

THE
DOCTOR WHO
PROJECT



**RAISING THE OBERON
PART II**

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Published by Jigsaw Publications

Doctor Who, TARDIS © 1963, 2024 by BBC Worldwide
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First Printing May 2024

Cover design by Robert Carpenter
Interior design and layout by Bob Furnell

Jigsaw Publications
Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada

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Previously on The Doctor Who Project...

Receiving a distress call from a mysterious Time Lady, the Doctor and Maggie have arrived aboard the salvage ship *Lysander*, whose captain, Soria Vikander, is tasked with rescuing the research starship *Oberon*, which crashed under mysterious circumstances on the uninhabited ocean world Nereus Prime. A team consisting of First Officer Demetrius, Safety Officer Chanmothco ('Moth'), Equipment Specialist Peter Quince, Technician Voxx, and the contractor Francis, has gone down to inspect the ship, and encountered signs of violence, numerous dead bodies, and an android, Puck, whose silence is treated with utmost suspicion. The nature of these horrors becomes more apparent when Francis and Demetrius see mysterious apparitions that lure them to grisly fates. Refused permission to go down by Captain Vikander and unable to take the TARDIS, the Doctor has jumped into the roiling waters of Nereus, followed by Maggie and Captain Vikander, and the *Lysander* has been forced by an oncoming storm to leave the team down there in the wreck of the *Oberon* ...

Weaving spiders come not here;
Hence you long-legged spinners. Hence!
Beetles black, approach not near;
Worm nor snail, do no offence.

—*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Act II, Scene II

Chapter One

Voxx was seated at the workstation. Moth and Demetrius had removed Larsson's corpse to a cold store near the kitchen, but the poor man's blood stains remained smeared across the desk, which she deliberately tried to avoid looking at directly.

"I've tried restarting the feeds from here, but it makes no difference. Diagnostics have brought up zip, nothing in or out." She leant back in the chair. "It's not the storm, Chief. The problem is down here, I know it."

"What about the drones? Are they still working on floating this heap?" Demetrius asked, peering at the screen.

"Nothing from the drones since they made contact at the designated points."

"OK, then, we can assume that operations have stopped. Hopefully the lack of contact doesn't mean something happened to the *Lysander*." Demetrius sighed and rose, suddenly aware of Puck's presence. "Hey tin man, are there any other comms devices down here that could help us contact our ship?"

Puck tilted his head to the side, then straightened it in a manner would have seemed like a habit in a human. "Yes. This was a research vessel sir."

"Would you care to elaborate?" Demetrius pushed.

"Yes. There are a set of programmable probes held on-board. If they have survived the impact, one could be used to contact your spacecraft from outside the *Oberon*."

"Can I activate them from here?" Voxx asked, frantically searching the system.

"No ma'am. They will need to be activated locally; though we should be able to interact with them from this terminal once they are active." Puck moved over to the relevant workstation. "They are located in the Express Logistics Carrier, here."

"Those things aren't built to be used underwater," Voxx said. "Won't they just sink?"

Puck's giant domed head swivelled towards her slowly. "The launcher is built to be airtight. Once the probe is in the open water, its booster system will propel it to the surface."

"As long as we are quick then," Voxx said.

"As long as we are quick," Puck repeated.

Demetrius shrugged. "We've got nothing to lose. Tin man, you're with me. Moth, you stay here with Voxx. If we find a probe, I'll need you ready on the interface for when we launch."

Voxx and Moth nodded their assent in unison and Demetrius moved to the door with Puck. He paused on the threshold and turned, trying to seem confident and relaxed.

"It'll be OK guys, keep in contact and focus on the job. We get in touch with Quince or the *Lysander*, then we get off this crate."

"Roger that, Chief." Voxx returned his smile.

"I am primarily made of polycarbonate and aluminium," Puck said.

"Huh?" Demetrius said absently.

"You referred to me as 'tin man', twice. That's incorrect, as I am primarily made from polycarbonates and aluminium, not tin. Much like your arm."

Demetrius continued walking, ending the conversation.

Demetrius had made most of the trip across the *Oberon* in silence, contemplating what had happened to his team. He didn't trust the robot that had almost flooded the part of the vessel that they occupied. Bringing him along meant that he could both use his knowledge of the *Oberon* and keep a close eye on him.

Deep space salvage often meant entering an already perilous situation. But losing an experienced crewmate, someone he trusted, like Francis, was a danger beyond what he'd expected.

They reached a vast hollow area, where a long gantry joined the port and starboard sides.

"Hey Puck," he said over his shoulder. "You're connected to the *Oberon's* primary systems, right?"

"Correct sir, I am."

"What is the current operational status of the elevators in this section?"

Puck took a few seconds to cross-reference the data. "Three elevators are still operational, one between Decks Three and Four, the others between—"

"OK," Demetrius interrupted. "What about the doors for the elevators that aren't operational—could they be accessed manually?"

"No. The safety system shuts down all elevator controls when the car is out of operation."

"Damn, I thought you might say that." Demetrius knew there was no way Francis would accidentally step into the empty elevator shaft. If the doors were already open when he had arrived, that affirmed that belief.

Death was something he'd never get used to, he'd seen enough of it, but he wasn't immune to it. He'd served in the Space Corps and always thought he could try to prevent death; he'd been trying to do that when he'd lost his arm. He glanced down at his prosthetic and flexed his fingers.

The feelings came flooding back to him, the smell of burning fuel, the heat from the waves of flame in reduced gravity. The trapped engineer screaming at him. He was right back in the midst of it. Trying to breathe despite the fumes in the air. Just desperately trying to breathe...

"Such a bright light..."

The song interrupted his thoughts again, creeping into his ears, into his thoughts.

"My radar sends me danger... but my instincts tell me to..."

"Keep breathing," he heard himself say aloud to the man struggling to reach him.

"Help me, please!" the man shouted hoarsely.

"Keep breathing. I'm here." Demetrius felt the heat on his face, his shoulders, his arms.

The inferno raged; the ship would explode as soon as the fire made it to the main drives. They were so close to escape, so close to each other, but time was against them.

Demetrius pushed against the pain, every fibre of his being pulling at him to leave, but he couldn't give in, he couldn't look into the eyes of the man and leave him to a fiery death. He stretched every sinew, strained his fingers, desperately trying to stretch into the gap between them.

“Keep breathing, you’re going to make it!” Demetrius shouted over the din of the klaxons overhead. The module rotated slowly. Disorientated, desperate, he felt as though the fire was spiralling around them.

“*Keep breathing...*” The song washed through the module. “*Out, in, out, in, out, in*”.

He knew he couldn’t stay any longer, the fire was too intense, the module was about to be sealed off. He strained forwards, pain shooting through his shoulders. Finally, he grabbed the man’s hand and the man latched on.

“I’ve got you!” he shouted, blinking hard. “Come on!”

“You let me die to save yourself,” The man spoke calmly, his voice distorted.

Demetrius opened his eyes to see the charred and smoking form of the man, his skin blistered and burnt but with bright blue, accusing eyes staring out from his cracked and blackened face. His nose, lips, and hair were gone. Horror filled Demetrius as he held the man’s burning hand, realised he was trapped in the vise-like grip of the dead. He felt the fire passing over him, searing his skin.

“No, no – this is not what happened! It didn’t happen like this!” he screamed as he felt himself being engulfed in flames.

“Because you left me to die?” the man said, that lipless mouth contorting unnaturally to form the words.

“I had no choice!”

“What about me?” another voice asked, breaking him from the dark spell. It was Francis. “Did you have no choice but to let me die, Chief?”

The module faded from view and Demetrius realised he was leaning over the edge of the gantry, screaming into the vast empty space below with his cybernetic arm outstretched. Francis was standing next to him looking down, a mocking smirk on his face.

“Frankie?” he said scrambling to his feet, “You’re OK? I – we thought you were dead.”

“Is that why you just left me behind?” Francis said, looking him directly in the eye.

“Sir?” Puck said from behind him. “Are you all right?”

“Quiet!” Demetrius shouted.

Francis moved in closer.

“Is that why you just left me behind... Chief?” He placed a hand on Demetrius’ shoulder. “Is that why you left *him* behind?”

“I tried,” Demetrius said, filled with shame and regret. “If only we had more time.”

“It’s too late for them,” the dark being said from where Francis stood moments earlier, its voice distorted and low. “It’s too late for all of you now.”

Its white lid-less eyes bore into him from its dark featureless face as it extended its long limbs around him like a spider wrapping its prey, before pulling him over the handrail and clear of the gantry into the open space.

“If only I had more time,” Demetrius said aloud in a quiet, detached voice. His eyes were wide and unblinking, unaware of what was happening as he fell into the shadows below.

Puck moved silently to the edge of the gantry, tilting his head to the left, and peered out over the side. He stared blankly into the darkness below, then retreated slowly.

The *Marlin* had docked successfully on the port side of the *Oberon*, connecting an umbilical tube that Quince guided into place remotely. The connecting bay had been dry, and the Doctor, Maggie, Vikander, and Quince were able to disembark successfully. The air in the bay was stale but still breathable.

"This is Captain Vikander, dive team, do you copy?" The captain was impatient for news of the crew, her voice echoing around the large empty space, its pitch amplified and higher than normal.

After an audible shift in the connection, Voxx's voice came ringing back, laced with anxiety. "Captain, is that you? Yes, yes, we hear you." She composed and corrected herself. "I mean, this is Voxx, I copy, Captain."

Vikander smiled to herself, both in relief and at the young crewmember's nervy response. "Don't worry Voxx, we're all happy to hear your voice too."

"Captain, we need you to send Quince back with the *Marlin*. Demetrius has ordered us to pull out and go back to the *Lysander*." The request sounded more like a plea.

"We're not on the *Lysander*, we've just boarded the *Oberon*. Where's Demetrius?" Vikander asked, an uncomfortable feeling rising in her stomach.

There was a pause on the line as the landing party stood by the inner access door at the opposite side of the bay. The Doctor stood by Vikander's shoulder, already expecting the response.

"He's gone, Captain. We don't know where. He was on his way to launch a probe so we could piggy-back a signal to the *Lysander*." Voxx exhaled pronouncedly. "We can't reach him, there's been no contact since."

"Where are you Voxx?"

"Central operations room. It's just Moth and me."

"Stay there, we're on our way," Vikander said pressing the door control hard. Maggie glanced at the Doctor who gave a slight grimace. She could tell where this was going, and he knew it. Her anger began to simmer again.

"Voxx, the doors are locked, can you override?" the captain asked.

"Yes, sorry Captain, after the incident with the airlock I routed all external door controls to this terminal."

The control panel illuminated green, and the door whooshed open. The Doctor kept pace with Vikander at the head of the small group.

"Captain, I agree with your first officer's assessment, we need to gather the rest of your crew and get off this ship." He knew he was still on thin ice with Vikander, and she was innately inclined to fight against his suggestions.

"Of course, but that includes finding Demetrius."

"I fear it may already be too late for him."

Vikander sharply turned to face him. "Aaron Demetrius is a trusted colleague and a friend. I will not abandon him, even if you have a valid point. I must try. Do you understand me?"

"*Help me! Please, find me,*" the voice chimed in inopportunistly, now clearer than ever, almost as if the woman was standing next to him.

The Doctor shook away the presence, and replied, "Better than you know."

Vikander's face gave nothing away as she digested what Voxx and Moth had told her. The dead man in the chiller, the attempt to delete logs, finding Puck, and then Francis falling down the open lift shaft, the communications being frozen, and Demetrius disappearing in search of a solution. They had seen and heard no one since they had arrived, other than the android and the dead bodies they kept tripping over.

"And the android never came back?" Vikander asked.

"No Captain." Voxx lowered her head.

“And these are the files you were trying to clean up?” the Doctor asked, sitting by her side at the workstation.

“Yes, I sent some to Starveling too before we lost contact, the only new file I have found is this one,” Voxx said pointing to the visual display.

The video played without sound and showed a woman with her back to them at the same terminal that they had found the blood pool. A man approached her and after they exchanged a few words he leapt through the air at her. She responded by shooting him in the torso with a volt-gun.

“Friendly,” Voxx commented. “I think he’s our popsicle in the freezer.”

The Doctor wriggled his long bony fingers over the controls. “Can I have crack at it? I’m pretty good at this sort of thing usually.”

Voxx nodded and the Doctor sat at the computer and clicked away busily at the interface as Vikander continued: “OK, so we trace the route Demetrius took, and hopefully we’ll pick up a trace of him along the way.”

“Ah! What’s this then?!” the Doctor interrupted.

“What have you got?” Vikander walked over to the workstation.

“It’s a recording from some kind of salvage,” the Doctor tapped the video file.

“The return of the PX-5 probe has yielded unexpected results,” Doctor Titania’s voice narrated a video of an orb-shaped object being studied by crewmembers dressed in protective suits. *“The foreign object that was scraped from the surface of the debris has some interesting properties. It’s unlike anything that we have studied previously.”*

The video focused on a black substance that moved slowly when touched with a long instrument.

“Incredibly the subject does not appear to be carbon-based. Which, if true, is ground-breaking.”

Suddenly the substance took shape, like an oily tentacle and struck the nearest crewmember, knocking them off their feet.

Doctor Titania’s narration continued, *“It appears aggressive if threatened, so we have contained it for now. But this is an unexpected opportunity that we cannot ignore.”*

“I’ve heard that kind of thing before,” the Doctor declared. “And it rarely ends well.”

“This video was dated three weeks before the first one that we found,” Voxx said.

“Three weeks later it was designated ‘Morpheus’ and had become our good doctor’s favourite project,” the Doctor leant back, interlacing his fingers. “Shortly after that, the *Oberon* changed course and ditched here.” He drummed the desk while he thought aloud. “We know that a foreign body was brought aboard the *Oberon*. We know that it isn’t classed as a contagion according to the ship’s system. Therefore, it is probable that either no one had time to update the definitions, or that this ‘subject’ was an unclassified lifeform.” The Doctor turned to Voxx. “If it did ultimately pose a risk to the crew, indicated by the blood and the odd corpse, then it isn’t a leap to assume that someone tried to make sure no one else was at risk by crashing onto an uninhabited planet.”

“OK detective, but how does that help us find Demetrius?”

“I know where Mr Demetrius is located,” Puck interrupted.

They all turned to the doorway, where the android stood, his blank face eerily staring at them with yellow unblinking eyes.

“You! Where the hell have you been?” Voxx shouted as she leapt at him. “What did you do to him?”

Moth jumped to her side and managed to restrain her as she tried to claw her way toward the robot.

“I assure you ma’am, I did nothing to Mr Demetrius,” Puck responded flatly.

“Liar!” Voxx shouted with another lunge.

“Voxx, calm down, that’s an order,” Vikander said firmly, holding up her hand. Voxx stopped struggling and composed herself but remained close to Moth. Vikander faced the android. “Puck, is it? I

am Captain Soria Vikander of the Commercial Salvage Vessel *Lysander*. I am commanding you to tell me where first officer Demetrius is.”

The android bowed deferentially. “Yes, Captain, my designation is Puck. I am afraid that First Officer Demetrius jumped over the gantry connecting the port and starboard sides of Deck Eleven.”

“Jumped? Why the hell would Aaron jump?”

“I cannot answer that, Captain Vikander. I have insufficient data on your first officer’s psychological profile.”

Vikander slammed her fist into the robot’s body which rocked him backwards, surprising everyone.

“Psychological profile?” she shouted. “Listen to me, you metal moron, Aaron Demetrius would not jump. So, you’re going to have to do better than that.”

“I am sorry Captain. I am merely reporting what I observed.”

“I need to find Doctor Titania’s lab,” the Doctor said. “My guess is she’ll have a personal log, or other information files not on the main system. It might shed more light on what’s happening here. If we are staying, which seems ill-advised, then it’s in our interests to know what we are dealing with.”

“I assume you’ll be able to provide the location and passcodes Puck?” Vikander confirmed.

“Checking operating parameters. Yes. I can do that.”

“OK, Quince and I will go with the robot to find Demetrius. Voxx and Moth, get everything ready to ship out on the *Marlin*. We’ll meet back there.”

The Doctor nodded his approval of this plan. “Maggie and I will check out the lab then.”

“Oh, we will, will we?” Maggie sniffed.

“Well, I assumed so, yes.” The Doctor looked confused.

“You assume a lot. But you’re right, I am coming with you.” Maggie said, feeling that her anger at the Doctor’s rash actions still smarting. However, he was her friend, and after all they had done together, she couldn’t be angry with him for long.

Chapter Two

The Doctor and Maggie walked in silence to the working elevator that Puck had indicated. One deck above, Dr Titania's research lab was associated. The android had indicated on the ship's computer that the stairwell had been compromised in the crash, and the ducting here wasn't wide enough to traverse, so the fastest route up was the elevator.

"Maggie, I get the impression that you're unhappy with me," he said turning his back to the elevator doors.

She pursed her lips, considering how to approach the rest of the conversation. She had known the Doctor long enough to know he was capable of great empathy and complete dissociation in equal measure. She had learnt to pick her fights but wasn't sure she could let her current anger go if she didn't speak up.

"Doctor, you took an enormous risk today. You acted without thinking. You endangered yourself, Captain Vikander, and me – unnecessarily." She jabbed her finger towards him, which instantly made her feel like a schoolteacher. "You still don't know if there is someone down here to save, but you risked your life anyway! If you died in that water I'd be trapped in this time, with whatever happens next – alone."

She realised saying it aloud that her real anger came from concern for her own safety and her face reddened in embarrassment.

"I'm sorry Maggie," the Doctor said, taking her off guard. "Everything you say is true. Mostly that I acted without thinking. I was so sure ..." He rubbed the cut in his temple. Had it all been to find her? Had this ghostly Time Lord in distress made him act so recklessly?

Maggie fidgeted with the cuff on her sleeve, feeling self-conscious and raw. "I know, it's just..."

"And worse, you're absolutely right, I didn't think about how it might affect you. I can't assume that you are *au fait* with every decision I make." He caught her gaze. "And we're here now, and that captain's nearly as stubborn as I am, leaving us stuck here."

"Since we are stuck here, I guess we may as well see it through," she said looking up at him, hearing a tremor in her voice she hadn't expected.

The elevator doors slid open.

"Besides, when have I ever let you down?!" the Doctor said, backing into the lift obliviously, his arms outstretched.

"Wait!" Maggie said, grabbing hold of his arms. "Check the elevator is there!"

The Doctor peered over the threshold sheepishly and looked up and down to confirm the elevator car was indeed where it should be.

“Safety first,” Maggie said.

The Doctor tapped the control interface. Though mildly dismayed that the top floor was locked off, he entered Puck’s access code, and with a beep of acceptance, the car ascended.

“Well, at least the android’s code worked.” the Doctor said.

“It might be my mixed experience with robots Doctor,” Maggie said, “but I don’t trust Metal Mickey.”

“That’s probably because he doesn’t have a face or expressions.” the Doctor said. “Funny the phases humans go through when it comes to android design. At times they look like people, and the closer they got the less people liked them. Then they go the other way, and some don’t like *that* either.”

“Maybe you’re right. I can’t read him, I don’t know what he’s thinking when he’s doing the butler act. He gives me the creeps.”

“There are far worse forms out there than the creepy butler.” The Doctor smiled, recalling a few unpleasant encounters from his past.

“Well as long as this isn’t the one where the butler did it.”

The elevator doors slid open, and they stepped out to a lobby of some kind. Its décor looked expensive but sterile. On the other side was a locked door with another digital keypad, its controls backlit in red. There were no windows to see inside.

“I’d assumed that there would be some kind of DNA or retina scan to get in – not very spacey,” Maggie said as they passed through the doors into the dimly lit entrance.

“That wouldn’t be very user-friendly for a robot with no DNA and no retinas,” the Doctor pointed out.

Inside was a desk with an integrated workstation, comfortable chairs on either side, and a bookcase behind, where many books had fallen loose in the crash. There were two large potted rhododendron plants, also overturned.

As they approached the desk, another set of doors opened. A strange blue glow came from within. This dim lighting came from several clear tanks filled with liquid, fixed to the floor and the ceiling. The nearest tank looked like it contained a floating head. As the Doctor moved closer, he identified it as the damaged head of a Cyberman, of the type he had battled in the Wheel in Space in the twenty-first century. There were several fibre-optic connectors linking the head to some unseen apparatus.

“My word,” the Doctor said. “It’s a long way from home. I wonder where they found it?”

“Doctor, look at this,” Maggie whispered, stepping back from the next tank.

The Doctor approached it and stared within at a large squid-like organism, its tentacles thrashing about. As he moved, he stared at its single large eye. The eye was closed.

“Dalek,” the Doctor said as he approached the tank.

As if sensing his presence, the eye slowly opened and stared directly at him for a moment, before glancing downwards. It returned its focus to him before repeating the movement. The Doctor realised it was directing him to an intercom-style button on cylindrical pillar encasing the tank. Reluctantly the Doctor pushed it.

“H-help, me,” the Dalek croaked through the speaker. The Doctor realised that someone had connected the Dalek’s voice modulator, which gave its voice a familiar sound even without its outer shell.

“Help you?” The Doctor frowned as he spoke, repulsed by the request from a being that had no doubt sown its fair share of destruction before finding itself here. “Not enjoying your stay? My heart bleeds for you. Why should we help you?”

“M-mercy,” the Dalek responded, straining to keep its eyelid open. “Show mercy. K-kill, me.”

The Doctor stood nearer to the tank. “What kind of experiments were they doing, to have broken a Dalek? Well? Why are you here?”

The mutant gave a few inarticulate gurgles before lapsing back into unconsciousness.

He scanned the room, seeing other tanks occupied by other biological subjects, some dead, some clinging to life, or just parts of a lifeform. The Doctor pointed out each one: the hairy tail of a Therianthrope, scales from the hide of a Krarg. In a far corner was the arm of an Axon, transforming between a shiny humanoid arm and an orange, tuber-like tentacle at regular intervals, trapped in an endless transformation cycle.

"It's like the island of Doctor Moreau in here," Maggie said standing closer to the Doctor.

A meter away was a work area under-lit in pale white. As the Doctor passed, it came to life, the glass displayed open files and notes and a mechanical arm moved nimbly over to face him. On the end a small camera tracked his movements.

"I think we found Doctor Titania's video log studio," the Doctor guessed, squinting at the camera. A 'record' button flashed.

"Look, more log entries," Maggie pointed out the screens to the left of the desktop.

The Doctor tapped the nearest one. A notably dishevelled Doctor Titania faced the camera; her face drawn, and her eyes framed with dark rings. The playback started.

"The nature of the subject 'Morpheus' is unlike anything I have ever seen; I am equally awed and disturbed by it. It barely registers on any of our instruments. It has no mass, no internal or external temperature readings. It is as if it doesn't exist. Were I not seeing it with my own eyes I would say that it can't."

She was leaning on her desk with exhaustion, her focus seemed to drift.

"You don't know what you do by keeping me here. I am speaking from the depths of my heart, of my very soul. You don't know whom you wrong, or how, and I may not tell. Woe is me! I may not tell."

The video recording ended abruptly, the background showing a pair of scientists or assistants reviewing data, slightly out of focus. One of them had vibrant red hair and was looking straight down the lens, as if she could see them. But it was difficult make out her features.

"What was that about?" Maggie said. "She was quoting a novel – it was a monologue by Renfield I think, you know, from *Dracula*. I'd have thought she was more *Dr Frankenstein* looking at this place."

"Yes, yes indeed," the Doctor said. He flicked through files that contained details on research, playlists of what was designated 'classical' music from the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. "She had all kinds of experiments on the go. Moreau, Frankenstein; these are appropriate comparisons, Maggie. What you'd call a real 'mad scientist' type. The effects of separation from the neural network on a Dalek mutant, reanimation, and extraction and implanting of alien DNA into a host. That kind of thing. The worst kind of science/weapons and warfare research. Oh, humans..." He shook his head with patrician disapproval. "Why do you always fall into the same terrible traps?"

"Oh, Kate Bush," Maggie said, pointing to the music playlist.

The Doctor half-smiled before tapping another recording. Titania stood in the frame, the whites of her eyes wide, the pupils dilated. The lights in the lab flashed red, and a repetitive klaxon sounded in the background.

"We are trapped. There's no escape and the vessel is damaged. I must survive, must endure. There is a place I can go to stay safe from the crash. I can wait to be liberated there."

She walked and the camera tracked her movement to the far side of the room where a stasis pod stood open, waiting for her.

The video ended before she reached the pod, and the Doctor looked around the lab and traced her route with his eyes. Cables and piping ran across one side of the ceiling and disappeared into the wall.

"That's a separate power supply to the rest of the room, so the stasis pod is somewhere behind that wall. Maybe our mad scientist is still there!" He swept the room, feeling around the walls for a release button, noting the moisture on the floor.

There was a *beep* as his right hand found the hidden control. A section of the wall glowed purple and green as a panel slid open. The stasis pod rolled forward on an automated track. The panel on the left

side should have displayed the occupants' vital signs: heart rate, brain activity, oxygen levels. But the panel was cracked and only displayed 'ERROR' for each heading.

The Doctor wiped the window with his sleeve and said to the familiar female face behind its inspection glass: "Hello Doctor Titania. Welcome back to the party."

Quince and Vikander raided a nearby equipment cabinet and had armed themselves with volt guns. Puck walked out in front of them. Quince checked around them as they walked, while Vikander kept her eye and her weapon trained on the robot.

"My programming compels me to tell the truth, Captain. I assure you I was not responsible for the death of Mr Francis, or for the unusual actions of your first officer Demetrius."

"Yeah, well, forgive me if I don't automatically trust every strange robot that I meet on a death ship."

"I don't like this place, not one bit," Quince said. "It's like a freakin' haunted house. But not the fun kind."

"Haunted?" Puck inquired quizzically. "As in a fairground attraction inhabited by ghosts, or a habitation permeated with mental anguish or torment of its inmates?"

Quince cleared his throat. "Both."

"Has anyone told you that you're creepy?" Vikander asked their impassive mechanical guide.

"Yes," Puck confirmed. "Miss Voxx. Twice."

They had taken a stairwell down two floors. Inside the vast hollow area at the heart of the *Oberon*, there was a network of stairways that connected levels that didn't go all the way to the top or the bottom. They had gone in the opposite direction from Maggie and the Doctor. At this level the lighting worked intermittently, the infrastructure servicing the area likely damaged with the impact, or when the ion drives exploded.

"Why didn't the sub-light engines going critical destroy the *Oberon*?" Quince asked as they walked through a confined corridor.

"The *Oberon* was designed to separate in such a situation. This part of the vessel could sustain life until rescue. Unfortunately, the impact took us into the gravitational pull of Nereus Prime, and we went down," Puck answered.

"What caused the ion drives to explode?" Quince probed.

"I have insufficient data to answer at this time."

"What can you tell us about the crash?" Vikander pushed.

Puck stopped abruptly. "The vessel was in trouble before the ion drives exploded. There had been a containment breach."

"What was the nature of the breach?"

"There is insufficient data for me to answer at this time." The robot walked on. Were it not so totally incapable of emotion, Vikander and Quince would have guessed it was growing impatient with their badgering.

Quince was also struck by its repeated answer. "What do you mean by 'insufficient data'? And 'at this time'? *Did* you know at one time?" he inquired, hurrying after the shifty android.

Puck took a moment to answer. That round chrome-plated head swivelled back to look him in the eyes, and finally said, "Affirmative ... my logs indicate that I may have known at one time. My data files are corrupted. There are gaps in my sequential memory records."

"Has your memory been tampered with?" Quince said.

"That is entirely possible, Mr Quince."

The corridor opened into a large space that looked like a botanical garden. Its lighting was still damaged, the cold silver fringing the flowers' vivid greens, reds, and yellows bringing a surreal feeling to the environment. The larger plants and trees stood in silent vigil over them.

"Whoa, look at this place!" Quince said, looking upwards. "You ever seen anything like this Captain?"

"Only on terraforming vessels." She craned her neck to look upwards, tracing a narrow circle before colliding with Puck.

"My apologies Captain Vikander, but we are here," The robot pointed up, where they could make out the lights from the gantry high above them. "The first officer's trajectory should have taken him somewhere here based on my calculations of his weight and the angle of the fall."

Vikander stepped back and scanned around. The lighting made it difficult to see, but there was no body. She clicked on a torch and swept its light over their immediate vicinity.

"There," Quince said solemnly.

She looked over to where his flashlight fell and saw that there was a large sickly red stain on the floor, an obvious area of impact, but no Demetrius.

"I see it, but then where is he?" she asked, stepping over to the pool of blood.

"According to my calculations he could not have survived the impact," Puck said dispassionately.

There were strange drag marks on the floor, moving away from the impact zone in a loosely linear fashion. Nearby were visible boot prints.

"What the hell?" Vikander said, motioning for them to follow her.

"Dead men don't walk away, Boss," Quince said sweeping the volt-gun from left to right. "What's going on here?"

"I have no idea, but if Aaron is alive, then we have to find him."

The path wound to the right around some large tropical plants that seemed to reach out for them in the darkness. The lights overhead flickered, making it increasingly difficult to orient themselves. Suddenly the trail ended, as if Demetrius had either been lifted off the floor or stopped bleeding.

"This doesn't make any sense," Vikander said. "He can't just have disappeared."

Quince turned slowly in a circle, holding the volt-gun in front of him with the flashlight above it, breathing harder than before.

"Captain. We should leave, now."

"D-don't want to t-take your ol' pal with you?" a scratchy voice called from the darkness behind him.

Quince wheeled around and his flashlight fell on the distorted face of Demetrius looking back at him through one pale eye. The right side of his skull had been crushed in the fall, and his arm hung limp and disjointed from the shoulder down.

Before Quince could say anything, a shovel swung wildly from the left side and connected with the side of his head with a sickening thud. Quince was taken off his feet by the impact.

"Pete!" Vikander shouted before instinctively discharging her volt gun at the advancing form from the darkness, his twisted mouth peeled back in a snarl, a wet exhalation forcing through his lips. It connected in Demetrius' torso and knocked him backwards out of the light.

"Come on Puck!" she shouted, taking off in the direction that they had entered.

The android backed away, its gaze locked where Demetrius had been knocked backwards into the shadows.

"Yes Captain Vikander. Data files updated, transmitting to secondary repository."

Quince struggled for breath in the dirt, trying to climb to his feet, but couldn't. Panic raced around his brain as he lay in the darkness, but there was nothing he could do. The impact from the shovel had been devastating. He was dying.

“Just breathe Pe-ter. We will a-all be toge-ther soon e-enough.” Demetrius laboured through the words as he looked down on Quince. “Y-you’ll s-see, it’s better that way.”

Quince lay prone, unable to move, lost in fear. The dark shape above twisted and contorted from his friend’s form into its own dark shade and arched in towards him, grinning with malevolence.

“If we shadows have offended, think but this, and all is mended, that you have but slumbered here, while these visions did appear,” it whispered as it closed in around him.

Chapter Three

Doctor Titania sat at her desk, staring ahead unblinking. She was rigid with tension, clearly struggling to regain her faculties after being roused from stasis. Maggie found a working food synthesiser, and she got it to produce a mug of coffee, ascertained that Titania liked it black, without sugar. The scientist sat with the plain black mug in her hand, in a numbed approximation of her posture in all those log entries, as if she were trying to summon herself back by stumbling through her routine.

“Do you know where you are?” the Doctor said shining a fiberoptic penlight in her eyes and observing the pupil reactions.

“I’m on-board the deep space research vessel *Oberon*,” Titania said woozily, “I assume.”

“Correct. I’m the Doctor, and this is Maggie,” He picked up a stethoscope from the table and held it up in front of Titania and smiled kindly. “Do you mind if I have a listen?”

“No ... not at all,” Titania said, her dark green eyes staring straight ahead, barely acknowledging the visitors in her lab.

The Doctor listened to both sides of her chest for a moment, then paused and grunted.

“The *Oberon* has crashed on the ocean planet Nereus Prime. You appear to be the only survivor.”

“Appear,” Titania said the word as a statement rather than a question.

“There is a salvage crew aboard. We came to look for answers, to see if we could find out what happened to the ship, and now enough bad things are happening to the crew of the salvage ship to make those answers more pressing,” the Doctor said.

Those dark green eyes stayed staring into space as Titania informed them haltingly: “The *Oberon* was sabotaged ... the same person injured us. Needed to heal, so used the pod.” She pointed down at her stomach to show a fading burn on the fabric of her uniform.

“The saboteur did this to you?” the Doctor asked, “Do you know who it was?”

“She said she was a research scientist, sent by the company to review our research. No record of her ... But she wouldn’t let us leave.”

The Doctor flinched at how similar this sounded to his own fib. He was glad Captain Vikander wasn’t around to hear this, or volt guns might start twitching around his ears.

“Did anyone else survive?” Maggie asked.

“No.”

The Doctor turned his back on the patient and in a low voice said: “She’s not out mysterious Time Lord. No binary vascular system, though it sounds a little off, but that could be the effects of stasis.”

“Do you think the Time Lord was the saboteur?” Maggie asked in a lowered voice. “That phony research scientist story sounds like the cock and bull stuff you usually say.”

He smiled thinly. “I thought the same thing.”

“Do you think it could be one of the bad ones after all?”

“It’s hard to say. Often it isn’t as simple as right or wrong, good, or bad.” the Doctor said. “But it’s obvious that this ‘*Morpheus*’ has something to do with it. At the risk of sounding like a broken record, I think we need to get the crew and leave, now.”

“We should leave now,” Titania said from behind them.

The Doctor turned to see that she was sat facing them, her eyes fixed firmly on them, a slight half-smile on her face.

“Time to leave.”

“I ... couldn’t agree more,” the Doctor said, suddenly unsettled. Looking back at her, his instincts told him something was wrong, something was here, and they needed not to face it down, but to run from it.

“Doctor!” Vikander’s voice broke in over the communicator, jolting him.

“Ah, Captain Vikander! You called me ‘Doctor’, is that a good sign?”

Vikander cut him off, sounding as if she was running as she spoke: “Aaron – Demetrius, he’s up and walking around, he hit Quince hard. I- I don’t know how he’s alive but...”

“Demetrius is alive?” the Doctor asked.

“Listen – he, he can’t be alive not looking like that, but he’s hurt Quince.” She paused for a moment. “Oh, I left him, I left Pete behind!”

“*Morpheus*,” the Doctor said to himself.

“I need to go back. I need to get Quince.” a mixture of fear and adrenaline clouded her judgement.

“No Captain, think clearly. If you head back to Voxx and Moth, we will meet you there. We need to stay together.”

“Together,” Titania said, standing. “We’ll leave together.”

“We need to be ready to leave as soon as the captain gets back,” Voxx said to Moth as they walked the umbilical connector from the *Oberon* to the *Marlin*, a hover-pallet carrying three cylindrical containers behind them. “Once we have these oxygen cells loaded, we’ll be ready to go.”

“No salvage is worth this,” Moth replied over the helmet radio.

Voxx agreed, but tried to keep her voice peppy as she listed off the items they’d recovered. “I don’t know, man ... field matter synthesizers, micro-optic drills, plasma injectors, and a full spice rack from Sirius ... that should be enough to live the sweet life for a year or two.”

“The sweet life,” Moth repeated grimly. “Seems pretty far away now, doesn’t it?”

“I remember Quince told me this would be his last trip with the *Lysander*,” Voxx said looking back at him. “When he goes, will you go too?”

“No, I think I’ll stay. It’s a good crew. It feels like home,” Moth said with a smile.

“I’ll feel better that you’re around,” Voxx said grinning back. “Go team blue!”

Moth laughed in response, but his smile faded as he looked past her shoulder, he saw movement beyond the open hatch to the *Marlin*.

“Someone is on the *Marlin*.”

“What? There can’t be – Quince and the captain are on the lower decks. Who could possibly be on the *Marlin*?” Voxx tried to focus ahead, but she couldn’t make anyone out.

They quickened their pace and pushed their way inside the submarine.

All was quiet inside as they set the oxygen cells down in the cramped hold of the *Marlin* and searched for the intruder. There was a low beeping coming from inside the control deck. Voxx shuffled forwards, past all the *Oberon's* treasures, to look at the control panel while Moth looked around the storage.

"Moth – we have hydraulic system warning. I think we need to get off the sub," Voxx said, looking at the display.

Moth saw one of the internal hydraulic lines had cracked open. Voxx climbed back through into the storage area behind him. He looked around and saw a volt-gun on the floor, its external casing cracked and sparking electricity.

"Oh crap," she said, scrambling for the external hatch door. "Moth! Come on!"

They both bolted for the tube connecting to the *Oberon*. As they reached it they saw Francis leaving through the airlock, his back to them.

"Francis?!" Voxx shouted after him. He turned and looked at them, his neck bent at a sickening angle, his left leg dragging behind. A haunting smile played across his face.

"No! Don't!" Voxx called out as the door closed in front of them.

The volt-gun sparked again, and the hydraulic gas ignited, engulfing the storage area in flames. A second later, the *Marlin* exploded, sending flames down the umbilical tube, tearing it away at the seams like paper and severing it from the *Oberon*. The ocean water crashed in.

The Doctor and Maggie hurried the dazed Dr Titania to the airlock. At an intersection between corridors, they ran into Vikander, visibly shaken after her encounter with Demetrius and the realisation she had left Quince behind.

"I left him, I can't believe I just ran and left him behind."

"We all do unexpected things through fear. We need to group together, get to the surface."

"Together," Dr Titania said absently at his side.

"Who – wait, I recognise her. That's the woman in charge of this house of horrors?" Vikander asked.

The Doctor swung around to Dr Titania and back to Vikander awkwardly and flapped his arms at his side. "Yes, this is Doctor Titania. We found her in stasis in her lab."

"And does she know what's going on here?" Vikander's eyes were wild and angry.

Before the Doctor could answer, a tremor ran through the ship from the bay beyond the closed doors.

Vikander spun around instinctively and opened the doors. They whooshed open and she ran towards the outer airlock door which was sealed tightly. She peered through the observation window as the Doctor and Maggie rushed in behind her. The aftermath of the explosion had left a cloud in the water with debris visible from the *Marlin* and the connecting tunnel. Vikander looked out at the twisted remains of that familiar submersible, horrified about what its loss could mean.

"No. No, not the *Marlin* – Voxx, Moth, do you copy?" Vikander said over the open crew channel.

There was no response.

"Oh God..." She put her hands to her face and sank to her knees. "This can't be happening."

The Doctor and Maggie stood at the observation window taking in the wreckage of the submersible, while Dr Titania sidled up behind them.

"How could this happen?" Vikander sat on the floor, her hands on her knees, breathing hard. "Francis, Demetrius, Quince, now Moth and Voxx. How can I have lost them all?"

The Doctor squatted on his haunches next to her, placing a hand softly on her shoulder. "This wasn't your fault, Captain. Someone or *something* else is responsible for this."

"You!" Vikander said springing to her feet suddenly with a surge of energy." You jumped off the *Lysander*, it's your fault that Quince I and are down here and not on my ship!" She jabbed an accusing finger towards his chest.

"Well – I ... I'm not sure..." the Doctor wasn't often left fumbling for words, but he wasn't sure what to say given the look on Vikander's face.

Maggie cut in front of her. "The Doctor didn't send the others down here – you did Captain. He wanted to come down here with them. He told you to bring them back up, but you didn't listen because you didn't like him. Maybe if he had, he could have stopped what has happened. From what I could tell, your team tried to do everything properly, by the book. Whatever this is, it wasn't their fault, and it isn't yours, or the Doctor's."

"Contact your ship," Titania suggested.

"We can't, all outgoing communications are down."

"We should try again," the Doctor said. "We've nothing left to lose." He eyed Titania again, moving two steps to the side and observing her silently.

"We should try again," Titania said. "Please."

The walk to the operations centre was spent in tense silence. Vikander had her volt-gun trained ahead. She, Maggie, and Dr Titania wore body armour vests that they had found in the docking bay. Maggie also carried a volt-gun, but the Doctor had refused. Vikander had taken her through its safety and firing mechanisms.

"If we can speak to Starveling, we can get them to refloat the *Oberon* using the original plan. Once it is topside, we can use one of the exterior hatches to get of this godforsaken crate."

"Are there no other submersibles aboard the *Lysander*?" the Doctor asked.

"No. She's only a small ship. We usually carry two DSVs, but the other one is damaged from our last job. We were due back to port for repairs when we responded to this call. The drones will be able to get us afloat though."

"Then that has to be the plan," the Doctor turned to Titania. "Are you feeling better Doctor?"

"Better, thank you Doctor." Titania smiled back at him, her eyes bright, more colour in her face, apparently improving minute by minute.

The Doctor studied her carefully. "Stasis can be rough for prolonged periods. We'll get you checked over properly as soon as we can."

"Thank you, Doctor." Titania smiled.

They reached the operations centre. The Doctor held up his hand and they came to a halt, listening quietly as someone fumbled around clumsily inside the room. He stepped forward and tried to peer inside the open door.

"Is it Demetrius?" Maggie whispered.

"No." The Doctor burst through the door, "What are you doing?" he shouted.

Puck span around to face him.

"Apologies sir. I wasn't sure where anyone was."

"So, you thought you'd toss the room?" Maggie asked, looking around at the mess.

The floor was covered with objects from the desks. Equipment, personal data-pad devices, and several terminals were on and had been accessed.

"No ma'am. I was searching for missing data."

"Data relating to what?" the Doctor asked impatiently.

"Well, my primary directive is to..." The robot's sentence stopped as Dr Titania stepped out from behind the small group. "Oh. It's you."

"I'm not sure I'd be happy if my robot butler addressed me like that," the Doctor said with a dry laugh. He moved past the android to the workstation that Voxx had used earlier.

"Hello, Puck." Dr Titania smiled at the robot, who stepped backwards again.

"Ma'am."

The Doctor tapped away at the computer, deftly gaining access to the *Oberon's* communications array. Vikander took a seat next to him. "Do you know what you're doing?"

"I do. I've learned my way around computers, interfaces, mainframes, databases, and such. I can even fix the occasional office printer."

"Office what?" Vikander asked.

The Doctor continued typing furiously "Oh, just an old Earth piece of kit, theoretically capable of copying documents onto paper, but mostly adept at chewing up the paper and flashing error messages."

Vikander smirked despite herself. "I might have guessed you'd be some weird antiquarian in your spare time."

As they spoke, the communications system ran through a reboot sequence and appeared to connect; the Doctor tried the last channel used to contact the *Lysander*.

"*Oberon*, this is the *Lysander*, do you copy? Over." Starveling's voice sounded almost musical across the open line.

"Captain Vikander here, we read you loud and clear *Lysander*. Can you hear us Mia?"

There was a slight pause, then Starveling came back: "We read you Captain. It's good to hear your voice! Did you locate the dive team?"

The smile faded from her face, and her voice sounded flatter as she admitted: "Yes, but we've had ... multiple fatalities. We have lost the *Marlin* and I need you to raise the *Oberon* for evacuation. Over."

There was a longer pause on the line while Starveling digested the news. The crew had formed a solid bond through their history together. Even losing one crewmember was devastating, but the deaths of the entire dive time were difficult to comprehend. Vikander knew they were barely able to process this; she knew *she* was barely able to process it.

"Mia, do you copy?" Vikander asked.

"I copy, Captain. Despatching additional drones to the predefined coordinates. Unless there are alternative headings?" Starveling asked.

"No, despatch the drones, get this crate to the surface."

"Roger that. I'll keep you posted Captain."

Vikander turned to the Doctor. "How did Voxx struggle to get a signal, but you succeeded? She was a genius at this stuff, there's no way she just didn't try..."

"Turning it off and back on again?" the Doctor speculated. "I don't know Captain, but I do not doubt her ability. Maybe someone wants us off the *Oberon* ..." He clamped his mouth shut abruptly to end this unpleasant chain of thought.

"So, what now?" Maggie asked, visibly agitated. "We just sit and wait for a rescue?"

The Doctor crossed to Maggie, putting his arm around her shoulder to calm her. "Don't worry Maggie. We'll be all right. Just breathe."

"Just breathe," Titania, said standing beside Puck, that rictus smile still plastered on her face. "Don't worry, Maggie. We'll just sit and wait for rescue."

"Indeed," the Doctor said with an uneasy smile.

On the surface, the storm had passed, and the *Lysander* sat atop its floating platform once again. The drones had been launched and had made contact with the hull of the *Oberon* where the inner compartments were flooded. They were each equipped with extendable hoses that connected to two

tanks, each carrying half of the active mixture needed. They would create a waterproof seal, then pump the area full of the active foam. Once the two substances were mixed, the water would be flushed out and the *Oberon* would float to the surface.

Botham ran the process from the *Lysander's* operations room, watched by Starveling. As acting senior officer, she had the final say. She was reeling from the shock of losing people she knew and trusted but was using all her training and every measure of psychological trickery she had learned to push that horror to the back of her mind. At least it made her determined that there be no more casualties. Captain Vikander was a friend, as well as her commanding officer. She had to get her back aboard.

"*Oberon*, this is the *Lysander*, we have commenced pumping sequences. Hold tight. Over."

"Copy that *Lysander*. Over."

The Doctor was crouched inside the freezer where Larsson's body had been laid out, covered with a cloth sheet. He carefully inspected his injuries with the pen light he had kept from Dr Titania's lab.

"What are you thinking, Doctor?" Maggie asked, her sudden entrance making him jump.

"Ah, Maggie. I wasn't surprised," he lied, "I was just in deep thought."

Maggie stepped inside the freezer. "Thinking about?" she asked.

"Who shoots a man after he's beaten his own head in?" The Doctor pointed to the body. "He was shot with one of those pulse rifles. Looking at the recording, it was turned all the way up to eleven."

"*Spinal Tap* reference, nice." Maggie smiled, crouching next to him.

"Except this man wasn't shot, look." He shone the light across Larsson's chest, showing no impact wound from an energy blast.

"So, someone shot someone who looked like him?" She looked at the injury to the back of his head.

"Or the woman from the video shot *something* that looked like him. Remind you of any apparently dead people walking around this ship recently?"

Maggie climbed to her feet and rubbed her hands together as the cold set in. "So, the captain thinks we have a dead first officer walking around, and someone walked around looking like this guy after he was dead too?"

"Yes, I think they might have."

She stepped back outside the freezer. "I'm not sure about our defrosted Doctor Frankenstein."

"Neither am I."

"She gives me the chills."

"Is that not the freezer?"

Maggie's rebuke was interrupted by Captain Vikander's stern voice on the radio. "Doctor, Maggie, we have an anomaly at Bay Five, I need you two to check it out. It is a crew signal, but it is incomplete."

Maggie glared at the Doctor, shaking her head furiously to impel him to refuse her order. He held up his hands in mock submission. "OK Captain, we'll check it out."

Maggie smacked his left shoulder with the flat of her hand. "What are you doing? You don't have to take orders from Captain Dragon-Lady you know, even if she is going soft on you."

"Rest assured; my motives are entirely selfish. We need to get to the bottom of this, we'll stick together and see if we can find the answers. We always do, Agent Cooper." He grinned at her.

"Don't pull that on me. If you think Cooper got any answers, you *really* haven't watched *Twins Peaks*."

They raced across to Bay Five. The overhead lighting was out, and the door control glowed an ominous red in the darkness.

Out of the door a humanoid figure lunged at them, swinging a large wrench that narrowly missed the Doctor's skull. He slapped the arm away and caught hold of the blue wrist, pushing the assailant backwards into the docking bay. They both recognised the woman who was attacking them.

"Voxx, it's us!" the Doctor shouted as she made another lunge.

Voxx stood shakily in her compression suit as she assessed them. Maggie ran forward to support her as she staggered and almost fell.

"Voxx, what happened to you? Are you all right?" she asked.

"I-I'm sorry. I thought it was Francis, I thought he'd come back for me."

"Francis? But I thought he was dead?"

"So did I, until he blew up the *Marlin*." Voxx sat on the floor, exhausted. "Before he tried to kill me, when he *did* kill Moth," there were tears in her eyes.

"I was lucky, I was thrown clear, and I had just enough oxygen in my suit to make it to the next bay, but it looks like my suit-tech was damaged in the blast. I couldn't reach anyone. I thought I was going to die. What's going on down here? What's happening?"

The Doctor ran his hand right hand across his short hair as they both looked at him waiting. "Morpheus is what's happening," he said grimly.

"But what is Morpheus?" Maggie asked.

"Not what, but who," the Doctor said over the crew radio. "Captain Vikander, we've found the source of the anomaly." And then with a tinge of pride, he explained, "It was the rather resourceful Miss Voxx. We're coming back to you."

Chapter Four

Starveling was relaying an update from the *Lysander* as the Doctor, Maggie, and Voxx entered the operations centre.

Captain Vikander stood by the desk with Puck, and Dr Titania seated a meter away. Titania's long legs stretched out in front of her and crossed at the ankles, her back ramrod straight, and her eyes alert.

"Someone's woken up," the Doctor noted, nodding a greeting to her as they walked towards the captain.

Vikander unexpectedly leapt from her seat and embraced Voxx. The gesture seemed to take the Crespallion by surprise, her pale green eyes widened with shock and then sadness as she realised that the hug was both in relief and grief.

"I'm so happy you're OK," Vikander whispered to her, fighting back tears of her own. "I thought you were gone."

"I'm still here Captain," Voxx whispered back. "But we lost Moth," she unlocked herself from Vikander's arms. "Captain, where's Pete?"

Vikander stared at the floor for a moment, composing herself before she looked her young subordinate in the eye. "We—we found Demetrius; he should've been dead. I know this sounds crazy – but he *was* dead. But he attacked us, and Quince was in his way."

"And you left him behind to save yourself," Titania said out of the blue, her flat voice pregnant with underlying menace. "You can say it, it's a very human thing to do."

Vikander's nostrils flared. "What did you say to me?"

Titania's voice was still slow and dreamy, oblivious to Vikander's hostility. "Relax Captain. It's not a criticism, I am a great believer in self-preservation." She uncrossed her legs and rose with a serpentine grace. She was taller than Vikander by five inches or so and cut a striking figure, her well defined features seeming full of life in comparison to her earlier state.

"I'm not justifying myself to you. I don't know you. All I want to hear from you is an explanation for this hell you have pulled us into!" Vikander moved towards her as if gearing up for a fight, unperturbed by her height disadvantage.

Dr Titania opened her palms and spread her fingers out individually before clasping them together, in a motion that resembled a Venus fly trap closing over its prey.

"I was stuck here, unable to escape this *'hell'* as you put it. I called for help, and in you came – riding to the rescue."

“That’s not what I asked. I asked you to explain what is going on here.”

The Doctor observed the conversation in silence, motioning for Voxx to sit down.

Dr Titania smiled a joyless smile, like someone who had practiced the movement in a mirror. “As far as I can tell, the same thing that happened to the crew of the *Oberon*. The crewmembers injured themselves. There were accidents and malfunctions all over the ship. But they didn’t die, instead they came back for the others. On and on the cycle went, with nearly a hundred souls eaten up by ...” She trailed off pointedly. “As I told the Doctor over there, an intruder sabotaged the ship, and we went down.” The smile faded quickly. “And like you, I survived.”

“Francis,” Voxx said sadly, her head in her hands muffling her voice.

“What was that Voxx?” Vikander asked, moving her attention toward her junior officer, the edge out of her voice. “What about Francis?”

Voxx looked back up at her, wiping tears from her eyes. “Francis was on the *Marlin*, he sabotaged the sub using the hydraulic system, blew it up. Moth ...” She broke off, choking back a sob. “...he and I both saw him. But he was dead.”

“That’s Francis and Demetrius, that guy Larsson in the freezer, who was caught on video, right Doctor?” Maggie asked.

The Doctor nodded, touching Voxx’ shoulder, then straightened, placing his hands behind his back. Maggie was reminded of a detective about to impart some key information, like Sherlock Holmes or Columbo.

“The dead crewmembers get up and walk, someone tries to sabotage the ship. Both before the crash and now.” He tapped Puck lightly with his right hand as he walked by. “And you, Doctor Titania.” The Doctor stopped beside Vikander. “Sending out your distress signal and waiting for a rescue ship. But in that message, you don’t mention the violent ends being met by the crew of the *Oberon*, don’t mention the deliberate act to crash it here – on an uninhabited ocean world, cut off from all life.”

“Is that important?” Titania looked him directly in the eye, her gaze piercing.

“It is when you consider the video logs, that mentioned Doctor Titania found a strange life form like no other, one she called ‘Morpheus’. I assume the good doctor had a classical education and named the creature after the Greek god of dreams.” The Doctor moved Vikander away from Titania, his left hand still behind his back. “I think you know how they died, and you know exactly what’s going on, because *you* killed them.”

Titania took this information in blankly, making herself seem guiltier by far. “Surely if I killed them, then I’d have killed the captain here when you left me alone with her, wouldn’t I?” she asked, moving her head to the side with the same sleek precision as Puck, keenly awaiting his response.

“The clue was in those same video recordings she made so often, both personal and public – played all over the ship. So candidly discussing her work with her deep, intelligent brown eyes.”

Dr Titania flashed a broad predatory smile. Maggie stood back instantly, reminded of the wolf in a fairytale or Christopher Lee in an old vampire movie.

“Her eyes are green,” Maggie said. “Of course, that’s what has been bothering me.”

“That’s because they’re not *her* eyes,” the Doctor said. “I’m not sure whose they are, but they’re not Doctor Titania’s, or yours, are they, *Morpheus*?”

The woman before them wearing Dr Titania’s face laughed humourlessly, throwing her head back theatrically. “I’m getting better at it I think, being human.” She cracked the bones in her slender neck by twisting it from side to side. “But you are right, she didn’t have these eyes, but I liked them on someone else. One of the other thousand souls I took. I wanted theirs, so I kept them for myself.”

Her fingers began to elongate at the ends and narrow into sharp points, like a row of blades.

“I don’t think any of the dead are walking around this ship, I think it’s you somehow, assuming their forms as easily as you approximate poor Titania and those green peepers. And you didn’t kill the

captain yet because she's your ticket out of here, aboard the *Lysander*. And you used your little robot man here to herd the crew like cattle." He thumbed in the direction of Puck.

"But she no longer sets my primary direc—" Puck started to speak but was interrupted by Morpheus.

"Doctor Titania called me '*Morpheus*'. That isn't my name—my kind have no need for names—but I like it, so I might keep it." Her grin distorted, spreading from the ends across her face, and displaying two rows of razor-sharp teeth.

Her body and spine began to stretch with a sickening crack and her arms took on a strange rapier-like shape, bladed and long. Her form resembled a woman distorted through a hall of mirrors; the green eyes shone with terrifying malice.

"I'll met by moonlight, proud Titania," the Doctor quoted as he backed away from the creature.

"I might keep the parts I like most from each of you." The voice was now deep at points and distorted. She took a lithe step forward.

"Not today thank you, I quite enjoy my independence." The Doctor stepped out of the way as Voxx and Maggie advanced and opened fire with their volt-guns.

The pulse blasts fizzed into the stretched torso. Morpheus made no sound, but was thrown back violently against the wall, sending chairs and the clutter from workstations scattering in all directions.

"Now we run," the Doctor announced, ushering them out the door. "Come along all!"

Voxx and Maggie ran for the door, whilst Vikander stopped to lock the workstation before joining the Doctor at the door. "We don't want that – *whatever* it is, calling the *Lysander*," she explained.

They followed the others down the corridor, leaving Puck behind, all sprinting away from Morpheus, its twisted approximation of Titania's form burnt into their minds.

"Where are we running to Doctor?" Maggie said breathlessly.

"Back to the lab. I need to find out what we're dealing with, I need to know more about Morpheus and the file there might be our best chance."

"So that we can kill it, right?" Vikander asked.

"If need be, yes."

In the operations room, Morpheus sat in the dark, its long dark limbs settled on its haunches. Those piercing eyes stared ahead, a malicious grin across its featureless face as it uttered a laugh stitched together from the tones of Demetrius, Quince, Francis, Dr Titania, and several others—a long continuous chorus of the screams from the dead.

"Just breathe," it whispered in Titania's voice, before it closed its eyes and disappeared backwards into the dark.

The Doctor and the others had reached the elevator without further incident. None of the fallen crew had been spotted and the Morpheus creature hadn't pursued them. Inside, they breathed heavily, until Vikander broke the silence.

"What is that thing? What are we up against? Is it hunting us? Playing with us?"

"I don't know. I am hoping that we can find answers in Doctor Titania's files," the Doctor replied.

"But what if it comes back?" Maggie asked.

"The lab is locked off from the rest of the ship. It's a defensible position, one way in, one way out, right?" Vikander sounded defiant. Voxx nodded at her captain, again summoning her best commanding air. By contrast, the Doctor seemed meek and hobbled with his doubts.

“Let’s hope so.” The Doctor managed a weak smile.

The elevator reached Dr Titania’s lab. Voxx and Vikander stepped out first, training their volt-guns. They moved to the office, and the Doctor indicated Titania’s personal computer. “Voxx, can you see what you can find on there and if you can contact the *Lysander*. I’ll try and see what I can find in the lab.”

Voxx nodded and picked the chair up from the floor.

“When did we put you in charge, Doctor?” Vikander asked.

“I beg your pardon, Captain. Do you disagree?” he asked.

“No,” she admitted ruefully. “I just wanted something to do. How about I watch the door.”

Maggie followed the Doctor into the lab’s inner compartment where the blue light from the tanks provided the ambience of a sinister, empty nightclub. He filed past the gruesome tanks of his his old enemies and made his way to the desk, tapping on its surface, moving the log files around, and opening folders in a rapid-fire sequence, consuming information at an astonishing rate.

“Do you think there’s something in here that can give us a weakness for this Morpheus creature, Doctor?” Maggie stood at his side scanning the interface, hoping she might pick up a thread that could help them.

“I can’t think of a better place to look right now Maggie.” he replied. “We’re not exactly blessed for options.” He levelled his gaze at the tanks.

“What did she mean when she said she kept the eyes?” She shifted uncomfortably in her borrowed *Lysander* uniform, its stiff fabric chafing her.

He stopped and heaved in a breath. “I believe that it hasn’t inhabited Doctor Titania, rather it assimilated her. There is some evidence of Morpheus being kept in a controlled environment, able to assimilate introduced organic matter, like hydrogen, carbon, and then microorganisms.”

“So, Morpheus absorbed matter? And they just let it out?” Maggie shook her head in disbelief.

“Well in my experience life-forms like this never stay isolated for long. If they recovered it from deep space, then it has been patient, waiting for who knows how long. It was probably clever enough to get out on its own.”

“And then at some point, it replaced Titania?”

“Yes, it would appear so.” The Doctor stopped for a moment. Between video entries from Dr Titania, there was an entry from someone else, a younger pale woman with vibrant green eyes and wild red curls. He touched his temple unconsciously, remembering her from his visions. “Hold the phone, who’s this?” He tapped the video to play the entry.

“To whoever sees this message, my name is Oracle. I am an independent scientist who arrived on the research vessel Oberon by accident. I stumbled across Titania and her experiments, out of intrigue I stayed to observe. She is quite brilliant, for a human, but she took chances and now a creature is loose. I’m not sure how long ago it got free, but the crew had begun to hallucinate when they were around it, so she called it ‘Morpheus’. The crew became increasingly violent to each other and themselves, one after another they have died and there are so few remaining.”

There was a noise in the background, and she stopped for a moment peering past the camera, then she resumed: *“I should have noticed earlier, but it has replaced Titania, I’m not sure if she’s simply dead, or she’s been assimilated by it. I cannot let this ship reach civilisation. I need to act and get out of here. I wish I had acted sooner.”*

The recording ended and the Doctor studied the face frozen on the screen. He was haunted anew by her. Seeing her in the unbiased light of a computer log rather than in his unreliable mind made her more real; and yet, the time-stamp from so long ago made her seem farther from his reach. There was a reflex link, a dormant part of his psyche, that twitched when he felt one of his own people nearby. He felt nothing now.

“Is that our Time Lord?” Maggie asked.

“Yes, I’d say so.” The Doctor pointed to her picture on the screen, “Look at her eyes.”

Maggie looked at the screen and realised what he'd seen. "They're the eyes Morpheus kept."

They were interrupted by a shout from Vikander.

"Is everything all right?" the Doctor asked striding towards them.

"We've got contact with the *Lysander*," Vikander said. "Voxx is a genius."

"I just think you might be, Miss Voxx." The Doctor smiled at her.

"Thanks, but you haven't heard what Mia has to say yet." Voxx grinned shyly. "Go on Mia, tell him what you told us."

"Well, I have been working on a few of those corrupted files, and it looks like Doctor Titania thought that there was an airborne component to Morpheus," Starveling's voice informed them, muffled slightly by the damaged computer audio. "She was looking for evidence, but she seemed to think it could somehow influence the crew's minds, she compared it to a virus."

"Silently polluting the air," the Doctor mused aloud.

"From the data we were able to get from Demetrius and Francis before they died, there were elevations in both blood pressure and body temperature and an increased heart rate."

"A bit like the human bodies' response to hallucinogens," Maggie said.

"Yes, exactly like that." The Doctor paced behind the desk. "Starveling, can you tell any other trends in the data?"

"Well, there is one thing," She paused. "They were two of the first three crewmembers to breathe the air on the Oberon without their helmets."

"Who was the other?" he asked.

"Me. I was the other one."

Chapter Five

The Doctor, Maggie and Vikander stood with their backs to the wall, each taking a step back in unison at Voxx' admission. All of them were silently wary, their collective attention focused on her.

"She said 'like a virus', it's not like I am infected or anything."

"Just hold on Voxx." Vikander held up a hand. "I mean, you were blown up with the *Marlin*, yet here you are. Untouched."

"Hardly!" Voxx's voice elevated at the implication. "I have lost my friends, I have burns on my back, I had to swim for my life, I almost died out there!"

"Just *almost*?" the Doctor asked with deliberate emphasis.

"Yes – almost! I'm not some replica, or projection, I'm not that – that thing! It's me!" Her pale green eyes were vibrant, as was her blue skin. She looked somehow younger, like a child pleading with a sceptical parent.

"Wait," Maggie moved to the lab doorway. "There were no readings on the pod when we found Doctor Titania. At first, I thought it was broken, but what if there were no readings because it didn't *have* a heartbeat, or blood pressure?"

"But I listened to her heart," the Doctor said.

"And you said it sounded 'off'. What if it sounded that way because it wasn't a heartbeat at all? What if it was what the creature thought a heartbeat would sound like?"

The Doctor nodded. "Starveling, do you have Voxx' biometric markers in the *Lysander's* system?"

"Of course, I have all of the crew's data on file."

"What about the missing crew? Do you have any recent data from them?"

"No, just the captain, Maggie, Voxx and you. Your data is weird..."

"Yes, yes, but more to the point, what does Voxx' data tell you?"

"Well, she's not human either obviously, and we're getting intermittent readings because of the effects of the explosion I think, but all of her other biological profile data is in her usual ranges, apart from the recent heart rate spike caused by this conversation."

"See!" Voxx shouted.

"Then why haven't you been affected?" Vikander asked.

"I have been, I've heard her whispering to me. But then I put my helmet back on. When Moth and I went to the *Marlin*, it stopped." Voxx sat back down as her mind went back to the moments before the impact, the look on Moth's face as they realised, and the twisted visage of Francis closing the door.

"I didn't say anything because I thought the guys would say I was just jumpy, you know, a stupid kid."

"You are anything but that," Vikander said. "You're a survivor."

The Doctor was suddenly jolted by a realisation, he moved over to Titania's desk and read the data files again.

"The person, Oracle, who crashed the *Oberon* did something else before the ion drive blew." He opened the system error logs. "She purged the *Oberon's* air supply."

"They flushed out all of the oxygen?" Vikander walked to his side and examined the data herself.

"Yes, but everything was scrubbed. They used the system to empty the ship and create a vacuum. It doesn't make a difference to the buoyancy, but it may have stopped Morpheus from spreading through the air, or at the very least slowed it down. You were right Voxx when you said that this place was a tomb." He wagged a finger of acknowledgment at her. "A tomb that our saboteur designed for Morpheus."

"That's clever," Maggie said.

"It also explains why when the air supply was restored, and the helmets came off, that she started to infect your crew, as it were."

"They breathed her in."

Vikander nodded, taking the information in, then said: "Wait, like we are now, do you mean?"

"Yes, yes, good point." He pondered for a moment, "Voxx, where are the spacesuits stored on this ship?"

Voxx moved back to Titania's desk, tapping her way through the computer system.

"There are none in the lab, but there are emergency rebreathers inside the wall to your right, and four more in a storage compartment near the elevator."

"Then we should make use of them," the Doctor said, crossing to the wall. At the press of a button, the storage locker slid out to reveal three masks and their accompanying packs. "OK everyone, grab one. They filter the air and hopefully it'll be enough to block her out." He threw a suit to Vikander and then Maggie.

"What are you going to do?" Maggie asked, catching the unit.

"Well clearly, I'm going to have to work harder for mine. And maybe not being human makes me less susceptible."

"You have no scientific basis for that theory," Maggie said as she pulled on her mask.

"I never said it was a theory, it's more a sort of cock-eyed hope."

Maggie carried the third unit through to Voxx, still seated at the computer. She took the rebreather, set it on the desk, and removed her dive suit, muttering her thanks to Maggie.

"No problem. It was the Doctor who decided to give his up."

"No, thank you for what you said back there. You spoke up for me." Voxx smiled warmly.

"Well, I didn't want any more of a 'Thule Station' thing going on here," Maggie laughed.

"A what?" Voxx asked.

"Oh right!" Maggie flicked her hair out of her eyes in embarrassment. "Nineteen eighties movie references probably don't carry for everyone."

"You two are so weird." Voxx laughed, "But not the weirdest thing to happen today."

Starveling's voice suddenly broke back in: "Hey team, the *Oberon* is buoyant and should surface in around an hour."

"Is there any way that you can stop it?" the Doctor asked urgently.

"No, once the catalyst has been mixed there's no reverse," Vikander informed him.

The Doctor paced again, his brain ticking over trying to solve the problem. The *Oberon* was going to hit the surface, their only way off the wreck was to use the *Lysander*—which Morpheus was banking on.

"We need to sink the *Oberon*. Trap it here," the Doctor declared.

"What?! How?" Vikander said.

“Explosives?” Maggie said, “Are there any on-board?”

“Negative,” Voxx said looking at the screen, “This is a research vessel, no munitions whatsoever and the few weapons are no more powerful than the volt guns.”

“Sorry to interrupt, but we have explosives. The ones we use in salvage on the *Lysander*. We could set them along stress points in the ship’s outer structure,” Vikander said.

“Then that’s it then!” the Doctor clapped his hands together.

“But how do we get off the ship?” Maggie asked. “And what about the distress call from the saboteur, Oracle?”

“We haven’t seen any evidence that there is anyone alive down here other than us. There are no life signs on the ship apart from ours,” he replied. “And this ship’s computer shows nothing for us to go on other than one video log entry. Perhaps she got away in her TARDIS or she fell victim to Morpheus. It did use her eyes in its disguise. It may have simply copied the feature rather than fully absorbing her ... we can only hope.”

The Doctor looked down at the floor where Voxx’ discarded dive suit lay. “We each have a dive suit. Is there somewhere near the highest part of the ship’s structure that we can use to exit?”

Voxx sifted through the ship’s layout and technical information. After a moment she snapped her fingers and pointed at the screen.

“I think this is it! There was a robotic mobile servicing system used for external maintenance. One of the units was here. The robotic unit must have been destroyed or broken off in the crash, but there is an access hatch here. It leads outside. If we have our suits we could wait until the *Oberon* is nearer the surface, then swim out.”

“All we have to do is get our timing right,” the Doctor said, nodding approvingly.

They returned to the operations centre cautiously, where most of their dive suits had been left. They knew that going back was dangerous—Morpheus could be lying in wait anywhere.

They had agreed a ‘radio silence’ with Starveling before setting out. Once they had secured the suits they would check in, but until then they were relying on the countdown, synchronised with the captain’s wrist device, ticking down to when the *Oberon* would reach the surface.

“You said back there that you weren’t human Doctor,” Vikander whispered to him as they walked. “Be honest, for once, what are you? And why didn’t you just say so?”

He shrugged in acquiescence. “I am a traveller, I come from a long way away. I received a different distress call from one of my people. The red-haired saboteur from Doctor Titania’s home videos. She called herself ‘Oracle’. Doesn’t ring a bell. I needed time to work you all out.”

“Did you know what we were walking into?” she asked.

“No idea. I’m still not sure what role she played in all this before the crash, what her game was.” He smiled grimly. “I’m not exactly on the best terms with the folks back home these days.”

“Can you get us out of this mess?”

The Doctor waved away her insecurity with a reassuring smile. “Yes, I believe we can. I need you, Captain. We all do.”

Morpheus walked with languid grace around the laboratory, running a lazy hand over the tank containing the Dalek mutant, who convulsed in reaction to her presence. That distorted approximation of Dr Titania’s face smiled wickedly as it accessed the memories of her experiments.

“Such cruelty in the pursuit of knowledge.” She inhaled long and hard. “I approve.”

She walked over to the desk and looked at the files. Dr Titania's muscle memory was stiff and unfamiliar at first, but soon became quicker and more fluid.

She paused at the video of the Oracle and with a snarl of recognition and played back the perfidious Time Lady's words.

"Our toil must be in silence, and our efforts all in secret. And you have broken that silence again," she said, quoting the classic novel *Dracula* from Titania's memories.

She walked over to the open cabinet that held the rebreather units. "What are you doing Doctor? How do you intend on leaving me behind in this prison?" the creature said aloud.

"I have loved our time together," she said caressing her face as she stared at its reflection, "but I am afraid I'll need to wear a new one if I am going to leave this prison. One must be the captain of one's own destiny now."

She smiled and her lips curled cruelly as her grin spread the width of Dr Titania's face, the Oracle's green eyes alive with malice.

The Doctor and his group reached the operations room once more. Somehow not seeing Demetrius or Francis made the situation worse, each corner checked and each looming shadow a potential, unseen threat.

They moved carefully inside, and Vikander flicked on the lights, illuminating the room for the first time since they boarded. This harsh lighting drew gruesome attention to the old blood smattering the walls.

"What does it do to people?" she asked the Doctor, recoiling from the sight.

"I'm not sure, but I'd say given the lack of bodies around the ship and the information from the laboratory, that perhaps it didn't stop at absorbing microorganisms. The hallucinations might just be a way of ensnaring its victims. Making them vulnerable before it makes them part of itself."

"Doctor, let's just get the suits and get out of here," Maggie said, pulling hers up to her waist, tying the arms loosely around her front leaving her torso free and holding her helmet under her arm.

The Doctor nodded his assent and handed Voxx her helmet before locating his own suit. Vikander walked to the computer interface and connected to the *Lysander*, trying to ignore the macabre decoration on the walls.

"*Lysander*, we have the dive gear. What's our progress?" Vikander asked over her personal channel.

"The drone units are on their way down Captain, we should be ready in ten minutes."

Vikander glanced down at the countdown clock, showing forty minutes until the *Oberon* was due to break the surface.

" 'I'll put a girdle round about the earth/ In forty minutes'," the Doctor quoted under his breath. They had thirty minutes to get clear and blow the charges.

Chapter Six

The *Oberon* was rising from the depths of Nereus Prime, and the occasional groan from its superstructure made the already tense journey more unsettling.

There had been damage to the elevators and stairwells. However, the nearest stairwell was miraculously unobstructed and would lead them down to Deck Three where they could ride the elevator to the top – or use the connecting stairwell if necessary. They were aware that this way complicated their task and took them closer to where Demetrius had last been sighted, but it was the only viable way to climb the creaking shell of the titanic vessel.

Vikander and the Doctor headed the group, with Maggie and Voxx behind. The captain and Voxx held the two-remaining volt-guns, and used the same system as before, covering front and back, checking corners and moving at a steady pace.

“All the Doctor would say is that you two are travellers. You’re Terran, though.”

“Canadian.” She merely blinked in response, leaving Maggie wondering whether her home and native land had survived to the twenty-third century.

“Where have you travelled?” Voxx whispered.

“Oh, lots of places. We got split up a while back and now we’re making up for lost time,” Maggie replied wistfully.

“Is it always this dangerous?”

“Not always...” Maggie admitted, though even she didn’t know how truthful she was being. Were these adventures the norm or the exception? That enchanted evening at the Empire Regency Cascade, in another era and the opposite side of the galaxy was entirely delightful. How funny to think for her personal clock, it was the small hours of that same evening. But she had long ago adapted to that quirk of time travel: wherever she was, it was ‘now’. It was a sensory overload. It was simply impossible to generalise.

“That must be quite an exciting life. Never a routine. Always taking risks.” Voxx had a wistful look of excitement written on her face that implored Maggie for details.

“Working in salvage must have its fair share of excitement too.”

“This is more than I can cope with. Usually, it’s all too routine. But you ... no training, just a civilian, and yet you can take all this horror in your stride. That’s incredible.”

“It’s not boring, that’s for sure. But I do wonder what I’m doing at times like this, and I wouldn’t say it’s easy. Maybe the Doctor has a way of making you feel like you can do anything.”

The Doctor pushed the door at the bottom of the stairs, but only when he and Vikander leant into it did it scrape open (more loudly than they would have wished). They stepped out into a familiar looking corridor with a large “3” stencilled in black on the white wall.

Vikander clicked her helmet torch on and peered down the corridor, dust motes dancing in its narrow beam. Even with her and the Doctor shining their helmet-lamps down, the corridor seemed unfathomable in the darkness.

“Well, there’s nothing coming from that direction.”

As they moved onwards, Maggie felt the hairs on the back of her neck stand on end as a scraping sounded again. It wasn’t the sound of the door; it was coming from the floor. Something metal was dragging along it, she was sure.

“What is that?” she asked.

“Parts of the ship settling as the pressure reduces outside?” Voxx answered dubiously. They reached an area where the walls widened to a circular area with two sets of sliding doors.

Vikander indicated the doors. “The elevator on the right should take us upwards.” She faced down to the left and the Doctor pressed the call button, Maggie by the door and Voxx covering the corridor with her volt-gun. After an excruciating delay there was a familiar ‘bong’ as the doors next to them opened. Maggie leant forward and her heart sank.

“Doctor, there’s no elevator car.”

“What? No, the system said it was working, we heard it!” Vikander hissed, her disbelief edged with despair.

Suddenly the scraping noise came back, closer this time. Vikander, to her horror, saw the mangled form of Demetrius stalking towards them, dragging a heavy-duty shovel across the floor.

“Don’t leave m-me here Soria.” He struggled to part with the words and his voice sounded hollow. “P-please.”

“Don’t listen to him Captain,” the Doctor insisted, “it’s just Morpheus playing with us. Whatever made him Aaron Demetrius is gone. We need to stick to the plan.”

He turned to see Vikander’s face frozen in horror at the corpse of her friend and mentor, dragging toward them in the torchlight. From behind, two piercing white eyes loomed in the darkness of the elevator shaft, the dark face barely discernible save for a wide smile of spiky grey teeth.

“Captain. Soria, please.” He squeezed her name out between his teeth and beckoned. “Step away from the elevator. W-wouldn’t want anything to h-happen to you ...”

Before she could react, two long limbs unfurled from the elevator shaft silently and swept her off her feet, pulling her into the black. The volt-gun tumbled from her grip, and her helmet unclicked, and the tentacles lobbed it back out of the doors, landing at their feet.

The Doctor rushed forward and peered downwards, they were gone save for a clang below and a small shift in the darkness as Morpheus receded from view onto one of the floors below.

“Doctor!” Maggie shouted, picking up Vikander’s volt-gun and firing at Demetrius.

Voxx looked toward him, panic on her face, “Doctor, the captain! What do we do?”

The Doctor wrenched the door to the stairwell open; the stairs had come loose in sections and the doorway was partially obscured. There was a gap between the entrance and the stairs, but he reckoned that the distance could be jumped.

“You need to continue.” He pointed through the doorway. “I’m going after the captain. You and Voxx to go together to the service shaft.”

“Be careful.”

“Aren’t I always?”

“No,” she answered flatly.

“Well, I’ll give it a try this time.”

The Doctor turned and jumped over Demetrius as his form began to dissolve into an oily goo. He clambered down the elevator shaft, remembering every detail he had memorised from the *Oberon's* schematics.

He was compelled to head for the gardens. Demetrius has been pulled to his death there, the creature had lain in wait for Vikander and Quince there, and Morpheus had dragged the captain downwards, not upwards to Titania's lab. After all his journeys he had come to rely on his instincts, and he was hoping that they wouldn't let him down.

Maggie and Voxx climbed through the gap in the doorway to the stairs, moving the frame of the collapsed part of the staircase out of the way. It was tight in their dive suits, but they managed to crawl through. There was a ledge barely big enough to stand on before the structure fell away into the darkness beneath them.

Maggie turned and tried to pull the door closed behind them, but she couldn't get enough purchase. She turned back to Voxx, who was surveying the gap in the staircase.

"Are you ready?" she asked.

"No, but here goes," Voxx said, heaving herself away from the platform and up onto the staircase. "Come on Maggie, your turn."

Maggie took a deep breath, closed her eyes, and jumped. Her feet landed with a thud before she swayed backwards, teetering on the edge. Voxx reached out and grabbed her arms, pulling her in.

"Thanks," Maggie said in relief. "That was close."

The garden was quiet as the Doctor approached, the still scene framed by the circular pathway lights that illuminated the plants and trees from underneath in an eerie silver glow. Running in the spacesuit was difficult and his hearts pumped rapidly from the exertion. What he wouldn't give to be back in his comfortable cable-knit fishing sweater.

He could hear music somewhere ahead, the floating melody giving the scene a whimsically surreal quality. A drum beat and a piano played, accompanied by a celesta and guitars. The music was real, not a manifestation induced by Morpheus.

"How could you leave me when I needed to possess you? I hated you; I loved you, too..." the female vocals cascaded over the music.

In the middle of the botanical garden, a podium stood, with a computer interface from which the music played.

Morpheus, in the form of Dr Titania, danced. Her arms moved from the shoulders down rhythmically to the sound. Her eyes were closed as she swayed back and forth, enjoying the melody, humming to herself. Captain Vikander knelt in front of the creature, held in place by long black vine-like tendrils at her arms and around her legs and waist.

The Doctor surmised those tendrils were were extensions of the creature, like the phantom of Demetrius binding its prospective victim. Vikander's normally stoic face was strained in pain.

"Don't be shy Doctor, we've been waiting here for you. We hoped you would come. Both of us."

He stopped in his tracks as she turned to face him and opened her eyes. He felt transfixed in her gaze. She tutted and wagged a finger from left to right lazily.

"Wearing the helmet means you don't get to experience everything as I intended Doctor. Why don't you take it off and save yourself the struggle? Just breathe it all in."

"No, I don't think I'll be doing that, if it's all the same to you."

Morpheus ran a hand across Vikander's face, who convulsed from the touch.

"I gained much from my time with Doctor Titania, she was truly remarkable. But one thing I will be eternally grateful for is the music. I have never heard such sounds." She smiled with pleasure and inhaled. "I'm used to waiting. I have waited in the recesses of space since the outpost I was on was destroyed by the settlers. Floating alone, adrift, starving save for the scraps and the morsels of matter that came my way."

"And that's what you feed on? Matter?" The Doctor was focused on Morpheus as he continued to pace.

"Yes and no. There is energy attached to the living, everything they were, everything they are, everything that they could be. The more, the better. But I was alone, almost spent and clinging to a rock with nothing to feed me, until the *Oberon* called to me like a beacon, and then the feasting started again. You see, I'm hungry Doctor. So very hungry." Her smile broadened once more as she spoke. "Matter is useful, and I can use it to manifest myself, make their bodies an extension of myself, but the quantum energy I consume, that is real food. Good for the soul."

"You feed on quantum energy? What are you?" he asked.

"There is an energy here that is more of a meal than a thousand of these humans," she said, ignoring the question. "There is *your* energy. The endless possibilities of a Time Lord." She stepped towards him, like a cat stalking a bird.

"You know about my people?" he asked, suddenly feeling snared in a trap.

"Yes, yes, the saboteur was just like you. She realised all too late what I wanted. She tried to seal me in this watery grave."

"And you consumed her?" he asked.

Morpheus rolled back with laughter, the teeth sharpened once more, the woman's face replaced with a black featureless visage and white, lifeless eyes.

"Do you think I would have had to be so patient if I had?" she cackled, and the laugh distorted into a hundred different tones. "No Doctor, she escaped me, but the taste that I had enabled me to contact you, bring you here, and when you got close, it helped me to reach into your mind. But you won't escape me. She gave me a glimpse of the feast a Time Lord would provide me, and once I have consumed you and all your precious lives, once I have access to the infinite possibilities of time and space, I'll truly be 'a force of nature' as Titania would have said."

She lunged at him, her arms and mouth outstretched like a hellish bear-trap.

Maggie and Voxx had made it up to Deck One. Voxx eased it open. There was no resistance this time and the lights were on in the corridor inside.

"It looks clear." She said looking back to Maggie. "Do you think the Doctor will find the captain?"

"If anyone can, it's the Doctor." Maggie said.

They followed the corridor a few meters to the service hatch. The shaft ran vertically from the hatch, only wide enough for one of them to climb at a time.

"We're almost there. We'll wait at the hatch for the Doctor and Vikander, we'll give them as long as we can," Voxx declared.

As she stepped forward a hand gripped her wrist, and she dropped her volt-gun. She wheeled around and with her left arm and struck her assailant, who swayed to one side but didn't let go.

Maggie aimed her volt-gun before realising who it was:

"Puck?!" she shouted in surprise, "What are you doing here?"

The robot released Voxx's arm and stood back, bowing awkwardly at them.

“I’m sorry ma’am, and ma’am. I didn’t mean to startle you. I calculated the most likely exit path and sought to intercept you here.”

“So you can feed us to that creature?” Maggie asked, levelling her gun at that sightless chrome bowling ball of a head.

“No ma’am, I tried to say before. I do not serve the creature with my former mistress’s face. I have been re-programmed to serve another mistress.” The robot looked between them trying to anticipate the next blow. “My mistress calls herself ‘Oracle’, she wasn’t a member of the crew, she is a traveller, like you. And I am here to tell you that she requires your help.”

Chapter Seven

The elongated jaws of the creature were clamped around the Doctor's helmet as they grappled on the floor. The dive suit was designed to withstand the pressure of deep-sea salvage and exploration, but against Morpheus' jaws he wasn't sure how long it would hold out.

Inside its mouth, independent black tendrils whipped and thrashed in a deliberate show designed to terrify. Fear was how Morpheus caught its prey, how it confused and subdued it so that it could devour it. He knew that he had to push past the fear to survive.

He glanced away from Morpheus to Vikander, only a short distance away. With the creature's attention on him, it seemed the spell was lifting, and she was regaining consciousness.

Morpheus thrashed at him, but he held its tentacles back with all his strength and refused to let go. If it didn't pierce his suit, he had a chance to reach Vikander and get out of here. But he knew that it would pursue them, he had to buy them some time to reach the others and escape.

The Doctor relaxed his muscles to draw Morpheus in, then kicked furiously with a last burst of strength. The blow knocked it away, and he fumbled for the external pocket of his suit. He had just managed to retrieve the object when it lunged at him again without warning.

He raised his legs on impact and flipped her over him, using the creature's own momentum against it, flinging it away and into the large fronds at floor level. He cycled through the settings of his sonic screwdriver; a task made more difficult by the thick gloves. While desperately programming the tool, he looked up to see Morpheus explode out of the foliage and attack once more.

"Matter is a curious thing," it pontificated as it coiled multiple arms around him. "It can be manipulated, stretched and consumed. Perhaps once I have consumed you and your eons of energy, I won't need to manipulate matter at all. Perhaps I'll move freely around this universe feeding wherever I like, stretching on forever."

"That's just the thing, you consume matter, you're something visceral and dark, clinging to the matter from others to give you substance," he spat through his struggling. "So, what happens if I disrupt the connection?"

He flicked his sonic screwdriver and plunged it inside the creature's open mouth. A piercing sound emitted from the device as it was consumed by the creature.

"See, that device is on overload, for a short time. It should leave you with a little indigestion."

Morpheus began to vibrate, shuddering from the inside out, as the screwdriver's high-pitched squeal shook every molecule of matter that the creature had absorbed violently.

Feeling the tentacles' grip loosen, the Doctor wriggled free and ran to Vikander. The tendrils had also let go of the captain, but raw patches of skin showed where it had begun to eat at her epidermal layer. It hadn't been in a rush: the captain was merely bait on a hook, and he had been the bigger fish—though the Doctor had never known any fishermen to nibble on the worms while they waited for their catches.

"Come on Captain, wake up, we need to get out of here," he implored, trying to rouse her.

Vikander came to with a pained wince. "It was ... in my head. I could feel it pulling away at my memories, my emotions, it wasn't just my skin it was eating, it was everything. Everything that makes me."

The Doctor placed her arm over his shoulder and helped her walk through the garden, the further away from the creature they were, the stronger her steps became.

"We can't let her leave. The more life she consumes, the stronger she becomes, and the more she needs to consume. We need to cut her off."

"Well, if it helps, I suspect it'll be me that it comes after now. It may have been me all along, thanks to the Oracle whetting its appetite."

"I thought I was done ... I should have listened to you. I'm sorry."

Maggie and Voxx followed Puck from their escape point. She had told herself that it was stupid, but they had come looking for this Time Lord. She asked herself 'what would the Doctor do?'

Puck had appeared wary of Morpheus when he thought she was Dr Titania. He did not react like someone in service to the creature, he didn't appear to be the Renfield to her Dracula as she had thought, and he had also stated that he couldn't lie – though he could choose not to answer a question or obfuscate with his answer.

Voxx, however, was not convinced. "What if he's serving us up as a meal for that creature?"

"If there is someone we can save, then we must try. Morpheus has caused enough death."

"In this operational span, the anomaly designated 'Morpheus' has been directly responsible for the death of sixty members of the *Oberon* crew and four members of the *Lysander* salvage team." Puck said facing away from them.

"I forget you hear everything." Voxx said aloud.

"My auditory systems are finely tuned, Miss Voxx."

"Why didn't you just tell us about Morpheus?" Maggie enquired.

"Because I could not be sure if one of you *was* Morpheus," the android replied. "It can simulate other life patterns easily. And it had already tampered with my memory once."

"The creature damaged your memory?" Maggie probed.

"Yes, before it used me to jettison the ten members of the crew attempting to destroy it. Thankfully my mistress Oracle restored me."

"So where are we going Puck?" Maggie asked, growing impatient. "You told us she wasn't far away."

Puck stopped suddenly at an unremarkable corner, with 'MED 2' stencilled on its wall.

"We're here," He pointed ahead of them. "My mistress is inside."

Maggie narrowed her eyes at him. "I swear to God, if this is a trap, the last thing I'll do is take you out with me, Puck."

"Ma'am please," he held up his hands in surrender.

He pressed the button and the door slid open. The room inside was kitted out with an array of medical equipment, for everything from simple first aid to scans and surgery. Some of the machines looked partially dismantled or under repair. They walked tentatively through until they reached an area marked 'ISO 2'.

“This is where Mistress Oracle is.” He pointed them past the window, to the isolation room.

Voxx and Maggie looked up and down the partition, seeing a now-familiar keypad barring their way. “Do you have the code?” Voxx asked in exasperation.

“No ma’am.”

“Then what? We’re supposed to guess?” Vox threw her hands up in the air and sighed heavily, turning away from the door and paced the floor before composing herself. “OK, well then it’s a good job I’m here.” Voxx said looking at the door control panel.

She felt along the wall for an access panel, “Maggie, see if you can find something to pry this open, something with a thin edge.”

Maggie opened a cabinet full of powders and lotions, then she noticed tools left near the dissembled equipment and opted for a small implement that looked like a scalpel. She tapped the side of the tool, and to her surprise it emitted a thin beam which sliced into a metal cover in front of her. She ran back to the door and carefully removed her helmet.

“Oh, nice work!” Voxx nodded her approval as Maggie handed her the tool. Voxx sliced open the panel near the door lock, exposing its underlying fibre-optics and components.

“All right, all it takes is to manipulate the right fibre and we’re in.”

“Brilliant!” Maggie beamed.

Voxx tapped and tugged away at the connections, trying different combinations of the fibres, and as she was dreading how many combinations lay ahead, there was a satisfying bleep, the panel went green, and a computerised voice confirmed: “*Isolation Bay Unlocked*”.

“You did it!” Maggie patted Voxx on the back.

“Well, I know a few tricks.” Voxx smiled and stepped inside.

There were three pods inside, reminding Maggie of their discovery of Dr Titania. One of them was occupied by the red-haired woman from the video. She wore a cropped singlet, and she could see a faded, scarred area of skin under her ribs where recent surgery had taken place. Unlike the stasis unit she had seen earlier, the pod had small robotic limbs inside. The integrated panel displayed two steady heartbeats and the message ‘PROCEDURE COMPLETED’.

“Ooh, this is a Variant Five med-pod.” Voxx nodded approvingly. “These are good, they use nanotechnology to repair damage, treat infection, remove foreign bodies, the works. Proper Scientific Corps kit. They’re worth a fortune on their own.”

“OK, Miss Nerd.” Maggie said, looking for the opening mechanism. Voxx looked at her obliviously, indicating that the insult had died out in the intervening centuries. “Let’s get her out.”

Voxx keyed in a command on the panel. “These things aren’t meant to be opened by the patient, but they are designed for the medical personnel to open on the outside.”

“What about this?” Maggie said picking a card key of the table and offering it to Voxx. The card had been an ID for a Doctor N. Navalny.

Voxx pressed it to the interface panel and stepped back as a hiss of air and a whir of the door hydraulics sounded, out and upwards.

Maggie leaned close into the woman and said quietly: “Hello? Can you hear us?”

The woman’s tattooed right arm suddenly gripped Maggie by the throat with surprising strength. “You think I’ll go down without a fight, do you?” she snarled through gritted teeth.

“Mistress, I brought help,” Puck said loudly, trying clumsily to get between them.

“Oh, that’s OK then,” the Oracle smiled cheerfully, releasing Maggie.

Maggie coughed and gasped for air, her face flushed and her eyes wide.

“I’m the Oracle, and I’m very pleased to meet you ladies.”

“You could’ve fooled me!” Maggie said with a cough.

“Ah, sorry about that sweetheart. I thought you might be someone else. How long have I been in there?”

“Mistress. It’s been about three months.”

“You’re probably wondering who I am.”

“You’re a Time Lord—or, uh Lady? —from the planet Gallifrey, you travel through time and space in a TARDIS, and you got stuck here when you tried to crash the *Oberon* after you realised that there was a dangerous entity killing everyone on board,” Maggie reeled off humourlessly. The Oracle stood for a moment; her mouth slightly ajar.

“Well, yes, you left out that I am utterly fabulous, but that’s about the sum of it.” She turned to Puck. “What did we say about discretion?”

“It wasn’t him. I came here with the Doctor in *his* TARDIS. We received your distress call.”

The Oracle pursed her lips and gripped Maggie’s arm gently: “Sweetheart, I didn’t send a distress call, I get myself out of a pinch. Which means your friend, the Doctor, is likely to be in a great deal of danger. Where is he?”

Vikander was moving more freely as she and the Doctor worked their way back towards the escape point. She had found herself so drained by her captive state that she felt in the throes of a fever dream. Her head pounded, and she was unsettled by what she had seen, and felt, of the creature.

“Doctor, when the creature held me captive, it made me relive the worst parts of my life, loss, fear, heartbreak ... it seemed to enjoy them.”

“I don’t doubt it, Captain. It’s a being of pure malevolence, feeding on the energy of the living, of all life and matter, *anything*. I suspect that situations of high emotion such as fear, are like flavours in a fine meal to it.”

Vikander shuddered at the memory. “But it wanted you, right?”

“Yes, it appears so.”

“Why did she want you, more than any of us?”

“Because I am a Time Lord, and my people can regenerate at the point of death, make ourselves new. And the energy that takes ... it finds intoxicating. A linear life is a tasty repast, but the infinite and timeless span of our kind ... do you still have all-you-can-eat buffets these days?”

Vikander nodded with resignation. “Then she’ll just keep coming.”

“And that’s why it’s important we get off this ship as soon as we can.”

“But we’d miss you so,” a distorted voice said from the shadows.

They stopped as the shell of Peter Quince emerged behind them, the side of his head badly gouged from the impact of the shovel and his eyes white and pupil-less where they had rolled back in his head. He walked towards them slowly, joined by Francis, his neck broken and bent at a sickening angle, and he dragged a leg behind him and had same lifeless stare.

“We know there’s no ‘we’ Morpheus, there’s only *you*. Turn off the theatrics,” the Doctor said through gritted teeth.

As they stepped back there was a familiar scraping sound as Demetrius dragged his frame into view from behind them, his arm still holding the shovel.

“You left so abruptly Doctor. And I was so hoping you would join me,” they all simpered in unison with Doctor Titania’s voice.

“And I have already told you, no. I have managed to resist conversion into a Cyberman, extermination at the hands of the Daleks a dozen times over, disintegration, decapitation, discombobulation, and myriad other grisly deaths. I’m not about to become a five-course meal for you, no matter how many spectres you conjure to scare us.”

“Oh, but you would be so many courses. And I never said there was a choice.”

The ghoulish manifestations stopped abruptly. A voice came over the communications channel: “*Lysander*, this the captain, do you read me? Over.”

Vikander gripped his arm. “That’s my voice, she’s using my voice.”

“This is the *Lysander*, we read you Captain. Over,” Starveling replied.

“The threat has been neutralised. We can let the *Oberon* surface Mia. Over,” Morpheus said in Vikander’s voice from elsewhere inside the dark belly of the *Oberon*, unseen.

“Captain, so we should stand down and expect to board?” Starveling sounded surprised.

“Confirmed. Stand down,” Morpheus replied.

“No! Mia, don’t listen to her – it’s not me!” Vikander shouted, but the comms line was dead. “Morpheus has shut us out Doctor.”

“Roger that Captain. ETA to surface is twenty minutes. Over.”

“Over and out,” Morpheus said with obvious delight.

“We cannot let it leave the *Oberon*,” Vikander declared. “But what do we do?”

“Nothing,” her deceased crewmembers answered as a chorus. “You’ll be too dead to care what happens next.”

Suddenly there was a fizz of energy and Francis shuddered violently, dropping to the floor in a black watery pool.

A red-haired woman sprang from behind him, clapping a small puck-like device to the back of Quince’s neck with the same effect. She deftly flicked an identical device to the Doctor and nodded for him to do the same to Demetrius.

“Ah, that’s better, I hate it when people monopolise the conversation,” the Oracle said stepping over the puddle that had once been Peter Quince. She crossed to the Doctor and cocked her head to one side. “*The Doctor*, right? Maggie says good things.” She shook his hand vigorously. “Oracle. Big fan.”

“You can’t have been back to Gallifrey recently, then.” The Doctor seemed taken off-guard. “Oracle?”

“Yes, ‘a person that gives wise council or authoritative decisions’. Used commonly for women who prophesied or spoke the words of the gods of the Terran-Greek era.”

“Yes, I know what the word means. And how is your fortune-telling?”

“It’s a little pretentious I know. But if we’re scoring cheap shots, how’s your medical know-how?”

“Touché.”

“Localised frequency disruptors?” the Doctor said, pointing to the devices on the floor.

“Yes, just a little something I was able to whip up before I went under.” She smiled cockily.

“Puck took us to the medical bay; she was isolated there,” Maggie explained.

“You were injured? By Morpheus?”

“Yes, the bloody thing nearly got me, I was so close to getting off this floating house of horrors. I locked myself in an iso-chamber. It repaired my injuries, no regeneration required!”

“But incalculable damage. Morpheus used your voice and knowledge to summon me here.” The Doctor nodded. “And then kept your eyes.”

“Wait, what?” The Oracle raised an eyebrow.

“When we found it hiding in the form of Doctor Titania, Morpheus had modified her appearance with your eyes,” Maggie continued.

“When I fought the creature, it managed to skewer me,” the Oracle recalled, wincing at the memory. “When it did, it managed to connect to me telepathically. I felt it digging around in my mind. It was mere moments to me – but it must have been able to reach out to other Time Lords, like you.”

Vikander stepped into the huddle with her hand up, halting any further conversation, “This is all very well and good, but the creature has just told the *Lysander* to let the *Oberon* surface. Meaning we need a new plan in less than twenty-five minutes.”

“Sorry, quite right.” The Doctor seemed a little embarrassed. “The *Lysander* crew have placed explosive charges on the hull, we were hoping to sink the *Oberon* whilst making good our escape. So, we need to either get in touch with the *Lysander* or set those charges off ourselves.”

“Crazy. I like it.” The Oracle grinned.

Chapter Eight

“So, you don’t have a sonic screwdriver?” The Doctor seemed put out.

“No,” the Oracle laughed. “I didn’t plan on travelling around doing DIY for people I met. What were you going to do with it anyway?”

“I was going to adjust the wave field to allow me to use it as a remote detonator for the explosives on the hull,” he replied sulkily.

“Guess it’s plan ‘B’ then, old man,” She smiled her cocky smile.

“Well, I think we’re well past Plan ‘B’ at this point.” He looked away coyly as the Oracle paced the floor in thought.

“You like her,” Maggie whispered, walking up besides the Doctor.

“What? Don’t be silly,” the Doctor said, “I’m not a schoolgirl.”

“OK, OK.” Maggie smiled. “But you do. So, what’s next? What are our options? What is Plan ‘C’, or ‘X’, or ‘Z’?”

The Doctor closed his eyes, recalling the layout of the *Oberon*, flicking from deck to deck, section to section in his expansive mind. “Oracle, you used the ion drives to crash the *Oberon* into the planet. You did that because you could access the routines associated with the drives from the ship’s on-board system.”

“Yes, I did.”

“You did that because you wanted to crash the ship but give yourself time to escape. Well, a vessel this size, in this time, has a different way of getting around. A faster than light engine, that works without moving faster than light.”

“They have a Fujikawa-Stratten built Einstein-Rosen drive,” the Oracle told him. “You know, a wormhole engine. Allowing them to move between two defined points in space.”

“And you’re going to use it as a way to explode the *Oberon*.” Maggie looked at him grimly. “So, what’s the catch?”

“Implode, actually. I need to access the engine core. I think that I can disrupt it with those devices the Oracle made.”

“Two left,” she said, wiggling them from side to side jauntily.

“Maggie, you and Voxx go with Captain Vikander to the hatch, to contact the *Lysander*. Morpheus will come for her.”

“Because it wants to use me to escape.”

“Correct, Captain. Imagine Morpheus as a spider in the centre of a web. All of us being here makes a tremor in the web, the more you breathe, and move, the more of a disturbance you create, the louder the tremor. I believe that we all make our own unique vibrations. I need it to follow your vibrations, away from us. But I’ll make sure that it comes back for us.”

“You can make sure of that, can you?” Maggie said sceptically.

“Yes. I can,” He shrugged. “I am the Doctor after all.”

“And there are no votes for cutting our losses and getting ourselves off this floating graveyard? Mick Jagger would love you, Blue,” the Oracle winked at Voxx.

“Who?” she asked arching an eyebrow.

“No, ‘cutting our losses’ isn’t an option,” the Doctor snapped. “If you want to go it alone from here, leave the devices you made and be on your way. But we’re making a stand, to save the countless lives it’ll devour. That creature is not leaving this ship,” the Doctor said with disdain.

The Oracle stood back, wrestling with her self-preservation, before she clapped her hands in excitement. “I’m in then!”

“Then I’m coming with you,” Voxx said stepping forward, “I know you two are smart, but the security override needs three people, it’s standard operating procedure for the core. I can do it. Unless you can sprout additional limbs too?”

Maggie, Vikander, and Puck neared the exit hatch. Maggie didn’t like being pushed into accompanying the captain alone, but in the back of her mind she knew that the Doctor was trying to get her best friend off the ship alive, and he couldn’t guarantee that he would.

The captain had been weak and struggled at times. Maggie had been impressed with her strength and resolve throughout, even though she hadn’t always agreed with her decisions. She had noticed that her hair had greyed in places after her contact with Morpheus and her skin was drawn slightly around the eyes.

“We’re almost there, Captain. Just a little further I think.” She pointed to a signage on the wall that read ‘MSS’.

“Thank you, Maggie. For staying with me. I know we don’t know each other, but I don’t want to face it alone,” Vikander smiled weakly.

“Anytime,” Maggie replied with a supportive smile.

They stopped under the hatch. Up those metal ladder rungs and past the outer hatch lay the *Oberon*.

“Are you ready?” Maggie asked.

“Not really. Are you?”

“No. But here goes anyway,” Maggie sighed.

They removed their helmets and breathed long and hard. Vikander cleared her throat and attempted to connect to the *Lysander’s* external communications channel. Puck waddled up beside them, peering back into the darkness.

“So how do you two know each other?” Voxx asked.

They had quietly made their way down through the ship at pace, the clock was ticking and there were only minutes before the *Oberon* emerged. The Doctor wore his helmet, and the Oracle had reluctantly donned a rebreather.

“Oh, we don’t. The Doctor is a quite a bit older than I am, he had left our planet way before I was born.” the Oracle said. “He’s become a bit of a legend amongst our people.”

“Yes, but not always the good kind,” he chipped in, his ears evidently burning. “Most often I believe I’m whispered about to get youngsters to mind their manners or go to bed— ‘Be good or you’ll end up like that Doctor chap’.”

“We’ve never formally met, but I am actually a bit of a fan.” she laughed a raspy laugh, “I especially liked him as a blond, I’m not sure blondes have more fun, but I did. Did you?”

The Doctor ignored the question.

“You were a blond?” Voxx asked in wonder, assessing his head of shortly cropped black hair.

“Huh, I’ve been a bit of everything over the years, and now and again I have been back home, usually against my will. I don’t give much credence to the pompous whittering of the presidents and councils full of self-important windbags. I try to put as much distance between them and I as I can. Get out amongst the people of the universe, see the sights, make a difference where I can, not spend my time debating and pontificating.”

The Oracle was taken aback by his bitterness. “I guess if I make it back home, I shouldn’t say ‘hi’ to anyone for you?”

“What about you? What are you doing out here?”

“Trying to have some fun. We live a long time; we may as well make the most of it.”

“All care and no responsibility, eh?”

“I beg your pardon?” She bristled slightly at the implication.

“Well, I mean there were a lot of crew members on this ship when Morpheus began its rampage...”

“But I only saved myself, it that it?” she snapped. “Look, I’m not an Arcalian librarian, and I’m no one’s babysitter. If people want to go blundering around the cosmos and getting into trouble, fair enough. But they roll the dice and take their chances, and that’s not my responsibility, old chap.”

“That is where we differ.”

The Doctor made light work of the containment door’s lock, thanks to Dr Titania’s personal access code. They entered an open sterile circular chamber, with a solid white sphere in its centre. Behind the sphere’s shielded cover was the mechanism for generating a wormhole. Around the sphere stood three standing control panels of equal size at sixty-degree angles.

“We’ll need the three of us to open the outer shield from those controls,” Voxx said. “This is only supposed to be opened using the system’s own protocols at the point of a space-jump. Never manually.”

The Doctor stepped forward, tapping the visor of his helmet as he pondered. “Oracle, this unit normally opens the Einstein-Rosen bridge to allow the ship to move between two points. I want to open it, then collapse it upon itself.”

“Won’t that collapse in on the planet?” the Oracle asked.

“Honestly, I can’t be certain, but the wormhole should collapse itself naturally if we override the core’s safety protocols. I am hoping we can lure Morpheus into the event horizon, and by disabling the drive’s containment systems, collapse it.”

“OK. This is going to be wild. How do we lure it here?”

“My guess is that the *Oberon* entering this part of space is what attracted it, the collective energies from the ship and crew. If we activate the core, Morpheus will know it’s us. Then we give it something it wants: us.”

Maggie and Vikander stood near the exit hatch breathing heavily, remembering the Doctor’s analogy that their every breath was like a tremor in a spider’s web to Morpheus. They had attempted to make a show

of contacting the *Lysander*, and Maggie imagined it crawling out along its network of invisible threads towards them.

"Fifteen minutes until the *Oberon* surfaces," Vikander said. "I hope there is enough time for the Doctor to work his magic."

"He'll make it." Maggie had no doubt she was reassuring herself as much as Vikander.

A moment later they heard a clamour in the ship's ducting system as the creature closed in. Panic crept in as Vikander recalled how she felt under the control of Morpheus, her every fibre being slowly eaten away.

Morpheus slid from the shadows and across the ceiling, first its white unblinking eyes becoming visible, then its sharp-toothed grin. It unfurled its long limbs and dropped to the floor in front of them in silence.

Morpheus' exaggeratedly long form towered over them both as it raised itself upwards. Vikander winced as it flicked a tentacle towards them.

"I know why you choose to look like this." Maggie's voice was raised and firm as she stepped around Vikander.

"So brave without your doctor. So brave for a girl who is lost and far from home."

"You chose something we'd be afraid of. Slinking out of the dark and the shadows to prey on our fear – because you like fear, the smell of it, the taste of it!"

The haunting smile spread across the featureless face, a smile of delight and menace.

"Yes, that's why. I prey on your fear, I enjoy it. I devour it." Dr Titania's laugh rang out through the corridor. "And despite your brave words – I can still smell your fear."

The process to unlock the shielding from the wormhole generator was painstaking, but the Doctor and Oracle worked quickly whilst offering prompts to Voxx, who was almost able to keep up.

"The aperture isn't supposed to be opened unless the system has engaged the wormhole drive, so there are a series of failsafe protocols that we need to bypass," the Doctor said with a determined look.

A warning siren sounded as the outer casing separated into four quarters, the lights in the room flashing orange. An automated voice warned: "*Core exposure alert; proceed with caution.*"

The casing opened. All that held its raw power in place was a containment field, invisible to the human eye, aside from the odd fizz of small particles in the air contacting its surface.

"It's a misnomer to call this a 'generator', surely, Doctor?" the Oracle asked, half-rhetorically. Though glancingly familiar with the principle, by Gallifreyan standards this was all in the same category as the crudest Terran combustion engine.

"The field is to focus the wormhole and keep it stable. It expands and contracts the wormhole and projects it to the ship's destination points. Think of it more like a lens directing a beam," the Doctor said.

"So, what now Doctor? We disrupt the field?" Oracle asked, holding one of her localised frequency disruptors. "Then all hell breaks loose?"

At that moment a loud tone sounded from the Oracle's belt.

"That's the signal from Puck. The girls have company."

"Then it's time to breathe." The Doctor removed his helmet and the Oracle followed suit with her rebreather mask. The Doctor held out his hand and the Oracle took it in hers.

"Let's shake that web."

Maggie and Vikander could feel Morpheus' extremities curling around them as the lights went out one by one.

"You're a part of me now." They heard its silky whisper as if it was nuzzling them in the dark, savouring the moment.

"Not yet," Vikander whispered back, pushing her hand into the creature. Its outer surface parted and enveloped her hand.

With a fizz and a crack, the Oracle's device connected to Morpheus and emitted a disruptive frequency deep into the creature's mass, hurting it. It let out a piercing chorus of screams from the dead, each belonging to a victim. It vibrated violently and writhed in agony as the device tore at its fabric.

Neither of them needed to be told it was time to go. They both quickly reattached their helmets and scrambled to the ladder, the screaming echoing all around them. Puck clambered clumsily up behind them.

After a few moments of writhing and shuddering in agony on the floor below them Morpheus let loose a guttural noise of rage as it composed itself. The device had burnt itself out. Its function was to delay, not destroy, Morpheus; and this it had accomplished. The white eyes narrowed on Puck's legs disappearing inside the service shaft.

"Where are you running to?" the chorus of voices asked.

It coiled one of its long black limbs around a ladder rung and pulled itself upwards without grace, still shaky from the device. It still reached within touching distance of the escapees.

"Puck, the hatch!" Maggie shouted back down the shaft.

The android slammed the inner hatch. The tubular shaft illuminated automatically to light the rest of their climb.

In the corridor below them, Morpheus was gone.

The Doctor stood in the chamber with a pensive look, the Oracle held her localised frequency disruptors out to the event horizon of the exposed wormhole core.

"We won't have enough time to get off the ship, will we?" Voxx asked ruefully, looking towards the door. The space between them and it had seemed to widen while they were talking.

"I honestly can't say, but the main thing is that Morpheus won't, which will save countless lives," the Doctor admitted. "I'm sorry."

"I had a feeling it was going this way," Voxx straightened her back. "I cheated death once, I suppose it's my fault for volunteering to roll the dice again."

There was a change in the air suddenly, the feeling that people would compare to someone walking over their graves. A dark shape shifted through the bright white room. Its tentacles spread to block the way out. The creature seemed immense, no doubt drawn together from all its disparate parts spread around the *Oberon* in order to assure its victory over the Time Lords.

"And here you are," Morpheus said, a familiar sharp, wide grin spread across its face. "Ready to dine with me?"

"If I do, I'll count myself lucky I went out chatting with such a brilliant conversationalist," the Doctor answered with a self-assured smile.

Morpheus moved inside the room towards them, looking from the Doctor to the Oracle with a smile of sheer delight. "Both Time Lords here. How lovely. What a feast we have ahead of us. What glorious lives we will share together."

Voxx slipped out of the door quietly unnoticed. The creature stretched itself out in front of them, completely focused on the Time Lords.

"We have something we want to share with you," the Doctor said.

To its credit, the creature sensed the trap, its sharp grin curled into a snarl, but driven either by its hunger or its malice it was committed to its attack. The Doctor clicked the device on as Morpheus crouched and sprang towards them, then threw it behind him. He and the Oracle jumped to either side of the core as the device connected.

“Warning: containment breach,” the automated voice blared.

There was a maelstrom of noise as the wormhole was released. The Doctor and Oracle ran for the door as Morpheus whirled around to face them, pulled back into the event horizon, unable to move forward, trapped on the edge.

The Doctor turned to face it in the doorway and flicked it a wave.

“Don’t worry, just breathe,” he said with a smile as the door closed.

Morpheus stood anchored to the edge of the event horizon, frozen in place as the room began to fold in on itself. A tormented noise rose up from inside it, hundreds of different voices crying out in anguish as pieces of it tore away and into the wormhole, sheared from its writhing form.

Chapter Nine

Their muscles screamed as the wormhole devoured the *Oberon* with an appetite as ravenous as Morpheus'. After the containment field had been compromised, it would continue to pull everything in until it collapsed.

The Doctor could feel the forces tugging at his atoms, the pain growing, but continued to run. It might have been futile, but they were giving everything they had left to survive.

"We're not going to make it to the hatch, it's too far!" Voxx screamed.

"Wait!" the Oracle bellowed suddenly. "My TARDIS – it's closer! This way! It's this way!" She turned and almost collided with the wall.

"It would have been nice of you to mention that before we ran across this blasted ship half a dozen times!" the Doctor shouted with incredulity.

"Why would I? Unlike some people I don't like piling a bunch of stray aliens into my TARDIS."

The Oracle was out in front of them as they ran, Voxx was fit and healthy but began to struggle, the Doctor reached for her hand and held it tightly.

700 meters – round a blind bend, slowing slightly, then powering through.

600 meters – through a poorly lit intersection without slowing.

500 meters – lungs starting to burn.

200 meters – though another doorway, calves tensing.

100 meters – the bay doors in sight. They were almost there!

With a crash, the ducting fell loose, and the walls of the ship tore down around them. A girder lanced through the corridor like a hot knife through butter, slicing downwards at the Doctor, who narrowly avoided being cleaved in two.

He stopped suddenly, his ears ringing, sparks flying around them and the lights strobing. The Oracle was on her belly in front of him, apparently in one piece, but he couldn't see Voxx.

"Voxx! Voxx are you OK?!" he shouted looking around, searching desperately for her.

"Doctor!" came a cry behind the debris. "Doctor I'm here! Can you hear me?"

He ran over to the obstruction. He could barely see Voxx through a small gap. He heaved and pulled on the masses of mangled metal and ducting. They were stuck, too heavy to move.

"Voxx, I can see you – hang on, I'll try and get to you!" he shouted to her.

"It's no use Doctor. There's no way out."

"No! No, I'll think of something. I must."

With a loud groan, the ship began to give way just a few meters from her feet as the structure of the ship gave way to the power of the wormhole.

"No Doctor. It's too late. Go now, while you can," She painted a brave smile on her face.

"We don't have time for this!" the Oracle shouted, her arms outstretched.

"You might be able abandon people on a whim, but I'll do whatever I can."

"Please!" Voxx implored. "I don't want you to throw your lives away. Don't worry, I'll be fine." She smiled.

The Oracle pulled the Doctor away as the twisting and groaning grew louder, the sound of tearing metal almost deafening.

"Until next time, Blue."

She took one last lunge across the gap to grip Voxx' hand in hers, a contrasting blue and alabaster skin locked briefly through the small hollow.

The Doctor and the Oracle ran through doors to Loading Bay Four and she stopped at a red container, identical to those around it, in the far end. She slotted a key in its side and pushed a seamless section of it inward. She crossed its threshold, and the Doctor ran through behind her.

Behind the collapse in the corridor Voxx sat in quiet contemplation with her back to the obstruction and shook her head. She heaved in and out, letting the air fill her lungs before expelling it.

"Just breathe," she muttered to herself, leaning her head backwards.

She noticed a gap in the ceiling big enough for her to crawl through. Maybe there was one last hope! A way out!

She jumped onto the twisted rigging and climbed, but the alloys twisted and groaned once more, breaking free and disappearing into oblivion. A white light filled the gap and she stopped.

"If only there was more time," she sighed to herself.

Maggie could scarcely believe she had made it to the deck of the *Lysander*. She watched alongside Captain Vikander as the ship rose from the ocean, the water churning inwards, distorting as the wormhole pulled everything into its jaws. The hulking outline of the *Oberon* disappeared from below the surface, pulled to pieces in the whirlpool of water and matter.

"They did it," Vikander said with a mixture of relief and sadness. "They actually did it."

"The Doctor never lets me down." Maggie had tears in her eyes.

The *Lysander* palpably strained as Thomas fought at the helm for control.

"Captain, we can't wait. There are no life signs down there."

As the captain, Vikander knew she had to make the right call, but she had been chewed around the edges of her psyche, picked over by the creature, and now felt spent. Even in this state, she never doubted the order she was going to give.

"OK Mr Thomas, take us out."

In moments they had cleared the cloud cover and were exiting the planet's mesosphere. The *Lysander* rattled and shook under the strain as it tried to leave the planet and the pull of the wormhole. The crew strapped into their seats and holding on as the white-knuckle ride of their escape unfolded.

The ion drives were pushed to maximum velocity as they sped outwards and away from Nereus Prime, the further the distance between the *Lysander* and the planet the less the ship struggled.

"Instruments say that the wormhole is collapsing captain," Starveling reported. "Just a little farther and we'll be in the clear."

Below them the ocean folded in on itself and then narrowed into a singularity, a few moments later the wormhole closed, and the ocean crashed into the space left by the void.

Vikander rested a hand on Maggie's shoulder softly in conciliation. Maggie glanced up, seeing the toll the encounter on the *Oberon* had taken. Maggie couldn't compare the scale of her loss to the strain on this formidable woman's soul. "I'll be all right Captain."

Vikander flinched at her gaze, trying to reassume her commanding demeanour. "Starveling, deactivate our beacon. Send a transmission to the company: scientific vessel *Oberon* lost with all hands. Recommend quarantine on Nereus Prime due to an extremely hostile biological organism."

Thomas noted: "But there was no life signs captain—from Voxx, the two aliens, or the biological organism."

These words stung Maggie anew.

"It was funny really—the aliens and Voxx, they just blinked off the scope," Thomas mused.

Vikander's focus remained on Morpheus. "If there's even the ghost of a chance, we have to keep that planet isolated."

"Of course, Captain," Starveling nodded. "Welcome back."

Vikander closed her eyes and breathed, a sense of desolate calm washing over her. They had managed to leave the *Oberon* and the nightmare behind; they were free.

Voxx jumped onto the twisted rigging and began to climb towards it as the metal of the corridor twisted and groaned. She climbed until a white light filled the gap in the ceiling she was aiming for, and she stopped mid-climb.

"If only there was more time," she sighed as she stared up at the maelstrom.

"I said 'until next time', remember?" a voice above her shouted.

She opened her eyes blinking into the light above her and saw the Oracle leaning over the hole, her arm outstretched.

"Well Blue, this is next time."

Voxx grabbed her hand, and the Oracle pulled her towards the gap. Voxx heaved herself up using her legs as a lever against the fallen column, as the corridor disintegrated below her.

The Oracle heaved her in through the TARDIS doors. For a moment Voxx' stomach flipped as her equilibrium shifted—and instead of moving upwards, she landed with a bump on the floor of the Oracle's TARDIS.

The Oracle ran to the console—a compact pentagon that looked like a jade marble sculpture with primary-coloured clusters of controls. The Doctor stood waiting, fingers hovering over the controls, keeping it in a holding position. She flipped the critical lever and the engines wheezed into life as the wormhole swallowed the *Oberon*.

Voxx sat for a moment in awe and bewilderment at the room she suddenly found herself in. A moment ago, she was clinging to the crumbling edifice of the *Oberon*, and now she was here in this impossible room where large cloister-like pillars stretched upwards from the floor to a high painted ceiling that seemed to melt away into a vast view of the cosmos with great spiralling galaxies and multicoloured nebulas. The stone walls were carved with all manner of creatures and scenes that were meticulous in detail. The walls held large oval-shaped lights that circled the console 360 degrees.

The five-sided console itself looked as if it was sat on the roots of a large tree that seemed to grow out from the floor, though it didn't appear to be wood, being a smooth crystalline structure that reflected the light in places. Branch-shaped supports gripped its central column, a warm-looking long translucent column that emitted a green glow.

A pair of large armchairs stood in the left on a large, patterned rug, next to a giant bookcase with a drinks cabinets built in. Voxx' mouth dropped open slightly as she saw to her right an actual tree that grew from the floor with branches at the top of a long trunk. The carved stone walls had climbing ivy clinging to them. There was a doorway with thick supports set into the wall, beyond that a corridor that led to parts unknown. A tantalising amber light glowed from the passage but gave away no details.

The Oracle rooted around in her waistcoat pocket and pulled out two sticks of 'Ka-Bluey!' bubblegum. Voxx gratefully took the stick and followed her example chewing it, as the Time Lady showed her around.

"Welcome to the TARDIS," The Oracle bowed theatrically, "It means Time and Relative Dimensions In Space. That tree is a based on a miniature California Redwood. I love them, don't you? I thought might have needed a lift."

"Well, I did, yeah," Voxx beamed. "Thanks, Red."

The Oracle turned back to the console and tweaked some controls while studying a projected display that floated up from the console like a huge bubble. She tapped it with her finger and instead of bursting it responded with a satisfying 'water droplet' noise.

"Your ship hasn't made its jump yet. I can drop you back if you like. Or...?" She let the sentence trail deliberately.

"Or what?" Voxx said, walking to her side.

"Or we could go somewhere else – anywhere else in fact, in space or time."

"Well, this is quite a room and that's a lot to consider. Shouldn't we check on our friends first?" Voxx said.

The Doctor cleared his throat loudly and deliberately from the opposite side of the console and folded his arms in mock disdain.

"I'd like to get back to Maggie and my own TARDIS on the *Lysander*, thank you. I'm the one that usually whisks people away, I am not the one who's whisked."

"Sorry old man. I blame the adrenaline." The Oracle held up her hand in assent. "Quite right too."

Vikander stood by Maggie's side on the flight deck of the *Lysander* in silence, feeling sorry for the decisions that meant they had lost friends and colleagues, and wondering what the future might hold for this poor dislocated woman without the Doctor. Balanced against that was overwhelming relief. Relief to be free of the *Oberon*, and relief that it had been destroyed and Morpheus along with it.

This relief turned to delight when the communications link crackled, and the voice of the Oracle filled the airwaves. "Ahoy crew of the *Lysander*! This is the Oracle, the Doctor, and Voxx, requesting permission to come aboard!"

Starveling swivelled her chair and looked at her, startled. Vikander nodded enthusiastically. "Roger that Oracle, come aboard!"

Moments later Vikander, Maggie, Puck and Starveling stood in the same cargo bay that Maggie and the Doctor had emerged onto the *Lysander* from as the Oracle's TARDIS phased into sight, its wheezing and whirring sound coming to a halt as it took the form of a cargo pallet, only distinguishable from the

surrounding stacks of such pallets by the dusting of iridescent snow that glowed brightly on its surface, then faded as it came into contact with the floor. A gap opened, and the Doctor came sauntering out, followed by the Oracle who untied her hair from its scrunchie.

The Doctor made straight for Maggie, who clamped him in a warm embrace that took him a little by surprise, but which he happily reciprocated.

"I don't believe it, I thought you were gone," Maggie said tearily.

"You can't get rid of me that easily Maggie." He smiled as she hugged him tightly. "Besides, the Oracle neglected to mention that she had a type 89 TARDIS stowed away on the ship."

Vikander looked around the group and back at the counterfeit cargo pallet. "Where's Voxx?" she enquired solemnly.

"I'm here Boss!" Voxx said running out of the TARDIS to embrace her, a gesture that took the captain by surprise. "I thought I was a destined to be a smudge in space-time, but they came back for me!"

The Doctor smiled warmly and put his hand on Vikander's arm. "The wormhole collapsed the *Oberon* around us. She helped us stop Morpheus, so we couldn't simply leave her behind. She was quite brilliant."

"She is," Vikander said staring at Voxx and then hugging her tightly. "Quite brilliant."

"We couldn't have done it without Voxx, Captain," the Oracle said. "She was fearless."

The Oracle smiled awkwardly, and clapped her hands together whilst walking backwards, suddenly compelled to move, like lightening had struck her.

"Well, I think that's my cue to leave. Thank you, Maggie, for helping to save me. Doctor, it was a thrill watching you work sweetheart, even though I thought the Time Lords back home were exaggerating when they said you travelled in a junkyard capsule like that," she said, gesturing towards the police box reassuringly still in the corner of the bay.

The Doctor's eyes flared angrily. "Mark my words, my old girl will still be trawling time and space when your sporty model has its dimensional stabilisers burnt out."

"Promises, promises. We'll have to hook up some time." She winked at them and smiled cockily.

"Lovely to make your acquaintance, Oracle. I hope our paths cross again soon." The Doctor clasped her hand, but the Oracle pulled him to her tightly, kissing him roughly on the forehead and then the lips.

"You little charmer," she mocked. She hugged Maggie tightly. "Maggie, an absolute pleasure, make sure you keep this one in line. You know Time Lords, slippery as a barrel-full of Altairian zero-gravity eels in grease."

"I sure will. Thank you for bringing him back," Maggie smiled warmly at her.

"Come along Puck," the Oracle beckoned to the android, who waddled after her stiffly. "And you, Voxx?"

Voxx ran a hand across her head and ruffled the back of her dark hair as she considered the Oracle's offer.

"What about you?" Vikander sensed she knew the answer but asked anyway.

"The Oracle has asked me to join her, to travel," Voxx said bashfully.

"And you're going?" Vikander asked.

"Well, I was considering it boss. After what we have just seen, after the people we have lost. I think I need to see what's out there—live a little," Voxx looked her captain in the eye. "I think I have to."

"This thing can go anywhere in time and space. I can bring her right back here, a minute from now. Maybe even a minute earlier, with some nifty steering."

"I'll be back," Voxx smiled.

"Fair enough." Vikander nodded solemnly, whilst she couldn't stand the thought of losing another member of her trusted crew, she could understand why Voxx would want to go, even if it all felt very sudden. "Don't be a stranger Voxx."

Voxx embraced Vikander and Starveling warmly, "I'll be back. I promise," She turned and joined the Oracle and Puck at the threshold of the shimmering TARDIS. The ship just as quickly faded from sight.

The Doctor turned to Vikander. "What will you report to your company?"

"Mia's already filed the report. There was a hostile organism down there, probably neutralised, but just on the safe side to cordon the place off." She gestured towards Starveling. "And we will honour our friends and their memories."

"Remember Captain, you did what you could. You deserved to live. Those who died didn't deserve that, but they died with honour and you will honour them with your memories. Good luck, Captain Vikander. And thank you Miss Starveling, our guardian angel." He nodded his acknowledgement and walked towards his TARDIS as Maggie embraced Vikander and Starveling individually.

"Be safe," Maggie said as she ran after the Doctor and in through the TARDIS door.

Once inside, Maggie felt overwhelming relief as the double doors clicked shut behind her. There were several times since they had left for the *Oberon* that getting back had seemed impossible, but thanks to the Doctor and the sacrifices of others, she was here, safe inside. She stood for a moment with her back to the doors, breathing it in.

The Doctor stood at the console flipping through operations and scanner readings. He couldn't find anything on Nereus Prime to suggest any of the *Oberon* had survived. There had been a surge of energy before the wormhole collapsed, but then nothing.

"What do you think that means, Doctor?" Maggie asked.

"I honestly don't know Maggie. Morpheus *couldn't* escape the event horizon. It just couldn't." His baritone voice wavered.

"You don't exactly sound convinced."

"Then again, it survived for untold centuries in space ..."

"Anything else you'd like to worry me with?"

"Even if it had survived, I don't think we'd be able to detect it anyway. It was elusive, dangerous, adept at camouflage."

"Do you have any way of knowing where it went? Where the wormhole opened up?" Maggie felt a pang of concern.

"Oblivion, the ends of the universe—a completely different universe altogether—who knows?" He sighed heavily, letting his anxiety go. He felt the knots in his shoulders relax a little. "Onwards," he said, engaging the TARDIS engines.

Maggie felt more relief as their roar sounded from deep within the ship. "If you'll excuse me, I'm going to change into some decent clothes."

Vikander and Starveling stood for a moment watching the Doctor's TARDIS disappear before Starveling turned to the captain and tapped her on the shoulder gently:

"Come on Captain, let's get the crew home," she said as she turned and walked out of the bay doors.

Vikander lingered behind a moment—savouring a solitary moment as a person, and not the captain—before she let go a heavy sigh and followed her.

Epilogue

“The crew are ready for the jump; I’m getting into my pod,” Botham announced over the crew frequency as Starveling walked alone from the *Lysander’s* fuselage toward the flight deck.

“Roger that Botham, thanks. I’m going to get the captain. We’ll see you on the other side,” Starveling said.

Once all the crew were safely in their pods, the ship’s computer would manage the jump through space.

“Over and out,” Botham replied, ending the transmission.

Starveling approached the doors to the flight deck. As she did, she could hear music faintly through the closed doors, the notes indiscernible. She pressed the door release, and they separated in the middle. As it parted the music came flooding out, a strange and ancient melody made with primitive instruments she wasn’t familiar with, and a drumbeat. A female vocalist sang:

“Oh, come on, darlin’... let me steal this moment from you now... Oh, come on, angel, come on, come on, darlin’... let’s exchange the experience...”

On the flight deck, Vikander’s back was to her. She stood in her tank top, her crew fatigues rolled down to her waist, swaying slowly to the music.

“Captain? Are you OK?” Starveling asked, a half-smile on her face. “Nice tune.” She nodded her approval and approached slowly. “I’ll be glad to close the book on this one Captain, you know. Try and put it behind us.”

Vikander drew a long deliberate breath in through her nostrils, akin to a chef savouring the smell of their culinary creation. “Not so. Alas. Not so. It’s only the beginning.”

“Are you ready to go, Captain?” Starveling frowned, puzzled by the response.

Vikander opened her eyes slowly, the life and colour had returned to her face, where before she had looked drained and sullen. She regarded Starveling for a moment, then smiled.

“Of course, I’m looking forward to making port. I just wanted to listen to the music, I like to take it in, let it wash over me, you should try it, Mia. Just relax, close your eyes, and *breathe.*”

Vikander’s green eyes shone vibrantly.

COMING UP NEXT ON THE DOCTOR WHO PROJECT

Season 45 Midseason Finale

AGE OF THE ICE WARRIORS

THE DOCTOR WHO PROJECT

The Doctor, Maggie, and a reluctant Captain Soria Vikander make a perilous journey into the unforgiving waters of Nereus Prime to rescue the salvage team trapped aboard the Oberon.

Already, history seems to be repeating itself, as members of the salvage team have died after seeing visions of loved ones. The only two survivors of the horrors that befell the science vessel are its commanding officer Dr Titania and a coy android, Puck, neither of whom are willing to provide answers. Trying to keep them and the surviving salvagers alive so they can get off the ship is a more difficult task than it appears: at every turn, the Doctor and Maggie find themselves menaced by a mysterious threat that can invade the minds of its prey.

As they search the wreck for the wayward Time Lord and try to find answers, will they be able to stay one step ahead of the dark entity hunting them? Or will they too fall prey to the test subject codenamed: 'Morpheus'?

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This story features the Eleventh Doctor as played by Winston Adderly

