

THE  
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PROJECT

**Freedom Fighter**



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*Washington DC*  
*August 20, 1998*

The dead were pounding on the door. The sun was setting, the world was quiet; the television cast a sickly blue sheen across the darkened living room, and outside the dead were pounding on the door, wanting to come in.

Martin Silverstein ran his hands through his tangle of brown hair. It hadn't been combed for days, and was as unruly as the unchecked beard flourishing on his chin. There wasn't time. There wasn't water. And there wasn't exactly a lot of point; being ugly wouldn't save you from the kiss of death. *Speaking of ugly*, Martin thought, as he prodded the slick greenish mass in the bottom of a beaker. It was the remains of a grabber, broken down into its composite organic soup. It hadn't been pretty. And it hadn't been fast. And therein lay the problem.

It was less than a year ago a fisherman had hauled the first one out of the Mississippi, attached to the shell of a turtle. It was green, jellid, weak tendrils holding it in place as it hitchhiked through the muddy water. It was a creature utterly unknown to science. Creationists called it proof of God's will in action. Evolutionists called it amazing, a fascinating link between vertebrate and invertebrate. The press, taken by its slimy cuteness and its ten photogenically flailing arms, called it Gertie Grabber.

Within months they were commonplace. *Now that we know what we're looking for*, the argument went, *we're finding them everywhere*. They were found from the coldest ice-covered waterways of Alaska to the hottest equatorial jungle. The grabber soon superseded iguanas, hermit crabs, tarantulas and bush babies as the ultimate wow-factor pet.

The first victim was some guy in New Caledonia. He was found face down in the sand at low tide, seaweed tangled in his hair, his long board bobbing abandoned in the surf. At first they thought he'd lost his footing, drowned in the treacherous waters. Then they looked again.

A massive Pacific Grabber, bluer and less slimy than their freshwater counterparts, was wrapped around his throat. But he hadn't been strangled; the tendrils were more like a loving embrace than a death-grip. They held the grabber's surprisingly firm body nestled against the base of the dead man's skull. The tiny pincers ringing its maw were firmly embedded in his brain stem.

A gurgle wrenched Martin back to the present. He rubbed his tired eyes, took a swig of the long-cold instant coffee. It wasn't supposed to be like this. He was supposed to be a simple story of Jewish kid does good. Decent education, nothing Ivy-League, but decent. His early work in biology had seemed a mishmash of two separate strands; the clinical coldness of figures on datasheets contrasted roughly with the messy, dirty biological confusion of the real world he discovered on field trips. Biochemistry combined the two, tamed the wildness and unpredictability into something quantifiable. Controllable. Martin liked control. He liked being master of a nice house in one of the nicer Washington suburbs. He liked being the breadwinner while Lisa attended to charity and looked after little Rachel. He liked the well-ordered normality of it all.

So what was he doing here? That wretched man could talk him into anything. And this was where it got him: barricaded in a makeshift lab in his own living room, while the dead battered at the door.

As reports leaked out of the South Pacific, panic spread across the globe. Parents called their children away from the water. Thousands of suddenly unwanted pet grabbers were corralled in pet shops. They couldn't be put down, since no humane method had yet been found to dispatch the resilient little critters. In the playground, the big boys told the little girls how the grabbers in the duck pond could suck their brains out through their noses, and the little girls pretended to not believe them.

Martin reached into the lidded tank with the long silver tongs that until a few days ago had served salad from Lisa's coloured glass bowls. He latched onto a grabber, shook it free as it tried to cling to its colleagues as the biochemist hoiked it out of the tank and into a large beaker. It thrashed bad-temperedly in the bottom, as though it knew what was in store. Perhaps it did, Martin mused. After the first attack, there had been more. And more. It was as though a switch had been tripped, as if some unheard command was murmured into the grabbers' sealed ears. That wretched man -

the one who'd convinced Martin to slather grabbers with various acids - had suggested some kind of group mind. It didn't make sense to Martin; there was no scientific rationale for long-distance mind-to-mind communication. But neither was there a scientific rationale for grabbers in Arkansas suddenly knowing how to make their victims get up and walk around, just hours after those pioneering South Pacific grabbers mastered the art of controlling their victims' bodies.

The grabber made a nasty noise as the acid hit. It wasn't pleasant stuff, and Martin didn't want to think about where his friend might have picked it up. But it seemed to be fast; within moments the grabber began to dissolve, until there was nothing but a murky biological soup and a few strands of ligament swirling in the bottom of the beaker. Martin sniffed it cautiously, then on a whim dropped a tiny amount onto some litmus paper. Dead neutral. Strange.

"Dad, that is *soooooo* gross." Rachel pulled a disgusted face as only a prepubescent girl could. She held her fingers over her nose and wrinkled her brow. Martin looked at his daughter. She looked so little, standing in the semi darkness in her too-short nightie and bedsocks flopping at the toes. She didn't look just a year or two shy of the terrible teens. She still looked like Daddy's precious little girl. He suddenly realised it was dark, the blue pall of the television the only light in the room. Where was Lisa? She should have been home by five. Rachel was asking when Mum would be home, when they were going to have tea.

That reminded Martin he hadn't eaten since some time that morning. Or was it yesterday? His hungry child plucked the still-bubbling beaker out of his hands and plonked it down on the coffee table so sharply Martin was afraid it would break. He had visions of the chemical washing across the table, scarring his precious daughter's hands. But the glass held firm, almost as firm as the look in Rachel's eyes.

"Dad, it's not like you have to cook or anything," she said in chiding, singsong tones, "there's pizza in the freezer."

Martin dragged himself from the alien invasion threatening his world to the everyday demands of domesticity.

"Pizza. Right."

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Martin was scraping the burnt slick of cheese off the pizza pan when he picked out a new rhythm in the constant pounding outside. Their special rhythm, the beat from Their Song. Lisa was home. Martin dropped the pan with a clatter, making Rachel jump. He threw back the bolts on the door, dragged away the heavy blanket box he'd shoved in the doorway in a desperate attempt to barricade the entrance. Lisa's dumpy form was huddled in her jacket, her dark hair covered by a scarf; it had been a depressingly mild summer and autumn was already beginning to bite. The couple performed their welcoming ritual, gently caressing each other across the back of the neck, checking for the cold embrace of an alien hijacker. Checking their spouse was still alive. Checks completed, Lisa sagged wearily into Martin's arms as the pair kissed passionately, still in love after a decade and a half. Rachel rolled her eyes and piled the dirty plates in the sink with a little more noise than was strictly necessary.

Martin froze as he felt another presence enter the room. He looked up, holding Lisa close to his chest, instinctively turning to put himself between his family and the intruder. He gave an exhausted, wry laugh as a familiar goateed face popped around the doorway.

"Honestly, Doctor - I wish you wouldn't sneak up on a person."

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*Washington DC  
August 20, 2002*

Martin stood before the bathroom mirror, willing his bleary eyes to focus. He swilled cold water across his face again, blinked fiercely to clear the last of what sleep he'd managed to catch from his

mind. He swept a comb through his hair, the silver strands at his temples taunting him. He had work to do, important work. Most people assumed the threat faced by the grabbers was over, that the last few pathetic wriggling things were long since banished to refuges in obscure landlocked lakes. But Martin knew better. He knew as long as human or grabber existed, the feud was not over.

*The Doctor was somewhere up ahead, near the chopper. They had to get to the lake in Alaska, the site the Doctor's machine had pinpointed as the nerve centre, the central hub controlling the alien menace. Martin ran behind, the precious vial huddled to his chest. He was feeling his age. Behind him, Lisa was fending off the dead. Until a few days ago, she'd never fired a gun. Now she fired and fired and fired and fired as the dead massed around, blocking their way, pulling at the chopper. Still too clumsy to do much damage - but for how much longer? Martin reached the helicopter hovering a few feet off the ground like a greyhound straining at its leash. The Doctor hauled him inside. The human gasped for breath, feeling weak and shaky. He turned to help his wife. Their hands touched. She fumbled to get a grip. Her hands were slick with blood and the smoky residue of a fire fight. Then she fell and he didn't see but he heard the wet crunch and he felt the cold blossoming inside him and then he didn't feel anything for a long long time.*

Martin was back in the present, swaying on his feet. He grasped the edge of the washbasin to steady himself, trying to calm his ragged breathing. The digital clock suction-capped to the mirror told him the flashback had taken less than a minute. He balled his hands into fists; forcing his adrenalin-flooded body to take deep, slow breaths. Slowly the red faded from his vision, the room stopped spinning. It was okay. He was strong. He was in control.

Martin carefully negotiated the piles of hair accessories, CDs and strewn clothing as he made his way across the living room toward the kitchen. His eyes noted the obstacles without really seeing the room; his hands were knotting his tie and his mind was already in the Whitehouse briefing room. As he pumped the coffee jug plunger vigorously, he realised the girls were playing with the grabbers. Martin kept his breathing under control, willed his skin not to crawl. It was normal; the ungodly things were sold in pet shops again, for heavens sake. Cheryl was busying herself in the kitchen, preparing breakfast for Rach and her sleepover buddies. The slim blonde woman was already fully dressed, her makeup immaculate. His wife kissed the air in the approximate vicinity of Martin's cheek as Rach and her friends prodded the grabbers with forks to make them move. Could five teenage girls really make that much noise? Cheryl frowned.

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"Rachel, get those disgusting things off my kitchen floor. You know perfectly well that horrible slime stains the grout."

"Whatever." The sixteen year-old crouched on the floor facing away from her stepmother, dark split-ended hair curtaining her face. Martin didn't look too closely for fear of seeing her mother in Rachel's small, plump body, her uncontrollable dark frizzy mane.

"Young lady, you'll look at me what I'm speaking to you if you expect to be going to this ridiculous festival thing of yours next weekend."

Rachel swung around without getting up, gave Cheryl a Look. Her girlfriends shifted uneasily, not wanting to witness a Domestic, yet not wanting to discreetly withdraw in case they missed something juicy.

"Now put those disgusting things back in the tank. You know perfectly well they upset your father."

Rachel stood, scooping up most of the grabbers with one hand. Her friends quickly gathered the remainders as the teenage posse headed for Rachel's bedroom.

The troupe of girls marched in loose formation towards the bedrooms, fussing over their respective grabbers. The creatures were technically classed as pets, but there weren't many families who wanted one. The past was still too fresh in their minds. Still, the tiny aliens held a strange fascination, seemingly so frail, yet once so dangerous. To a young teen, teetering on the verge of independence in a strange, uncertain world, it was an appealing combination. Julie, hair still in

misaligned pigtailed from the previous night's styling session, stopped as they wandered past a row of photos propped up on the mantelpiece.

"Rach, is that your Dad with the President?" Julie looked at her friend, awestruck.

Rachel snorted and flicked the offending photo glass-down onto the shelf.

"What's the big deal? He's just some old guy with bad hair. You'd think he was Leonardo di Caprio the way you morons rant about him."

The frame held a newspaper clipping, a serious row of sombrely dressed departmental types. The Taskforce. The people responsible for rehabilitating the post-grabber world. Martin Silverstein smiled uncertainly out of the photo, his hair darker and his face less creased than that of the man in the kitchen with his new wife. The President stood out a mile. He was the only one not wearing a jacket, his shirtsleeves rolled to the elbow. He had some kind of waistcoat open at the front, and a little pair of round glasses, giving him a somewhat Lennon-esque air. His brown hair curled uncontrollably nearly to his collar, but his beard was trimmed into a neat goatee. It was a face everyone knew well, anyone with the Internet, or a television, or newspapers or magazines. The man who'd risked everything to conquer the grabbers, who'd come good when all hope seemed lost. The obvious choice to lead the loose coalition of nations as the world rebuilt itself after the invasion.

The President.

The Doctor.

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*Washington DC  
August 20, 2005*

Martin leaned his elbow on the window button as he clutch-cruised towards the checkpoint. He handed his parking pass to the guard, an automatic action. His mind was elsewhere, already in this morning's briefing session. He returned the validated pass to its usual haunt on the dashboard, and eased the vehicle into his usual space, nearest the door to the labs. Even though the briefing would, of course, happen in the presidential suite of the White House proper, Martin wanted to check out a theory before the meeting. He knew some of the other Taskforce members thought he had an axe to grind. Thought he was paranoid. But he was just conscientious. Dedicated. In control. Martin swiped his key card more aggressively than he meant to, before the doors opened.

The lab was in semi-darkness, only the bluish white light of monitor screens flickering through the darkness. There were no longer power shortages, but Martin found the ambience comforting, and it seemed to agree with some of his more unusual specimens. Martin was the world's foremost authority on the taxonomy of the grabber, no mean feat for someone who wasn't even strictly speaking a biologist. He glanced at the various tanks and enclosures as he passed. The Pacific Grabber, blue and coarse-skinned in its massive floor-mounted tank. It was nearly four years old, one of the first specimens he'd collected, from that fateful beach in New Caledonia. It seemed the appropriate place to start. The creature was nearly three feet long now, and circled mournfully in its pool. Martin gave it no sympathy. The Mississippi Grabbers, frisky with the new moon, flung themselves harmlessly against the glass as he approached, blowing bubbles through the murky water they preferred. He glanced nervously at the refitted aviary that housed the Norwegian. It was a new one, only arrived a few weeks ago. Martin didn't like it. It was too... Different. Too unlike the others. It wasn't strictly aquatic, preferring as it did to spend most of its time dozing on one of the branches than had been arranged in the cage in an approximation of its 'natural' habitat. Occasionally it flicked a tendril into the pool on the floor, or moved with surprising speed to snare a passing moth. Martin disliked that even more. It wasn't a filter feeder like the others, preferring live prey on the wing. Was it more highly evolved? Or just different?

Martin shoved a computer mouse from side to side to bring one of the monitor screens back to life. It showed a diagram of arton energy levels overnight, the vestigial remains of the group mind that once linked the grabbers. Martin stopped. He stared. He hit the print button and tapped the

printer impatiently as it spewed out an endless sheath of charts. The Taskforce would have to see this. This changed everything.

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*Temporo/physical location unverifiable*

The lights were down. Maybe it was midnight, or evening, or that dark, dark time just before dawn. The Doctor yawned and stretched in his armchair, letting the book slide to the floor to join several others in an unread heap of ideas. He couldn't concentrate. He shut his eyes and willed away the confused jumble of thoughts, back down into the depths of his unconscious, where he wouldn't need to face them again until next he slept. He reached out with his Gallifreyan mind, thought forms dancing in time with the mechanical consciousness of the Ship. Her concern touched him. *Critical timing malfunction my foot*, thought the Doctor, *you prevented that last landing yourself, you canny old girl*. He felt the coy non-commitment flick through his mind like a mental shrug. The Timelord smiled ruefully. And people wondered why he considered the TARDIS female.

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*Washington DC  
August 20, 2005*

Martin entered the Whitehouse briefing room at 0857 hours. Three minutes before the emergency meeting was due to commence. The Taskforce hadn't met en masse for over a year, these days what little mopping-up work was still required was usually handled locally. Whatever had triggered the President's last-minute call for this meeting, it was clearly serious. He settled himself into his seat, politely ignoring Shou Lin's valiant but doomed attempts to get her laptop talking to the overhead projector. Slowly the Taskforce trickled in. Mainly American, with a smattering of other nationalities. Representatives of various humanitarian organisations. Conservationists. Mediators. Specialists. The various resources needed to bring back a society from the brink of collapse.

The President himself was fashionably late. He entered the room like a multi-coloured tornado, scattering papers and yabbering in Urdu into a clunky mobile phone wedged between ear and shoulder. As the Doctor's prescription glasses faded from tinted to clear in the dim light, Martin shook his head inwardly. This was his friend in everyday mode, the strange not-all-there frame of mind he seemed to inhabit when there wasn't a crisis in need of solving. You couldn't take him anywhere.

"Alrighty, Alwidah shukridah old chap. Cheque's in the mail." The President collapsed into his seat with a self-deprecating sigh, dumping his mound of papers, folders and unidentifiable bits and pieces onto the polished mahogany of the tabletop. A yoyo rolled mischievously out of the heap, and the Timelord intercepted it with a sheepish grin.

"Ladies, gentlemen," the Doctor smiled, did one of his famous sweeps of the room. It didn't matter whether he was talking to three people or thirty million; within a few words he'd made eye contact - real, substantial eye contact - with everybody. And when his deep blue eyes met yours, you realised he knew, better than knew, he *understood*. It was a gift.

"I must apologise for my tardiness." His voice dropped pitch from cheery to serious, as he rifled through his stack of newspapers. He hauled out the Tattler. Nobody in the room batted an eye to see it was the coming afternoon's edition. The Timelord held it aloft for the Taskforce members to read. He made another sweep of the room, more slowly this time, checking as various 'oh dear' noises were made and heads shook. The graphic took up the whole front page, a luridly photoshopped Pacific Grabber, shot from beneath to show the nipping mouth in huge foreshortened detail. The looming blueness was superimposed over that now-famous black and white image of the dawn-lit beach in New Caledonia, the body and surfboard clearly visible in the foreground. The two-word headline said everything and more.

## THEY'RE BACK

The Doctor flicked the tabloid across the room into the wastepaper bin in an easy, fluid motion. He leaned forwards, elbows resting on the table.

"Well, chaps. You can imagine the panic when that nice little montage hits the streets in a few hours. Delightful. So, how do we make sure it doesn't happen?"

Martin felt a coldness creeping up inside him. An old expression of his mother's drifted unnoticed though his head, involving rocks and hard places. Lin finally broke the tense silence.

"Mister President, what does the Tattler say about its sources?"

"Well, here's a treat, my dear lass. They say, in fact their editor swore blind to me in not twelve hours time that *we* told them. This poppycock story about a second grabber uprising came direct from the Whitehouse. *And* he was telling the truth." Martin shifted uncomfortably. The longer this went on, the worse it would be.

"Mister President?"

"Martin, my dear friend?"

"Mister President... Our arton monitoring facility is picking up unusually high background levels of delta activity."

"It is?"

"Yes sir, I've been down to the labs myself this morning," Martin didn't notice several Taskforce members staring at the table in front of them, resisting the urge to sigh, groan or roll their eyes. "These levels are just a few hertz below the readings we picked up before the main attack back in '97."

The tension in the room built as Silverstein paused, trying to find a persuasive way to say what needed to be said. The Doctor reached up, scratched his head, and almost absent-mindedly removed his spectacles. He was blind as a bat without them, but that didn't stop him carefully working the room over with his eyes. Despite Silverstein's speech, it was the Doctor on whom all eyes were trained. At last the Timelord spoke.

"The readings are only slightly higher than normal background arton radiation. This tiny discrepancy is not any kind of indication that the grabbers are on the move again. They are not. These tiny increases can in fact be attributed to a large-scale group meditation last night, down at Riverfest."

A relieved titter erupted across the room. But Martin noticed the Doctor wasn't laughing.

"Martin, thank you. Without your dedication, we wouldn't have known about the readings shifting. This time, it was harmless. But there may be a next time. You did well."

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Desme tutted loudly, hoping the girl would get the idea and move away from the shop window. She was a sight to behold. Thick, heavy boots peeped from under a black velvet skirt, lined blood red and slit to the hip, colour flashing as she moved. Her top half was clad in little more than some form of brassiere covered by layers of ragged black mesh that could, to a more open mind than Desme's, be called a blouse. Her hair hung down past her shoulders, jet black except for a vivid purple streak at one temple. Several silvery necklaces dangled around her neck. She wore no makeup. She was young, maybe late teens, yet there was a certain weariness in her eyes that spoke of something deeper than boys and homework. Desme flinched as she realised the little harridan wasn't just going to loiter at the window of the pet shop; she was actually going to come in.

Silver wasn't interested in puppies or kittens, squeaking little mess-making bundles that made her sneeze. She gave a cursory glance to the hermit crabs and loitered for a moment by the decrepit tarantula that had been a resident of the pet shop for as long as Silver could remember. She moved towards the back of the store, the old bag at the counter shifting to follow her movements in the security mirror. There, between the fish and the axolotl, were the grabbers. Miserable things barely the size of a golf ball and not more than a few weeks old. All were variations on brown and

green. Satisfied, Silver turned on her heel and marched out of the shop. She didn't even bother to scowl at the old bag on her way past; her mind was too caught up in mathematics. She realised even if she charged half the going rate, the latest litter at home was still worth more than eight hundred dollars. That would come in very handy, thank you very much.

"Hi Ho Silver!" Silver looked up and gave her friend a wry smile. Julz stood on her seat in the food court, waving. The blonde girl wore clothes similar to Silver's own, but in brighter colours. Silver slid into the opposite seat and stole one of Julz' hot chips.

"Did you get to Riverfest last night?"

Silver nodded. "S'ok. Few good stalls, some of the food was nearly edible. The group meditation went off."

Julz cocked her head. "Not happy?"

Silver blew a strand of hair out of her eyes. "Met a few freaks last night, you know, morons who're still doing stuff."

"Nasty?"

"Wasn't too bad, just a bit of crap I could've done without. 'Nuf about me - what's this big news?"

Julz leaned forwards conspiratorially, "Listen to this, Rachel Ruth Silverstein - you are looking at the Whitehouse's latest recruit."

Silver laughed and nearly choked on her chip. "You're not for real? The Whitehouse? The Presidential offices or the porn site?"

"The real Whitehouse, silly! Listen, you remember that catering company the hot guy from the school careers department talked about? They give aspiring Iron Chefs like me a start in hospitality."

"I wouldn't know, I skipped that day."

"Anyway, they're hiring - and they've hired me! They supply people for cafeterias in offices and stuff. And they're going to put me on staff at the Whitehouse!"

"Look, I've been there with Dad's work. It's not such a big deal. And I don't think they'll like the clothes."

"Oh, there's some crappy uniform provided. But this'll be fun! I might end up making tea for the President!"

Silver rolled her eyes. "You're a hopeless case, you are."

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*Temporo/physical co-ordinates unverifiable*

The TARDIS chimed gently as she materialised. The lights were still only half-lit, sending unusual shadows around the cavernous interior. The Doctor stood, leaning forward against the console. He stroked the machinery gently, his mind lacing briefly with the carrier wave that pulsed gently through the ship. Then the Timelord stood, purposefully. He ran his fingers through his hair and straightened his waistcoat. He'd changed to a burgundy number lately, thanks to a certain wardrobe malfunction. The tiny gold stars meandered around the fabric with a planned randomness. The Doctor hefted a jacket from the stand on his way through the door.

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*Washington DC  
August 21st, 2005*

The Doctor sniffed experimentally, prepared for the usual eyewatering chemical fog of Earth in the early twenty-first century. It didn't come. The air was surprisingly fresh; he could see the mountains in the far distance without the expected filter of smog. While it was very pleasant, it set the Doctor on edge. He'd been here often enough to know what the place was like. Differences, even

tiny changes, worried him. Even if they seemed to be for the better. The Doctor looked around, pulling his jacket tighter around him. It was surprisingly cool for the time of year. Another unexplained change.

The Doctor shifted uncomfortably as he realised people were beginning to notice him. He wasn't in the mood. Not now. He stroked the rough, flaking paint of the TARDIS' external shell, wishing not for the first time she'd chosen a less noticeable form. He locked the doors and wandered down the street with a controlled aimlessness not unlike the stars on his waistcoat, trying to blend into the crowd. People kept shifting away, as though trying to allow a respectful distance around him. People were staring. The Doctor frowned into a shop window. Reassuringly, his own unassuming features frowned back. The Doctor didn't think his current body looked like any popular celebrity or recently-convicted serial killer. What was going on?

The Doctor was dragged from his reverie by a tug at his jacket. A little human girl, barely four years old, was staring up at him. She was holding a pen and notebook.

"Can I have your autograph please?"

The Doctor caught himself before he could step backwards through the shop window. He knelt down to the child's eye level.

"I beg your pardon, sweetie?"

"Can I have your autograph please mister President?"

The Doctor looked around, spotted a couple he assumed were the girl's parents. They were standing a short distance away, looking proud and nervous and sheepish.

"I think you've mistaken me for someone else." He pushed her, gently but firmly, towards her parents. He gave them a vague, apologetic smile and walked away as fast as his long legs would carry him.

The Doctor buttoned up his jacket and turned up the collar, tucking his long hair underneath to hide it. He rummaged through his pockets until he found a pair of sunglasses, and despite the overcast day, popped them onto his nose. He put his head down and shoved his hands into his pockets as he kept moving fast, his body language screaming *leave me alone, I'm in a hurry*. He passed a newspaper vending machine on the corner. The Doctor paused, found a few coins the machine was likely to recognise and picked the most up-market looking title on offer. The one most likely to have political news. He read as he walked. He glanced around every so often to make sure he wasn't about to walk into another pedestrian or a lamppost or a moving vehicle, but once again the world seemed to be leaving him a respectful distance, getting out of *his* way. As if he was someone important. As if he was, well, the President.

The Doctor picked out the sports section, the real estate and the movie guide and dumped them in a handy recycling bin. He didn't recognise any of the news stories, none of the current events were ones he'd lived through. Something was definitely wrong. He finally found what he was looking for; smartly dressed men and women standing awkwardly in the standard 'lined up like fence palings' group shot pose, a limp flag trying to look patriotic behind them. They were the Taskforce, apparently, whatever that was. In the centre stood a vaguely familiar figure. Dark hair, neat beard, even but unremarkable features. Well dressed but somehow scruffy, as though his mind had been elsewhere when he got out of bed. The Doctor suddenly stood very still, nearly causing a collision as a woman with a stroller swerved to avoid him. He stared again at a convenient shop window. He looked at the photo, read the caption, the growing coldness in his chest thudding down to his gut when he realised the man he was looking at was the President.

It was him.

The Doctor threw the newspaper into the gutter and ran. The print blurred in the murky water as he bolted for the TARDIS, shoving people out of the way, dodging through traffic. Close now, just a few more steps. The Doctor stumbled as he felt time shift and change, a heavy, laboured wheezing filled the air.

"No!"

He lurched forwards, overbalancing and landing heavily against the TARDIS. His fingers sank slightly into the blue surface, now smooth and featureless. Blurring. Fading.

"No!"

The wheezing grew louder, reached a frenzied pitch as the time ship slid out of the Doctor's hands and into nowhere.

The Doctor fell forwards and landed on his face on the pavement on the spot where the TARDIS had been. The crowd flowed around him, unsure what they'd just witnessed. They moved away quickly, not wanting to get involved.

The Doctor stood painfully, the wind knocked out of him. He pulled off his sunglasses and jacket and turned in a slow circle, checking the horizon. Buildings, shopping centres, signs and screens. Houses. Trees. Another building, a fair distance away but visible in the strangely clear air. The Whitehouse. His eyes narrowed. Whatever was going on, whoever had taken his TARDIS from beneath his very own bruised nose, he'd find it there.

*Well, thought the Doctor, since I'm apparently the President of the United States, I suppose I'd better be getting to work.*

\*\*\*\*\*

*Washington DC  
August 21, 2005*

"So the arvo shift starts at two, so if I get changed at your place then I can get that direct bus to work. Sweet as!"

Julz tottered on her heels down the alleyway. It ran through a shady part of town, but it cut ten minutes off the walk back to Silver's home. Silver, in her heavy boots, was coping better with the slick bitumen. Today's skirt was much like yesterdays, but with deep bottle green lining, split to the hip on both sides with underlay of fine green gauze to keep things decent. It was the top-end of the Goth look, if it wasn't for the staff discount Silver wouldn't have even bothered saving up for it. The flashes of green offset her burgundy Indian-cotton bodice, the ever-present jangle of silver at her throat and wrists.

"Have you got time to check out the new litter?"

"Euuugh, you're not still breeding those horrible things are you?"

"Hey, at least they don't make me sneeze like that bone-idle mutt of yours. And, they're worth a lot of money."

"Get out! Who'd pay good money for something that ugly?"

"Do you have any idea what the pet shop charges for those things? And they seem to be doing all right out of them, too. Not like that poor bloody spider that's been there for a hundred years."

"Why don't you buy it?"

"Yeah! And put it in Cheryl's knicker drawer! Bit of luck, I might scare the bitch to death!"

Both girls bent over in hysterics as they trudged down the alley, their laughter echoing off the dull bricks and blackened windows of the industrial area. A shadow stepped into their path.

"Yo Rach."

He was about twenty, a thin, spotty-faced boy dressed in black. He wore even more layers of clothes than Silver, a black beanie pulled down low over his eyes.

"Piss off, freak. I don't know you any more." Silver shoved past him. She grabbed Julz by the arm, propelling her high-heeled friend along at an uncomfortable rate of knots.

"Who's that little piece of nothing?"

The boy called out after them.

"I got some nice stuff, Rach. Maker's own blend. You know you want it."

Silver didn't turn around, kept walking. With her free hand she grabbed one of the protection charms slung around her neck. The boy followed, gaining on them. "When you going to share Daddy's money with the working classes, eh? Local artisans. Takes years of study to cook up shit this good." He grabbed Silver by the wrist, tried to force her to look at him.

She spun round with surprising force, knocking Julz flying. She punched. The boy flinched, not moving fast enough to avoid the impact as her fist connected with the side of his face. He was

expecting her to be girl-weak. He wasn't expecting her to be strong, muscles honed by months of semi-vegetarianism and lifting rolls of fabric around at the shop.

He wasn't expecting the strength of hate behind the punch.

He wasn't expecting her to have slipped off the necklace, to be holding it in her attack hand, pieces of the metal and stone charms protruding from her fist.

He curled on the ground, blood gouting from the jagged slashes to his face. "You watch it bitch! I'll get you killed, you dumb nothing!"

Silver dragged Julz behind her as she kept walking. Fast. The blonde girl made a few noises as she attempted to ask questions, then gave up. Sliver was walking too fast for talking to be an option.

Silver awkwardly threaded the necklace back over her head without breaking her stride. She sought out a certain charm, a large, pale stone the size of a quail egg. It was one of her goes-everywhere, regardless of her outfit. She held it gently, forcing away the badness in the alley. Silver breathed deeply, concentrating on breathing good, clean Future air and leaving the Past in the alley where it belonged. She let her energy cool, from fire-red to the colour of cooled blood, as it built up in the base of her spine. It gradually worked upwards, burning away the anger and fear as it went; orange, yellow, green, blue, violet. By the time it reached her crown chakra, it was pure white. Silver let it out with a sigh, let the white light wrap carefully around herself and Julz. It wasn't great; Silver still wasn't much on portable circles. But it should do until they got home.

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The Doctor fumbled in his pocket for some more loose change. He carried handfuls of the stuff around, doubloons and dollars and the occasional florin or narg. The vending machine seemed to like whatever it was he'd fed it in his distracted state, and obligingly provided him with a cup of tea. He looked around. It wasn't as flash as he'd expected, to be honest, just another government building. He mentally pinched himself at how easy it had been to get into the Whitehouse. Security was obviously tight. The first cordons and pass checking had started more than a mile from the building itself. Official paranoia? Or...? The guards seemed to be in on whatever joke the universe was having at the Doctor's expense, laughing away his lack of identification and waving him through the various checkpoints.

"Mister President, will you be available for the two o'clock briefing?"

"Pardon? Er, yes, of course Miss..." The Doctor thanked whatever hunch had taken him to get his eyes tested. His new glasses were proving invaluable for reading nametags. "...Lin, I'll be there."

Miss Lin checked her watch pointedly, and the Doctor realised it was three minutes to two.

"I'm afraid I'm a bit disorganised today. Could you remind me where..." The Doctor tailed off with an embarrassed shrug. Miss Lin smiled knowingly, as though she dealt with presidential absent-mindedness every day. Perhaps she did.

"Follow me, Doctor."

The Doctor thought he was doing reasonably well. He'd managed to ask a few reasonably intelligent questions, bluffed his way through god-knows what, and blamed his general air of not having a clue on misplacing his 'paperwork'. Most importantly, nobody seemed to suspect he was an interloper. Whoever the President was, he certainly had the Doctor down pat. *Assuming it's not really me*, the Doctor thought for not the first time that day, *a few years down the track, power-mad and running the United States. As if I couldn't find something better to do with my time.*

"Now, er, anything else we need to discuss before we all head back to the canteen for a nice cup of tea?"

A man stood, plump, on the older side of middle age. The Doctor made eye contact, sensed trouble.

"Doctor, about those readings we discussed yesterday."

"Er, yes. Oh, thank you, thank you very much indeed." The Doctor ran an eye over the print out the man had given him.

“Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear. This doesn’t look at all right.”

“That’s what I said yesterday, Doctor.” Martin was losing his patience.

“These readings, this energy signature. I’ve seen it before somewhere.”

“Yes, mister President,” said Martin through gritted teeth, “These readings match the ones before the main ‘97 attack.”

“No, no, no.” The Doctor didn’t know what the main ‘97 attack might be, so for the moment he ignored it, returning his attention to the print out. “Somewhere else, not here. Not recently. A long time ago. It’s a group mind. Quite primitive. Some sort of...”

The Doctor realised the room had gone very quiet. He looked up from the sheaf of papers. Three guards had surrounded him, rifles raised. There was someone at the door. Someone who could only be the President. In the flesh, the Doctor realised his double wasn’t identical. With some gall, he realised the other man was probably a little younger than him, hair slightly darker and eyes... Different. Less weary. More full of life. At the moment, through, those eyes were dark and full of dangerous ideas.

“Ah,” said the Doctor, “I can explain.”

“Take him away,” said the Doctor, “Kill him.”

\*\*\*\*\*

Julz let the grabber inch its way up her arm. She’d expected it to be cold, like a fish on ice. But it was warm, blood-warm and not slimy as such, more damp. Like a freshly washed baby.

“How come those in the other tank look different?”

“They’re Pacifics. All these ones are Missis. Hang on a sec.” Silver gathered a handful of Mississippi grabbers and put them back in the tank, surprisingly gently. They were the latest litter, only a few weeks old. Silver fed them well, with spirulina and fish food and the occasional dried prawn as a special treat, and they were already much bigger than the sorry specimens in the pet shop. With the last of the babies safely back in their tank, Silver replaced the lid and moved over to the Pacifics. These preferred salt water, they were bigger and more blue than green. Silver reached into the tank and let one wrap itself around her bare arm. She hoisted it out and offered it to her friend.

“See, big fellers. You still need a licence for these, though. ‘Cause of the teeth.”

Julz, who had been about to stroke the grabber, pulled back in alarm. Silver laughed and gently raised the creature’s body, exposing the mouth on the underside. Twin rows of mandibles rotated gently.

“Don’t worry. I’ve never seen it gnaw anything bigger than a dried prawn. Offered it a cockroach once, and it spat it out. Couldn’t handle the legs.”

\*\*\*\*\*

Earth hung in space, a tiny ball of green and blue and white. A thin envelope of atmosphere kept the strip-mining vacuum of space at bay. Far, far away, things were watching. Earth was nice. It had a pleasant climate and a surprising amount of the surface was habitable by carbon-based life. It had, despite the best efforts of the natives, bountiful natural resources. The animals and vegetation were tasty, the natives were backwards and aggressive but were reasonably easily trained and were generally pretty to look at. Earth was nice. Something hung in space, waiting to inherit the Earth. But it wasn’t meek. It was hungry. It was the Gisb.

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Julz reached out tentatively and stroked the blue mass.

“It’s like sandpaper!”

“Rough little buggers, aren’t they?” Silver gently uncoiled the grabber from her hand and coaxed it back into the tank.

“Take a little one.”

“Get out - my parents would kill me!”

“Nah, come on. Do you good. Better than Boofhead the Wonderdog. Here, pick out a baby.” Silver gathered up her special baby-grabber mix from her vials and jars on the shelf by the bed. She tipped a generous portion into a more-or-less clean jam jar.

“How am I going to get it home?”

“Give us a look... It’s a she. Come one, we’ll stick her in one of Cheryl’s Tupperware containers with a bit of water and some food, she’ll be OK.”

\*\*\*\*\*

The bus stopped at the checkpoint, the nearest civilians could get to the Whitehouse. Julz stepped out, eyed the guards nervously. She was uncomfortable in her white top and red knee-length culottes, a naff little cap on her head. She hadn’t worn black leather lace-ups since primary school. *Julie* was embroidered on her top, *please ask me for service*. Her newly laminated swipe card read *Anderson, Julie Louise. Crofton Catering ancillary staff. 0789643*. Her bag contained the forms her new employer had faxed through the day before and her own clothes, crumpled into a ball. And a baby grabber housed in a Tupperware lettuce crisper.

\*\*\*\*\*

The holding cells were in a separate building, a stout brick construction with a formidably secure feel. The Doctor was still under armed guard, even with the cell door locked, and another card-operated lock on the main entrance. He wasn’t going anywhere. He sat curled up on the bed. He was worried. Not about his own safety - he’d talked his way out of tighter scrapes than this. But that signal. It nagged at the back of his mind. He’d met it somewhere before, somewhere on Earth.

The Timelord looked up as the main door bleeped and opened. Through the window in the cell door, he saw the President enter. His double. Somebody with the hide to be walking around in his body, and looking better in it than he did. The cell door opened, and the President entered with another armed guard.

The President stood and inspected his double. He stroked his beard, deep in thought. A small, wry smile crept across his face. He moved forwards, the guards nervously shifting, ready to spring into action if the intruder tried anything.

The Doctor sat down beside the Doctor, saying nothing. He reached out, brushed his fingers across the other Doctor’s temple. Mindtouch. Another Timelord. The *same* Timelord?

Contact.

Contact

*Warm hug remembering best friend brother thought you could leave me trapped in the cold?*  
*Warm cold revulsion love pity revelation You! What a mess*  
*Not a mess not a mess think you’re the only one to make things better? Who else? Me. Here.*  
*Saving Earth and making everything better. Warm glow love recognition*  
*Power.*  
*Respect. Play acting. Good fun to be you better than to be me cold black jealous flick hatred*  
*love now I am you.*  
*I am the Doctor.*  
*No, trapped you now. I am the Doctor.*  
*Hatred love pity revulsion compulsion You are the Master. I thought you died in the chaos on*  
*Pendryx Prime.*

*Thought? Or wished it so? Best friend brother Timelord you never came to find me trapped in the cold under stones and dust cold emptiness*

*I see you got the new body you so desperately craved?*

*Oh yes. A lovely body. Your body. Much better to be you, to be The Doctor who everybody loves than be me who everybody hates.*

*I don't hate you.*

*You do I feel it cold black hate hate hate in your mind.*

*I don't hate you..... Friend. Only you hate you. Let me take care of you.*

*Oh no bitter laugh don't trust you think I'll fall for that? I'm taking care of business here. I'm in charge. I saved the world.*

*Revelation bright spark this attack of 97 thing people keep mentioning?*

The Doctor whimpered quietly as a massive slice of data planted itself into his mind. The Master severed the mindtouch, gently lowered the semiconscious Doctor down onto the bunk. The older Timelord lay quietly for a few moments, assimilating the chunk of memory the Master had given him. The grabbers. The group mind. The invasion. Suddenly his eyes opened.

"No."

The Master gave him a quizzical look.

"No, there's more to it than the creatures. There's something else controlling them. Another force. These grabbers are only half the story. Oh." The Doctor fell silent as the last of his new memories fell into place. The controlling force. Hovering somewhere not-quite-here, close by but not-too-close.

The Doctor's eyes widened.

\*\*\*\*\*

"You didn't! You lunatic! You gave the Gisb a free ride to Earth, gave them pets to help them stage an invasion, and then turned around and defeated it so you'd look like a hero! It's Munchausen's Syndrome on an undreamed of scale!"

"I did a lot of good, Doctor. Human society is improving. We're co-operating. Pulling together instead of pulling apart."

"You realise we're still in great danger."

"Nonsense Doctor. We won."

"The battle, or the war?"

"The grabbers are harmless. The planet is cleaner. Resources are distributed properly. Children are no longer starving."

"People have died."

"People die anyway, Doctor. It's what people do."

\*\*\*\*\*

Julie dunked the mop, stepped on the pedal and let the rollers squeeze out the excess water before returning to endless figure eights across the floor. The cafeteria was big. There was a lot of washing up. And when there wasn't washing up, there was a floor perpetually needing mopping. And she hadn't seen so much as an undersecretary so far, let alone the President. The highlight of Julie's first day on the corporate ladder had been tuning in on the guy delivering the bread. And he'd turned out to have a boyfriend. Julie looked up at some movement at the corner of her eye. She stopped. She stared. An armed guard was marching past, with a handcuffed prisoner. But the man in handcuffs was the President. She'd recognise him anywhere. She'd had a not-so secret crush on him ever since the invasion nearly ten years ago, when she was just a kid. She was so busy staring she didn't notice her bag, inching across the floor. As though there was something alive in it. She stood and stared until she was distracted by a

## SPRONG

The baby grabber in her bag burst out through the mangled remains of Cheryl's lettuce crisper. It might have grown, it might have not, but with tentacles thrashing in all directions, it looked big enough. Julie screamed. As it clambered up the leg of the nearest table, she brought the mop head down on it with a thump. It clung to the mop and started working its way up the handle. Julie flung it away from her with a shriek. She wasn't the only one making noise. Through the open door, she could hear the President yelling.

"Do something! For God's sake man, do something!" The Doctor yelled, trying to put the guard between himself and the rampant grabber. It was definitely bigger now, absorbing the water from the mop and using it to bloat its green brown body. The guard stood and stared at the scene in the cafeteria.

"For God's sake man! You're the one with the gun! It'll kill us all!"

The guard turned his attention from his prisoner to the grabber. It was in a corner of the room now, swaying side to side, apparently planning its next move. Julie stopped staring at it long enough to look back at the man she thought was the President. He didn't seem to be panicking now. He caught her eye and gave her a sly wink. She couldn't help but smile.

The Doctor inched forwards, hands still cuffed. He moved as quietly as he could, trying to go unnoticed, hoping the guard would stay focused on the angry grabber. The Doctor didn't know how dangerous the critter was, and didn't want to think about it. At the moment he hoped it was nothing but a useful diversion.

The grabber suddenly took off, skittering across the floor. The guard tracked it with his rifle, waiting for it to do something dangerous before he fired. The Doctor used the movement to edge nearer to a wheeled trolley, now behind the guard. It was laden with sandwiches for some reception or other on the lawns this afternoon. The Doctor nodded to Julie. She glanced at the bucket by her feet and nodded back.

"Now!" The Doctor shoved against the trolley with all his weight. It took off, trundling towards the guard. He turned with a yell, let off a bullet in panic as the trolley bore down on him. He turned to run, but the parquet floor was suddenly slick with sudsy water from the upturned bucket.

"Run!" The Doctor yelled. But before he ran, he leapt over the guard and the upturned trolley and awkwardly gathered up the writhing grabber in his cuffed hands. It seemed stunned by the impact. For want of a better place to put it, he shoved it down the front of his shirt and took off up the corridor after Julie.

\*\*\*\*\*

Silver was deep in meditation. She sat cross legged on the bedroom floor, thinking about thinking about nothing. The tape had reached the long bit of silence in the middle meant for inner reflection, and she was having trouble concentrating. Her mind was already drifting from oneness with the universe to whether there was any chocolate cake left and eight hundred dollars worth of grabbers when she heard the first thud.

\*\*\*\*\*

Desme prodded her glasses a little higher onto her nose and set off on the afternoon feeding rounds. It was quiet, too early yet for schoolchildren hanging around being a nuisance with their sticky germ-ridden little fingers. Desme rattled a half-cup of kitty pellets into the kitten cage and refilled the water. She gave the contents a critical once-over. The little black one looked worse than this morning. Desme had left it out, hoping someone would feel sorry for it and take it off her hands. But now it was shivering and the discharge was worse. She roughly picked up the mewling kitten and stamped through to the back room, dumping it in the big box with a few dead fish and a dropsy

chicken. Frank would need to do a run out to the bins later. On her way back into the shop front, Desme noticed water on the floor. She looked around and realised the tank housing the grabbers was cracked down the middle. Tutting, she found a towel and started mopping up the mess. Then Desme felt a gentle touch on the back of her neck, a caress gentler than any lover she'd known. She looked up, and part of her mind noticed the tank was empty. Her next thought never had time to form before the caress became a bite and something else started thinking for her.

\*\*\*\*\*

Silver opened her eyes, writing off the meditation as hopeless. She was too distracted. She hauled herself onto her feet, looked around the room. Water. The tanks were leaking. Cheryl was going to kill her. The babies! The tank was empty. Where were the babies? And the Pacifics? Silver started to panic. She did a quick once-over of the room. Nothing. *Persona non grabba*.

Silver made her way to the altar by the eastern wall. She hefted the athame, considering it for the first time as a weapon. The ceremonial dagger must never be used to draw blood. It is to be used only to cut energy, never flesh. But Silver held it tightly as she moved out into the hallway.

“Cheryl?”

“I'm in the kitchen, sweetie.”

Silver froze. *Sweetie?* Nobody had ever called her that. Not even Mum. Mum, dead at thirty-two with a grabber hanging out of her head. Certainly not Feral Cheryl the bitch from hell.

Silver took a deep breath and walked into the kitchen. They were everywhere. Cheryl gave a strange smile, like she'd never done it before and wasn't quite sure which muscles to use. Silver shoved the athame into the belt of her skirt and grabbed a proper knife from the block, a big nasty mother of a carver.

“Come and give mummy a big hug, sweetie.”

Mummy. That did it. Even if Silver hadn't been able to see the grabber's tendrils at her stepmother's throat, she would have killed her anyway.

\*\*\*\*\*

Martin heard a thump from the other end of the lab. The Norwegians. Now what were they up to? He strode across the dimly lit room, a battered cleansuit over his own clothes. He hefted a small spray bottle of the Doctor's special acid, the chemical that would stop a rogue grabber in its tracks. But the Norwegians were behaving themselves, hanging lazily from their branches like jellied birds nests. Thump. The noise raised the hair on the back of Martin's neck. Thump. He cranked the lights up, stared around the room. Everything seemed to be in order. Thump. He moved cautiously towards the big, low pool housing the elderly Pacific. The coldness, the cold blackness he'd felt in his heart for so long was welling up, whispering to him that it had always been a matter of *when*, not *if*. He was strangely unsurprised when he saw the pool was empty.

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Silver ran back to her bedroom, sobbing. It was too much. It was horrible. The worst trip on the worst cut stuff couldn't compare. She'd hacked and hacked and hacked but those things just kept coming. You couldn't kill them. Where was the Doctor's magic acid when she needed some? In the end, she'd settled for dismembering the attacking grabbers, chopping off tentacles so they couldn't climb up her and bite into her brainstem. Cheryl had been harder. She'd had to cut and cut and cut to get the thing off. It had been harder than she'd expected to pull the creature's teeth out of the woman's neck. And then, even though she was already dead, Cheryl bled. There was a lot of blood in her. Silver wondered whether it would stain the grout.

Silver shook herself back into the present. There were other grabbers out there. She remembered the one she'd given Julz and felt sick in her stomach. She had to find her friend and warn her before they were all dead. Silver hauled a dusty bag out from under her bed. She swept

across the altar, picking out a few protective charms and amulets. The big moonstone was around her neck, as always. The athame. A mirrored pentacle that looked like it might come in handy. She shoved the altar aside and ripped up the carpet where it had stood. Beneath the carpet was a small plastic zip-lock bag filled with white powder and a four-inch flick knife that Silver had been saving for emergencies. This, she decided, was an emergency. She piled the lot into the bag and ran from the house.

\*\*\*\*\*

The Doctor bolted down the Whitehouse corridors, with Julie hot on his heels. She was shaking inside, the baby grabber bringing back long-dead memories of the earlier attack. Julie nearly ran into the Doctor's back as he stopped dead at an intersection.

The Doctor closed his eyes and let his mind curl out over the surrounding area, looking for the Master. He could still feel the after effects of their earlier mindtouch. He let his mind drift across the area, seeking out the familiar scent of the other Timelord's mind. There. He felt a whiff, like a cool breeze against his face. The Master. And something else, something more intimate. The TARDIS. He turned abruptly and followed it, sensing the Master getting nearer. Julie stared after him, wondering what she'd walked into. Then she heard shouts from the cafeteria. Someone must've found the unconscious guard. She wheeled in panic, and set off after the man she was beginning to suspect wasn't the President at all.

\*\*\*\*\*

The President was sitting at his desk. The deeply polished surface was barely visible for the clutter of papers and bits and pieces of dismembered technology strewn across it. Behind him, in the corner, stood a big blue box, parked at an awkward angle to the wall. The Timelord sat quietly, his chin resting on his steepled fingers, a small, smug smile on his face. Julie got the impression he'd been expecting them.

The Doctor sized up his double closely.

"We have a situation."

"The situation, my dear *Doctor*, is your unfortunate arrival. Until your appearance, this world was running smoothly and ahead of schedule. People were happy. Now there's a concussed man on his way to hospital and water damage to the Whitehouse floor, thanks to you and your interfering little friend. Don't think much of the new regeneration, by the way, a little too bourgeoisie for my tastes."

The Doctor took an imperceptible moment to work out what the Master was talking about.

"This isn't Grae, you goose. I'm travelling alone. This is just a poor random human girl who's been caught up in this ridiculous play-act. Well, it stops now."

"Why, Doctor?"

"Pardon?"

"Why does this 'ridiculous play-act' stop now? What is it about this brave new world you find so particularly repellent?"

"You're messing with this planet's correct timeline, but that's neither here nor there for now. I'm more concerned that you engineered an invasion simply so you could step in and foil it. And now your precious little critters are getting uppity again."

"Garbage, Doctor. The grabbers on their own barely have enough brains to remember to breathe."

"Of course, the group mind. The controlling force." Pieces began to fall into place in the Doctor's mind.

Julie decided she'd seen enough. Not only was the man she'd thought was the President apparently some sort of understudy, but if he was telling the truth, the President himself was behind the invasion. It didn't make sense. It *couldn't* make sense. Because if it did, a vast tract of Julie's

life was based on a lie. She shrugged off her passcard, letting the cheap plastic fall to the floor. She hefted her bag over her shoulder, as quietly as she could, and started inching for the door.

“My dear Doctor, the Gisb are history. Their node was destroyed in the dying stages of the invasion. As you - am I amusing you, Doctor.”

The Doctor was behaving most strangely. He shifted on his seat, wriggled and rummaged in his short front, scratched his chest, then suddenly his eyes grew wide and he leapt to his feet.

“Ouch! Oh, you little...” The Doctor fumbled the front of his shirt open, where the stunned grabber was coming back to life. It wrapped its tentacles around his chest, and started inching upwards, towards his neck. It’s nippers were buried in his flesh. The Doctor gritted his teeth and pulled, yelping as the creature came away with blood spraying from its mouth. He brandished it towards the Master, staring in silence at the scene.

“Now are you convinced? It’s not harmless! It’ll take a lump out of the next person to come near, and it won’t be the only one. That node thing of yours is obviously still active.” The grabber chose that moment to sink its teeth into the Doctor’s wrist. He yelled and gave a reflex thrust, sending the creature through the air. It landed wetly on the presidential desk. The Doctor raised an eyebrow.

“Your best friends the Gisb appear to be shaping up for a rematch. What do you propose to do now, Mister President? Or is this all part of your marvellous self-aggrandising plan?”

“No, Doctor, it isn’t. But you know the beauty of being a double agent?”

“What’s that?”

“Freedom to change sides.”

\*\*\*\*\*

“Name?”

“Silver, ah, Rachel Silverstein. I’m Martin’s daughter.”

“So why do you need access to the labs, Martin’s Daughter?”

“He’s, ah, doing research on the grabbers, and he, ah, needed some gear from home. Look I’ve got a pass and everything so just let me in, all right? Please?”

“Look, Martin’s Daughter, we’re in the middle of a security lockdown. We’ve already had one loopy wander in here today. I can’t just let non-staffers go parading around.”

Silver took a deep breath, stroked the moonstone at her throat. Why wouldn’t anyone listen to her? “Look, I can make it worth your while, OK?”

“Sorry love, your not my sort. Now run along home, alright?”

Silver dug in her backpack. “Is this your sort?” She brandished the bag of powder. It wasn’t new, but it was good stuff, and should last for years. The soldier gave her a long, slow look. She met his gaze, silently asking Cerriduen, the Goddess of the Cauldron, to just bail her out this once. The Goddess smiled. The guard snatched the powder and tucked it into a pocket.

“Right. I never saw you. Now get in there and get out of my sight.”

\*\*\*\*\*

The Doctor made eye contact with the Master, gave him one of those long, long looks. He realised the Master was telling the truth. He could quite comfortably abandon this world he’d worked so hard to save, throw it all away to join forces with the Gisb. Sell humanity out to an entity that looked like a ball of grey wool after the cat had been at it.

“Oh no, you don’t!” The Doctor moved suddenly. He launched himself across and over the desk, knocking the Master backwards and landing on top of him, pinning the other Timelord down.

“Really Doctor, I never knew you cared.” But the Master stopped smiling when the Doctor snapped the handcuff shut. The Doctor had managed to free one of his own hands from the device, and that cuff was now secured firmly around the Master’s wrist.

“Now then,” The Doctor stood, pulling his unwilling Siamese twin behind him. “Presumably there’s a research facility around her somewhere? Somewhere we can learn a bit more about these introduced pests of yours?”

“Silverstein’s lab, in the annex. He has a marvellous collection of the things. But what good will that do us now?”

The Doctor strode off, pulling his counterpart behind him. “We’ll just have to think of something, won’t we?”

\*\*\*\*\*

“Dad! Dad, those things are attacking!” Silver ran the last few yards of the corridor, and threw open the door to her father’s lab. She’d been here before, many times. Helping. Learning. Snooping. She was used to subdued half-lighting, so she stepped back in alarm at the glare that met her eyes.

“Dad? You in here?” She stepped forwards, a creeping sickness in her stomach. The floor was wet, littered with fragments of glass. Smashed tanks stood empty like eggs whose chicks had hatched. Silver moved further into the lab, the carving knife in her hand. One of the Norwegians was wandering around looking lost and bewildered. She gave it a heavy kick and watched it skid across the floor.

“Dad?” Silver stalked carefully around the now-unoccupied wading pool, alert and waiting. “Dad?” Silver froze as she saw him. Her father was lying on the floor, the big blue Pacific grabber wrapped around his neck.

“Dad!” She ran forwards, hacking at the thing with the knife. It was hard to cut if off without cutting her father. She cut and cut and cut, then realised that crouched on the floor she was a sitting target for the other creatures. She grabbed Martin by the legs and pulled him across the floor, dragged him to the doorway away from the worst of the danger. She finally managed to get the last of the bits of grabber away from his throat. She threw the bits into the lab, tears streaming down her face.

“Dad? Dad!” She shook him, Praying he’d wake up although she knew deep in her gut he couldn’t.

Silver looked up as she heard footsteps echoing down the corridor towards her. She scowled as she recognised the Doctor.

“About bloody time you showed your face, isn’t it?” Then her anger drained into confusion as she realised the Doctor was towing someone behind him, someone who looked like his long-lost twin. As far as Silver cared, he could have stayed lost - two Presidents were just twice as useless.

The Doctor knelt beside her, the Master standing awkwardly, scowling. Their strength was too evenly matched for him to be able to break away. She realised he didn’t look like the man she knew as the President - he was a bit older, a few strands of grey blossoming at his temples. He looked tired, weary somehow. The Doctor carefully examined the dead man’s wound. He looked at the girl, saw the resemblance.

“Your father?”

Silver nodded. “You’re not the Doctor, are you? He’d know that, he was a friend of Dad’s.” The Doctor took a deep breath. “It’s a long story my dear, a long, long story. But suffice to say I am the Doctor, and this character...” He jerked his bound wrist, nearly pulling the Master off his feet, “...who you think of as the President, isn’t.”

“Right. Great. Whatever. Now how do we stop these things killing everyone?”

The Doctor gave the Master a sideways glance. “Look, since you’re here you might as well make yourself useful. What did you do to neutralise the group mind last time?”

“There was an Earth-based node in a lake in Alaska that the Gisb were using to control the creatures. We dropped a few tonnes of explosives on top of it.”

The Doctor winced. “Well, let’s see if we can’t deal with this with a little more finesse this time, yes? Empty your pockets.”

“Pardon?”

“Pockets. Empty. Now! I need some bits and pieces. Unless you’d like to go for a nice stroll through that grabber-infested lab to get some supplies? You too, dear.”

Silver scowled. “I have a name, y’know. I’m Silver. And your not having my stuff.”

“Silver, I’m trying to destroy the thing that’s controlling the grabbers - the thing that made them kill your father.”

“And my stepmother.”

“Okay, and your stepmother.”

“And my real mother.”

“Ah, Okay, and your mother - but we can destroy it this time, get rid of it forever.”

Silver cast a critical eye over the contents of the Master’s pockets; various forms of currency, apple cores, a recalcitrant yoyo, bits of wire and circuitry, a sliver of motherboard and three gobstoppers.

“You’re going to knobble this thing with a kids’ toy and some lollies?”

The Doctor rummaged through their cache of goodies, started adding a few goods and chattels of his own. “This thing’s a group mind. It uses thought to communicate with these grabber whatsies. If we can feed it’s own thoughts back to it, we should get some feedback going.”

Silver nodded. “Like a guitarist with the foldback speaker pointing the wrong way?”

“Yes, and you know the horrible noise that makes?” Silver nodded. “Imagine that going through the controlling mind. It won’t be quick or pleasant, but it should be fatal.”

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It didn’t look fatal. It looked like a piece of junk. It combined bits of circuitry and little resistors with a couple of batteries and the headphones from Silver’s iPod. The Master eyed it suspiciously.

“You’re not actually going to use that contraption, are you?”

“Unless you’d like to?” The Doctor offered him the headphones.

“The feedback will probably kill you, too.”

Silver called from her post, watching movement in the lab through the glass door. “Hurry up and use it. Those things are getting nasty!” As if to reinforce her words, the doors suddenly bulged outwards with a thump. The Doctor took a deep breath and cleared his mind, seeking the carrier wave. He found it, coarse and brutal. Primitive. He wrapped his own mind around it, inviting it in. Then he shoved the last battery into place to complete the circuit and let the machine do its work.

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It looked like it was going to explode. The Doctor’s little machine was starting to spark and hiss. Sweat ran down the Timelord’s brow as he struggled to maintain contact, to feed the group mind’s influence back to it, amplified by the machine. Silver was still staring through the door.

“They’re slowing down, they’re sort of drunk looking. Swaying from side to side and running into things.”

The Master looked up at her.

“But are they stopping?”

“Not likely mate. Those things are immortal.”

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Three minutes. Three long, long minutes. The Master was now holding the smoking machine together, forcing the nearly spent batteries to stay in position.

“Are they stopping?”

“No, they’re still coming. They’re no slower than they were before.”

The Master licked his singed fingers. “We’ve failed.”

Suddenly Silver looked up, realising something. A last chance. “Not yet we haven’t.”

Silver left the door unguarded, came back and sat beside the Doctor. She took a deep breath, tried to clear her mind. To push away all the badness with Cheryl and Dad and the grabbers, all the old, cold badness swilling beneath the surface. She cleared it all out and focused on light, pure white light. She held the moonstone at her throat tightly, trying to draw strength from the gem. She rested her hand on the Doctor's shoulder. Locked in his inner struggle, he didn't notice. But now, she felt it. She could feel the sandpaper roughness of the other thing, the strange velvety darkness of the Doctor's alien mind. And her own tiny, pitiful thoughts rattling around inside her little human skull, random and uncontrollable, but trying. Just a bit more. Just a little bit more. She held the stone tighter, her fingers tangling in the chain. Silver took a deep breath, gathered her energy, and *pushed*.

The Doctor screamed. Silver screamed. The machine exploded in the Master's face. From the lab came the high, pathetic noise of aliens dying. The human girl slumped exhausted against the Timelord. Carefully she let go of the moonstone. The creamy gem was clouded with veins of dark, smoky grey.

"They're gone, aren't they?"

The Doctor had recovered enough to speak. "Yes, they're gone now, Silver. We won."

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They were still sitting quietly when the Master made his move. He stamped heavily on the chain connecting him to the Doctor. The Doctor yelled in surprise and pain as the Master's weight landed on his hand. The Master pulled upwards sharply, managed to pull the cuff rivet away from the connecting chain. Now free, the Master ran back up the corridor. The Doctor was on his feet in a moment, pulling Silver with him.

"After him!"

They reached the Presidential office gasping from the run, just a few steps behind the Master. But when the Doctor and Silver barrelled through the door, the office was empty.

"Where's he gone?" Silver started checking the corners. The Doctor leaned heavily on the cluttered desk. "Think! Think! Thin - ah!" The Doctor landed on the floor as the desk suddenly disappeared with a deep wheezing, groaning noise and a flurry of wind. The Doctor lay on his stomach on the carpet, and gave a wry laugh as he rubbed his doubly bruised nose.

"Goodbye, old friend."

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### *Temporo-physical location unverifiable*

The Doctor sat curled up in his armchair, a mug of tea balancing precariously on the stack of books by his feet. It was irresponsible, he realised. Despite the Master's disappearance, or perhaps because of it, the job didn't feel finished. The Doctor sighed as he realised he had to let the somewhat bewildered political wheels of Earth keep turning on their own, however much he'd like to supply a little grease. The Master was out there, somewhere, still wearing his body and looking better in it than he did. No doubt he'd turn up soon enough, causing more embarrassment. President of America indeed, the Doctor sniffed. He stirred his tea, dislodging the wad of semi-dissolved sugar congealing in the bottom of the cup.

What about the girl? Silver, she'd called herself. A tangle of unusual clothes and defensive attitude. She'd said she'd be all right. Said she didn't want his help, thank you very much. But she was an orphan now, the Master had robbed her of her father and step-mother as well as her mother and a normal, safe childhood. He shouldn't have left her. But he didn't want a travelling companion yet.

There were still things to do, things better done alone.

It was too dangerous, he couldn't justify dragging another innocent with him into oblivion.

But he shouldn't have left her.

With a deep sigh, the Doctor dragged himself to the console room. He wasn't surprised to find the Ship had already suggested some landing co-ordinates.

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Silver sat on the floor in her father's laboratory, surrounded by bits of dead grabber, smashed glass, water and the Past. Her tears ran freely, she howled a low, feral note. Getting it out of her system. It was all gone now; her father, her mother, even Feral Cheryl were all just bits of meat stashed on mortuary boards somewhere. What was she going to do? The job more or less kept her head above water, she supposed. She'd have to figure out what to do with her parents' stuff. Assuming she didn't get arrested and put in jail forever for hacking her stepmother to death with a carving knife. It was hard.

It was all just too hard.

She held the ruined moonstone in her hand. It was her pride and joy, now even it was wrecked, cracked and clouded with ugly grey veins. She held it close, realising she had little choice. She breathed deeply, trying to summon just a little energy. She couldn't find any, she was empty, as if someone had prematurely let out the plug. She whispered, quietly.

"Come back. Please, come back for me. Come back."

She was still finishing her whispered prayer when the now-familiar noise and wind filled the room once more....

# JODIE VAN DE WETERING

*Jodie van de Wetering*: Is an online entity, which haunts various obscure niches of the web, but is believed to exist in physical form as well. She would like to look like Jennifer Aniston, but isn't prepared to actually DIET or anything, so she's resigned to looking more like Bill Oddie. Speaking of the greater bearded scruff-pot, she's currently involved in a Goodies fan fiction writing group, spends far too much time being a nuisance on various internet forums, knits, sews and makes papier mache sculptures - of fish, mainly. It's an artist thing. She collects stray animals, currently playing mother to two cats, a dog with different-coloured eyes, and a budgerigar with half a beak. She is the photographer for a radio station.

