

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 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 splashing around her ankles. 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.