



In Her Absence

In this Issue:
Part Five: Of Peril
and Impropriety

by
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*"I have been one acquainted with the night.
I have walked out in rain -- and back in rain.
I have outwalked the furthest city light.*

*I have looked down the saddest city lane.
I have passed by the watchman on his beat
And dropped my eyes, unwilling to explain.*

*I have stood still and stopped the sound of feet
When far away an interrupted cry
Came over houses from another street,*

*But not to call me back or say good-bye;
And further still at an unearthly height,
O luminary clock against the sky*

*Proclaimed the time was neither wrong nor right.
I have been one acquainted with the night."*

***Acquainted with the Night,
Robert Frost***

Her swords cleaned, oiled, and carefully placed in their *saya*, Vastra slowly trudged back up the stairs to the hallway. She considered for a moment leaving the door unlocked...after all, what did it matter now that the house was empty? Still, old habits die hard, and she reached into a pocket, pulled out a burnished brass key, and shut and locked the door. She slid her hand back into her pocket, feeling the cloth against her scaled skin, and walked, head down, toward the library. The curtains were open just wide enough for her to tell it was prematurely dark outside. Likely a storm was coming in.

She walked to the windows and opened them, one by one, just in time to hear the first splatterings of rain hit the cobbled street. While the curtains remained, for the most part, drawn closed, she could hear the rain and feel the breeze as it blew in through the windows. She found her way over to a couch and curled up on it, listening to the rain and trying to clear her mind from the conflicting thoughts of past and present that threatened to overwhelm her. The rain was calming; it reminded her of the sound of the waterfalls near her family's home when she was a child.

She recoiled a bit at the first clash of thunder. That was something she still needed to get used to. The whole concept of weather was, for the most part, a new one for her. While she certainly spent several excursions above ground in the constant and never ending battle against the apes when she was younger, for the most part those excursions took part under cover of night, purely as a psychological fear tactic. The thunder and lightning were still new to her, and every time a storm hit, she'd be nervous for the first few minutes until she came to grips with the violent thundering crashes.

She laid there as darkness descended, her eyes closing and her breathing slowing as she drifted closer and closer to sleep. *Finally*, she thought, *finally I have got a moment of respite. I have no idea how long this is going to last, but I will accept it while I...*

Her head snapped up.

'What was that?' she asked the empty room.

She listened, more carefully this time. And waited.

A few seconds later, she heard it again.

A scream.

Definitely a scream. Female. And not that far from here, by the sound of it.

Vastra jumped up. The logical portions of her mind screamed at her to at least grab a cloak or something to cover her obvious peculiarities, but the instinctual side completely and totally overruled her. She burst down the hall and threw the front doors open. In the darkness it was hard to tell where the sound came from, and she hoped beyond all hope it wasn't too late.

Then, from the distance, and from her right...

'Get your hands off me you filthy bugger!'

Vastra took off at a sprint. They were a hundred and fifty yards up the street, at least, and she pushed herself as quickly as she could. Her bare feet splashed against the wet cobblestone road, and as she ran, she tried to devise a plan. She reached for the *tsuka* she'd normally find at her right side and...

Nothing.

Damn it! She cursed herself. *Back at the house.*

Seventy five feet now, and closing fast.

There was nothing else for it. She lowered her shoulder, and changed the angle of her run just enough that she'd separate the two, driving the assailant into the brick wall behind him. After that it'd be anyone's guess what would happen, but at the very least, it'd offer the girl time to escape if she could.

Fifty feet.

Twenty five.

The round of her running drew the assailant's attention, and he looked up in time to see her fling her body toward them. He pushed the girl away as Vastra lunged at him, the force of impact driving him, as she expected, back hard into the wall. He hit it with a dull thud and slid to the wet ground. Gasping for breath, he struggled to right himself to a standing position.

Vastra turned to the girl, still standing, petrified with fear.

'Run, girl...get away from here! I will take care of this...thing!'

The girl barely nodded as Vastra turned to face the mysterious assailant. She walked over to him, still struggling to stand and laughed. The laugh was cold, heartless, inhuman.

'You made a terrible mistake picking on a defenseless girl, ape.'

'Ape?' The man coughed the word out, still struggling for air. He gasped once or twice, and found it easier to speak as he opened his mouth a second time. 'You should learn some manners, woman...as well as when to keep yer nose out of yer better's business.'

She opened her mouth to speak and was caught off guard by two rough leather soles connecting with her midsection. She was lifted into the air, the kick sending her almost to the wall on the opposite side of the alley. In mid flight she turned herself to land on her feet, crouching like a beast ready to strike.

'Impressive,' the man spoke, his voice rough from too much drink and too little education. He reached down to the ground, picked up his cane, and pulled the head of the cane from the shaft. A narrow, gleaming blade emerged, beads of rain collecting across its surface.

'Since ye already stopped me from my 'pointed prey, p'rhaps ye'd be kind enough to give me yer name so's I know 'oo I killed in her stead.'

'Vastra,' she spat out, still crouched. 'Remember it well, because I can assure you it will be the last name you ever hear.'

He laughed.

'We'll see 'bout that, girlie. We'll see.'

He waved the sword in front of him, and she regarded his movements carefully. *He has no idea how to actually use that thing, she thought to herself. That's a plus. And he's slow. Big, lumbering, and damned strong, but slow. I can use that to my advantage too. But I will only get one shot at this, so I had better make it count.*

She remained crouched, judging the distance between them. She watched as he crept slowly toward her. She noticed despite his swagger that he was being overly cautious, wary of the newcomer who had entered the fray.

He took a step forward.

'Time to say g'night, Vastra,' he heckled.

Just one more step, she thought. That's all I need. Just one more step.

He planted his right foot and raised his blade hand, preparing to swing.

As his arm reached its apex, she lunged. He didn't have a chance to respond, and she caught him square in the midsection. She felt his body crumple over her, felt his chest collapse slightly as her body, all lean muscle, hit him like a hammer swung by a railroad worker. She heard the metallic clatter as the sword dropped from his hand and he fell backward, hitting the wet ground with a dull thud. His eyes were wide with shock, his mouth moving but making no sound. She could feel the hot fetid breath coming from his mouth as once again the wind was knocked from him. She watched his hands grasping absently for something, anything to use against her.

With a cold, cruel smile on her face, she straddled his chest and looked down on him.

'I am dreadfully sorry...was I supposed to say good night?'

The man struggled to catch his breath.

'I am so sorry, *sir*, but I simply cannot hear you...would you mind speaking up? It's so hard to hear in this storm, after all.'

He reached up with one hand, and then the other, reached for her neck, tried to find some leverage to push her off or strangle her. Calmly, without any effort, she took one wrist in each hand and pushed them back to the cold, wet stone.

'I do not think you heard me. Was I supposed to expect something from you after all that bluster, or are you simply filled with hot air and no ability to follow through on your puerile threats?'

He looked up into her face, black in the shadows. A flash of lightning, and he finally saw the face looking down upon him. Her mouth widened in a smile, her teeth gleaming in the lightning's light. His eyes widened in shock, and he found the breath to whisper a reply.

'What on earth are you?'

'I, *sir*, am the last thing animals like you will see if I ever catch them preying on the innocent.'

She paused for a moment, tilting her head in thought.

'I believe you told me to say good night. Well...say good night...*sir*.'

He opened his mouth to scream, but the scream died in his throat as, bereft of any other weapons, Vastra slashed her right hand across it. Her claws dug into the soft

exposed flesh, and even in the rain she could smell and almost taste the rich, coppery tang of his blood as it spurted from his arteries. She regarded him coldly as the life slipped from his eyes, still open, yet duller now.

She looked up to the end of the alleyway. The girl was gone.
'Smart girl,' Vastra whispered. 'It is better she not have seen this.'

Her reverie was broken by a noise behind her. She swiftly turned to see a shape, distant and growing more so with each passing second. There was no way she could catch up with it, but she wondered how close the person had been. Were they an accomplice, or just an innocent bystander caught in a most unfortunate set of circumstances? She shook her head...there was no real point in thinking about that. It was beyond her ability to control.

Nonetheless she jumped up and started to follow. It was easy enough for her to scent him...all adrenaline and sweat and fear. Her nostrils flared at the vulgar scent, and she picked up her pace...a brisk walk, then a jog, and finally an all out sprint. A few more yards, and the alleyway would end. There...a streetlight marked the end of the alley and she stopped short. She looked to the left and to the right. The scent faded away, as if it had never been there in the first place. Her lips curled back in a grimace and she stomped one foot against the wet ground.

Lost him, she thought ruefully. *This is not good.*

She turned and walked to the far head of the alleyway, where the fight had begun, and looked down toward her house. She saw the light from her hallway pouring out into the street. She sighed, knowing there was no way the girl had run that way. It was the faintest of hopes, thinking it were Jenny...three days' searching had not turned her up, and it was likely the girl was gone.

So much for following your heart, Vastra, she thought cruelly. *Perhaps it will be better if I am alone from now on...*

Still, there was hope. A faint glimmer, but hope nonetheless. She ran down the street to her house, the open door shifting back and forth with the gusts of wind. The front hall was slick with rain...and little more. Still, she ran from room to room, quietly calling out Jenny's name everywhere she looked.

With each empty room, that faint glimmer of hope faded until it flickered and died out.

Vastra drew her lips tight and walked back out into the rain. Her stride was purposeful and determined as she made her way down the middle of the street toward the alleyway. Anger drove her, and her pace never faltered. As she walked, she heard a familiar voice in her head.

'Anger's the shortest path to a mistake, Vastra. You'd do well to remember that.'
She shook her head, banishing the voice and the thought.

Oh, the mistake has already been made, Doctor, she thought, her inner voice cold and vicious. *It was not anger that brought it on. It was faith...and hope...and*

love. All those things you tried to show me. And what good were they? No, this time I will let my anger flow out, and if that means I must atone later, I will. But for now...

Her eyes narrowed as she turned and walked back down the alleyway. She looked at the body lying on the ground before her. She felt the rage building up inside her, a rage she had not felt since her younger days hunting and fighting with her tribe. Looking both ways, she dragged the body further down the alleyway, away from the street where prying eyes might look. A river of blood, fresh and hot but thinned and cooled by the rain, trailed behind her. She bent down, and even over the sound of rain and thunder, a wet, tearing sound could be heard.

When the lightning flashed again, Vastra raised her head in satisfaction. Her teeth, once gleaming white, were stained with gore.



There was a knock on the door.

Vastra rose, the muscles in her body from head to toe singing in agony. She had more than half expected this knock as well after last night; in fact, the thought of what was to come had kept her awake for most of the night as she soaked in a tub of hot water to wash the stain of blood off her, before fatigue finally took over and forced her into a few hours restless sleep in her bed. She slowly rose from bed as the knock repeated.

‘Just a moment please...I will be right there!’

She tried to sound cheery but knew even an untrained ear would detect the false cadences in her voice. Slowly she pulled on a plain skirt, tall boots, and a dark, high necked blouse. She grabbed her best cowled cape and leather gloves and pulled them on as quickly as possible. Muscles and joints sang as she slowly made her way down the stairs to the front door. Without so much as a thought she opened it.

‘May I help you, sir?’

The man at the door had turned his back as he waited, but he quickly spun around. His face was softly rounded, as was his gut, and there was a certain redness about his nose and cheeks. A thick, bristly moustache nearly covered his top lip. He raised a balled up hand, coughed into it to clear his throat, and then looked down at a sheaf of papers he held in his other hand.

‘Could you please tell Mrs. Vastravosky that her presence is required?’

Vastra sighed.

‘I am Vas...Mrs. Vastravosky. Please, come in, Mister...’

‘Inspector, actually, if you don’t mind. Inspector Paul Danforth, Metropolitan Police. I work out of Scotland Yard, and I have a few questions for you, if you have the time?’

Vastra stepped to the side.

'Of course, Inspector Danforth. Please do come in.'

He stepped past her and took in the front hall.

'Quite a place you have here, if I do say so, madam.'

'Thank you,' she replied quietly. 'Of course, it is quite empty now that my husband...'

She faked a sniffle. Inspector Danforth looked at her, sympathy etched on his face.

'Oh, I am sorry. How long, if I am not rude in asking?'

'Just over a year. But it just does not feel right to stop mourning him. I am afraid there will never be one to replace him.'

Inspector Danforth patted Vastra on the shoulder. She stiffened, just for a moment, and hoped he didn't notice.

'Oh, I understand. Been 5 years since my Rebecca...the 'flu. So I know what you must be feeling.'

Vastra nodded.

'Somehow, Inspector Danforth, I feel your visit has little to do with inquiring about my well being.'

Danforth sighed.

'Afraid so, madam.'

He looked around.

'Is...is there someplace we could sit and talk?'

Vastra pointed to a door. 'The library is perhaps the most comfortable room in the house right now. We could speak in there if you would like?'

Danforth nodded.

'That'd be splendid. Please, lead the way.'

Vastra and Inspector Danforth soon found themselves sitting in chairs across from each other. Ruefully, she realized that the chair Danforth was in was the same one Jenny sat in when she was interviewed for the open position. Vastra sighed. *There will be ghosts of her everywhere, I fear*, she thought, not without some small sadness.

'So, Inspector Danforth...what does bring you to my door this day?'

Inspector Danforth took a deep breath, exhaled, and began.

'I'm sure you keep up with the papers, madam. Likewise, I'm sure you know that just five days ago, there was a body found in the street. Murder.'

Vastra nodded.

'I read about that, Inspector. He seemed to be a well regarded financier.'

Inspector Danforth nodded in reply.

'I also assume that you read further into the article and found that he'd been suspected in several rather inhuman, ghastly crimes.'

'I did,' Vastra replied. 'But is a man not innocent until proven guilty?'

Danforth laughed.

'That's what the courts say, yes.'

He leaned forward, conspiratorially.

‘Between you and me, Mrs. Vastravosky...we had more than enough evidence to not only convict him, but to have him put away for life.’

He paused, and then drew a finger across his neck.

‘Or...worse, depending on your point of view.’

‘Oh,’ replied Vastra, her voice a little shocked. ‘I see.’

‘The funny thing,’ Inspector Danforth continued, as he stood up and began to walk around the room, ‘is that he wasn’t the first.’

‘Excuse me?’ questioned Vastra. ‘I am not sure I follow what you are saying.’

Danforth ran his fingers along the embossed spines of books on the library shelves.

‘I mean that we know of at least three or four other suspected killers...men who had done horrible, terrible things. Most of them we were able to keep out of the newspapers, out of fear of people trying to copycat those crimes.’

He reached out and pulled a volume from the shelf.

‘A Tale of Two Cities! I love this book! “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had...”’

Vastra coughed, trying to bring the Inspector’s attention back to the present. He looked over toward Vastra, blushed, and quietly slipped the book back onto the shelf.

‘Sorry...I got a bit carried away there.’

Vastra waved her hand. ‘Think nothing of it. Please, continue.’

‘Anyway...three or four other suspected killers...not a single one of them named in the press...until they turned up dead.’

Vastra’s voice betrayed her curiosity. She hoped it didn’t betray her involvement.

‘Why is this, then, the first I am hearing of this?’

Inspector Danforth turned to her.

‘We try and keep these things off the record. No point in causing a panic amongst the public if we can help it. Unfortunately this last one, the one what made the front page of the papers, there was no way for us to stop it from getting out.’

He paused.

‘And last night there was another one.’

Vastra gasped.

Inspector Danforth returned to his seat. *Jenny’s seat*, Vastra thought ruefully. He looked directly at Vastra as he tried to string together the right words.

‘I know that there was a massive thunderstorm last night, but I have to ask you...did you see or hear anything out of the ordinary last night?’

Vastra pretended to think.

‘No.’

‘Nothing at all?’

‘Well,’ Vastra said, pausing ever so slightly. ‘There was something, but...’

‘What was it?’

‘I thought I heard something that sounded like a scream, but it definitely did not sound human. Maybe like a dog howling, or something like that.’
She paused again.

‘But I thought it might have been the wind howling down the lane. It does get rather noisy when the wind whips up, as I am sure you could guess.’

Danforth nodded.

‘Didn’t see anything then?’

Vastra held her arms out.

‘As you can see, Inspector Danforth, I am a lone woman living in a large house by myself. Do you think I should risk stepping out at night...alone...in a thundering rain storm...when the streets seem unsafe even when there is no rain?’

Danforth cringed at the truth of her words.

‘Having said this, yes, Inspector Danforth, I did poke my head out my front door to see if I could make out anything. I happened to see someone running off up the street a few minutes after the scream. However,’ Vastra continued, ‘I do not know if they are in any way related.’

‘Hard to say,’ Danforth replied. ‘They could be. It might have been an accomplice, especially if he turned on his partner. Or it could have been the intended victim. It’s just too hard to say.’

He looked around the room, noting the small piles of books here and there.

‘No household help then, I take it?’

Vastra’s voice grew cold.

‘I am between employees at the moment, if you must know. She left her position here three days ago now, and I do not expect her back. Not that it is any business of yours.’ She spat the last words out intensely.

‘My apologies, madam.’

Danforth stood from the seat and made his way from the library. Vastra followed him as they made their way to the door. As Vastra was about to open it, he turned to face her.

‘S’a funny thing, though.’

‘What is?’ she replied coldly.

‘Oh, just the fact that you thought you heard a dog or dogs. The body, well...’

He looked around nervously.

‘Confidentially, madam?’

‘Of course,’ she replied. ‘Who would I tell?’

Inspector Danforth rubbed his chin for a second, considered answering her question, and then continued without replying.

‘The body was pretty mangled when we got called out. Looks like whatever got to him was pretty hungry. Doubt he had much chance to scream either...his throat was ripped from side to side by something powerful strong.’

Vastra reclined back slightly.

‘So, it was not something human then.’

Danforth laughed. ‘Well, I can’t say that he wasn’t dead when whatever decided to make a meal of him made the scene...but I doubt it. Dogs, most likely...we try to keep

them off the street too, but there's only so much we can do. We're not paid to police animals...just people.'

Vastra nodded.

'I know I would be rather concerned if I found my taxes were going to pay you to collar dogs, not criminals.'

Danforth laughed, a smile wrinkling his face.

'Right you are, Mrs. Vastravosky. Right you are!'

He paused, considered his next thought, and continued.

'Course, the boys back at the station are torn. Some of them want to find the blighter doing this and lock him away for the rest of his natural life.'

'And the rest of them?'

Danforth laughed.

'The rest of us? Hell, we want to give him a badge and commendation and set him to work walking the streets at night!'

Vastra smiled beneath her cowl.

'I'll be honest, madam...I didn't expect you'd be able to tell me anything different from anyone else we spoke to today. The storm's a convenient cover, but honestly... these days, people'd sooner turn their head and look the other way than offer a hand to someone in need. It's a sad world we live in these days.'

Vastra nodded. 'A sad world indeed. But there is always hope.'

Danforth smiled.

'That there is.'

He paused.

'You will...um...that is, if you hear anything...'

Vastra put a hand on his shoulder.

'Of course. If I hear anything, I will inform you immediately.'

Inspector Danforth took her hand and shook it vigorously.

'Thank you madam. Now, if you'll excuse me, I still have two or three dozen more people to interview today, and if I don't get to it...'

She reached out and grabbed the door handle.

'I understand, Inspector. Good luck to you. I hope you catch the man who did this and bring him to justice.'

'You and me both, Mrs. Vastravosky. You and me both.'

Vastra turned the handle and opened the door inward. Inspector Danforth took one step toward the door and stopped suddenly.

'Oi there! And who might you be, missy?'

Vastra looked over the Inspector's shoulder to see a young girl, dressed in dripping wet clothes and shivering as if she'd been caught in an ice storm. The girl looked up, and two brown eyes gazed directly into Vastra's eyes, hidden in her cowl.

'Jenny?'

Inspector Danforth turned back to look at Vastra.

'Jenny? Who's this Jenny, then?' His voice was cautious and questioning.

Vastra pushed past the Inspector and pulled Jenny back into the house. Jenny moved in a jerky, ragged fashion, almost unsure of her surroundings, her muscles still from the chill. Vastra looked at her closely, and then turned back to the Inspector.

‘Jenny is my house keeper...the one I told you left three days ago.’

Danforth smiled.

‘And now she’s back. One mystery solved, and without the intervention of the Met! Most excellent! I’ll just let myself out and let you take care of the girl.’

He leaned over and whispered near Vastra’s ear.

‘If I were you, I’d give the urchin a good seeing to for up and leaving like that. Just my unofficial opinion, of course.’

He turned, grabbed the door handle as he passed through the entryway, and closed the door behind him. Jenny flinched at the loud click, the only sound in the otherwise silent front hall. She looked up at Vastra and two trembling hands reached toward Vastra’s cowl. Vastra took Jenny’s hands in her own and held them.

‘Jenny...no. You don’t...’

‘Shh....’

It seemed the only sound the girl was capable of making. Vastra cautiously let go and watched as the hands reached up, touched the front edge of the cowl, and pushed it back, exposing her head and face to Jenny. Jenny’s left hand dropped, while her right slipped down, fingertips touching Vastra’s cheek. Vastra shuddered, her heart beating faster.

‘Jenny...’

‘Shhh...’

Vastra stood, unable to move, as those fingertips continued to trace her cheek, scale by scale.

‘Saved me.’ Jenny’s voice was weak, barely a whisper.

Vastra’s lips parted. Her mouth was dry, but she was able to whisper in reply.

‘Saved you? How?’

Jenny continued to gaze at Vastra.

‘Saved me when you hired me.’

Her right hand dropped, and she raised her left hand, caressing Vastra’s other cheek.

‘Saved me last night when that man nearly...it was you, wasn’t it?’

Vastra pursed her lips. *Of course it was Jenny.*

‘Of course I did. How could I not?’

During the exchange, Vastra failed to notice Jenny inch forward. She was, therefore, surprised beyond reckoning when she felt a pair of lips, soft and warm and human, press against hers. They stayed there for a few seconds, and Vastra closed her eyes, letting the emotion and release wash over her.

Suddenly the lips were gone.

Vastra opened her eyes and saw Jenny looking at her, a hint of shock in her eyes.

‘Sorry...I didn’t mean...I...’

Jenny tried to pull away, tried to run, but as sluggish and chilled as she was, it took Vastra very little effort to catch one of Jenny's wrists in her hand. She held Jenny in place, firmly but gently.

'Jenny. Listen to me.'

Jenny struggled, but she was still weak.

'Listen to me.'

She stopped struggling, and Vastra loosened her hand ever so slightly.

'Jenny...I have spent the last three nights looking for you. Every place I could think of to go, I went. I have barely slept in three days. You have had me worried sick. And here you are, returning to my door, my house. Our house, if you want it to be. But you have to stop running. Whatever you are afraid of, we can face it together. Just let me help you, the way I was helped. Please.'

A tear fell from Vastra's eye as her voice broke on those final words. Jenny stepped forward, haltingly, almost in a stagger, and felt Vastra's arms encircle her.

'I am glad you came back,' Vastra said.

'Me...'

Vastra felt Jenny's body go limp in her arms. Terrified, she dropped to her knees, lowering Jenny to the floor with her. She placed an ear over the girl's chest and heard her heart beating. A hand placed above her mouth caught the feel of breath exhaled.

Passed out, Vastra thought. Exhausted, chilled to the bone. It's a wonder she kept conscious as long as she did when she got back.

'Oh, my Jenny,' she said to the unconscious form before her. 'Welcome home.'

Wordlessly she placed one arm under Jenny's shoulders, the other under her knees, and lifted the girl from the floor. Vastra carried her up the stairs, marveling at how light she was. *I doubt she ate anything while she was gone...no wonder she is so weak*, Vastra thought. Without thinking she carried Jenny to her own bedroom and sat her in a chair next to the window closest to the bed. She looked down at her own hands, drenched in wetness from carrying Jenny upstairs. Finally, and after moments of worry, she was comfortable that Jenny was not going to slip from the chair. She ran to the girl's bedroom, grabbed some clean, dry night clothes and hurried back to her own room. She held them in her hands, and froze.

'Now what do I do?' she asked aloud.

She placed the cotton garments on the bed and carefully, nervously, began stripping off Jenny's wet clothing. It was the first time she had seen Jenny, or any human for that matter, naked. Tentatively she reached out and brushed a fingertip against her skin. It was cold...colder, almost, than her own. Worried, she spun around, grabbed the dry nightgown, and pulled it over Jenny's head. She carefully worked the girl's arms into the sleeves, standing her up to allow the garment to flow to the floor. She sat her back down, pulled the sheets back on the bed, and carried the girl over. Laying her down, she pulled the sheets back up, then hurried to a closet and grabbed two blankets from storage. She shook them open and covered Jenny with them as well.

Vastra stepped back and watched as Jenny slept, her breathing slow, unhindered, normal...or at least normal as Vastra knew it to be. Vastra felt her own tension start to unwind ebb away, and she walked downstairs to grab a drink of water.

Five minutes later she was back at the door, checking in on Jenny.

There was no change. She'd not moved from the spot Vastra had laid her down, curled over on her right side and facing the windows and the sun's warmth.

She tried going down to the library. She pulled out the book Inspector Danforth had mentioned, and sat down to read. She picked up from where she had stopped his distracted reading.

We had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way--in short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only.

There were a king with a large jaw and a queen with a plain face, on the throne of England; there were a king with a large jaw and a queen with a fair face, on the throne of France. In both countries it was clearer than crystal to the lords of the State preserves of loaves and fishes, that things in general were settled for ever.

Then she thought she heard a sound from upstairs.

Frantic, she dropped the book and ran back to her room. She opened the door and...

Nothing.

No change.

Jenny had not moved an inch, her breathing still normal as ever.

Vastra sighed. There was no way she'd find comfort until she was certain everything was alright. She drew the curtains open wide, to allow as much sun and light and heat in as possible, pulled off her boots, and laid down on the bed next to Jenny. Protectively she wrapped one arm around her, and she felt Jenny, in her sleep, nestle closer. Vastra smiled as her eyes, heavy with fatigue, closed to a welcome darkness.



Vastra had no idea how long she had been sleeping when she felt a rustling next to her. Her eyes opened in a flash and she watched Jenny toss and turn slightly. Jenny settled for a moment, and then spoke.

'Where am I?'

Vastra smiled...not that Jenny could see it, of course.

'You are in my room.'

Jenny struggled for a few seconds, and Vastra reflexively held her closer.

'No, please...I'm just too hot under all these blankets.'

Her speech took on a slightly more playful tone, to ensure that Vastra didn't think she was angry.

'What're you tryin' to do, smother me?'

Vastra relaxed.

'No, but when you got back, you were freezing. Your skin was cold to the touch, even to me.'

Jenny started to move again, and once again Vastra wrapped her arm slightly tighter around her.

'Madam...I'm not goin' anywhere, I swear. But it's rude for me to not face you when we talk...isn't it?'

Vastra had to admit the girl had a point, and relaxed again. She watched as Jenny gracefully spun around under the sheets, lifted the extra blankets off of her, and playfully tossed them in Vastra's direction. Vastra couldn't help but smile.

'How did I get up here, madam?'

Vastra thought for a second.

Well, Jenny, you came back into the house, dripping wet and chilled to the bone. You told me that I saved you twice, and then you kissed me. You tried to run off, I stopped you, and you collapsed in my arms. I carried you up here, stripped you bare, redressed you, and laid you in my bed. And I couldn't bear to be apart from you any longer...three days was too long as it was, let alone the short time since you finally decided to come back to me...so I came in here to join you.

No, that wouldn't quite do. Not yet, anyway.

'When you came back, you were dripping wet and so very cold. You looked like you had not slept for days. You fell into my arms, fainted, and I brought you up here to get into dry clothes and a warm bed.'

Jenny smiled and blushed.

'So you saw me...'

Vastra blinked. She understood the question. Further still, she understood the intent behind the question. She decided to face it head on.

'Yes. I did.'

The blush on Jenny's cheeks deepened.

'Jenny,' Vastra said after a moment's pause, 'tell me what happened when you ran away.'

Jenny sighed deeply and took several deep breaths. Vastra was willing to be patient...willing to be more than patient, as she thought about it. She would wait as long as it took for Jenny to collect her thoughts and speak. Pushing her would only make things far more complicated than they already promised to be. Than they already were.

Finally, Jenny began to speak.

'I was so scared, madam. People in the street, they told so many stories about you...how you were widowed, or...or...'

‘Deformed? Disfigured? A hideous creature unfit for human eyes to gaze upon?’ offered Vastra quietly.

Jenny stiffened at those words, but nodded slightly.

‘It is alright, Jenny. I have heard all of those things...and more. They hurt at first, but I know the truth. And that is what matters to me.’

She looked at the girl warmly.

‘But I am interrupting you. This is your tale, not mine. Please...continue.’

Jenny tried to smile...something Vastra did not fail to notice.

‘I didn’t want to believe any of those folk. I just figured the ones sayin’ you were widowed were right. It didn’t bother me none. And like I told you...I liked workin’ for you. I liked *you*.’

Vastra caught the emphasis on that last phrase, and knew it had to be intentional.

‘So when you took your hood off, and I saw you, I just...I was scared. Because...’

Vastra reached out and touched Jenny’s cheek tentatively.

‘You do not need to continue if you do not wish to.’

Jenny shook her head.

‘Let me tell it my way, OK?’

Vastra nodded and reclined back a few inches. She smiled when she saw Jenny move closer in response.

‘So I ran. I don’t even know how far I ran. I just ran. The first night was almost the worst, but I had some money from the last time you paid me, so I was able to rent a cheap room for the night. I didn’t sleep...every time I closed my eyes I saw you, and I heard your voice, beggin’ me to understand and I...I just couldn’t.’

Vastra nodded.

‘The second night was harder still. I spent the last pennies I had earlier that day on some bread so at least I could eat. I was mindin’ my own business outside a public house when a man in a suit and top hat walked up to me and asked me if I needed a place to stay for the night. I thought he was bein’ kind to me, so I said sure. Then he told me that he’d be happy to offer me a warm bed for the night if I...’

She paused.

‘If I did...things...’

Vastra’s lips curled back as if she were about to growl.

‘What kind of things, Jenny?’

Jenny looked at her, her eyes wet.

‘I think you know what kind of things I’m talkin’ about, madam.’

‘What did you do?’ Vastra’s voice was cold, with an edge of anger.

‘I did the only thing I could think of to do, madam. I walked over to him, nice as you please, leaned in, and...drove my knee up between his legs. Then I told him no thank you and tried to run off.’

Vastra tried valiantly but could not suppress her laughter. Jenny regarded her employer with a smile.

‘I was just being polite, madam.’

‘Yes,’ replied Vastra through almost choking bursts of laughter. ‘I suppose you were being polite, in your own special way.’

Jenny smiled. And waited for Vastra's peals of laughter to quiet.

'That still doesn't explain where you spent the night that evening, Jenny.'

'Oh,' Jenny replied. 'One of the women who ran the kitchen outside that public house saw what I did. She came over and grabbed me by the arm and pulled me back by the kitchen. She told me to keep quiet 'less that man heard me. Then she slapped me on the shoulder, and you know what? She was laughing herself! Told me that man tried every night to bring someone home with him...and most nights he succeeded. But she also overheard me say that I needed a place to stay for the night, and while she didn't have much, I was welcome to stay in her place with her kids and ma and da...just for the night. Said it was to repay me for entertainin' her so much with what I did.'

Vastra felt something and looked down to see Jenny's fingertips lightly brushing over her arm. She shivered a bit, relishing the softness of her skin and the warmth that finally came had returned. She looked up and saw Jenny's smile, wider now, and so warm, so genuine. She didn't want to break the moment, but she knew she had to.

'And last night, Jenny? What about last night?'

Jenny took a deep breath before continuing.

'I figured I'd find something. And then the storm came. When it was just some rain, I figured I could hide under some roof somewhere and wait it out. But it kept getting worse and worse. That's when I...'

She paused.

'The whole time I was gone I was thinkin' about why I ran away. And how wrong I was. Because I wasn't just runnin' away from you, madam...I was runnin' away from me. And...'

Vastra reached out and grabbed Jenny's hand. She felt Jenny hold it just as tightly.

'Madam...I know why you decided you needed me to see who you were.'

Vastra's eyes opened just a little bit.

'And why is that, Jenny?'

Jenny lowered her eyes, but then brought them back up again just as quickly.

'Because I think you think of me as more than just an employee...or a friend.'

Vastra regarded her carefully.

'And if that is the case, Jenny...?'

Jenny closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

'Anyway,' she continued, temporarily changing the subject, 'I'd been thinkin', and as the storm got worse, I thought maybe I should just come back here and we could... talk. And try to understand. And then...'

She swallowed.

'This man, he came out of the shadows. Asked me what I was doin' out on a night like that, that it was dangerous to be out at night, and he could escort me where I needed to go. I told him I was goin' home, and that I was just fine, thank you very much, and I didn't need his help. And I tried to walk away, but he walked around me and blocked me. He said 'I don't think you understood me, little girl. Little girls like you shouldn't be out on nights like this. Anything could happen to them.' I just put my head down

and tried to walk around him, and that's when I felt him put his hand on my shoulder. I tried to shrug it off and run, but he reached around my waist and grabbed me.'

She paused, tears flowing from her eyes as she recounted the tale.

'I screamed.'

Vastra felt Jenny's hand clench harder on hers.

'I know you did...I heard the scream. And I came running as fast as I could.'

Jenny held Vastra's gaze.

'I fought him, madam. I fought him as hard as I could...but it was so wet, and cold. And I was so tired already...I couldn't do much, as hard as I tried. He didn't bother coverin' my mouth, and I kept screamin' and screamin', but no one came. I tried to bite him even, and he just laughed. I never heard a laugh like it, madam...it was so cold, so inhuman. I felt him reachin' into a pocket, and I thought he was grabbin' for a knife. Then...'

Jenny's eyes narrowed slightly.

'Then you showed up. Though I didn't know it at the time...but I hoped it was you. Ploughed right into him and pushed me away. I saw him get knocked into the wall, and heard your voice tellin' me to run. And I didn't know where I was or nothin', and all I wanted to do was run back to the house, but...'

'You ran the other way, because you were confused.'

Jenny nodded.

Vastra let go of Jenny's hand and reached up, brushing away her tears, feeling the wetness on her warm cheek. Jenny laid there, calm, at peace for the first time in days, and Vastra saw the tension and fear flow from her body. She waited until Jenny's breathing returned to normal before speaking.

'You do not have to worry about him any more. Nor do you have to worry about anything like that happening again. You are safe here...assuming, of course, that you wish to remain here.'

'What did you do to him, madam?'

Vastra looked at Jenny carefully.

'That really is not that important, Jenny.'

Jenny's voice was firm and surprisingly strong as she replied.

'Tell me. I want to know.'

She paused.

'I need to know.'

Vastra took a deep breath and exhaled.

'I made sure that he would not hurt anyone else ever again. That is all you need to know.'

'Is that why the Inspector was here today, madam?'

'The Inspector,' Vastra began, 'was simply canvassing the area because they found a body in an alleyway about a hundred and fifty yards up the street. He wondered if I heard or saw anything last night in the storm. I told him I heard a scream, and saw someone run off, and that was all I knew.'

'You lied, then,' Jenny said with a small smile.

'Jenny!' Vastra replied in shock. 'I most certainly did hear a scream, and I most certainly did see someone run up the street.'

She paused.

'I simply did not tell the Inspector where I was when I saw them. After all, if I were to say that I was in the alleyway myself when this happened, it would be rather... incriminating, would it not? Even if it was because I was defending someone... important to me.'

Jenny laughed quietly.

'That doesn't explain why you're in here with me, madam.'

'I just...wanted to make sure you were safe.'

'Didn't want me runnin' off again, madam?'

Vastra shook her head in disagreement, then thought better of it and nodded slightly.

'Well, that too,'

Jenny smiled, wider this time.

'I'm sorry I ran off. I'm sorry for bein' afraid.'

Vastra put a finger on Jenny's lips to hush her.

'You do not need to apologize for being afraid. All of us are afraid of something. It is in how we deal with that fear that makes the difference. You can run away, but whatever you are afraid of, it follows right along with you. You can never escape it.'

Jenny nodded.

'You need to face the thing you are afraid of and show that it has no power over you.'

Jenny nodded again, and a tiny smile crept over her lips.

'But madam...what if I don't mind if the thing I *thought* I was afraid of has power over me...from time to time, that is.'

Vastra's eyes narrowed and she turned her head in thought for a few moments before the meaning finally sank in. She smiled.

'Then I would say that is something that might need to be discussed at a later date.'

She felt Jenny move closer, felt her warmth even through the sheet that separated them. It seemed so much hotter than before, and she wondered where that heat was coming from.

'Madam...' Jenny said, pausing after that single word.

Vastra's throat was dry and constricted. She felt her heart quicken.

'Yes, Jenny?'

'I...kissed you downstairs, didn't I?'

Vastra nodded.

'Yes. Yes you did, Jenny.'

Jenny smiled. Vastra felt herself melting into that smile.

'Did you like it, madam?'

Vastra opened her mouth, tried to speak. No words came. Instead she nodded mutely.

'I liked it too, madam. A lot.'

Jenny inched closer still.

‘Would it be alright if I did it again?’

Vastra nodded. She didn’t want to seem too eager, but the fact of the matter was simple. This was what she wanted, what she longed for since her adolescence, and it was coming from the most unexpected source. And she did not care one bit.

She reached out, wrapped her arm around Jenny, felt Jenny’s arm mirroring hers, and despite the sheet between them, felt Jenny’s warmth envelop her. She watched Jenny’s lips move closer, slowly, inexorably slowly, and then...

Her eyes closed.

At first, there was darkness.

And then heat.

So much heat.

A murmur passed between them as lips touched, tentatively at first, and then with increasing confidence and fervor. A tongue darted, nervously, exploring, to be met by its opposite doing the same. Vastra’s fingertips caressed soft, smooth skin, while Jenny’s ran over Vastra’s smooth cool scales. Their bodies moved naturally, of their own volition, and what may have only been seconds felt like an eternity.

In that darkness, as lips touched, Vastra felt a glow, could almost see it. It brightened with each passing moment, threatened to wash over them both, enveloping them in heat and light and connection. Vastra welcomed it, begged it to take over...and in that moment of connection, she thought she could hear Jenny’s voice asking for the same thing.

Lips parted, and both Jenny and Vastra regarded each other closely through heavily lidded eyes.

‘Madam, I...’

Vastra smiled.

‘How many times have I told you it is fine to call me Vastra?’

‘But...’

Jenny paused.

‘Sometimes...I kind of like calling you madam...madam.’

Vastra reached out and brushed an errant lock of hair from Jenny’s face. Jenny smiled, her face glowing, still flushed and heated.

Jenny broke the silence.

‘What happens next?’

Vastra pulled away just long enough to crawl under the sheet with Jenny. She pulled the sheet over them both, feeling Jenny’s heat even more closely. She could feel Jenny’s heart beating in her chest, and carefully placed a hand over it.

‘I can feel your heart, Jenny.’

'I can hear yours, madam,' Jenny replied.

'*J'entend ton coeur*,' Vastra replied quietly, a finger twirling in Jenny's chestnut brown hair.

'What was that, madam?'

Vastra looked up, her reverie broken.

'Oh, just something an old friend of mine taught me. He said it might be useful someday. Supposedly it's in a language your people call French, and it means just what you said to me, basically. 'I can hear your heart.'"

Jenny's blush grew deeper, if such a thing was possible.

'Now, Jenny,' said Vastra, pulling the girl closer, 'to answer your question as to what comes next, I believe the best way to find out is to follow where our hearts and bodies lead.'

Jenny nodded enthusiastically, biting her lower lip lightly as she did so.

'As for anything else, well...we can figure that out later.'



Vastra's eyes opened to a gradually darkening room. The sun was setting, and with the exception of a brief interlude with Inspector Danforth first thing in the morning, the vast majority of the day had been spent in her quarters. Normally she would be cursing herself for the waste of the day. There was so much she could have been doing, even if it was simply trying to read more to understand the strange people called humans she'd been sharing this city with for the past year plus.

Then she looked over and smiled.

The sheets were a royal mess, and as she raised her head slightly, she saw one of her legs, lean and tautly muscled, draped protectively over two pale, girlish legs. The sheets twisted and knotted, barely covering them both from the waist up. She felt Jenny's arm, warm, so very warm, tucked under her own, and listened as the smiling brunette next to her softly inhaled and exhaled.

She shifted, just an inch, and Jenny's eyes opened.

'Mornin', madam.'

She looked over her shoulder.

'Umm...is it mornin' already, or is the sun just settin' now?'

'It is nearly evening, Jenny. You have not slept the day away...though I must admit, with how tired you were when you got back this morning, well...'

Vastra was at a loss for words.

Truly, for the first time in her life, she was incapable of finishing her thought. How could she describe it? There simply were no words...not in her language, not in the English Jenny spoke. All she knew was that it was intoxicating, and she wanted more.

Not now, of course...they both needed food, and rest...and so much needed to be talked about, and worked out.

But soon.

Her thoughts were broken by a rhythmic tapping on her arm. She looked down to see Jenny, one finger pointed, as she tapped that finger lightly across her arm.

‘What exactly are you doing, my dear?’

Jenny smiled and blushed.

‘I was just...oh, it’s silly.’

Vastra reached over and brushed Jenny’s cheek.

‘Tell me. Please.’

‘I was just countin’ your scales. They’re not rough like I expected. They’re smooth, like pebbles at the beach.’

Vastra nodded and laid there, content to let Jenny continue her efforts. After a few moments, she moved her arm just slightly. Jenny jerked her head up in exasperation.

‘Hey, that’s not fair! I lost count! Now I have to start all over again!’

Vastra laughed quietly.

‘That’s the idea, love.’

Jenny looked at Vastra carefully. Her eyes narrowed just slightly as thoughts cycled through her head.

‘Did I say something wrong, Jenny?’

Jenny shook her head.

‘No, madam...it’s just...you called me ‘love’.’

Vastra looked into Jenny’s eyes carefully.

‘I suppose I did. Is...was...that a bad thing?’

Vastra expected Jenny to say something in reply. She did not expect the girl to push herself across the bed deeper into Vastra’s arms, clinging to her tightly. Vastra tried to speak, but didn’t want to betray the meaningful, almost spiritual silence that had entered the room. Instead she just held Jenny close, feeling their hearts beat together in time, feeling Jenny’s breath hot against her own bare skin.

That silence was broken by a loud, almost vulgar gurgling sound. Vastra leaned back just in time to see Jenny’s face turn beet red.

‘I’m sorry, madam! It’s just...’

‘How long has it been since you had a proper meal, Jenny?’

Jenny lowered her eyes. Vastra wanted to correct her, but thought better of it for the moment.

‘Breakfast, madam. Four days ago.’

Vastra’s eyes widened in shock.

‘Four days! Jennifer Flint, I...’

‘It’s not the only thing I ate, madam! But you said proper meal, and...well...that was the last one.’

Vastra rose from the bed, carefully untangling herself from the sheets.

‘We will soon fix that.’

Jenny sat up, wrapping the sheets around her.

‘What do you mean, madam?’

Vastra strode over to her closet and began pulling out clothes. She turned and regarded Jenny with a smile.

‘What I mean, young lady, is that you are going to go to your room, get dressed, and you and I will go out this evening for a meal to celebrate your return to the household.’

She paused for a moment.

‘Your *permanent* return to *our* household, that is.’

Jenny smiled, jumped up from the bed and wrapped the sheet around her like a shawl. She quickly ran to the door before stopping.

‘But, madam...what about...’

Vastra looked over and saw the concern on Jenny’s face.

‘I shall have to make do with the same arrangements I always do when I am out in public. Enough people have seen me to know I walk about with gloves and hood. And if one restaurant will not serve us because of it, we will find one that will. Am I clear on this?’

Jenny nodded, but Vastra could see the doubt in Jenny’s eyes, in the slight tremble of her lips. She walked over and held Jenny’s shoulders lightly.

‘Jenny...this is not going to be easy. For a moment, let us ignore the obvious differences. But let us instead look at how society would look at any two women...together. Add in the fact that I am your employer...and then to that add the fact that you are human and I am...’

She paused, unsure of how to continue.

‘What exactly are you, madam? If I might ask?’

Vastra smiled.

‘Silurian. Though from what I read of your books that would not exactly be accurate. We could be called Eocenes, but even that is a misnomer. An old friend of mine called us *Homo reptilia*, which sounds lovely except we are not descended from apes like you humans are.’

Vastra rubbed Jenny’s shoulders lightly, eliciting a smile.

‘In the end, Jenny, I am myself, nothing more. And what I am is different enough to what you are to make all the other complications seem small by comparison. Before we go any further, you need to be honest with me...but more importantly, you need to be honest with yourself.’

‘Honest about what, madam?’

‘You need to be honest about whether all these difficulties are worth taking on for what we have. What we could have. Together.’

Jenny thought for a moment, then leaned in and once again pressed her lips to Vastra’s. She held the kiss for a few moments, then stepped back and smiled.

‘Does that answer your question, madam?’

Vastra smiled.

‘Go get dressed, Jenny. And hail Parker...we are going to need a carriage this evening.’

Jenny turned and began to leave the room. Two steps later she ‘accidentally’ let go of the sheet covering her, and slowly walked to her room. As she reached her door she looked back, saw Vastra staring at her, and with a wave and a wink, walked into her room and closed the door.



Jenny and Vastra waited just outside their door for Parker to arrive. It was very difficult not to give in to temptation, but both of them knew the risks, and neither of them was willing to expose the other in any way.

The clomping of hooves on cobbles streets heralded Parker’s arrival. He pulled up to the front of the house and hopped down off the driver’s perch. He hustled over to the carriage door and opened it for the two ladies.

‘There you are, madams. I hope I didn’t keep you waiting too long.’

Vastra took a look at Parker’s clothes. She was used to seeing him in more traditional work clothes, but this night he wore a nicely tailored suit, complete with polished shoes and gloves. She looked at him warily.

‘You seem turned out a bit more impressively than normal, Parker. What might be the occasion?’

Parker smiled.

‘You can thank your girl Jenny...she told me tonight was a special night for you, and I should try and make my best impression on you. I hope it’s not a problem, madam.’

Vastra chuckled and then turned to look at Jenny, who had already stepped into the carriage. Jenny looked out and winked, a smile creeping across her lips. Vastra pointed at her, wagging her finger slightly, which only caused the girl to begin giggling. Vastra then turned her attention back to Parker.

‘Not at all, Parker. Not at all. Just a bit unexpected, but a rather nice surprise.’

‘Thank you, madam,’ Parker said, bowing slightly as Vastra stepped up into the carriage. He closed the door carefully behind her and then mounted the carriage himself.

‘Where to, ladies?’ he called down cheerfully.

Vastra turned to Jenny, who shrugged her shoulders. Vastra sighed.

‘Some lot of help you are,’ she whispered.

‘Hey!’ Jenny replied, her whisper slightly louder. ‘It’s not like I ever got much chance to go out to eat before!’

Vastra leaned out of the carriage.

‘Parker...I will leave it up to you. Somewhere nice, perhaps by the river? It does not have to be extravagant, but somewhere where they treat their customers well. Do you know any place that fits that description?’

Parker thought for a moment, then clapped his hands.

'I know just the place, madam. Friends of the family run it, and they make the best steaks in London, and that's no lie. You should find it quite to your liking, I'm sure.'

'Very well then, Parker, take us there.'

She leaned back into the carriage, then stuck her head out again.

'About how far away is this place, Parker?'

He looked down into the darkness of Vastra's hood.

'Oh, a half hour, I'd wager? Why?'

Inside that hood, Vastra smiled.

'Oh, no reason, Parker. We're in no rush. Just bring us there.'

'Right enough, madam!'

Parker cracked the reins slightly and the horses started off on their course. The carriage jerked and bucked for a few moments, but soon settled down. Jenny looked over at Vastra curiously.

'Why'd you want to know how long the ride would be, madam?'

Jenny watched as Vastra moved from curtain to curtain, closing and securing them. When she was confident they were all closed, she sat back down next to Jenny.

'We still have too much lost time to catch up on, Jenny,' she said quietly.

Even in the darkness, Vastra could see Jenny's smile widen.

'We'll have to be quiet. Can you do that?'

Jenny nodded, biting her lower lip innocently.

Vastra sighed. *I love it when she does that*, she thought wistfully.

They leaned in, simultaneously, and kissed. Being in the carriage only added to the exhilaration.



As the carriage drove off, a ragged looking man stepped out of the alley directly across from Vastra's home. His clothes looked almost muddy, the knees of his trousers almost worn through. He looked at a sheet of paper in his hands...even from across the street, he could make out the girl's face. That was all he needed to know at this point...the rest would follow on from there.

He began to walk, unsteadily at first, but with increasing nimbleness and speed. He had overheard the discussion, heard the driver's recommendation, and knew exactly which restaurant they were heading to. Better still, he knew a short cut that would get him there in half the time. His jog became a run as he made his way up the mostly empty street.

He would get there before them.

He would be ready.

He would succeed where his partner failed.

And in the end, he would reap the rewards of that success.

After all...*He* promised them reward beyond compare if they were successful. The reward would be greater still, he reasoned, if only he partook in it.

