..."

Jenny's eyes widened as Vastra told her story. Vastra studied Jenny's eyes

intently. After so much time together, she could read her without even trying.

"Ma'am..." Jenny began.

"Tomorrow, my sweet," she said, "We shall go to the Church tomorrow."

"But I never said..."

"You didn't have to."

"Ma'am..." Jenny hesitated, "what do you think we'll find there?"

Vastra smiled. "Why my dear, I positively *dread* to think."

Five o'clock came and went with no sign of Docherty. Six o'clock followed suit. Then seven. Vastra glared at the antique wall clock and made her way to the basement, in the hope that a little exercise would keep her from brooding over a wasted evening.

Mounted to the far wall, a mahogany rack laden with nearly a dozen swords lay dimly illuminated in the flickering light of an oil lamp sheathed in red glass. She had, over the years, amassed an intimidating collection. She had two *wakizashi*, two sabres, a rapier, a short sword, two pole-mounted *nagatatas* and – the pride of her collection – three curved *katanas*, custom-made of course, with gold filigree on their *tsukas* and Komodo dragons etched into the blades.

With both hands, she gently lifted a *katana* from the rack and slid it from the scabbard. She swung it to her left, and then to her right in slow, deliberate strokes, checking her form against her shadow on the wall. The lamplight glanced off the blade in flashes of liquid gold.

She parried the advances of invisible foes, ducked under their savage broadsides and thrust toward their hearts. It had been too long since she had last danced, and she worried she had lost her edge. But with every stroke she sank deeper into herself, until the only things in the world were her sword and her shadow.

It was another hour before the dinner bell broke her trance. Vastra had hardly thought about herself since she returned from the church, but, her attention thus directed, she was surprised by how hungry she was. She swept up the stairs and into the dining room.

"Of course," said Vastra over dinner, "Sir Oswald's death means we can exclude him from the list of missing dignitaries."

"If he *is* dead, ma'am," said Jenny.

Vastra lowered her fork and looked at Jenny, intrigued. "Go on, my dear," she said.

Jenny hesitated. "Well... it's just that... If *I* wanted to disappear, but I wanted to keep my money, I might leave it somewhere those what I leave behind can't get to it."

"Of course!" Vastra exclaimed, rising abruptly from the table. "I should have considered as much myself!"

"Ma'am," Jenny said, "where are you going?"

"To the offices of Brooks and McCauley, my dear," Vastra said. "I want to take a closer look at Sir Oswald's suicide note."

"But ma'am," Jenny protested, "it's nearly ten. I don't think they'd appreciate..."

"Don't worry, Jenny," Vastra said, "I can be *quite* persuasive."

As luck would have it, Mister G. P. Chambers Esquire, solicitor to the erstwhile Sir Oswald Hawthorne, was a man given to burning the midnight oil.

But though he would fondly claim to anyone who cared to ask that it gave a lovely light, even he was surprised by the insistent rapping on his front door, as the wall clock chimed for half past ten.

"All right, all right," he blustered in his gruff Yorkshire baritone, as he deftly manoeuvred his impressive girth through the furniture cluttering his office with that lightness of foot that is, it often seems, the exclusive domain of small, plump men.

"Old on, 'old on!" He shouted. "'T' bloody building ain't going nowhere!"

By the time he reached the front door, he resembled nothing so much as a dewy beetroot, and his breathing came in laboured puffs. He flung open the wooden door and rested against the frame.

"Yes?" he muttered.

"Good evening, sir. Would you kindly tell your employer that Madame Vastra of Paternoster Row wishes to speak with him regarding a police matter of some urgency?"

"My... employer?" asked Chambers, barely comprehending.

"Yes, a Mr Chambers, I believe. Could you fetch him? It is, as I say, a matter of some urgency."

Mister G. P. Chambers Esquire drew himself up to his full height, which was barely five foot four, turned up his nose, tugged ostentatiously on his lapels, and said, in the haughtiest voice he could muster, "There's no need to fetch anyone, Madam. I am Mister G. P. Chambers, and while I never shy from 'elping the police, the hour is insalubrious and I am quite past tired so if you would *kindly* state your business my digestion will thank you for it!"

Vastra winced under her veil.

"My apologies, Mr Chambers. I was..."

"Expecting someone with a little more bearing? Hmm? A tad more vertically inclined, per'aps? Aye, I don't doubt it. Well, here I am, as you see me, and a keener legal mind you won't find on this side of t' Thames. Not at my prices at any rate. Now come inside. I won't 'ave you freezing on me doorstep. Never let it be said that G. P. Chambers wants of hospitality. Besides, icicles make for miserable clients."

With that, he turned and beckoned her inside. When they were both seated comfortably around his comically large mahogany desk, he spread his arms wide as if to say "Well?" and Vastra began her tale.

"My..." he whispered when her tale drew to a close, "it's a queer bit of business, I'll grant you that, but I fail to see what help I can be. Of course, if I think of anything I'll..."

Vastra cut him off. She didn't have time for lawyerly equivocations.

"Mr Chambers, I do believe there's one way you could assist me. Would you perchance happen to have Sir Oswald's suicide note?"

The portly little man promptly vanished behind the mountain of files, folders, and promissory notes littering his desk, emerging triumphantly a few moments later clutching a piece of paper, a victorious expression on his whiskered face.

All,

Help is not something that I've ever been accustomed to receiving, but as my troubles grow ever deeper they threaten to submerge me completely. By the time you read this I'll be dead by my own hand. My previous will and testament, a document from another life, I hereby declare to be null and void. I trust that you will execute these new instructions to the letter, & I owe my profound thanks to my lawyer Mr Chambers for aiding me. Firstly, I shall bequeath an annual sum of no less than five hundred pounds to my younger brother Clarence from now until the date of his death. Lastly, the remainder of my estate shall be bequeathed to the Church of Christ of the Unrequited Heart under the auspices of Reverend Josiah Brandenheim.

May God have mercy on my soul,

Oswald.

"Did anything strike you as odd about the missive when you first received it?" asked Vastra.

"Sadly, no," replied Chambers, shaking his head ruefully. "Sir Oswald was always a melancholy man, prone to brown studies, bleak humours and the like. It didn't come as no surprise. Although, there is one peculiarity, now you mention it."

"Go on."

"Well... it's been three days and I've still seen neither hide nor hair of this brother of his, this Clarence Hawthorne."

"And that's unusual, is it? Not to hear from the deceased's relatives after that amount of time?"

"Absolutely madam. 'Specially if the departed were a wealthy man, and Sir Oswald were certainly that. Not a problem shared by the rest of the so-called mourners, I don't mind sayin'. Grasping vultures, the lot o' them. I tell you truly Madam, there's nowt so mean as those that have too much."

"But this Clarence remains, shall we say... elusive?"

Chambers chuckled, setting his multiplicity of ample chins to bouncing in a manner Vastra found peculiarly endearing.

"You could certainly say that, madam! It's like he's walked off the face of the earth, if he ever resided upon't in the first place."

"If he ever resided upon it..." At that, Vastra felt an icy chill trickle down her spine, like a dewdrop down a blade of grass. Her senses piqued, and all of a sudden, the roaring fire's billowing breath seemed to her to be woefully inadequate. She felt overcome with the profound sense that she had been misdirected; that the truth was there, hiding in plain sight, hovering on the edge of thought, like the image of a dream on waking.

Impulsively, she leaned across the desk and plucked the note from Chamber's meaty paw. She read it once, twice, and thrice again.

And then it hit her.

Her free hand flew to her mouth. She gasped in mortified realisation, and the paper slipped from her grasp and floated gently to the floor.

"What's the matter?" Chambers enquired, suddenly concerned. "Don't you think he's dead, or something?"

"Oh, Mr. Chambers," she whispered, "I'm quite certain that he is."

She handed the note back to him.

"He was clever. Very clever. If only we had..." she paused, groping for the words.

Chambers stared at her a moment as if she'd lost her wits, then turned his attention to the paper, shaking his head in bafflement.

"The first word," Vastra said. "The first word of every line."

Comprehension dawned slowly, but when it did, it was with the force of a thunderbolt.

"Gods be good!" Chambers choked.

Silence swallowed them up, like a wave, or a shadow.



In the chill serenity of the night, the Black Chapel took on a very different form. The

darkness obscured the dilapidation and rot, leaving only the austere Gothic outline, an edifice to something cruel and unforgiving.

Darkness pooled in the doorways, and in the gaps where the windows should have been.

In a Hansom parked a little way down the street, Madame Vastra surveyed the Church with evident concern.

"Are you quite certain you're ready for this, Jenny?" she asked, pinning a tracking device about the size of a farthing to the inside of Jenny's smock.

Those with only a passing familiarity with Miss Jenny Flint of Paternoster Row would doubtless have been taken aback by the presence of the unkempt interloper answering to her name. Gone were the conservative trappings of professional service, the costly, albeit shapeless blouse, the milk-white apron, the spit shined shoes as black and reflective as oil. Instead, this bedraggled creature wore a muddy smock that barely covered her shins, and a flat cap in the fashion of an East End hod carrier. Her face and hands were streaked with dirt, and a big toe poked impudently out of her left boot. She was, in a word, unrecognisable.

"Born ready, ma'am," she replied, with an eager grin.

It had been Jenny who had first suggested infiltration.

"A Bishop, and five Lords 'n Ladies, one of 'em murdered! Ma'am, it ain't right. Something's going on in that Church and we're never going to find out what less we have a look for ourselves."

"Perspicacious as ever, dear," Vastra said with a wan smile. It was true enough, of course, but the last thing she'd wanted Jenny to say. She knew where this was leading.

Jenny frowned, folded her arms, and shifted her body away from the table. The temperature in the room fell a little, despite the roaring fire.

"I don't take kindly to being patronised, ma'am. You know well as I do that someone's got to see what's going on in that awful place."

Vastra stood and put her hand on Jenny's shoulder.

"I do, dear. Much as I know it must be you to undertake that. I only wish it wasn't."

"Well, wishing's good for wells and birthday cakes, but it don't help us none, does it?"

Vastra had to smile. "I suppose not. All right. It's settled. We'll go tonight. And fetch Strax. I feel we may have need of him."

Courage, Jenny reflected anxiously, was like helium. The less you had, the heavier you felt.

The walk from the cab to the Church couldn't have been more than fifty yards, but by the time she reached the door her legs felt like lead. She knocked on the decaying wooden door and waited. A moment later, the door creaked open and a vinegar faced elderly man peered out at her, haunted eyes brimming with suspicion. His breath smelled like swamp water.

"Yeah?" he grunted "What do *you* want, gutter rat?"

Jenny wiped away crocodile tears with a dirty rag and sobbed into her hands.

"Oh please sir!" she whimpered, "Please do help me! I've not got no one, no family or nothing. I ain't eaten for four days. I'm so hungry! All I ask is a little help. Somewhere to bed down for the night. Can you help me, sir?"

The old man grunted again. "Wait 'ere," he said, slamming the door.

He returned a few minutes later and opened the door fully. Jenny's eyes widened. The inside and the outside could not have clashed more starkly. The floor was covered in a white shag carpet a whole inch thick. A string of golden gas fired lamps provided both heat and light. And the walls were festooned with portraits of all shapes and sizes, set in gilded frames. Curiously, Jenny thought, they all appeared to be of the same man, cast in various attitudes of contemplation. In one, he stood sombrely, cowed in a black smock, the impudent whiteness of his dog collar setting off the whites of his cavernous eyes. In the next, he sat in a garden, admiring the reflections dancing on a rock pool. There was a serenity about him, evident even in these portraits; a centeredness which stood out even from the oil and canvas.

"Rev'rend Brandeheim," the old man said by way of explanation. "You'll meet him presently."

He led her to a spartan little room with a hardwood floor, and a mattress in the far corner. Gently, but firmly, he guided Jenny into the room.

"Wait 'ere," he said again, closing the door and plunging her into darkness.

"Wait for what?" she almost blurted out as the faint echo of the old man's footsteps dimmed away. A few moments later all was silent. Sighing, she crouched to her knees and felt her way to the mattress. She soon became aware of the music of the cell. In the dark, every sound was amplified. She could hear the faint rhythmic tapping of water on stone, and imagined, with a shudder, the frantic scurrying of tiny paws beneath the mouldering masonry.

She couldn't have said how long she waited. Alone in the dark, time quickly lost its authority. It became somehow weightless and insignificant. All she knew was that her eyes had long adjusted to the gloom by the time the old man returned. He flung open the door and the light made her wince. When she could bear to lower the sieve of her hands, she saw, silhouetted in the doorway, the tallest man she had ever seen. His face was a crag, with a nose like a peninsula, and a wide, downturned mouth. His eyes scrutinised her intently beneath a monolithic brow, and without even knowing how or why, Jenny suddenly felt exposed and vulnerable, as though she were made of glass, and he were seeing right through her.

Long moments passed in silence before he spoke.

"Good evening," he murmured. The depth of his voice was suitably proportionate to his height. It sounded like the first rumblings of an avalanche. "It's a pleasure to meet you. I only wish it could be under better circumstances. Come, child. Step into the light. Let me look at you."

Hesitantly, Jenny stood and walked into the light. The giant smiled.

"Tha... thank you for taking me in, sir." She said with practised hesitation. "I don't know how I can repay you."

He sighed softly and shook his head, as though she'd said something both charming and profoundly stupid.

"Repayment?" he asked with a note of wry amusement. "My dear, look at me and tell me what you see."

She eyed him warily. Was this a trick? Was he testing her?

"I... I..."

He silenced her with a wave.

"What you see is an old man, set in his ways, and well aware of the limitations of his body, his mind, and his meagre lifespan. I have a *vision*, of kindness, and prosperity. Do you know your Bible?"

"Yes, sir."

"There's a passage I've memorised. Isaiah 41:10: *'Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.'*"

He took her hands, and locked his gaze on hers, eyes gleaming with fervour.

"To hear my vision, and to hopefully share in it, is all the repayment I require. Tell me, do you have a family? Friends? Anyone you can turn to?"

"N... no sir, no I don't, sir." Jenny stammered.

He beamed. "Well, now you have all three. My name is Josiah Brandeheim, Reverend of this modest parish. You are, and always will be, welcome as though you were my own blood."

Despite herself, Jenny felt absurdly grateful. Of all the things she had expected to find inside the church, she hadn't expected compassion. Without even intending to, Brandeheim had taken her back to the days of her lowest ebb, the penury and ostracism, the lonely nights and scornful, sideways glances, and offered her unconditional escape. It was a seductive message. And, had she never met Madame Vastra, she would doubtless have gratefully accepted. An inkling of doubt slipped behind her façade like a subtle knife. Had they been wrong about this man?

"Thank you, sir," she said.

"Please," he grinned, putting an enormous arm around her shoulder. "Come now, these are hardly suitable quarters for a member of our flock," he turned to the old man. "O'Boyle. Find suitable quarters for our new parishioner. And see she gets a good meal. Something hot, understand?"

"Sir."

Brandeheim turned to Jenny and smiled conspiratorially, as though she were an old confidant.

"I've tried training him to abandon the formalities, but he's too much of the old guard. Still, a more leal servant you won't find in all the Empire. Come; let me show you to my study. We have some things to discuss."

Brandeheim led her down a series of crimson corridors, decorated with damask prints and adorned with busts from the farthest reaches of antiquity. They walked in silence, but it was an easy, comfortable silence, and Jenny felt under no pressure to break it. Then a question occurred to her.

"Si... Reverend Brandeheim. Can I ask: do you get a lot of people like me coming here?"

"Honestly, not as many as I'd like, Jenny. I fear I don't yet possess the resources to be as charitable as I'd like. That will change, in time, I hope."

They came to a pair of double doors at the end of the corridor. Brandeheim pushed them open and beckoned Jenny inside.

"Please, take a seat," he said, planting himself in a high-backed leather chair behind a mahogany desk, "I have much to tell you."

Jenny hitched up her tattered skirts and sat demurely opposite him with her hands on her knees.

Brandeheim filled two glasses from a frosty jug of ice water, then sat down, leant forward and stared at her intently over steeped fingers.

"I have a vision, my dear," he said, his voice lowering as he leaned forward. "I see a world free from the surplus suffering which blights the lives of so many, where the pain of loss, inevitable as it is, is ameliorated by the knowledge that no man, woman, or child was ever denied a chance at happiness. A world of plenty, of art, and culture,

united under a single banner. I see it as clearly as I see you right now. And I see how it can be achieved. What say you? Do you think this is a vision worth holding?"

"Why yes, Reverend," she replied.

"Would you like to help me achieve it?"

"What would I need to do?"

"Do you know your letters?"

"No Reverend. I ain't never had no schooling"

Brandeheim raised a quizzical eyebrow.

"None at all?"

"No, reverend."

He paused briefly, and Jenny felt there was something to his expression that wasn't there before. A different sort of scrutiny.

"Where are you living now?" he asked.

"I'm 'omeless, sir. My father, well... when my mother died he took to the drink and..."

"I see. The poor man," Brandeheim said.

Every single trace of warmth had drained from his voice. He rang a bell and O'Boyle appeared in the doorway almost immediately.

"Take our guest to the Sanctum. I shall be along presently."

A wave of confusion passed briefly over the old man's leathery features. "Sir?"

"You heard!" snapped Brandeheim. The retort hung in the air like something faintly horrible, a distant scream on a winter's night. Jenny tensed in her chair.

The old man shrugged. "Come wiv me, young miss," he muttered, indicating down the corridor.

Jenny walked behind the old man, noting the speed of his gait and the strength in his shoulders. He seemed a formidable sort, in spite of his age. As they walked, she reflected on what had transpired in the study. She wasn't imagining things; Brandeheim's mood had soured somewhat toward the end of the conversation. She went over it all again. Had she somehow given offence?

It seemed the Church was deserted. As she replayed her time with Brandeheim over in her mind, Jenny kept coming back to what he had said when she asked if he had other visitors.

"Not as many as I'd like, Jenny." he'd said.

The breath hitched in her throat and a deep chill passed through her bones.

"How did he know my name?!"

And that was when everything changed.

The old man stopped so abruptly she walked straight into his back. He grabbed her by the shoulders and pushed her against the wall.

"Hey!" Jenny cried "What you playing at?"

"Shut up!" the old man spat. The mix of ferocity and exhilaration in his voice shocked her. It spoke of a pronounced taste for violence. "Shut up you filthy gutter rat! I ought to cut your bloody throat!"

She looked about her frantically. To her right was a dead end, and to her left two burly men had seemingly stepped from the ether to block off her only exit. She looked the old man dead in the eyes, and they were full of poison.

"You're welcome to try, dear."

The old man took one hand off her shoulder to reach for his belt. That was all she needed. She fainted right, slipped left, grabbed his retreating arm by the elbow and spun it over her head. The old man dropped to his knees with fearful alacrity.

"Let me go! Let me go you bloody urchin!"

"Shut it, you," she snapped. "On your feet!"

She pulled the dirk from his belt, pausing half a moment to admire its sharpness. It curved like a lazy smile. She held it to the mottled flesh of his throat. Together, they inched toward the two men at the end of the corridor. She called out to them.

"I don't wanna hurt him. You hear me? I just wanna get out. So on the floor with your hands behind your backs and nobody has to get hurt, alright?"

"Sorry darlin'," the rightmost man replied with a mercenary grin, "someone definitely has to get 'urt!"

They barrelled down the corridor toward her. She planted a boot in O'Boyle's back and sent him careening into the path of the left man. They collapsed in an ungainly tangle of limbs. The rightmost man, the bigger of the two, ran towards her and she realised she had dropped the knife. It lay just out of reach as the man swung his fist down in a hammer blow. He was holding a cudgel. She parried, grabbed his sledgehammer of an arm, drew herself into his path, and used his own weight to tip him onto his back. She kicked the cudgel out of his fist and he rolled away clutching his right hand, howling. O'Boyle lay prone on the floor, but the man he'd collided with was younger, stronger. He drew a stiletto from his belt and came in low, slashing left and right, forcing her back. Her heart was pounding, but the adrenalin slowed everything down. She glanced about her and realised she was running out of room and still without a weapon as the man advanced, methodically cutting and slicing his way toward her. Out the corner of her eye, she spied the cudgel. She fainted left, dove right, snatched up the cudgel and threw with all her strength. It clipped him just above the temple and he slumped to the floor, like a marionette with its strings cut.

Jenny stood, dusted herself off, and picked up the knife. As she walked down the corridor the first man scurried away from her, still holding his hand. She glanced at O'Boyle as she passed. He was still breathing, but was far beyond a threat. She smiled at the man.

"You were right dearie," she said, "someone did."

The shock, when it came, galvanised every cell in her body. She glimpsed a large black shape shift into her field of vision from the corner of her eye and had just enough time to recognise it as a man. She saw the light blink off something silver in his hand, then a flash of red, and she collapsed in a shuddering heap. There was no pain. Instead, there was something far worse. A shameful sense of disempowerment as the strength drained from her limbs and she slumped to the floor.

She looked up, focus shifting lazily back and forth, and saw Brandeheim standing over her, brandishing a weapon that had no business in that time and place.

"Bloody oafs," she heard him curse. As consciousness faltered, and the world dimmed away in a reddish haze, he gave a terse command.

"On your feet. Take her to the Sanctum!"

Brandeheim was enraged. She knew that before she even opened her eyes. As the darkness receded, she heard snippets of furious conversation, broken by moments of sweet oblivion that seemed to last for hours.

"...One job to do!" Brandeheim raged. Then silence.

"...Bested by a little girl!"

"...Should throw you all in there with her!"

"Sir..." a tremulous voice, O'Boyle's, she guessed, interrupted with obvious trepidation.

"*What?!*"

"I...I think she's awake, sir."

There was no further point in pretending. She opened her eyes, sat up and yawned.

"Morning gents," she said with a cheery smile, leaning nonchalantly against a heavy steel door. "Anyone know where the breakfast hall is? I got a real hankering for scrambled eggs."

Brandeheim smiled. "As much as I admire your spirit, Jenny – and believe me, it *is* admirable – you would do well to remember I'm the only thing standing between you and a slit throat, and I can walk away at any time. Understand?"

"It's not a complicated picture you're painting there, dearie."

"Good. Now. I have some questions. It's in your interest to be both forthright and succinct. Tell me, what do you know of what we really do here?"

Jenny said nothing.

CRASH!

Jenny leapt to her feet and flung herself over to the opposite side of the corridor.

CRASH!

The breath hitched in her throat. Whatever was making that... that... *bludgeoning*, was waiting behind that door. And whatever it was, it was *strong*. The smooth steel was now covered in an array of peaks and ridges and more shot up with every impact.

CRASHCRASHCRASHCRASHCRASH!

"What the bloody hell's that?"

Brandeheim laughed. "You'll see in due course."

Jenny suddenly felt very cold.

"Listen mister, I don't know what you think you know..."

"You are Jennifer Flint, chambermaid at 13 Paternoster Row. Home of the great Veiled Detective... oh yes, we know all about her. We've been watching you for some time."

He leaned in, and his eyes were full of murderous intent.

"I suspected your true purpose from the start. But I couldn't discount the possibility that you had separated from your employer and come to me in earnest. So I couldn't bear to kill you, not without first confirming my suspicions. It was your lies that gave you away." He chuckled. "Your maudlin fictions were most amusing, Jenny. But I haven't the time or inclination to hear any more."

"But sir, I've no idea what you're..."

"*Don't. Lie. To me!*" Brandeheim shouted. He took a breath.

"My creature," he said, calmer, "is an agent of temporal chaos. It feeds on time energy. The more one has travelled in time, the more excited it gets at the prospect of a good meal." Without warning he grabbed Jenny by the shoulders and shoved her up against the iron door. The effect on the creature within was galvanic.

CRASHCRASHCRASHCRASHCRASH!

"Please!" Jenny cried. "Make it stop!"

"Where is Vastra?!"

She didn't answer. Instead, she punched him as hard as she could, clean in the

solar plexus, a blow that would have felled any normal man. But Brandenheim, as she was rapidly learning, was far from a normal man. He didn't even flinch. Instead, he smiled at her, a malevolent leer devoid of mirth.

"Ha! A little fight in you. We'll see how much good that does you in there. Open the door!"

"No!" Jenny shrieked, but before she knew it she was sent spinning into the room. The iron door slammed shut behind her, trapping her with the monster.

But there was no monster. Only an empty room snaked with vines, and a weather-beaten old statue. But *something* must have created that commotion. She looked briefly away and examined the markings on the door.

And when she turned back around she screamed, and her scream was thick with terror. In the mere moments she had looked away the statue had turned, silent as a crypt, and reached behind her, arms outstretched. It snarled like a wolverine. Its teeth were hooked and razor sharp. Its expression was a bizarre mix of greed, and lust, and hatred. And there it stood, as still and silent as history.

"It's alive," she said, stupidly. "It's alive. Oh Jesus, it's alive!"

She backed into a corner, as far away as she could get and scrutinised it. What was it? And why was it now so still? Could it only move unseen? Was that it? That would explain... but surely that was impossible! Then again, in the three years since meeting Madame Vastra, she had become intimately familiar with the impossible. There was only one way to find out. "On three," she thought. "One... two... *three!*" She shut her eyes for an instant, for only the merest fraction of time. And when she opened them the angel's snarl had gone, replaced with a smile of triumph, and its finger was less than an inch from her face. She scrambled away from it. She knew she couldn't keep it at bay forever. All it would take would be one blink...

"Forgive me, ma'am," she said. She tore off the tracking device and crushed it underfoot.



"Jenny!" Vastra's anguish echoed through the empty street. The tracker had fallen dead, and sat useless in her hands. She turned to Strax and threw it in his lap.

"Fix it!"

"It's working perfectly, madam."

"*Then why is it dead?*"

"It..." Strax fumbled for a solution. "It... Ah! It must be the tracking device itself. *That* must be malfunctioning."

"Why would it do that?"

"Well... lead shielding, or electromagnetic interference, or..."

"*Or what?*"

Strax looked down. "Or... blunt force trauma, madam," he mumbled.

Vastra felt the Hansom's walls close in. The air was suddenly hot and unbreathable. Though she'd spent many sleepless nights dreading such a moment as

this, it felt...different. Not how she'd anticipated. There was no heart-rending grief, and no bitter tears. Just... emptiness, yawning and unfathomable, and a creeping nausea that sapped her strength. She sat back.

"I don't know what to do," she whispered.

Then, as suddenly as it had descended, the fugue passed. Anger galvanised her to action, sweeping through her veins. She turned to Strax.

"We're going in."

"Ah, excellent madam! In addition to my regular arsenal, I've brought twenty laser guided battle hammers, a quiver of bloodcurdlers, and two cages of armoured stoats. I suggest a full frontal assault with Pulver grenades and Death Porridge!"

"Agreed! We'll... wait. Death porridge?"

The Sontaran produced a sack of lumpy, beige explosive slurry that did indeed look remarkably like porridge. He nodded sagely. "Oh, yes."

Vastra drew her katana and jumped out of the cab. "Just blow the door, Strax. Now is not the time for subtlety. Jenny's in there. She may be hurt or... Gods, I dread to think. She needs me. We have to go now!"

Strax grabbed the Death Porridge and crept toward the church. "Gladly, madam! Two ounces ought to do it!"

A few minutes later they crouched behind the hansom, Vastra with her fingers in her ears, Strax clutching the detonators.

"On three, madam... *THREE!*"

The explosion destroyed not only the door but the entire front face of the building. The roof disintegrated into a shower of slate and splinters, and stones two feet in length were flung into the air like confetti. Vastra ran toward the ruin.

"What the hell have you done? If Jenny's been harmed, God help you!"

"You *did* say it was no time for subtlety, madam."

"How much explosive did you use?"

"Two ounces madam, just like I said."

"Two... ounces," she repeated in disbelief.

"Yes, madam!"

Vastra sighed. "Strax, you *are* familiar with imperial measurements?"

Strax looked offended. "Of course, madam," he replied haughtily. "It's nine pounds to a goose, eleven geese to a... a *ball*. Aaand... ah, yes. Twenty-eight balls to a desk. Oh, and two desks to an ounce. Child's play!"

Vastra gave up. "Come on!" she cried. "We need to rescue my wife!"

The explosion blazed through the Church, hurling bricks and mortar as effortlessly as a gale scatters leaves over a forest floor. A billowing curtain of red destruction, it ate everything in its path, stopping only when it reached the reinforced walls of the

Sanctum. Nonetheless, it demolished the cell's far wall with consummate ease. Jenny gawped in dumbstruck horror as the brickwork and cement seemed to dissolve under the force of the blast. She choked on bitter lungfuls of powdered masonry and struggled to her feet.

In the shock of the explosion, she realised she'd forgotten the statue. She pressed her back against a wall and squinted through the dust, but the monster was gone.

She clambered through the ruins of the far wall and ran up the corridor toward the entrance to the Church.

The force of the explosion flung Brandenheim to his knees, while the noise of it made his ears ring. He was at the back of the Church, far away from the epicentre, but the violence of the blast was still enough to knock pictures from the walls and loosen the gas lamps from their fastenings. He stood up, his head a blaze of pain, and put a hand to his temple. It came away slicked in blood. He had to leave. He had to go to the basement and make sure the specimens were still alive.

He strode to the back wall, and removed a painting from its hook to reveal a keypad. Typing in the combination, the wall slid back revealing a ladder. As he descended, the wall slipped noiselessly back into place, and the corridor was again silent.

At first, she could barely hear it. A faint, plaintive whisper, echoing through the ruins of Clarence Church. She stopped, lowering the Katana to her side.

"Madam, we must keep moving. Time is of the..."

"Be quiet, Strax!" she snapped. "I heard something."

"Vastra..."

There it was again, undeniable this time. It was coming from one of the corridors up ahead. She closed her eyes and through her fear, through the relentless thudding of her heart, she tried desperately to focus. Silurian hearing was markedly superior to that of the most sensitive human. If only she could hear it one more time.

"Vastra!"

There! At the end of the corridor. The passage on the left. It had to be.

"Jenny!" she cried.

She ran to the end of the corridor and, through a gentle rain of debris, she saw her. Relief washed over her like an Arctic stream.

"Oh, Jenny! My darling, I was so worried about you. Are you hurt?"

"What?" Jenny replied with a grin. "Think I can't take care of myself?"

"Jenny, what happened to your tracker? It just... stopped."

"I had to break it, ma'am. They locked me up in this tiny little room with no way out. I needed you to come get me. See, ma'am... there was this... *thing*."

"What, Jenny? Tell me!"

"It was just a statue, I thought. Like you'd see in the park or down by the graveyards. But it weren't no statue, ma'am. It... you're gonna think I've lost me marbles."

Vastra placed a gloved hand on her cheek and looked straight into her eyes.

"Jenny," she said, "whatever you saw, I believe you. I will *always* believe you."

Despite everything she'd been through, Jenny couldn't help but blush. She didn't think she'd ever loved Vastra as much as she did in that moment.

"Vastra..." she said "It was... I saw... when they put me in that room, I wasn't alone. There was this statue in there. Vastra, it could *move*. I..." she tailed off. For the briefest of moments, something had flickered behind her lover's eyes.

Something Jenny was deeply unused to seeing. Something perilously close to fear.

"You know what I'm going to say, don't you?"

"I fear I do, Jenny."

"I don't!" muttered Strax.

"You've seen them before, then?" Jenny asked Vastra.

"Not personally, no. But I've heard them mentioned, in my travels with the Doctor."

"What did he say?"

"Very little. It was not a subject he liked to dwell on."

"What are they?"

"The Doctor called them the Weeping Angels. He said they were the oldest species in the universe, and the deadliest. He didn't say much more than that. He didn't have to."

"But what *are* they?"

"Merciless. If there's an Angel here, our task becomes far simpler. We destroy it, at all costs. Now come. We have to find it."



The trio stalked the corridors, Vastra and Jenny with their swords drawn, Strax brandishing his gun. Vastra explained what little she knew of the Angels. How they could only move unseen. How, when observed, they literally ceased to exist. How they displaced their victims in time and fed off the potential energy of all the days they would never see. How their hunger was a force of nature, furious and infinite.

They came to a dead end, with a keypad on the wall. Vastra cursed.

"There must be a million combinations! How are we ever going to..."

Strax stepped forward. "Allow me, madam."

Vastra and Jenny retreated as the Sontaran scooped a handful of explosive from his side pack and slapped it against the wall. But after the dust cleared, the wall remained intact with barely a scratch.

The trio stood in silence. There was no way forward, and no way back. Then Jenny saw the picture. It lay askew against the wall, the frame broken in two by the ferocity with which it had been discarded. It bore an inscription:

"Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand."

She stepped forward.

"Don't worry ma'am. I think I know what to do."

She punched in the combination: 4-1-1-0.

The wall slid noiselessly to the side.

"How on Earth did you do that?" Vastra and Strax asked in unison.

Jenny smiled coquettishly and shrugged. "I have my moments."

Vastra stepped into the alcove and gripped the ladder. It gleamed with promise in the half-light.

"Wait two minutes and come down after me. If I've found Brandeheim, we'll need the element of surprise."

The ladder was long, the rungs cold steel. As Vastra descended into the dark, the light at the top of the shaft shrank until it was barely more than a speck. When she reached the last rung, she found she could touch each wall without moving.

Methodically, she tested them, until one gave way beneath her and she stumbled through. She descended gingerly, uncertain of what awaited her. She had anticipated perhaps a crypt, littered with bones, policed by rats of enormous size; a sepulchre with a blood stained altar, idolatrous lithographs and blasphemous mosaics; or an endless network of catacombs sprawling under the city like cracks in desert rock. But when she finally saw what lay beneath the Church, she could do nothing but gasp in awe.

It was a laboratory. Chrome consoles replete with brass levers and twinkling diodes gleamed softly under fluorescent lights. Giant copper urns rose like pillars from floor to ceiling, belching puffs of steam into the air. The floor was corrugated metal, which rang hollowly with every footstep. In the distance, she heard the faint hum of a generator.

"Impressive, isn't it?"

Vastra turned to see Brandeheim towering over her. His eyes brimmed with gleeful anticipation, like a boy showing off a magic trick. In his right hand he held a gun that had absolutely no business in that time and place. It was small, snub nosed, with a dial on the side. Its chrome plating caught the light wickedly.

Vastra smiled coolly. "I take it I'm addressing the illustrious Reverend Josiah Brandeheim."

Brandeheim snorted. "You really are a detective, aren't you? The pleasure is mine, Madame Vastra."

Vastra narrowed her eyes. "You know of me?"

"Of course," Brandeheim nodded. "I've been watching you for some time. You and the little wildcat you sent in here under false pretences. A pity. I had naively hoped that the two of you had had some sort of contretemps and she'd come to me in earnest. A spy under the Veiled Detective's roof would have been eminently useful."

"Where is she?" Vastra demanded. It was, she knew, the question Brandeheim would most expect of her.

"The question, Vastra, is when is she? Come with me."

They walked in silence, Vastra leading and Brandeheim directing. They reached an alcove and Brandeheim reached under his collar and retrieved a key hanging on a string around his neck. The back wall slid back and Brandeheim gestured with his gun. And for the second time in almost as many minutes, Vastra was shaken to her core by what she saw. She stepped forward into what was nothing less than a vision of hell.

The alcove hid a long chamber lined on both sides with rows of glass cylinders twice the size of a man. They were filled with opaque slime and dimly hidden within the ooze were living things. They throbbed and squirmed inside their confines. Vastra felt sick just looking at them. The first specimens were hardly more than formless blobs of cells. But as she passed, they grew more animated, adhering themselves to the glass, pulsating in time to her footsteps. As she advanced, the creatures grew more noticeably human, but it wasn't until she was halfway down the chamber that she saw one with recognisably terrestrial features. The others were simply abominations of the human form. Macabre multiplicities of limbs flailing inside liquid prisons. As she approached the end of the corridor the creatures grew more human still until, standing in stunned amazement, she saw to her immediate left she saw the body, naked and comatose, of Lord Basil Hardacre.

"Well," Brandeheim said. "Tell me. What do you think of my specimens?"

"Your... specimens? These monstrosities are..."

"Monstrosities?" Brandeheim thundered. "These are miracles. And this," he said, gesturing toward Hardacre, "is one of my crowning achievements. A perfect duplication, down to the last strand of DNA. A miracle in the guise of a man."

Vastra had only one question. "Why?"

"Look at me and tell me what you see."

"I see a murderer and a maniac. Why? What should I see?"

"We have more in common than you might think. Oh, and you can remove that ridiculous veil. I know a Silurian when I see one. No. We are very much alike."

Vastra snorted.

"Look at you," Brandeheim said, "a living fossil. How many millions of years out of time are you? And yet you prance about like some grieving widow, consorting with these primitives? I thought Silurians had pride."

Vastra scowled. "I don't take lectures on pride from murderers."

"Oh, you don't?" Brandeheim asked. "A Silurian warrior with no blood on her hands? Astounding. Forgive me if I remain unimpressed with your hollow piety."

"What would a Victorian know of Silurians?" Vastra asked.

"Oh, nothing," Brandeheim agreed, "but I thought it would have been obvious, even to you, that *I* am no Victorian. Tell me Vastra, do you know of the Weeping Angels?"

"Regrettably."

"In some eras they're known as the lonely assassins. Not in mine. In my era, they're a *plague*. When the Angels came, humanity..." Brandeheim paused, and took a deep breath. "We had no idea what we were dealing with. Not at first. The disappearances came in waves. Hundreds of people, thousands. Vanishing into thin air, like whispers on the wind. At first, we thought it was an Eastern bloc plot. Neo-

communists and Bethlamites – not that you'd know anything of them. All the old wounds we'd managed to staunch with treaties and disarmaments opened up again. The world was factionalised. Looking at a map of the world in the fifty-first century is like studying a jigsaw puzzle."

"The fifty-first century!" Vastra said. "My, but you *are* far away."

Brandeheim nodded. "The world was brought to the brink of Armageddon before we realised the Easterners had the same problem. I was one of the first time agents. An Angel attacked me, but I outwitted it! I was wearing a vortex manipulator, and the ensuing temporal conflagration snared the Angel as well. We arrived here together. The manipulator burnt out on arrival, but I realised I'd been given the perfect opportunity to prevent the calamity awaiting us. The war between Angels and humanity.

"I established this Church, recruited some leal servants, and set about remaking the world. London's days are numbered, you know. The Empire is disintegrating as we speak. I've always been a student of history, Vastra. I know the period well. I know the missteps we made. And I know how to rectify them."

"To what end?"

"To keep the Empire strong! To unite the world, in perpetuity!"

"With you at the centre of it."

"You think I *wanted* this?" Brandeheim asked. "I had a wife and four children who'll never know what became of me. I'm doing this for *them*!" He paused to compose himself. "What I do here and now will save countless lives in the future."

"And Sir Oswald? Lady Westermont? Lord Hardacre? What of their lives?"

Brandeheim shrugged. "The Angel needed feeding. And what better way to dispose of troublesome guests? They doubtless lived full lives. As did that oafish detective friend of yours. Docherty, wasn't it? I'm not a murderer, Vastra. No matter how much you would like me to be."

"I just have one question. What became of Sir Oswald?"

"A mission like this doesn't pay for itself, Vastra. We needed funds to continue our work, and Sir Oswald was a very wealthy man. We chose not to duplicate him, the better to inherit his estate."

"So you kidnapped members of the aristocracy, cloned them, and sent them back into the world to govern as your proxies, is that it?"

"Think of it, Vastra. Think of the wars my children could prevent, armed with my knowledge? In less than a generation, a war more terrible than any yet seen will tear Europe in half. *I* can prevent that. I can save millions of lives."

"And open the door for more wars, different wars," Vastra countered, gesturing around the laboratory. "Wars animated by this kind of technology. We may not even survive until the fifty-first century."

Brandeheim dismissed the notion with a wave. "I'm getting tired of arguing. Your choice is simple. You can either help me, or die, here in this lab. Either way, you won't be able to stop me."

And then cold steel was at his throat.

"Really, dear? I think I'd like to test that theory."

Brandeheim slowly raised his hands, and Jenny plucked the pistol from his grasp and slid it into her belt. Behind her stood Strax. He levelled his blaster at Brandeheim.

"Ta, Reverend," Jenny said. "Keep this up and we'll all be home for dinner. Well. You won't. You'll be in prison. But we will. Isn't that right, ma'am?"

Vastra beamed with pride. "That's right, Jenny."

Brandeheim's eyes widened. "Jenny? How... how did you?"
"Oh dear," Jenny said, "you not been upstairs Reverend? It's a bit of a mess up there."
"But," Brandeheim cried, his voice hoarse with panic, "if you're here, where's the *Angel*?"
And then the lights flickered. And all was darkness.

Vastra was the first to act.

"Strax, flares!" she commanded.

"Aye, madam!"

A moment later, the group was bathed in a blaze of fiery light. Strax handed out the flares.

"Everyone form a circle, facing outwards," Vastra said. "And be silent! The Angel has the upper hand."

"I don't take orders from reptiles," Brandeheim said. "And I'm not staying here to die with you!"

He barged past them, effortlessly knocking Vastra aside, and ran headlong into the darkness.

Vastra was in pursuit before anyone could stop her. She called back over her shoulder. "Stay here! Stay here and don't let those flares go out!"

She followed the effervescent trail of Brandeheim's flare until it came to a stop by a bank of consoles.

"Stay away!" he shouted. "I'm trying to get the lights back on." A moment later the fluorescent bulbs sputtered back to life. Vastra spotted the Angel almost immediately. It stood motionless at the back of the chamber of clones, teeth bared in a snarl of hatred.

"Jenny! Behind you!"

Jenny and Strax spun round in unison. When she saw the Angel Jenny stepped back and drew her sword. Even Strax looked frightened.

"Step back, boy!" he commanded. "This Pulver grenade will reduce the beast to atoms!"

"I think we might need something stronger than a Pulver grenade, Strax," Jenny said.

"I'm open to suggestions, boy," Strax growled.

He drew the Pulver grenade from his side pack and launched it at the Angel. It landed at the Angel's feet and exploded in an almighty flash of brilliant white light. But when the dust cleared the creature remained, unscathed. For all the good it did, he might as well have blown it a kiss.

"Keep your eyes on it!" Vastra said. "Don't let it out of your sight. Don't even blink!"

Brandeheim laughed. "You think that will save them?"

"What do you mean?"

"Such a touching pair," he said. "I suggest you make the most of these final moments."

He slammed a meaty paw down on the console and a glass barrier dropped from the ceiling like the blade of a guillotine. They were cut off. Jenny turned to her.

"*Look at the Angel!*" Vastra screamed. "*For God's sake, look at the Angel!*"

Jenny raised a hand to her ear in mute incomprehension. She couldn't hear a word. Vastra drew her sword and pushed the point into Brandeheim's throat, drawing

a bead of blood.

"Raise it!" she thundered, tears welling in her eyes. "Raise it or so help me I'll cut you to pieces!"

Brandeheim stood, calm as a cloudless summer. "These controls are isomorphic," he said. "If you want any hope of seeing your... *servant* again, you'll sheath that blade."

Vastra stepped away, her eyes full of poison. "Release them."

Brandeheim smiled cruelly. "Beg."

Thoughts of prideful refusal didn't even begin to cross her mind. "I beg you. Brandeheim! Please! If there's a shred, if there's *anything* human left inside you, *please* let them go."

She realised her error immediately. She'd made it too easy. Deprived of his fun, Brandeheim's smile soured like curdled milk.

"No."

He hit the console again and the room collapsed under the weight of the darkness. A shriek pierced the black, followed by the hollow clatter of a katana sword.

"Jenny!" she wailed. Brandeheim was running, his footsteps receding in the dark. The room became a vacuum, sucking the strength from her bones and the air from her lungs. She collapsed to her knees; her slender body shuddered under the weight of her grief. She sobbed like a child. "Oh, Jenny," she whispered.

"You should have begged harder!" Brandeheim's voice rang mockingly around the laboratory. She barely heard it. She thought she could stay there on her knees forever.

The shattering of glass jolted her back to reality. A moment later she heard the hum of a back-up generator and the lights sputtered back on. What remained of the glass barrier lay strewn in a thousand jagged pieces. And Jenny was nowhere to be seen. Nor was the Angel. Strax ran toward her.

"Madam!" he said. "Miss Flint. I couldn't stop it."

"I know, Strax. But now we have to..."

"*Madam, get down!*" Strax roared. He levelled his gun and fired. A brilliant blaze of blue light flared from the barrel, and a translucent orb shimmered down the laboratory at lightning speed. Vastra felt a pang unease tug at her gut.

"Strax," she said quietly, "why did you do that?"

"The Angel, madam!" Strax said. "I saw it move, up there, at the end of the corridor."

"You saw it move?"

"Why, yes madam."

"You *saw* it, and it moved."

"Yes madam."

"*You were looking at it, and it moved?*" she said, her voice rising.

"Why... I..."

"Would you care to explain how that is possible, Strax?"

Strax fidgeted awkwardly. "I suppose it could have been a trick of the light. But..."

"What did you fire?"

"Madam?"

"What. Ammunition. Do you have. In your *gun*?" she said, struggling to control her anger.

"Standard issue Sontaran heat-seeking blunderbuss torpedo madam. The slogan is 'A deader primitive, for a cleaner universe'."

"A heat-seeker."

"Yes madam."

"You fired a *heat-seeker*, at a statue."

Strax paused, his mouth half-open. There was a very, very long silence. The orb, now a pale blue speck at the end of the laboratory, halted in mid-air. It turned, and slowly started back towards them.

Vastra and Strax looked at one another.

"I concede I may have made a tactical..."

"*Run!*"

They careened through the laboratory in desperate search of an exit. Across the floor, her keen hearing picked up on the electric blue hum of the heat-seeker. It was getting closer.

"All these corridors look the same!" Vastra despaired.

"Madam! Over there!" cried Strax.

Vastra looked where he was pointing. The effervescent glimmer of a flare hovered by a door at the other end of the lab, and then disappeared. Brandeheim!

Despite the agony of loss, or perhaps because of it, Vastra smiled. She would find Brandeheim, and *Gods* she would make him pay.

"Quickly, Strax," she said, charging toward the door.



Brandeheim stumbled through the passage. The walls and floor were rough-hewn rock, carved straight out of the earth. A catacomb, it ran half the length of the street and emerged just behind Scotland Yard. He'd built it almost as an afterthought, a last-ditch retreat in case of industrial catastrophe. Well, he thought mordantly, this could probably qualify.

As he ran, his dreams of Empire turned to ashes in his mouth. Those meddling Sapphic whores and that mutant they kicked around with had destroyed everything! Thirty years of struggle, shattered like so many panes of glass. The sheer cosmic unfairness of it all. He hadn't asked for this burden. It was no pleasure. It was *duty*. He had been blessed with an opportunity unique in the history of his species. The chaos, the corruption, and the internecine warfare tearing the future apart were *his* to prevent. And now...

"Brandeheim!"

"Halt! Human scum!"

He froze and turned slowly, hands raised. At the end of the passage, the reptile and the Sontaran were advancing rapidly, weapons drawn.

"Where's the Angel?" he demanded.

Vastra and Strax shared a look.

"I'll guard the exit, madam," Strax said.

"Strax, don't be absurd. I've lost too much today. I won't have you..."

"Madam, don't *argue*!" the Sontaran said firmly. "I owe it to Miss Flint."

With that, he trundled back toward the exit.

"Touching," Brandeheim sneered.

"Is this your end-game? Scurrying into the dark? You craven!" She drew her katana. "I ought cut you down where you stand. Rid history of your filth!"

"You ought to," Brandeheim replied, the shadow of a smile playing at the corner of his lips, "but you won't. You don't have it in you. You're a perfect specimen of weakness. The very disease my mission sought to cut out of the world. How can we progress with strength with spineless children like you holding us back?"

Vastra slammed the blade into the rock above his head, showering them both with debris.

"You trespassed on this era. You slaughtered your way through the rulers of this nation, and you murdered the woman I love. Today is not the day to test my patience!"

The thin cable of fluorescent lighting hooked to the roof of the cave began to falter.

"The Angel," Brandeheim whispered.

For an instant they were plunged into darkness. Then the lights reasserted themselves.

"Strax!" Vastra cried. She span around to the mouth of the tunnel. But Strax was gone. In his place stood the Angel.

"*They're always hungry, Vastra.*" The Doctor's voice echoed in her mind. "*They don't know how to stop.*"

The lights flickered again and then darkness reigned once more. Brandeheim bolted and she took off in pursuit. The Angels were fast, faster than you could believe, the Doctor had said. They couldn't hope to outrun it forever.

The lights, in their death throes now, flickered on one final time.

The Angel stood between them, a finger reached in each direction. A second's more darkness and it would have consumed them both. She reached for the handcuffs she kept on her belt and clasped one cuff round the Angel's wrist, and the second round Brandenheim's. For a moment, he stood in dumbstruck horror, unable to process what he was seeing.

"What the hell are you doing? Let me go! Get these bloody handcuffs off me!"

She smiled coldly. "Beg."

"I don't beg for reptilian scum!" he spat, his eyes burned, the sum of all the rage and hate in his gargantuan form. "I am Josiah Brandenheim!"

"You could be Queen Victoria herself," Vastra replied. "All I need do is turn my back."

A sea change was occurring behind Brandenheim's eyes. The venom bled away and fear took its place.

"Please," he said. "Please, don't look away. For the sake of the future, help me!"

A soft thrumming of electric vibration filled the cave. Keeping an eye on the Angel, Vastra looked toward the entrance. The heat-seeker had found them, and was approaching with mindless resolve.

"What's that?" Brandenheim asked.

"Standard Sontaran heat-seeking missile," Vastra replied. "My friend could have told you all about them. But he's dead. Thanks to you."

That brought the realisation home for her. She was all alone. In all of London, in the entire world, she had no one. She turned back to Brandenheim and for an instant they shared an unspoken connection. He realised what she planned to do.

"No!" he cried, his voice thick with unbridled panic. "Please! No. Look away. Let it send me back. PLEASE!"

"Interesting thing about heat-seekers, Reverend. They automatically home in on the warmest thing in the room. And the interesting thing about, what was it? Ah, yes, 'Reptilian scum' like me? We have very cold blood." She lit her last flare and threw it between Brandenheim and the Angel. He tried to kick it away, but it was just out of reach. It blazed white hot as she walked away.

"In every sense of the word, *very* cold blood!"

She turned and ran headlong into the cave.

"NO!"

The missile detonated on the flare, pulling the cave in upon itself. Vastra ran 'til she thought her lungs would burst. Her heart pumped battery acid as she headed for the light at the end of the tunnel. There was a ladder leading to the surface. She leapt up it with a single bound and pulled herself up into the street as the tunnel collapsed in her wake, burying the Angel and Brandenheim both... if there was anything left to bury.

She looked about her. The street was entirely empty, but curtains flickered in the houses on both sides as curious humans peered out to see the cause of the commotion.

"Time to go home," she thought.



She visited the ruins of the Church the next day, and the day after that. She arrived at the rising of the sun and stayed until dark. Onlookers doubtless wondered what she was doing, and what she hoped to accomplish staring at a dilapidated old hovel like Clarence Church. And had they asked, she wouldn't have been able to tell them. It was the last place she'd seen Jenny. That was all there was to it. She liked to stand there under the rolling clouds and think about the days they would have spent together, the jokes they would have shared, the wordless conversations they would have held, and the nights they would have stolen away from the watchful glare of the world.

"Ma'am?"

She smiled, keeping her back to the stranger. "I had a friend who used to call me that."

"I know, ma'am. I know her quite well."

She turned. Before her, stood Jenny, still dressed as the urchin from two nights previous. There were tears in her eyes and her lips trembled with joy.

"I'm losing my mind," Vastra thought. Slowly, she walked to her and put her arms around her, tentatively at first, as if to see if she was really there, and then more passionately, as she realised she wasn't dreaming.

"Jenny! How..."

"Strax's Pulver grenade must've done more damage to the Angel than we thought, it only managed to send me back a few days." Jenny replied. "I'll say one thing for Sontarans. Good workmanship."

"But what happened?" Vastra asked. "Where did you? *When* did you go? And how on earth did you get back?"

Jenny grinned. "I wound up in Yorkshire, of all places! As for getting back, well. I tried to get a train but dressed like this no one would give me a ticket, so I walked a bit, hitched a cab when I could and... well. Here I am. What happened to Brandeheim?"

"Truth be told, I'm not entirely certain," said Vastra. Whether the explosion had killed him or whether he'd had the wit to close his eyes and allow himself to be consumed was something she had, frankly, spent precious little time asking herself. Either way, she didn't think he would trouble them again.

They walked home together arm in arm. The urchin and the widow. They made for a curious pair, but neither of them cared. They turned into Paternoster Row and Vastra fished her keys from her pocket. She turned to Jenny, serious for a moment.

"Jenny," she said, "after what happened, if you want me to stop..."

Jenny shook her head. "Ma'am, I won't hear of it. Adventuring makes you happy, and between you and me, I ain't never had so much fun!"

Vastra smiled and opened the door. "Either way, I think we're long overdue for a

holiday.”

“That’d be nice, ma’am. How about Paris, the three of us?” She paused.

“Say... where’s Strax?”

As implacable reality broke through the thick fog of unconsciousness, Commander Strax coughed himself awake and rolled onto his side. He’d led, by any standard, an interesting life, but if awakening from the time jump wasn’t the strangest thing to ever happen to him, it was certainly in the top five.

He could feel his heart pounding out a battle beat in his temples, and there was a roaring pressure inside his skull that, although it was slowly dissipating, made him reluctant to move. He imagined his head exploding like a pound of beefsteak wrapped around a firework. It was as if someone had stuffed the entire cosmos up his nose only for it to slowly leak out of his ears. It had to be said, he’d had better starts to the day than this.

“Who the bloody hell are ye?”

He looked up with a start. Towering over him was quite possibly the biggest, baldest human he’d ever seen. Six foot eight if he were an inch, with muscles that bulged ferociously under his white vest and apron, topped by a face crammed with bulbous features, built for a perpetual snarl. Strax liked him immediately. He struggled to his feet, and drew himself up to his full height.

“I am Commander Strax of the great and glorious ninth Sontaran battle fleet. Who are you, ape? I order you to tell me where I am.”

“Where ye are?” the man exclaimed unbelievably, a faint wrinkle of amusement creasing his Cro-Magnon brow. “Yer in *Glasgow*, ye wee Southern Pish! In *my* bloody pub!”

“Ah, a brewer’s domicile, eh? Excellent! This will make a prime base for tactical operations. Primitive, I am commandeering this dwelling for the glory of Sontar!”

“Yer doin’ what for the what now?” The giant eyed him queerly. “Are ye starting trouble, wee man?”

Strax pondered the question. “Why... yes. Yes, I suppose I am.”

“Well yer in the right place then, ye potato headed little goblin!” He grabbed a chair and swung it high above his head. “Lessee what yer made of!”

Strax met his opponent’s eye, caught the gimlet gleam of blood-lust there, and the low cunning behind his tiger’s smile, and smiled right back.

“*En Garde* human scum!” he cried, seizing a chair of his own.

Things were definitely looking up.



The tall man with the top hat and dour expression cast his book contemptuously aside and turned to face her.

"Thank you for seeing me," she said.

"Don't expect me to make a habit of it."

"I wouldn't have come if it wasn't important."

That gave him pause. "No. I suppose you wouldn't. So. Thrall me. Why are you here?"

"I need help?"

He snorted. "Don't we all?"

She handed him a list of names.

"These men..."

"Are not my problem."

She sighed, and pressed on. "These men have been scattered through time! It took a lot of research but I managed to track them all down. They're lost, and alone, and they've no way back."

He sighed. "Like I said. Not my problem."

He stood up and walked to the opposite corner of the room, keeping his back to her.

"Anything else?"

For a moment, she truly didn't know what to say.

"Remember who you *are*!" she said, finally, her voice shaking with anger. She turned on her heel, and left.

An anguished grimace rippled across his face, and he turned to pursue her.

"Vastra!" he cried, but she was gone. He sighed, and picked up the paper.

Lord Basil Hardacre – February, London, 1806.

Sir Oswald Hawthorne – July, Seville, 1804.

Bishop Montmorency – August, New York City, 1819.

Lady Westermont – March, Dusseldorf, 1797

Lord Cambridge – February, Plymouth, 1808.

James Neville-Boothroyd – December, Santiago, 1804.

George Docherty – October, London, 1762

“Fine!” he muttered. “Fine, fine, *fine!*”

He approached a console in the centre of the room. Studded with diodes and replete with alien hieroglyphics, it was clearly a technology that had no earthly business in that time or place. With a casual grace he began flipping switches and twisting dials. And soon the night air rang with harsh metallic sound. It was the grinding of gears, the clashing of engines, the howling of time itself. And far above Victorian London the TARDIS slipped into the ether, as the first snows of winter softly began to fall.