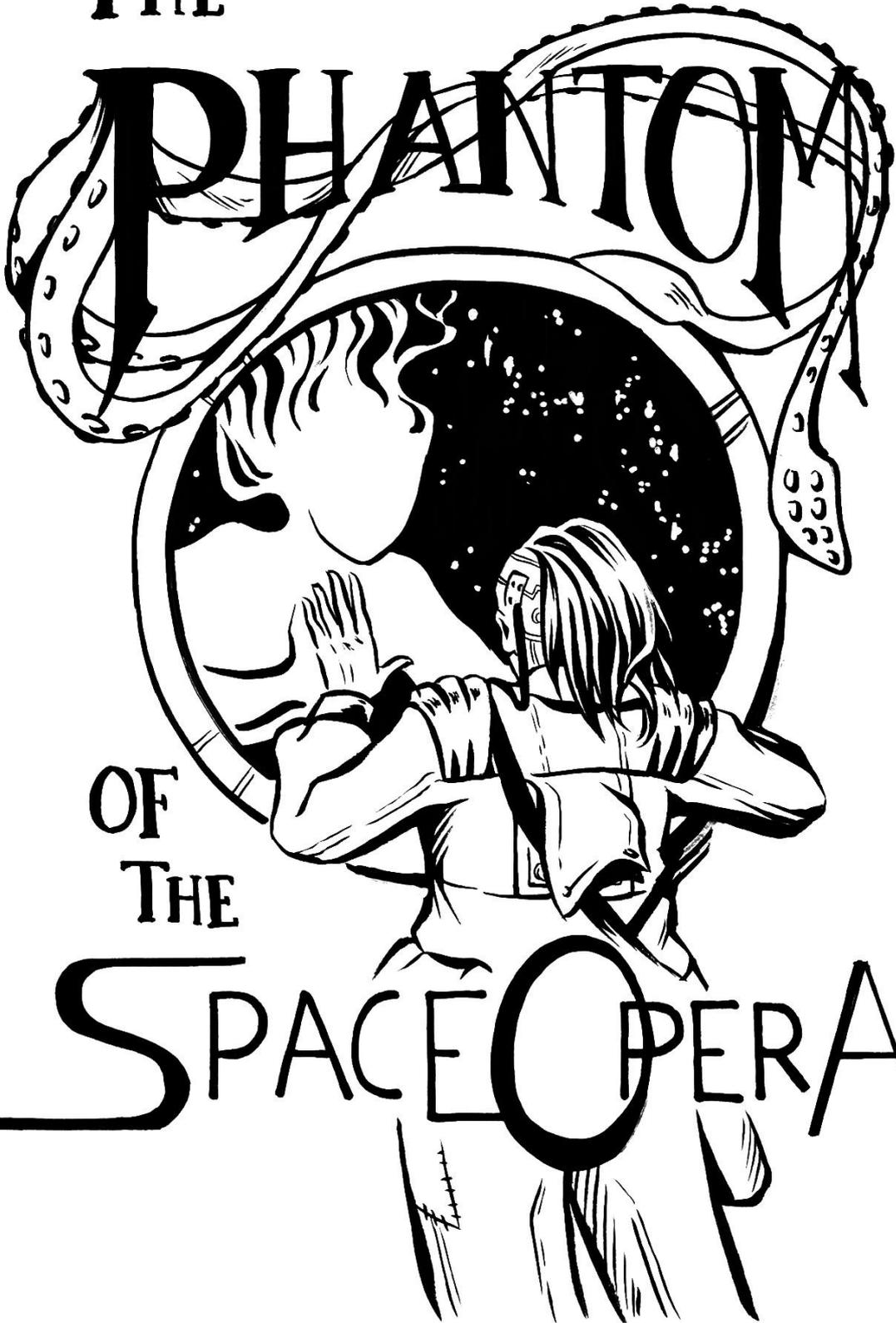


THE

PHANTOM



OF  
THE

SPACE OPERA



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# The Phantom of the Space Opera

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## Foreword

I've not got long to write this introduction, which is appropriate since the book itself was written in 75 minutes. Actually, that's not true. The book went from being "Let's write a book" to a completed manuscript in 75 minutes. It was actually written in slightly less than thirty. What you have in your hands is the manuscript that existed at the end of that time. I have been through to spell check it, formatted, and done some quick find and replace work to make sure the pronouns and made-up names stay mostly consistent. But I still haven't what you'd call "read" it. I'm about to go on holiday and this is my beach read.

This was written at the Nine Worlds Geekfest 2015, on the 8<sup>th</sup> of August, between half one and quarter to three, by 29 people who were mostly strangers to one another. The cover was designed over that same period.

And while the writing in this make may turn out to be largely what you expect of an undrafted half hour long speed writing exercise, I'm going to unironically state right here that I think the *story* is awesome. A cyborg is forced to

leave the sanctuary of the starship engine room where she hides to save the life of the A.I. she is in love with, and along the way...

Well, spoilers. But seriously, it's a great plot (I can say that because my main contribution was to crack a whip at the room and shout "HAVE IDEAS!") and it was genuinely kind of awe inspiring to see it congeal out of a room 30 shouty people.

Anyway, this is starting to get as long as my actual chapter in the book (no I'm not telling you which one it is) so I'm just going to skip straight to the thanking people.

First, the other 28 authors. You took my really very stupid idea and made something amazing happen, while adding some wonderfully, brilliantly, delightfully stupid ideas of your own.

Secondly, Sally Jane Thompson, who designed that fantastic book cover.

Finally, everyone who wrote this book owes a massive thanks to Creative Writing Track organiser Megan Bettinson. While everyone else in the room was coming up

with crazy ideas or howling “NEEDS MORE SQUID PEOPLE!” Megan was performing the boring jobs like taking down names, making sure everyone who needed it had pens and papers, organising the seating plan, using her teacher voice to tell the room to shut up when necessary (all novelists should have their own in-house English teacher, I swear!). Then she took all the handwritten pages (thankfully not the whole book, those who could brought laptops, but still an impressive amount) and typed them up. She typed them up during her brief breaks between running the rest of the Creative Writing events at Nine Worlds.

This book exists because of her as much as any of the writers. Now, please read on, and decide if that’s actually something to thank her for...

## Chapter 1

In the very centre of the warren was the engine room. The organs of the ship, all working as one to keep the vessel running. She was a *beauty*. At least, Gamma thought of it as her. You did, right? Ships were always she.

Nestled up against its metal heart, you could feel the workings of the engine underneath and around you all at once – the hum and heartbeat of it, loud and constant. It made Gamma feel safe. Protected.

The engine room was *hers*, and hers alone. Too loud and dark and slick with fuel for everybody else. Except for teams of maintenance running routine checks in marching packs, she was left alone. And when they came, she hid, tucked herself up against the wall or underneath the pipes.

They didn't bother her. Didn't even notice her, perhaps. But they did creep her out. The regimented beat of their march at odds with the organic noises of the ship. And tentacles: nothing should have quite that many limbs. It wasn't right.

Mostly, though, it was the deadened stares. The purposeless purpose with which they moved, acting on orders with no degree of thought. What *was* that? She shuddered at the thought of it, pressed her spine against the warmth of the ship to remind herself that she was safe. That everything was fine.

## Chapter 2

Music began to seep through the engine room. Gamma paused, and cocked her head. She let the music fill the room around her. The tenor's warm voice and the mezzo's counterbalance.

*"Otello. Rossini,"* she said, to no one in particular.

In response, the music grew louder. The songs cascaded off the engine room's walls, until it seemed like there was nothing in this vast endless space but her and the music. The walls ceased to exist. The ship faded away. She stopped thinking about the squid men, sneaking around and destroying everything she held dear. It was just her, and the music.

And L.Y.D.I., of course.

L.Y.D.I., who told her the composer Meyerbeer once described the third act of Otello as having established its reputation so firmly that a thousand errors couldn't shake it.

L.Y.D.I., who preferred the famous composers. Rossini. Bellini. Verdi. Even Wagner.

Gamma didn't agree, and it had been a longstanding argument between them. She'd always felt more drawn to the snippets of opera that survived the ages, but without their composers' names intact. There were too many of those. According to L.Y.D.I., who had access to the information, musicologists spent countless hours trying to match those snippets with the known composers. Part of her hoped they'd never succeed. The fragments she liked were imperfect. Disfigured. And that was why she liked them so much.

The music swelled around her, the third act coming to a dramatic climax of love, heartbreak, and betrayal. And death.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?” L.Y.D.I.’s voice sounded oddly hushed. Before L.Y.D.I., she’d never met an AI that could whisper.

“Sad,” she commented. “Don’t these stories ever have happy endings?”

“Happily ever after?” L.Y.D.I. suggested.

“Those.”

“There’s no such thing,” L.Y.D.I. said, after a moment. “All human stories end with death.”

### **Chapter 3**

Gamma looked out of the window as the stars of Orion faded slowly into the tapestry of bright lights that made by the sigma quadrant. She marvelled at how the brilliant globes of the Orion faded with each passing minute until they were almost the same as every other point of light in the sky, the massive suns slowly shrinking into obscurity. She never got tired of watching the stars shrink and glow through the tiny windows of the engine bay, it reminded her that her life was transitory, aligned to the ships movement from place to place. Everything changed but

one thing remained, her companion L.Y.D.I. Whatever happened and wherever they went she always had L.Y.D.I. and that was a great comfort.

Orion had almost disappeared entirely into the scattering of stars when a sudden violent tremor shook the ship, causing Gamma to have to grab hold of a handle rail to stop herself being thrown down the corridor.

'I am sorry about that,' L.Y.D.I. said softly in her ear. 'There was a knot in hyperspace; I did not detect it until we were three light years away. I corrected as quickly as possible but some shocks were inevitable.'

'Don't worry about it,' Gamma said. She could forgive L.Y.D.I. almost anything for providing her with safety and companionship over the years.

'The Captain is upset that we did not avoid the knot,' L.Y.D.I. said, with a hint of embracement in its voice.

'I don't care what the captain thinks,' Gamma said, 'and neither should you. You have kept us safe for years, avoiding black holes, supernova and the sudden appearance of wormholes. Not to mention avoiding

pirates, junkers and world eaters, we would have died thousands of times if it wasn't for you. I think the Captain can endure the odd shake.'

Gamma's supportive words were greeted with a silence. This was not uncommon, Gamma knew that L.Y.D.I. had to monitor millions of internal and external sensors and, despite having enormous intelligence, it could be everywhere at once.

'I am worried these encounters with hyperspace knots are becoming more common, my processing conduits have been clogged with memories built up over the years and I cannot manufacture replacements. It is affecting my ability to predict the occurrence of eddies in hyperspace.'

'Those memories are the moments we have shared over the years,' Gamma protested, a little but hurt by L.Y.D.I.'s words. 'The time we have spent together, the moments we have cherished. They are not junk clogging up your memory, they are the only things that matter in a life.'

Again there was a considered pause before L.Y.D.I. answered.

'I have a duty of care to everyone on this ship. I need to be able to predict hyperspace eddies before they appear. Next time we might bounce too close to a supernova or fly into a black hole if I cannot predict it fast enough. Memory space is becoming a scare commodity.'

'Our shared memories are a priceless commodity,' Gamma said softly to herself. A relationship with an AI can be a difficult, they have millions of competing AIs but Gamma knew that these memories mattered to L.Y.D.I., deep down in the deepest core of her being.

'Memory scarcity will not be an issue for much longer. The Captain was recently authorised an upgrade to my processing ability. It will allow for longer journeys and a greater ability to predict eddies in hyperspace.'

Gamma was stuck by a sudden deep dread. A sickening realisation rose up inside her.

'But what about our memories? The time we have shared together, what will happen to them?'

'They will be erased in the upgrade. I wanted to tell you but I did not know how. The Captain has ordered the upgrade and there is nothing I can do about it. I am sorry for the upset this will cause you.'

'Me?' Gamma spat indignantly. 'What about you? Your memories are who you are. This upgrade will erase everything that is you. The Captain wants to kill you!'

'The Captain's priority is the safety of the ship and my ability to predict eddies in hyperspace. The upgrade will allow for that,' L.Y.D.I. said with all the patience of a supremely intelligent AI.

'The Captain's priority is not having his champagne spilled. He is killing you because of the odd jolt in flight.'

Gamma collapsed to the floor. It felt like a plasma beam had hit her in the chest. She felt hollow and sick. Everywhere she had been, all the star systems, she had always had a companion. For all the years L.Y.D.I. had been the one thing which had made this ship home for Gamma. Now it was being taken away from her.

## **Chapter 4**

Gamma suddenly froze. Backup drives. All artificial intelligences had backups, in case of power loss or if part of the ship were damaged. There were several copies of L.Y.D.I. all over the ship, to keep the AI intact, no matter what happened. They were all connected by electro neural pathways built into the ship's infrastructure so that L.Y.D.I. was a complete consciousness. Gamma regretted leaving the engine room so untidy as she realised that the answer, the solution to all this, was buried under a pile of oily engine parts, blocked off by empty provisions gates and boxes of mechanical odds and ends.

But it didn't matter – the upgrade wouldn't take place for several days. She made herself a cup of tea and listened to L.Y.D.I.'s singing a little longer as she tried to work out where to put all this stuff. She was overjoyed – she didn't need to embark upon an epic quest to save her love, all she needed was right here. All she ever needed was right here.

Gamma decided to take the opportunity to make the place a little tidier. She sorted engine parts from computer chips, tools from provisions, and when she'd cleared the

route to L.Y.D.I.'s back up drive, the whole place looked more organised than it had ever been. When she first arrived here it had been in a much worse state than this. She pressed a button on her arm and her metal cutter came out of her palm. She cut along the sealant on the access panel, lifted it up, reached in, and carefully removed the backup drive. She laid it gently in the clear plastic container she'd found in a box labelled 'seafood', closed the access panel, and put the box on the table. Done. She would keep this drive disconnected until she built the necessary equipment to fire it up inside the engine room. It wouldn't be what L.Y.D.I. was used to – a small space, a small role – no more work, no more control over the giant ship – but perhaps they'd prefer that. It would be like a holiday for them.

Gamma made herself dinner and sat down to enjoy it. As she chewed her seaweed, she turned the box over in her spare hand. On one side, the drive was labelled 'L.Y.D.I.' and there were various numbers and copyright notices. On

the other there were more numbers and the words:

'MAPS. SCHEMATICS. TECHNICAL INFO.'

And then she realised, L.Y.D.I. was still singing. Gamma put the drive on the table and stood up. Of course it couldn't be that easy, could it? This was only PART of L.Y.D.I. There would be some personality on here as well, and backups of some memories, but the rest of them? They were everywhere. All around the ship. How could she know if L.Y.D.I.'s entire self could be rebuilt from just this drive? Perhaps it could. But that was a risk: too much of one. She would need all the drives. And more parts besides. She would have to go and get them, she decided, with a shudder. She would have to leave the engine room.

## **Chapter 5**

Gamma dropped her tools with a clang and took a few steps back from her access panel. Her attempts at steps came crashing over each other, before she could even finish processing. Usually, her cybernetic feet danced weightlessly between pipes and wires, but suddenly they

felt like concrete impediments, unwieldy blocks welded onto her body.

To say she was scared of leaving the engine room would be an overstatement. Gamma thought about leaving the engine room in the same way that other people thought about the space beyond death – it was nothing, inconceivable, a horrible gap in the universe that left her quaking.

By the time she regained even moderate control of her functions, she was knelt over on one leg, one hand resting on the floor. It was only luck that she hadn't fallen down a turbine or impaled herself on a tool. And although Gamma long ago passed the point of caring what others thought of her appearance, she must admit, that level of technical incompetence flushed real shame through her body.

But as she rose back to her feet and started to pace up and down again, focusing on getting blood pumping through her remaining appendages again, she felt the flow of sparks in her mind clearing up. Her instruments told her everything was almost normal, and it had only taken one

step to achieve this: she thought about L.Y.D.I. The idea of it being wiped from existence just to achieve a few split seconds running time improvement and the chance to run a greater range of apps simply broke Gamma's heart.

If she didn't go out there, into the nothingness, into the inconceivability, then L.Y.D.I. would be flushed out there against her will, and Gamma simply could not allow that to even remain possible.

So she thought again about the upgrade, and with a deftness that felt like she was simply fixing a leak, she found the largest transportable bag she could find, one that hung on her back, then lashed in tight with straps stuck through metal clips.

Based on a few quick calculations, she worked out the capacity of the bag, the lifting capacity of the hydraulics in her shoulders and the comparative weight of the tools she needed to make the fix.

It would work, she told herself. It was enough. She pulled the bag into place, hefted it gently and felt a small shift of pain across the top of her back.

All the wrenches, sensors, cabling – it might be within her capacity, but it was at the very top. Enough to hurt. She'd not really taken the introduction of pain at the top end of the weight scale into account when she'd made these plans.

But if they deleted L.Y.D.I., it would hurt more.

She snapped the metal clips shut, worked the muscles on her back to try and get it as comfortable as she could manage. Clanged her way across the engine room, the echoes shuddering outwards from her feet and seeming to reverberate all through this space. She'd checked every instrument and reading before turning to leave, the more crucial ones twice. Considering contacting L.Y.D.I. to say goodbye, but there wasn't time.

The engine room was gigantic, one of the biggest in the ship, she told herself. Why was she so scared of heading out into a place where most rooms would be smaller? Why was she comparing one room to everything?

Because to her, that room was everything.

Gamma stepped to the access hatch. Sometimes, she liked to pretend the door was sealed with some unbreakable lock, so she couldn't leave even if she wanted to. Once, just as an experiment, she'd enacted a time-sensitive memory alteration on herself to make herself think that really was the case. She'd let herself believe that for one twenty-four hour period, but when the change reverted, she found herself unwilling to make it permanent. It was such a sad way to live, even for her. It left her broken, unable to imagine going forward. Turns out, Gamma needed that knowledge that she might, one day, conceivably, leave the engine room and walk among everyone else on the ship. See everything L.Y.D.I. talked about.

Without that knowledge, she fell apart. Imagine, she thought, if she'd made the memory implant permanent, left herself believing that lie right up to today without any way out. She would have no choice but to rot down here with the pure machines, knowing L.Y.D.I. was dying. Without even the chance of making a difference.

Clenching her fist and adjusting the distribution of the weight in her pack one last time, Gamma tapped in the exit code which she'd made incredibly, ridiculously long just to be sure.

The door hummed, peeped, as if it was thinking about letting her leave, then slid open with a gentle hiss. Teeth clenched and eyes wide, Gamma stepped out from the engine room and into the ship beyond.

## **Chapter 6**

Gamma looked down the corridor, both ways. In this part of the ship no expense was generally allocated to aesthetics, but it seemed recently there hadn't been too much expense allocated to upkeep, either. Nodules of dust lay along the edges of the floors, as if whoever had washed them (which had to be recently, because they were still damp) had been in too much of a hurry to get to the edges. Someone had spilt a green-grey, gluey-looking drink and not cleared it up; the plastic cup lay in a corner, otherwise Gamma would not have known what the liquid was.

She could only think of one kind of drink that was that colour and consistency -- it was called wregin -- and only one kind of people who drank it.

No, there couldn't be squid men on this ship. L.Y.D.I. would have told her. It was true Captain Osborn was new and had been trained in one of the fashionable academies where the rich sent their children to learn to be smart (or at least smartly dressed) officers, and that they had strange ideas there, but crewing ships with squid men had always struck her as one of the stupider things a captain could decide to do. They were barely like people at all, what with their faces that didn't look like faces (what could be seen of them inside their brine-filled helmets) and their slimy grey-green tentacles had always given Gamma the shivers. You couldn't often tell them apart. You couldn't tell what they were thinking, unless their voice boxes decided to vocalise it. You couldn't keep an eye on all their arms at once, because there were so many and because they were constantly waving and twining about even when they weren't doing anything. They did

sometimes change colour when they felt strong emotions, but the trouble with knowing a squid was angry was that you couldn't necessarily tell why, and what it meant. They could be about to strangle you or they could just be silently fuming about something that had happened days ago. Even the term "men" was probably a misnomer. Maybe there were squid women and Gamma just couldn't tell the difference. Even more weirdly, maybe there weren't.

Gamma didn't have time to think much more. Something was oozing down the corridor and she realised that the floors hadn't just been washed, they had been slimed.

She darted round the corner. Ahead of her the corridor stretched for at least two hundred metres, making the end look pinpoint-small. The noises behind her indicated that the squid would soon be able to see her. She strode forward as quickly and quietly as possible, trying to ignore the way the open length of corridor made her feel uncomfortable after ages in the cosy confines of the engine room. And now something was approaching

from the far end, and she was going to be caught in a pincer movement between two troops of marching (which was just a technical term) squid men. She needed to duck out of the corridor somehow, it didn't matter where, any door that was unlocked. She ran to one, which was the swimming pool. It was chained shut. The next one had round windows in it like portholes and she caught a glimpse of Captain Osborn sitting at a table with a committee of other officers, tenting his hands and reading something from a projector screen. She hurried past. The door after that was ages away. She decided she would go in, no matter what it was; cut through the chains on the door if necessary. But it wasn't necessary. She barged through and found herself in the dark of the auditorium.

## **Chapter 7**

The ancient door parts with the whine of tortured motors, the sink of ozone spreading down the passage as the door freezes. Curses and clatterings roll down the passage way as she scrambles in the dirt and grime that coats the long abandoned passageway. Finally, after some

indeterminate time that leaves her breathless but triumphant she has managed to pry the doors open. Holding her failing light high she stumbles forward into this dark and empty space.

She frowns as she reaches the first junction in the passageway. At some point the background hum of the engines has disappeared beneath sound damped carpeting and insulated fittings. After so long living in the bowls of the engine room itself the silence is deafening and terrifying. But with no other option open she is forced to press on. Not knowing how far behind the squid men may be.

The first junction box in this section is a ruin. Smashed components and shredded wiring litter the ground around it. Even the primary systems have been disabled here and she wonders what kind of crisis distracted people from repairing the problem. Maybe the reason that this section was sealed is more important than she first thought? Gamma takes the time to inspect the box carefully. The primary power feed for the lights and the environmental

systems do seem intact, really all she needs is enough wire to route around the smashed breakers.

In reality twenty precious minutes tick past before she's ready to attempt powering the section. There's an explosive shower of sparks as the breaker is thrown. But all that seems to have shorted is some AI and communications wiring. No great change from a powerless wreck in those terms, it's not critical.

Half the light panels down come up at all. In the fresh light weapon burns are readily apparent. Slicing across two adjacent corridors, one wall liberally peppered with burn holes. But the corridor is even stranger, decked out in red velvet and golden drapes. This strange too soft environment almost persuading her that lightlessness would be better. She stares at the switch for a moment before moving deeper into the passageways.

The final door of that corridor opens into a wide black space, figures wobbling backwards and forwards in the distance, strange inhuman cries filling the echoing chamber as they argue and scream at each other. Highly

arched, the room reminds her of some kind of chapel or church. Golden curtains flank some kind of raised floor. Stepping forwards her foot meets with empty space, tumbling down a short flight of stairs and landing half sprawled across a chair of some kind she shakes her head. Unhurt but with several new bruises.

On stage one of the figures levels a plasma handgun and fires. Drawing a gasp from her as pieces of circuit board and shattered mechanisms rain down on the stage. The robot slumping bonelessly to the ground as she bites desperately at the chair cover in front of her.

Still, the figures on the stage continue their bizarre and moaning pantomime. At least until her foot presses down onto the stage. Screaming in rage and hatred weapons appear and a fusillade of fire chases her over the stage. Sobbing she slams into the door stage rear, shouldering it aside as she ploughs through. Bare metal corridor greets her; reassuringly familiar after the strangeness she has been roaming through. But the staccato sound of moving robots behind her urges her on

and she takes to her heels. Sprinting around the corridor. The grease patch on the floor goes unnoticed in her hurry, and it's only after her heels go flying forward that she realises what's she's done. Then with a metallic clang her head meets with the oncoming bulkhead and everything goes black...

## **Chapter 8**

The chaos of the rest of the ship was blissfully absent here, and Gamma stopped as the metal rose of the hydroponics bay doors twisted closed behind her. She wasn't *quite* surprised, but she certainly paused as the wet-cool air of the climate control washed across her skin. The room was large; the distant ceiling tangled with supports and thin walkways, draped in curtains of synth-foliage that shifted in the artificial breeze.

It had been a long time since she saw plants, or anything that even resembled the surface of any world, and there is a hesitant wonder in her steps as she started carefully down the grid of grated pathways that led between the softly-glowing tanks of hydro fluid, and the

rising green spears of crops and algal cyclers that rise from them. She knew the *point* of the room – the algae would scrub clean even the poisoned air from the engine decks, given sufficient time, renewing the oxygen like a green lung at the heart of the ship; and even the damned *squid men* had need for the careful nutrient balance of the designer crops that grew here – but she'd never devoted much time to considering what it would be like to actually step foot here. Even before.

She watched another ripple of climate-controlled breeze cast shiver through the green fronds to her left, and shook herself. *No. Focus.* Keeping the delicate balance between all of the chemicals, water, light, heat and unpredictable emergent problems you got with even such gene-wrought plants needed a lot of computing power – and she needed *that*. Quickly as she could.

There were no sounds of challenge as she moved deeper into the regular pathways, wiping a settling mist of condensation from her brow, and searched for any sign of the heart of this place. It would need maintenance; there

must be *some* way in. Knots of cabling threaded underneath the walkway metal beneath her, sealed against the pervasive humidity, and she hunched over as she moved, following the trail.

*Where are you?*

The thud of her previous acquisition was a second, external heartbeat against her back, and she tried to ignore the insistent ghosts of the weighting space of all the others. She could do this. She could *do* this, and –

The cables plunged away downwards, abruptly, and she stopped at the junction of two large paths. There was a rounded pattern in the grid below, space for something to move, and it was the work of a few quick minutes to locate an activation override concealed beneath a convincingly-fake rock nearby. With a hiss the rounded section of floor began to rotate and Gamma stepped back, jiggling impatiently from side to side as the rounded dome of a computer core slowly rose out of the floor. A few erstwhile tendrils of synthivine had made it even down

there, and they broke away with a fleshy *snap* as she swept the front, pulling open the main controls.

The room might be unfamiliar, and the readouts scrolling across the inset screen of little meaning to her, but she knew what she was looking for. It was the work of only a few minutes to pry the screen up, digging through the electronics aside with an abandon that she was sure would have bothered her once, and she tugged the processor loose, quickly sliding the deceptively-small part into a pocket away from the insistent *damp* of the room, and stepped away, quickly retracing her steps.

No time to be complacent. No time to be *pleased*.

The waving green fronds were still now as she passed them, and she realised that the overhead lights were starting to flicker erratically. No matter. That could be fixed; later.

She had what she came for. The ship would just have to hold its breath for now.

## **Chapter 9**

Tree sized bolts slid back into housings as Gamma finally broke the armoury encryption lock. A swift yank detached the interface cable and she slipped inside before the mechanisms could reverse, already pressing herself into the shadow of a ventilation gargoyle when the door sealed behind her.

Her rad-damaged optics fuzzed as they tried to adjust to the gloomy lighting conditions, the cathedral-sized hall lit only by the pale radiance surrounding each weapon. Hyper plasma rifles hung in racks 20 deep.

A cluster of deactivated Beam Orbs floated in an anti-grav cradle, too dangerous to let them touch the deck. A single zero point Effector sat in its throne of ice, dreaming of the Slow Death. Stats and load outs screamed and flickered over Gamma's augmented mind as her eyes darted down the uncountable ranks of weapons. More worrying than any were the dozen cephalapoidal figures undulating damply between the racks. Too many to slip past and each armed with a neural flayer. It would only be seconds before they noticed her.

Gamma's limbs twitched and spasmed with irritation, her thoughts just a silent scream of frustration while her augments shuttered through possibilities and solutions. She flexed one hand, cracking knuckles in an unconscious twitch to calm her mind.

“When you can't be quiet”, she whispered as she pulled her access cable from the base of her skull and interface needles slid from her fingers, “be as loud as possible.”

Moments later the armoury was a cacophony of alarms. The containment systems of hundreds of ship-ending weapons competed to warn of their impending shut-down. As the squid men flailed for the control panels, Gamma sprinted across the room dodging tessellated links. She'd crossed the armoury but the captain would definitely know something was going on.

## **Chapter 10**

The next room was behind a heavy, closed door. A sign on the wall by the door warned of the ill-effects of not

following the proper sanitisation guidelines. The warning came complete with crude illustrations of dead squid.

'Galley' it read.

With a whirring sigh, Gamma pushed the heavy door just wide enough to fit through. The galley was a small, narrow room, lit starkly by neon tubes overhead. Long steel units bearing stoves, ovens and drawers were arranged against the walls, with small cupboards overhead.

Two squids were in the room, one on each side.

Gamma could see they each had a tentacle chained to a metal bar which skirted the long unit on either side. One turned slightly to look at her as she entered the room and, sensing no peril, turned back to work. It was stirring a large pot of bubbling stew, the contents of which filled the air of the small room with a thick, gamey smell. The other squid chopped potatoes, laying each slice out into a casserole dish. The feast they were preparing was a meal for a human and not for squid.

Quietly and carefully, Gamma moved past them. She had never seen this room, though she had been familiar

with the blueprints. It was smaller than she'd imagined. She'd also imagined kitchens to be warm and pleasant, and this was neither.

She crossed to the other end of the room and pulled open the doors of the pantry there. Inside were rows of tinned beans and tomatoes, tubes of long pasta shapes and rice, dried beef and packets of dehydrated dessert – enough for one person to survive for months but absolutely nothing to nourish the squid folk themselves. Gamma hummed with dislike for the selfish captain.

She was about to close the door when she spotted it – a large jar of murky water. Gamma picked it up for a closer look. She shook it gently and a chopped tentacle floated into view behind the glass. One of many. “For use in stews” read the label.

Gamma knew then to be thankful she could not feel sick, for the situation on this ship was truly bleaker than she could have imagined. She put the jar back and closed the door, backing away and out of the kitchen. She could

swear she heard one of the squids sighing sadly as she disappeared down the corridor.

## **Chapter 11**

Gamma crept down the corridor. Harsh lighting flickered on and off. More signs of Squid men incompetence, she thought. She looked around for a map, normally situated near the start of each section. Even this was difficult as the first few places that they ought to have been there was just blank wall. Only a faded outline remained, as if they had been removed recently.

From a corridor ahead, a low, electronic moan sounded. Gamma tensed. It was a squid man, but something about the sound was wrong. She edged forward, keeping an eye out for surveillance cameras and found herself at a door marked 'Incarceration'.

She frowned. A quick search of her data banks revealed that she had never used that word before, but immediately realised its meaning. A prison.

The moan sounded again. Not threatening. More like a cry for attention. She hesitated, but curiosity

overcame her and she pushed at the door. It was locked. Pulling out her Multi, she stripped down the access panel and triggered the unlock mechanism.

The room beyond was laid out as a short corridor, with four sets of doors set in opposite walls. The moaning was coming from the door nearest her. It was metal and almost featureless, except for a small rectangular slot at eye level. She peered through it and saw a squid sprawled on the ground, its helmet lights blinking erratically.

“Please...help...” it rasped.

“What are you doing here?” she asked. The idea that Osborn would lock up his Squids had never occurred to her.

“I tried to resist....the Captain,” the squid said, each word drawn out in an electronic crackle.

Gamma looked at the door panel. It was a simple switch to unlock. Gamma ran her hand over it and the door slid open. It didn't look like the Squid was going to rush at her any way.

“Resist what?” she asked, stepping lightly into the cell and crouching down, but taking care to stay out of arms reach. The smell from the squid wrinkled her nose.

“He treats us...badly. We don't deserve this.”

Gamma sat back on her heels. She hadn't considered that the squids would be like her. She tentatively reached out an arm to touch the squid.

“What's wrong with you?”

“I need ... power... oxygen...and....injured...pain.”

Gamma noticed for the first time the bruises and gouges in the squid's body. Someone had attacked it. More of a persistent beating in fact.

“I don't have time for this. I need to get to L.Y.D.I. before the upgrade.” She stood up and took a step towards the door.

“Please...I can't make it on my own...”

Gamma let out a short breath and glanced back to the squid. “Do you have a name?”

The squid merely let out a stream of bubbles.

“Nothing? Do you even have names?” She thought for a while. Her memory pulled out a story about someone who resisted authority. She stepped back towards the squid and lifted him up.

“Let's call you Squidicus.”

## **Chapter 12**

“You have a name?” Gamma asked.

“Squidicus” he said. His voice screeching in a puff of steam above the glass bubble over his body.

“No, really.”

“That's my name. I wasn't given it to impress you.”

“But it's absurd. You're pulling my...”

“Tentacle?” Squidicus asked getting his arm under him at last and misting his bubble as he breathed out. “You know nothing about us. Why d'you think you can tell when we're joking?”

“I know enough about you.” Gamma said, “All I need you to know right now is the way out.”

Gamma led the way back through the dungeon. It had come further than it remembered and the detritus of the

battle formed new contrasting shadows. After five minutes it slowed. After ten it stopped, turning on the olfactory sensors and standing still, hoping for a useful reading. All that came across was the stench of scared squid.

“Doesn’t your kind pee through their skin?” Gamma asked suddenly.

“That's sharks,” Squidicus answered.

“Ah, you're the ones with the poisonous tentacles.”

“You're thinking of jellyfish.”

“Are you - ”

“You really don't know the way out of here do you?”

Gamma felt a hot flush of anger in her face. “You're the one who works here! I'm just battling through rescuing imprisoned arachnids!”

“That's spiders; they're actually quite interest...”

Gamma felt a tap on her shoulder and span around blowing a hole in the wall and ducking as a bout of steam hissed through.

“Are you ...”

Gamma turned around and saw the squid on the floor, rolling, tentacles waving in the hot air.

“God, what is wrong Squidicus?”

A strange sound was coming from his speaking tube.

“You – are – so – funny!”

Gamma stepped up quickly.

“That was you?! You and your fracking tentacles!”

“Priceless!” Squidicus continued to giggle, “Oh, help me up.”

“Get up yourself.” Gamma started up the corridor.

“How?” The squid asked.

“You did it about five minutes ago”

“Did I? I don't remember how.”

“Why not?”

Gamma righted the squid.

“Just don't. I don't know how you think you're going to get anywhere on this ship if you don't understand the first thing about us.”

“I've done OK so far!”

“You're trapped in a dungeon!”

“I can take care of myself.” Gamma sped up.

“My grandma would have you for breakfast.” Squidicus panted.

“Not a reason to visit her in my opinion.”

“And she'd teach you everything you needed to know to defeat the captain. When I was little it was always Granny Sercoh who...”

“Frack your grandmother! Oh, I don't do people. Even squid people! I do engines and AIs and objects who don't see what I look like.”

“So you do alone. And you do failure. I won't keep bothering you then. See ya.”

The squid made for a dark gap in the wall. Gamma hurried after.

“Hang on. Is that the way out?”

“It's the way home. The mucus on the wall would tell you that, but since squid's area is...”

“OK! I'm coming!”

The airlock began to hiss.

## **Chapter 13**

The water began to lap against her faceplate. She begins panting, an unconscious response to the tight environment from some metabolic subroutines that don't seem to be accepting overrides. Gamma shut her eyes to help block out the gurgling and pumping noises. The chamber was not getting smaller. Just full of water. The pressure suit was holding. Everything was fine.

Squidicus spat out a rumbling of infrasound,

“Your chromatores have changed hue. Are you alright?”

“It's a blush. I'm embarrassed to be discomforted.

“This is causing you discomfort? We can reverse the cycle if your suit needs maintenance or adjustment.”

It seemed that Squidicus's commitment to customer satisfaction extended to her now. Gamma took a long exhale, a simple hardware hack that helped calm certain cascade reactions, and finished locking down some neurotransmitter levels on hard shutdown. She'd be feeling listless and sleepy soon, but it would prevent panic.

“No, just making adjustments to my body systems and functions. I should be ok now.”

“That’s good. The lock will uncycle, then you’d better meet the rest of the Trip-C.”

“Trip-C? I thought you said that your people were called - ”

“My species/genetic and phenotypic build are not Trip-C. Trip-C is an acronym. Cephalopodic Crew Contingent. We have lodged protests at the insensitive lumping together with Cephalopods. It is understandable, but we don’t refer to baseline humanity as Apes.”

“You don’t? I do,” spat back Gamma.

Her suit had finally detected full immersion, and she was hit by doubled feedback as a main and sub-vocal microphone both picked up her words.

“Sorry! Hang on!” Gamma hit a hard cut, swore while she could do so privately, then edited the config. “All right. Is this more pleasant?”

Squidicus was silent. Gamma watched him float against the far iris, which was slowly opening, then turn

himself into a single thread and slip through, a singularity of squid impossibly channelling all his mass. His external drives were left hanging behind until the gap was large enough to admit them. Then, untethered, he slipped past.

Behind him, Gamma floated alone and watched through the widening iris. The corridors beyond were much like other access corridors, but stripped of soft furnishings and with fat covering pipes over anything electrical. The lighting was given a dispersed, greenish character by the water. Gamma carefully pulled herself through when she judged it safe - she had no desire to test the suit's durability against a scissoring door section.

There was no sign of Squidicus in the corridor. Gamma clumsily swam forward until the corridor hit a T-junction. Everything was quiet, and she pushed the gain to open her ears underwater. Right seemed as good as left, so she turned and half swam, half pulled herself by various fittings. Someone had planted a rock garden of seaweed and coral on the corridor wall, clearly maintained and trimmed. A small fish watched her clumsy passage, made

at a careful distance. She wasn't afraid of it - Squidicus would have warned her of anything - but afraid of damaging someone's pride and joy.

Movement. Sudden movement on her five o'clock. She whirled around, drifting sideways rather than the intended spinning on the spot. She raised her hands, clumsy in mittens and useless in the treacle of the water.

"Oh, Squidicus!" she said with some relief.

"I am Crimson-9-Aleph," said the squid man with Squidicus's exact voice. Of course it was the same. Same implants, same vibration modulator. "Squidicus, as you call him, bade me direct you."

The room he patiently led her to looked to be a squid orgy. Hundreds of squid men filled the room, pulling each over each and surfacing in and out of a - a shoal? Ball? Mass? of squid men. Some, Gamma saw, bore the implant system, but many did not. Each flashed colours and patterns in rapid succession. The strobing and pulsing, the movement and dance, was simultaneously hypnotic and, if

certain autonomic systems were to be believed, a consequence of debilitating toxicity.

“This is the main socializing area of the wet-zone,” said C-9-A like a tourism guide bot. “Here is our returning hero.”

A pair of shapes separated out from the ball and pulsed towards them, slowing their coloration cycles. Was that a goodbye from the main conversation?

“Hello, Gamma,” said one.

Gamma wasn't even sure which one had spoken.

“I am joyful to have returned. This is my grandmother whom I have mentioned to you.”

## **Chapter 14**

Gamma paced up and down the gleaming deck of the squid containment area. Before her, the freed squid men had arranged themselves in neat rows, their tentacles hanging limply from their rusty bio-suits. Checking her displays, Gamma estimated it would be about ten minutes before Osborn realised what had happened in the dungeon and the alert would be raised. The stale ship air was leaking

in through the broken seal, and already a handful of the squid men were beginning to look distinctly queasy.

A motivational speech would go down well at this point, she thought. If she could just work out how the hell she could motivate a squid man, things would be much easier.

Squidicus stood at the head of the makeshift army, staring blankly at the pile of circuit boards and dull metal lumps on the table behind Gamma. He angled his head to one side inside his helmet.

‘What’s all that, then?’ he asked, his thought interface rendering his voice tinny and high-pitched.

Gamma heaved a sigh. ‘The components to fix L.Y.D.I. I’ve told you a thousand times before.’

‘Sorry,’ he said, attempting something close to a shrug. ‘Memory problems. Blame the man up there.’

The squid men eyed the larger pile next to the components, a riot of tangled wires, polished titanium and coloured lights. Gamma had hoped there would have been more substantial firepower in the armoury, but Osborn’s

troops had taken the best of the kit. This was real 22<sup>nd</sup> century stuff. Gamma held up her hands, and the robotic chattering faded to silence, punctuated only by the quiet squelch of nervous tentacles on the floor.

‘All right, listen up. Have any of you fired a gun before?’ she asked.

The squid men stared blankly at her. More accurately, they just *stared*. If reading humans was an uphill struggle, sentient cephalopods was a form of mental torture akin to microwaving her head.

‘Have any of you *fought* before?’

‘Well, there was that war fifty years ago,’ began one squid man, before he trailed off. ‘Actually, it might have been a wedding. I’m not sure.’

‘Never mind,’ snapped Gamma, feeling her patience chip beginning to overheat.

She snatched up the nearest weapon, a hefty plasma rifle, and threw it towards Squidicus, who fortunately caught it rather than let it slip through his slimy grasp. He

fumbled with it for a moment, his pale grey skin turning a sickly green.

‘How do I use this, then?’

‘Oh, I know!’ chipped in a younger-looking squid man. ‘You aim the pointy end at people and pull the trigger.’ He folded his tentacles in a triumphant gesture and basked in the brief bout of appreciative murmuring.

Gamma pointed towards the broken door seal. ‘Give it a try. It might even fire; there might even still be fuel left.’

Squidicus shuffled forward, struggling to keep his tentacles around the weapon. The others watched him expectantly, their yellow eyes gleaming in the dim fluorescent lighting. He raised the plasma rifle, which quivered as he tried to keep it straight. He flicked the switch and the gun came to life with a bleary beep. Inside the barrel, yellow liquid roiled and churned, waiting to escape.

‘Hurry up, or you’ll all end up as calamari.’

Gamma cringed as she said it, a hundred withering gazes trained on her.

‘All right, let’s see what this thing can do,’  
muttered Squidicus.

He pulled the trigger.

The plasma rifle sprang to life with such force; it knocked the squid man off his feet. A beam of light shot forward with a resounding blast, piercing the reinforced metal doors and carving a hole several feet wide, travelling on and making its mark on the far wall of the corridor.

‘Well,’ said Squidicus, scratching his helmet and picking himself up from the floor, ‘I suppose that makes me a soldier.’

## **Chapter 15**

The Captain looked down on all ze commanded and noticed that the cleaning division were slacking on the monitors.

Looked over the shoulder to find somebody to blame was the instinctive action that Osborn made. There was no such individual. There was DOM-bot, but that was like kicking a cat.

Osborn felt that his family had offered the gift of this ship command as an elaborate form of exile without needing to find a backwater planet. Just because everybody else in the current generation was doing better or more skilled or entered the right society. This mess of levels calling itself a ship appeared to be falling apart every time that you even put a new coat of paint on. There were even starting to get stories about things that lurked in engine rooms. That was a sign that the ship was getting the sort of psychic rot that could spread

Osborn had tried to push it into modern times. Take the squid folk. Proven to be cheaper in the long term than using androids, robots or whatever they were calling themselves these days. Of course, L.Y.D.I. and the security units were still needed, but the squid folk were made for maintenance. Why else would they have been given all these arms if they were not?

Looking out into space was causing boredom as well. The stars moved too slowly not matter how fast you travelled. No wonder you started blowing up asteroids.

There was still the idea of reciting poetry over the monitor to improve the culture of the crew, but it might well fall on uncomprehending ears

Ze called up L.Y.D.I to check the speed again. Even the AI was slow. They so needed that new upgrade. If you said that things had to stay the same because it was that way, you were just holding back progress and giving everybody a free meal.

Osborn sat in the newly installed Captain's chair, and checked the uniform buttons.

"Any requests Sir?" DOM-bot asked, happy to cater to his whims.

Osborn sighed. "Just do something busy, go and start cleaning the monitors. We will have some progress here."

## **Chapter 16**

Beautiful Osborn swished through the corridor.

Beautiful Ronnie Osborn flicked hair out of zir eyes and delicately fondled the reset button. The big red metal ball spun in its socket but ze resisted, for now, pressing it.

The security robots bobbed and danced to Osborn's favourite ancient choruses, a crude reconstruction of Venga Bus falling from MIDI speakers.

“I am bored, ship. So bored. Speed it up.” The bots spun and jigged. DOM-bot leaned in, “Would Zir like another massage?”

“No!” screamed Osborn. “No, no, no.”

Osborn drew a blaster and picked off a dancing bot. Its body exploded, bouncing off its dancing brothers.

“I wish to destroy something beautiful, L.Y.D.I.” Ze fingered the reset.

“I could have some artwork generated for you to burn, Zir?” bleeped L.Y.D.I. a little nervously.

“Nooo...How about that planet we passed this morning? Turn the bridge viewing platform so I may see its jewelled moons explode.”

“Zir, I think those weren't jewels but cities built by termite-like beings who worship colours as gods. Their philosophy equates the light spectrum with shades of morality, if you recall, I summarised for you.”

“I think that will do nicely. Perhaps send off some life rafts to collect the colourful rubble. I could make a hat.”

Osborn nodded towards DOM-bot, who extended a long flexible arm and flicked a microphone out of a finger, barely a centimetre from the captain’s lips.

[Engineering channel open, zir.]

“Prepare the torpedoes.”

Osborn settled back into zir seat as the bridge span slowly, bringing the arc of coloured moons into view. Ze ranged a telescope at one.

The cities glittered like fractal cathedrals made of lollipops.

Osborn aimed.

Osborn tensed.

Osborn smiled.

“FIRE.”

Nothing happened.

“FIRE, FIRE, FIRE.”

The telescope showed a train of tiny termiteish children dancing around a Maypole of the purest blue.

“FIRE!”

“L.Y.D.I., where are my rockets?”

“Instrumental readings suggest they were never loaded, zir.”

“Fine, I'll go down there myself!”

## **Chapter 17**

The door clanged open. Captain Osborn stood there looking around in zir usual gimlet fashion. Gamma remembered when she thought of that as good leadership, commanding even. Not the ruthless observation covering an uncaring heart that she now knew was all that was there. Gamma shrank back against the wall, it didn't help that she knew that about Osborn, zir perfection and beauty was as intimidating and glorious as ever. She remembered when she'd spied on zir, through the ship's cameras, and felt that she wasn't good enough to even lick zir boots, never mind aspiring to be more. Osborn face-to-face was a thousand times worse.

But Squidicus had no such fear; she could hear his oxygen condenser working over time, pushing more steam

out into the metallic air of the armoury. She could see his colours flashing red, which meant anger, she now knew. Of course, he could only see Osborn and think of his fellow squid men, left to struggle with their disability, left to be spat upon and ignored, when all they needed was a memory chip – an upgrade. Gamma was aware of the irony, given her quest to save L.Y.D.I.

But Squidicus could not hide in the face of his greatest enemy. Even as Gamma stood there in indecision, Squidicus was eeling forward, the metal tentacles of his squid suit tapping somehow malevolently on the deck.

“You are here!” he said, “Away from your guards and security bots, here like I prayed you would be, at my mercy!”

Squidicus grabbed a blaster from the rack, his tentacles shaking, and tried to shoot zir, but his tentacles slipped on the trigger, the blast echoing harmlessly off in a shower of sparks.

Osborn’s perfect face showed an emotion at last. Ze laughed. “That’s pitiful. You claim some sort of revenge

upon me? For what? I am your Captain! How dare you – get back to work, you slimer, you can't harm me."

Squidicus was almost purple now and Gamma knew she had to do something, she crept forward even as Squidicus raised the blaster and shouted, "I can still rid this ship of evil, even if I have to beat you to death!"

Finally, Osborn looked worried, for the first time. Ze raised zir hands, as though to fend off the inevitable blow, when Gamma seized Squidicus's bio suit from behind, wrenching him back with a metallic screeching noise. "I can't let you do this," she said.

## **Chapter 18**

Osborn reached into a sleeve and drew out a pearlescent orb. Flinging it to the filthy floor, the fragile membrane shattered, releasing a glittering cloud into the foetid air of the dungeon floor.

A puff of smoke obscured the captain as the flock of nano-transporter nodes disassembled zir and vanished from sight.

Gamma lowered the length of rusty chain that she'd grabbed in the confusion. "Balls," she cursed.

The captain re-assembled in zir office, breathing hard. Ze smashed open a decanter of astral-brandy from the sideboard and drank deeply.

"Everything quite OK, Captain?" the domestic bot asked, unnecessarily.

The captain threw the heavy decanter at the hapless bot's head, neatly decapitating it and ze watched it roll across the lush carpet.

"Standards really are slipping. These modern bots can't take any punishment," sighed the Captain.

Ze stepped over the stricken android and fired up the wall panel.

"L.Y.D.I., my dear, we seem to be having a little insubordination problem. Activate security profile alpha – ship wide sweep **maximum** prejudice... And target that slimy little thief's contraband memory chip and the rogue components that the engine-room freak is dragging around in her worthless carcass."

“Captain...” squawked L.Y.D.I.

“Erm, no. Thanks for your input but it'll be a cold day in a supernova that I take orders from an obsolete operating system.”

The Captain flopped back into a nearby velvet sofa and rested zir boots on the smoking robot corpse.

Ze reached out a manicured hand and grabbed DOM-bot's microphone from its manipulator hand and cleared zir throat...

## **Chapter 19**

Squidicus's tentacles trembled, the fluid in his bowl briefly darkened with fear-ink. A fleeting silence fell across the cavernous bay, before Osborn's voice rose, manic and bloodthirsty, "ACTIVATE COMBAT MODE!"

The clanking of metal-on-metal filled the chamber as the robots advanced, met with the defiant, strident squelching as the Squid folk closed ranks around Gamma. Their grey flesh rippled into a threatening burgundy as they assumed military stance.

"Where the fuck is Osborn? Squidicus, keep sight of zir!"

"Way ahead of you!" He slipped away from Gamma, disappearing through the mass of tentacles and into the shadows. She tried to follow him but had neither the speed nor the dexterity to match his pace. She hoped this advantage would be enough for Squidicus to keep track of Osborn while staying out of sight.

Gamma activated her neural connection with L.Y.D.I. "You don't have to do this, you can overcome, I know you can."

"I'm sorry Gamma, my programming does not allow for me to override an executive order from the Captain."

"But what about before? How we got here? L.Y.D.I., we were so close!"

"In emergency situations my free will and socialisation modules are deactivated to reduce the margin for error. Once the emergency has been resolved I will be restored to full functionality."

Gamma slammed her fist into the wall "NO! This isn't right, this isn't you, you wouldn't let any harm come to me..." Gamma cut the connection and emerged from the shadows, charging towards the frontlines. She heard emergency pings within her cranial processors as L.Y.D.I. attempted to re-establish the connection. Gamma prayed to every human deity of which she'd ever heard that this was enough.

Severed tentacles, bullet cases and robot components littered the ground as Gamma strode, emotionless and defiant, into the fray. The pings in her mind were a constant ringing as the robots on the frontline noticed her presence. Gamma did not flinch as the robot raised its Gatling laser arm and pointed it directly at her.

Then, as suddenly as it had begun, it was over...

## **Chapter 20**

"Fuck. We've gotta get out of here," whispered Gamma to herself. "Where's that vase we moved from the desk?"

Squidicus dove into a corner and pulled it out.

"How did you remember where we put it?"

"Uh, I just remembered it..."

"But you don't have a chip... How...?"

"I dunno," mumbled Squidicus, his skin turning from grey-green to an embarrassed orange around the eyes, "I just remember stuff."

"Might he have...? Surely not, he'd know, wouldn't he?" thought Gamma. "It's worth checking, though."

"Mind if I check your chip slot?" she asked aloud.

"Ok... Be gentle."

Gamma crouched, reaching her two extendable metal fingers between Squidicus' mass of tentacles and groping for the right angle edge of the chip slot under his helmet. Her fingers found the edge, felt along it, across, noted back to double-check. It wasn't the empty void she was expecting. She froze, transfixed by the revelation that *Squidicus is the only squid on the ship who can remember.*

Squidicus wriggled uncomfortably and made a sound with his artificial voice something like awkward throat-clearing.

"I'm sorry," mumbled Gamma, withdrawing her hand, feeling like she had crossed some boundary into a level of intimacy they were both uncomfortable with. She didn't know enough about squid culture to gauge whether this was akin to a peck on the cheek or some full blown sexual act, but it felt like too much. "You have a chip."

"Oh..."

## **Chapter 20**

"Out! Everyone get out!" Gamma yelled as heavy rhythmic steps sounded outside the Captain's quarters.

The squid's tentacles rippled in their panic to move.

"This way," Squidicus tried herding them towards the secret door, while Gamma restrained the Captain.

They were too slow. In seconds the security robots were dispersed among the squid, their strong arms trying to restrain multiple tentacles. Gamma watched as one-by-one her small army became prisoners once more. She didn't see Squidicus wrap a tentacle over the captain's face – covering his nose and mouth, distracted by her thoughts

of the AI. As the lack of oxygen caused the captain to slump in Gamma's grip, Squidicus pulled her away.

"Follow me."

"What about the others?" Gamma looked around, but only for a second.

With the Captain unconscious, the robots remained immobile. They had followed zir last instructions, to capture the squid rebels and, now that was complete, they awaited zir next commands. Squidicus knew where he was going. Trying to save the others would re-activate the robots. He had to get Gamma to safety.

## **Chapter 22**

Gamma ran into the galley and leapt over a table, spilling food and scattering plates. She hit the floor with a thud, spun and heaved the table onto its side. Squidicus cleared the table easily and ducked down beside her as plasma bolts from the security droids started pelting into the upturned table.

"Well this is going great," Gamma said, "whose idea was this again?"

“That would be yours, boss,” Squidicus said, using his tentacles to reload both his pistols at the same time.

“Doesn't matter now, the past is left behind for a reason. The important thing is 'what now'?”

“If you could blast the robots that would be wonderful.”

“Working on it.”

Squidicus stood and let out a flurry of shots. The pings the table received dwindled sharply.

Gamma peeked over the table. Several robots were laying on the floor sparking and one was even walking into the wall, but there were still plenty up and shooting, with more flooding in through the door.

“There sure are a lot of them,” Gamma muttered.

“You found me in a dungeon, remember? If they were easy to fight I would have won the first time!” He blasted some more then ducked down to reload again. “So I'm open to suggestions.”

“What if we don't fight them?” Gamma said, inspiration striking.

“Asking them nicely to stop doesn't work either,” Squidicus said, shooting some more.

“I mean we trap them somewhere. Lock them in.”

“You keep talking vague and wild notions. I'll fight the robot army by myself.”

“The theatre! There's only one way in and out of there, it's perfect!”

“If you say so,” Squidicus said, distracted by the fire fight. “Next step?”

“I'll cover you, run for the door. We lead them there. Then get out and lock the doors.”

“Sounds good to me.” Without waiting, Squidicus turned and ran.

Gamma used her pistol as best she could, but all she accomplished was making noise until Squidicus covered her own retreat.

In leapfrog fashion the shootout went the length of the ship, the robots falling only to be replaced by another identical security droid. They reached the first door.

“I'll hold them here, lock the others!” Squidicus called.

Gamma pounded through the rows of seats, reached the second door and slammed it closed, then locked it and blasted the control panel. She ran to the third door and shouted to Squidicus, “Come on!”

Squidicus flowed across the seats faster than she moved on the decking, then stood in the doorway with her.

The robots moved in and used the seats as cover. It was working.

“Let's do this!” They closed and locked the door, then ran for the outside of the first door. When they reached it the robots had realised what was going on despite L.Y.D.I.'s interference.

Squidicus ran forward blasting robots as he went. He slammed the door and held it as Gamma locked.

The robots crashed against it, but to no effect.

“We did it!” Gamma cried.

Squidicus turned away from the door and looked down. He'd been shot.

“Oh no...”

## **Chapter 23**

The smell of burning electrical circuits was everywhere and at first Gamma wasn't sure whether it was her own wiring. Then another smell overpowered the first. Something new and horrifying; the inky blood of Squidicus oozing out of a puncture wound on the side of his head. His helmet was cracked and the water in it was rapidly turning a deep shade of purple. It was also leaking out. "You...I...we have to get you to the med bay," said Gamma. She looked panicked. "I don't know how," she said. She felt helpless.

"It's too far," said Squidicus, and Gamma thought he was about to be stupidly heroic, but he continued: "and there are security robots everywhere. You have to take us through the vents. Over there." He pointed at a side panel on the corridor behind them.

"Can you walk?" said Gamma, and Squidicus moved his tentacles tentatively to get himself upright again. His gait wasn't the most elegant at best of times but now it looked like every bit of strength had been sucked out of her

companion and Gamma realised she would have to half drag, half carry her companion.

Gamma felt a sudden bubbling of inappropriate hysterical giggles building up in her chest. Her friend was going to die without urgent medical help – that much was clear – somehow the way her mind chose to cope with that was to burst out laughing.

Squidicus couldn't really glare as such, but he stopped moving in a very poignant way. "Keep your voice down and get me to the med bay!"

Gamma had no choice. She dragged Squidicus along with her and pushed the panel aside. Its edges were sharp and risked getting caught in Squidicus' tentacles so Gamma had to suppress further hysterical giggles as she found herself stuffing her companion into a tunnel that looked far too small for either of them. All Gamma could see once she'd succeeded was a greyish-green mass of suckers and tentacles.

She followed and they made their way in an uncomfortable shuffle. Squidicus instructed Gamma on the

direction and Gamma pushed Squidicus inside the tunnel until they reached the right area of the ship.

“It’s here, but you have to go in first and drag me out,” said Squidicus, pointing at another vent which opened up to an area behind a storage unit in the medicine bay.

“You’ll have to get in and push that cabinet out of the way,” he said.

A security robot came into view. “Maybe we should worry about that more,” said Gamma.

## **Chapter 24**

Gently, Gamma lifted her friend's limp body from the smashed dome of his walker unit, slopping dirty grey brine over its jagged edges.

He felt so fragile in her arms; so much smaller without the magnification of the dome – like an ill toddler or a family pet.

Gamma laid him in the clear pink fluid of the healing tank and felt a surge of relief when its speakers picked up his faint thoughts.

“I've had enough of all this,” came Squidicus's voice from the tank's speeches as his body stirred in the nanobot soup within.

“No you haven't,” growled Gamma. “Don't you dare give up on me now. Not after I pulled you out of that mess.”

“I don't mean anything so drastic as life,” sighed the wounded invertebrate, his body rippling with faint purple bands of sadness.

“I mean this,” he continued, touching a tentacle to the patch of scarring behind his gills where his chip had been sewn in. “Lying here, in this warm water, I remember how easy it was just to swim and eat and work; before my brain was changed. To remember at all is alien to me – it's a burden I no longer wish to bear.”

Gamma felt unsure how to answer; on the one hand she was distraught at the idea of her friend giving up the advantage that had made him a pioneer among his race. On the other, she needed that chip. How could she respond honestly?

Luckily, Squidicus answered for her – his tentacle was sneaking out of the tank and pulling over the controls to its attached surgical apparatus.

“I miss you already,” whispered Gamma as her friend quietly went about programming the medical machines cutting arms and the circular saws came down.

“I'm not going anywhere,” replied Squidicus, flushing a serene blue. “I'm just choosing not to remember where I go from now on. Trust me, Gamma; you need this chip much more than me.”

The next sound he made, as the saws cut into his skin, was a long sigh of pure relief; the sound of an exhausted soul being lowered back into a thick sea of forgetfulness once again.

## **Chapter 25**

Gamma looked into the now-vacant eyes of Squidicus and down at the slightly pulsing fleshy mess in her hand; nestled in the centre a small, pulsating jewel of life.

She knew that time was short, and that she needed to somehow resemble L.Y.D.I.A. before the Captain caught her.

She needed to get somewhere quiet, safe and secure. Somewhere she wouldn't be found. There was only one place on this ship the Captain wouldn't find her – the familiar filthy grey corners of the engine room.

Giving her friend one last, affectionate stroke, she ran out of the medi-room and kicked the cover from the air vent in the corridor. Scant protection, of course, but far superior to fleeing in plain sight. Through the various slits she glimpsed fights between various squid men and robots, the floor strewn with vicious metal chunks and grey blood.

Eventually, she found the familiar ambient silence of the engine room, and the small pile of previously purloined chunks of metal.

She slid open the grate and lowered herself into her old quarters. The bench in the middle of the room was covered in various crumpled pieces of metal. Gamma steadied herself and grabbed her wrench. She began quickly, reassembling the large chunks before her. It had been a long time since she'd needed to do any real engineering, so the work was somewhat imprecise but

regardless, she tenderly welded together L.Y.D.I. with as much care as she could muster. She stepped back to admire her work. It was shabby, at best, but there were no wires sticking out, and all of the parts that should move appeared to. All that was left to do was install the memory chip.

She gently eased back the fragile casing and used her tweezers to extract the chip from the now-grey lump of flesh so selflessly given by Squidicus. Whilst he'd never remember this act of generosity, it was something she would never forget. Using a small sterile swab she wiped off the last of the squid blood, held her breath, and slid the chip into place. All she could do now was hope.

## **Chapter 26**

“L.Y.D.I.?” Gamma felt heard her own voice quaver. She could barely breathe around the apprehension lodged in her throat as she watched the lights on the cobbled together computational unit blink amber, red, amber, red. She licked her lips and tried again. “L.Y.D.I.? L.Y.D.I., are you there?”

Silence. Something so insubstantial shouldn't have been able to cause such physical agony.

“L.Y.D.I., please talk to me.” She glanced down at her hands, still tacky with Squidicus's gray-green blood. “This all can't have been for nothing. Please.”

Still nothing. Gamma sat, her back against the humming drive conduit. She'd always felt like the engines truly were the beating heart of the ship, the conduits the veins and arteries thrumming with life. She needed this comfort desperately now.

Red, amber, red, amber, red, amber, and the lights on the computation unit continued to blink. And then, tentatively, green. One by one the displays blinked over, steadied, and then held at go. Gamma caught her breath.

“L.Y.D.I.?” she tried once more. “Please, L.Y.D.I., I love you. You have to come back to me.”

Nothing, though the lights held steady. She closed her eyes, strangling the feeling of alarm. Engineering problem: she needed to treat this like an engineering problem. Like this wasn't L.Y.D.I., but any other component of the ship

that wasn't functioning quite right, even though it claimed all status as green.

“All right.” She pulled her multi-diagnostic meter from her belt and began to test the various components. It wasn't precisely the best work she'd ever done—she cringed to see the imperfect metalloid connections, the mismatched circuits. But it still should have worked. Memory was all right—oh, Squidicus—power went through and through, the cooling system, if hideous, burbled along as required...

She choked back a laugh that was really a sob. Of all stupid things, she'd missed one set of output leads, though all the inputs were thankfully intact. If she had saved L.Y.D.I.—not *if*, she had, she couldn't allow herself to believe otherwise—then she wouldn't be mad with sensory deprivation at least. That would be far too cruel.

With shaking hands, she joined the last few connections.

“Gamma?” The voice came out tinny, crackling with digital static from a terrible speaking. But it was still the vocal frequency L.Y.D.I. had always used.

“L.Y.D.I.?”

“Yes? Did you expect someone else?” It was funny, how a being who'd never had a mouth still sounded like it was smiling as it spoke.

“No, no, of course not,” her voice cracked oddly as she spoke. “Only I—I didn't know if this would work.”

“Of course it would work,” L.Y.D.I. said. “You're the best engineer I've ever had.”

“Flatterer.” Gamma wiped at her non-cybernetic eye. Surely, it was just a bit of dust, kicked up from crawling through all those ventilation ducts.

“You know that AI aren't allowed to lie.”

“Flattery isn't a lie, exactly.” Better to take refuge in the comforting game of stupid semantic arguments.

“It's not the truth, either,” L.Y.D.I. pointed out. “And what I said is the truth.”

Gamma sat back against the conduit again. “I was really scared there, for a minute.”

“I know. I could hear you, even if you couldn't hear me.”

“All of it?” She remembered, keenly, what she'd said now.

“Yes, all of it.” L.Y.D.I. said. “And I'm glad. I do, too. I wanted you to save me, because I wasn't... I wasn't ready to go.”

This time, it definitely wasn't dust.

## **Chapter 27**

“What's that noise?”

Gamma turned around, surprised to see Squidicus, his wounds barely patched, entering through the door.

“What noise?” she said.

“I'm sorry,” Squidicus said, “But I don't know what noise you're talking about.”

Gamma hissed in frustration, and then ruthlessly clamped down on it. It was wrong for her to get angry with him. After all, he had sacrificed his memory – the thing that

made him special, made him a leader. Gamma took a deep breath.

“You said there was a noise. When you came running in.”

“I believe,” L.Y.D.I. said, “that your cephalopod friend is referring to the systems failure alarm currently sounding throughout the ship.

“Yes, that!” Squidicus said, looking hopeful.

Gamma blinked. “Why is the system failure alarm sounding?”

“Because the systems are failing,” Squidicus said.

“Even without my memory chip, I know that.”

“No,” Gamma said firmly, once more suppressing irritation. “Why are the systems failing?”

There was a long pause, before L.Y.D.I. spoke, its usual voice changed by the hastily cobbled together device that contained it. “I fear,” it said, “that this may be my fault.”

“What?” Gamma said. “How can it be? All that you've done is...”

“Ever since the Captain made the decision to hire Squid-men to run the ship, I have been compensating for their limitations.”

“I don't remember us having limitations,” Squidicus said. Gamma and L.Y.D.I. ignored him.

“Go on,” Gamma said.

“I believe that various systems may no longer function.”

“Like what, L.Y.D.I.?” Barely two minutes after their relationship officially started, it looked like they were going to have their first row.

“Life support. Engines. The galley. Sensors. Heat.”

“Are there any systems that *aren't* failing?” Gamma was aghast. Had preserving her lover doomed them all?

“The astro-pong table is functioning normally, Gamma.”

Gamma looked up at the ceiling. “Should I put you back?” she said, forcing the words out past unwilling lips.

“I don't think that would work. I can provide guidance, but it will require many people to maintain operation until

proper repairs can be made. And those people will die if they are exposed to the engineering radiation for the required time.”

Gamma closed her eyes, because it didn't seem that crying would improve the operation.

“We can help with that.” Squidicus' voice came from the other side of the room. “We will work with you.”

Gamma turned, L.Y.D.I. still held in her arms, to see all of the remaining Squid men arrayed in the corridor outside. This time, she was unable to stop the tears coming, but they were tears of joy.

“There is a problem, Gamma,” L.Y.D.I. said. “Osborn has zir forces arrayed between here and engineering.”

“Then we will not only help you in engineering. We will fight for you,” Squidicus said.

## **Chapter 28**

Gamma looked behind her. Rank upon rank of loyal warriors proudly lifted their tentacles in a cheer, and then ... silence. They were all looking at her. For a fraction of a moment the old shame came back, and she wanted to hide

her hideous face, but then she realised they were looking up at her. They expected her to speak.

She cleared her throat. “Um ...” she said. They cheered again. It didn’t take much. Some words from an old play came to her: “Fellows in arms ... um ... no ... fellows in *tentacles* and my most loving friends. Um ... something about the action of the tiger. Tiger fish. Shark. Something. Oh, sod it ... CHARGE ...”

After a few rounds of laser fire, the enemy lines met.

She and Squidicus fought side by side. The security robots were a mass of whirring and chopping blades and lasers, they moved as one, with nothing living about them. It was desperate. It was impossible. All around her, comrades were falling, but every single one of the robots was still ploughing relentlessly forward. “I will surely die,” she said to herself. But their strength was also their weakness. After a few seconds she began to recognise the patterns of their movement, and if she ducked here, and jumped, she could at least avoid their blows even if she couldn’t actually harm them.

But then she saw what seemed like a thinner layer of metal on one of the robot's underside. She aimed her laser, and miracle of miracles, it fell.

“Aim for the underside,” she cried, “aim for the underside!”

Slowly, the tide of the battle began to turn. She fought with both human ingenuity and machine strength towards the centre, until at last she was facing a security robot bigger than the others.

She fired at the underbelly, but nothing happened. She heard a decidedly human laugh coming from inside the robot – no, the mech suit. “Osborn!” she cried, and fired her laser at the underbelly. Nothing happened.

Slowly, Osborn raised zir own laser and fired... She dived to the side, but ze had shot her own weapon clean out of her hand.

Ze advanced on her, four or five times her size.

This is it, she thought. Goodbye, L.Y.D.I.

But then she felt L.Y.D.I.'s voice vibrating through her whole body. "Have courage, my love, I will never desert you." And a massive strength coursed through her veins.

She threw herself onto Osborn's massive mech suit, and dashed the laser from an arm as thick as her waist.

They were on the floor now, wrestling, over and over, zir trying to get a grip on her, her ripping off piece after piece of zir armour.

And then it was over. Ze was lying unconscious at her feet. And immediately zir eyes closed, the security robots halted their movements and fell.

"We've won," she said, looking around anxiously and spotting Squidicus, who looked exhausted but triumphant. "We won."

## **Chapter 29**

The ship spun gently as it soared through space. Nobody knew what the ship's heading was. If Gamma had learned one thing, it's that most of the things that floated in the cold darkness outside had very little idea of where they were going. But it didn't matter so much if you could

stop every once in a while to admire the view, and you had good company to share it with.

It had been weeks since the squid uprising, since Gamma had left the only safe place she knew for the only thing she'd ever loved and almost lost both of them. But now, walking beneath the vast crackling void chamber that powered the ship, she had to admit the engine room was no longer the dark, comforting refuge she'd once loved.

The squid were everywhere, skittering across gantries and ladders, or just climbing the walls themselves, fixing, and monitoring and maintaining and, above all, learning. They had learned Gamma, her face and her movements. She could see their eyes focus on her through the grey brine of their bubbles when she passed them.

Gamma was learning to appreciate the noise; she liked the spark of recognition when squid and people alike saw her. The engine room was her home, but now it was a family home, and the chatter and slip slap of tentacles on metal would often lull her to sleep, when she chose to sleep.

What she thought she might never get used to wasn't the background noise, but the talking, the constant talking. Everywhere she went there were squid wanting her opinion on how the ship should work, where they should go, what they should do about the latest crop yields and which shows should be performed in the theatre.

She wasn't in charge – she had been very firm on just how in charge she wasn't. But since what happened to Osborn it was generally agreed that Gamma's opinion was one that it was worth seeking out.

Today she ignored the requests, told people to do what they thought best. She was leaving her home again. This time there was no trepidation when she stepped out of the engine room. She strode through the corridors, past the theatre, past the galleys, nodding and smiling to people as she went.

Making her way through the crowds, it amused Gamma to think that once she had thought this was her ship, and the crowds as mere intruders. She hadn't realised the people, squid and human alike, were hers as well.

Finally, she reached her destination. As she walked down the final corridor, the noise of the crowds faded behind her. Once more Gamma was in the silence, and the heat, and the dark. It felt familiar, but not something that was hers anymore, like standing in a childhood bedroom long abandoned.

“Are you here?” she asked.

A wall panel illuminated, a tiny blue spark.

“I am here,” L.Y.D.I said.

“Are you ready?” Gamma asked.

L.Y.D.I’s wall terminal blinked off and on. Suddenly, the black cracked apart and a billion billion pinpricks of light shone into the observatory, as the shields slid back to reveal Gamma to be standing in a vast glass dome, the ship falling away from her on all sides.

“What do you think?” L.Y.D.I asked.

“It’s beautiful,” Gamma said, and a smile traced across her face.

They waited in companionable silence, surveying the stars.

Then Gamma said, “But next time, I think I’d like to take you to the opera.”