

# The Cult on the Canal

By Steve Fiori

*Slllosshh, Fwooooooosh*  
*Slllllloshhhh Fwooooooosh*  
*Sllllosh, CRACK.*

The barge slammed into the sidings with an almighty whack. Inspector Frederic Horton had been chasing it for a quarter of a mile along Regents Canal, with Jim Morris, local tradesman, seller of veg, trailing behind.

It wasn't the first mysterious and unmanned goods boat. It was sure not to be the last.

"See, weren't wrong was I?" Morris had panted when they reached it. The Inspector reached under the covers, finding chipped wood, potatoes and various veg scattered all over the place. And the other thing, a translucent slime...

"It's that strange substance again," said the inspector, running a finger through it. "That weird brine-like stuff?" asked Morris, grimacing. "It made Mr Sallis the butcher return his dinner week before last!"

"Exactly that. I'll report it to the yard."

"Not much they can do, inspector! You said it yourself."

"Reporting to the yard for official reasons..."

Morris smirked at him knowingly.

"Ah!" he laughed. "And then you visit that green woman I've heard rumours about!"



"Been another one, Ma'am!"

It was the morning after the latest boat appeared, and Jenny Flint led Inspector Horton into the living room of 13 Paternoster Row. He stood with Jenny waiting for Madame Vastra to enter, and had the same wobbly feeling in his stomach as he had during previous meetings there. A few meetings previously, he had seen her true face. He'd been shocked, though not horrified, more unnerved.

*She's a great woman, though. If she's indeed a woman. It'd be rather remiss of me to ponder on her looks. Especially since she got rid of the Ripper. But what is she?*

When Vastra entered the room, he smiled despite feeling a jolt in his gut as she shook his hand and beckoned him to sit down. She was followed by Strax entering with tea, milk, and sugar.

*Now he IS strange,* Horton thought, nodding in acknowledgement at him. *In looks and personality.*

"So, the canals have sent us another empty boat," Vastra said, anticipating his request. "And you need our help?"

The inspector frowned. He sensed a condescending tone in her voice this time. Vastra sensed his concern.

"Oh, it's nothing *you* said..."

"I went down the Yard to offer our services, but they didn't want us 'amateurs' involved," Jenny interjected, rolling her eyes.

"Amateurs?" he scoffed. "The people who took down Jack the Ripper, amateurs?"

"We could take down the moon people, and still be referred to as 'amateurs'," Strax said, feeling rather indignant. "Nobody respects the Madame, the Boy and I".

"Moon people? And boy? Do you have another assistant, Madame Vastra?"

"Ignore Strax," sighed Vastra. "But the powers that be there do understand we can help. So, these boats and barges... another one appeared last night?"

The Inspector went on to confirm and explain that the latest, the ninth boat, had appeared at eleven o'clock the night before. Everything the same. Scattered goods, broken oars, and the clear brine-like substance that, after careful analysis, was certainly not of an earthly origin.

"Any idea where it might be from, ma'am?" Jenny asked Vastra after seeing the Inspector out of the house. "Though I suppose that's more the Doctor's area of expertise ain't it?"

"Indeed it is. My knowledge of universe isn't quite that wide yet. Besides, I wouldn't want to disturb him, Clara herself is a mystery he needs to solve right now," she replied.

Jenny nodded at Strax.

"If only 'im over there didn't break the scanner."

"For the last time, I thought it was a small metallic creature," he huffed.

"We could have been killed!"

Vastra rolled her eyes, got up, put on her veil, then picked up a little notebook. "Then we investigate the old way!"

Strax beamed.

"Rigorous and violent interrogation!" he bellowed.

"Rigorous? Only a little, and only violence if they attack you!"

Strax nodded. He was going to get violent anyway.



For the first of the trio's interviews, Jenny sat with Mr Morris in the office (and study) above his modest but successful shop. She knew she could get some info, but only the basics, as Morris hadn't witnessed any bigger incidents.

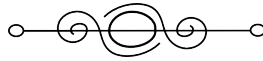
"So, you've been talking to Inspector Horton already then?" she asked.

"Yep, I've followed the boats a few times now, last night with the inspector," he replied. "Fast things for something unmanned!"

"That's one of the reasons I'm interviewing you. You haven't seen what's doing this, but you've seen the boats going faster than they oughta. You didn't notice anything, say, underneath or in front?"

"Nope. They 'ave been getting a bit faster each time though."

Jenny nodded. *Something's getting stronger?*



**Interview report of my interview with the feeble girl Bernard Andrews, local witness to these odd happenings, by Commander Strax**

*My interview with this girl Mr Andrews went most quickly. He had seen the boats on three different occasions whilst walking with his rather disgusting and old looking canine "Henry" who sat with him during my interrogation into what this man saw.*

*He was big but no match for me, but we'll get to that after I report the information he gave me. On each of the nights he had seen the boats floating down from the east end of the river. He saw nobody on board these vessels and all he could see on them were scattered foodstuffs and bits of wood.*

*That is all the information I could muster from him.*

*After these formalities, he spoke of why he liked to walk this Henry at night. He said when the night is clear*

*by the river he likes to look up at the moon.*

*The MOON.*

*I expressed my disgust. He said I was being 'irrational'. I informed him he was an enemy of the Sontaran Empire. He said he'd never heard of us and accused me of trying to invade England. That was the last straw. If the mighty Sontaran Empire were to invade Earth... again... then we wouldn't start with this smoggy hole. I threw my chair aside and flipped the table then we fought. He wasn't a grand fighter, throwing rubbish punches as I hit him and wrestled with him. His inferior position within the fight was confirmed when his 'beloved' Henry turned on him and started biting at his trousers. The fool conceded defeat then informed me, in the sternest terms, that the "mutt was all yours".*



"I think he's lovely". Jenny stared at Henry the dog, now contentedly chewing some meat in the conservatory of 13 Paternoster Row.

"I'd like to eat him," replied Strax, who was pacing up and down in the garden. "Wild animals as pets. *Hmmmmph.*"

"You're not going to kill him like you killed them horses. Timothy's getting quite angry at that. You're wasting his time and our money!"

"But Timothy didn't bring us the canine. Besides, isn't his surname the very definition of harming a horse? He is a Horseravage!"

"I didn't say he did, I just don't want you killing the dog! And his surname is Horseradish!"

"Oh. Still, we'll see what Madame Vastra says. Where is she?"

“Interviewing the boathouse owner”.

In the main lounge, a veiled Vastra sat with Martin Fairweather, the owner of the Eastern Boathouse where a majority of the missing men had rented space. He was a big, broad and strong looking man, but was in more of a nervous disposition that afternoon.

“Have you seen anyone outside perhaps following the traders once they had left your premises?” she asked him.

Mr Fairweather was uncomfortable. He shifted in his chair, constantly tapping the cup and saucer, still holding on to them despite his swift drinking of the tea, now all gone bar the leaves at the bottom of the cup.

“No,” he said quietly. “It’s just the delivery men in and out, each morning or evening, heading off to take stock, or bringing the boats back for safe keeping.”

“And there’s nothing wrong with the boats themselves? No markings or extra ropes hanging off?”

“Nothing of the sort.” His gaze shifted; he couldn’t continue looking at Vastra, he looked to his side then down on the floor. Vastra stared at him. *Can he see beyond my veil or is he hiding something?* She looked to her right at the mirror; even with it quite close to her she couldn’t see her own reflection. She decided to be very direct.

“Who are you working for?” she asked in a stern and clear voice. He began to shake.

“I don’t know where they’re from. There’s more and more of them.” He seemed shocked at his sudden honesty.

“I don’t know why I said that.” He couldn’t see her smile behind her veil.

“I could sense your nerves and dishonesty the second you arrived, Mr Fairweather,” she said. “Your unkempt facial hair, the sweat... you’ve been running your hand through your hair a lot, too, and you have the complexion of a man who hasn’t slept well for months.”

He looked up at her. She had got him good. He listened on as she continued.

“But in spite of these anxieties, you’re a man who would probably prove resilient in keeping a secret, so you needed a bit of a push.”

He looked down at his cup and back at her.

“The leaves emit enough of a serum to provide a small window of honesty for the person consuming them to speak only the truth,” she finished.

He got up and flung the small table towards her and ran out of the room. Alerted by the noise, Jenny, Strax and Henry the dog ran in and chased Fairweather out of the house. Faster than Strax and the old dog, Jenny ran on in pursuit of Fairweather, weaving down the side streets not far behind him. They ran for less than a mile as they got to London Bridge, where he ran down the stairs towards a small ledge beneath the bridge. Jenny got down there and, as if from nowhere, a small rowing boat appeared from underwater. Along with Fairweather, she jumped onto the boat as it pulled away from the side.

“You don’t know what you’re doing, who you’re dealing with!” he yelled, pulling a knife from his pocket. He was panicking, even near tears, Jenny thought.

“What are they? Who are they? We can help!” said Jenny as she slipped a slightly bigger knife from of her sleeves.

"They're bigger. They've grown; they've taken people into their number. Into their cult." He raised his knife as she raised hers.

"We're good at dealing with a lot of things!" she tried to reassure him. He swung at her, missing, as she only just missed him.

"I don't want to hurt you!" he said as they tussled. "I actually think you're rather pretty and nice!"

Jenny got out of the hold and kept a ready combat stance in case he lunged again. She frowned at him. "What?"

"I'm so sorry, I shouldn't have said that, she did something to my tea!" he said, embarrassed, but about to lunge again.

"Ah. The leaves. Well you're not my type, mate!" Jenny yelled, as Fairweather pounced again, this time without his knife. She jumped aside but mistimed it and tripped overboard.

She was about to get back aboard when she saw him hit the deck and lie straight. The boat began to submerge, as she took hold and went under with it. Realising it would go deep, she let go, trying to get a good look through the murky water. Then she saw it on the underside of the boat, very human in appearance, but a pale yellow and scaly, with webbed feet propelling the boat under.



She returned to Paternoster row still soaking wet. She entered number 13 and immediately headed to her room, without talking to Strax or Vastra.

"Is everything alright, boy?" Strax called through the door. He could hear Jenny sigh.

"Yeah, just need to get out of these and into dry clothes. Think I saw one of them though!"

Vastra came to the door. "What did it look like?"

"Bit murky down there so I only saw it a bit. It was scaly, like you, only with a more human shaped head, and it was yellow."

She opened the door, newly dressed, and walked with them to the study.

"Really fast and strong though; it took the boat and Mr Fairweather under." She stopped to think. "You reckon he's dead?"

"I don't know," answered Vastra.

"One thing I must say about him – he throws tables! That shows plenty of spirit!" Strax said. Jenny and Vastra glared at him.

"I'm gonna go to Tim and see if we can get a boat tonight," said Jenny as she walked out.

An hour later, the three had taken positions under a small bridge, waiting for the barge to start its journey.

"We're like those little trolls from Earth children's tales," said Strax, grinning. "Trolls. They sound wonderful."

"Trolls?" asked Jenny, confused.

"Yes, ones that kill goats. We're under a bridge, you see."

"Billy Goats Gruff? It was the goats that killed a troll," Jenny explained. Strax grunted.

"Well that's disappointing. I'd prefer a troll to kill a goat. Smash its little noisy braying head in"

Jenny frowned.

"Don't scowl at me, boy. Goats are almost as bad as those Moon dwelling cockroaches," Strax continued.

Jenny sighed and edged out ahead of Strax and Vastra to look out further.

"Timothy will be here with the boat in a minute," she said. "Then we follow the other boat, just like we've planned!"

"Then we blast the thing to smithereens!" yelled Strax.

*Shhhh!* Vastra nudged Strax.

"Quiet!" she hissed.

"Hello, you lot!"

The three of them jumped, then realised it came from Timothy, who had turned up, towing a rowboat big enough for the three of them.

"Just on time," Vastra said. "Thank you Timothy!"

"You on a secret mission, then?"

"Yes," Strax boldly announced.

"Well, I hope for your sakes you're not going out as far as Scotland like last time. Need me to stick around and help?"

"We'll call you!" Vastra said as they got in the boat, leaving Timothy on the bank.

Just as they left the mooring, the goods barge moved on. They kept close as it went Eastbound and headed towards the boathouse.

"What's the plan when we get in? May I shoot at them?" Strax asked excitedly.

"You have a more important job. If we find Mr Fairweather alive, or indeed any of the other missing men, you get them out!" Jenny replied. "Me and Vastra will take on this lot, whoever they are."

Strax didn't like this plan.

They reached the boathouse and kept back as the other boat entered, and reached the bank. There was no security around, so they moored and quickly moved to hide outside the doorway on the side of the building.

They snuck into the boathouse slowly. Strax first, lowering himself behind the crates, followed by Jenny then Vastra. Jenny suddenly grabbed Strax, and motioned over to the other side of the water, to the people on the opposite ledge. Three of them, robed, lunged at the man who had just brought his boat in. They disrobed, full yellowy scales on show, and slashed at the man as he tried crawling away. In the corner stood Fairweather, watching on. Vastra gave Strax the nod. He looked to Fairweather who was below a shelf that was holding bags of fruit.

He giggled as he shot the shelf, the contents landing on Fairweather, knocking him out. Strax ran to him as Vastra and Jenny leapt to the aid of the man being attacked. They swung their swords at them and they backed off slightly.

"What is your name?" Vastra yelled as she picked the stricken man up.

"Joe Walsh. I'm just a veg delivery man!" he replied.

"Mister Walsh. I need you to find a carriage and get to Whitechapel as soon as possible; ask for Inspector Horton and send him here!" With that, Joe ran out as fast as he could, along the bank. Strax followed behind, much slower, lugging the unconscious Fairweather along. *Stupid huge girl*, he thought as he took him outside.

Vastra turned her attention to the yellow-scaled men. Jenny was still keeping them at bay by keeping her sword raised, and Vastra moved towards them. Jenny slowly sheathed her sword and stood alongside Vastra, ready.

"You are not from here," said a fourth scaled creature who entered the room. This one was female, and taller than the rest. She walked past the others and stopped in front of Vastra. "Your skin has the same consistency as ours. Where are you from? The Tundra belt?"

"Believe it or not, I'm from earth, far below. My people lived here before the humans," Vastra replied.

The scaled woman looked her up and down. "But you are still as much an alien among the fleshy humans as we are. You could join us."

"In truth, I feel at home here now," she said, smiling at Jenny. "And I have important work to do here in this city. Which includes ending your plans. Why are you here? What is your purpose?"

"To find a new home. Our home, Quis, at the end of the Tundra belt, collapsed. We, the last Cult of Quis, myself the genetically dominant one designated queen, had to find somewhere new and arrived here with our sole mission. Repopulate this planet with our own. These humans will keep their personalities, but their lives will greatly improve. A longer life, a stronger body, purer without smoke and all manner of other poisonous substances. Eventually all humans on earth will be Quisian. There are men inside these crates undergoing the process now, near completion." She stopped, as if she was pondering something.

"Where have you got the template? How are you able to imprint yourselves on humans? You'd need someone helping... Fairweather?"

"That's him. He is strong, resilient, the perfect specimen. In fact, we took our last sample from him tonight. I say we... I mean me personally."

Vastra eyes widened and she smirked. "I can see."

"What does that mean?"

"You could tell me. Where is the container or tank containing your gene pool?"

"Beyond that door."

She frowned. Why was she telling Vastra this? Jenny smiled; the penny had dropped for her.

"Seems you took a bit more than human blood from him. A special something Ma'am gave him earlier!" She turned to Vastra. "We'll take this lot." She then turned to the door. "Strax, you're up!"

Strax ran in, gun aimed. The Quisian men went to chase him as he headed out back, firing, but Jenny and Vastra took hold of them. As Jenny grabbed one in a hold, he went limp. Before she could react, another that Vastra had confronted fell to the ground. The third and final male did the same. The queen had followed Strax into the back room, where she found him atop the tank, gun aimed. He



leapt off, through the landside door, lobbing a grenade into the tank. With one almighty explosion, the back of the boathouse collapsed on top of the queen.

As Vastra and Jenny went to run in to find Strax, Jenny saw Vastra collapse to the ground. She went to help her but suddenly felt the room spin around her.

Everything went dark.

"You're awake!"

It was daytime, and Jenny blearily woke up. Standing over her were Inspector Horton and Vastra. Vastra smiled at her and picked her up. She looked around at the boathouse, now empty of crates.

"The captive men are now free and are undergoing checks," Horton said. "You and Madame Vastra were knocked out with poison darts, it seems. By the time we got here, they were taking everything away. The only person unaccounted for is Mr Fairweather."

"They?" Jenny asked, looking at Vastra, who shrugged.

"People above the yard," Horton answered.

"They wouldn't tell me," Vastra said. "Also, I've already explained that Fairweather ran away," she continued, and smiled, pulling her veil over her face. "Are we done here, Inspector?"

"I believe so. I'll call in if I need to know anything else".



When they got back to 13 Paternoster Row, a letter awaited them on the table. Strax sat by it, guarding Fairweather, still unconscious from the blows to his head a few hours earlier.

"I apologise for my hasty retreat, I had to hide this one here. There wasn't much of a battle really. They all went to sleep and then you did too. It was peculiar."

"It's fine," said Jenny. "Poison darts all round."

Vastra picked up the letter. It had a royal seal, then a singular letter beneath, a strange "T". Vastra opened it, and the folded paper had a message before she opened the letter fully.

*From the Torchwood Institute on behalf of Her Royal Highness Queen Victoria.*

"Curious," Vastra said, as she unfolded the letter and read it aloud to Jenny and Strax.

*"Dear occupants of number thirteen Paternoster Row: Detective Vastra, Miss Jennifer Flint, and their accomplice of undetermined origin..."*

*"A slight on the Sontaran Empire!"*

Vastra ignored Strax and continued. *"We write to thank you for your efforts in fighting crime and misdemeanours in our capital city. It has, however, been noted that two of you are not of Earthly origin. – Well, now I'm offended - We must request that if you are ever to come into contact with another extra-terrestrial*

*known simply as 'The Doctor', then you must inform us immediately, or face possible execution on count of treason.*

*As for last night's events, this 'cult' are within our... custody.*

*Kind Regards,  
The Torchwood Institute."*

"Well that's just rude," said Jenny, taking the letter off Vastra and reading the contents herself. She looked concerned. "We're not gonna tell them about the Doctor, are we?"

Vastra lifted her veil up and smiled, looking at Mr Fairweather, still tied up in the corner.

"Of course not, my dear. But we can give them someone for a while, can't we?"

She went to the desk, picked out a piece of paper and a quill, and drafted a reply, dictating as she went.

"I do believe we may have found him!"