

# The Theft of Thought

By Brandon McLendon

"We've almost got him!"

Jenny's shout echoed through the back alleys of London along with herself. Rain fell, gathering in puddles on the cobblestone streets, and scattered by Jenny's leather boots as they fell in chase. Madame Vastra's own footfalls came close behind, as always. The investigations, the questions, the verbal games that came with being a detective were what drove Vastra. But the chase... the chase belonged to Jenny.

It had taken nearly three weeks to track down John Cuthbert. He had killed four women in some pagan rite meant to attract the attention of some higher power; whether alien or demonic, none were quite sure. Regardless of his intentions, the rite had failed and Scotland Yard was quickly on his trail. But John Cuthbert was a wealthy man with many contacts in the upper echelons of London society who followed the higher mysteries to one degree or another, and their investigation faltered. The detectives feared he would soon flee London aboard ship or to the continent and never catch them again, and so they turned to Madame Vastra.

It had not taken her long to find the clues the police had missed, leading them to the river warehouses lining the Thames. He was being kept there out of sight until the time was right for his friends to smuggle him away in a freighter to continue his 'holy' work. But now those plans were dashed and Vastra and Jenny were in hot pursuit.

"Be careful, Jenny," Vastra called out. "He's armed."

"Aren't I always, ma'am!" she called back, a smile in her tone. Madame Vastra always told her to be careful and Jenny always was, but she had also trained with swords and hands and feet and worked her body to top physical condition. No man could overpower her in a fight, let alone some well-fed aristocrat putting on airs.

For all that, he was putting up a fine run. Better than Jenny would have expected, but fear could put new strength in any man.

Jenny rounded a corner just in time to see Cuthbert's coattails vanish into a door leading into a textile mill. She was just about to enter when a reptilian hand grabbed her shoulder and pulled her back. Just in time as a gunshot passed through the doorway where Jenny stood an instant earlier.

"I told you to be careful, dear," Vastra chided gently.

"Sorry miss," Jenny replied, chastened.

From inside the mill, a laboured voice shouted forth.

"You'll never take me alive, Vastra!" Cuthbert called out, breathing hard.

"Mr Cuthbert, you killed four defenceless women in pursuit of your madness," Vastra replied, her voice as cold-blooded as her species. "I assure you, your being taken alive should be the least of your worries."

Against the side of the doorframe, Vastra and Jenny signed to each other, suing gestures worked out over years of similarly dangerous adventures. Jenny looked around and found a rusted tin can. On cue, she tossed it inside, where it made echoed loudly on the empty floor.

A series of panicked gunshots followed; then there came the click, click, click of a revolver chamber running empty. Grinning, Jenny dived in, rolling low and to the side in case Cuthbert had a spare pistol. He did not, but she saw him grabbing bullets from his pockets and trying to shove them into the gun with shaking hands. He looked up, saw her crouching there in her black leather

working clothes and grasping the hilt of the oriental sword that she'd been given after entering Madame Vastra's service, and ran.

"Good," she said, more to herself than anyone else. "More fun this way."

He made for a staircase mounted against the wall, leading to the offices and the rooftops. It was to the rooftops he went, slamming through the doorway.

In the few moments it took Vastra and Jenny to climb the stairs and head through that door, Cuthbert had vanished from sight. Up here, the rooftops were a maze of brick walls and chimneys.

Jenny looked over at Vastra. Vastra stood there in thought for a long moment, her face wrapped in thought and worry. Finally she nodded. The two split up and began to move through the brick labyrinth.

"You cannot stop me," Cuthbert's voice echoed, impossible to trace. "With blood I call to the Black Heralds and when I am rid of you, my work will begin again!"

Jenny knew better than to reply, as did Vastra. The hammering rain and the many obstacles threw off the sounds of voices, but better not to even give a hint.

Jenny moved from post to post, keeping a lookout. Already they had lost track of Cuthbert, but even in the din they would have heard footfalls if he had been trying to outrun them. No, he was hoping to sneak past them or was trying to hide. But with all his yelling and bluster he wasn't doing a fair job of it.

She lost sight of Vastra as she moved towards the far end of the building. Jenny crossed over to the river side. There was a rusted ladder there; maybe Cuthbert had tried to double back and get back to the streets. But there was no sign of him.

That was when she heard the pistol cocking behind her.

Jenny spun around. Cuthbert was there, his revolver drawn on her. Still breathing heavily, still shaking from exertion, but smiling all the same.

"Jenny!" Vastra shouted as she shot out from behind a pillar behind Cuthbert. But it was far too late.

A shot rang out, louder than life. Vastra was shouting, but her voice seemed quieter than the blood pounding in Jenny's head. She could see the barrel right at eye level; so large she bet she could see right up it. She saw the flashing spark of the gunpowder. She even thought she could see the bullet screaming towards her skull. That might have been her imagination, though. She felt it, though, sure enough. It was cold. She never expected it to be cold.

And then she was falling. Lights and colours spun around her vision in swirls. And then it was dark, completely black, and cold all over, but everything was still spinning.

That was so silly, was her last thought. How could she be spinning if there is nothing there?



Vastra sat in an overstuffed chair in the lounge. Her work and success let her afford a fine townhouse in one of the finest neighbourhoods in London, outfitted with furnishings fit for a wealthy noble. It was an image she put on, a disguise for

visitors to let them see her home as one for a high society layabout. But here and there, mementos and personal touches alluded to something more. Certainly no other home in London had as fine a collection of swords and weapons from across the world, even as display pieces.

But in her lounge, there was no subterfuge. Like in the stories now circulating of the fictional detective Sherlock Holmes, based in part on her own exploits, her inner sanctuary contained nothing that was not of special meaning to her. A mishmash of artefacts; scraps of paper, books, and letters under glass cases; figurines and statues from three continents set on bookshelves alongside books in a dozen languages; pictures and photographs and portraits hung from walls and sat on tables; and so much more.

But there was no sanctuary here. The only sounds were the ticking of a grandfather clock, and though Vastra sat in her chair and seemed the picture of ease, her every muscle was taut like wire. She was waiting. And for all her talents, waiting was never something she was good at.

Her head snapped towards the door as it eased open. Strax was there. He was quiet and entered quietly, which was not a good sign. The look on his face was answer enough, but Vastra had to ask anyway.

"Any word?" she asked in a tight voice.

"None, ma'am," he replied in a tone that for him passed for polite. "I went along the docks and asked Three-Fingered Nick, six harlots outside Madame Gillespie's, Cleveland Jack, the other Cleveland Jack, and some very nice ruffians who answered my questions after they regained consciousness. No one has seen any sign of the boy."

Vastra thought about correcting him, but really there was no point. "The only thing we can assume is that no news is good news. There have been no-" she swallowed. "No... *bodies* that have been dredged or washed ashore, so she is still out there. We have to keep looking."

"As expected," Strax replied. Nothing ever fazed him; thank goodness for that. "I've already put the lads to work on it. Cleveland Jack has the longshoremen along the docks looking day and night for any sign. Cost me three of my best whiskeys but if there's any word, it'll be worth it."

"Are you quite certain you should be trusting Jack with that much alcohol? We don't necessarily need him sober, but we need him functional."

"No, you're thinking of the other Cleveland Jack. The Cleveland Jack at the docks is a puritan with a good left hook. Tried to convert me to one of these pagan human religions once," he added conversationally. "Told me he worshipped an ancient human that was killed by Romans for inciting rebellion. He seemed quite confused when I told him he got what he deserved for defying the social order."

"Well, go back and tell sober Cleveland Jack to redouble his efforts and to have more success finding Jenny than he did in his preaching!" Vastra snapped back, coming out of her chair, her tension finally bleeding through. Even Strax was a bit surprised.

"Right away, ma'am," he said as he withdrew, leaving Vastra alone.

Vastra smoothed her skirts, exhaling as she sat back down, trying to force herself to remain calm. It would not do to run around like a headless chicken, however much she would like to be in the thick of the search. But besides Strax, she had enlisted every contact, every informant, everyone she could pay, bribe,

extort, or who owed her a favour to turn out the search and she had to remain here to coordinate the effort and receive any news. Intellectually, she knew it was the smartest, most logical course. But in her heart, the idea of sitting in her home while her friend and love was missing was almost beyond tolerance.

But Madame Vastra was not a woman ruled by her emotions. Both literally and figuratively, she was cold-blooded and regardless of her own preferences, any action that increased the odds of finding Jenny as quickly as possible was one she could take. So she settled into her lounge chair, picked up a book whose first page she had reread a dozen times already, sipped at a cup of tea long turned stone cold, and waited.



The cold gradually faded. The blackness was there, but the quiet began to fade as well; there were voices. Muffled, distorted, not at all clear, but the woman latched on to them all the same. The effort made her head hurt, but at least it was a feeling. Far preferable to the dizzying dark.

"I think she's coming around," were the first words she could make out clearly. It sounded like a young girl close by. She could feel the air in the room now. And then slowly, acutely aware of the daggers of light piercing them, she cracked open her eyes.

True enough, a young girl was leaning over her face. A pretty thing, no older than sixteen, like as not, with the kind of auburn hair that turned heads on the street. She was smiling. The woman saw that as a good sign.

"Give her some room, lass," a gruff old voice barked out. Reluctantly, the girl backed away. An older man stepped into view, looking down at her. He was dressed like a tradesman, with iron-grey hair and holding a cane.

"How are you feeling?" he asked.

The woman worked her tongue in her mouth before she tried to answer.

"Much better, thanks." The words came out as a guttural croak. She got a better look around her. She was lying in bed in a loft; just down the steps were lights and the sounds of men drinking and shouting, like a pub.

The man grunted. "I don't doubt that. You were a bit more than half dead when Mouse here found you by the quay." He gestured to the girl beside him, who smiled shyly at her. "Convinced me to bring you back here and get you well. Quite the beating you took, too. Bruises everywhere and a nasty scrape along the head, but it was the water that almost did for you."

"Thank you," replied the woman, a little stronger than before. She struggled to lift a hand to her face, feeling the thick bandage covering the deep cut at her scalp that hurt even to touch lightly.

"No need to thank me. I'm taking it out of her pay. Now maybe you won't mind telling me your name."

The woman opened her mouth to answer, but nothing came out. There was nothing there! She felt her jaw moving up and down, thinking that if she found her mouth in just the right position, the words would tumble out by reflex. But nothing came.

"I... I don't know," she finally said, rather lamely.

"It's all right," the man said. "Most of the lot here don't know the names their mothers called them neither, and those that do don't care much for them. As for me, you can call me Roger. This little rodent here's Mouse, like I said."

"Pleasure to meet you, Roger," said the woman.

Roger frowned just a bit. "Are you some society woman, maybe? You talk like one of them fancy folks uptown."

"I don't know. I... I can't remember," replied the woman, sounding just a bit defeated.

Roger grunted again. "Suppose I shouldn't be surprised, what with the knock on your head we found."

The woman reached up and touched a bandage at her temple as Roger continued. "You took quite a hit, whatever the cause. You were half drowned by the time we fished you out of the quay. Came down with a nasty fever, too. Even once you were out of the water and dried up, it was no sure thing." Roger smiled a bit himself at the thought. Sure enough, the woman peeked under her sheet and found herself in naught but her skin. She could feel the heat in her cheeks so fiercely it was a shock she wasn't glowing.

Roger laughed at her indignation. "Ha! Some refined society wench, no doubt. Not to worry, miss nameless. It's fair to say I've seen more than my share of women in my time. All have their charms and you're no better or worse than any other. Besides which, I had Mouse handle all the necessities. Not my way to take advantage of a woman what can't say yes, if you take my meaning."

"Thanks... I think," was all she could think to say.

He grunted. "Mouse here will fix you up with some new rags and get you something to eat when you're ready." With that, he turned and limped away without another word.

"Charming man," said the woman after he'd left.

"He's not all that bad," replied Mouse, who crept closer, sounding much younger than her face implied. "He takes care of us. He took a lot of us in when we had no other place to go."

"I suppose that means me, then. I don't know my own name and certainly I don't know where I live."

Mouse frowned just a bit at that. "I don't know. He might, but Roger has you earn your keep if you want to stay around here. Helping out around the house and... other things. Are you ready to get up?"

"I think so," the woman answered. With help and effort, she struggled out of bed and into an outfit Mouse had ready: A long skirt and billowy tavern blouse that made her look like a barmaid.

"There's some food downstairs," continued Mouse as she helped pull the blouse into place. "Not much tonight. Just some chicken and bread, but it's hot and there's plenty of it."

"That sounds wonderful," said the woman. "I can't remember the last time I ate. Or anything else, for that matter."

"Then you're in for a treat as long as you're not expecting caviar and fine wine." Mouse grinned.

"What were you saying before?" the woman asked. "About earning your keep?"

Mouse was hesitant. "I'm not sure I should say."

"I won't tell anyone," the woman promised.

"Well... he has a lot of us do things. Not just chores, but... taking things."

"Like... stealing?" asked the woman.

"Shhh!" Mouse looked around to be sure no one heard. "Don't say that kind of thing around Roger or you're likely to get whipped. He likes to call it 'wealth redistribution'. Only taking from the high and mighty, what those who can afford it. Fancies himself a champion for the poor. But he's not a bad man, though. He keeps us fed, keeps a roof over our heads when otherwise it'd be the factories and orphanages for the boys and laying on our backs for a few shillings for us girls."

The woman was shocked to hear such a young girl speak so brazenly on such a topic, but it was truth. For the young and poor and female, with no education and fewer prospects, the choices were few. And the factories and poorhouses of London were hardly safer. Mouse continued on.

"He teaches us a trade. Might be that it's not the most respectable, but at least it's something."

"Yes," the woman nodded. "Yes, I suppose so."

They headed downstairs and found a table in the corner, lit with candles and set with an old wine bottle with flowers tucked in for colour. The raucous crowd paid them little mind, and Mouse left and returned with a pair of trays with steaming food. The woman tucked in; most of the meat in the stew wasn't identifiable, but it was hot and to her, it tasted divine.

Roger came over to visit. "Looks like you're back on your feet," he commented.

"Yes, I'm feeling much better, I think," she replied.

"Glad to hear it. You can stay the night but in the morning you'll be on your way," he told her, all business.

"But I thought-" Mouse jumped in, then stopped. "I... I thought she might be able to help us."

"Help us?" grunted Roger. "Skinny little twig like her? Probably faint her dainty head we ask her to work an honest job."

"What I hear," the woman replied, hardly believing her own daring, "is that what you do is less than honest."

Roger turned on Mouse. "What have you told her?"

"Nothing, I swear!"

"It wasn't hard to figure out," the woman continued before Roger could respond. "Nobody keeps all these people under their roof unless there's something in it for them. A lot of young, impressionable people who learn quick and do what they're told, am I right?"

"That's none of your business, lady," Roger told her. He reached for his belt. "I'll give you a few pence for your trouble and you can find somewhere else to sleep- what the bloody hell?" he exclaimed, raising his voice for the very first time. It was enough to draw the attention of others dining nearby, who looked over to investigate the noise.

Angry, but mystified, Roger pulled a hand from his belt. He was holding a money pouch, but when he reached a hand inside and pulled it out, all he held was a handful of rose petals, which fell to the ground in a flutter.

"Thank you," said the woman with just a hint of smugness. "But I have all the money I need."

She raised a hand and placed a small mound of coins on the table, near the flower vase of roses, now denuded of petals.

"Hmph," grunted Roger. Slowly, he reached across the table and scooped the coins back into his pouch. He stared at the woman for a long moment.

"I suppose we'll find a use for you yet," he finally said, before turning and walking away.

Mouse watched him go out of earshot before she turned to the woman with a wide grin. "How did you do that?" she asked excitedly.

"I don't really know," replied the woman in a daze, looking at her own hands as though she'd never seen them before.

Mouse thought hard for a moment. "You know, if you don't remember your name, we're going to have to think of something to call you."

"I don't know. Any suggestions?" asked the woman distantly.

Mouse thought about it some more until her eyes fell on the scattered petals on the ground. "I know. How about Rose?" she asked.

"Rose?" After a moment, she nodded, smiling. "I like it. Sounds good. Rose."

"Okay, Rose," said Mouse. "Best finish up your dinner and get to bed. We've got a busy day ahead."



"So this is the place?" asked Mouse.

She and Rose stood in front of a large manor. Home to an aristocratic Army officer, the owner was a widower, his children married and gone, and lived in the mansion alone and was in need of help running his household, a post Roger meant Rose to fill.

"I'm pretty sure," confirmed Rose.

"So do you know anything about being a maidservant?"

"Strangely enough, I do." Rose smoothed the folds of her black and white outfit, wearing it as though she had done it for years. "When I saw it on the rack, it looked perfect. Like it was familiar, somehow."

"Do you think it might be part of where you're from?" asked Mouse.

"Maybe you were a servant in some household."

"Maybe. I still can't remember anything." The outfit felt like it was made for her, but putting it on hadn't sparked any new memories.

She had played the part well enough. The old officer was not at all particular when he had interviewed her earlier in the day. He did not inquire much as to her previous experience; honestly, he seemed lonely and as much in want of company as someone to help tend his home, and he could do far worse than a pretty young woman who seemed both friendly and amenable to his requests. Not that he had any reason to be suspicious. She played the part of a maidservant to perfection: Polite, demure and professional, with just a hint of spark to hold his interest. He offered her the post on the spot.

She remained there for three days before now, learning the old man's habits and customs. He retired early in the evening and was an early riser; so now at twilight was the best time for her real work to begin.



Inside the parlour, Mouse looked around with an appraising eye. "Didn't think he could afford all this on a military salary."

Rose shook her head. "He comes from an old family. A lot of these things are family heirlooms."

"Let's see. A lot of these things aren't going to be easy to unload." Roger knew people in low places that would pay for goods without asking too many questions, but things like unique paintings and the like were too easy to trace and often were not worth the trouble.

"You're right," confirmed Rose. "Too big, too heavy, not worth the time. If we had a whole night and a whole crew, then maybe. But these aren't why we're here."

"Then why?" asked Mouse, curious.

"I already said he's from an old family," said Rose. They moved from the parlour up the stairs, stepping quietly. The old man wasn't by any means a light sleeper, but best not to take chances. "He has these hand-me-downs, but he also has estates in the country. It took a while in his offices to track down the details. He never visits them, but he still earns an income on the farms and such."

"Then that money would be in the banks, wouldn't it?" exclaimed Mouse. "There's no point if we can't get to it."

"Ah, but that's just the thing. I looked through his finances up and down. There's no account records, no receipts, no nothing. Apparently he doesn't trust banks with his money."

"So he has a stack of notes here somewhere?"

"Nope. Doesn't trust them. He keeps some for spending money, but the rest he keeps in gold and silver. That was the tricky part; he's very good at security."

They entered the library. It was a fine-looking room, stacked with books on old wooden shelves built into the walls. Portraits of people long dead lined the walls in between.

"You see, family is very important to him," continued Rose. "Lineage, ancestry, status. Not as people, mind you, but for his honour and the like. All these are pictures of his parents, grandparents, and so on. But notice..."

She stopped before a large landscape painting of a country manor home, surrounded by picturesque fields.

"The only painting in the room that's not one of his family. Notice the date." She indicated the tiny signature in the bottom corner. "Commissioned only three years ago. No other painting here is younger than a decade."

Rose felt along the bottom of the frame, sliding a finger until it caught on a hidden latch. She pulled and the painting swung free of the wall on a hinge. Behind it was a safe.

Mouse grinned. "That's great! Roger will be very happy with this. All we need is to bring in a safecracker one of these days and- what are you doing?"

Rose was already turning the dials with expert speed. She stopped and pulled the lever and the door swung free. Inside was a small stack of bars of precious metal, some documents, and other valuables. Mouse looked at the bounty in stunned silence.

"How did you do that?" she finally asked.

"You're not going to make me tell you all my secrets, are you?" replied Rose with a sly grin. "Now come on. Let's pack all this up and get going."

It did not take long for the pair to shovel all the goods into a sack Mouse had brought along. Before making her exit, though, on some impulse, Rose snatched a flower from a vase standing near the lounge chair and placed it in the empty safe before closing it shut.

"Why'd you go and do that?" asked Mouse.

"Dunno," Rose shrugged. "Just seemed like the thing to do. Now let's go."



The safe did not open for another twelve hours, when a distraught elderly gentleman opened it, saw the empty enclosure, and slammed it shut. It remained that way for another three hours until it opened again. When it did, Vastra was standing before it, with the older man, now furious, standing at her side.

"You see?" he said. "You see, Madame Vastra? Gone! All of it! The conniving harpy took everything. Years of income in gold, gone in an instant!"

"Calm yourself, Major Howe. I see it quite clearly," replied Vastra in an even tone. Despite her own cares and worries, there was still work to be done, and the old soldier was wealthy and influential enough to both find the best and most reclusive detective in London and afford her services on short notice, despite his sudden and unfortunate loss of currency.

She appreciated his lack of comment on her appearance, at least. She wore a black veil in deference to human sensibilities, though those in London and across the kingdom who knew enough to find her had often seen things much stranger than she.

"Tell me," Vastra continued. "Where exactly did this woman come from?"

"Well, you know I... at my age I find I need some help keeping my affairs here in order, so I sent to an agency for someone to fill the post. And I'm not ashamed to admit I was quite taken with the young lady. Very charming, very articulate. Absolutely knew her business. Or so it seemed until I found out it was all an act."

"What's this?" asked Vastra. She reached into the back of the safe and pulled out the flower placed there earlier.

"Oh, yes. I saw that earlier. The tart took a rose from the flower vase and left it in there for me to find. Some kind of calling card, no doubt."

"I quite agree," said Vastra, deep in thought, running her fingers across the rose in her hands. "But whose?"

Vastra's mind cast back through her memory, some five years past. She was alone then, as she had been for many years since she came to London. In her work she had acquired many informants, many clients, trusted sources, men and women helpful to her in her work, but no friends.

She had been called to another manor house. A thief had burgled the owner of a fortune in precious gems, which he had kept inside a hollow stone statue cunningly mortared so as to appear seamless, hidden among a dozen other like statues. Along with the gems, the cavity of the hollow statue was filled with sand to give it weight and keep the gems from rattling and giving the game away. Every precaution that could be taken by someone wealthy and paranoid had been taken, yet that statue and that statue alone was broken. Cracked

perfectly along the invisible seam, not crudely thrown on the floor to shatter, the sand was kept inside and the halves replaced with the gems removed. It was not until days later that the owner discovered the theft by accident, when he nudged the statue and caused the upper half to fall free, releasing a cascade of sand and a handful of black rosebuds still in bloom.

It was the first time Vastra had come across a display of such perfect dexterity and cunning and she could not help but admire the skill needed for such a heist. It was the first time she had seen the handiwork of the Black Rose.



The dock house was in a full-on celebration.

Cheap wine and beer were flowing from kegs by the gallon as thieves, con men, pickpockets, sweet talkers, and rogues of every sort gathered in Roger's guildhall to toast the woman of the hour, who had found and pilfered, literally, a lord's ransom in less than a week of work. Cheers and toasts went up every time Mouse retold the story of how Rose had found the treasure, cracked the safe, swiped the goods, and even had the gall to leave her own calling card in their place.

Roger didn't smile when Rose had laid the shining bars of metal on his desk. Roger almost never smiled, but everyone knew how pleased he was with his "new protégé's" work by the simple fact that the stern and unforgiving skinflint has taken part of his share of the bounty and thrown a feast that everyone in his gang and at least a few others were invited to.

"What's wrong?" asked Mouse. She and Rose shared a spot at the head table as guests of honour, but after such a calm and confident performance at the manor, she had been morose ever since returning. While Mouse had retold the story of Rose's flamboyant deeds at every asking, Rose picked at her food and barely seemed to pay attention.

"What?" she replied distractedly.

"You've been a lump ever since we got back. You should be celebrating. With your cut of the take, we can live like fine proper ladies."

Rose smiled despite herself. "We?' Seems to me that I did most of the work."

"Well, you'll need someone to help run things when you get all high and mighty. Someone who knows her sums and doesn't take any gruff from your servants and the like." Mouse preened as though the post and its perks were hers already.

"Ha!" Rose barked a laugh. "Servants. Oh, that's rich. What would I ever do with a house so big that I need servants to help keep things in order?"

Mouse leaned in close, a smile still on her face. "Anything you want."

Something about that phrase sent a chill down Rose's spine, though she couldn't say why.

As Rose mulled that thought over, the din and commotion of the common room suddenly quieted into an uncomfortable silence as the double doors to the building slammed open. Standing there was the most grotesque man Rose had ever laid eyes on. He stood not even five feet tall, but had the muscled girth of a

man much larger. He was bald, with a hideously swollen face and had no neck joining head to body. Instead, his head simply jutted from his shoulders like a tumour. Strangest of all, he was dressed in a fine black suit, expertly fitted to his unusual frame.

He walked into the common room as though he had every right to be there, and certainly nobody tried to stop him. There was shock and surprise at the man's sudden arrival, but very little at his appearance. He was well known here, by reputation if nothing else, Rose surmised.

"Oh god, it's Strax," Mouse whispered.

"Who's Strax?" Rose replied.

"A troublemaker. He comes by and breaks some bones whenever he wants information from some of the lads here for one reason or another. They say he works for the Great Detective."

Rose had no idea who this 'Great Detective' might be, but did not ask. As she looked on, Strax climbed up onto a chair to be better seen. Even then, he barely came to the chins of many of those present. He cleared his throat, every sound clearly heard in the whispering din. He then spoke with great poise and importance.

"I am looking for a boy," he announced with great poise and importance.

The silence was absolute. Then the room erupted in gales of laughter.

"Might be I have one you can have!" one wit shouted from the back.

"Want to be taller than someone for once?" came another shout.

Unperturbed, Strax reached inside his coat and pulled out a slip of paper, read it quickly, and put it back away.

"Your pardon. I meant to say *girl*," he said, completely oblivious as though he chose not to hear the mocking laughter around him. And that laughter did not get any quieter.

"You don't seem like the type," another shout came.

One drunken idiot actually entered the empty bubble the others had formed around Strax. Laughing, the man ignored the suddenly urgent warnings of those around him and rubbed Strax's bald head.

In an instant, Strax's arms were a blur. It wasn't clear what exactly he did, but one moment the drunken thug was happily oblivious and the next he was flying through the air, crashing against the wall and slumping to the floor in a heap.

The laughter tapered off quickly. The empty bubble given around Strax only grew larger despite the crowded room, everyone pressing against one another to give Strax more space.

"And what kind of girl are you looking for exactly, Master Strax?" Roger stepped to the front of the crowd, everyone around him happy to let him take the lead.

"She goes by the name of Jenny. Average height, with a black-" Strax cut himself off, reaching again for the piece of paper inside his coat, reading and then replacing it. "With black hair. I am told most people find her quite attractive." He winced and shook his head in disbelief before continuing. "Any help you can offer in finding her would be greatly appreciated."

Roger was quiet for a long moment, looking at Strax with a shrewd gaze. "Appreciated in what way?"

Strax took a step toward Roger. The empty bubble around Strax shifted as the crowd took a matching step backward, but Roger held his ground. "You know who I work for," Strax began. "I have been asked to inform you that my lady would be enormously grateful to anyone who can be of assistance, and very upset at those who withhold their help. As for myself, she has given me permission to take the more obstinate among you and beat them unmercifully about the head and upper torso."

"I see." Roger rubbed his chin in thought. "Well, then. You may tell your lady that the lads here and I will do everything we can to find this girl she's looking for."

"She will be quite glad to hear that, I'm sure," Strax said. He took another long look around the room. On some instinct, Rose ducked down. With Strax's height and the crowd of people around him, it was easy for Rose to avoid being seen. Mouse looked at her curiously, but said nothing.

After Strax was gone, the crowd began to disperse. The festive atmosphere was gone and many in the group began to leave for their own homes while others drank their wine or beer in relative quiet. Roger walked over to Rose, who did her best to look unconcerned.

"Now why would the Great Detective be looking for you, I wonder?" he said, jabbing the air with his cane.

"I don't know why she would be," Rose replied. "We don't even know if I'm the one she's after."

"Oh, I think she is. The only reason I didn't hand you over is that I think it will be more profitable to wait in the long run. But I warn you, if you're bringing trouble to my door with you—"

"She told you she doesn't remember anything," Mouse cut in. Roger glared down at her. The girl seemed to shrink in her seat and said nothing more.

"Like I said, I'm letting this go for now because you've already made yourself useful, but this is your one warning. If you cause me trouble with the detective, you'll get a lesson from me you won't forget no matter what kind of memory loss you say you have."



"There's still no word?" Vastra asked. She and Strax were in Vastra's sitting room comparing notes.

"Not yet," Strax explained. "I just finished visiting Roger's guild. He knows more than he lets on, but he said he would help if he can."

"He's too clever by half, that one," Vastra mused. "He won't do anything for us unless he sees some profit in it for himself."

"That's true for almost everyone we know, isn't it?"

"Well... yes," Vastra reflected. "But even more so for him. But he is competent within his field of expertise. Keep an eye on him, but let him do things his own way. If he gets results, we'll deal with his price when the time comes."

Vastra stood, walking over to the window. Outside, even at night, porters, horsemen, drunkards and wagons continued to pass at all hours. Despite the

luxury of her home, Vastra had chosen a place in the centre of town where the action was, rather than in some outside district behind walls and gates.

Sometimes, she regretted this.

"There might be another way."

"What way is that?" Strax asked.

Vastra jumped, startled. She had not even realized she had spoken her thoughts aloud. "I believe that the Lady Margaret owes us a favour, am I correct?"

"Quite so. She slapped me so hard when she first saw me I felt it for a week. Wonderful woman."

Vastra could not for the life of her figure how Strax could mistake male and female humanoids so consistently except in cases where they did him harm. Perhaps she should beat him more often. On the other hand, to judge from what passed for a wistful grin on his face, perhaps not. She had enough to deal with.

"First thing in the morning," Vastra began. "I want you to seek out this wonderful woman of yours and tell her to take a holiday to the countryside for the next few days. Then come back here. I'll have more work for you."

"May I ask why?"

"It's a theory. Something about the theft at Master Howe's manse put me in mind of a case from years ago. If it comes to nothing, then we've lost nothing but the effort. But if I'm right..." Vastra stopped and sighed. "Go quickly, Strax. We haven't much time to spare."



Rose stood on an empty street in the middle of London. It was strange. Even in the middle of the night the streets should be busy, with thieves and whores if nothing else. She walked as though in a fog, her body tingling with every movement. She looked down and saw herself wearing a simple outfit, a drab brown skirt and vest with a puffy white blouse. She looked like a barmaid, and they were clothes that she could not remember ever having worn in her life. They were the same clothes that she had seen women at Roger's tavern wearing.

This is a dream, she realised. The thought did not bring her any distress. She continued on, observing the empty windows and alleys with detached curiosity. She had never had a dream so vivid or lifelike, and in the back of her mind she was curious what would happen next.

"Hello," called out a voice nearby. Her own voice, Rose noticed.

At the mouth of a close by alley, she saw a young woman who looked exactly like her. Only she was dressed as a maidservant, all black skirts and a lacy white apron, her black hair styled up in a bun.

"Who are you?" Rose heard herself ask.

"Why, that's a silly question to be asking yourself," the woman replied.

"Why are you still here? The lady is worried about you."

"The lady? What lady?"

"Knowing her, she's probably been tearing the city apart looking for you." The woman looked at her with kind concern. "You should go back. Come with me and I'll show you the way."

"Why should I even bother with her?" It was not Rose who spoke, but another woman who shared her voice and face, though Rose could not recall a time when she herself had spoken with such casual arrogance. The new woman stood opposite the maidservant version of herself, leaning against a wall. She was dressed all in black, her hair tied back in a simple braid, with a leather vest open to show more cleavage than Rose would feel comfortable showing herself.

"All the lady has done is dress me up in pretty clothes and make promises not even she can keep. She keeps me in the shadows where I'm just a side note to her stories and not the star of my own. Why should I indulge her whims when I am just as skilled as she is? She should follow me!" the black-clad woman snarled.

"I serve her because it makes me happy to see her happy," the maidservant woman replied. "Seeing a smile on her face is all the reward I need."

"Pah!" the black-clad woman spat. "Reward? I remember rewards. Gold. Jewels. The finest clothes and wines and every table in every household in this country open to me. Servants following my every whim. An entire city's underworld all but worshipping me."

"I never cared about the money," said the maidservant. "It was the respect I wanted. The adoration and, yes, even the fear. But who gives me more adoration than the lady?"

"Enough. Enough!" The two doppelgangers' voices echoed in her head like pounding drums. "Neither of you are making any sense. I don't understand it, none of it!"

The maidservant looked at her with a trace of pity. "I am sorry. But it's not that you don't understand, just that you don't remember."

The rogue woman snorted. "There's no need to remember. Those memories only get in the way of what you want."

"So you say," said the maidservant.

"Only one way to find out," the rogue shot back. She reached behind her belt and pulled out a black rose. "I'm happier this way. Not weighed down by the meaningless. I grew up knowing that the only one who can take care of me is me, and that's got me everything I ever wanted. There's no good reason for me to change now. No good reason at all."

With a wicked grin, she blew and then black petals were flying. More and more, more than were possible from a single flower. The maidservant was engulfed in a cloud of petals and fell out of sight, and then the cloud was upon Rose. It was cloying and choking, and beyond the rushing wind there was the sound of the black-clad woman's laughter...

Rose gasped awake and shot upright in her bed. She was drenched in sweat, with only a flickering candle for light. It was not yet dawn.

"Are you all right?" Mouse asked in a drowsy voice from the next bed over.

"Fine," Rose replied. And then, quieter: "fine." A smile spread across her face. "Never better."

The next morning she awoke properly and had brought a plate of breakfast back to the chamber for her and Mouse. Mouse soon joined her.

"Are you sure you're all right?" she asked.

"I told you, I'm fine. Why d'you keep asking?"

"It's just that you were tossing and turning quite a bit. Was it a bad dream?" Mouse pressed.

"Yes," Rose replied. "A bad dream. A dream was all it was. But be honest; I know what you want."

"Want?" Mouse asked, confused. "What do you mean?"

Rose smiled a Cheshire grin. "No need to hide it. I see how you look at me. I've looked at so many others the same way, but never quite knew what to do about it. Would they be offended? Would they ever feel the same way? Oh, but it's a dangerous way to look at someone."

She had moved closer all the way as she spoke, until her and Mouse's faces were but a few inches apart. "But I learned a long time ago that there's only one way to go about these things. When you see something you want, you take what you want, when you want, however many times you want it."

"Rose?" Mouse said, a tremor in her voice. "What's got into you?"

Rose leaned back, putting a hand behind Mouse's head. "It's nothing, dear. I don't mean to scare you. I just wanted to show you that I know what you feel because I've felt it all myself. We're in this together, you and me. We're friends. There's nothing we need to hide from each other."

She leaned forward again, resting her forehead against Mouse's own. The younger girl trembled, but did not pull away.

"You don't need to stay with Roger. I'll take care of you now. Stick with me and before long we'll have the entire city at our feet. I had it that way before. Years ago." Rose trailed off, suddenly looking lost.

"Do you mean, you remember where you came from?" Mouse asked, whispering as though afraid to speak.

"Bits and pieces, I think," Rose replied in a wandering voice. "You've seen how good I am. There was a time when I was the best. By day I played the part of a proper lady like living in a masquerade, by night I danced into the other proper ladies' fancy houses and made off with whatever I wanted, and in all the world there was no one who could stop me. And that's what I want back."

Rose pulled back her head before Mouse could reply. "A few days ago," she said, suddenly all business. "I heard of an Indian princess who has come here on holiday. And she's brought along a fortune in diamonds to sell and have shaped at the city goldsmiths. You know how the people in India love their diamonds, don't you?" she asked, cupping the girl's cheek in her hand.

Mouse could do naught but nod.

"Then come with me. We'll break into her manse, take everything we want, and the both of us will live like queens."

"But-" Mouse stammered, almost afraid. "But what about Roger? We..."

"Forget him," Rose said. "He's clever enough, I'll give him that, but all he wants is his dockside guild and a few good men and his little rackets. I have much bigger plans in mind. Whatever you think you owe him, I'll pay him off. Then I'll take you with me and take care of you. And I'll give you everything. What do you say?"

Mouse was quiet for a long, long time. Fear and desire and concern crossed her face at time. And then, at long last, she nodded.





The door was almost depressingly easy to open. Mouse entered first, stepping through on silent feet, followed by Rose, dressed in her blacks.

"I still don't think it's a good idea to do it this quickly," Mouse whispered. "We should do our legwork first, check this lady's story and defences."

"I know what I'm doing," Rose replied with an almost feral grin. "Don't you trust me?"

"Of course I do. It just seemed reckless, is all."

"Sometimes being reckless is the best way to do things. I've been doing this for years and I've never been caught. In this kind of case, the more investigating we do, the better chance they have of catching on to us. This way we're in and out before anyone's the wiser."

"If you say so," Mouse said, still doubtful.

"I do say so. Now come on."

They crept up the stairs, testing each step for creaks and cracks before placing their weight upon it.

"Still don't think we should have left Roger out of the loop," Mouse muttered.

"Why not? Doing this score on our own just means more for us," Rose said. "I told you, we'll pay him off afterwards and move on from there. Now be quiet and come on."

They reached the top of the landing, marked with a wall-mounted plaque holding a Japanese sword and crept down the hall. They stopped at the end.

"Hmm," Rose wondered aloud.

"What is it?" Mouse asked.

"I'll let you figure it out. Notice something odd here?"

Mouse looked at the hallway wall and back downstairs through the landing, back and forth. "It... ends sooner than it should."

"That it does. We'll make a proper thief out of you yet," Rose said with approval.

The hallway end was decorated with a small table and a painting. Rose ran her hands along the painting frame, the wall itself, the table, all around until her fingers felt a catch. "Ah. There we go."

She gave the catch a press and the wall swung open on silent hinges, exposing a dark hidden room beyond. "Now then. Let's go get that-"

A razor-sharp sword lashed out from the darkness. Before Rose could so much as blink, the blade was resting on her throat. Rose backed away slowly. The blade did not move as its wielder moved forward with her until a woman in loose-fitting blouse and skirts emerged from the shadows, holding the curved sword in a green reptilian hand.

"Hello, Jenny," Vastra said quietly.

"Oh god, oh god, oh god, oh god," Mouse was saying in a mantra of terror.

"Who are you?" Rose demanded, her voice quivering slightly as she continued to back away.

"It's her!" Mouse answered. "It's the Great Detective herself!"

They reached the top of the landing. Vastra did not press forward, Rose did not flinch, and Mouse did not dare move toward or away from the duo.

"Her? The Great Detective? Pretty for a lizard woman, I suppose, but I'm not impressed," Rose said.

"You've lost your memory," Vastra stated.

"What I've lost or not is none of your business."

"Oh, but I'm afraid it very much is," Vastra replied, almost sadly.

Rose's eyes twitched to the side, where the wall plaque held a sword on display. Before she had a chance to think, she had ducked away from Vastra's sword and snatched the katana from its scabbard. Vastra made no move to pursue, instead holding her blade in a ready stance as Rose took her own stance facing her.

"This is how it happened before," Vastra observed.

"How what happened?" Rose demanded. She took a swing at Vastra that her opponent batted away without so much as breaking eye contact with her.

"How I caught you," Vastra stated.

"You're lying. I've never been caught!" She attacked again, more seriously, and again Vastra deflected the attack away with equal skill.

"I'm not saying it was easy. But it happened once and once was enough. And it happened just like this before," Vastra said, her voice not raising even once as the pair struck and riposted back and forth atop the landing.

"I remember the Black Rose well. A beautiful skilled woman thief who preyed on London's high society who could not be stopped. It was impossible to stop you from breaking in to whatever target you set your eyes on, but in time it was possible to set a trap. I'm assuming you heard the rumours of the Indian diamonds and the travelling princess?"

"Impossible. I checked and double-checked those stories. Everything was accurate!" Rose snarled, pressing forward.

"It wasn't easy. It cost me a fortune in money and favours to spread the tale far enough that there would be nothing to contradict it. But it worked, just like it worked then, and here you are."

"So what happened then?"

"I stopped you."

"Then stop me now!"

She attacked with fierce abandon. Blades clashed with strikes and blocks and counters so quickly that it sounded almost like a single constant sound. Mouse looked on in awe as one lady took the advantage, then the other, until finally they broke apart on equal footing, breathing heavily.

"You're quite good," Rose gasped.

"So are you," Vastra replied. "Aren't you at all curious why I left a sword here for you to find? Or why you are so skilled with it?"

"I- what?" Rose asked, confused.

"You never needed a sword before. I gave that one to you after the Japanese ambassador gifted us the set after we exorcised the Yomi demons from his clan home. That very one in your hand. Don't you remember?"

"That's... that's not possible. I've never seen you before in my life."

"Yes, you have. Because you are my life and I am yours."

"That's quite the sentiment," came a voice from below.

The two women and Mouse turned to the door. Roger was there, with a pair of strong-looking men at his side.

"I knew you were nothing but trouble the minute I laid eyes on you," Roger said, glaring up at Rose. "If I'd known you were involved with the Great Detective, I'd have thrown you back in the river and been rid of you. And if I'd known you were the Black Rose then I'd have throttled you myself. Thought I'd never had the chance after all this time after you dropped off the map. I can't begin to guess how much money I've lost over the years because of you."

"What are you even doing here?" Rose demanded. "How did you-" She cut off, turning slowly to look down at Mouse standing nearby. "You sold me out?"

"I... I'm sorry," Mouse stammered. "I didn't want to. But he's taken care of me. I had to!"

"I would have taken care of you!" Rose shouted. "All you had to do was stay quiet and we'd have had it made."

"No need to blame her. At least she knows where she owes her loyalty. Now, if you please."

The two men beside him drew large pistols and took aim.

"The city's best thief and the Great Detective. With both of you out of the way, I can run this city for good."

"Hold on, you said you weren't going to hurt anybody!" Mouse protested.

Roger shrugged. "Plans change. I hadn't planned on it until the detective herself got involved. Now stay out of the way or you'll get the same."

"No!"

"Stupid girl, you didn't see this coming?" Rose hissed at the girl. "It's a bit late to play the innocent. Now get out of the way."

"Since you've established there's nobody at home to disturb and call the constables, there's no reason to worry about noise. Gentlemen?"

"Aren't you forgetting someone?" Vastra asked.

"You needn't worry, miss Vastra. I don't intend on neglecting anybody here and I have bullets enough for all."

"You flatter me, but it wasn't myself I was referring to."

"Who, then?"

"Now would be a good time, Strax," Vastra called out.

"What?" Roger asked.

"Oh good," came a very deep, very pleased voice from behind him.

A flurry of blows, a gunshot, and some high-pitched screams followed. When the dust settled, Strax was there, standing over a trio of unconscious men with several limbs bending in peculiar directions.

"Well, that was very satisfying," Strax said, dusting his hands.

"So," Rose said after a long moment. "You had that henchman of yours following Roger on the complete off chance that he might try to interfere in your ridiculously complicated plan to make me remember you?"

"That just about covers it, yes," Vastra said. "Did it work?"

Rose thought for a moment. "No. Afraid not. Now if you'll excuse me."

She turned to walk down the stairs, but Strax was there, holding a silvery metallic device to her face. Before she could react, a bright flash of red burst into her eyes, dazing her.

"Rose!" Mouse called, stepping toward her. "What're you doing to her?" Vastra took hold of the girl's shoulder, holding her back.

"Hold on just a moment," she explained. "She'll be fine. He may not look it, but Strax is a most excellent healer."

Strax groaned in disgust. "It's hardly necessary to shame me so, ma'am." Rose looked around, blinking with new eyes. "Strax?" she asked. "Is that you?"

"Indeed, it is." He put the device away. "It seems you suffered a rather severe concussion resulting in memory loss and memory displacement. A rather unique case that would make for a fascinating paper if the University would ever return my calls and if I could read or write."

"I really was hoping she could break through on her own," Vastra noted.

"It's a rather unrealistic expectation that simple reminders would repair this kind of damage," Strax said. "That kind of healing only comes from badly written pulp stories."

"Rose? Are you okay?" Mouse asked softly.

Rose turned toward the girl, a sad little smile on her face. "I am. But I'm sorry. Rose hasn't been my name for quite a while now. The Black Rose died years ago. I'm just Jenny now."

Jenny turned to face Vastra, who looked close to tears. "I'm sorry I put you to such trouble, miss."

They stood facing each other in awkward silence before breaking their resolve and flying into each other's arms.

Strax looked on in slight annoyance. "Will that be all for tonight, then?" He was waiting for an answer, but either of the two who might have answered had lips that were otherwise occupied.

"I got the idea that they were together," Mouse remarked. "But I didn't know they were... *together* together." She leaned in closer, looking on in amazed curiosity. "They're quite flexible, aren't they? When do you suppose they'll come up for air?"

"Knowing them, it could be quite some time," Strax remarked. He turned to face her. "I suppose I'd best prepare the carriage. Come along, boy. Perhaps you can suggest some alternative to beating the horses for their insolence when they don't obey."

"Have you tried the reins?" Mouse asked as they headed for the door.

"Not often," he replied, his voice only a dim echo to the pair of women left behind who had eyes, ears, and hearts only for each other.



"Still," Jenny said to Vastra the next morning, setting down a cup of tea next to the pot they shared in Vastra's sitting room. "I can't believe you went to so much trouble."

"My love, for you it was no trouble at all," Vastra replied gently. "How are you feeling?"

"Better. Everything is still a bit fuzzy," Jenny admitted. "I try to remember everything that's happened the last week or so and it just feels confused and jumbled around."

"According to Strax, that's normal. Give it a few days and everything should settle in."

A silence followed, stretching from comfortable to awkward.

"Have you decided what to do with your young friend?" Vastra asked.

"Mouse? Well obviously, she can't go back to Roger's gang. I really don't know."

Mouse had spent the last two days making sure Jenny was still well and assisting Strax with his own duties. She had been trying to teach him the subtle art of not disintegrating the horses when they didn't immediately obey amongst other things, and rather than being afraid of the short-tempered Sontaran, she seemed genuinely fascinated with him and his awkward manners.

"If it's alright, maybe she could stay here as a guest until we find some place for her to go," Jenny offered.

"Are you sure that's what you want?" Vastra asked.

Jenny was quiet for a long while before replying. "Yes. I don't think her staying here for good is the best thing for her. She doesn't know me, not really. She was a friend of Rose, not Jenny."

"You talk as if those are two different people. Whatever it was she saw in Rose was a part of you. And whatever you did and thought and felt as Rose will always be part of you."

Jenny nodded. "I suppose it will."

"I have a question," Vastra said. She quieted, hesitating.

"Yes, miss?" Jenny prodded.

"It's only... I talked to your friend Mouse the other night. She told me... a great many things about your thoughts. About how you felt... constrained by your relationship with me. So I ask you... do you feel that I am holding you back?"

Jenny was quiet for a long time, gathering her thoughts. "Once," she finally admitted, "but not any more." She stood from her chair. "If you'll excuse me, I'd best see to matters around the house. After having been gone for a week, I can only guess at the state of things."

Vastra watched her leave before picking up her own teacup and taking a sip. She sputtered, looking down.

There was no tea in her cup. Only a small handful of rose petals.

Vastra smiled. "Will always be a part of you, indeed."