

The Man in the Long Black Coat

By Julie Kay

Somebody seen him hangin' around
As the old dance hall on the outskirts of town
He looked into her eyes when she stopped him to ask
If he wanted to dance he had a face like a mask
Somebody said from the bible he'd quote
There was dust on the man in the long black coat.

The Man in the Long Black Coat

Bob Dylan

"Daily log entry commences. Commander Strax reporting. There has been no change in the situation in this Earth city they call Lon-Don. The citizens are, as mentioned in previous log entries, by and large unarmed, and easy targets for even a single Sontaran vessel. Their military forces, such as they are, would be no match for the might of the Sontaran Empire!"

Strax paused, looked around, and then quickly grabbed a biscuit from a nearby plate. Looking about one last time, he took a large bite before continuing.

"In the interim, since my ability to obtain current field reports under current conditions is limited, I have begun to take a survey of the humans' foodstuffs. I do believe it will provide important tactical information for the coming invasion. At this time, my survey shows that these so-called butter orange mint biscuits are of particular interest, and could perhaps be used as..."

The clicking of a door latch snapped Strax out of his biscuit-induced log entry almost immediately.

"Log entry ends!" he muttered, clicking a button on the wrist recorder built into his body armour. Quickly tossing the rest of the biscuit into his mouth, he rolled down his shirt sleeve, rebuttoned the cuff, and pulled his jacket sleeve down just as Jenny Flint and Madame Vastra rounded the corner, towels draped over their shoulders. Without a word, Strax quickly walked past his housemates and attempted to make himself absent as expeditiously as possible

"I must say, Jenny," Vastra spoke, her voice tired yet slightly playful, "your reaction times are improving."

"Improving, ma'am?" Jenny replied, one eyebrow slightly raised. "I thought my reaction times were never an issue before."

Vastra chuckled.

"You know full well what I mean, Jenny. You know I was impressed by how quickly you picked up the use of my *ōdachi*, even when I found it a bit unwieldy. The *katana* is more my style...quicker, subtler. But there is a difference between swordplay and hand to hand combat, and you..."

Vastra paused, sniffed once, and furrowed her brows. She spun on her heels, causing Jenny to jump back just a bit in shock. Without skipping a beat, Vastra yelled.

"STRAX!"

The call echoed through the house and left nothing but silence.

"STRAX! FRONT AND CENTRE IMMEDIATELY!"

Jenny could hear Vastra's nails clicking against the countertop. They beat a slight counterpoint to the shuffling steps that slowly made their way down the hall. Those steps were followed a few moments later by a very nervous looking Sontaran dressed in tailcoat, waistcoat and tie.

"Yes, Madame Vastra?" Strax replied, the nervousness clearly audible in his voice.

"You have been at the biscuits again. Am I correct?"

Strax paused for a moment before replying.

"No...Madame. I...have not been at the biscuits. Again."

Vastra sighed.

"First off, Strax, there is a distinct odour of orange mint in the air...far stronger than there would be had the biscuits not been disturbed. Secondly, when Jenny and I went downstairs to practice her *Daitō-ryū*, the plate of biscuits was near the oven, while now, on our return, they are sitting here, nearer where we came across you after our session."

She then reached out and brushed some crumbs from the lapel of Strax's coat.

"Finally...there are these."

Jenny barely stifled her giggle as Strax deflated in defeat.

"But Madame Vastra..."

"No buts!" she exclaimed. "You are already complaining about how difficult it is for you to fit into your Sontaran battle armour as it is. Do you think I can just pop down to the local haberdasher and ask, 'Pardon, good sir, but have you any Sontaran Battle Armour in a size...'"

She looked at Strax and struggled for the right word.

"...in a size bigger than this?" she finally replied, pointing directly at Strax.

"But..."

"I SAID NO BUTS!" Vastra yelled. Both Jenny and Strax jumped at the cold steel in her voice. Vastra herself was taken aback by how sharp her words sounded, and took a deep breath before continuing.

"I apologise, Strax. I know it is difficult, adjusting to a new life and a new planet. Even though I was born here, after years in hibernation, it seemed very much a new planet for me as well. Luckily, I have the fortune of having had a longer time to adjust than you. But you are barely making an effort! I hear you making your log entries about the softness of this planet and 'the glories of the Sontaran Empire, Sontar Ha!'"

She paused and took a breath.

"But please, Strax...do try and make an effort here. Jenny and I have both seen what you can do...we saw it on Demon's Run. This may not be to your liking, but it is a good place, and there is room in it for you."

Vastra smiled.

"As long as you do not eat us out of house and home, that is."

Strax exhaled in a huff.

"Fine, Madame Vastra. Is there anything further you need of me this evening?"

"No," Vastra replied, still smiling. "You may retire to your chambers. Go...polish your guns, or play with your grenades or something. But please...do not blow up the house."

"Yes, Madame," Strax said, his voice expressing the frustration he felt as he turned and left the kitchen. Jenny and Vastra both heard him clomp up the stairs, down a hallway, and then heard the inevitable bang of a door as it closed in frustration.

"You didn't need to be that hard on him, madam," Jenny said after a few moments silence. Vastra turned and her face softened as she gazed at Jenny. Slowly she raised her hands and placed them on Jenny's shoulders.

"You are, as usual, correct. I shall apologise to him further in the morning. Right now I think it best we give him his space to pout and mutter. I would prefer that to any further confrontation. Still," she continued, having taken a deep breath, "he does rather eat more than the two of us combined, and I do worry what might happen should we truly have need of his armaments and we cannot get him through the front door."

Vastra pulled her right hand from Jenny's shoulders and idly began tapping on the counter top.

"Perhaps some exercise program would do him well, Jenny. I could have you supervise it."

"Me?" Jenny looked at Vastra with a mix of shock and surprise. "He already continually calls me boy, and you think I should be in charge of telling him to march on the spot, swing his arms, bend at the waist, and skip around? Not only will he laugh at me, he'll do it while licking custard off his fingers!"

Vastra considered that image for a moment and burst out laughing. Jenny looked at her, aghast, as the laughter showed no signs of subsiding.

"Are you alright?"

Vastra waved a hand at Jenny as the laughter finally began to fade.

"I am quite sorry, my dear," she finally said. "I just imagined the scene you just described, and I could not help myself. No, perhaps this is not a job suited for you."

Vastra reached out and wrapped an arm around Jenny's shoulders. She spun her around and they began to walk together toward the grand stairs. Jenny rested her head against Vastra's side as they made their way down the hallway...a walk that came to a sudden stop as they entered the foyer and Vastra noticed a plain white envelope resting on the floor just inside the door. She dropped her arm from Jenny's shoulder and quickly moved toward it.

"Madame?"

Vastra raised a closed hand, her index finger pointing straight upward.

"A moment, Jenny," Vastra replied. There was silence, followed by the quiet sound of an envelope sliced open by the sharp edge of a claw-like nail. The envelope fluttered to the floor, and Jenny could but watch from behind as Vastra read the letter. She watched as Vastra stiffened slightly, and then folded the letter back up. When Vastra finally turned, Jenny could see her face had stiffened, turned hard, her eyes narrowed to slits.

"Madame?"

Vastra strode past Jenny forcefully, taking each step up toward their room with purpose. Jenny took a few steps toward her mistress, her lover, her wife, and was shocked when Vastra turned and pointed directly at her.

"Jennifer Flint, you are to remain where you are. Do I make myself clear?"

Jenny's lips trembled. "Vastra? You're scaring me..."

"Do. I. Make. Myself. Clear?"

Jenny nodded, grasping for the banister for support as her face went white with terror. She could feel her insides twist as terror began to seep up from somewhere inside her. She had never seen Vastra like this before, and she truly had no idea what was about to happen next.



Time passed.

It passed with the slowed intensity that comes with a terror that threatens to engulf everything. Jenny stood where ordered, as much out of fear as out of obedience. Time passed, and with each moment she could feel her heart beat that much faster. After what felt like hours, Vastra strode from their room, clad head to toe in black. Jenny recognized the dress...Vastra had several, and it had been specially designed to allow her the greatest freedom in movement when on the hunt. Jenny watched as Vastra walked down the stairs slowly, almost pausing at each step. As Vastra reached the bottom step, Jenny cautiously reached out and touched Vastra's arm. She flinched slightly, then reached over and took Jenny's hand in her own. Vastra's lips parted, about to speak, and then closed just as quickly.

Jenny turned as Vastra walked past her. She fully expected to watch as the matched pair of *katana* were strapped at her lady's side, but Vastra walked past those as well, steadfastly making her way to the front door. Jenny watched as Vastra's right hand reached out slowly and took the door handle lightly.

"Madame? Please? Tell me what is going on. You're terrifying me!"

Vastra turned, and tears rose, unbidden, as Jenny saw the almost indescribable look on Vastra's face.

"I..."

Vastra paused.

"I cannot, Jenny."

"But...my love!"

Vastra closed the distance between them quickly and took Jenny's face gently in her hands. She looked deeply into Jenny's eyes before she spoke.

"I would if I could, dear heart. I shall be honest...I am not even sure what is about to happen. But this has been a very long time in coming, I think..."

Jenny sniffled as Vastra wiped a tear away.

"I don't understand..."

"So many things, my love. Everything draws together. Every explosion starts somewhere, and I have missed so many clues in so many of the cases I have taken. So busy ensuring the quarry was captured, I failed to notice the subtle hints that were laid bare...all lines leading to a single point."

Jenny's voice broke as she spoke. "I don't understand."

"Nor do I, Jenny. Nor do I. This evening is my opportunity to find that understanding. If luck is on my side, dear heart..."

She held Jenny's face for just a few moments more, then let go with reluctance and turned back toward the door.

"...with luck, I will see you in the morning."

"And if luck is not with you?" The tears flowed freely, running down her cheeks in rivulets.

Vastra opened the door and stepped through it. She turned, one hand still on the door handle, and in the dim light that filtered out from the hallway, Jenny saw something she never thought she'd see.

Vastra was afraid.

"If it is not, then know this, Jennifer Flint...I loved you with every beat of my heart, with every ounce of my being, and that what was done this night was done to protect the dearest possession I could ever have wished for."

Jenny reached for the banister, but still felt herself slump to the stairs. She began to cry...it came in fits and starts at first, but the tears truly fell uncontrollably after Vastra turned and closed the door behind her. Jenny's hands twisted in the towel still wrapped around her shoulders, which shook with her body as she sobbed.



Time lost all meaning. For all Jenny knew, she sat there weeping for hours when a hand settled itself on her shoulder. She launched herself away and screamed, scuttling on the floor as feet and hands struggled to gain traction against the polished wood. She pushed herself up against the door and looked up into the eyes of a very confused, and possibly perturbed, Sontaran.

"What is the meaning of all this crying, boy?"

Jenny pushed herself up against the door, used it as leverage as she finally steadied herself on her feet before she lunged forward toward Strax. She grabbed at him, shaking him roughly as she screamed.

"She left! She left, Strax! She left me! She could be dying right now, and I don't know what to do!"

Strax looked at Jenny, certain she was deep in some kind of human fit. He filed this away for a later data log.

"What do you mean, she left? Madame Vastra can't just leave. She runs this house with an iron fist, or haven't you noticed? I can't even have one butter orange mint biscuit without her..."

"Oh shut up about your damned biscuits, Strax!"

Strax stepped back and took a closer look at Jenny. Her clenched hands, tightened jaw...all signs of more than some hysterical fit. He could even smell the fear and adrenaline coming off of her.

"Where has she gone?"

"I DON'T KNOW!" Jenny screamed, punching a closed fist against Strax's armour to punctuate each word. Strax held back from returning the courtesy and

hoped she would tire herself out enough to get a full report from her. In her current condition, however, he knew she would not offer any solid tactical information. His blood began to race...perhaps there would be action more suited to him this night after all.

"We were going to bed, and she...she..."

Jenny sniffled, composed herself, and continued.

"She found an envelope on the floor, just inside the door."

"An envelope? There certainly wasn't one there when I went to my chambers," Strax replied.

Jenny nodded. "Yes, an envelope. She opened it, read it, and told me to wait here. When she came back downstairs, she was dressed for one of her cases."

Strax motioned toward the rack just inside the door.

"Jenny...her swords are here. She couldn't have been out on a case."

"That's exactly it, Strax! She wasn't acting like herself at all. She...she was afraid."

Strax laughed.

"I don't think there's a thing in this world that could scare Vastra, boy."

"I'm telling you, she was scared. I could hear it in her voice. And she was talking all strange... lines leading to a single point and stuff like that. Saying she'd see me in the morning if luck was on her side...and that if she didn't..."

"If she didn't, what?"

Jenny shuddered.

"I don't want to think about that."

"Where did she go?"

Jenny shook her head. "I don't know. She didn't tell me."

She paused, then began running up the stairs.

"She wasn't acting like herself at all. And I didn't see her carrying that letter. It must be upstairs! We can find out what is going on...where she's going!"

Strax smiled.

"Yes!"

He strode up the stairs behind her. Jenny heard him clomping down the hall as she made her own way to her bedroom, and she turned, a look of confusion on her face.

"And what do you think you're doing?"

"Getting prepared, of course. I believe a plasma railgun with laser sights, positron grenades and electrode saws should see us through this!"

"You know what Vastra says about those weapons of yours, Strax."

"Only use them when needed?"

"That is not what she says...and you are wasting my time. Vastra's time."

Jenny shuddered at those last two words.

"Jenny, for all we know, right now the hordes of the Twenty-Seventh Hyperion Fleet of the TechnoCore are seeking your...wife...out in the streets of London. How do you propose we prepare? For that matter, do you even know where we are going? We can't decide on a proper tactical assault with controllable casualties without that vital information!"

"That's what I'm trying to find out!" Frustration seeped into Jenny's voice, and she was about to slap him when a sudden realization struck her.

"While I do that, I have a very important job for you."

"Load the carriage with tactical antimatter missiles?"

"More important than that."

Strax looked at her, shock clearly visible on his face. "What can possibly be more important than tactical antimatter missiles against the Twenty-Seventh Hyperion Fleet of the TechnoCore?"

Jenny smiled.

"A soldier should never go to battle on an empty stomach, Strax..."

Strax looked at her oddly, and then his eyes opened wide.

"Do you mean..."

Jenny nodded. "And, if you're quick enough, there's a rosemary-lemon verbena tea cake that I baked earlier today in the sitting room under cover. I'd never even know..."

Strax pushed past Jenny and bounded down the stairs.

"Out of my way, boy...I must prepare! For the glory of Sontar!"

Jenny shook her head, her smile quickly fading as worry began to reassert its hold. Nervously she turned and walked toward the door to her room.

Their room.

She reached out and took the handle. She feared what she might see behind it, yet hoped secretly that everything so far had been the worst of dreams, that she would open the door and see her Vastra sleeping in their bed, waiting for her. She closed her eyes, felt the cold brass against her skin, and turned the handle. The door opened inward, swinging silently on its hinges, and she heard it thump quietly against the wall. She took a deep breath and opened her eyes.

As she expected, the room was barren, save for the expected furnishings and their various personal effects. So many of them were unidentifiable to her, even now, but some held deep memories. There was the blaster pistol from Demon's Run, an orb from a Dalek from the time Jenny and Vastra helped the Doctor face down an invasion on Albertus Alauda. There were strings of alien crystals from the natives of Extopius-426, gifts from a festival they had witnessed. So many things...so many experiences together, and now, on this night, they sat balanced on a razor's edge. One breath could bring them all back...one push could take them all away.

Jenny looked carefully, as emotionlessly as possible, for anything that seemed out of place or different than usual. Each moment nothing turned up, the fear became harder and harder to hold back. Distantly she could hear Strax make his way from the kitchen to the sitting room, and for that brief second she was amazed that he was able to finish an entire cake that quickly. Or perhaps he was bringing them with him to the cake, so he could have them nearby and...

No.

Hold it together, Jenny. Vastra needs you. There is something out of place here, and you have to find it...

She closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and opened them again. Within seconds she muttered.

“Hidden in plain view...how could I have missed it?”

She knew how, of course...emotion had a way of making even the easiest tasks harder to do. Vastra kept trying to teach that to her in their sparring lessons, and now she finally understood what Vastra had meant when she said her reaction times were improving. She was learning to push down the emotion when needed, to think about what needed to be done in the moment. *This was what Vastra must feel when on a case*, Jenny thought for a moment, then shook her head and bounded across the room to grab the folded paper from the vanity.

My Dear Madame Vastra...

We have played this game far too long, don't you think? We have seen each other in part, I do believe, but now it is time that we meet, face to face, so that you may know me as I know you.

Camden Lock. When the clock strikes twelve.

Come alone, if you cherish your beloved 'companion' as much as I believe you do.

M.

Jenny looked over at the clock in the corner of the room.

11:45 pm.

Fifteen minutes.

Cursing herself, she quickly retrieved a jacket from the closet and pulled it over the white shirt she had been wearing during her lessons. There was no time to change her trousers or shoes. She paused for just a moment, thought, then grabbed a second piece from the closet. She burst from the room and took the stairs in twos as she ran to the sitting room.

“Strax! I know where she is! We have fifteen...”

Strax looked up at her, one hand holding a huge piece of tea cake, the other fist filled with biscuits.

“Oh. Oh, Strax...”

Strax looked up at Jenny, guilt washing over his face as a piece of cake dropped down and stuck to his battle armour.

“Whmf abmf th plshmf rllgn n?”

"No. Most definitely not. You fire off a plasma rail gun or drop a positron grenade and I can assure you that not only will you likely kill my wife, but you will likely flatten three city blocks. Can you rest easy with hundreds of innocent deaths on your conscience?"

Strax opened his mouth to answer, but Jenny shushed him.

"I already know your answer, and my answer is no. No rail guns. No grenades. No saws. Besides, we have this."

Jenny held out a huge piece of equipment, oiled walnut and blued metal glowing warmly in the gaslight of the room.

"What on Earth is that?" Strax muttered in disbelief.

"A gift from an old friend of the Doctor. Said he got it as a gift when he turned eighteen and never used it. No better time than now, I reckon."

"Jenny, it's more likely that will blow up on you than actually fire. At least with a properly maintained railgun..."

"I said no. Now you will come with me and get in the carriage, or so help me, if we all come out of this alive, I will make sure that Vastra knows about every other sweet and dessert you have hidden away in your room."

Strax's mouth dropped.

"How...?"

"Doesn't matter, does it?" Jenny's eyes narrowed. "Now, are you coming with me or not?"

Strax looked down at the half eaten cake and biscuits.

"Fine," Jenny huffed. "Bring them if you must. But we have to hurry!"



Vastra walked out of the shadows and into the lamplight at Camden Lock. By her reckoning she had a few minutes' grace before the appointed hour, and she took that time to examine her location. Secluded, but just...easy access in and out, but plenty of places for someone to hide...or to hide someone, as the case may be. And the canal, of course. Floaters came up all the time...but how would they explain one like her? She knew this was a trap, but she knew she had to face it on her own.

Calm yourself, Vastra. You need to be in control of yourself now more than ever.

She thought back to all her previous cases, ran through them with the cold casualness of a professional, looking for clues, hints, anything that might give her some kind of advantage of the situation. All she had was that one fateful packet of letters she'd turned over to Inspector Abernathy all those years ago, when the waiter-who-wasn't tried to first poison, then gut both of them at dinner. She wondered about Parker, her devoted driver. She wondered how he was doing...she couldn't put him at risk anymore, not with how dangerous and deadly her cases seemed to be getting with each passing year. She hoped that he was enjoying his early retirement at Llanwrtyd Wells, raising horses near the spa springs.

She heard a click.

11:59 pm.

She sighed. Assuming she got out of this...assuming there was a way out, with no idea who or what she was facing, unarmed, with every possible advantage in their favor, he thought perhaps she and Jenny would take a trip there to visit Parker. She knew they'd be welcome...he'd said as much, in the letters he dutifully sent month after month. He seemed happy, Vastra thought, and she was glad. He seemed at peace, and if she read between the lines of his letters, she could pick up the slightest hints that he was glad to be away from the danger.

Click.

In the distance, a bell began to chime midnight.

As the twelfth bell's ring faded, Vastra waited. Her hands clasped tightly...almost too tightly...her eyes darted back and forth, trying to pick up any movement near her. She sniffed at the air tentatively, but the stench of the canal obscured anything that might point her toward her intended.

Nothing.

Click.

12:01 am.

She turned slightly, and that was when she heard the voice.

"On time. Of course you are. I should expect nothing less of the one the people in the street call the Great Detective. If only they knew..."

"Show yourself!" Vastra called out, her voice loud, yet modulated. Controlled. She had to maintain control, even the illusion of control. It was all she had right now, and until something else presented itself, it was perhaps the only thing close to an advantage she had.

"In due time, Vastra. After all, that is all we have, isn't it? Time. Time is the master of us all, and in the end, it's time that makes its call."

"How do you know my name?"

A laugh came from the darkness, and Vastra was frozen by its chill.

"How can I not? A better question is, how much more do I know about you? Would you like to know that? Would you?"

Vastra considered the question.

Control.

"In...time."

"Oh, so you will play the game with me? That is excellent. Most of the time, in your position, people just...give in. But not you. No, never you. Made of sterner stuff, you. A Silurian...though that evolutionary moniker is far from accurate, isn't it? What woke you up, hmm? Was it mining? No, something less prosaic than that. I seem to recall reading about a strange incident at one of the locations earmarked for the expansion of the London Underground. A minister from the Department of Geology...a ministry department that, in fact, has never existed...put a stop to that."

Vastra gasped.

"How...how could you possibly know that?"

A shape slowly emerged from the darkness. From this distance it was hard to tell, but it was male. To Vastra's eyes, the silhouette was human. At the very least, it was humanoid. She could make out a top hat, and a long coat. The top hat was

pulled down, obscuring the man's face, and even in the dim light, her eyes could tell the coat was black. Beyond that, she had nothing at all to go on.

"I have been waiting so long for this meeting. Do you know that?"

"I have gathered that. After all, your letter did imply such."

"Oh, you have no idea. Asleep for millions of years...what I would have given for such a gift. But no, my gift for saving this forsaken planet was to be pulled into an eternity of dying over and over and OVER AGAIN! Can you imagine the agony? CAN YOU?"

He choked out a cold laugh.

"Of course you can't. No one can. And then spit out of a locked impossibility, sent back to nearly the same place I left, a hundred plus years earlier and with nothing but tatters. Try to wrap your tiny reptilian brain around that. You can't. Not even after everything you've seen and everything you've done, you can't. Because in my eyes, you might as well be human for how pitiful and limited you are."

Vastra took several steps forward.

"How dare you speak to me like that!"

The shadowed man lifted a hand, and Vastra felt herself being held back by some force.

"Hush, now! Listen to your superior!"

"You..."

"I said HUSH!"

Vastra tried to speak but found herself unable.

"The game ends this night, Vastra."

He paused.

"Not all of it, mind...just your part. At first I wanted both of you...you and your precious, beloved Jenny Flint. That certainly would have worked. But in the end, I think you'll suffice...and in a strange way, it actually pleases me to not only call him out of hiding like this, but to break him that much more."

Vastra's eyes opened wide.

He couldn't possibly mean...

"Oh, I know you can't tell. But I can. We always can. It's in our blood, you might say."

Silence fell, broken only by Vastra's ragged breathing and the gentle lapping of water against canal walls.

"You wanted to know who I am. Which name would you like? I've been known by so many, after all."

He took a step forward.

"On Uxarieus they called me Martin Jurgen. At the Newton Institute, I was Professor Thascalos...such a step down, but needs must and all. Once I even fashioned myself Count Marius Castillo, which was to my tastes a far more fitting title."

He stepped further out of the shadows, and beneath the lowered brim of his top hat, Vastra could just barely make out hollowed cheeks, sunken eyes, roughly stubbled beard and moustache on an emaciated face.

"But between you and me, my dear Vastra, let's drop all disguises. After all, I know what lies behind your mask, and it's only fair that you know what lies behind mine. I am ever so tempted to say 'pleased to meet you, hope you guess my name,' but as we're nearly eighty years too early for that..."

He stepped fully under lamplight and doffed his top hat.

"Hello, Vastra. I am the Master, and our little game ends tonight."

His right hand slipped inside his long coat. He fumbled for a few moments before fingers wrapped around a familiar item. His hand slowly withdrew, and in it was a long, cylindrical object. Holding it lightly, he looked up toward Vastra and smiled coldly.

"There was one benefit to my little eternity in Hell. Would you like to know what I mean by that, hmm?"

Vastra shrugged. "I do not suppose I have much choice in the matter, do I?"

The Master laughed. His laughter, much like his smile, was cold, devoid of any genuine humor.

"Oh, indeed not, Vastra. Indeed not."

He effortlessly tossed the object in the air, watched it flip once, twice, then fall back into his open hand. His fingers quickly wrapped around the item's shaft. Even in the dim gaslight, Vastra thought, certainly she should have been able to pick up some flash, some hint of form or shape or function. All she could tell was that it was every bit as black as the clothing the Master wore.

"I called it Hell, Madame, because that was exactly what it was. Fire and death without any sign of end. Dying in unbearable agony, yet hopeful that perhaps this time there was an end to the eternity of suffering...only to have my eyes open again and again. War without end...or without any hope of end. You would think that would appeal to me, but no. In the end, I just wanted it to stop."

His lips parted in a smile...the smile of a predator.

"But it was more than Hell. At one point, far in some distant past I'm not entirely sure even existed, it was home. And home meant that I finally could get my hands on a few items I had left behind...in case of emergencies just like the one I found myself in."

He held his arm out toward Vastra, the black cylinder in his hand pointed directly at her.

"This was just a tiny little invention of mine. It is barely a trifle, really, yet I have missed it so much these last years. I should like to introduce you to my Tissue Compression Eliminator, though I imagine that you won't find the meeting to be as enjoyable as I will."

Four flaps snapped open at the end, and inside, a light began to glow...dimly at first, but quickly growing brighter.

"Farewell, Madame Vastra. I shall ensure that your beloved Doctor knows how much you suffered at the en..."

An explosion...an explosion to end all explosions...broke the silence. A massive gout of flame erupted from the dark several hundred yards away, and Vastra watched as the man...this Master, whoever he was...wheeled on the spot from the impact. He grabbed at his shoulder and looked up at Vastra. She could see his

eyes blazing with a mix of pain and anger. Still held in place, she feared what was next.

"You think a mere gun can stop me? An eternity of fire and death, death without end, and you think a gun can stop me? I don't think!"

Voices rose up from houses all up and down the street from the canal. In the distance Vastra heard someone yell out "Someone's been shot!" From another direction someone screamed "Someone get the police!" Hundreds of yards away, she could hear the sound of feet running their way.

Still clutching his shoulder, the Master grinned at her, his face twisted in an almost feral rictus.

"This is far from over. Mark my words, Vastra...mark them well..."

As the footsteps came closer, Vastra felt the mysterious hold on her begin to fade. She tried to move toward the retreating figure, but instead watched in shock as he simply melted from view. Everything became watery, her vision blurred, and in the distance, she heard an almost familiar voice speak.

"If you sick up from all that cake, so help me..."

Darkness beckoned, and Vastra willingly walked into it.



"Where..."

"Home, love. You're home. And safe."

Vastra tried to sit up, but found it a harder task than imagined. Slowly she made it to a sitting position, eyes closed, and slowly opened them. She was, as the voice of her beloved Jenny told her, home, and in their room. Strax stood off to one side, hands gently holding his stomach, his face visibly distressed.

"How..."

"You left the letter behind. We followed."

"You risked your life, Jenny."

Jenny smiled. "And you risked yours. Fair's fair."

In the far corner of the room, Strax groaned quietly and held his stomach a little more tightly.

Vastra looked over and shook her head. She then turned back toward her wife.

"You do not understand just how much you risked out there..."

"Of course I do. Do you remember what the Doctor said when he found out about us?"

Vastra smiled. "Remind me."

"He said another Doctor once told him, 'We are all a little weird and life is a little weird, and when we find someone whose weirdness is compatible with ours, we join up with them and fall in mutual weirdness and call it love.'"

"Yes," replied Vastra. "I do remember him telling that. A lovely bit of doggerel...but true enough, I think."

Jenny sat at her on their bed and watched as Vastra rested.

"That man..."

"What about him, ma'am?"

"He was...looking for the Doctor."

Jenny's eyes narrowed.

"What?"

Vastra shifted a little.

"You remember, I trust, the evening we went out to dinner after your return?"

Jenny shuddered.

"I shouldn't like to, but I do."

"When the man leapt over the table into the canal, he dropped a packet of papers. Among them were photographs of both you and me, and a letter from an individual who signed it only as 'M.' seeking our..."

Vastra took a deep breath. She felt Jenny grasp her hands tighter, and watched as she worked it out on her own.

"He wanted us dead, didn't he?"

Vastra nodded slowly.

"But why?"

Vastra took Jenny's hands in hers and held them gently.

"Because, my dear, we have both traveled with the Doctor. And somehow, this man knows this. He thinks that if he...eliminates us...it will cause the Doctor to come face him."

"Why would he think that?"

"Because, my dear," Vastra began. She breathed deep and steeled herself for her next statement. "Because I happen to believe that he is, like our Doctor...a Time Lord."

Jenny's eyes opened wide in shock as a hand quickly covered her mouth.

"But...how? The Doctor said..."

"...that he is the last of the Time Lords. I know. But...something tells me this man is not lying. And he is more dangerous than we can possibly imagine."

"What do we do?"

"We wait, my love."

"Wait? That's it?"

"It is all we can do. If this man...this...Master, he calls himself...is in fact a Time Lord, I don't know what we can do. There is only one person I know who might have a plan, and until he shows up..."

Jenny scoffed. "IF he shows up."

Vastra's grip on Jenny's hands tightened. She saw Jenny wince, and just as quickly lightened her touch.

"WHEN he shows up. Because you know he will, just as I know he will. When he shows up, we will tell him everything that has happened."

"And then?"

Vastra smiled wanly.

"We hope."

Jenny and Vastra sat as silence fell between them. A few moments later, Strax spoke up.

“Madame? Jenny? If I...erm...”

He grimaced, clutched at his stomach, and began to quickly shuffle toward the door. Vastra took the strange sight in, blinked her eyes a few times, and turned back to face Jenny.

“Dearest...is there in fact a good explanation for what we have just seen?”

Jenny fidgeted for a moment before quietly replying “A tray of butter orange mint biscuits and three-quarters of a rosemary-lemon verbena tea cake.”

Vastra’s eyes opened wide.

“Jennifer Flint! What in the world possessed you to...”

“He was threatening to bring plasma railguns with laser sights, positron grenades and electrode saws! And tactical antimatter missiles! What choice did I have?”

“Apparently a thirty year old elephant gun that had never been fired.”

“It worked, didn’t it?”

Vastra shook her head.

“I should punish you for disobeying me.”

“But...”

“But you saved my life. So, for now...”

Vastra patted the bed next to her. Jenny moved in closer and laid down, draping one arm across her beloved.

“We shall allow Strax to recover from his intense tactical explorations of your baking skills, and we shall get some deserved rest.”

Jenny closed her eyes, a smile softening her face as she heard Vastra’s heart near her. Just as she began to drift off, Vastra spoke.

“One last thing, my dear?”

“Hmm?”

“Strax doesn’t have any tactical antimatter missiles.”

Jenny smiled.

“Didn’t think so. Still wanted to be safe.”

Slight smiles crossing both faces, Jenny and Vastra drifted into sleep.



“Give me one good reason why I have interrupted my busy day to meet with you, Mister...”

“Blackpool. Nathaniel Blackpool.”

Even a new suit couldn’t obscure the fact that the man sitting in front of the desk was emaciated almost beyond belief. He still held himself with a poise that belied his current state. His eyes darted around the room when he entered, and he knew that he was not going to actually see the man behind Mechanika Industries, but seeing wasn’t important. That could come later ...if at all.

"I doubt very much, Mr. Blackpool, that you have anything that might interest me. I have seen plenty of hucksters and con artists in my day, and I have gotten to where I am by avoiding them at all costs. You have wasted enough of my time as it is by coming here, so if you will excuse me..."

"You're interested in mechanics, aren't you?"

"It is in the name of my company, yes. Having established that, I will bid you a good day, and..."

"Not just any kind of mechanics, though."

The room fell silent.

"What do you mean by that?"

Mr. Blackpool smiled. "I mean exactly what I said. Not just any kind of mechanics. Anyone can build a factory and make cogs and spanners and sprockets. But not you. Oh, certainly you dabble. You need to keep up a front. And well done there. No one expects a thing."

He paused.

"No one but me."

"What do you think you know, hmm?"

"I think I know enough about your true intentions that I can offer you things beyond even your wildest dreams. Things that make your experiments look like child's play. Things that will give you power beyond anything you have even thought of."

He tossed a few sheets of paper on the desk, and a hand, fat with thick fingers, snapped out of the darkness to grab them. He heard the rustling as those sheets were flipped through, and then a gasp.

"This is...this design...this kind of augment...it's...impossible."

Blackpool laughed.

"Hardly impossible...just merely improbable."

"And you're giving these to me?"

"Giving? Not exactly."

There was a pause before the man in the darkness spoke.

"What do you want? Money? A position at Mechanika Industries? You make me laugh. I could have you killed and no one would be the wiser."

The man leaned forward. "I don't need anything like that. All I want is something simpler."

"And that is?"

"Oh, it's quite simple, really..."

Blackpool stood up and paced the room.

"You follow those designs in your secret laboratory. Take all the time you need...I have plenty of it. I will stay completely out of your business...save for updates on your progress, of course. But as soon as you have a fully functional prototype..."

He reached into a jacket pocket and pulled out two photographs. He tossed them on the desk, illuminated by gaslight. One was a girl of twenty or twenty-five years, pretty enough, almost indistinguishable for any of a thousand girls in London. The other, however...there was no way to properly describe her. At first glance

human, but even that first glance exposed the scaly skin, angled eyes, and bony frills that ran like ridges up over her skull, like some relic from the time of dinosaurs.

"As soon as you have a functional prototype, you use it."

"For?"

"Revenge."

Silence filled the room. Blackpool sat back down, arched his fingers, and waited. He could hear the slightly labored breathing across the desk, and could imagine the sweat on the man's brow.

"Wealth beyond compare. Power beyond reckoning. And all for such a small cost. What do you say? Do we have a deal?"

He waited patiently, but he already knew the answer to his question. After all, he was a master of choosing his targets, and he chose them well.

"How will we contact you with updates?"

Blackpool laughed. "You've already threatened to kill me once. Do you really think I'll be giving you an address? I'll be back in two weeks."

He paused.

"No, I know how complex those designs are. Three weeks. And then every other week thereafter."

He rose from his chair.

"I'd offer to shake your hand, but I know enough of you to know that you'll not be returning the courtesy. I'll show myself out, since it seems we've reached an...arrangement. I must say, it has been a pleasure doing business with you."

"I do not believe I can say the same, Blackpool."

He laughed.

"Oh, but you will. Trust me. Once you see where this leads, you'll wonder why you ever questioned this arrangement in the first place. Now, if you'll excuse ME..." he continued, the balance of power in the room suddenly shifted in his direction, "I believe you have some work to be getting back to."

"Y...yes...yes I do."

"Three weeks."

"Three weeks. Yes."

Blackpool smiled.

"I'm looking forward to it."

He spun on his heels and walked sprightly out of the office. He'd have his revenge; that much was certain. It would take longer than expected, that much was certain, but what was time when all of a sudden you had all the time in the world again?

He reached into his front pocket and felt the wad of banknotes rolled together and smiled. Yes, there'd be revenge...but he was ever so hungry...