**The Witch of Hardwick**

 The TARDIS wheezed to a stop in a dimly lit space. The Doctor poked his grey-haired head out and looked around, then he drew back and slammed the door shut.

“Oh dear,” he said. “We seem to have arrived at a very unfortunate point in Earth history.”

Jo Grant looked at the video screen. The gloom outside was suddenly brightened by flickering lanterns held by men in leather and black versions of the men's clothes called ‘doublet and hose’. They carried the sort of single shot guns called ‘muskets’ that were new in the times when men wore such clothes as well as more traditional swords.

There was a lot of shouting before the men retuned the way they had come with a prisoner resigned to his fate.

“Oh!” Jo exclaimed. “Oh, goodness. That was… Guy Fawkes… being arrested on Bonfire Night. Only… of course it wasn’t Bonfire Night then… I mean... now. I mean… it’s sad, of course. He was killed horribly. So were his friends. Trying to blow up Parliament is terrible, of course. But they were being picked on for their religious beliefs. Still….”

Jo struggled with historical allegiances. The Doctor smiled softly as he examined the drive control and considered the necessary adjustments to take them to a less dangerous destination.

“They were definitely guilty of treason," he said. "Still, I’ve always had a sneaking admiration for political dissidents. I’m a bit of a one myself.”

Jo had never asked too many details about The Doctor's expulsion from his Time Lord home. She suspected he wouldn’t really tell her much anyway. To think of him as a dissident in the same way that Fawkes and Catesby and the rest were in this historical time was a little disconcerting.

“Mind you, I was meant to be a spy, before they sent me to you,” she admitted. “I might have gone to Bulgaria or Russia where I’d have been an enemy of the government.”

“I should think those governments would have fallen within days of your arrival,” The Doctor commented. He was joking, of course. Jo laughed with him.

“There, now. Let’s see. Now that the Plot is failed, this is as good a time to explore Stuart England as any. You’ll want to go and change, of course.”

Jo was wearing a thigh length dress and knee length boots with some inches of exposed leg between. Very trendy in 1972, but far from suitable for this era. Besides, her love of clothes meant that the prospect of dressing up in historical costume thrilled her. She ran off to the room called the Wardrobe.

When she returned in a cream-coloured gown, its bodice glittering with tiny gems she suspected were real diamonds, The Doctor had changed, too. He was wearing a dark green and silver doublet and black hose with a short black cloak lined in an even deeper green and edged in gold.

“You look… absolutely Lordly,” she told him. “As opposed to Time Lordly.”

“You… look astonishing,” The Doctor answered her with a proud, avuncular smile. “You’ll turn heads.”

Jo beamed. The Doctor took her arm as they stepped out of the TARDIS into a small stand of trees that happily concealed the time and space ship from the lane they joined shortly. There were other people walking along, all dressed in finery. Jo checked out the women to see if The Doctor was right about her turning heads. It might be a close thing. But she felt confident in herself.

“Where are we?” she asked as they turned onto a driveway in front of a large mansion. Jo was struck by how big all of the windows were in the pale stone edifice. She had been expecting Tudor black and white gables and small mullioned windows. She wondered if The Doctor had brought them to the wrong time, after all.

“Oh yes,” he assured her. “This is Hardwick Hall in Derbyshire. It was built in the time of peace and prosperity towards the end of Elizabeth’s reign when it was no longer necessary for a manor house to be defensible and lots of big windows were a sign of wealth.”

Oh.” Jo hadn’t known that before. She added it to the many things she had learnt since knowing The Doctor.

“These people must be VERY wealthy,” she added, rallying herself after being caught by her lack of knowledge of late Tudor house building. “There is more window than stone in this house.”

“Very wealthy,” The Doctor observed. “Bess of Hardwick, the four times married lady of the house was second only to Queen Elizabeth herself at one time, due to inheritance and good investments. This is, of course, 1605, two years into the reign of Elizabeth’s successor….”

“James the First of England, Sixth of Scotland,” Jo pronounced, pleased with her knowledge of royal succession, at least.

“Yes, indeed,” The Doctor confirmed. “And, as we just saw, the year of the Gunpowder Plot. It is now November 10th, five days after the excitement, and the birthday of the son and heir of Hardwick House, the present Baron Cavendish of Hardwick, later the first Earl of Devonshire, but not just yet.”

“Even though he comes from Derbyshire,” Jo mused. “I never understood the way those things worked. But are we invited to the party?”

“I’m an old friend of the lady of the house,” The Doctor answered. “I’m always invited.”

While Jo was musing again on The Doctor being friends with the second richest woman in Elizabethan England she also paid close attention to the house that proclaimed that wealth. This was certainly not a fortified house with portcullis slammed down against attack. A wide door was flung open to all comers and light spilled out. Indeed, all those big windows glowed with light. Since it had to be candlelight Jo spent a little time calculating how many candles it needed, how many servants to light them, how much the very wealthy owner of the house spent on candles.

Inside the house Jo knew that the answer to that last question had to be ‘a lot’. Even the entrance hall was warmly lit by candles in silver and pewter holders all around the walls. But they didn’t stay there in the entrance for long. After giving their names, liveried servants guided them through to the great hall, twice as high as the high-ceilinged entrance, where a party was just getting started. Again, there were candles, most of them in great, elaborate chandeliers suspended from the high ceiling. Warmth and light also came from a huge log fire in a hearth taller than Jo was.

Music was being played by a small group of musicians on a gallery above – the minstrel gallery, Jo realised with a shiver of excitement. Around the magnificent room people were drinking goblets of wine. She was handed one by a servant, but only tasted it, briefly, finding it too heavy for her palate.

The food provided for the feast was doubtful, too. She wasn’t exactly a vegetarian. She did have a sneaking liking for a lamb chop, but the side of roast ox and the whole suckling pigs, the huge meat pies, all looked far too much for her. Vegetables, she suspected, were considered food for peasants, unlikely to be on the menu.

“Come along,” The Doctor said to her. “I want you to meet Bess of Hardwick, the lady of the house.”

He guided her through the gradually denser throng to where a lady sat by the great hearth. She was elderly, perhaps in her late seventies, Jo guessed. She was dressed in a very fine gown of deep red damask with a velvet overgown open to display the finery. She wore a high ruff of the sort Queen Elizabeth was famous for and several strings of fine pearls, some in her greying hair piled high on her head.

The Doctor bowed to her in fine style, his cape swinging gracefully.

“Lady Elizabeth, it is good to see you again, and in such good health. May I present my young ward, Mistress Josephine Grant of Lambeth. Mistress Josephine, this is Lady Elizabeth, Countess of Shrewsbury.”

That, of course was her full title. “Bess’ was her name only to those who knew her, and perhaps to history.

“Lambeth. A goodly place to come from,” said the lady as Jo bent into what she hoped passed for a curtsy. As she rose, the countess was smiling benignly at her. “The Doctor is, indeed, a good friend, and so I may count you as a friend, too.”

“I hope so, Lady Elizabeth,” Jo answered. She wondered if she ought to curtsy again. It didn’t seem to be necessary.

“I wonder where my son is,” the Lady added. “Do you remember my William? He was but a boy of twelve years when you saw him last, my dear Doctor. Now he is a man with children of his own.”

Jo wondered at that. Surely the lady must have realised that The Doctor hadn’t changed a hair on his head in the time her son had grown up and become a father? He seemed to have charmed her into not noticing.

She was quite sure of that when a tall man with red hair and beard of the pointed sort seen in paintings of Stuart noblemen in the National Gallery threaded his way through the crowds accompanied by two teenagers, a boy who was a beardless junior version of him and a girl who would be turning heads herself in a few more years.

“William,” his mother said to him warmly. “Here is an old friend. Do you remember The Doctor?”

William looked at The Doctor and for a moment Jo thought he was puzzled, then he smiled widely and bowed his head as one nobleman acknowledging another of equal status.

“May I present my children, William and Frances,” he said. The two children made gracious bows and curtsies respectively and the same to Jo who they addressed as ‘madam’ before their father dismissed them to go to the food table and indulge themselves.

“Their mother died just two years ago,” William explained. “It has been hard on them. But happiness may yet return to our home. A new wife… a new mother for them….”

Lady Elizabeth interrupted him with a loud noise from her throat, as close as a human being could possibly come to a growl.

“That woman will never be wife or mother. I have warned you endlessly, William. You should set her aside and find an honest woman of our own sort.”

William had obviously heard the argument before. He looked from his mother and asked The Doctor if he had heard any news from London during his travels. Five days on, word of the Plot had reached the farthest corners of the realm by official reports and by gossip that as it ever had done, travelled even faster. Everyone was agog for confirmation from any traveller.

“The conspirators are being rounded up daily,” The Doctor answered, staying as vague as possible. “They will face the very severest penalties, of course.”

“Their names will be snuffed out for posterity,” William affirmed. “They will never be spoken of again,”

Jo smiled ironically. It was true that most people had forgotten Robert Catesby, the leader of the plotters and most of his followers. She thought one of them might have been called Tresham or something. But she had learnt about the Gunpowder Plot in junior school history and Guy Fawkes was as famous as any pop star of her time.

The Doctor talked some more about the likely fate of the Plotters, but Jo wasn’t very interested. She was more concerned about this woman that Lady Elizabeth disapproved of. It struck her as odd. ‘Bess’ had been charming and welcoming to her, a stranger to the house, and with no social position to speak of. Surely. she wasn’t such a snob as to object to William’s love because she was of common stock?

Jo left the company by the fireplace and found the two children with plates of food and cups of some sort of non-alcoholic honey drink. They filled a plate with choicest morsels for her and brought her into their conversation.

“What do you two think of this lady your father is seeing?” she asked after a few less dangerous observations.

‘She is a witch,” young Frances replied immediately and with an expression of one who had just sipped poison.

‘She is,” William junior agreed. “Father is bewitched by her. Everyone is except grandmother. She sees her the way we do.”

“What do you mean by that?” Jo asked.

“See now….” Frances answered, turning to look towards a new arrival at the party – as everyone else had turned, their conversations dying as they fastened upon a figure of universal interest.

Jo actually gasped in admiration of the beautiful woman who had entered the Great Hall. Her gown was of the purest white, so white it made the gown she herself was wearing look positively grey and dowdy. The crisp satin of the bodice was covered in pearls and the waistline was so slender it would have made Disney’s Cinderella envious. The ruff and collar were perfectly fixed. The skirt that flared out from the waist shone with silver thread that must have been woven through the fabric and more pearls randomly sewn on. Her hair was a warm blonde carefully arranged and decorated with more pearls.

Jo wondered how anyone in this age could own that many pearls.

This, surely was a princess at the very least. Her face was a perfect oval with clear complexion, bright green eyes and a mouth that seemed to smile naturally.

“She had no reason to come late,” Frances said scornfully. “She is staying in the east wing… in a whole suite of fine rooms, as guest of honour.”

William junior made a disgusted sound at the very idea. William senior, meanwhile, moved like a man in a dream through the parting crowd and took the lady’s hand. In the hush that had come across the whole company he smiled widely and announced the new arrival.

“May I present the Lady Persephone de Winter, my future bride.”

The lady curtseyed perfectly to the crowd who applauded warmly. William took his lady to his mother to introduce her. From the other side of the room Jo could see that Lady Elizabeth was not impressed. The Doctor, too, was looking at the Lady de Winter curiously even though he behaved courteously towards her.

‘She is… beautiful,” Jo said.

“No, she isn’t,” William junior told her. Frances grasped her hand.

“Look at me,” she said. “Then look back at her… but not directly… look at her from the corner of your eye… as if just catching an accidental glance.”

Jo tried to do what the girl suggested. At first, she didn’t understand. The lady was entrancing, dazzling….

Then in a side glance she saw what the children meant. She looked again and it was impossible not to see, now that she knew

The dress so admired by all was not shimmering satin. It was a shapeless grey thing that hung from a skinny, shapeless form.

The ‘Lady’ wearing the ugly dress was not beautiful, either. She was a hag, with grey, wrinkled skin, sunken eyes, a hooked nose and a mouth with thin grey lips. Her hands were not slender, graceful, but ugly talons that pressed into the flesh of William’s arm so far that blood was drawn.

How bewitched was he that he didn’t even feel the pain? And just how was it being done? How powerful was this woman that she could hold everyone in this great hall so completely in thrall?

“I don’t know how, yet, either,” The Doctor said. Jo wondered when he had moved across the room to be at her side. Perhaps she was a little bewitched after all, for here he was with a plate of food and a goblet of wine, looking for all the world like a reveller.

Jo realised that she hadn’t even asked ‘how’ even rhetorically. Her wonder must have been on her face.

“It doesn’t surprise me that you youngsters saw through her,” The Doctor added with a warm smile to the two offspring of the thoroughly bewitched William. “Children are harder to fool than grown ups with their closed minds and their certainties about the world.”

“What about Lady Elizabeth?” Jo asked. “She knows, too.”

“Bess can’t be fooled,” The Doctor answered. “She has lived to her great age through the transition from Catholic England under Mary to Protestant England under Elizabeth. She was a lady of the chamber through all of Queen Elizabeth’s whims and caprices, through Popish plots and Scottish intrigues. Now in her latter days she has seen the accession of Scots Jimmy and Gunpowder Plots. She married well and profited from the marriages. She never let herself be the common sort of obedient wife, answering to a husband. No wonder Bess isn’t fooled.”

“What can we do?” William junior asked. “How can we stop that witch marrying father? How long would he live if she did? How long would we… as his heirs… live under her…”

The boy was fifteen, his sister twelve. But both perceived the danger fully. Jo put her hand around Frances’ small, trembling one. The Doctor put his steadying hand upon William’s shoulder.

“We will prevent it,” he promised sincerely. The two youngsters looked at him and saw in his face what Jo had always seen in them – somebody they could trust absolutely with their young lives.

But promising them, and ensuring it was done, were two different things even for The Doctor. Jo wondered how he meant to bring it about.

The youngsters seemed reassured, at least. They thanked him sincerely before going to their grandmother across the other side of the press of dancing couples that filled the floor. Bess took the twelve year old Frances on her knee while young William sat close to her on a stool.

Jo watched them with a strange thought in her head. She had seen paintings of women like Lady Elizabeth in their stiff collars and extravagant ruffs, their severe expressions as they posed for artists. She had never really thought of such women as mothers and grandmothers, hugging the children without regard to the set of those ruffs or the sweep of their strings of pearls.

She saw them now as a real family who loved each other deeply and clung physically and emotionally to each other in the face of something very terrible.

 “How did this so-called Lady de Winter come here in the first place?”

“William brought her from Lancashire,” The Doctor answered. “He had been visiting Lathom, the home of the Earl of Derby… yes, another one whose county is at odds with his title. The Lady was there, apparently holding all in thrall. She somehow latched upon William and when he rode home she was at his side, her baggage upon a pack horse but no servant, not even a tiring woman. He insisted that she was a Lady of substance, and of position, but Bess never believed that for a moment.”

“She saw her for what she was right away?”

“Not at first, but she was suspicious. She spent many years at Court. She has had cause to know every noble family in these islands, and many European ones, too… every branch and scion. And having those suspicions she then saw the true face of the woman her son was calling his betrothed.”

“Didn’t she tell him what she knew?” Jo asked.

‘She tried. But the Lady's power over him seems absolute. Not just making him see what wasn’t there, but to hear all criticism of her as nothing more than disapproved of her lack of antecedents. He thinks his mother looks down upon his fiancée. There have been bitter words between them. And all over a witch who means them all harm.”

“Witch?” Jo was curious. She knew The Doctor didn’t believe in witches and witchcraft. She recalled the incidents at Devil’s End with The Master and the powerful aliens who called themselves the Daemons. He had insisted that witchcraft, even the harmless work of Miss Hawthorne, was nonsense and that science explained everything.

“It is what she would call herself,” The Doctor answered. “Exactly what she is, I still have to learn, but the word will do for now. I will be watching her very closely until I know just how dangerous she is.”

As long as the party lasted he was able to do that. Later, when the guests went home, lanterns receding into the dark, cold night, the Lady was absent. William said that she had gone to her chamber. She was tired from dancing.

“We are all tired,” Bess said. “We should all be in our chambers.”

She herself took the children to their rooms. William conducted The Doctor and Jo to the sumptuous guest suite where they were to sleep. Jo was relieved to find two adjoining bedchambers. The Doctor would be right next door. She had dreaded being in the same wing as that dreadful woman.

She slept surprisingly well considering all there was to think about and the fact that she was sleeping in a seventeenth century four poster bed with curtains around it and long tapestry covered bolsters for pillows as well as some pottery under the bed that served as an en-suite bathroom.

Her relatively untroubled sleep was disturbed near dawn by sounds from The Doctor’s chamber. She threw on a warm woollen gown over the bed kirtle and went through the dividing door without considering whether The Doctor was dressed suitably.

He was decently gowned and pulling on slippers as William Cavendish, similarly dressed for the night, hovered anxiously.

“Lady Elizabeth is ill,” The Doctor explained. “William has asked me to attend her.”

“Let me come, too,” Jo said at once. The Doctor nodded his assent. She would have gone anyway even if he had refused. She liked Lady Elizabeth. The thought that she was sick at her great age was disturbing. She wanted to do something, even if it was only a very little, to help.

The ante chamber to Lady Elizabeth’s room was buzzing with servants, some crying, some speculating wildly, all moving around randomly and without any purpose. The Doctor looked at them once then called out peremptorily.

“Find something useful to do or go back to your beds,” he said. “None of you are any help to your lady with this unseemly racket.”

His tone was such, even The Brigadier might have scurried off to read his dispatches. Lesser people had no argument. As they hurried away he crossed the room and entered the bed chamber itself. Jo and Sir William were a heartbeat behind and didn’t see what he did in the first moment.

“What was it?” Jo asked as he turned from a window that was fully open to the cold night air.

“A witch,” he answered. “Look….”

Jo and Sir William both looked. In a sliver of moonlight they could just see a dark figure climbing down the sheer side of the house without any obvious handhold or ivy to cling to. The figure just seemed to flow across the wall until it reached a widow near the east corner.

“My lady’s quarters,” Sir William gasped. “She is in danger.”

“Oh, don't you get it yet?” Jo replied scathingly. But Sir William was hurrying away and she turned her attention to the bed where The Doctor was carefully examining Lady Elizabeth. She was breathing with difficulty, her face grey and deathly sick.

“She has been poisoned,” he said. “But the poison was clearly not working fast enough. The witch tried to finish her off by strangulation. We got here just in time. Watch the door, Jo. I am repairing the physical damage with the sonic screwdriver in tissue repair mode. This would look a lot like more witchcraft to the people of this time. As for what I’m going to do next….”

“What ARE you going to do next?” Jo asked, but The Doctor didn’t answer. She checked that the ante-chamber was clear, and for good measure the corridor beyond there, then she came back to watch The Doctor perform what certainly did look like witchcraft. He was holding Lady Elizabeth’s head in his two hands. His eyes were closed tight as if he was concentrating very hard. As he did so a strange silvery grey film of dust appeared on the lady’s skin. After a little while it evaporated, and as it did she breathed easily with something of a healthy colour on her cheeks.

“What did you do?” Jo asked, aware that there were people hurrying towards the antechamber.

“I mentally forced the poison out of her body,” The Doctor answered.

You can do that?” She noticed that he clung momentarily to the bedpost. He hadn’t done it easily. There was a price to pay, mentally and physically. But he had saved Lady Elizabeth. Jo felt a warm wave ₃of gratitude towards him for that sacrifice.

But now there were people approaching. She couldn’t say any more about it. She stood back as Sir William, followed by several of his gentleman of the house, all waving swords, rushed into the bedchamber.

“My lady is gone,” he cried. “The fiend who harmed my mother has taken my fiancée.”

“Oh, for heaven's sake!” Jo turned and stormed up to Sir William. Before anyone could react in any way, she slapped him hard on the cheek. He stepped back, stunned. Some of his faster gentlemen turned their swords on Jo, but The Doctor was faster than any of them. In the blink of an eye he had parried them all and they were nursing stinging fingers while their swords fell to the floor.

"A witch!" Sir William cried in the moment of uncertainty after that. Everyone turned to the window where he pointed. To everyone not under any glamour the grey hag was stepping on empty air as she passed through the open window and landed on the carpeted floor. Francis and William junior were grasped tightly by her. They were terrified by their journey from their bedchamber but defiant, struggling against the vicious talons digging into their flesh.

"But… sir… that's the Lady Persephone!" One of the gentlemen protested.

"Do you want a slap, too?" Jo asked. "Stop her, why don't you?"

"Stay back, or these wretched children die," the witch said, viciously closing her hands around their necks. "You fool, William Cavendish. All you had to do was marry me, according to the law of this land, and I would be fully human. That's all I needed to make the transmogrification complete. But then your friends turned up… interfering… seeing through the glamour… poisoning you against me."

She moved around the room, dragging the frightened children along with her. Sir William ordered his men to step back from her. The Doctor held Jo's arm. She was ready to spring to the rescue, fearless as ever for her own life when others were at risk. But the witch was watching them all with sharply darting eyes and she could crush the life out of one or both of the children in an eyeblink.

"Let my children go," Sir William demanded as the standoff lengthened. "Let them go and… and I will do what you want. I will marry you… if that is what must be done to save my children."

The witch paused as if considering that offer, her back to the curtained four poster bed where Lady Elizabeth was still slumped after her near death at the hands of the evil creature.

"I mean it," Sir William repeated. "I will marry you…. I promise… on my honour as a Nobleman of the Court of King James."

"Over my dead body!" came an unexpected cry. The witch was startled and began to turn towards the last voice she expected to hear, but then three things happened at once. Francis took advantage of the distraction to bite her on the arm while William Junior kicked her in the shins. At the same moment Lady Elizabeth sat up and stabbed the witch between the shoulder blades with an ornamental dagger. The witch gave a cry of despair and slumped forward. This time Jo moved quickly, pulling the children away from the last desperate grasp.

The witch fell as if she was a felled tree and lay groaning in pain and trying to reach behind her back to the dagger.

"That was my father's weapon," Sir William remarked. "He gave it to my mother when he had to be away from her on Court business and he wanted her to feel safe."

"And I have kept it by my bed ever since," Lady Elizabeth replied. "Even when I shared it with two more husbands. This was the first time I had to use it."

"And well used, Madame," The Doctor said. He looked around at the two children, still holding Jo's hands. He wondered about taking them out of the room, but perhaps they needed to see what followed, so that they fully understood that their nightmare was over.

He reached down and pulled the dagger from the body. A gout of dark green and bad smelling liquid that might have been blood escaped from the wound and pooled around the witch. The liquid fizzed and burned the body until there was nothing left but a wide hole in the carpet and a deep scorch mark in the sturdy wood used in the floorboards of Hardwick House. The Doctor looked at it for a moment then threw a rug over the mark. It would do until the damage could be repaired.

"How could a body do that?" asked Sir William.

"A human body couldn't," The Doctor answered. "But she was a creature not of this good realm. You heard it from her own mouth."

"She fooled me," Sir William admitted. "She fooled us all."

"Not all," Jo told him. "Your mother and your children knew the truth. You need to show them that you're sorry for doubting them and that you love them above anyone else in the world."

The two children ran from her to their father and their grandmother. They all hugged each other a lot and cried a little. The Doctor hurried everyone else out of the bedchamber while Jo again remembered that Lady Elizabeth and her family were real, living people, not just portraits in a gallery wearing uncomfortable old-fashioned clothing.

"So… what was she?" Jo asked as The Doctor took her back to her bedchamber.

"I still don’t know," The Doctor admitted. "Something alien… a shape changer with strong powers of hypnotism. I don’t understand why she needed to be married to a human to become human. That is such an arbitrary thing. But the point is that she WAS defeated. It is over."

"It really is? But won't there be talk about a witch? Won't it cause misery for the family, still?"

"It will take a few days," The Doctor said. "Maybe a week or so, but the whole matter will start to feel like a bad dream. It was mostly just a glamour anyway. It will fade. Everyone around here will soon be talking about the Gunpowder Plot like everyone else in the country."

"Really? So they won't be worried about shape changing witches roaming around? The children… they'll be all right?"

"They'll be fine, all of them," The Doctor promised. "The children, and their children's children. Young William's descendants, the Cavendishes, the hereditary Dukes of Devonshire, are still the richest people in Derbyshire in your time."

Jo smiled widely. She was glad to know that.

"But to be on the safe side, we'll stay around for a little while. You can wear some more fabulous dresses and enjoy life in a Stuart country house."

And she was glad of that, too.