The Doctor and Yasmin walked around the exhibition in Sheffield's Millennium Art Gallery with a purpose that might have surprised any of the other visitors.

As its name implied, the Millennium Gallery was newly built at the start of the twenty-first century. By contrast the temporary exhibition it was currently hosting harked back to the city’s Tudor past – long before the industrial age it was more famous for.

“Mary, Queen of Scots was mad about tapestry,” Yas said, cutting through at least a page of the more academically worded guide book she had bought in the foyer. “While she was a prisoner under sort of house arrest, she did loads of them. Historians have found all sorts of secret symbolism in them, messages to, you know, posterity, about her feelings about being a prisoner and what her future might hold. And we all know what it DID hold.”

Yas made a sweeping gesture that mimed a sword being brought down on a slender neck.

“Yes,” The Doctor nodded. She knew as much about the turbulent Tudors as anyone else, here. More, in fact, since she had actually met most of them. She mentally skipped over her not entirely legitimate ‘marriage' to Elizabeth I. In her current incarnation that was a complication too many. Jousting and sword fighting with Elizabeth’s father, Henry VIII before the leg injury that put a stop to such sports for the king was another memory from her many adventures as a man. So was tutoring the young Prince Edward, Henry’s son by the tragically short-lived Jane Seymour in his Latin verbs.

She had not actually met Mary, Queen of Scots in either gender, but she had met her gaolers at the time when many of the tapestries on display were completed. Sir George Talbot, sixth Earl of Shrewsbury and his wife, the Countess, known to history as Elizabeth Hardwick, or more familiarly as Bess of Hardwick, had both looked upon her earlier faces as a friend.

“I think this is the one Ryan's dad saw in the paper,” Yas said, breaking into the Doctor's thoughts. “And he was dead on. Look, Doctor!”

The Doctor looked and understood why Mr Sinclair had got in contact with his son.

The centrepiece of this tapestry was a very detailed rural scene with deer galloping across a field and a building like a small castle in the distance. Around the scene was a frame of very symbolic flowers including the Tudor rose, white cinquefoils which had been on the arms of Hardwick, and purple thistle heads representing Queen Mary herself.

But in four corners of the frame were blue rectangular shapes, abstractly represented, but which could only be one thing.

The TARDIS!

“How did that get there?” Yasmin asked.

“I don’t know,” the Doctor answered. “And that really worries me. I can feel some predestination coming on.”

“Predestination?”

“Because we saw this, we HAVE to go back and find out WHY the TARDIS made it into sixteenth century needlepoint.”

“We’re going to Elizabethan England?”

“Elizabethan Sheffield,” The Doctor said looking closely at the castle in the image. “Let’s find the men.”

Neither Graham nor Ryan had felt that Tudor tapestries were their ‘thing'. They settled for coffee in the gallery cafe. Yas found them and the three hurried to meet the Doctor outside where the TARDIS was parked unobtrusively down a side alley where it wouldn’t be mistaken for a modern art installation.

Their destination in time and space called for a visit to the TARDIS wardrobe, a place the RSC would envy for suitable costumes for all occasions.

Yas loved dressing up as a Tudor noblewoman. Ryan and Graham weren’t quite so sure. Doublet and hose were rather embarrassing clothes to wear. Both felt vulnerable about the calves and ankles.

The Doctor, Yas thought, didn’t seem entirely happy about dressing up in a silk kirtle over a whalebone farthingale and multiple petticoats, either.

“This dress....” she sighed, smoothing down the lawn green fabric with her hands. “My granddaughter used to wear it.”

Yas's eyes widened in surprise.

“You were actually a grandmother at some time? “

“Grandfather,” The Doctor amended. “Long time ago. Don’t say anything to the others. That’s between us girls. But... I need to talk to Graham. There’s something I need him to do.”

Before she left the wardrobe The Doctor looked in a small chest of drawers and found a large medallion on a chain that she brought with her to the console room. She spent a little time with the medallion and the sonic. When she was satisfied she jabbed her thumb with a drawing pin and made a couple of drops of her blood fall on the back of the medallion.

“Graham, I need you to wear this,” she said with unaccustomed solemnity.

“Yeah, OK, Doc,” Graham answered, slipping it over his head and arranging it under his neck ruff. “What's the symbol and what does it do?”

“It is the Seal of Rassilon, a symbol of great power among Time Lords. What it does... in this instance... Look in a mirror. “

Graham looked. He was disconcerted to see the face of a grey-white haired man, maybe five or ten years older than himself, looking back.

“What the heck?” he asked.

“We all see you,” The Doctor explained. “Because we know you. But when we step out into Tudor times, everyone there will see me as I looked the last time I met the Earl of Shrewsbury. He’ll know you... As me.”

“What?” Graham was, to say the very least, nonplussed. “You want me to be you... To be the Doctor?”

“If we had any other choice, I wouldn’t think of it. But we're going to a man's world, where women do tapestry and look attractive to men. I'll never manage enough Power of Suggestion to convince Sir George and Lady Elizabeth that I have a new face AND a new gender.”

“Yeah... But... Can I pull it off? I'm not as smart as you. Nobody is.”

“The blood drop on the medallion... gives you a sort of psychic connection to me. It'll help you to act like you have....”

“Nerves of steel and the luck of the devil?” Graham smiled wryly and asked if he got to hold the sonic screwdriver.

“I’d better hold onto that,” the Doctor said. “Are we ready? We’ve landed.”

“I hope we’ve landed in the right place,” Ryan commented. “We’re going to look a bit stupid if we step out into Meadowhall Shopping Centre.”

They didn’t. The view on the big external screen was of a wide meadow where deer grazed quietly. In the middle distance was a building that would be recognised by anyone who had lived for any time in Sheffield.

“Manor Castle, “ Ryan confirmed. “As it looked originally. In our time there’s a lot less of it. Just the Turret House used as a visitor centre.”

“The castle in the tapestry,” Yas added.

“A hunting lodge and retreat for the Earl and his family,” The Doctor explained.

“Retreat?” Ryan commented. “The Sixth Earl owned at least three castles and stately homes and his wife had two in her own name in Derbyshire. What do they need a retreat for?”

“It probably isn’t a good idea to ask,” Graham told him. “Are we expected, Doc?”

“No, but I have an open invitation to drop in any time. Shall we go and meet the second richest people in Britain after the Queen herself?”

The TARDIS had landed at the edge of a shady copse of trees that offered it some camouflage and its crew a moment to adjust their eyes to a bright summer afternoon. It was January in their own time so nobody was complaining, though Yas wondered if the term ‘overdressed’ was heard of in the sixteenth century. She understood that the linen shift under all the layers soaked up sweat and kept the silk clothes fresh, but how often, then, was the linen shift thrown in the washbasket?

“Oh,” the Doctor said. “One quick thing before we present ourselves. We'd all better practice bowing and curtseying. Especially me. I'm not used to curtseying. But quite apart from the royalty we're going to meet, handshakes aren’t the norm, yet. People bow and curtsey to each other. Let’s just give it a try so we don’t look too stupid.”

It was a surprising, but at the same time obvious notion. They tried not to get the giggles as they bowed and curtseyed to tree trunks, not daring to do it with each other.

Graham did well first time, crediting some amateur dramatics and possibly some unconscious help from the Doctor. Ryan copied him a little clumsily at first but getting it in the end.

Yasmin got the curtsey first time. The Doctor herself wobbled twice before getting the hang of it.

“Never done it before,” she repeated. “Got it, now. Come on, let’s mingle with the Tudor upper crust.”

The practice was well timed. They had barely left the shade of the copse when they came across a party of men and women walking leisurely. Two servants approached, looking a little hostile at first. They were trespassing, after all.

Then a fifty something man in black and silver doublet called out cheerfully to The Doctor. She almost forgot the subterfuge they had arranged when she recognised George Talbot, the Sixth Earl.

Graham stepped forward and after a moment’s uncertainty did her proud.

“Sir George, pardon our unannounced arrival. May I introduce my wife, Grace....” Ryan gasped softly as his step-grandfather introduced The Doctor by the precious name of his grandmother. “And these are our wards, Yasmin and Ryan who are travelling with us to see something of England under the good Queen Elizabeth.”

Sir George bowed as an equal in social status to Graham, and deep and graciously to the Doctor and Yasmin. His bow to Ryan admitted him as kin to the Doctor, but a youth who had not yet earned parity with him.

But it was a respectful bow. Ryan and Yasmin had both wondered how colour might affect their welcome in this time. They were relieved to see it appeared to make no difference.

“You are come at an interesting time,” Sir George continued. “Know you of our Royal guest?”

“I do, indeed,” Graham answered.

“Come and be presented.”

That was sudden. They had all expected a little more protocol before getting to the top. But ready or not they were soon being presented to Mary, Queen of the Scots.

“Your Majesty,” Graham said, taking the lead again with a deep bow. Ryan followed him. The Doctor and Yasmin curtseyed gracefully to the red haired lady dressed in deep purple satin and silk with lighter purple thistle motifs around the collar and cuffs.

“Doctor, I have heard of you from Lady Elizabeth,” Mary said, nodding to the elegant lady beside her. “I am very pleased to make your acquaintance. I should be pleased to talk privately to you, later. But doubtless you have much to say to Sir George. Perhaps your good wife and Mistress Yasmin will accompany me back to the Lodge as part of my entourage.”

That suited The Doctor just fine. As one of the Queen's female confidants she would surely learn something of the mystery behind the tapestry.

Ryan and Graham went with Sir George to a wide courtyard between the outer wall and the lodge itself. There was a surprising piece of garden furniture – a life size chess board made of finely smoothed and polished wood.

“A match, Doctor,” Sir George called. “I have to win back the guinea you had from me at our last meeting.”

Ryan was worried. Did Graham know how to play chess?

“I’ve played a bit,” Graham assured him. “The rules are the same. Plus I’ve got the psychic connection with the Doc. She’ll help me out.”

The game worked by the two players standing at each end and calling their moves while a servant moved the giant pieces for Sir George and Ryan for The Doctor. Ryan only knocked two pawns and a knight over in the first game while the servant placed Sir George’s queen wrong twice, so he considered it a success.

Yasmin and The Doctor joined Queen Mary and the Countess of Shrewsbury as well as a selection of their ladies in waiting in a bright, airy day room, pleasantly furnished and as far from a prison cell as it was possible to imagine. The Queen of Scots was under confinement, with Sir George and Lady Elizabeth as her gaolers, but she WAS, after all, a queen, and cousin to the English queen. She had every luxury except her freedom.

Servants brought wine and cheese, apple tarts and other delicacies less recognisable to twenty first century eyes.

After those refreshments the women turned to a huge frame upon which a tapestry was part completed.

Yasmin nudged the Doctor in suppressed excitement. Without a doubt, this was the tapestry from the gallery.

But it wasn’t finished, yet. Part of the meadow with the deer was still blank fabric and the frame with the flower and TARDIS motifs hadn’t even been started.

“Are we too early?” Yas asked.

“Not TOO early,” the Doctor replied. “Just about right to sort out what's bothering everyone.”

“When we find out what that is, “ Yas noted. “And if you're thinking of finding out over group tapestry I should warn you I’m not much of a sewer. If I had ever wanted to do that sort of girlie stuff I’d never have become a police officer.”

“Its not something I’ve tried before, either,” The Doctor admitted. “I preferred temporal physics to needlepoint at school.”

It looked complicated. Yas sat amongst the women and watched what they were doing before taking up a needle already threaded with beautifully fine and delicate silk yarn. She started to insert small stitches into a block of one colour that didn’t need any creativity.

The Doctor looked for a few moments then began to stitch confidently. Time Lords never needed long to master a new skill. The slender female hands of this regeneration quickly adapted to a pursuit that previous incarnations would never have contemplated.

As skilful as it was using coloured threads to depict a scene, it wasn’t temporal physics. It wasn’t even rocket science. The women talked as they worked. Mostly it was just gossip, the sort of thing women have always talked about whenever two or more were gathered together.

But as the Doctor and Yasmin gradually gained the confidence of the group, they began to talk about something more vital and immediate that concerned them.

“I saw the faceless woman again, this morning,” one of the Queen’s ladies in waiting said, laying down her needle as she spoke. Her hand trembled too much to continue. “When I opened the curtains in your room, my Lady. She was there on the lawn... Looking up at me.”

“Its an evil omen,” another of the ladies said in a thick Scottish accent of one who had come south to England with her royal mistress.

“It may well be so,” Queen Mary responded with a slight shudder despite a brave attempt to preserve her dignity. “Goodness knows what the future holds for any of us....”

By ‘us' she clearly meant ‘herself’. At this stage in the complicated relationship between the English and Scottish Crowns she was not under sentence of death, but her enemies had the ear of her cousin, Elizabeth, and any hint of a plot, even if she was innocent of it, might change this genteel house arrest with all of the comforts and courtesies into a cold cell and a death warrant.

What was very clear, was that the Queen and her ladies fully believed in the ‘faceless woman’. Lady Elizabeth and her courtiers were also concerned about the sightings. Lady Elizabeth mentioned that there were no strange or unnatural sightings before this. The Manor Lodge was too new to have any dark history of hauntings. But she nevertheless could not rule such a thing as hysteria or fantasy.

“If she is faceless, how could she look at you?” Yasmin asked the Lady in waiting who had brought the subject into their conversation.

“I... don’t know, “ the lady, addressed as Margaret by the group around her answered. “But she WAS looking up at me. The head was turned upwards, and even without features, I felt as if she was looking intently at me... As if her eyes were burning into me... Even though there were no eyes.”

All of the Queen’s ladies and two of Lady Elizabeth’s gentlewomen had similar stories.

“I am glad The Doctor is here,” Lady Elizabeth said. “He has been a wise counsellor and a brave defender of all that is godly and wholesome and of proper nature in the past. I pray that he may be so again in this strange time.”

“I am sure The Doctor will do his best,” The Doctor said. “Tell me more about this strange woman. I will relate the details to him later. How was she dressed, for a start.”

There the stories differed. Mistress Burns, known around the tapestry circle as Meg, was the earliest witness to the strange woman’s presence. She described her as wearing nothing but a long white shift with long silvery-white hair hanging loose. The next to see her, Lady Fiona McGillivray, said that she was more fully dressed in a kirtle and overgown of white and her hair was darker.

On each sighting the faceless woman was more completely and properly dressed. At the same time her hair changed to a rich red.

“Red?” Yas looked at Queen Mary and Lady Elizabeth. Both were red haired. Mary was famous for it, though Yas thought there was something in the history books about it turning out to be a wig that fell off when she was beheaded.

Queen Elizabeth was famously ginger, too. Was there something in that?

The latest version of the lady was distinctive in other ways as The Doctor’s careful questions elicited from Margaret, the latest witness.

“She was magnificently dressed,” Margaret explained. “Her kirtle was crimson satin and her gown a deep purple velvet. Her ruff and collar were perfectly set as if a tiring woman had spent an hour upon it. Her red hair was perfectly arranged upon her head. She looked ready for court – except for her face.”

“Crimson and purple,” Queen Mary mused. All except Yasmin who had never heard of the Sumptuary Laws that restricted some rich colours and fabrics only to the higher ranks of society understood her unspoken question.

“Whatever is intended, will happen very soon,” The Doctor said. “The danger is imminent.”

“Thanks be to God that The Doctor is here,” Lady Elizabeth said. “We may depend on him to protect us all.”

Yas looked at The Doctor as she heard those confident words from Lady Elizabeth. There was a flicker of something in her eyes. Irritation at the subterfuge that had been necessary. Women like Lady Elizabeth and Queen Mary put their faith in the strength of men. They expected to be protected by them.

Yas wondered what was going to happen when this mysterious woman showed her true purpose.

And how would The Doctor fight her without giving away her true identity, which she surely would have to do.

Graham and Ryan had an entertaining afternoon playing chess and then, later, retiring inside to the gentleman's room, a large, comfortably furnished drawing room where tobacco was smoked by some and port wine drunk by all. The alcohol was soaked up by apple tarts and what was called cheesecakes, literally a sort of bread with cheese inside, not the dessert Ryan knew in his time.

The fact that neither Ryan nor The Doctor – aka Graham – indulged in the ‘drinking of tobacco’ was remarked upon by Sir George.

“You may be right not to have taken up the habit,” he said lightly. “There are some who condemn it as unnatural to civilised men’s constitutions. Though I understand the natives in the Americas have indulged for generations without harm.”

Ryan smiled and thought about the centuries of smoking habits, with the invention of cigars and cigarettes as well as the pipes smoked here. And only in perhaps the last fifty or sixty years of that history did anyone seriously question whether it was healthy.

Neither Graham nor Ryan drank as much as the other gentlemen of the house, and nor did they fall asleep, sprawled on chairs and snoring noisily, which seemed to be how they habitually spent the hours before the evening meal.

Sir George was made of sterner stuff than his gentlemen. He was the one remaining man awake and in command of his faculties. He invited Graham and Ryan to stroll with him in the long gallery.

“Your coming to the Lodge is fortuitous, Doctor,” he admitted now that he was free to speak. “There is a shadow over us all. No doubt my wife and her ladies will have talked to your own ladies about it. I wish it were not so. I know how they will fashion the story. There has been talk of an ungodly figure, a witch or some such thing. For myself I don’t know the truth of that. I don’t tend to believe what I have not seen with my own eyes. But there is a weight upon me that I cannot fully explain. This Lodge which has always been a cheerful place where my family have been at ease, feels like a dungeon, a prison, that keeps us all in darkness.”

“A prison?” Ryan queried. “That’s strange, hearing you say that. I thought that was the last thing this house was, even though you have a prisoner.”

Graham nodded. Ryan had expressed his own thought.

“The prisoner... Is freer than her guards. If she were to attempt any treason, or effect an escape, the wrath of Queen Elizabeth would fall upon Bess and myself, though we are both her favourites now. We live in fear of some plot from outside. I wish the burden could be lifted from us. I wish to God the burden had never been placed upon us. Bess and I would be a happier couple without it. And I doubt we would be troubled by unnatural creatures if it were not for our ‘guest'.”

“You think the Queen is the reason why these things are happening?” Graham asked.

“I know not, in truth. But this family was never troubled by such things until she came.”

It occurred to Graham, without any psychic insight from The Doctor, that Sir George and Lady Elizabeth could do with some marriage guidance. The strain of being in charge of their royal prisoner was telling on them. Perhaps, after all, it was no more than that which sat so heavily upon him.

Then Ryan gave a yelp of surprise and fear mixed together. Graham and Sir George both turned towards the window where he pointed.

Both gasped at the sight of the faceless woman who, though without features was nevertheless staring in at them with an undoubtedly malevolent intent. That intent was felt by all three men as they stared back, unable to look away.

Then Sir George moved. He grabbed up his sword and ran for the door from the Long Gallery into the lawn garden where the strange woman stood. Graham ran after him. Ryan paused for a moment longer, wondering whether to grab a sword, too. But with his dispraxia, he would probably cut himself first. He decided against it.

In any case, by the time they reached the place where she had been seen, the woman was gone.

“No footprints,” Ryan observed. “But the ground is firm. It doesn’t really help to prove anything.”

“Fled,” Sir George railed. “I shall have a double guard upon the house. If she comes again we shall have her. Then when she is unmasked we shall know the truth of the whole matter.”

“You think she was wearing a mask?” Graham asked.

“What else could it be? This is a game of wills. Some enemy thinks to undo our senses and bring us down. But it will not work. Bess and I are not weak-minded fools. Nor, I think, is our prisoner. We will none of us be deceived by mummery. “

“That’s the spirit,” Graham told him enthusiastically. But he knew what he had seen was no mask. One look at Ryan's face told him that he didn’t believe that, either.

But then what WAS the faceless woman and what was going on?

For all the self confidence The Doctor was lending him with her medallion, Graham was at a loss just now. He really wanted to talk to her face to face. But there was no opportunity, yet. Sir George seemed determined not to let anyone brood upon ungodly beings he himself didn’t believe in. Before dinner he had all the curtains in the Great Hall closed and candles lit in gilded candelabras that made the room bright. Then he roused his gentlemen and set them to entertainments that would pass the hours.

Dinner was roast venison. Everyone tried not to think about the deer roaming the parkland outside and ate pragmatically. The conversation was deliberately light. Afterwards there was music until it was time to retire to bed.

Finally, the time travellers could consult each other privately in the rooms given over to them.

They gathered on the huge four poster bed that Lady Elizabeth had assumed would suit ‘The Doctor’ and his ‘wife'. Later they were going to have to sort out who was sleeping where, but for now they were discussing the mystery woman.

“There are a lot of mutable species that can take on any form they like, “ The Doctor told her friends. She named a few possibilities, including one that concerned her more than the others. “Zygons jump straight to mind, and impersonating high born Tudors is right up their street, but they don’t lurk around without faces, and they usually kidnap the person they want to impersonate to get their pattern.”

“Stuart, not Tudor,” Yas said almost casually.

“What?” The Doctor looked at her quickly.

“Queen Mary is a Stuart, isn’t she?” Yas explained. “Not a Tudor.”

The Doctor had been thinking of a time, not as long ago as it seemed, when she had dealt with a Zygon Queen Elizabeth. But Yas had brought her back to the present situation with a startlingly obvious point.

“It IS Mary that this faceless woman wants, isn’t it?” Yas continued. “She’s the most important person here. I mean, Sir George and Lady Elizabeth are rich, but they’re not royalty. It must be to do with her. That’s why the clothes are so royal looking.”

“I think you're right,” The Doctor said. “Which makes the bedroom arrangements much simpler. You three pick a bed each. I'm going to sit up in the Queen’s room and keep an eye on her.”

The Doctor gathered a warm woollen bed gown around her kirtle and departed. The others played rock, scissors, paper for the biggest bed. Yas won. Graham and Ryan took the smaller and less elaborate beds in the two side rooms. With candles blown out, and no lights beyond the windows except for a sliver of a crescent moon and a scattering of stars, the three city dwellers got used to sleeping in the dark.

The Queen had one candle by her bedside by which she was reading a bible when The Doctor swapped places with her usual bedroom companion and got comfortable on a low, narrow couch under the mullioned window.

“The Doctor asked me to have a special care for you,” she explained.

“Many people have a special care for me,” the Queen answered. “But thank you. I feel as if your presence in my Chamber is a comfort. There is much to fear by night and by day.”

“You don’t just mean the mysterious woman, do you?” The Doctor queried. One of the most admirable traits the troubled Queen with her uncertain future had displayed when surrounded by others was a dignified resignation to her situation. But here, in the dark, speaking in low voice with one confidant, she could give in to her inner feelings.

“I have enemies enough without such creatures,” she admitted. “Those who dislodged me from throne, family, country, would see me dead. My royal cousin in London knows full well my death would relieve the tension between our nations and only stays her hand from my death warrant because for one Queen to have another Queen put to death would be a stain upon her soul. Sir George and Lady Bess are good to me, but I am a trouble to them. Bess suspects her husband of paying too close a courtship to me, though it is not so. Sir George resents that acting gaoler to me prevents him from seeking advancement at Court. I fear if there is no worse consequence of my existence, I may be the cause of a marriage breaking apart.”

“I am sorry to hear that,” The Doctor said truthfully. “I like them both well and should hate to see them unhappily separated. But do not lay the blame wholly to yourself. Bess is a very strong woman with ideas of her own. Marriage, with the implied dominance of a husband over her does not sit well to begin with.”

“I understand that,” The Queen admitted. “As an anointed queen, I certainly resent any man trying to dominate me – even a husband. I suppose it is at least one reason for my troubles.”

“Your cousin, Queen Elizabeth, has much the same view of husbands.”

“Aye, that she does.” Mary sighed deeply. “It is the intrigues of men that winds us both in such dangerous knots. Would that I had freedom to make a choice about my future, I would renounce all worldly claims and seek a nunnery's cloistered peace.”

“Really?” The Doctor was surprised. “I never thought of you as a pious woman. You have enjoyed the fruits of noble birth – the fine clothes, the comfortable homes, the adoration of men. Could you give all that up?”

“I believe I could,” Queen Mary admitted. Then she laughed softly. “As long as I am in cousin Elizabeth’s Protestant England that is a hopeless wish. Her father closed all the convents.”

“That is a difficulty,” The Doctor admitted. She wondered how much she could say to reassure a clearly troubled woman. She didn’t dare offer her any sort of hope for the future even if there was any to give. The fate of Mary, Queen of Scots was a historical fact. There was no changing it.

“You are kind,” Queen Mary said to her. “I shall remember you in my prayers. The Doctor, too. Bess and Sir George have both assured me that he will do his best to resolve this immediate and frightening trouble of ours. And... That his best is as good as any of us might hope for. I am comforted by those assurances.”

“He will be gratified to know that,” The Doctor told her with a wry smile that was lost in the dark. “You really ought to sleep, now, your Majesty. You need your strength.”

“Aye.” The Queen put away her bible and blew out her candle. There were sounds of a head settling on a pillow and then, soon after, quiet, regular breathing.

Outside the window all was quiet except for the night-time noises of semi-wild deer and an occasional nocturnal bird. There was a sound of tramping boots every half hour or so. That was the double guard Sir George had promised, but all other souls were asleep.

On the face of it there was no reason for anyone not to sleep soundly, certain of absolute safely.

But The Doctor knew that there was great danger. She had ruled out at least a dozen mutable species including the Zygons she had talked about, and including two non-human creatures native to Earth that were part of human folklore. She had also dismissed Sir George's belief that the phantom woman was merely a human in a mask. Graham and Ryan had both seen her clearly and their descriptions of the featureless flesh were detailed enough to convince her.

She still had a couple of ideas about the species, and how to fight it. She wouldn’t be absolutely certain until it made its final move. And that had to be imminent. The template was almost complete.

All it lacked was a face.

The Doctor kept her vigil through the dark of the night. Slowly, the imminent dawn began to lighten the sky outside the window. Not that the coming of the day made the danger any less. The facsimile had been seen in full daylight. It could come at any time, regardless of how many guards Sir George set to patrol the garden.

The Doctor kept watch by the window. It seemed almost certain the final assault would be through the glass. Every sighting of her had been at a window. The fact that they were in an upstairs room made no difference to that calculation.

The sun had been up just over an hour when it was suddenly blocked by the shape of a finely coiffured head with a high Elizabethan ruff and stiff collar.

The Queen was still asleep, but The Doctor was wide awake and ready. She put herself between the window and the bed, sonic screwdriver held out like a wand as the woman who looked completely human, albeit capable of floating in mid air, now came forward as if the window - glass, leading and the wooden frame - didn’t exist. She stood inside the room, now, looking at The Doctor with the face of Mary Stuart, Queen of the Scots.

“You won’t get past me,” The Doctor told her, though she was not entirely certain of that. Something that could walk through unopened windows could probably get past flesh and blood, even Time Lord flesh and blood, easily enough.

“And me!” Graham cried from the suddenly opened door before he strode forward and stood beside The Doctor armed with a dagger. Ryan rushed in after him, tripping on the edge of the carpet but keeping his feet and taking his place beside The Doctor as well. Yas said nothing as she went to the bed where the Queen was now wide awake and asking what was going on.

“Stay where you are, your Majesty,” the Doctor said without taking her eyes off the facsimile Queen. “I mean her Majesty, not you, of course,“ she added keeping her eyes on the still unidentified creature. “But you can stay put, anyway.”

Curiously, that was just what it was doing. Something seemed to hold the creature back now that she was this close to her target. She stood there, a low, insistent growl in her throat, but without taking another step forward.

“Now why is that?” The Doctor wondered aloud. “Maybe... No... Wait... I wonder... Let me see.” She fingered the controls of the sonic screwdriver and then scanned the creature quickly.

“Artificial,” she said. “Interesting. Very interesting. Unexpected, but interesting. No, stay put,” she added when the creature tried to dodge past Ryan as if he formed part of a line back in American football.

“What’s artificial?” Graham asked. “I mean, apart from her. But we knew that.”

“Everything about her is artificial, including her clothes. But if that’s... Hang on. Wait... Oh yes, I get it. She's a plasticia. An artificial form imitating life, but not life. Ryan... Slap her left hand, would you. Catch hold of what she's holding.”

Ryan accomplished part of the instruction. He slapped the hand, but he failed to catch the small object. Instead he had to dive after it and clamber back to his feet.

“Just as I thought,” The Doctor said, examining the marble sized object. “Localised, short hop transmat. That’s how she's been getting around here like some kind of will-o-the-wisp. She got past the window with all its organic components – wood, lead, glass – heat fused silicone, of course. She couldn’t get in otherwise. She can’t get through anything made of natural substances. She can’t even touch anything like that. Even her clothes are synthesised.”

“She’s wearing gloves,” Graham pointed out. “Doesn’t that mean she can touch us?”

“Not long enough to do us any harm. Not while we're wearing silk made from fibres spun by Chinese caterpillars, linen and cotton harvested from plants, leather from animal hides....”

The facsimile hissed angrily and reached towards Graham, but he pulled her glove off and she retracted her hand from him.

And while she was distracted, Yas had quietly moved around from the bed on one side while Queen Mary herself moved on the other. Yas threw a silk shawl over the creature’s head while the Queen got her around the neck with a string of pearls – grown organically inside oyster shells. The facsimile gave a strangled cry and fell to her knees.

“That was easy,” Ryan commented.

“I hope it wasn’t too easy,” Graham countered thinking of traps aliens had drawn them into before this.

“No,” The Doctor assured them. “We found her vulnerability. Yas, Your Majesty, nicely done.”

“Release me,” the facsimile cried with a hoarse voice slightly muffled by the silk. “Please... It hurts. Please do not torture me so.”

“I don’t intend to torture you... For long,” The Doctor answered. “Not if I have the truth from you. Why were you trying to replace the Queen?”

“To carry out the plot to take the throne of England. My master has tried to persuade the real Queen to conspire with him, but she refused. “

“Of course I refused,” The Queen responded scathingly. “I would never try to take my cousin's rightful throne. If I could wrest my own Scottish crown back, I would. But I am not, have never been, never shall be, an enemy of England. I wish to God my cousin would understand that.”

“But....” Yas began, thinking of the plots that eventually led to Mary’s death warrant and her removal from genteel house arrest to close confinement and execution. Wasn’t she a part of all that?

“I would never....” Queen Mary repeated.

“Which is why I was sent....”

“You would have killed me to take my place?” Queen Mary asked.

“It is my purpose,” the facsimile replied. “My Master wishes it.”

The Doctor shuddered. She really didn’t like that name.

“Who is your master?” she demanded.

The facsimile resisted briefly, but when Yas threatened to wrap a girdle of cloth of gold around her waist she gave up the name.

The Doctor suppressed a sigh of relief. It wasn’t THAT master. She recalled a minor player in the plot that eventually sent Mary to the axeman. How that man managed to take control of an alien with such interesting skills was a question that she couldn’t answer right now, but at least she didn’t have a bigger problem to sort out.

“It's not happening,” The Doctor said. “History is finely balanced as it is at this time. It doesn’t need you in the mix.”

“What do you want to do... Grace?” Graham asked, still keeping up the pretence that he was The Doctor and The Doctor was his wife. He wasn’t sure if the pretence hadn’t been blown in the past few minutes, but he was ready to try, at least.

“You and I will deal with her,” The Doctor answered. “Yas, you stay with the Queen. Ryan, see if you can find her own women. There should have been at least three of them in the ante chamber.”

“They were all hiding in a cupboard on the stairs when we came by,” Graham said. “They saw her hovering in mid air outside and panicked.”

The Doctor nodded to Ryan to find the superstitious women and get them back to their work of attending the Queen. She and Graham brought the facsimile out to the empty antechamber where she paused and looked at the confiscated transmat device.

“We can save a walk and avoid any awkward questions from anyone up and about in the Lodge,” she said to Graham. “But stand close to me and her. Transmats are nauseating. It helps if more than one body shares the experience.”

Graham stood close. The Doctor pressed the device. Moments later he was seeing flecks of light in front of his eyes and the TARDIS door beyond them. The Doctor opened the door and pushed the facsimile in front of her. Safe inside the console room she removed the silk shawl but left the pearls to subdue the prisoner.

“Where are we taking her?” Graham asked. “Is there some kind of space prison she can go to?”

“There are several,” The Doctor answered. “All dreadful places where she would face hundreds of years of misery. What I have in mind is shorter and more decisive. It... would probably be a good idea not to refer to her as ‘her’ and ‘she’, actually. It will make it easier to be dispassionate about what happens next.”

“What is happening next?” Graham asked.

The Doctor didn’t say. She set the TARDIS destination for a little after two o’clock in the morning of February 8 1587, in a cold, barely furnished room of Fotheringhay Castle, Northamptonshire.

Graham knew enough Tudor history to know what that night presaged. When they stepped out of the TARDIS to see a startled Queen Mary standing alone in the middle of the room, having risen from her prayers, he was far less surprised than she was.

“Doctor... You... At the last... You kept your promise.”

Perhaps being shriven and ready to meet her death stripped away all artifice, or perhaps it was some deeper instinct, but this time Mary addressed the real Doctor.

“I am here,” she said. “Do you remember that night when I sat with you in the dark of your chamber and you expressed a desire to live quietly in a nunnery and cause no trouble to anyone? “

“I do. But it is too late. In only a few hours....”

The Doctor brought the facsimile out of the TARDIS.

“This creature was made to take your place,” The Doctor told Mary. “I think it is time to let her fulfil her destiny. “

“Wow... that’s....” As both Graham and Queen Mary realised what the plan was, his thoughts wavered from horror and astonishment that The Doctor would so coldly condemn the creature to appreciation of how brilliant, though still rather macabre, the idea was. He still had a few misgivings, but....

But, after all, it was a matter of history that an execution was going to take place soon after dawn. And in the short time he had known her he had come to be impressed by the Scots Queen’s quiet dignity and courage. He especially admired how she had acted along with Yas to subdue the facsimile. Many people in her position would have merely sat and watched.

And if his memory of school history was right, hadn’t she denied any part in the conspiracy she was accused of? Saving an innocent woman from a nasty death seemed like a way of justifying the substitution of the facsimile.

Queen Mary's quiet dignity stood her well as she briefly viewed the amazing TARDIS interior. Her courage came when they landed again a few minutes later.

“Where are we? “ Mary asked as they stepped out into a grey flagged courtyard with walls around. It could have been another prison but for a church bell and a sound of prayers being said aloud by a crowd of voices.

“Northern France, where convents haven’t been closed and the old faith prevails. They are expecting a Sister Mary to join them in their life of quiet contemplation. Of course, nobody must ever know the truth. Mary, Queen of Scots is dead. You understand?”

“I understand,” Mary answered. She took a deep breath and stepped forward, towards that new life. “Thank you, Doctor.”

She spoke without looking back. A sudden movement of air and a noise she had heard just once before, when she had thought all hope was lost, told her that The Doctor was gone, along with that strange blue box.

At breakfast, back at Manor Lodge, nobody had mentioned the events of early morning, but it felt as if a weight had been lifted from everyone’s shoulders. Sir George was in good humour and talked especially kindly to his wife, who reciprocated with a warm smile. Queen Mary looked less worried than she had been for many weeks. Her future was still dark, and uncertainties remained, but at least they were matters she understood. Unnatural beings were no longer threatening her peace.

Afterwards the men went riding and the women to their tapestry. There was some surprise all around when The Doctor was found sitting alone at the canvas. There was even more surprise when they saw that each corner of the frame had been embroidered with rectangular shapes in bright blue thread.

“Your Majesty,” The Doctor said. “You so often place secret messages in your needlework. This is a message for YOU. When things are as dark as they could possibly be... and I'm sorry to say that such darkness is unavoidable... But at that time... Look out for a blue box. Help will come to you in that box. I promise you as much.”

“Thank you... Doctor,” Queen Mary of the Scots answered. Around her it was possible that some power of suggestion let others hear something else, but Mary saw the truth.

Later, Yas had something to say to the Doctor. Several things, in fact.

“Graham told us what you did. I'm glad. I liked her, and her execution was horrible. Three swings of the axe to cut off her head. Uggh. But you couldn’t have got to her before the last night?”

“I couldn’t risk the facsimile and her ‘Master’ causing more trouble than is recorded in history. As it is, I’m still not sure how a minor English noble got hold of the technology, but since he got rounded up in the wake of the ‘Babbington Plot' and went to the axenan himself, it really doesn’t matter.”

“Graham also told us how good that psychic connection with you is. He woke this morning knowing you needed help in the Queen’s bedroom.”

The Doctor smiled.

“Don’t ever tell Graham, but there WAS no psychic connection. That was a lie to make him feel he could act like ‘The Doctor’.”

“You know, I thought it might have been.” Yas grinned conspiratorially. “Don’t worry. I won’t tell him. Besides, that means his instinct that we needed help and his bravery in coming and standing between us and the danger was all him, and in a lot of ways that’s better.”

“Yes, quite so,” The Doctor confirmed, pleased that another of her Human companions had the brains to work it all out. Proof, if it were needed, that she had the team she needed for whatever came next.