

Chapter 1 - Minutes to Launch

Gamma-Six “Ginger” scrunched up her face as the enclosing elevator shaft transitioned from metal to glass without any warning. Eventually, her eyes adjusted and she took in the hidden hangar for the first time. Endless ribs of curved steel went off in either direction, each massive beam supporting Wing 3. Drones buzzed around like fish, all of them carrying out essential functions throughout the structure. Then there was the reason this hangar was hidden.

Three decks below, three towering bio-mech units each awaited another in deployment order—and it was T-minus twenty to launch. Her suit's mostly matte blue mass seemed to fill the “cage” created by the crisscrossing lattice-work of pivoting beams and gantries that afforded the maintenance drones access from every angle.

She should have been excited, this was the whole reason she was a member of the ship's crew, after all, but all she felt was dread. After years of training, the practice interface chamber had come to feel more like home than her quarters. What awaited her, however, felt like hostile territory. Unlike the trainer, this cockpit was tied into what was, effectively, the nervous system of another living thing (although hive mind might have been a better descriptor).

No simulation of the suit's operating system, no matter how complex, could come close to replicating the full experience that awaited her. No amount of practice could truly prepare her for becoming one with a swarm of separate but united beings. She had seen others—almost a dozen of them—succumb to a matrix of sentience so complex, so expansive, that it consumed them. Thus far, not one pilot had returned from a sortie. When the suit was recovered, all that

remained was their plug suit—and now it was her turn to vanish in the name of finding a new home for humanity.

Reaching ground level, she was filled with equal amounts of awe and squeamishness at the "suit" she was going to wear. She was going to control this? *This?!* The thing had to be fifteen feet tall, maybe more, it was hard to tell with the machine resting on its knees and knuckles. She could only guess based on the thing's very visible metacarpal bones coming up to her hip.

Despite the dull color she had seen from the descending elevator, at this distance, the surface was like the largest stained glass window she had ever seen. Tiny hexagonal slabs of carbon fiber-infused ceramic overlapped, scale-like, over the back of the machine's hand and arm. The precision of the pattern made her head spin. How had Fiber Optik managed to construct not one but three of these machines while also building the colony ship she called home? Why hadn't the impossibility occurred to her before now?

The facts had always been there, right? The suits were not some sudden revelation. Then again, she had only seen images of the semi-living constructs before now. Another inadequacy. Yet more secrets. Either way, she was here now and had to grapple with the certainty that just like all of her training couldn't prepare her for the interface awaiting her, nothing short of seeing these things up close would have impressed upon her what she was a part of.

Someone she only knew as a name on Fiber Optik's letterhead greeted her at the bottom of the ladder up to the gangway. They said things to her that only registered in the abstract as impressions and not specific words. Even so, she could feel how self-important this

person was, how self-absorbed. They were celebrating this moment like it was the crowning achievement of their life and not the moment before her impending obliteration.

When they were done offering their hollow platitudes, they clapped their hand on her left shoulder and turned her to face the stairs. Then, in a way that made her see red, they saluted her.

The scaffolding of the stairs creaked and wobbled with each step, but she got to the gangway after a moment. Another staffer was there to greet her and guide her to her doom. They, like the executive, offered her praise without any warmth. She stepped down into the cockpit and 'good luck' followed her. The interface liquid splashed around her ankles, the echo deafening in the small space.

The hatch's spiral-shaped pieces slid closed and blue lights came up. Early on, in history class, she had seen holos of racing motorcycles, and the physical interface of the suit was shaped in much the same way. Well, aside from the fin-like structure at the back.

Much to her surprise, the pre-launch procedures seemed to be exactly the same as they were in training. Swinging her leg over, she sat back so that the cables in the fin could attach to the ports in her suit. A HUD flashed into view on the nano-glass embedded in her eyes as the suite of cybernetics in her body synced up to the system. It was a moment later that the chamber began to fill with the conductive fluid. Her calves and thighs tingled as they were submerged. Then her arms, her chest, and finally her head. Resigned to her fate, Ginger let herself drift away one last time as total silence settled around her.

Chapter 2 - An Amazing First Impression

Open your eyes.

Open. Your. Eyes.

The phrase, the words, they came from everywhere. Up, down. Ahead, behind. All around. The voices were childlike. Gleeful. They were excited to see her. Small hands seemed to tug at her plug suit, trying to pull her this way or that. Tiny fingers dragged through her hair. They touched her lips and her face.

Gamma-Six?

Gamma! Six!

No, Ginger! See? Ginger.

She groaned as her awareness came back into focus. She was floating on her back, but completely submerged. A cloud of what registered in her mind as pixies flitted about around in the entry fluid that engulfed her. Their diminutive bodies were a deep blue that faded into a glowing yellow-green around the elbows and knees. Their eyes—black, shiny, and somewhat insectoid—were huge in their faces. They continued to say her name in a sing-song kind of way.

Now that she was awake, her body was rising towards what must be the surface. A few song-filled seconds passed and she rose from the ocean without disturbing the surface at all. At first, she saw nothing in all directions. Then, slowly, the shape of a massive figure appeared off in the distance. Six points of yellow-green light flared on what seemed to be its head and it began to move towards her.

There was no sound as it moved. No disturbance of the ocean. It just... moved. Maybe it wasn't moving, she realized. Maybe the space between her and it was shrinking. No one knew what the rules of this space were. No one had come back to say. What else could be done here?

Anything is permitted.

If you have will.

Anything, huh? What about...?

All of a sudden, she was standing on solid ground. It was just a dusty patch of dirt, but it got her out of the... whatever it was she'd been floating in. The figure was close now, maybe fifty meters away. Ginger held up her fingers so that it looked like she was pinching it between them. She hoped the trick would work as she turned and opened her hands to drop the diminished creature into her hand.

Something slimy and wriggly landed in her palm. There was a puddle of goo resting in her open hand. Like with the pixies, the main body was a deep blue and it seemed to be covered in a yellow-green sheen. A huge green eye opened and stared up at her, its iris drawn into a cat-like slit. After a moment, other eyes opened and closed over the gleaming surface of its skin. It reminded her of trying to shake her head to clear it.

"Are you the core?"

It is! It is!

She willed it into a humanoid shape and she was suddenly cradling a slender woman who had her arms around Ginger's neck. She was still quite slime-like. Her hair was a mass of pulsating tentacles. Other thick tendrils formed here and there over her body. Both swayed as if the creature was submerged. Below her glowing eyes, her pointed face was featureless.

[You're the first to have us at a disadvantage, Gamma-Six.] The creature said, speaking directly into her mind. It nuzzled Ginger's throat and relaxed into the embrace. [We kind of like the feeling.]

"Wh-what happened to everyone else?"

[We consumed them, obviously. They were all very... plain.]

"Are you going to do the same to me?"

[No. Not yet, at least. We rather like you. We might even come to love you.]

That strange reassurance did little to calm Ginger as the creature's form softened and started to mold around her. The slime-like flesh of the creature was seeping through the plug suit and each tiny bit of connection made Ginger's awareness widen a little more. The sensation was similar to the final initialization process and that familiarity gave her confidence.

She was eager to feel that power that had been just out of reach in the simulations. The actual might of the machine she was set to pilot. She wanted—no, needed—to be one with it. If that required being one with the creature, then so be it.

[Oh? You enjoy the feeling of your mind sinking into our body?] The words almost felt like her own thoughts and she felt an unexpected rush of endorphins at that realization. [Good. Not one has embraced us like this. They were all too panicked by now to enjoy everything we have to offer.]

Her mind agreed and then pretty much demanded the creature consume her in order to show her.

[As you will it, Mistress.]

Mistress? Yes. That felt right. While the creature was more powerful than her, it also respected her for some reason she couldn't quite parse. Either way, she was the pilot, so she was in charge.

The creature's invasion of her body accelerated. Soon there was no part of her that remained untouched—even her insides had been consumed—and everything was bliss. She knew everything the creature—her Shoggoth—knew.

In a flash, she experienced the memories of every other pilot who had lost themselves to her as prey to a crafty predator. She was superior to them. She had realized the rules of the game the moment she started playing and had won an unexpected victory over a creature that lingered on the edge of incomprehensible. No wonder they had been surprised. We could perhaps be their equal.

There was a flicker, then a spark and Ginger was back inside the cockpit. They had already been deployed, it seemed. They were hit with a wave of sensation that told them they were planet-side and in the middle of combat. Their hands were closed around the throat of another machine. It was bigger than them, but they were stronger. They grinned as thumbs crushed bone and windpipe. They threw their foe aside and crushed its head underfoot before starting to tear into the monster's abdomen with their teeth. They feasted. They devoured. Then, everything went blank in the midst of a triumphant roar.

Wilson and Donovan groaned at the sight of Big Blue as it was unloaded from the recovery vessel. It was an absolute mess. Viscera and fluids covered almost every inch of the

mech's armor. It was going to take ages to get it clean and prepped for the next sad soul to be sacrificed.

"D'ya think they made any headway down there this time?" Donovan asked as they lingered on the pilot-level gantry.

Wilson shrugged. "Don't care. Not like we'll ever know anyway."

They waited in silence as the mech was placed back into its support cage. Once the accessway was secured, Donovan put in the override code to open the hatch. He hefted his cleaning gear. "Well, let's get star-what the fuck?"

Instead of an empty plug suit floating in a few inches of leftover fluid. A young woman with neon green hair was asleep on the controls.

"This is clean crew four to dispatch. We have a survivor."

"Come again, clean crew four."

"I repeat, we have a survivor. The pilot is still present."