



In Her Absence

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Part Two: Of Doctors
and Daemons

by
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*Both the victor
and the vanquished are
but drops of dew,
but bolts of lightning -
thus should we view the world.*

***Ôuchi Yoshitaka
1507-1551***

Part Two: Of Doctors and Daemons

Vastra's eyes quickly adjusted to the dim light of the basement. With no lamps or candles lit, the only illumination came from the open door at the top of the stair. While she was more than comfortable with the small amount of light weakly filtering down, she still walked from wall to wall, slowly lighting four oil lamps hung mid way across each of the damp chamber's four walls. Still far from brightly lit, the lamps did enough to reduce the basement's cavernous atmosphere.

In the center of the room stood a tall wooden pillar, a length cut from an old larch tree and stood on end. Much of the bark appeared to have been stripped or chipped away in a rough manner. Vastra walked over to it, running a hand over the rough surface, her eyes a sea of confusion and hurt and loss. She slowly strode past, her hand trailing behind as she retained contact on the wood. A few more steps brought her to a table covered with a red and gold embroidered cloth. One hand reached down and lightly touched the material, the smoothness of the silk a very different sensation indeed compared to the rough wood she had walked past.

A teak rack sat atop the cloth covered table. The flickering lamp light danced across three glossy, laminated black *saya*, arched to the top with hilts pointed to the right. Beneath them sat a small ceramic bottle on a blood-red silk rope. She picked up the bottle and held it in her hand for a moment before placing it back on the rack. Deep in thought, she ran her fingers across the cool, smooth surface of the black *saya*, over the sculpted metal *tsuba*, and finally to the textured *tsuka* itself. Her fingers lingered there, finally wrapping around and drawing the blade from the *saya* slowly. The blade itself was finely patterned, the result of countless hours folding and refolding the steel the sword was forged from. Vastra then drew the blade's sister from the *saya* beneath it, holding one loosely in each hand. Turning back to the length of wood behind her, she raised the blades in salute, and silently began a carefully choreographed kata.

As she did, her thoughts drifted back...



The alarm sounded in Forward Stasis Chamber Viridian Beta. Within one of the individual hibernation cells, a pair of eyes slowly blinked. The figure jolted as a pulse shocked her systems into full function. The cell opened and she quickly exited, her ornate handgun cradled tightly in her hands. She looked from side to side, noticing the remaining eleven cells had opened, yet none of her warrior-sisters emerged from their sleep. Concerned, she ran to one of them, and the sight brought a strained cry from her throat.

Inside the cell slumped the desiccated husk of one of her sisters, collapsed against the far wall. The corpse's skin was dull and dry, the grey mask barely hanging on her

face. Tears running down her face, the lone warrior moved from cell to cell, knowing what she would find in each, yet needing to see this for herself. Of the twelve warriors in her unit, only she survived to awaken. Anger rising deep inside her, she moved to a display screen and brought it online.

There was an incursion one mile from her current position, near Forward Stasis Chamber Viridian Alpha. Closest to the surface, the warriors there would be the first line of defense in the event that their cavern was breached. Concerned that they too had somehow not survived their hibernation, she took off at a run to survey the situation and drive off any possible invaders. She knew she was alone, but she reasoned it was most likely that any invaders would be simple, primitive apes. She could certainly handle a group of them on her own...her training assured her of that.

The tunnels grew lighter as she closed in on the surface. There was a sharp bend before the final incline toward the stasis chambers and the outside. She paused there, slowly peering around the corner to assess the situation.

Some two hundred or three hundred yards ahead, what appeared to be a group of apes stood, as he expected. She did not expect them to be wearing what appeared to be clothes, nor did she expect them to be carrying flame or what appeared to be digging tools. She wondered for the first time how long she had been asleep, as these apes had none of the heavy, wiry hair that covered their bodies as last she saw, when she and her sisters hunted them for sport. They chattered and chattered at each other, but their sounds had the actual shape and form of words.

How can this be? she asked herself.

She then shook her head, casting that thought from her mind. *Clothed or not, they are still apes*, she reasoned. *My sisters may not have woken, but I have, and it is my job to protect my people!*

With a scream she burst from behind the corner, her gun at the ready as she charged the apes before her. They turned to see what had made such a noise, and one of them gaped as his lamp shone across the near-featureless grey mask, broken only by two large black glass eyes that stared, empty of any emotion or humanity.

'God in Heaven! A monster! For the love of all that's holy...RUN!'

He turned to run, but found himself blocked by the men who had come with him. They stood there, slack jawed and shocked as the creature burst up the tunnel toward them, terrible screams coming from some inhuman throat. Paralyzed with fear, they could do little more than stand there and watch as an avatar of death advanced unrelentingly upon them.

'You fools! RUN!'

Their shock worn off, they turned to flee *en masse*. As they neared the tunnel's mouth, one of them tripped over a rock jutting up from the floor. He fell to the tunnel's floor hard, nearly knocking the wind from his chest. He screamed for help, but not one of his companions stopped or turned to offer assistance. Scrambling across the floor, he had nearly made it back to a standing position when he felt something heavy strike him from behind, sending him sprawling on the dirt and rock a second time. He turned over and looked up, seeing the creature standing over him, a strange weapon pointed down at

him. He held his hands up before him, covering his face. His eyes squeezed shut, yet tears still began to flow from them as he began to plead for mercy.

‘Please...I don’t know who you are! I don’t know what you are! Please, don’t do this! I’m begging you...spare me!’

The only response was a hiss from behind the mask. He opened his eyes in time to see a finger squeeze slowly against what was most certainly a trigger.

The rest was silence.

She looked up and saw the tunnel emptied of the rest of this ape’s tribe. Hearing nothing from beyond the tunnel’s mouth, she stepped to one side, placing her hand on a small indent on the wall. Cracks appeared on the stone surface, revealing a door that slowly slid open. Stepping into the chamber hidden beyond, she touched a dark screen. After a few moments, it glowed with life. Lights came on inside the ten hibernation cells in Forward Stasis Chamber Viridian Alpha and she moved from cell to cell, already knowing what she would find at each.

She rested her head against one glass chamber as tears flowed from her eyes like twin rivers. Once again she cried, and a sound that evoked pure sorrow arose from her throat like some wordless elegy.

She didn’t know how long she stood there mourning, but as the flow of tears slowed, she knew one thing. ‘I will have my revenge on the apes for what they have done to my sisters,’ she spoke quietly.

‘It’s not their fault, you know.’

She spun on her heels, her weapon at the ready.

At the entry to the stasis chamber stood a male ape, dressed in a similar manner to the ones she had just chased out of her tunnels. Thin, almost gangly or malnourished looking, he stood with one leg crossed over the other, leaning against the opening with a sad half smile on his face. One hand was hidden in a trouser pocket, while the other stretched over his head, aiding in supporting him.

‘What trickery is this? How is it you speak such that I can understand you?’

‘Always just a moment too late...or too early. Any answer to your question would make so much more sense if we’d gotten here on time.’

‘Explain yourself!’

The ape smiled, not moving from his spot. ‘I speak everything. Every language... even some that don’t actually exist. Makes it much easier to get around in life if you can at least ask where the bathroom is, or where you can get a really good steak, don’t you think?’

She pointed her gun toward him threateningly, and he stood straight in the doorway.

‘A gun.’ He sighed. ‘It’s always a gun, isn’t it? Is the gun really necessary?’

‘You speak, yet so many of your words mean nothing to me. Are you mad, or just some kind of fool?’

He smiled. ‘I’ve been called worse, you know.’

‘Why do you say you and your apes did not cause this?’

‘Me and my apes? They’re not apes, first off...they’re humans. Homo sapiens sapiens, if you want to get technical, and not altogether unlike you Homo reptilia. Secondly, they’re not ‘my’ humans, even if I do happen to look like them. Actually, if you want to remain technical, it’s more that they look like me than the other way around. Thirdly, isn’t there something better I can call you than Homo reptilia? Names are so much better than taxonomy, after all...and when you consider that you’re not descended from the same common ancestor, the taxonomy is actually quite wrong.’

‘And why should I give you my name, ‘human’? I could just as easily shoot you and be done with this charade!’

The man pulled his hand from his pocket, a slender metal tube held firmly in grip. Surprised by his quick movement, she could not react when the end of this tube glowed bright green and a high pitched sound began to fill the small chamber. She felt a jolt as her gun flashed with light. She dropped it with a hiss, jumping back slightly. As her eyes readjusted from the bright flash, she looked down, only to see her weapon, smoking and twisted.

‘Anger’s the shortest path to a mistake, my new friend. You’d do well to remember that. There’s a huge difference between doing what’s easy and what’s right. It may be an easy choice to pull a trigger...but it’s not always the right choice.’

‘What did you do? And how dare you call me ‘friend’?’

The man tossed the device in the air, caught it after a flip or two, and slipped it into a pocket hidden inside his jacket. ‘Sonic screwdriver. Great for hanging shelves, unlocking doors...or disarming Homo reptilia who won’t be polite and give me a name to call them by.’

She hissed at him, as much in frustration as anger. ‘Vastra.’

The man smiled. ‘See, that really didn’t have to be as hard as you made it, did it? Always better to assume friendship than to be on shaky ground. Makes for messy situations, I find. Oh, and before I forget my manners, it’s a pleasure to meet you, Vastra. My name’s the Doctor, and I know you don’t want to believe me, but I can assure you that those humans had nothing to do with what happened to your sisters in those hibernation cells.’

Behind her mask, Vastra’s eyes widened. ‘How do you know this?’

The Doctor’s smile faded. ‘It’s a long story...but you’re not the first of your kind I’ve met. After all, I must have known your people if I can speak your language, right?’

She crossed her arms, incredulous. ‘Go on...Doctor.’

The Doctor took a deep breath. ‘Your scientists were amazingly brilliant, you know. So advanced...it’s only been recently that the humans up there...’

He pointed back toward the cave’s opening.

‘...have been able to replicate some of what your people had done million of years ago. Oh, they have a long way to go, don’t get me wrong, but for such a young species, they’re really quite incredible.’

The Doctor caught his breath and continued.

‘Anyway, your astronomers detected something moving in the night sky. At first they were unsure of what they had found, but in time it became obvious that something

very large and catastrophic was heading toward the Earth. An asteroid, maybe...or maybe another planet.'

'I know this story, Doctor. It is part of the history we are all taught. You need not educate me on my own past.'

The Doctor coughed, caught off guard by Vastra's retort.

'Anyway, they had to do something, and plans were made. Some of them worked to build vast arks to send off portions of colonies, along with native plants and animals, to colonize other planets...or to come back to Earth if scanners showed it was not destroyed. Others built vast underground cities...hives almost...to hibernate in. Your tribe chose the later, of course. They built quite well...amazingly well, if I might add. Amazing architecture and geologic design. Not that it mattered in the end. It was only the moon moving into place, and once it hit the rim of the earth's gravity well...with a little help from yours truly to slow its trajectory, of course...well, it just started revolving around like the Earth revolves around the sun.'

The Doctor paused, out of breath after his dissertation.

'Vastra, your people were brilliant...but they couldn't predict everything.'

Vastra scoffed. 'You speak so highly of my people and then insult them in very near the same breath? How dare you!'

The sadness on the Doctor's face deepened. 'Not long after your people went into hibernation, and before the first sheets of a vast ice age began to cover this land, there was a storm. A vast solar storm, gouts of plasma and magnetic energy bursting off the sun's corona with the force of billions and billions of volcanic explosions. Your people, deeper under the earth, most likely survived with little or no difficulty...they're probably still sleeping.'

The Doctor paused, carefully choosing his words.

'Closer to the surface, however... the electromagnetic energy disrupted your life support systems. There was less dirt and stone blocking it. The fact that you yourself survived at all was a miracle.'

Vastra chuckled coldly, her voice harsh with emotion. 'And you feel this should offer me comfort, Doctor?'

The Doctor shook his head. 'No, Vastra. I don't think it should, or will. At the same time, those men you chased out of here...and in one case killed...they were not to blame. They did not kill your people. Killing them will not bring your people back...in fact, it may cause more of them to organize against you, bringing war to your people. I won't let that happen, Vastra.'

She scoffed. 'War, Doctor? These apes...humans, as you call them...do not know the meaning of war. Let them come. We will defeat them, and then take our place above once again.'

'They're not ready for you. Not ready to share the Earth. Not yet.'

'The Earth is ours, Doctor!'

'Not any more it's not. While your people slept, the humans evolved. Certainly, they're not as advanced as you were, but they're so much more than they once were! In time, it's possible you could both exist together...but it's not time for that yet.'

The Doctor paused, running one hand through his tousled hair. He looked down at a watch on his wrist, tapped it a few times, and then looked up.

‘Let me show you.’

‘Show me? Show me what?’

‘Let me show you what these humans are capable of. Let me show you how they’ve grown, how they’ve created, how they’ve changed. Come with me.’

‘My sisters...my people...’

‘...will be fine, Vastra. I can assure you we’ll be back here almost faster than we left. Perhaps you’ll learn a thing or two...and maybe, just maybe, you’ll find that these humans deserve their place here too.’

‘I have my doubts of that, Doctor.’

The Doctor turned and walked up toward the tunnel’s mouth. A few moments later Vastra followed, warily and at a distance lest this was some kind of cunning trap. At the opening she saw the Doctor walking toward a small building of some kind, roughly built from cut timber. She hastened her steps and rounded the building to see the Doctor standing before a strange blue object. Opaque windows glowed with white light, while strange words were emblazoned at the top of the structure.

‘Police Public Call Box? What madness is this? What are these words? And how can I read them? They are not in my written language?’

The Doctor looked visibly hurt. ‘It’s my ship. She’s called the TARDIS. I travel in it.’

He paused.

‘As for the rest, well...I’ll explain later.’

‘You truly are mad,’ Vastra scoffed.

‘Yes I am,’ he replied, his hurt look quickly replaced by a wide grin. ‘A mad man in a box, that’s me. And don’t you ever forget that!’ He turned to the TARDIS, slid a key into the lock and opened the door. It swung inward quietly, golden light pouring out from within.

‘After you, Mademoiselle Vastra.’

She cocked her head to the side, her eyes narrowing slightly behind her mask. Still, she stepped forward into the golden light, into the TARDIS. The Doctor quickly stepped in behind her, closing and latching the door behind him.

Vastra stood, her head whipping from side to side as she tried to grasp what she saw. Outside, the ship...this TARDIS, the Doctor called it...seemed no bigger than her arms outstretched. The ship opened up immensely inside the door, far larger within than without. Hallways led off in numerous directions, while a short stair led to a raised platform. The Doctor bounded up the stairs, spinning and pressing buttons and flipping levers at a circular console that dominated the center of the chamber. A tall clear cylinder rose from the center of this console, reaching the high vaulted ceiling above. The walls themselves seemed to glow, much like the walls of Vastra’s caverns, yet these walls were of some strange burnished metal. Dozens...no...hundreds of strange sounds accosted her ears.

‘This is madness,’ she said as she reached up to take the mask off her face. As she did so, the Doctor came round the opposite side of the console. He looked down at her and smiled.

‘Yes, I know! Isn’t it cool?’

Vastra walked slowly up the stairs to the platform the Doctor was working at. She found a seat and lowered herself upon it, watching him as he danced from side to side.

‘What exactly are you doing, Doctor?’

The Doctor looked over at her briefly through the central column. ‘I’m setting temporal-spatial coordinates, plotting a vector and calculating acceleration and braking across a four dimensional matrix.’

She looked at him through narrowed eyes. He caught the meaning immediately.

‘In other, far less exciting words...I’m setting a course in time and space to our destination.’

Vastra laughed. ‘You truly are mad if you expect me to believe that this...thing... can move. Not only that, but you expect me to believe that it also moves through time and space?’

The Doctor looked up and smiled. ‘Yep.’

He flipped a large lever forward, and Vastra felt the floor beneath her rumble slightly. Looking up, she saw a strange structure within the central column begin to rise and fall, almost like a pulsing heart. Then the sound came...a strange tearing sound, like thousands of screams in harmony ebbing and fading in pitch and volume. The entire structure shuddered, and she grabbed at the sides of her seat in terror.

‘Doctor! What’s going on?’

‘We’re going!’ The Doctor yelled in reply, laughing as he spun and danced around the console, hitting controls as he did so. ‘Next stop...everywhere!’



Vastra clung to the brass railing that surrounded the console as the ship shuddered to a stop. She glared at the Doctor, oblivious to her obvious discomfort, as he checked readings and flipped dozens more switches that had no obvious visible effect. As he absent-mindedly stroked a polished metal lever and muttered to himself ‘Another perfect landing, hey old girl,’ she found herself wondering if he was truly mad.

‘We’re here.’

Vastra looked up, her whole world still spinning as she tried to gather her bearings.

‘We’re here? And where exactly is here, Doctor? I fully expect, when you finally let me out of this...this...contraption...’

‘Contraption? Did you hear that, dear? She called you a contraption!’

He paused for a second, the silence filled with the same hums and noises that seemed a constant.

‘Yes, I agree...it was rather rude. But that’s OK...she didn’t know.’

Vastra rolled her eyes at him. ‘You speak as if it were alive!’

The Doctor looked at her incredulously. ‘But she is.’

Vastra shook her head. ‘No matter. As I was saying...when you finally decide to let me out of here, I fully expect that I will walk out that door and find myself in the very

same field we left. And when that happens, I will ensure that my sisters are bothered no longer by the stupid human vermin!’

The Doctor looked at her, aghast. ‘Do you have to call them vermin, Vastra? I’ve traveled with them for a very long time, and I can assure you that they’re not vermin. Well, mostly not vermin...there are a few bad ones in the bunch, sure, but by and large they’re really lovely people!’

Vastra held her ground, arms crossed. ‘Then why are you not traveling with any now, if you are so close to them?’

‘I was,’ the Doctor smiled. ‘But they got married. Amy and Rory, lovely kids, them. They’re off on their honeymoon, and I had things to do, people to see, places to go. I told them I’d catch them up after a month or so. You know kids these days, always with the...exploring.’

The Doctor’s face suddenly showed confusion.

‘Anyway, enough about them. Step outside! I think you’ll be pretty surprised!’

Vastra turned with a huff, striding to the door. She took it in one hand and paused for a moment. Surely this was all some sort of hallucination, brought on by the hibernation chamber. Surely, once her synapses were firing properly, all of this would make sense, and the Doctor...whoever he was...and this strange ship he called a TARDIS, would all fade like the bad dream they were. Reassured, she opened the door and...

Found herself in daylight.

In the middle of a pasture.

Surrounded by cattle.

She turned, saw that the TARDIS still stood behind her, and ran back inside.

‘Doctor! Explain this now!’

The Doctor laughed. ‘I told you, didn’t I? A whole new world out there. Well, not really a new world, since it’s actually the same world we just left. And not really new either, since by my guessing...’

He strode past Vastra, still in shock, and stepped outside. She followed him, struck mute by the experience. He took a few steps beyond the TARDIS door, enough for Vastra to follow behind him, and took a deep breath.

‘It should be about 1299, give or take a few years. And this, Madame Vastra, is Okinawa...or rather, it will be some day. Right now it’s the Ryūkyū Kingdom, and King Eisō...’

‘Is dead, stranger, and your arrival is most disconcerting in this troubled time.’

The Doctor looked up to see a half dozen armored men, spears and swords pointed dangerously toward him. He held his hands up, showing himself to be unarmed. He gently nudged and motioned Vastra to do the same.

‘My condolences on the passing of your King. He was a good man. But really, the swords aren’t necessary. My friend and I, were decided to stop by and visit. Besides, I’m late for my *shanshin* lesson, and I know how cross his majesty’s court musician is

when I'm late for a lesson. Last time, he had me carrying buckets of water all day, and then expected me to do my lesson anyway. Tough man, him...but one hell of a musician. Why, I heard him do an amazing rearrangement of Beethoven's Fifth on a *shamshin* alone. Of course, it hadn't been written yet, and I had to tell him not to write any of it down because that'd really mess things up, but...'

The Doctor looked around and noticed not a one of the armored men had dropped from their ready stance.

'And quite a tough crowd, too, it seems.'

The Doctor took a deep breath.

'Listen, how about you take me and my friend back to the royal court and I am sure all of this can be worked out. I can assure you, I do mean you no harm.'

One of the soldiers turned his attention to the others. Judging by the richer looking armor, he was the leader of this particular troop.

'Bring your weapons to rest. He certainly does not look Mongol. And besides, he's tamed a dragon. Despite the inauspicious timing of his arrival, perhaps he brings us a mighty boon. Taisei should be informed.'

He turned to the Doctor and Vastra.

'Come with us...friends you may yet be, but you must understand our caution. Eisō has just died, his son about to ascend to the throne, and the Mongol threat is never far from any of our minds. If what you say is true, I am sure you will be recognized in court, and all will be well.'

He paused.

'If not, well...even with your dragon, I fear you will find somewhat less hospitality than you seem to expect.'

The unnamed leader took the front and led the soldiers, the Doctor and Vastra toward a complex of buildings ahead. As they walked, Vastra leaned over and whispered into the Doctor's ear.

'A dragon? What foolishness is this?'

The Doctor smiled. 'To the Japanese, dragons are powerful beings indeed. Nearly godlike. They are seen as ancient and wise...capricious as well, from time to time.'

Vastra chuckled quietly. 'Perhaps these people are not so foolish after all.'

The Doctor smiled. 'I thought you might find some happiness in that.'

'I am not tamed, Doctor, Vastra snapped, her eyes cold and steely. 'Nor should you ever expect I will be'

The Doctor's smile didn't falter. 'Of course you're not...and when we get to court, I am certain that the truth will come out. But...a word of advice?'

'Yes, Doctor?'

The Doctor leaned in and whispered into her ear. 'Whatever you do, don't let on that you're really not a dragon. If they think we're deceiving them, well...'

'Yes?'

The Doctor paused. 'Honor is of great importance to these people. If we dishonor them, they have ways of dishonoring us.'

Vastra looked at the sheathed swords and pointed.

'I should assume those might be the tools with which they show that...dishonor?'

The Doctor nodded.

Vastra raised her head slightly and smiled. *I think I should like being a dragon... for a little while*, she thought to herself.



The Doctor expected the royal court to be in chaos, and so it was. Advisors hustled to and fro, planning both King Eisō's funeral and his son Taisei's ascension to the throne. All activity came to a halt and voices silenced as The Doctor and Vastra were ushered into the royal hall. As the doors closed behind them, quiet words began to be passed from one to another...about the strange man's dress and appearance, about the creature who walked with him. Could he or she be a dragon? How was it possible that a human, even one as odd as the man who obediently followed the royal guard, could tame one of the god-creatures themselves and be willingly followed? The people got back to work, as was their duty, but it was obvious little more would be completed until some scraps of information filtered from the hall.

Vastra and the Doctor found themselves flanked, three soldiers to a side, with the more ornately armored man leading them forward. At the far end of the hall, lit brightly and glowing in shades of red and gold, a pair of ornate chairs rested atop a raised dais. Both were empty, but two men stood to either side. Both were older, long white beards kept impeccably. Deep red skullcaps contrasted with their gleaming white hair.

'Tell me, Jirō ...what is the meaning of this commotion today? You know that preparations continue apiece as decreed by law. We have no time for interruptions... especially interruptions so petty as these. If these are prisoners, they can be escorted to the prison, where they can stay until such time as we can deal with their crimes.'

Jirō bowed. 'I do know this, sir. But they...he...'

He pointed to the Doctor, who waved his hand and smiled jauntily.

'He insisted they be brought here, so that they may plead their case personally. He does not appear Mongol, yet he has knowledge of our late King Eisō.'

The elder of the two men stepped down from the dais, walking toward the soldiers. Jirō stepped to one side respectfully, and the other soldiers followed suit, taking several steps back. The elder walked around the Doctor, gazing at him intently.

'Hmm...I see,' he muttered, one hand firmly gripping a knotty walking stick, the other stroking his beard in thought. Several moments later he stood before the Doctor, who watched this with quiet amusement. The elder stepped forward and peered up directly into the Doctor's eyes.

'Mmm hmm,' he muttered again, causing the Doctor's smile to widen. He held his walking stick out to one side, and a soldier quickly took it from his grip. With no warning, the elder then reached up and gently pulled and tugged on the Doctor's face, distorting it in multiple directions. Apparently satisfied, he held his hand out, and the soldier quickly returned the walking stick.

The elder took two steps back, and pounded the base of the stick on the stone floor.

‘You are late, Kyoujyu.’

The Doctor laughed. ‘That’s the trouble with time, old friend. You never seem to have enough of it!’

The second elder looked at the two men in shock. ‘You act as if you know this man, yet we have never seen him here before!’

‘Look at his eyes, you blind fool, and tell me that this is not the same man who visited us when Eisō himself took the throne! You know, as do I, that he travels in his blue shrine, not unlike the gods! And look...this time he brings with him a dragon! How powerful you must have become in order to tame such a beast!’

Vastra’s mouth opened in shock. ‘I am tamed by no man!’

The elder laughed. ‘No, I suppose you are not! And yet you travel with him. Surely you bring honor to him, and he to you, by your presence.’

He bowed.

‘I am Tsugu...Tsugu sensei to your friend, who is, by reckoning, nearly 2 seasons late for his lessons. To you, dear dragon, I am but Tsugu, your humble servant. And you might be?’

‘Vastra,’ she said firmly.

‘Vastra...such a strange name for a dragon.’

‘She comes from a different time and place, Tsugu.’

The Doctor jumped as Tsugu poked at him with his walking stick with alarming speed. ‘Until you can find it possible to be on time for your appointments, it is Tsugu sensei, or Sensei alone.’ He turned to face Vastra, offering her a small smile.

‘Your friend, of course, is under no such obligation.’

The Doctor caught Vastra smiling out of the corner of his eye.

‘Don’t think I didn’t see that, Vastra.’

She turned to him, feigned shock on her face. ‘My dear, apparently constantly late Doctor...whatever are you implying?’

The Doctor shook his head. Becoming serious, he turned to face the dais and Tsugu. ‘Tsugu sensei, I do apologize for my tardiness, and ask your forgiveness. I know these are trying times, and understand if our presence adds too much difficulty. We can come back another time...’

‘No,’ replied Tsugu quietly. ‘I am certain King Eisō would have wanted you here. He did always enjoy your stories, as...unbelievable as they often were. I am also certain that Taisei would find your presence a welcome one as he takes the throne. It would be fitting that you saw both the father and the son assume their place.’

He walked to the top of the dais and waved at the soldiers.

‘You may all return to your posts...these two are guests, and I shall look after them. Make sure preparations are in order...tomorrow shall be *kichu-fuda*, as rites and the gods demand. I shall make certain our guests are clothed properly for mourning. In three days’ time, we may be seating a new king, but Eisō must be shown proper respect.’

Tsugu turned to the other elder, who had remained silent since his outburst earlier.

‘Shunji, you will begin arrangements for the ascension. The eyes of all Ryūkyū will be on your work, so do not fail. Taisei will know if there is but a single flower out of place, and I can assure you he will not be as forgiving as I would be in his place.’

Shunji bowed, turned, and quickly left the hall. The Doctor and Vastra found themselves alone with Tsugu, who smiled as he slowly walked down the steps of the dais to them. He walked over to the Doctor and embraced him tightly, surprising him momentarily. He soon returned the hug in kind.

‘It is good to see you again, old friend. I thought my time would pass before you returned.’

The Doctor smiled and patted him on the back. ‘Do you honestly think I would neglect to come back and continue my music lessons, my friend?’

Tsugu laughed. ‘If even half the tales you tell me are true, then you know my answer.’

Vastra looked on in silence, confusion clearly evident on her face. Tsugu walked over to her and offered his hand. Cautiously she took it, feeling its warmth in her cool, scaly hand.

‘Come, my new friend. While we must make sure both you and Kyoujyu have appropriate dress for tomorrow’s mourning, I can see you and I have much to discuss about our friend here.’

He guided Vastra toward a door at the back of the hall. She followed, cautiously but willingly. The Doctor trailed behind, hands in pockets as they walked through the curtained doorway. Beyond was a suite of rooms, richly decorated without being overly ostentatious.

The Doctor looked around and whistled quietly. ‘You have gone up in the world, haven’t you, Tsugu sensei?’

Tsugu smiled and laughed warmly. ‘Being the King’s closest advisor does have some small privileges, old friend.’ He slowly made his way to a low table and lowered himself to sit at it. He motioned for Vastra to join him, and she did so, sitting across from the old man. The Doctor was about to join them when Tsugu held up a finger.

‘You are forgetting something.’

Confusion clouded the Doctor’s face, and Tsugu smiled.

‘Your friend and I are certain to be thirsty, and there is much talking to do. Go fetch some fresh water from the well, and then we can sit and become reacquainted...or acquainted, as the case may be.’

Shoulders slumped, the Doctor trudged outside, picked up a bucket, and began the long walk to the central well.



The Doctor returned a few minutes later, a bucket of water weighing heavily in one hand, slowing his usually energetic gait down significantly. When he re-entered the

room, he found Tsugu and Vastra laughing over some joke he had missed, a half-filled glass of wine within easy reach for Tsugu.

‘But...I thought...the water...?’

Tsugu smiled. ‘And had I not at least asked you to do one task for me, would you have remembered how important timeliness is? Even for you?’

The Doctor’s eyes widened as he replied, aghast at the implication. ‘Of course I would!’

‘Would you really?’ Tsugu’s eyes narrowed in return.

‘Well...’

Tsugu clapped his hands briefly and laughed. ‘I thought as much, my friend. Set that down by the door, and join us. While tomorrow will be a day of silence, tonight I am certain we have many tales to tell.’

The Doctor set the bucket down beside the door frame, turned, and knelt at the table alongside Vastra and Tsugu. There was a moment’s silence before the old man spoke.

‘I was just telling our friend here about our very first meeting. Do you remember that day, Kyoujyu?’

The Doctor smiled. ‘I’m actually rather surprised you do, Tsugu. It’s been, what...fifty years now?’

‘Closer to seventy, actually,’ Tsugu replied in a quiet voice, a smile deepening the wrinkles in his skin. ‘I know my youthful appearance belies that fact, but a fact it is nonetheless. My dear friend Eisō had just been named *Sessei* by King Gihon. Those were far more troubling times, were they not?’

The Doctor nodded slowly. ‘Your people were in terrible shape. Famine, disease, typhoons and storms wrecking the villages. It’s a wonder the kingdom survived.’

‘Gihon was a fool,’ spat Tsugu. ‘He was truly never fit to rule. Even from his first day as *Sessei*, Eisō showed a firm hand and a keen mind. He held the people together. He gave them hope.’

Tsugu paused, sipping from his wine.

‘It is never a good day when a King abdicates...but I can tell you this, friends... when Gihon stepped down and withdrew to the forest, there were celebrations the likes of which we had never seen. Of course,’ continued Tsugu, deep in thought, bringing the memories back before his eyes, ‘they did pale in comparison to the celebration when Eisō took the throne.’

Vastra spoke. ‘This Eisō sounds like a mighty warrior indeed.’

Tsugu nodded. ‘He was, to be certain. Twice the Mongols came to him, demanding fealty and our subjugation as they prepared an invasion of the main islands. The first time he laughed them out of the great hall. When they returned, 4 years later, the King himself and a handpicked group of samurai made certain in every way that the Mongols knew they would receive no assistance from us.’

He chuckled.

‘There may have been one or more who returned with slightly less than they arrived with.’

The Doctor spit a mouthful of water across the table. ‘No! He didn’t!’

Vastra laughed, as much at the Doctor's reaction as to Tsugu's story. 'Quite the warrior indeed!'

Tsugu nodded. 'There were costs, sadly. While we slept that night, the Mongols returned, cowardly, and under cover of night. They captured nearly 130 of our men.'

He paused, pursing his lips for a moment before continuing.

'I'm sure you can presume they did not remain captive for long.'

Vastra nodded her head. 'It is a shame I will never meet your King. Despite being a human, he seems more than worthy of my respect.'

'I am certain you will be allowed an opportunity to offer that respect during the ceremony. Already there are those who feel your presence is a sign from the gods that Eisō has been blessed and will ascend to the heavens. Were you not to attend, it would bode ill for our people.' Tsugu paused, his eyes closed, and after several moments both the Doctor and Vastra thought he had fallen asleep. The Doctor was about to nudge him lightly when his eyelids fluttered open, surprising the Doctor and Vastra both.

'You will attend? Both of you?'

The Doctor nodded, and watched as Vastra did as well.

Tsugu clapped his hands together twice and stood. 'Then it is settled. I will show both of you to your chambers for the evening. In the morning you will be seen by members of the court, who will assure that you are both appropriately clothed for *kichu-fuda*. While we will not be able to speak tomorrow, I am sure we will find time before Taisei's ascension to continue your *sanshin* lessons.'

He paused, peering directly at the Doctor.

'I trust you have been practicing, Kyoujyu?'

'Practicing? Of course I've been practicing! I've been practicing like a...like...like a really practicing thing!'

Tsugu shook his head. 'Not at all then. Just as I expected.'

He chuckled, taking obvious pleasure in the Doctor's discomfort and embarrassment.

'You know, my friend...there are seven and ten year olds in this very town who can play the entire written works of the *Uzakagu* canon. You, a grown man, can barely make a passable attempt at "Tinsagu nu hana!"'

The Doctor looked down at his feet, scuffing one shoe lightly against the floor. Tsugu walked over to him and put an arm around his shoulder. 'Do not worry, my friend...it is a skill that will come in time. For now though...the hour grows late, and tomorrow shall surely be a trying day for us all.'

He motioned to Vastra, who stood and walked over to their side.

'You will find your rooms to either side at the end of the hall. They may be simple, but I do hope you find them comfortable. I fear you may be somewhat lacking in assistance should you find yourself wanting anything of substance this night...as I am sure you might assume, we are quite preoccupied. But your beds will be soft and warm, and I hope you will find sleep will come easily.'

Tsugu turned and walked back to the end of the hall. Before stepping through the curtained partition, he turned back to the pair.

'I am glad you have returned, Kyoujyu,' Tsugu spoke, the weight of his years evident in his voice.

'I am too, old friend,' replied the Doctor, his own voice sounding every bit as aged. He started to raise his hand, but dropped it as Tsugu turned and left the chambers for the night.

The Doctor turned and looked beyond the curtains to his chamber. 'Looks comfy enough...bed, oh, a window! I love windows! Bright sunshine in the morning, the breeze blowing in...oh, but this one's pointed to the west...no morning sunshine for me, it seems.'

He turned to Vastra. 'How about your room?'

'How should I know?' she questioned, the look on her face implying that the Doctor should have known better than to ask the question. 'It is a room...a human room. I have never slept in a human room before, so how should I know what to expect?'

The Doctor nodded. 'Fair enough, I suppose.' He held his arms out slightly, in a 'who knew' pose. 'I know this is uncomfortable for you, but you do seem to be enjoying it somewhat. I told you they weren't all bad, these humans.'

Vastra made a quiet, derisive hissing noise. 'Perhaps not. It still does not excuse what happened to my sisters!'

'I never intended to say it did, Vastra,' the Doctor replied. He looked down at the watch on his arm, tapped it a few times, and then shook his head. 'I really must get his replaced one of these days. There's just never enough...time.'

He stretched, yawned, and turned to enter his room. 'It seems like tomorrow will be a very busy day, Vastra. I'd suggest we both try to get some sleep.'

He paused and turned back to face Vastra, still standing in the hallway.

'You can trust these people. They will make sure no harm comes to you. And while I know you don't trust me, if you need me, all you need to do is knock on the wall. I'm a very light sleeper.'

With that, he entered his room. Vastra could hear a strange creaking noise, followed by the sound of cloth sliding against cloth. The flickering light that had illuminated the Doctor's chambers went dark, yet she could still detect the faint glow as whatever was burning faded from flame, to orange, to red, to dark.

She entered her own chamber and cautiously climbed onto a strange piece of furnishing. Obviously this was what the humans used to sleep on. She found it pleasingly soft, supporting her lightly as he rested her weight against it. She pulled a long sheet of light silken cloth over her, marveling at its coolness even against her own scaled skin. She rested her head against an overstuffed cushion, turned to her left, and blew lightly on a candle. Its flame died out quickly and her eyes quickly adjusted to the darkness in her room.

'Good night, Vastra,' came a voice from across the hall.

She paused, still taking in the vast variety of new sensations...tactile, visual, olfactory.

'Good night, Doctor,' she replied, as the darkness took her and carried her off to sleep.



Morning came, and with it a loud female scream from the room opposite the Doctor's.

He jumped up, still dressed, almost fearful of what he would encounter. He ran across the hall, nearly falling over a terrified female court assistant who stood, paralyzed, in the doorway. Across the room, lightly balanced on the balls of her feet as if about to pounce, stood Vastra, eyes wide and teeth slightly bared.

'What's going on here?' the Doctor spoke in a voice that was loud yet not quite a yell.

'I heard something, Doctor, and when I opened my eyes, this woman was standing in the room with me! She had not even the common decency to ask admittance...how was I to know if she were friend or foe?'

The Doctor wrapped an arm gently around the woman. 'It's alright...what was your name?'

The woman looked up at him, fear still darkening her face. 'M-Miku, sensei Kyoujyu. My name is Miku. I was only...'

The Doctor placed one finger over her lips, shushing her. 'I know...just doing as the court expects. Let them know that it's all taken care of. I will assist Vastra with her preparations. Please let Tsugu know we will be with them shortly.'

Miku bowed, grateful to be released from what was most certainly a life threatening situation. And, oh, the tales she would be able to tell of how this strange man came in and quelled the mighty dragon with just a few words.

Vastra looked at him with exasperation. 'How was I to know?'

The Doctor smiled. 'You didn't. I forget that this is all new to you, and you are not at all familiar with their ways. That's why I sent her off, so we could talk about today, and what is expected of us, and make sure no other...'

He coughed nervously.

'...no other 'incidents' occur.'

Vastra huffed, stomped over to the bed and sat, facing away from the Doctor.

Sighing, the Doctor stood and walked around the bed. He leaned up against the wall as casually as possible. 'I don't know how your people handle the matters of death, Vastra...despite having spent time among them, I never had the sad opportunity to witness your death rites. But these people have very serious rituals to ensure that their dead are honored properly. There are certain things we must do, and they must be done in a certain way. Today is perhaps the most important of them, and Miku was simply here to assist in preparing you for this day.'

Vastra looked up at him, her eyes softening a little. 'We too treat our dead with respect, Doctor. So I understand. Still, some warning that I'd be woken up in such a way would have been appreciated.'

The Doctor smiled, his face softening. 'Can you accept my apology for not letting you know.'

'Yes,' Vastra replied, as her posture mirrored her increased relaxation. 'Now please explain to me what is going on today.'

The Doctor pushed himself off the wall and began to talk. He paced as he did so, taking on the air of a professor who loved his subject so much that his excitement came out not only in every word but every wave of the hand, every gesture of his arms.

'The people of this Kingdom are Shinto. It's not a religion as such, but it's a way of doing things, a set of beliefs and customs and folklore and mythology. It's a way of life. By comparison, death is instead normally handled in a Buddhist manner. And again, there are a whole set of rituals and customs which must be followed. The King has decreed that in his case he wished to be treated in death as he was in life, and so his wishes will be carried out according to Shinto custom.'

The Doctor paused, gathering his thoughts lest they get ahead of them.

'In any family, when a member dies, they are expected to do certain things. There are a great many steps to this custom, but the ones which will affect us most, as we are outsiders, are much less. The first of these is called *kichu-fuda*. The members of the family join together to begin their mourning, and certain rituals are presided over by a Shinto priest. As this is the King, all of his people are expected to follow this demand. Therefore, for the next full day, all people in the kingdom will dress in black, to signify their mourning as a single family, a single people. Even though we are not part of the kingdom, we are their guests, and it is customary for us to act according to those wishes. After all, when in Rome and all that...'

Vastra looked at him, confused. 'What?'

The Doctor waved his hand. 'Never mind. Mixed metaphor.'

The Doctor held up a black robe and sash. Even against the black material, both could see ornate symbols and designs woven into the material. Vastra reached out and touched it, marveling at how smooth it was.

'Once we're dressed, we'll make our way to the King's hall. There, the Priests will begin their opening Invocations for *kichu-fuda*. Until tomorrow, no one must speak. This is to show respect to the dead, to give his spirit a day of rest, and for the thoughts and love of his people to fully join with him one last time. There will be a wake, which will last all night. His family and closest advisors will remain with him to ensure his body remains pure, and fires will be lit to keep evil spirits away.'

Vastra laughed. 'Evil spirits! Surely you jest!'

The Doctor's face grew stony. 'Not one bit. To these people, evil spirits are as real as, well...'

He thought for a moment.

'As real as the energy weapon you were going to use on me near your hibernation chamber. They would see it and think it was magic, whereas for you, it's something that you think of as common. Does that make sense?'

Vastra nodded in understanding.

The Doctor continued.

‘After the wake, the priests will complete their preparations for King Eisō’s last rites. The younger priests will busy themselves erecting a funerary pyre, while the elders will read the texts that begin King Eisō’s journey to the afterlife. The next day the funeral will occur.’

Vastra followed along, nodding.

‘After Eisō’s body has been burned, his family and close kin will gather his ashes together. It is customary that they are buried in more than one location, though the majority will be interred at the family’s burial plot. There will be rites and rituals every day thereafter, and on the thirtieth day, each person who attended the rites will be given a gift to signify the end of mourning.’

Vastra’s eyes opened wide. ‘Thirty days?’

The Doctor nodded.

‘But...we can’t stay here thirty days! My sisters...they will find them...they will all be killed!’

The Doctor grabbed Vastra’s shoulders firmly. She fought against him, but he held firm, and finally she relented. She looked up at him, her eyes drawn tight with anger.

‘Listen to me, Vastra. I brought you here, didn’t I? I brought you to the past of your own planet. Don’t you think I can take you back as well? I can have you back there mere moments after we left. Your people WILL be safe. I promise you that. Do you believe me?’

Vastra looked away, refusing to make eye contact.

‘Do you believe me, Vastra?’

She turned to look at him.

‘Do you?’

‘I want to believe you, Doctor,’ she finally said.

He smiled. ‘Right now, that’s good enough for me.’

He motioned to the robes.

‘Now, I’ll just head to my room and get changed. You do the same. We’ll meet back out here, and then off to the King’s hall. We can’t keep them waiting, after all.’



