



THE
DOCTOR WHO
PROJECT

**RAISING THE OBERON
PART I**

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PUCK: How now, spirit, whither wander you?

FAIRY: Over hill, over dale,
Thorough bush, thorough brier,
Over park, over pale,
Thorough flood, thorough fire:
I do wander everywhere,
Swifter than the moon's sphere.

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

Prologue

Her hearts were beating out a rhythm so hard in her ears that it crowded her thoughts, so loud the alarm outside the storage room had dimmed into the background. Panic electrified her body and she tried desperately to steady her ragged breathing. There were few times in her lives that she felt the undiluted terror that she did at this moment. She was alone, save for the last few survivors of the crew, and none of them could help her. They weren't even able to help themselves. They were doomed, every single one of them, by the same danger she fled.

She was gravely injured; perhaps even fatally. But she couldn't afford to regenerate, not here, not now. Escape was the only thing in her mind, reaching her TARDIS and getting as far away as possible – to the ends of the universe if she had to. Survival was the key, at all costs, even the remaining crew's lives. She hadn't brought this doom down upon them, they had done that all themselves – she'd just stumbled into it by accident.

The pale skin of her forehead was covered in sweat, and the curls of her long red hair were matted to it. Her eyes were slightly reddened and tight around the edges where her tears had dried.

The tears of a Time Lord! Oh, how her contemporaries would have derided her if they had known! But they hadn't seen what she had seen – been made to see!

No, terror wasn't an emotion that her people would ever have admitted to, but she had fled from it, the blood in her veins had run cold with it, her hearts virtually stopped by it. Terror was what she felt, and she needed to be somewhere – anywhere else!

She fumbled around in the pockets of her grey waistcoat and her khaki trousers, empty save a pocket-watch on a chain and a stick of '*Ka-Bluey!*' bubble gum. Not a helpful combination in the current situation.

She exhaled slowly, releasing the tension in her chest, setting herself to the task of her escape she examined the gum and the watch. She shrugged to herself, unwrapped the gum and tossed it nonchalantly into her mouth.

Feeling her resolve returning, she gave a rueful smile. "Might as well go out with minty-fresh breath," she said as she swept her long red curls behind her head and bound them tight with a shimmering scrunchie from her wrist, the longest strands dropped loose either side of her forehead. She wiped the sweat from her brow with one of her long white ruffled sleeves and checked the time on the watch for checking's sake.

Her wide-eyed reflection stared back from the watch face, her emerald-green eyes framed within the numerals, shining and wet. Time, a fickle mistress even to the likes of her. If only she'd had her

time over again, she'd have avoided this forsaken place and passed right on. She'd have called in on Louis Armstrong and the Hot Five, he was always good for a party, or she'd have popped into Nellcôte to see Mick and Keith, she had promised to provide backing vocals on 'Exile on Main Street'. If only she had more time.

Time *-time!* That's it!

She was only a few meters away from a computer terminal that accessed the main system. It ran on a Fujikawa-Stratten propulsion system, using an Einstein-Rosen core for deep space travel and ion thrusters for shorter distances. She could get into the functions and trigger the research vessel's timed detonation. It had a built-in failsafe in case the quarantine seals were compromised. All she had to do was trigger it – and BANG! This whole thing and its abhorrent passenger would be obliterated in the vacuum of space!

If she allowed enough time to get to Loading Bay Four, she'd be in her TARDIS, and then be drunk and singing with the 'Stones in no time at all—maybe with a fresh new face to show off. She winced and looked down at the patch of blood below the ribs on her right side. She placed the watch back in her waistcoat pocket and balled up her fists, setting her jaw. *Time to go*, she thought.

The alarm wailed in the corridor outside the storage room, the emergency lighting flashed red. A futile display – anyone left knew there was danger. She checked the corridor left to right. Nothing – not a soul, or otherwise, in sight.

The lifeboats had been jettisoned. The only way off this ship was her TARDIS, and she'd be making the trip alone – she couldn't allow the creature to escape.

She moved silently along, step by step, inch by inch. The creature could come from anywhere, and she hoped that if it did, she would recognise it before it got too close.

Suddenly her left boot slipped on something, and she almost skittered over with the shift in momentum. Tentatively, she glanced downward, a dreadful feeling washing over her, almost sure what she would find – blood.

Her brown leather boot was set in the middle of the wet, red pool. Nearby was a volt-gun—a mostly non-lethal weapon, but with aim and the maximum setting capable of stopping a heart, or two. She traced the path of blood up to a smeared handprint on the side of the desk. Someone else had the same idea she had, but they'd been intercepted.

She filled her lungs with a deep breath, her hearts pounding again. She tapped the touch-screen interface and found it unlocked. *Result!* she thought as she wiped bloody fingerprints with her left sleeve, which she then rolled past her elbow, exposing part of the Japanese-style sleeve tattoo. The interface was simple for someone with her intellect—she opened a command window, cycled through system settings and sub-routines with artful grace, and found the right code prompts to start the self-destruct sequence.

But the core destruct had been disabled, needing a genetic imprint to unlock. That was unfortunate.

Sucking air through her teeth in frustration, she navigated to the propulsion system. She could overload the ion drives – ditch and run. Checking the planetary systems in the ship's path, she found a nearby planet—uninhabited and entirely covered in water.

A timer prompt appeared, and she set the countdown to five minutes.

Time to run!

There was a loud clang to her left, and she wheeled around to see a large man in his forties with short blond hair and a neat beard hunched a few meters away, his eyes closed tightly. She recognised him from her short and unpleasant stay aboard this ship as First Lieutenant Erik Larsson. His dark blue compression suit and his neck were covered in blood.

She gave a short, surprised yelp, despite her best efforts and gripped the edge of the computer.

“Arden, I – I couldn’t let him leave, he was trying to leave. I couldn’t let him,” he said breathlessly.

“Was this – Arden?” the Time Lady replied, nodding toward the blood trail.

“He was trying to leave; I couldn’t let him leave.”

“Oh, why’s that?” she replied quietly, shield the screen from his view as she completed the command with her right hand.

“Because – because he wouldn’t take me.” The man’s eyes suddenly opened, fixing her with a cold stare. “And I *need* to leave.”

She completed the sequence and the countdown clock started silently.

“We all need to leave, my friend.”

“But I *need* to leave.”

“Yes, yes indeed.” She shifted her weight slightly to the right.

“Yes, yes indeed,” he mimicked. “We all need to leave my friend,” he said again in her voice. “Yes, yes indeed.”

He suddenly sprang to his feet and cocked his head to the left, his eyes wide and white, pupils gone and a haunting smirk spread across his face.

“Oh, I see, it’s you. I thought it might be,” she said solemnly, “I don’t suppose we can talk about this?”

“I don’t suppose we *can* talk about this,” her voice returned to her from his lips, with a slight alteration in emphasis.

Suddenly he jumped like an animal pouncing on its prey. In a flash, the Time Lady reached behind her, aimed the volt-gun at his chest and squeezed the trigger.

With a loud fizz, the weapon discharged a jolt of energy full in his chest. He landed on his back, motionless. The weapon lurched back into her shoulder with the recoil. She threw it to the floor and took off down the corridor, slipping slightly from the residual blood on the soles of her boots. She had no idea how long the jolt would keep him down, so she had to get some distance between them. There were exactly 756 meters to Loading Bay Four. She had to make it to her TARDIS – and make sure that *thing* went down with the ship!

750 meters – through an open doorway.

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. She was almost there!

20 meters – through the bay doors! Almost there– *thump!*

The wind was knocked from her lungs as she hit what felt like a brick wall, was swept clean off her feet, and fell to the floor. Pain screamed through her body from the injury below her ribs.

So damn close!

“Help me! Help me please!” another crewmember, Ensign Alvarez, screamed from somewhere in front.

“What the hell are you doing?!” the Time Lady gasped, her cheeks flushed with anger. She clasped her hand to her wound, willing the pain away.

“DON’T LEAVE ME HERE!” she pleaded. Then suddenly more quietly, “Don’t leave me here with it. Please.”

She heaved herself to her feet as Ensign Alvarez groped desperately at her legs. Alvarez had a broken leg, the shin bone protruding from her trouser leg, exposed and bloody. Every fibre of her being screamed to leave, to close the last few feet to her TARDIS, and leave the *Oberon* behind, forever.

She shifted her weight and turned to her TARDIS, camouflaged as a large red logistics container. Freedom awaited.

"All the lifeboats have gone away. There's no way off."

"I know you can get me away from here. I know you were lying when you said you'd come aboard at Outpost Sigma. Take me with you!" Alvarez seemed to read her intentions and screamed again, "PLEASE!"

She closed her eyes and sighed heavily, "OK, hush. OK." She crouched and helped Alvarez into a seated position. She examined the broken leg, "Well, that's a mess."

"*Proximity alert,*" the *Oberon's* warning system blared between alert klaxons.

"Crap," the Time Lady said flatly. She'd almost forgotten the collision course plotted to the nearby planet's surface. She checked the fob watch: one and a half minutes remaining before the ion drives exploded.

Alvarez groped for a pole on the floor that she realised she had been using as a makeshift crutch, and she used it to heave herself up on her good leg. It was astounding bad luck that someone so painfully incapacitated had collided with her so unexpectedly.

She motioned to the corner of the loading bay. "My ship, it's hidden."

"Hidden where?"

She turned to the red logistics container, just about to reach out to its door, but stopped and turned back to the wide-eyed ensign. "Well, that's just the thing. I'm not sure I can tell you."

"Why? - wait, I'm not th-that thing! Just look at me!"

"Oh, I am."

"I was with Arden; we were trying to escape when we were blind-sided. We ... wait." Alvarez glanced over her shoulder. "Never mind, I thought I heard something," She continued, "Arden and I were escaping, we located a pod and..."

She suddenly gave a shudder, a brutal spasm from head to toe. She dropped the pole. As she did, she was lifted off her feet and was jerked violently back out of the doorway.

"*Proximity alert,*" the warning system blared again.

"So close ..." she said aloud stepping backwards again, her eyes fixed on the doorway, the lights inside the loading bay flickering before switching off.

She tried to calculate how far she was from the TARDIS without turning. If the creature was watching, she didn't want to give its position away. If she could make it inside and close the doors, she was safe.

"So bloody close," she said, shaking her head and closing her eyes.

"So... bloody... close," Her voice crept back into the room through the bay doors, delivered in a slow and deliberate tone that chilled her to the bone.

"*Proximity alert,*" the automated voice chimed in again.

"I don't suppose we can talk about this," the creature mimicked back at her in a perfect replica of her voice, a soundbite of their previous exchange, as a long shadow emerged from the bay doors.

"*Warning. Engines critical.*"

"No. I don't suppose we can," she said with a sardonic grin.

"*Proximity alert.*"

"Time's up," she said, smoothing out her waistcoat and straightening her back.

"*Warning. Engines critical.*"

"Time's up," the creature mimicked back.

"*Proximity alert. Engines critical.*"

Chapter One

“So, I’m just standing there, single malt in one hand, a bar of gold bullion in the other, right in the middle of Fort Knox ...” The Doctor mimed the balancing act.

He had unbuttoned his black double-breasted dinner jacket and his bow tie hung loosely from his crisp white shirt collar; its top three buttons undone. With a devil-may-care expression, he continued: “And I turn to Oliver Reed, and I say...”

His punchline was interrupted by a loud noise from the TARDIS console, and he stopped in his tracks, momentarily locked in the pose he had used to perform his anecdote.

Maggie had heard many different alarms and warning sounds in her travels with the Doctor, but this one was new: a high-pitched radar echo, in time with circular lights blinking on the nearest panel of the console.

“What’s that Doctor?” she shouted over the din.

“It’s a distress call.”

Usually, a distress call was a source of excitement for the Doctor, but this special alert elicited a different reaction completely, one of puzzlement and perhaps even a flicker of concern.

“It’s a bit different!” she shouted.

“Yes, it is,” he replied flatly, moving to the console, where he flicked a switch that stopped the alert sound instantly.

“What’s wrong, do you think?” Maggie bellowed, much too loudly for the now serene ambient noise of the control room. “Sorry.”

The Doctor examined a monitor on the console and his frown deepened. He leant back and let out a dissatisfied grunt. He rolled his sleeves past the elbow as if to signify purpose and concentration. He adjusted some dials to the right of the scanner screen. He ran a hand across his face and squinted at the numerals and symbols. “It includes space-time coordinates, and it appears to be from another Time Lord.”

Maggie attempted to read his change in demeanour. Only moments ago, they had boarded the TARDIS after dinner and dancing in the shining halls of the Empire Regency Cascade, with fine guests and even finer views of the Horsehead Nebula. The Doctor had been in great form, the life and soul of the party. He’d been effusive, engaging and imbued with infectious energy. The contrast to his current mood couldn’t have been starker. The smile on his face and in his deep, expressive eyes had been replaced with a furrowed brow and firm jaw.

“And that’s a bad thing?” Maggie asked.

“Possibly. It really depends on which one sent it. It’s a psychic frequency that a Time Lord would know, but it still could be trap.”

He adjusted the dials and rubbed the back of his neck in agitation as an elegant female voice filled the TARDIS loudspeakers. To Maggie it evoked images of a fine English lady, but it sounded cracked and panicked: *“If anyone receives this message, please send help. The vessel I’m occupying is stricken. I’m trapped and there’s no escape. I’ve enclosed coordinates. Please, don’t leave me stranded. I can’t stay here, I...”*

The transmission ended abruptly, and the Doctor perched on the edge of the console, his back to the screen. He clicked his tongue.

“I can’t tell who the message is from. It’s psychically encoded to find those few Time Lords travelling the vortex, unsanctioned by Gallifrey, some benevolent, some hedonistic, some neither,” the Doctor said, placing a cold emphasis on the last part of his sentence. “It *could* be a fun one, like the Corsair, or it could be a dangerous one like the Rani. Whomever it is, I can’t just leave them to die.”

“A rescue mission then?”

“Yes, a rescue mission it is, but if it goes pear-shaped, I may need you to be the rescue party,” he replied, spinning back to the console. “I can drop you home if you like?”

Maggie bristled; the Doctor had been asking that question more frequently of late. As always, she shrugged and brushed it off.

“It’ll be OK, even if it’s not a rescue.”

“Yes, yes, nothing we can’t handle, I’m sure,” the Doctor said.

“And what you can’t handle, I can, right?”

With the course from the message already locked in, all that remained for the Doctor to do was to throw a large lever on the TARDIS console and listen to the engines roar back to life.

The ion drives were at full capacity as the deep salvage vessel *Lysander* moved silently through space. Captain Soria Vikander checked the telemetry readings displayed on a large flat panel, absent-mindedly biting her lower lip as she reviewed oxygen levels, artificial gravity, and core power readings. Her shoulder-length dark brown hair was bound behind her head, and her blue-grey eyes were still adjusting to the light in her ready room, forcing herself to read some of the data more than once before it had registered.

Most of the crew of the *Lysander* were still recovering from the stasis-sleep after they had exited light speed, a necessary part of space-jumps if you were a humanoid and wanted to avoid liquefying in the most painful way possible. The drives that allowed ships like the *Lysander* to bend space-time were used for ‘point-to-point’ travel, but once clear, they required standard ion drives. She had been roused first as part of standard protocol, along with her first officer.

“How’re we looking Captain?” a voice suddenly said to her right, giving her a slight start. It belonged to First Officer Aaron Demetrius, who held out a drink in a stainless-steel mug.

“Sorry Captain, I didn’t mean to startle you. I brought you some water.”

Demetrius was a tall, well-built man in his late forties with olive skin and dark brown eyes. He had an assured smile which showed off his firm jaw, pocked with deliberately cultivated grey-black stubble. His head was shaved, and the short sleeve of his dark blue crew-issue t-shirt revealed a military tattoo on his right bicep. Her eyes were temporarily drawn to the smooth black surface of his lower arm, which reflected the light from the display screen like streetlights on the hood of a car at night.

Demetrius glanced down at his bionic lower right arm and shrugged. “It’s new for me too, Cap. But I think I’m just about getting used to it.”

“Sorry Aaron, I didn’t mean to stare.” Vikander accepted the cup, taking a mouthful of water in the hope that it would wash away the awkwardness. There was an embarrassed pink flush in her cheeks, and she was conscious of the heat in her face.

“Don’t worry about it. It’s not every day someone swaps out their arm for some sweet new hardware.”

Their previous trip had been the first in which Demetrius had been able to test his arm in the field. Modern bionics meant that once the neural pathways had connected, the user would be in no way hindered, in fact it offered a sixty percent increase in strength. The challenge was often the finer motor skills, targeted by a regimen of exercises. He was used to such discipline from his time in the armed forces, and he was diligent and committed to making sure that his current situation was in no way a disability.

“Who knows? After this trip I might have the down payment on an organic one.”

Vikander turned to the screen. “There was an ion spike in the warning range shortly after we switched to full burn, but it’s levelled out now. We’ll need to monitor non-essential systems due to the extended trip, but that’s nothing out of the ordinary.” She dropped her voice. “How’re the crew?”

“Bubbling with excitement about this one, Cap, it feels like a bit of prize tagged onto the end of an already successful trip. Everyone is already mentally spending their bonus.”

They had been readying to leave when the call was sent out to respond to a downed research vessel on Nereus Prime, a short jump away. They were fortunate to be in the sector: this promised to be a big one, a very tempting cherry on top of their current haul. Space travel wasn’t all plain sailing; many things could happen out in the vast expanse, within the shipping lanes and beyond. The company that commissioned the *Lysander* had many high-end interests floating around in space and if they miscalculated their course, or hit an unexpected debris field, or flew into an ion storm or unfriendly vessels, then someone needed to fly in to run salvage and rescue, and that’s where teams like theirs came in. It wasn’t uncommon for the company to encourage competition to ensure a salvage was completed. The first vessel to reach the planet’s airspace and activate their beacon had the salvage rights as per maritime law, and the company wanted to ensure it was a contracted crew rather than a privateer.

The company wouldn’t say so publicly, but the salvage took priority. Humans were expendable, but the lost equipment and cargo hurt the bottom line. There were a few dozen pay-rolled operators like the crew of the *Lysander* dispatched to handle such operations. There were bonuses on top of their basic pay attached to the value of salvage recovered and the size of the job.

“Are there any more details on the job from control?” Demetrius enquired, settling into the chair beside Vikander.

“Not much more has come through. It’s typical of an open tender, first-past-the-post. They’ll transmit more details once we’re in Nereus’ orbit. All they’ll say is that it is a large research vessel and marine salvage skills are likely required, and that had a critical system failure. Crew status is unknown,” Vikander shrugged. “No contact can be established with the crew.”

“Well, that’s their way of making sure they get the fish biting Cap.”

She shifted her view to an adjacent display. “We’ve picked up a distress transmission from the vessel. The computer is just cleaning it up, we’ll listen to it in the crew room with the briefing.” Vikander drank the last of the water and inhaled steadily. “My chance to address the troops.”

“You’ll do fine Soria,” Demetrius said, sensing her trepidation and briefly breaking formality. “You know the crew, you’ve worked with them long enough, and you’ve earned the right to be captain. Just relax.”

“Saying ‘relax’ is far easier than the act of relaxing,” she replied, putting her hand on his shoulder.

Their last job had been her first as captain of the *Lysander*. She knew then that Demetrius would be a solid first officer, having worked salvage with him since she was a rookie. He’d have likely been

made captain himself if it hadn't been for his accident. Once he was out of the infirmary, he'd learnt the company passed him over for promotion, and that Vikander would be given command of the *Lysander* instead. But rather than appearing bitter, he'd been the first to congratulate her, and been her staunchest supporter ever since. The rest of the crew were more sceptical, as she observed. "They all think you should have been made captain instead of me."

"But I'm *not* captain, you are. And as long as you believe it, they will too."

They moved through the airlock into the ship's interior sections. In case of emergency, the secondary doors locked and remained airtight, allowing the flight deck to manoeuvre away from the main superstructure as a life raft, able to limp to the nearest port on secondary ion propulsion. She had never been part of a salvage team that needed to be salvaged themselves and didn't want to be.

The hexagonally shaped corridor that linked the flight deck to the rest of the *Lysander* was a little over 20 meters long, with sterile white walls and floor illuminated from the ceiling and walls with day-bright lighting, which automatically adjusted to the time of day to help manage the body clock on long trips. A black strip ran the length of the corridor, inset with control panels for internal communications and terminal connections to the core system. The time was currently a little after noon, so the lights were at their brightest.

As they walked, she tightened a device to her left forearm that registered her vitals and a summary of key data from the vessel. It could be used for remote systems access and was encoded to her DNA. It wasn't something she wore in stasis as it could interfere with the monitoring systems.

"You know, even as a kid I dreamed of being a captain of my own ship. I was so taken with the romantic idea of deep space travel and the mysteries to be explored. The promise of travelling to far away worlds, seeing the ends of the empire, meeting new and wonderful beings, it was all I thought about."

"Well, it's hardly surprising Cap, it being in your family," Demetrius said with a warm laugh. "Your mother, your father—rest his soul. They made fine captains. And you will too."

Demetrius had served under Soria's father in the Space Corps, ensuring that outlying colonies didn't break away during the territorial wars. That loyalty had been transferred to Soria, and at times like this, she was grateful for it.

"I'm not an explorer, nor in charge of a peacekeeping force, Aaron. I'm a salvager."

"And a damn good one Cap."

"As are you."

"Damn right."

As they reached the doors to the inner sections, Demetrius moved ahead and, with the press of his palm, the doors separated like a camera aperture. Inside the crew room sat the full complement of the *Lysander*: seven full-time members and four contractors, talking loudly and drinking coffee and water, some still sleepy from the stasis.

The oldest and most experienced members of the crew sat to the right of the empty captain's seat at the large round table: Moth, a large insectoid Coleopterran (whose actual name was Chanmothcho, but who had allowed the crew to shorten it) who was the primary operations safety officer. Moth was listening intently to equipment specialist Peter Quince, who, as a human just over 182cm tall, looked smaller seated next to his insectoid friend. Quince had cropped dark hair, greying at the temples and designer stubble every bit as curated as Demetrius': in fact, they had once competed in an informal 'best beard' competition, but neither were happy with the results and had trimmed them back significantly afterwards.

Seated clockwise to Quince's left were: Voxx, a striking blue Crespallion salvage operative who had spent the past year as the *Lysander's* newest permanent staffer; then communications specialist Starveling, then Botham and Francis, well liked contractors often drafted in and out as the company

needed to scale up and down its operations. Two more contractors, Thomas and Snug, leant over a counter at the back discussing sports results.

“Captain on deck,” Demetrius announced loudly. The noise petered out, apart from Thomas and Snug’s conversation about the performance of their soccer teams.

“Quiet at the back!” shouted Quince over his shoulder.

“Thank you, Mister Quince. Good afternoon, everyone, I’m glad to see that there’s plenty of energy left in the tanks, especially as none of us anticipated being here.”

She motioned to one of the two empty seats, and, resuming her formality, commanded: “Please take a seat Mr Demetrius.”

“Where exactly is ‘here’ captain?” Quince asked, shifting to face her directly. Thomas and Snug followed suit.

“I’m glad you asked.” She turned on a large holographic display in the centre of the table. An image of the nearby planet appeared, surrounded by complimenting analytics for atmospheric and weather readings. “Nereus Prime. The good news is that though uninhabited we are reading twenty percent oxygen; the atmosphere is just about breathable. The not-so-good news is that it has an unpredictable and intense ion storm pattern—intense enough to damage the *Lysander’s* hull—and the surface is almost entirely covered in water. Ninety-two-point five percent to be precise.”

“The company did say it was a ‘salvage at sea’, and that’s our speciality,” Quince scoffed.

“Indeed. The exact details of the salvage are yet to be transmitted. We’ll receive them if we are first to the outer marker.” She pinched at the device on her left arm, and the planet moved to the back of the display, an audio file popped into the foreground. “As we exited our jump, we intercepted a short distress call.” she said and tapped the play icon.

The transmission playback started on the ships main internal audio system: “*This is Doctor Titania, head of deep space research vessel Oberon; our systems are critical, and we have lost access to navigation. We have been forced to ditch on a nearby planet. The system has notified control, but if there is anyone else out there – please, please help.*”

“The ship’s computer date-stamped the transmission as December 22nd, 2289,” Vikander said solemnly. “Control have been unable to establish contact since.”

“That’s over three months ago Captain.” Demetrius said.

“Yes. I’m not sure about the life support and structural integrity of the *Oberon*. I am hoping between the data sent by the company, and our own readings we’ll know a lot more once we activate our claim,” She paused to summon the right tone of severity. “But it might not be pretty, so prepare yourselves.”

“It doesn’t need to be pretty if the bonuses are good, Boss,” Quince quipped.

“Mister Quince, Moth, please take Voxx and start preparing the equipment for an aquatic salvage. We’ll likely send down an exploratory group first to assess the situation. So that should be the priority,” She gave her orders in a rapid-fire clipped tone, trying to leave as little room as possible for interjection. “Starveling, get to the flight deck, you’re on comms. I want to know as soon as there is any new information from the company or the planet, and if any competition shows up. Everyone else, the First Officer will have your assignments.” She crossed her arms. “We’re eighty-three minutes out. Let’s get to it.”

The crew climbed to their feet and the chatter resumed.

“OK Voxx, you’re with us,” Quince said with a wink.

“I’m such a lucky girl,” She smiled back sardonically, her green eyes bright. She brushed her dark black hair back from her blue face theatrically. “What did I do wrong?”

“Wrong?! You’re a part of the dream team now buddy.” Quince offered a fist bump, which she reciprocated.

“Well OK Grandpa, what’s first?”

“Well, you can stop with the grandpa jokes for a start. I’m only thirty-four.”

“It’s often hard to tell with humans,” Moth chimed in, standing to his full height of over two meters; his deep voice laced with a playful undertone.

“Heck Moth, next you’ll be saying we all look alike,” Quince said, feigning shock.

“Well, the old ones do at least,” Voxx replied.

“Wow. Just wow,” Quince picked up Voxx’ ‘Lysander’ branded baseball cap from the table and slapped it on her head. “When we get back to port, I’m logging a complaint to H.R. about you two.”

“They’ll have a backlog with all the complaints filed about you, Pete,” Voxx shot back, scooping her hair over her shoulder and adjusting the cap around it. The three exited the crew room towards the operations and equipment storage area.

“See, piece of cake Cap,” Demetrius assured Vikander after the crew had dispersed.

The flight deck of the *Lysander* was a synergy of form and function, with large windshield-like glass panels that curved toward the helm controls where there were two central seats for manual piloting. The boards were long and sleek and bore nothing that wasn’t essential for operations, such as manual throttles and controls moulded to the hand of the pilots. In the centre windshield panel, there was a large clear display projection that could take digital feeds from the other devices on the ship, including the communications and core system computer.

The communications instrument bank was to the left of the helm interface and monitored local and deep space frequencies, as well as internal communications.

“Ten minutes to the outer marker, Captain,” Thomas replied from the helm, scratching at his ginger beard. “Steady and smooth so far.”

“Good to hear. Starveling – comms report.”

“No other vessels in the immediate area captain, but I did get a ping from the *Pericles*’ beacon as they exited their jump. They’re currently too far behind to catch us. There have been no other transmissions received from the planet’s surface or the *Oberon* at this stage.”

At thirty, Mia Starveling was the same age as Vikander, and she was a confident and capable communications technician. They had been on several salvage missions together and had struck up a professional friendship. Being a mother of a young son, Starveling was warm and empathetic at times, but didn’t let that distract her from her job.

Thomas on the other hand was cordial but spikey. He wasn’t universally liked amongst the crew, but had a firm friend in Cotter Snug, one of the other contractors, and a begrudging respect for both Moth and Quince.

Vikander settled into her seat. “OK, keep me posted on the *Pericles*. And let me know when we reach the outer marker.”

The main screen bore an illuminated image of Nereus Prime, and the distress beacon’s frequency was displayed to the right, as well as the current weather readings.

“Can we get a status update from the operations team please, Mia?”

“Sure thing, Captain,” Starveling gestured at the panel in front of her, opening a channel. “Operations room, status update for the captain please.”

A video feed appeared on the bottom right of the main display, which showed the operations room, gear of all kinds neatly stored arranged in various lockers, containers, and racks. Quince may have been a character, but he ran a tight department.

“Ah! All present and correct, Captain,” Quince said from somewhere outside of the frame. “We’re running equipment tests on the pressure suits; Moth is checking through the systems on the

Nemo,” He popped into the frame with a mock salute. “We’ll be ship-shape by the time we enter the atmosphere, boss.”

“I hope Voxx isn’t picking up any bad habits.”

“No, only good ones Captain,” Voxx said, appearing at his side holding a pressure suit helmet. “We don’t want any leaks.”

“Indeed. We’re just under ten minutes away from the marker. At the moment we have no competition in range. So, we’re looking like we’ll have a green light. I want to be ready to roll as soon as we hit the atmosphere.”

“We’ll be ready boss. Over,” Quince nodded and closed the feed. “You heard the new captain Voxxy, let’s stick to it. We don’t want to disappoint the Princess.”

“I dare you to call her that to her face,” Voxx smirked as she threw him the helmet.

“Dare me?! What are we, six? Are you gonna be a grown up and make me a bet?” Quince said with a childish grin.

On the flight deck, Captain Vikander checked the system data again. So much of being in command felt like admin, but it was necessary if you wanted everyone to get back home alive. The oxygen levels on the *Lysander* were in the normal range, as was the artificial gravity and the burn rate of the ion propulsion system. She was about to open a channel to Demetrius when she saw an odd reading in the aft section.

“Starveling, what is that?”

“I’m not sure, Captain. I’ll try and get the system to isolate it and get an exact fix.”

“I didn’t hit anything,” Thomas chimed in.

“The data readings are normal everywhere else,” Vikander mused for a second, before ordering: “Reduce our speed Thomas, just in case we’re getting a false positive.”

“Captain,” Thomas replied without looking back from the helm.

Starveling worked through the system controls effortlessly, bouncing around the user interface to isolate the source of the spike. As she found the location and refined the data, she tilted her head and creased her mouth downward at the sides.

“Huh, the reading is coming from Cargo Bay Two, but all the system can tell us is that it is an anomaly. It doesn’t seem to be coming from the *Lysander* itself,” She turned to Vikander.

Vikander sucked air through her teeth and glanced back up at the main display, the schematic diagram automatically zooming in to the cargo bay.

“Well, we can’t ignore it. Thomas: reduce speed to fifty percent and await further instructions.” She opened a personal channel to Demetrius. “Aaron, we’ve got an energy spike in Cargo Two that we can’t account for. I’ve got you as being in Cargo One – I need you to check it out.”

“On it, Captain.”

Demetrius moved quickly to one of the safety equipment stations dotted around and removed a small hand-held device. Its screen powered up, displaying the logotype ‘Canary 9.1’ and its battery life.

“Francis, come with me, we need to check out Cargo Two.” He tossed the device to the nearby salvage operative.

“Check out what?”

“Energy spike.”

“A leak?”

Demetrius shrugged. “Wish I knew. The ship’s being unhelpful.”

For safety, they donned clear masks with adjustable straps over their faces, attached to a small box like pack via a long tube. The masks fitted tightly and were sucked in tighter when the pack was powered on.

They made their way quickly down the corridor to Cargo Bay Two, the deck quiet as the bulk of shipboard work was taking place in other, better-lit parts of the ship. Demetrius considered it reassuring that the system hadn’t automatically triggered an alert. They reached the end of the corridor and paused a few steps away from two large grey sliding bay doors. He pressed his hand to the door control and the panel illuminated yellow. The doors separated slowly into the wall cavity at a 40-degree angle; “Access authorised,” an automated female voice boomed, breaking the silence in the corridor, and making Francis jump.

“Sorry Chief,” Francis said, flushing.

Demetrius moved forward, the small device in front of him. “Let’s be certain before we commit. Keep an eye on the readings on your Canary.”

“Yes Chief.”

The Canary devices chirruped intermittently in a calm tone as they walked, providing readings on nitrogen, carbon dioxide, and oxygen levels, as well as data on water vapour and background radiation. Given that vessels like the *Lysander* relied on the large ion driven propulsion system, it also gave readings on xenon and lithium levels – as well as checking for other forms of radiation. The Canaries were a key part of the safety equipment and borrowed their name from the iconic birds used to detect carbon monoxide in coal mines in the twentieth century.

“No unusual readings,” Demetrius reported. “We’re moving inside.”

“We’re receiving data from your Canaries. Don’t take any risks,” Vikander responded, trying to underline that caution was required. “There is a registered lighting malfunction in the bay, it’s down at twenty percent.”

“Well, we won’t need light, we just need the Canaries, and if they say there’s any danger, we leave,” Demetrius declared. Francis nodded and proffered a grateful half-smile in response.

The cargo bay carried containers and metal-looking crates of salvage from their last trip, as well as additional supplies and machinery. The dim lights meant the containers’ shadows loomed large over them. The Canaries chirruped quietly as they walked amongst the stowage, sweeping their arms out in front and to their sides slowly.

“Everything seems fi- *wait!*” Demetrius stopped in his tracks. “Here they are!”

The canaries chirruped louder and quicker, raising the alarm as Demetrius rounded a large shipping container at his left. “We’ll try and get eyes on it.” Demetrius held up a hand to try and placate his companion, as his device grew louder, until it suddenly stopped, and the display indicator went green.

“It’s as if ... AGH!” he exclaimed despite himself as he crashed into something in the dim light. He almost lost his balance, but a hand reached out and steadied him.

“Hello there! I’m the Doctor,” said a voice from above him.

Chapter Two

“So, I’m going to ask you again: who the hell are you, and how did you get aboard my ship?” Vikander stood in front of the stowaways with her arms crossed tightly, her face slightly red. Since their discovery, the two stowaways in fancy dress hadn’t been allowed to leave Cargo Bay Two. She, Demetrius, and Francis still wore masks over their faces, which fogged slightly as she exhaled.

“As I told your friend here—”

“First. Officer,” Demetrius interrupted.

“Oh yes, ‘*first officer*,’” the Doctor repeated, his voice tinged with exasperation. “We’re here as part of a surprise inspection. Surprise!”

“From the company?” Vikander said, her right eyebrow arched sceptically.

“Correct.”

“And you didn’t announce yourself at port because?”

“Because then it wouldn’t have been a surprise,” the Doctor said with a wolfish grin.

“And the company would be?” Vikander asked.

“Erm...” the Doctor scrunched his lips together tightly, his bravado suddenly slipping.

“Tsuchigumo Conglomerate, a Sector Three division of Amorb, of course,” Maggie interjected, reading verbatim the logotype stamped in the bottom left of a shipping container.

The Doctor pulled a face. “Oh, those interstellar crooks and gangsters. So I assume you report back to some slimy characters from Thoros-Beta and we’re around the end of the twenty-third century?”

Maggie flashed the Doctor a rictus smile. “Don’t be such a joker, Doc—of course you know who we work for and what century you live in.”

“Uhuh, and you are?” the captain asked coldly. “Doctor ...?”

“I’m Senior Auditor Maggie Cooper,” Maggie replied, “and this is my associate Doctor Laurie Palmer.”

“Cooper and Palmer huh? Can I see your ID?” Vikander asked, holding her hand out.

“I am sure if you contact Control they can confirm,” the Doctor bluffed.

“Well, as I’m sure you’re aware we’re not exactly in range for a direct line, are we?” Vikander growled. She considered what this incredible pair had said. It wasn’t unusual for the company to audit vessels, especially those under new command. Though their fashion choices were a little mismatched; one of them looked like he was dressed for dinner from an old movie, with a sharp black jacket and crisp white shirt, he was only missing a bow tie. The other looked to be wearing what could only be described

as 'Earth retro', in a sequined spaghetti-strapped top, dark denim trousers, and high heels. They may as well have been wearing Jacobean ruffs and breeches.

"They allowed us to search them, they didn't have any weapons or ID, and they haven't stolen anything. The guy just had these." Demetrius unceremoniously dumped a pile of junk into the Doctor's outstretched hands, including a rusty apple core, a dog-eared notebook, a toy Batmobile, and the sonic screwdriver.

"It's for checking behind sealed covers," the Doctor said, miming unscrewing something in mid-air.

"OK, you're stuck here for now. Looks like you need a change of clothes."

The Doctor looked down at the sodden peak lapels of his black dinner jacket and nodded sadly. "Apparently. So much for dressing up."

Vikander sniffed and narrowed her eyes. Their story seemed equal parts ridiculous and plausible. If they weren't here to steal, and they weren't here as part of a surprise inspection, what *were* they doing out here, hiding in a cargo bay?

"Radiation levels seem to have returned to normal – but I'm taking no chances."

"Ah, you seemed to have had a loose inductor unit," the Doctor said, pointing to some ducting units besides the TARDIS in the corner of the cargo bay. "Hence my jacket—I got sprayed by a blast of coolant. A good thing I spotted it in time or you may have had a serious problem."

Demetrius' eyes narrowed. "Too small a leak for even the *Lysander* to identify and you just happened to be in the right place at the right time?"

"That's about the size of it. Not to worry, I've fixed it. Another win for the old sonic." He tossed the screwdriver in his hands in triumph.

"You were *both* in there?" Demetrius asked, his brows raised quizzically, pointing to the TARDIS.

The Doctor shrugged. "Cutbacks."

"Intimate," Demetrius shot back, clearly unconvinced.

Vikander took a step back and her gaze shifted penetratingly between them and the TARDIS standing silently in the shadows. After a time, she raised her left arm and spoke into her wrist device.

"OK. *Lysander* – open a corridor to Containment One, lock all other entries. No manual override."

"Yes Captain Vikander," the ship's computer answered and the cargo bay doors opened automatically with a loud clang.

"All right you two; follow me. Demetrius, seal this bay off until we've checked these two out." Vikander led them out of the cargo bay, the shift to the brighter light temporarily stinging their eyes. Francis and Demetrius followed.

"Quick thinking there," the Doctor whispered. "Cooper and Palmer?"

"You didn't watch *Twin Peaks*, Doctor?"

"I never spent much time in the 1990s. The TARDIS tends to avoid it for some reason." But I'll add it to my list. Do you know what I don't understand?"

"Why I was the senior auditor?" Maggie asked playfully.

"No, that makes eminent sense. I wouldn't trust me to audit a small-town bakery, let alone a galactic salvage operation. No, no ... why did the TARDIS bring us here? The coordinates were for a planet called Nereus Prime. This ship isn't damaged or in trouble, and from what I could gather from the cargo bay, this is a salvage ship."

"Well, the TARDIS isn't always *that* reliable Doctor."

"Ah, that only makes it more peculiar Maggie. The coordinates were encoded in that Time Lady's message. The TARDIS deliberately shifted us sideways ..."

"It doesn't trust her, then?" Maggie suggested.

“Precisely.” The Doctor raised his voice and turned back to Captain Vikander. “How long before we reach Nereus Prime, Captain? And have you established salvage rights yet?”

Without stopping or looking back, the captain replied, “We’re only a few minutes from the outer marker Mr Palmer.”

“Please, people just call me ‘Doctor.’” He smiled warmly.

The smile was lost on the captain, whose gaze remained forward. “Yeah?! Well not me, Palmer. Right through here,” She ushered them into a sterile room with a sealable chamber, stocked with medical equipment and large viewing window. They entered the chamber, and there was an audible sound of suction as it sealed.

“Since you’ve got coolant all over your fancy outfit, Demetrius will get you some more practical clothes,” Vikander said ushering the Doctor and Maggie into the room.

A loud female voice announced: “Captain, we’ve reached the outer marker.”

“OK, I’m on my way. Aaron, can you make sure these two complete the registration steps?”

“No problem, Cap.”

The Doctor looked at Maggie and smiled thinly. “Nereus Prime - and all is well.”

Vikander emerged onto the flight deck at pace. Thomas and Starveling were as she’d left them. They both turned to face her.

“We’ve halted at the planet’s outer marker, Captain,” Thomas informed her. “Awaiting your instructions.”

“No other vessels detected captain. I think we’re clear,” Starveling glanced back at her display screen. “The *Pericles* gained a little ground on us in the slow burn, but they’re the only other ship that’s even close.”

“Roger that. Let’s drop the beacon,” Vikander said giving the ‘thumbs-up’ to Starveling.

“Deploying beacon.”

Salvage law dictated that a vessel be in ‘serious peril’ and accept an offer of help, or that a contract of salvage be established, which had largely remained the cornerstone of the rules from antiquity all the way to the age of space exploration. The *Lysander* was contracted by the company but were often in active competition with others in the same position, or private salvage crews. In the ‘first past the post’ system, the beacon was a way of establishing the claim and was especially important where no contact could be established, and thus no way existed for the stricken vessel to accept help.

With the beacon deployed, they sent an encoded message to confirm salvage rights, and they would then decrypt the remaining data files on the *Oberon*.

“The beacon is live, Captain,” Starveling announced. “Transmitting now.”

“Roger that. It looks like we’re in business.”

“I’ve been trying to establish contact with the *Oberon* captain. There’s still no response,” Starveling grimaced. “If there’s anyone alive down there, they’re not picking up.”

Maggie sat facing the Doctor on one of the examination tables, dangling her feet over the side and kicking her legs lazily. Sadly, the Doctor’s dinner suit was indeed irreparably damaged by the spray from the inductor leak. They had both been provided with dark blue-grey company-branded crew uniforms and she was surprised at how well hers fit, there was clearly someone aboard who was a similar size and build. A bold ‘AMORB’ logo sat proudly on the left breast. On the left sleeve was a circular logo with a

stylised compass and the word 'Lysander'. She'd pulled her wet hair back into a tie as there didn't seem to be a hairdryer to hand.

The Doctor was severely displeased—whether about the loss of his tuxedo, or else about having to stand around waiting—and she could tell from his pacing that he was still stewing.

"You're going to wear a hole in the floor Doctor."

"I need to know what's going on. If this isn't where we were supposed to be, and if this is a salvage vessel, then a ship of some kind has crashed. Our Time Lord might have been on it." He stopped suddenly. "If it's the wrong Time Lord, then this crew could be blindly putting themselves in real danger."

His mind flashed to the Master's alliances with Sea Devils and Axons and his attempts to become 'master of all matter', to the Rani and her abhorrent experiments, and to Omega still raging in his own private purgatory. Then there was his recent tangle with that new, young upstart, the Waiter, who kidnapped him and imprisoned him on Telos, apparently at the Time Lords' behest¹. He never fitted in when he lived on Gallifrey, but his experiences in space and time with other Time Lords since taking his TARDIS had often been unpleasant, explosive even! And whilst he couldn't simply ignore the call, he couldn't help fearing what waited for them on Nereus Prime.

"My people can be volatile, aeons of civilisation behind them, vast intellects - but very short tempers."

"Huh. So, either trap *or* rescue it could still be dangerous, got it," Maggie said, straightening her back.

"I'm sure it will be fine. But I'd rather see what we were flying into than be stuck here."

The Doctor was interrupted by Demetrius: "OK Cooper, Palmer, we're done here. We can't connect to the personnel database from here to verify your credentials, so you're on restricted access, but other than that you're good to go."

"Finally!" the Doctor exclaimed, clapping his hands together and marching towards the opening door. "Come along, ma'am," he said to Maggie as he passed her, rolling his hand in mock deference.

"You best watch yourself Palmer, or you'll be getting an unfavourable mention in my report," Maggie quipped back with feigned indignance.

"Do you have my screwdriver?" the Doctor asked Demetrius, standing on the threshold.

"You know, manners never hurt anyone," Demetrius passed the silver tube back to the Doctor. "The instrument checks out, no threat detected."

"If I'd wanted to threaten this ship, I could have done it from the cargo bay before you'd even noticed," the Doctor said with quiet malevolence. "And manners once led to the destruction of an the Talaxi tribe on Klaxos-Steeleen. It turns out manners were extremely offensive to the Kaaras-Chor of infinite hunger, and she ate them all."

"Apologies, he's had a rough morning. His humour is an acquired taste," Maggie said interjecting with a friendly smile. "Thanks for the new threads though."

"You're welcome," Demetrius said with a smile. "This suit will mean that you can be located, and monitored, and added to the ship's communications and safety systems."

"Nice to be in the loop," Maggie noted.

"Attention all crew," Captain Vikander's voice announced over the ship's intercom. "We've decrypted the files on the salvage, please report to the crew room for further briefing."

"Ah – good!" the Doctor said with excitement. "Let's see what we've got."

"You mean you don't know already?" Demetrius enquired sardonically.

¹ See *The Doctor Who Project: A Mild Curiosity in a Junkyard*.

The crew had reassembled in the circular space at the end of the corridor from the flight deck when First Officer Demetrius, Maggie and the Doctor entered. There was a low murmur of chatter, and they were arranged more formally in anticipation of the information to come, with Vikander in front with her arms folded behind her back. The Doctor noted that there were ten of them (he and Maggie made twelve).

“OK folks, now that everyone’s here we can begin.” Vikander said stepping forward as the lights dimmed and the large holographic display of the company logo gave way to the briefing file. “The *Oberon* is a deep space research vessel under command of the same Doctor Titania from the transmission we intercepted. Nereus Prime is way off its charted course.” As she swept her finger across the display, a flight chart appeared. “On December twenty-two, the *Oberon*’s main propulsion system went critical, and it ditched on the planet below. From flight telemetry we can see that they were set on this course prior to engine failure, but it is unclear why. All data from the time of impact is either corrupted or was not transmitted back to control. Though they did report a total systems failure.”

She repeated the same motion again and a high-level schematic of the *Oberon* appeared. From what Maggie and the Doctor observed it looked insect-like in shape, like an elongated yellow jacket wasp. The ‘head’ was rounded at the top and pointed towards the bottom and looked to be where the flight controls were located. There was a narrow thorax-like linkage section before it widened into the main research area at the back of the ship. The schematics noted the ion propulsion systems at the rear of the ship, and an Einstein-Rosen drive based in the ship’s core for faster-than-light travel.

“The *Oberon* had one hundred registered crewmembers, from flight crew to scientists, to maintenance staff. She’s a behemoth at over 1,000 meters long. Needless to say, we’re not looking to get it off Nereus, but the job is to salvage as much of the crew, cargo, and equipment as we can.”

“Why does such a large ship have such a small crew?” the Doctor mused.

Vikander pursed her lips at the interruption, and answered briskly: “High-level research needs more specialised staff. And the scale of the experiments mean they take up most of the space.”

“Jolly good. Carry on.”

She shifted her weight and ran a hand across her cheek. “Our first task is to enter the atmosphere close to the calculated impact site here.” She pointed at a red spot illuminated within the digital representation of the planet. “Then we send the *Nemo* down to check it out. If structural integrity isn’t too compromised, we’ll send a team down for an initial assessment.”

She turned to the Doctor and Maggie, loitering at the back with Demetrius. “We stick to protocol; we make sure it’s safe before anyone sets foot on the *Oberon*. Because of the impact and the elapsed time, and also because all the ship’s lifeboats have been deployed, I’m not sure how many of the crew could be alive down there, so we’ll need to establish that first. Questions?”

“These lifeboats ...” Starveling asked, “where did they end up?”

“They touched down on an S3 planetoid two light-years away. The Space Corps is handling them.”

“And any warnings they have won’t be available to this crew,” the Doctor mused under his breath. “The left hand doesn’t know what the right hand is doing.”

“Do you mind speaking up if you have anything to say, Doc—er, *Mister Palmer*?”

“Please excuse my subordinate,” Maggie said, hoping to defuse this rising tension. “These observations are important for me to file my report, after all.”

Peter Quince cleared his throat and tried to get the briefing back on track. “This ‘high-level’ research they were doing, Boss ... any clue what type of research it was?”

“It’s vague. But the company say no research into contagions.”

“Well, I’m reassured,” the old spacedog quipped sarcastically.

“What’s the cut?” Snug asked curtly.

“That’ll be determined by what we can salvage, Mr Snug. And that’s ‘what’s the cut – *Captain.*” She took a step back, “All the details are available on your crew pads. Mr Thomas and the First Officer will take us in. Dismissed.”

The Doctor took a small step backwards and leant against the crew room wall. Maggie followed suit. “Well, I think we’ve found the location of our distress call.”

“Yep, on a huge spacecraft, deep underwater.”

“Which is a little exciting,” the Doctor said.

“That’s not exactly how I’d describe it,” Maggie turned her back to the crew, and asked under her breath, “Do you think whoever sent you the message is alive down there?”

The Doctor’s face clouded with worry. “Perhaps this ‘Nemo’ will provide us with confirmation. Mr Demetrius, what is the ‘Nemo’?”

“It’s a remote DSV. It’ll make the dive to the *Oberon* first, and we’ll be able to see what kind of mess she’s in from here.”

“Ah, how silly of me to miss the reference. ‘Nemo’ after the legendary nineteenth-century fictional submariner!”

“*No* – after the legendary twenty-first century fictional fish,” Demetrius replied as he walked toward the captain.

“What fish?” Maggie asked the Doctor.

“I’d tell you, but it’d spoil the movie. Add that one to *your* list, though you’ll need to wait until 2003,” he replied, patting her on the shoulder.

Chapter Three

The *Lysander* broke through the cloud cover like a giant mechanical sea eagle. They made a controlled entry into the atmosphere at a steady pace, retrorockets and braking system handling the process smoothly, and they were at a safe cruising speed above the surface.

Maggie observed the spectacular scenery from the flight deck, its wide observation windows allowing for panoramic views of the unspoilt and endless oceans sparkling in the sunshine. There was often chaos and madness involved when travelling with the Doctor, but she considered that moments like this made it worth it.

"It's amazing, Doctor. Simply stunning. Do you think that there's life down there?"

"Officially, there's not a sausage," the Doctor said, sensing her disappointment. "This planet is many times larger than what humans would call an 'exoplanet'. On Earth, phosphorus is washed into the oceans by rainwater hitting rocks on exposed land. It depends how much land there is – and the pressure on the sea floor. But stranger things have happened."

"I hope there is," she said with a sigh.

"Be careful what you wish for," the Doctor said with schoolteacher-like disapproval.

They passed over the rolling surface of Nereus Prime, the planet's two moons meaning the tides and swells were extreme. They could see giant waves crashing around the surface as the flight crew carefully monitored their flight path and developing weather and altering their speed and elevation accordingly. Starveling hailed the *Oberon* intermittently without reply.

"Looking at the data they have on the planet. There are two small continents separated by these giant oceans, Doctor. This is where we're heading, nowhere near either of them," She pointed at the red pin on the map.

"We'd better hope we don't have to swim for it!" the Doctor noted.

"No kidding."

Ahead of them at the helm, Thomas and Demetrius sat up in unison. The *Lysander* came to a smooth halt as the propulsion system pointed downward to form a 'four-poster' thrust vectoring system, like that of a Harrier jet. The ocean surface rippled and churned as they hovered above the water line.

"Hover achieved at two hundred meters above surface level, Captain," Thomas said.

"Roger that," Vikander replied. "Mr Quince, we're in position: deploy *Nemo*."

In the operations centre, Quince and Voxx stood a large hatch in the floor of the *Lysander* which opened out into the rolling waves of Nereus Prime. They wore blue and grey safety helmets, with a mounted camera and light on the left side, and they were harnessed to a circuit of insets in the ceiling which allowed them to move around on the track but kept them from being dragged out or knocked over in the gusts. Moth was standing at the controls to a claw release mechanism that lowered the *Nemo* towards the opening, the mandibles at the sides of his mouth twitching.

The *Nemo* was around six feet long and resembled a bright orange shark with pivoting cameras on its front and underside that could provide 360-degree views from beneath the waves. Underneath was a smaller version of the thrust vectoring system employed by the *Lysander*, programmed to close automatically prior to contact with the water.

“OK my boy, make papa proud,” Quince said, patting the DSV’s outer shell.

“Aw, cute,” Voxx teased. “Don’t let the bigger fish pick on you at school.”

The *Nemo* made a double-beeping sound in response and dropped through the opening quickly, until the thrust increased automatically and slowed its descent. A few feet above the ocean the thrust system shut off and retreated through four small apertures that closed before impact. It crashed onto the water’s surface and bobbed like a bath toy for a few seconds before it dived out of sight.

On the flight deck Vikander walked forward and stood between Thomas and Demetrius as the flight controls, “Let’s increase our altitude slightly, gentlemen, whilst we wait for the *Nemo* to do its thing,” She looked to the horizon. “And let’s keep an eye on that ion storm front. If we are going to try and set down, we need to know what’s coming. The storm could cause problems with the propulsion systems and those waves are violent already.”

The thrust increased and the *Lysander* moved steadily upwards, away from the thrashing water below.

As the ship moved away from the water the Doctor felt a sudden pull towards the surface. His head ached and he felt unbalanced, a wave of nausea washed over him.

He recognized the sensation all too well. He felt an invasion of his mind, an unwanted and unheralded psychic connected tugging away at his thoughts, groping for a hold. The feeling was unpleasant and unsettling, but he tried not to fight it off, confident of his own ability to withstand any serious invasion. And after all, he may learn something about his attacker.

In his mind, an image formed that evoked a faded watercolour. It was weak and blurry—downright Impressionist—at first, then gaining clarity. The image was of a woman with pale white skin and vibrant red hair. She was talking to him, but he couldn’t hear what she was saying. Her voice, intense and emotional though it was, was as blurred and out-of-focus as her image.

He concentrated hard, trying to focus on her and trying to tune into her words. Suddenly loud screams echoed in his head, like the cacophonous screech of a ghost train. He winced sharply as her desperate plea bled through loudly: “Help me! Don’t leave me here!”

The operations room was quiet, but the air seemed alive with the electricity of expectation as Voxx and Quince sat side by side at the monitoring interface for the *Nemo*. The display screens were alive with data from the remote DSV and a live picture feed from below the water.

Vikander and Demetrius stood behind them, with the Doctor and Maggie flanking them on either side. Moth stood to the right of Quince so he could see the feed from the *Nemo*’s camera rigs.

The Doctor rubbed his temples slowly, the vision that had forced its way into his head had subsided, but it had left him with a splitting headache. No time seemed to have passed, and his spell had gone unnoticed by the humans around him. He blinked past the residual pain and tried to focus on the displays in front of them.

They saw an eerie picture of the depths below, vast and empty, illuminated in a ghostly hue by the lights on the DSV. Every now and then there was a flicker of movement in the deep, and Maggie half expected a fish or a shark to swim into view, but there seemed to be nothing in the inky void.

"*Nemo's* closing in on the location beacon for the *Oberon* captain, the sonar confirms a large mass below us," Quince informed them. "We're approaching a pressure of over eight tons."

"How deep can the *Nemo* go?" Maggie blurted out before she could help herself.

"This model has been tested up to eleven tons per square inch of pressure. So, we should be OK. I hope."

Before Voxx could say anything witty in response, a large shadow loomed from the depths and the words 'PROXIMITY ALERT' flashed on screen.

"Whoa! Where did she come from?" Quince exclaimed.

The DSV came to an abrupt halt next to the giant, dark superstructure of a vessel before manoeuvring itself along the outside of the long shape. There was the odd external light illuminated, which indicated there was still a power supply, though the inside of the vessel was dark. The lights from the DSV suddenly fell on six large white letters on the hull: 'OBERON'.

"Well, there she is Captain, larger than life!"

"Well done, Mr Quince. Now let's scan the *Oberon* for hull integrity."

"We'll do better than that, Boss," Quince said. "Voxx, cross-reference the schematic data and let's see if we can find an externally accessed data port."

Maggie observed that the images of the hulking spacecraft resembled something like a huge, bulky body of a dragonfly spliced together with a science fiction space station, complete with large panels sprouting from arms that stemmed from its middle, some of which appeared to be missing along with the 'head' she had seen in the briefing schematics. Voxx navigated through the details and diagrams, showing multiple levels holding research laboratories, logistics areas, living spaces, cargo units, and docking areas.

"OK, looking at the currently location reference on the *Oberon's* superstructure – there should be a data port here!" she said after a few minutes of silence, pointing to a circular marker which read 'AIRLOCK 13'. Quince spoke some instructions to the *Nemo* using his headset and it cruised to the location of the airlock.

"These data ports are used for rescue ships, so they can get telemetry data directly from the ship's on-board computers," Quince said as he scanned the screen.

The *Nemo* halted and two small mechanical arms emerged from the sides.

"Knock, knock," he said aloud to himself more than anyone.

"OK, transferring the passcode now," Voxx said, tapping away.

The room hung in silent anticipation once more as the *Nemo* attempted to connect to the *Oberon's* internal system. Maggie became aware she was holding her breath.

There was a sudden bleep from the DSV interface, and a green alert panel displayed the phrase 'CODE ACCEPTED'.

"OK, we're in!" Quince said triumphantly. "Let's see what she has for us."

The Doctor stepped forward as the information from the *Oberon* appeared on the left-hand screen.

"She's missing the solar foils that she uses in deep space; they must have broken off on impact – or on the way through the atmosphere," the Doctor said, processing the information at an incredible

rate. "The Outer Stowage Platform is missing on the starboard side, though the safety systems kicked in and sealed it off, it has taken on some water on the neighbouring compartment."

"There's no way you're reading the data that fast," Vikander said with her eyebrow arched.

"I certainly am," the Doctor said, too lost in taking on new information to be indignant. "I'm an auditor, it's what I do. Isn't that right Cooper?"

"Sure is, Palmer. Are there any signs of the crew, Doctor?"

"Not yet," he replied, focusing on the display screen. "But she's a big ship."

"It looks like the internal data files are corrupted," Voxx said, "I've blocked transmission, just in case there is a virus in the system. But he's right: the starboard side was damaged".

"Of course, I am," the Doctor said sternly. "And the primary propulsion system has gone too. Water taken on to the stern, but the safety features have locked it down. Now I need to get aboard."

"You what?" Vikander asked incredulously. "You'll do no such thing until I say so, Palmer. I will not compromise the safety of this crew." She clenched her fists in anticipation of an argument.

The Doctor softened. "Quite right, Captain Vikander – safety first."

She turned on her heels and left the room without a word.

"That's our captain, Doc Palmer. She's a firecracker," Demetrius said with a nod. "Best you stay on her good side."

Chapter Four

The *Nemo's* successful connection to the *Oberon's* internal systems had yielded some useful information on the state of the vessel. Whilst the crew busied themselves around the *Lysander*, a smaller group had gathered in the captain's briefing room.

"As the data from the *Oberon* confirms, the propulsion systems are gone, detonated after it was pulled into the planet's gravity. We can also confirm, as Mr Palmer suggested, that the OSP was lost to the starboard – as well as the external communications array and one of the mobile servicing systems," Vikander informed the group. "The life support systems in the core of the *Oberon* seem to be in fully working order, though they are currently offline. There is some degradation. Water ingress has occurred in the impact sites to the starboard, stern, and here on the port side. But for the main, she's watertight."

Demetrius, Moth, Starveling and Quince took in the information quietly.

"So, what's the play then Captain?" Demetrius said after a moment.

Vikander moved around the table and perched on the edge, chewing on her lip as she considered. "I think, we can make her buoyant," she said at last. "If we are careful, and patient, I think we can raise her to the surface. Once she's topside, it'll be easier to send crews in in shifts to move the salvage from the *Lysander's* floating platform."

"And how will you make her buoyant?" asked the Doctor, his arms folded behind his back.

"We have a resin that we can pump into the water filled compartments on the *Oberon*, we then pump in a catalyst compound that acts on the resin to create a buoyant foam," Quince answered. "The active foam displaces the flooded water and takes her to the surface. Salvage at sea is nothing new to us."

Vikander added, "Though we've never tried it on something of this size."

"You said that she's mostly watertight and that the life-support systems are offline. Does that mean that there's no oxygen to the rest of the ship?"

"O2 levels are currently reading critically low to non-existent for the areas we have data for," Vikander said. "So, we'll get a small team aboard and turn the systems back on."

"We have a number of robotic pontoons that can keep her level," Quince finished.

There was the odd shake of the head from the crewmembers. The Doctor remained motionless, staring at the images of the *Oberon*.

"Good, if we're all in agreement then, we'll prep the dive team." Vikander clapped. "Let's raise the *Oberon*."

The team filed out of the room and into the crew room, chatting among themselves and Vikander paused a moment, nodded to Maggie and the Doctor, and left.

“What’s bothering you?”

“It might be nothing, but it’s the oxygen level,” the Doctor said.

“But Vikander said that there isn’t any.”

“Exactly. That’s what’s bothering me. If the data from the *Oberon* is correct, then the life-support systems could still function and only these compartments flooded. So, if the ship isn’t entirely flooded, and the life-support works, who turned it off?”

“And just as importantly – where did all the oxygen go?” Maggie asked.

In the main operations room, the dive team had assembled and completed the last round of equipment and comms checks. Vikander had agreed that Demetrius, Francis, Voxx, Quince and Moth would make the first trip down.

“I really think I should join them,” the Doctor protested. “I’m perfectly capable.”

“Oh? And exactly what use are your auditing skills?” Vikander snapped.

“I’ve got many other attributes. I can help get the systems back online.”

“I’ll let you know,” Vikander simpered. “Besides, Voxx is good with tech.”

The Doctor thought back to that unsettling vision, the blurry woman who might be a Time Lord in need of his help. “What if I told you ... there was someone important, close to me? Someone who needed my help, a kind of help your people would be incapable of providing?”

“And how do you know about this important person? Are you telepathic?”

The Doctor scowled at the sneering Vikander. “Never mind.”

They moved into a large bay where a giant motorised arm moved overhead with a manned submersible craft in its grip. Moth stood by the controls watching intently as Botham lowered the vehicle towards the hatch as it opened. The water below churned as the thrusters held the *Lysander* hovering just a few feet above the ocean.

“Let’s make this a smooth trip Mr Quince,” Vikander said from the flight deck of the *Lysander*. “No unnecessary risks please.”

“Boss, you know me. Everything by the book,” Quince said with a smirk.

“Yeah, but I’m not sure *which* book.”

The *Marlin* dived into the depths steadily and as its external spotlights flickered on in front, it set out on its short journey to the *Oberon* through the empty depths of Nereus Prime.

“There’s nothing down here apart from debris from the crash. This place is a tomb.” Voxx looked out of the *Marlin* and into the vast darkness, her voice tinged with a quiet awe.

“I hope not,” Demetrius said.

The immense dark form of the *Oberon* suddenly sprang from the murk, a lone object lying in wait in the ocean, the occasional inner light giving a spectral glow. Its sheer size was something to behold. Voxx tried to remember if she’d ever been this close to a vessel as large as they passed by observation decks, external bay doors, various antennae and measuring devices and window with their ghost-lights. As she watched and drank in the phantom in the depths her excitement started to subside into an uneasy feeling, a knot in the pit of her stomach that Voxx didn’t like.

The orange shark-like form of the *Nemo* swam into view.

“The *Nemo* is going to guide us in,” Quince said. “Voxx, can you lock onto the *Nemo*’s signal please?”

“I sure can, boss,” Voxx replied, mimicking his voice.

The *Nemo* led and the sub followed to the *Oberon's* starboard side. The large white letters loomed large as they passed them. Voxx leant round to stare as they passed.

There in the darkness she felt a prickle of electricity. Just outside her focus, something moved! A cold ripple shot up her spine and she jumped with alarm and tried to validate if she had really seen – a dark shape moving across a window. Someone moving inside the ship! Watching them – following them!

“Are you OK there Voxx?” Demetrius asked, making her jump again. “You’re not going to be sick, are you?”

“Whoa, whoa – no one is blowing chunks inside my sub!” Quince declared.

“Relax Pete – sir,” she assured them. “I’m fine, I’ve just never seen anything like her.” She nodded to the *Oberon*, forcing a smile despite her cold shiver.

“Your heart rate spiked, though,” Moth informed her, tapping a rectangular display on the left arm of his suit where could see the dive teams vitals.

“I’m fine. Honestly, thanks Moth,”

She wasn’t sure what to say, wary of coming across as another spooked kid. She hadn’t been with the team long and didn’t want them to think badly of her. She fixed her gaze on the *Oberon* again but saw nothing other than its ghostly black shell.

“She’s something all right,” Quince agreed to her relief.

“There’s our ingress point,” Voxx said.

“OK. Who’s up for a swim?” Quince said cheerily.

“In the crushing depths of a watery abyss? Who could resist?!” Demetrius said. “All right team – suit up.”

Demetrius, Voxx, Moth, and Francis moved to the stern, clicking into place their dive helmets and pressurising their dive suits.

“Cabin sealed,” Quince said over their helmet communicators. “Ready for depressurisation?”

Demetrius looked at each member of the team individually, who in turn gave a ‘thumbs up’ signal.

“Roger that, depressurisation in three – two – one.”

Water flooded in through a large dive hatch. In moments it had progressed to their waists, then their shoulders, until they were completely submerged.

The dive hatch opened, and they each swam out into the cold ocean the short distance to the airlock controls. At this depth, the environment seemed in a state of perpetual night. Their helmet-mounted lights bobbed through the water like angler fish.

The data spike once again shot from the right claw arm on the outside of the *Nemo* and it was inserted into a round data port next to the airlock.

The data port turned anticlockwise, and three small lights sprang into life on the control panel, first red then green. The airlock door whooshed open suddenly and a black object shot out toward Demetrius before he had time to react.

“WHAT THE F-?!” Demetrius shouted, clawing it away from his helmet and pushing himself free.

The black outline became clear in the helmet lights: the partially decomposed skull of the body wearing crew fatigues, the name ‘Arden’ embroidered on the right breast.

“Damn! Sorry, team.” Demetrius held up an apologetic hand. “My bad.”

The dive team watched silently as Arden’s body passed them.

“Can we identify the body?” Vikander’s voice barked in their communicator ears.

“The name badge said ‘Arden’, I think,” Demetrius said.

“Roger that. Lieutenant junior grade Carter Arden was a lab technician,” Starveling confirmed over the open line.

“OK team let’s keep moving,” Demetrius motioned towards the open airlock, and they filed inside. Demetrius clicked the button to close the airlock with his thumb. The door whooshed closed and

moments later the airlock emptied. They all remained in their sodden pressure suits with their helmets on.

Voxx reached the door controls first. "The locking mechanism seems to be online on emergency power."

"Great, let's open her up," Demetrius prompted.

Voxx held her breath and closed her eyes, not sure why, before pressing the door control. With a loud clicking and whirring, the door unlocked and separated into the wall cavity.

As the team moved past her into the *Oberon*, Demetrius paused next to her and placed his hand on her shoulder blade. "Are you sure you're OK Voxx?"

"I'm fine sir. I just think it's an inner ear thing," she lied.

They moved into the ship's interior in silence, apart from the sounds of their breathing through their pressure suits. There was no other movement inside the ship, their flashlight beams casting around like searchlights in a dark sky. In the current light, it was difficult to pick details, but the corridor looked to have a functional design, which made sense given that led to a stowage area. There were large round vents in the ceiling used as fans for the oxygen supply, currently sitting idle. At the sides, sealed units ran cables for power and fibre connections. Every few meters there were large screens that in the dark only displayed their spectral reflections.

"Captain, are you able to track us?" Demetrius asked over the comms line.

After a short delay Vikander's voice came back, fainter than before. "Yes, we can see you. And we are receiving data from your suits."

"There should be a terminal ahead of you in about ten meters. From there you should be able to access the systems and give yourselves some light."

"Copy that, Quince," Demetrius replied.

"Some light would be nice," Francis said. "It's creepy in here. Right Voxx?"

"Not any creepier than you are." She grinned, trying to sound more confident than she felt.

After a few meters Demetrius signalled them to halt and his helmet light fell on the terminal.

"Transmitting passcode. There should be an emergency access panel underneath," Vikander informed them.

The code was transferred to the small on-board computer in Demetrius' suit, and he duly typed in the six-digit code: 2-8-0-1-1-2.

The terminal sparked into life, illuminating his broadly smiling face. "We're in, Captain. Confirm, we have power, and life support."

He clicked through to the reboot routine and tapped the icon.

"Let there be light!" he exclaimed.

The humming of power surged through the dormant ship and the bright interior lights flickered into life around them. The screens on the walls displayed the instantly recognisable icon of their company. His smile turned to confusion as he looked at the faces of his team, fixed behind him.

He turned around to see the dried bloody handprint next to the control panels and the smear that led to the long-dried puddle next to where he was standing.

Chapter Five

The smiling face of a woman in her forties appeared on the wall-mounted display screens. The face had well defined cheekbones and jawline and was pristinely presented with carefully applied make-up, sculpted dark brown eyebrows above deep brown eyes and every inch of her dark shoulder length wavy hair carefully in place. She wore a company branded uniform with a bright white lab coat over the top. The presentable, marketable face of science.

“My name is Doctor Titania, and I want to welcome you aboard the Oberon. The Oberon is a state-of-the-art research vessel that we will be calling home for the duration of the programme.”

As the recording continued, the dive team tried to take in their surroundings. Next to the blood smears lay a discarded volt gun—not primarily intended to be a weapon, but the dried blood everywhere suggested it had been used as one. Over their heads, a burn mark scorched the ceiling. The corridor itself was clear: no bodies, no other signs of struggle.

“Captain, are you seeing this?” Demetrius asked, panning his helmet camera across the scene.

“Copy that Demetrius, we see it.”

“What in the world happened here?” Francis mused aloud, his eyes wide.

Demetrius nudged the volt gun with his right boot. He traced its line of fire from the ceiling to the floor where a boot print had dried next to the blood pool.

“Someone discharged this volt gun—a non-lethal shot normally, but they must have cranked up the setting and fired it point-blank. Looking at the scorch mark, they were trying to make sure their target wasn’t getting up in a hurry.”

On board the *Lysander*, the Doctor and Maggie watched quietly as the video feed illuminated the blood trails next to the computer panels.

“Help me,” a voice whispered unexpectedly in the Doctor’s mind, startling him.

“You need to be very careful down there,” the Doctor said calmly.

“I had thought of that, Mr Palmer, and I agree,” Vikander snapped. “Can you see any of the crew?”

There was a pause as the audio link fell silent, and everyone on the flight deck craned forward in anticipation of the reply. But they heard nothing but static.

Finally, startlingly, Demetrius’ voice boomed back: “No Captain. No signs of anyone.”

“Life support is online now captain. We have oxygen.”
They could hear the background noise from ceiling fans whirring overhead.

Below them on the *Oberon*, with a whooshing sound the air pumped from the vents, blowing a fine dust from the ducting system outwards. The ship creaked as air filled the space again.

Outside in the *Marlin*, Quince sat watching as lights erupted all over the *Oberon*, as if its hulking body was being resuscitated, breathing new life. He manoeuvred the sub around carefully, trying to spot oxygen leaks.

“The hull looks OK this side. I’ll do a lap and report.”

“Roger that Mr Quince. Try and locate a place to dock.”

“No sweat,” Quince replied as the *Marlin* whirred around to the ship’s forward side.

“Mr Thomas is going to bring us down and we’ll prepare to deploy the platform,” Vikander said over the open channel. “I’ll prep the crew for water landing, and we’ll show the auditors our team in action.”

“Roger that boss. Knock ‘em dead,” Quince replied.

“So, the platform floats on the surface of the water like a raft, and the *Lysander* sits on top,” the Doctor confirmed with Starveling, as more of statement than a question, looking out the flight deck portholes.

From here the floating platform resembled the deck of an aircraft carrier whose bow had sunk beneath the water line.

“That’s right,” Starveling replied with a smile. “It allows us to stay buoyant on the surface while we try and move back and forth from the salvage. It’s the most efficient way.”

“How does the platform stay rigid while you need it, and then fold away?” Maggie asked from beside Thomas.

“It’s made from a nanomaterial which solidifies when you pass a low frequency current through it.” Starveling indicated the relevant schematic, tapping two cylindrical shapes on its outer edge. “These buoyancy aids on the outer edges then inflate.”

The *Lysander* rolled a little with the swell of the waves underneath them and the Doctor and Maggie steadied themselves.

“Although, with the conditions here on Nereus, we might need to find our sea-legs,” Starveling chuckled.

“There’s a storm front too, we’ve been keeping an eye on it, but our data suggests that the planet’s weather conditions are *changeable* at best,” Thomas said, scratching his beard.

“After the dive team assess of the area around the flooded compartments, we send drones down with the equipment needed to pump those chambers full of our resin and catalyst mixture. Then up she comes – hopefully.”

“Thank you, Miss Starveling,” the Doctor said sincerely. “That was most educational.”

“You’re welcome.”

The Doctor stepped back and began to pace the flight deck slowly, in thought. Maggie joined him and leaned in as she tried to read him.

“You’re not going to sneak down there?” she whispered, trying to catch his gaze.

"We need to find a way on to the *Oberon*. I felt that Time Lord down there." He tapped his forehead. "She tried to contact me. I couldn't make out her message, but ..."

"Could that Time Lord have got away from the *Oberon* before it crashed? In the lifeboats maybe, or could she be somewhere else on Nereus?"

"It's always possible." The Doctor looked out at the roiling seas. "Though she'd be a bit soggy to say the least."

"Our dedicated facilities are here to help us to push the boundaries of modern science for the betterment of galactic society," Doctor Titania's recorded voice continued. The ship's system restart had automatically triggered this welcome package from the start of its voyage. *"We have the latest advances in equipment and automation at our fingertips..."*

"When we reach the main computer, I want to shut her up," Demetrius said, his frustrated exhalation fogging his helmet. Without thinking, he unclasped it and removed it.

"Once we're inside the main computer we can connect all the *Oberon's* functions to the *Lysander*," Voxx said from behind, removing her own helmet. "Once we have control, we can put whatever you like on the TV."

"Control? You think you're in control?" a voice whispered in her right ear with a humourless laugh.

"WHAT?" Voxx said, wheeling around to face Francis who was walking directly behind her. "What did you say to me?"

Francis screwed up his face in confusion, his forehead lining to accompany an awkward smile, and he shrugged in response. "I didn't say anything. What are you talking about?"

"You did, you whispered something at me you creep!" Voxx angrily prodded him in the chest. She was seven inches shorter than Francis, but her intense anger took him aback.

"I swear, I didn't say a thing, Voxx! Not a word."

"OK, OK you two, break it up." Demetrius made a calming motion.

"I don't like this place either Voxx, but don't go making me crazy."

"We have the very latest in controlled lab environments." Doctor Titania smiled from the nearest screen. *"Helping us to explore farther and create better than ever before."*

Voxx tried to relax her posture and take the heat out of her simmering temper.

"OK kids let's get moving," Demetrius said waving them onwards.

Francis moved off in front and Moth followed behind with Voxx, then Demetrius bringing up the rear.

"She doesn't like you much Frankie," Moth said with a wry smile.

"No kidding," Francis chuckled with relief.

They continued in silence, their movements accompanied by the monotonous soundtrack of breathing, Titania's disembodied spiel, and the occasional 'chirrup' from the Canary Francis held. Some of the damaged lighting flickered, giving the ambient effect of silent lightning.

Demetrius checked their position; they were only four meters away from a terminus. Five possible routes led from it. "We're turning right ahead, team." Demetrius tapped his removed helmet anxiously. "Francis, what's our air quality like up ahead?"

"The Canary confirms it's good enough to breathe."

"Great, any signs of ..." He trailed off as he heard a unfamiliar song creeping towards him from somewhere behind, melodic tentacles grasping at him. A piano played with a haunting echo, its notes distorted and extended.

“Breathing. Breathing the fall-out in, out in, out in, out in...” a female voice called from the ether. He turned, but there was no one, just the flickering lights back down the corridor. The screen was playing a melody that he recognised as a corporate jingle, with which this song had merged before stopped. There was no sound left but his breathing—just as the eerie woman had sung.

“Chief?” Francis’ voice intruded. “Any signs of what?”

Demetrius closed his eyes, exhaling in a slow, deliberate fashion and again tapping the visor of his helmet wondering at the wisdom of removing it. “Contaminants. Are there any signs of airborne contamination?”

“No, nothing so far.”

“I’ll be happy when we can get these pressure suits off, it’s stiflingly hot,” Demetrius said.

The route led to the main operations centre, which held workstations and computer terminals, as well as linkups to the computer core for the vast amounts of data the *Oberon* collected. The room was in total darkness, save the lights from the server room visible through a long windowpane blinking red, green, yellow in a disorganised display.

“This room is on a separate backup,” Voxx observed. “The systems are on idle, but once we boot up, we should have full access to the *Oberon*.”

She made her way inside the room and searched for a terminal, settling on one with a clear desk space beside. She eased the chair out of the way and angled the monitor upward. It wasn’t easy to sit in the suit and she laid her helmet on the desk. Her left foot bumped something lightly, and she swept it aside with her boot, focused on the screen which lit up in response to her touch.

“*Lysander*, can I get a passcode for the network please?”

“Roger that Voxx...,” Starveling answered back over the radio. “The code you need is x-ray-seven-four-one-nine-six-three-whiskey.”

“Copy that Starveling. Thanks.” Voxx clicked through the options on screen and stood back in triumph. “There we go. We’re in charge.”

The lights in the room flickered on along with the remaining terminals, now all displaying the oddly reassuring company icon.

“You know, I’d have expected to find more of this ship’s crewmembers than poor Mr Arden,” Voxx squinted at the screen. “I wonder what happened to the rest of them?”

“There’s one,” Francis stepped back suddenly.

Slumped on the floor was the body of a man with neatly cropped blond hair. Voxx recoiled, realising she had unthinkingly brushed away his left arm to get to the workstation. In the darkness it looked no different than a loose cable.

Demetrius knelt by the body, carefully lifting his head. The man’s eyes were closed and looked as if he had only died recently, the lack of oxygen in the *Oberon* halting its decomposition process. The man had a well-maintained beard the same blond colour as his hair, and Demetrius guessed this man was about his age. He had looked after himself in life too, with defined muscle structure and broad shoulders.

“We have another crew member *Lysander*. The name badge says ‘Larsson,’” Demetrius prodded the dead man’s uniform with his index finger. “He’s wearing a compression suit, like he was about to put on a space suit, or he’d just taken one off.”

“Copy that, Demetrius,” Starveling said. “First Lieutenant Erik Larsson, 42, head of security.”

“Any idea of how he died?” Vikander interjected.

Demetrius moved the lifeless head gently. “Looks like he was shot with a volt-gun. There’s some scorching of the chest. And he looks like he had a head injury.”

“Could that be the same volt-gun we saw on the way in?” Voxx pondered, eyeing the corpse carefully. “If so, he walked pretty far with a burnt chest and bashed skull.”

Demetrius looked down at Larsson’s right hand, clamped around a heavy monkey-wrench, covered in blood—as were his arm and sleeve.

“Erm, he might have bashed in his own skull, Captain.”

“What?! Why the hell would someone do that?” Vikander said.

“No clue. I’m just calling it as I see it.”

“We need to know what went on down there,” the Doctor’s voice cut in. “Access the *Oberon’s* data files, see if you can find additional logs, reports – anything.”

“Mr Palmer, this frequency is for operational crew only,” the captain snapped.

Compelled inexplicably to comply with this uppity auditor, Voxx carefully stepped over the body and returned to the workstation. Soon she had accessed the internal systems.

“There is a mess of corrupted data in here. And there are definite gaps, in my opinion someone has been dumping files.”

“Deliberate sabotage?” the Doctor asked, oblivious to Captain Vikander’s wrath.

“Well, I can’t say for sure, but yes. I think so. Let’s see how thorough they were.”

Voxx searched the deleted files and found some entries only soft-deleted. “Looks like they ran out of time on these ones. Let’s see what they were trying to hide.”

The files seemed to be ship’s logs committed by Doctor Titania herself. Voxx clicked on one.

“We have continued to push ahead with Morpheus. The project is a fascinating labyrinth of questions and discovery. The subject is like nothing I have ever seen before and is far more complex than we gave credit. This could be a pivotal moment in our understanding of life in the universe, and we must be cautious, but I cannot wait to see where it leads us.”

Titania’s face radiated positivity, her enthusiasm shining past her crafted professional veneer. Whatever ‘Morpheus’ was, it was exciting.

“The entry looks like it is from roughly the mid-point of the *Oberon’s* journey. But there is no reference to ‘Morpheus’ on the project list, manifest, or schedule,” Demetrius pondered.

“Send me what you have,” Starveling’s voice instructed. “I’ll try and piece them together and clean up the degraded data. The *Lysander* may be better able to cut through the fog.”

Voxx had no sooner executed this command when the *Oberon’s* computer suddenly announced: “Outer Airlock open. Inner airlock override. Warning. Inner airlock opening.”

“Airlock what?!” Demetrius shouted. “Voxx?”

“It’s not me! I didn’t do anything!” she replied, her eyes wide as she searched the system. “It’s the airlock that we entered through – but I can’t access the control.”

“Quince?” Demetrius asked over the radio.

“Not me man! I’m just completing my circuit of the *Oberon*,” Quince’s voice replied.

“Moth, Francis – get to the manual controls now! Stop that door from opening!”

Francis nodded and immediately took off with Moth for the airlock.

“Voxx, you have to make sure that door doesn’t open – we’re too far down,” he implored.

“Boss, I’m trying,” she said, sweat beading on her brow as the override countdown ticked down. “None of the door controls are responding.”

Chapter Six

Francis and Moth raced back to the airlock at a furious pace, with Moth taking the lead due to his superior muscle structure. Running in the suits wasn't easy, but nor was waiting for the crushing waters of Nereus Prime to smash through the open airlock.

"Guys, we have no access to door controls. It looks like a manual override. You have three minutes to get there and stop it!" Demetrius sounded desperat.

Francis' lungs burnt with the exertion and his legs started to feel heavy, but he pushed on to keep pace with Moth, he heaved his breath in and out as he pumped his arms. As they entered the service corridor from the terminus, he thought he caught sight of something moving, dark and fast against the bright white interior.

He turned to catch a better look, but whatever it was, it was gone. Turning back, he collided with the wall to the left, the impact knocking him clean on his back. Moth half-turned, but Francis wheezed "No – keep going, I'm OK!" from the ground, waving him on with effort.

Francis looked back in the direction of the shadow he had seen.

Nothing.

Nothing except the huge crack in his helmet.

Moth continued powering towards the airlock, trying to regulate his breathing as best he could. He soon reached the functional corridor of blinking lights, passed the bloody control desk and its accompanying stain on the floor. He avoided tripping on the volt-gun still lying on the floor.

"Almost, there!"

"You can do this Moth," Demetrius said.

He could see the airlock and read its stencilled lettering: 'OSP 1'. The door control flashed red and orange.

"Thirty seconds!" Voxx's voice sounded strained.

"I've got it!"

Moth hit the brakes as best he could, slamming his shoulder against the airlock. The control panel it displayed two options: 'CANCEL' and 'OVERRIDE LOCK' beside the override countdown clock.

He pushed 'CANCEL', but the interface didn't respond. Frustrated, he hit the button again, this time with two fingers. No response.

"It's not responding," He sounded calmer than the situation merited. He hit the 'CANCEL' button with his entire palm – hard.

"Airlock override cancelled," the *Oberon's* automated voice said with nine-point-four seconds remaining on the countdown clock.

"YES MOTH!" Demetrius shouted over the radio.

"Never any doubt," he sighed. He slid down the wall and slumped on the floor.

"Thank you!" Francis said from his position on the floor, smiling in relief. He looked up to see a figure walking away. From the back the figure looked female.

"Erm, excuse me, ma'am." He climbed to his feet gingerly as she passed. "Ma'am, are you OK?"

In the operations centre, Voxx tapped away at the workstation. Her compression suit made her uncomfortable and more sweat was soaking her temples.

"Someone engaged that override from inside the ship. I'm trying to close off the manual controls and route the functions through this terminal. I'm purging the airlock again."

The process ran, closing the outer door and pushing the seawater back out of the chamber.

"Moth, did you see anyone?" Demetrius asked.

"No one," he said with his eyes closed as he sat on the floor, trying to regain his breath.

Suddenly a shadow fell across his face. "That's not entirely true," a male voice said.

"So, who – sorry what the hell are you?" Demetrius asked furiously, a vein protruding from his left temple. "And why are you trying to kill us?"

"My name is Puck. I am an android attendant assigned to assist in the functions of the *Oberon*."

Puck was approximately 1.64 meters high, with a squat body, broad shoulders, and powerful looking arms. His rounded head and hands were silver, but the rest of his bodywork was black and white to give the appearance of a small, powerlifting butler. His eyes were yellow and illuminated slightly, but he had no discernible mouth. A white company logo was embossed on the left side of his chest.

"And does this 'assistance' involve trying to drown us?" Demetrius asked, his blood boiling.

The android paused for a moment, tilting his head to one side. "I'm sorry, I'm not sure I understand."

"The airlock! You were trying to open the airlock."

"I am sorry, I was merely carrying out the last command given to me before I went offline. I hadn't realised you were aboard."

"Oh, you hadn't huh?"

"No sir."

Voxx turned from the screen displaying the *Oberon's* asset list. "Puck is listed on the database. He was assigned to Doctor Titania."

Moth stood near the door, his arms folded, scowling at Puck. He hadn't appreciated being surprised near the airlock, and the noise he'd let out had led to a relentless teasing from Quince over the radio.

“Is one of those jobs skulking around in the dark?”

“Ah, you are Coleopterran. I am sorry for startling you; it wasn’t my intention,” Puck replied with a slight bow.

“Impressive, Puck. Not a lot of people recognise Moth’s species, he is quite rare around here,” Demetrius observed.

“I have an extensive database of peoples and planets from the known galaxy and have had two hundred and fourteen updates provided by Doctor Titania herself,” Puck replied courteously. “It was a necessary part of my role in supporting the *Oberon*’s research.”

“Which was?” Demetrius asked.

“Was what?” Puck said, tilting his head again.

“I mean what kind of research were they doing here?”

“I’m afraid I cannot tell you that. You don’t have the required security clearances.” Puck regarded Demetrius silently, as if measuring his reaction.

“Is that right?” the first officer exhaled, exasperated, and rubbed the back of his head. “What *can* you tell us, Puck?”

“I can tell you that the *Oberon* ran into trouble and was moved off course by someone not listed amongst the ship’s crew.”

“A stowaway?” Demetrius’ thoughts turned to those two suspicious auditors aboard the *Lysander*.

Puck stiffly nodded. “Someone also sabotaged the engines, leading to a critical reaction and the crash. I suspect this unlisted individual, but this is mere conjecture based on available data.”

“So you blame the mystery stowaway. That someone couldn’t have been *you* Puck?” Demetrius asked pointedly.

“No sir. It could not.”

“Are any of the crew still alive down here, Puck?”

“No sir. They are not.”

Demetrius sighed and put his hands behind his back, considering the information—or lack of information—provided by the robot. After a moment he clapped his gloved hands together.

“We need to check the locations on the ship with water ingress, we’ll mark any position where the damage is too great for the drones to start pumping as we make this hulk buoyant. Moth, you take the stern with Francis. Voxx and I will head to the bow, and we’ll see if we can get any information from the flight deck whilst we’re there. We’ll meet back on the port side.” Demetrius paused, looking around. “Hey, where is Francis?”

Francis moved warily after the woman. Her light brown, waist-length hair hung loosely, swaying hypnotically as she walked. It was slightly tousled at the top like she had been sleeping. Francis couldn’t place her outfit in the poor light, but it wasn’t a crew uniform. He found it difficult to see directly in front because of the large fracture line in his helmet. He disconnected the oxygen supply and removed it.

The corridor had a polished white sheen. Most of the doors were closed and marked with numbers. They passed a shared kitchen space with padded booths. A pair of upturned potted plants reached out to him like long green arms. Some of the cupboards were open, with pots and cups on the floor next to the kitchen island.

In the light from the kitchen, he finally realised that the woman was wearing pyjamas – a medium-length night dress and shorts, and no footwear. He light-pink skin stood out against the white interior.

He suddenly recognised her, and the shock was so great he dropped his helmet. “Dinah? Dinah, is that you?”

She paused and turned slightly, her chin parallel with her left shoulder, and smiled shyly. She dropped her head and her hair fell over her face. She turned back and continued to walk.

“Dinah, what are you doing down here?” Francis pressed. “I didn’t know you were assigned to the *Oberon*.”

She continued walking and he quickly followed, trying to make up the ground between them without appearing too excited.

“It’s been so long – I – I can’t believe you are here. Are you OK? Are you hurt?”

He was a meter or so away from her when he heard piano music, a melody creeping into the space between them from somewhere elusive, whilst a woman sang: “*Outside... Gets inside... Through her skin...*”

Francis spun in a slow circle to pinpoint the direction of the music, but it seemed to be coming from nowhere and everywhere all at once. He wasn’t sure if he was imagining it, but it wasn’t a song he knew, so how could it be from his imagination? His head swam.

When he turned around, the gap between himself and the woman had widened again, she must’ve been moving faster than he thought. The piano played somewhere out of reach, and he could smell morning coffee and warm croissants.

“Dinah - wait!” he called after her, tired but trying to pick up the pace.

She slowed, and for the first time she turned to face him directly. She smiled at him and held out her arms. There was a light coming through the window from the garden that illuminated the left side of her face. Bathed in the bright dawn she stood waiting for him.

“I can’t believe you’re here!” he beamed. “It’s so good to see you.”

He quickened his pace towards her, he felt electrified, alive – elated, his sense of reason had left him, he was just so happy to see her here – *alive!*

“*We’ve lost our chance...*” The female vocal returned in his ears.

Alive! Why, was he surprised to see her alive? Alive with the smell of coffee and breakfast. Alive and standing there in the first light of morning. And why was that word repeating in his head? *‘Alive’*.

“*We’re the first and last...*”

The last time. That’s what this was. It was the last time he’d seen her alive, in their kitchen, the morning before she’d shipped out on her last rotation. The day before the leak, and the explosion. The day before she died.

“Dinah. I don’t know how I forgot.”

He took a step forward.

“I don’t know how I couldn’t remember.”

He walked forward through the open door.

“I’d tried to forget. That you were dead.”

Her smile turned more sinister. She shrugged and held out her arms to him.

“If only we’d had more time,” he said ruefully.

He stepped forward and his elation suddenly plummeted into dread as he felt his body falling forward, the fog in his mind lifting as he realised that the ground beneath him was gone. His heart leapt in horror as he fell down the empty elevator shaft.

Dinah was gone.

Chapter Seven

“We should be able to locate Francis based on the transmitter in his pressure suit,” Vikander said from the flight deck of the *Lysander*, pacing anxiously. “Who last had eyes on him?”

“He was on the floor in the terminus where he fell, he said he just wanted to catch his breath,” Moth informed her as he walked alongside Demetrius.

“He wasn’t injured?” Demetrius asked.

“He didn’t appear so.”

Demetrius and Moth reached the terminus, its bright lights and white walls dazzling compared to the arteries leading towards it. There was no sign of Francis.

“He was over here?” Demetrius pointed to the wall Francis had collided with. Moth nodded in response.

Demetrius crouched down and searched the floor. There were small fragments from Francis’ helmet visor nearby.

“Francis, do you copy?” Demetrius asked over the radio link. There was no response.

“We have a hit on his suit transmitter,” Vikander said. “Take the route that leads off to the port side.”

“Roger that.” Demetrius jumped to his feet and ran to the entry point. Moth ran after him.

On the flight deck, the Doctor paced with his hand to his mouth, simmering with frustration. He pondered the events that had unfolded since the dive team boarded the *Oberon*: the bodies in the airlock and the operations centre, the blood stains in the corridor, the airlock override, the android, and now the missing member of the salvage team.

He wrestled with the facts, trying to piece together a pattern, but felt like a passenger, a voyeur, watching as events unfolded, powerless to intervene.

He winced in pain as the face of the red-haired woman flashed in his mind again.

“*Help me, Doctor! I’m trapped.*” The woman’s voice seeped into his thoughts, almost like an ‘earworm’ song he once listened to.

He struggled to see her features clearly, see anything of a Time Lord he recognised. But then she said something else—not her own words, but William Shakespeare’s: “*Out of this wood do not desire to go.*”

“Doctor, are you OK?” Maggie asked. “I can hear your teeth grinding from here.”

“*A Midsummer Night’s Dream, Act Three, Scene One...*” He shook away the vision and focused on Maggie. “The Time Lord reached out to me again. Something happened on the *Oberon*, something is *still* happening – but from here I can’t see what it is.” He suddenly sprang forward, jolted into action: “Captain Vikander, I really think you need to let my associate and I board the *Oberon* ourselves. We can assist your crew.”

“No. I won’t reconsider,” Vikander said without looking away from the display screens.

“There is no reading from Francis apart from his location. You know what that implies, and I know it too.” The Doctor’s voice lowered as he pointed to the screen. “Something is wrong down there. At least bring them back up until we can find out what it is.”

She opened her mouth to answer, but the Demetrius cut her off: “Captain, we’ve found his helmet. It’s on the floor in what looks like a kitchen area.”

“And Francis?” she asked.

“No sign, Captain.”

Starveling frowned at the screen and turned to the captain. “That ion storm front has swung around and it’s heading our way Captain – fast. The computer predicts it’ll be violent, but brief.”

“Goddammit, not now.” Vikander put her hand to her head and sighed.

“In the next ten to fifteen minutes it’s going to get rough from the sea or the air around here.”

The flight deck blurred around the Doctor as the woman’s voice echoed. “*Please Doctor!*” He tried to blink it away. “*There sleeps Titania some time of the night; Lulled in these flowers with dances and delight; And there the snake throws her enamelled skin, Weed wide enough to wrap a fairy in.*”

The Doctor murmured to himself a riposte from the play: “You spotted snakes with double tongue.” He stepped to Vikander’s side and tried to soften his manner. “Captain, we need to pull them out. Now.”

Vikander turned to him calmly. “The *Oberon* will be fine Doctor, we’re the ones in danger if we don’t pull back. There isn’t enough time to get them up and the *Lysander* clear of the weather.”

“I’m surprised a starship can’t handle bad weather,” Maggie admitted.

“Deep space vessels aren’t submarines. If it gets rough out here, we might need to pull clear of the water.”

“Don’t leave your team without our help—” the Doctor began.

He was interrupted by Demetrius, on the comm-link: “Captain, I’m sorry, but we’ve found Francis.”

On the *Oberon*, Demetrius and Moth pointed the torches down the exposed elevator shaft. Their beams fell on the body at almost the same time. It was crumpled and twisted, face down at bottom of the shaft. Demetrius inhaled sharply and shook his head.

“Oh kid. I’m sorry.” He took a step back. “Captain. I’m sorry, but we’ve found Francis. I’m afraid it’s not good.”

“He’s dead?” Vikander’s voice was quiet and flat.

“I’m afraid so. He looks to have fallen down an open elevator shaft. No life signs from his suit.”

Vikander thumped the interface in front of her in silence, gritting her teeth. She stood for a moment hunched over, then composed herself, focused on the situation, tried to be rational.

“Aaron, there’s a nasty storm front moving in. We’re going to have to take the *Lysander* above it, otherwise we might end up down there with you.”

“Do we have time to get top-side Captain?” Demetrius asked. “Regroup?”

“Negative. It’s moving in too aggressively. We’ll need to get clear and come back for you Aaron. Do you copy?”

There was nothing in response from below, not even radio static as thunder rumbled and lightning flashed on the horizon.

“Aaron? Do you copy?” she repeated. “Starveling – try and get them back on the line.”

“I’m trying Captain, but there is nothing on the localised frequencies.”

“Quince, do you copy?” Vikander asked more urgently.

After a moment the radio static confirmed a connection. “I’m here Boss. I hear you loud and clear.” Quince’s voice was layered with concern. “But I can’t contact them either, I’ve tried our shared frequencies on the mesh network and the helmet comms. Nothing.”

“Could it be the change in atmospheric conditions?” the Doctor asked. “Could the storm be interfering with the connection?”

“For us perhaps,” Starveling replied. “But not for Quince on the *Marlin*.”

“The *Marlin* has oxygen reserves, Boss. I can stay down here and try to contact them while you get clear,” Quince said. “If I can find a docking location, we can hunker down until the storm passes over.”

“Don’t do that. I’m telling you, Captain; this is a mistake,” the Doctor interjected.

“Copy that, Quince. Stay safe,” Vikander said ignoring him. “Mr Thomas, disengage the platform and get us in the air.”

“Roger that Captain,” Thomas replied with a stiff nod, triggering the process to retract the platform.

In the middle of this procedure, none of the crew noticed the Doctor and Maggie detach themselves from the fray and saunter down the corridor, picking up their pace to a determined sprint when they were in the main body of the ship.

“I guess Captain Vikander wasn’t going to be convinced,” Maggie whispered.

“Quite. Perhaps this is a trip the TARDIS should handle.”

On the *Oberon*, Demetrius stood at the open elevator shaft, his mind running through the possible scenarios of how Francis could have ignored the obvious hazard and fallen to his death, and now their connection with the ship had gone dead.

“Chief, what’s happening here? Should we be worried?” Voxx asked from the operations centre. “I’m trying to re-establish contact with the *Lysander*, but it’s as if there is nothing out there.”

“I’m not sure Voxx. These two things might not be connected. Francis had a knock to the head, maybe he was concussed.” He hoped he sounded convincing “And the weather might be affecting the *Lysander*’s comms relay.”

“What are we going to do about Francis?”

Demetrius paused to think, trying not to appear insensitive. It was a difficult situation losing a crew member, and to be cut off from the salvage ship heightened the sensitivity.

“We’ll focus on getting the *Oberon* to the surface. Then, I can rappel down with Moth and recover Francis,” He tapped Moth on the arm, and motioned backwards with his head. “We’re heading back to you Voxx. Sit tight.”

“Copy that chief,” Voxx replied, side-eyeing Puck who had watched their exchange in ominous silence. “I’d be glad of the company, and I’d feel better if we figure out what’s next. What do *you* think about all this?”

The android regarded her silently for a moment, then said, “Accidents happen ma’am.”

The Doctor raced across the *Lysander* towards the cargo area where the TARDIS stood waiting. His mood reflected the oncoming storm rumbling around the now-flimsy ship. He could never get used to being ignored.

“I can’t abide stubbornness! Vikander isn’t listening to me, and we need to get down there before anyone else dies.”

“What are you going to do once we get down there?” Maggie asked him, racing to keep up.

“*Look in the almanack; find out moonshine, find out moonshine,*” the voice implored, interrupting his thoughts. He felt a searing pain in his head. Why did her telepathic communication always feel so painful?

Maggie scrunched up her nose at the anticipation of scolding, but asked her question anyway. “How do you know that it wasn’t an accident? What makes you so sure? After all, that ship crashed landed on an ocean planet and its engines exploded. By my guess they’re lucky it’s stable at all!”

By now the Doctor and Maggie were inside the TARDIS. He jabbed at the controls, threw a lever, and the TARDIS gave a series of deep groans, but didn’t dematerialise. He tried again with no effect. “What’s wrong with her?” he said examining his calculations, he tapped at a small keyboard and checked the scanner before throwing the lever once more with the same outcome.

“Doctor, if the TARDIS doesn’t want to go down to the *Oberon*, perhaps it has a good reason,” Maggie observed. “Perhaps it’s trying to keep you away from this Time Lord. Perhaps the Time Lord crashed the damn ship! Either way, we should listen, shouldn’t we?”

“*The iron tongue of midnight hath told twelve.*” The woman’s voice echoed through his mind, more desperately than before. The searing pain was sharper now; he couldn’t ignore it. But he decided not to tell Maggie; he wasn’t sure if he could trust himself. He felt his every critical faculty crumbling; how could he know whether he was being driven insane?

“*You can’t waste more time, Doctor.*”

“I can’t waste more time,” he repeated the words agonisingly rattling around his psyche.

“*You must get down to help me!*”

“I must get down to that ship!” The Doctor charged back outside of the TARDIS.

Maggie caught up with the Doctor in a nearby equipment room, searching wildly. A panel came sliding out of the wall, containing a row of pressure suits, and on its right sat a row of matching helmets.

“Ah!” he exclaimed suddenly. “Perfect!”

“Perfect? What’s perfect?” Maggie said, hoping the plan was not as mad as it appeared. “You’re not going out there are you?”

“The captain won’t listen, so I’m going to take a gamble under the assumption that I’ve read these people well enough to know what they’ll do.”

“So, you’re just going to do what? Dive into the water and hope that they don’t just leave you there?”

“Well, it’s an assumption. Not a hope.”

“A ‘gamble’, you said yourself.”

He glanced up at her whilst pulling on the pressure suit. "I'm usually pretty good at reading people."

Maggie flung her hands in the air. "I wouldn't trust Captain Smarty-Pants to live up to that particular assumption. This is insane."

The Doctor ignored her. By now he had fastened the top of his suit, and was checking the helmet settings.

"Why, Doctor? Why?"

"Because I 'heard a mermaid on a dolphin's back/ Uttering such dulcet and harmonious breath/ That the rude sea grew civil at her song ...'"

For a moment Maggie stared as blankly at the Doctor as she once did at her high school English teacher. But from the recent events, she then inferred his meaning. "More psychic messages from your mystery Time Lady?" As he scrambled around the room with increasing hysteria, Maggie wondered whether these messages were hampering his thought processes, confusing him or even controlling him ... "Doctor, the TARDIS won't take you down there, this ship can't stay here ... this is not a rational decision. You must see that," Maggie said, stepping forward and putting her hand on the nearest helmet to hold him back.

"All I can see is that I *want* to get down to that ship. I *must*!"

"What about me?"

He halted and looked at Maggie sorrowfully. "I'd rather you stayed up here."

She paused, her mouth ajar, feeling the heat in her face. She was angry with him, and more than that, she was scared. Despite his explanations, she didn't agree with his thought process. She thought he was jumping headfirst into a foolhardy danger. She believed people would ultimately opt for self-preservation, the *Lysander* would pull clear of the storm, and the dive team would be more concerned with protecting themselves, especially in the light of Francis' death.

Despite herself, she flipped through the suits hanging on the rail and extracted one for herself. She was angry with the Doctor, but she found herself angrier that she was following him. She hadn't considered herself a fool before – but she would likely need to re-examine that point.

The Doctor clicked his helmet into place and the seal closed with suction, its internal light turning on automatically to illuminate his face. He reached down and selected a helmet for Maggie, checking it for cracks or notable flaws, far more carefully than when choosing his own.

"Just to be clear, I haven't demanded that you come with me. Quite the contrary." The light exaggerated the shadows over his prominent cheekbones, his severe expression adding further weight to his statement.

Maggie snatched the helmet from him and eyed him coolly. "So, this is a choice. Is that what you think?" She realised that she was even angrier at him for not considering what she had to say, not just for his irrationality. That was truly galling.

The Doctor seemed oblivious to her anger or chose to ignore it, pressing commands into the computer to open the aperture the *Marlin* had departed from. A warning alarm rang out as the doors slid open.

"Cooper, Palmer – please tell me that you haven't just opened the bay doors." Vikander's voice came through clear.

"I'm afraid we have, Captain. Despite your best efforts. It's cute, really, that you thought you could lock me out of your ship's primary functions." He grinned mischievously and toggled through some buttons on his gauntlet. "Maggie, we're on the same channel now. Ready?"

"No, but let's go." Maggie said looking down through at the water churning underneath. The rude sea had certainly not been calmed.

Truthfully, the Doctor now felt unready. Every time he pulled together his concentration, that terrible pain sliced into his head and the voice pleaded, even more desperately. "*Please – help me!*"

“You idiot!” Vikander snapped. “You’re going to get yourselves killed! Stand down now!”

“Sorry Captain, but we’re not under your command. Mr Quince, I suggest you come fishing.”

“Wait – *what?*” Quince answered from the *Marlin* below.

They jumped through the open doors and the ocean below rushed towards them, the thrust from the *Lysander* making it feel like they were hurtling into a maelstrom. Maggie subconsciously held her breath right until they hit the water.

Maggie looked around and saw the rolling water all around her, then looked up at the large bird-like shape of the *Lysander* hovering above them. The suit shielded her from the cold for the most part, but that didn’t mean she was warm. The instruments in the suit told her the water was freezing.

She kicked her legs and looked around as she treaded water, there was no sign of the Doctor.

“Doctor, it’s Maggie, where are you?” she said into the communicator. She checked the channel and spoke again. “Doctor, can you hear me?”

The suit warned her that her heart rate spiked as she circled around to catch a glimpse of the Doctor. She was starting to panic when she saw an impact a short distance away from her as something entered the water.

The lithe form of Captain Vikander bobbed up to the surface beside her. “If I die down here, I’m going to haunt you for the rest of your life Cooper.”

“I can’t find him. I don’t know what happened.”

“The bloody idiot jumped out of a moving spacecraft, that’s what happened. Quince, do you have a fix on my position?”

“I’ve got you, Boss. I’m on my way,” Quince said.

“Captain, the storm is coming in fast,” Thomas said from the flight deck.

Vikander grunted, looking up with yearning at her beloved *Lysander*. The ship and the crew had to come first, which meant there was only one course of action: “Take her up Mr Thomas. Starveling, you’re in charge until I return. When the storm recedes, get back down here fast.”

“Of course, Captain,” Starveling replied as the *Lysander* climbed up through the grey clouds.

“Doctor, where are you?” Maggie shouted into her communicator, more desperate.

Vikander swam to her side and tried to get into her eye line. “We’ll find him. Don’t worry,” she said, trying to sound reassuring. She motioned down to the water level. “We’ll dive under and take a look.” She tapped the side of her helmet and a flashlight turned on. “Like this.” She pointed to the area on the side so Maggie could see. Maggie flicked on her light and gave her the thumbs-up.

“OK, three, two, one...” Vikander submerged herself under the water, and Maggie followed.

There was a murky light under the surface, but with the storm now rumbling overhead it wouldn’t last long. The water formed an impenetrable wall of nothingness. A ghostly beam of light sprayed from the flashlights mounted on their helmets, and she could barely make out Vikander’s face partially lit from inside her helmet. “Look, there’s the debris field from the crash Voxx talked about.” She pointed at several dark objects in the water.

“Maybe he hit something!” Maggie said, twisting around to try and get a glimpse.

“Keep calm, let’s look around. Quince, are you picking up anything from the suits?”

It wasn’t just the thought of losing her friend that scared Maggie, it was the realisation that she was submerged in a gigantic ocean, centuries, and countless miles from home. Without the Doctor, how would she get home, even if she survived?

Then again, she had managed to pilot the TARDIS back to 1894 to rescue the Doctor². Perhaps that was what she feared, in a perverse way, even *more* than being stranded—that the blue box would drop her back in Revelstoke to spend the rest of her life mourning the dear friend and the vast life she had tasted all too briefly.

She tried to slow her breathing and compose herself, but every time she did, the fear crept back, like icy fingers of dread plucking at the back of her mind. She closed her eyes and waited for a response.

“Yeah, I’m picking up all three of you, but it’s hard to determine an exact location. All I can tell you is he’s not far from you. Him and someone else right on top of him. I’m getting two heartbeats from his vitals.”

“That’s him,” Maggie said with relief. Hearing he was alive made a difference, but she still had to find him. She looked at Vikander and asked, “How do we do this properly Captain?”

“We’ll go back-to-back given the size of the area and we’ll each scan the debris, shout up if you see anything. Let’s descend slowly.”

They searched in silence, using the digital reading on her helmet Maggie could see that that her heart rate had begun to slow.

The scattered dark objects came into focus as they dived deeper, indeterminate pieces of the *Oberon*’s exterior that broke away on impact. Next to a large piece of floating debris she caught sight a silhouette of arm and a leg floating under it.

“There!” Maggie shouted, shining her light on the large metal shard a few meters away. She broke away from Vikander and swam around it, gripping what the arm and pulling it toward her. She gave out a gasp as the lifeless corpse in an *Oberon* uniform bobbed towards her, his wide eyes rolling backwards. She screamed despite herself when Vikander touched her arm from behind.

“It’s OK, it’s not him,” Vikander said. “It’s not him, Maggie.” Her tone was calm and held none of the snap it had previously. For the first time since the TARDIS had landed, she was feeling some warmth from the captain. Maybe the Doctor should have jumped in the water earlier.

“I’m almost there, boss,” Quince said from the *Marlin*. “And I think I’ve got him!”

The lights from the *Marlin* were suddenly visible below them and Vikander signalled for Maggie to dive. As they swam towards the lights, they could make out a dive suit floating down towards the DSV, motionless.

Vikander motioned Maggie to join her. They took hold of an arm each and kicked to the *Marlin*.

Maggie looked at the Doctor’s face, hoping to see some movement. But his eyes remained closed, and she could see a patch of dark blood draining down his forehead.

The Doctor could feel himself floating through the water. In his mind he floated through the walls of the *Oberon*, through empty decks. The red-haired nameless woman stood there waiting for him. She held out her arms to him, her face was etched with fear.

“Help me, Doctor! Don’t leave me here!” Her voice was no clearer, but at least he could see her face. He tried to hold onto her but felt himself being pulled back abruptly, back out into the water and back into his body.

After Quince purged the seawater from the *Marlin*’s depressurisation chamber, they carefully removed their helmets.

² See *The Doctor Who Project: The Sawbones and the Grey Fox*.

“That was a foolish thing you both did,” Vikander berated Maggie as she knelt beside the Doctor and released his helmet. “You’re lucky that one or both of you aren’t dead.”

“Balls-y though,” Quince said, entering the chamber and saluting exaggeratedly.

“What if I hadn’t sent Quince after you? What if I hadn’t followed?”

“I had a hunch that you would,” the Doctor said weakly, opening his eyes slowly.

Vikander stood to her feet abruptly, equally relieved and annoyed with his flippancy in the face of a life endangering situation.

“I do not enjoy being played. Rest assured when we get back, I’ll be filing a complaint against both of you. You’ve put yourselves and my crew in danger.”

“Thanks for coming to get us Mr Quince.”

Quince flashed his charming smile and winked at her. “You’re quite welcome, Miss Cooper. It’s what I do.”

“Maggie.”

“Maggie it is, as long as you call me Pete.”

Vikander grunted. “If you’ve quite finished *Pete*, what’s the status of our dive team and contact with the *Oberon*?”

“Well Boss, the situation is the same,” he said, snapping back into a professional manner. “I can’t contact the team using their local channels, or the *Oberon*’s communication systems.” He scratched at the stubble on the side of his face. “Both were just fine earlier. The storm could interfere with the communications array on the *Lysander*, but not down here.”

“We need to get aboard the *Oberon*, Captain,” the Doctor said.

“That’s what you keep saying,” Vikander said with suspicion in her voice. “This is more than an audit, isn’t it ... Doctor?”

Flinching from her pointed use of his proper title, the Doctor considered a moment. He still couldn’t share the truth of telepathic Time Lords, especially since it unsettled him so much. He eased into another lie with a deft manner that came with hundreds of years of practice: “We’re not here for an audit, Captain. The circumstances around this crash has your company worried about what was taking place on the *Oberon*,” He decided to weave some truth into the tapestry of the tale to help it land: “There was a second distress call from someone not on the crew manifest. I’m concerned that whatever happened to the *Oberon* left it stranded here is a danger to your crew.”

Vikander narrowed her eyes. “And why didn’t you say anything before?”

The Doctor sighed, straightening his back, and added another dollop of truth to finish off the lie. “We weren’t convinced that there was a problem, and we weren’t—I wasn’t—sure if I could trust you. I’ve seen enough to show me that you are good people.”

“Do you think that Francis dying wasn’t an accident?” Quince asked him.

“I really don’t know. But given the two distress calls, I’m inclined to be suspicious. In the message Maggie and I heard, she used the word ‘stricken’ ... the facts point to the *Oberon* being deliberately ditched here,” The Doctor paused, lost in his grim ponderings for a second. “Everything since the dive team set foot on the *Oberon* has further convinced me that there is something wrong down there, and we need to get your team out.”

Vikander looked at him, her jaw squared, as she mulled over these facts.

“Quince, did you find somewhere to dock the *Marlin*?”

“I sure did, Boss. There’s a pressurised docking connector on the port side that *Nemo* found that wasn’t affected by the crash.”

“All right, let’s get down there and see for ourselves.”

O weary night, O long and tedious night,
Abate thy hours; shine comforts from the east
That I may back to Athens by daylight
From these that my poor company detest;
And sleep, that something shut up sorrow's eye,
Steal me a while from mine own company.

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

TO BE CONTINUED ...

THE DOCTOR WHO PROJECT

"If anyone receives this message, please send help. The vessel I'm occupying is stricken. I'm trapped and there's no escape. I've enclosed coordinates. Please, don't leave me stranded. I can't stay here, I..."

The TARDIS receives a distress call from another Time Lord, who was aboard the scientific research vessel Oberon, recently crashed on the ocean world Nereus Prime.

The Doctor and Maggie join a crew of salvagers sent to locate the wreck and bring back its valuable contents. Their captain, Soria Vikander, is suspicious of the time travellers and unwilling to accept the Doctor's help. And with the identity of his fellow Time Lord unknown to him, the Doctor is forced to accept the possibility that the Time Lord may have been the cause of the calamity that befell the starship.

When a team of Vikander's crew enters the wreck, they soon find themselves replaying the patterns of violence and self-destruction that plagued the Oberon's unfortunate crew. And the mysterious Time Lord telepathically compels the Doctor to join them down in the depths, no matter the dangers.

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This story features the Eleventh Doctor as played by Winston Adderly

