

Minutes to Launch

A MistyF Short (#225)

A young woman who has spent her entire life training to pilot a giant robot finds out there's a lot more going on than she has been led to believe.

This story contains mature themes as well as violent moments and horrific scenes.

Chapter 1

Gamma-Six “Ginger” scrunched up her face as the enclosing elevator shaft transitioned from metal to glass without any warning. After a few seconds, her eyes adjusted, and she took in the hidden hangar for the first time. A near-endless number of ribs made from 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.

Five decks below, a trio of towering mech units each awaited another sortie — and it was t-minus twenty to launch. They were humanoid in appearance with flourishes that felt insect-like. Horns, spikes, and the like. They were kneeling, one fist and knee on the floor and the other arm resting on bent knee. Ginger’s unit was mostly matte blue. Its mass seemed to fill the cage-like structure created by the crisscrossing latticework 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.

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 being that was beyond her understanding. 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 mech 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, across 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 mechs were not some sudden revelation. Then again, she had only seen images of the 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 stairs 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. A '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. Blue lights came up. Early on, in history class, she had seen holos of racing motorcycles, and the physical interface of the machine 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

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 vast body of liquid 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 waves were caused by its strides. 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. Suddenly, she 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. To embrace her utterly. Panic rose as the slime-like flesh of the creature seeped through the plug suit. Each tiny bit of connection made Ginger's awareness widen a little more. The sensation was similar to the final initialization process. That familiarity gave her the confidence to seize the moment.

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. There was 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.]

Ginger 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 – 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 it had been surprised.

Chapter 3

There was a flicker of light. Then a jolt of awareness. They had already been deployed, it seemed. They were hit with a wave of sensations that told them they were planet-side and in the middle of combat. Their hands were closed around the throat of something that had been trying to destroy them. 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.

Others they recognized moved around them, doing battle as well. As was correct. They hunted as a pack, as one. Life itself was satisfaction. Then, everything went blank in the midst of a triumphant roar.

Chapter 4

Pvt. Wilson and Pvt. Donovan groaned at the sight of Gamma-Unit 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. Echo and Epsilon's gold and silver surfaces weren't looking any better, either. It was going to take ages to get these clean and prepped for the next sad souls 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 backed 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."

Chapter 5

Ginger woke in her cabin. This had to be a near-death experience because no one came back from a sortie. Still, everything felt real. If anything, it all felt too real. She could taste the ozone in the air from the magnetic scrubbers. She could feel the subtle rumble of the ship's massive engines far away on the main body. There was something else, too. Something nagging at the edge of her awareness that she didn't have words for.

She swung her legs around and climbed out of her bunk. The movement felt more fluid than it had before, more graceful. For someone who was supposed to be dead, she'd never felt so, well, alive! That's when she noticed parts of her plug suit had become part of her body.

The carbon-ceramic armor and fiber optic connection panels of the lower sleeve were seemingly fused to her forearms. There were input ports on either side of her upper arm. She shivered and rolled her shoulders only to realize other ports went down her neck to between her shoulder blades which themselves had been merged with the ablative plating that had covered them.

Her hands moved down to discover that her lower thighs, too, were now fused to armor plating and input ports. The gleaming material along her shin seemed to be merged with the bone itself. There were two ports to either side, embedded into her calf. At least her feet and hands seemed unaltered by whatever had happened.

What sort of black hole nightmare was this? She held up her pad to get a look. There were bits of the plug suit's matte blue collar on her neck. The red of the cuff spread along her jaw and cheek bones. Her eyes were a brighter green than before—and her hair! What happened to her hair? *Why was it—? How was it—?*

She pulled on her boots and pushed off her bunk, sending herself floating towards the door. It didn't open. What the —? She tried the manual panel. Still nothing.

"Unit Gamma-Six, you are quarantined," said a digitized voice. "Please remain in your quarters until a medical review can be completed."

She punched the wall. Something about being trapped stirred a sense of annoyance she had never felt before. She had just experienced absolute freedom, and now she was some caged animal? No. Not happening. She was getting out of here one way or another.

Ginger wedged herself in the doorway and tugged on the seam. Before, her body would have burned from the unfamiliar exertion, but she could still feel the power from her mech flowing through her. This attempt felt ordinary. Trivial, even.

There was a metallic crack. Her fingers slid into a space between the door panels. She tugged harder. The door slid open. When it did, two armed figures were waiting for her.

"Unit Gamma-Six, you are quarantined," said the same digitized voice. Drones. "Please return to your quarters until—."

There was another tug at her mind, a new sensation filtering into her perception. It was a hum and a heat and something else entirely. Then, as if the necessary knowledge had always been there, she understood that she was sensing electrical currents.

"The fuck I am," she said back while trying to disrupt the drone's processes somehow.

"Unit Gamma-Six, we will use force to restrain you." Both drones leveled their rifles at her. They were only rubber pellets – stray fire being deadly and all that – but they would still hurt. A well-placed shot would make any progress impossible

"Last warning, Gamma-Six."

Ginger put her boots against the wall. "Don't think that's happening."

A snap-like sound was followed by a stinging sensation in her shoulder. Another shot hit the back of her other hand.

She could feel the energy in her mouth now, too. It tasted like the iron of blood. The rush of that bizarre fight she had witnessed returned. That throat she crushed. The biomechanical flesh between her teeth. This drone was nothing in comparison.

A biting motion followed by a jerk of her head yanked the cabling out of the closest drone's chest. The second wasn't sure how to respond, even as she pushed off the wall to zip through the low-grav and put her hands around its square neck. She squeezed just like she had before, and the polymer casing cracked in her grasp.

It seemed like she was going to get somewhere when the damaged mechanical guards got reinforcements. These drones had laser carbines and nanoedged sabers.

"Stand down, Gamma-Six! We are now authorized to use deadly force."

Her new sense sharpened as if her agitation with the situation were forcing it to develop faster. On a hunch, she swept her hand, and the lights went out on their weapons. "Go ahead and try."

There were several clicks, but no weapons fired. A drone rushed towards her, saber drawn, but she disrupted its movement enough to break its arm off. She kicked it back towards the others.

"I want to speak to the director. Now."

"Now, now," said a voice from behind the machines. "There's no need for violence, G6. I'm right here."

A comm drone floated into view, the display screen said 'Sound Only'.

"What happened? What did you do to me?"

"Oh, you did this to yourself, dear. At least we hope you were the reason."

"You don't sound sure about that..." Ginger thought of Shoggoth. The creature inside the mech. It had done this to her, and Fiber Optik's Lab Coats had no idea about any of it. Made sense. It was the only thing that did.

"What say you come down to the infirmary for a moment?" the director asked.

Her electrokinetic awareness spread out to engulf the hostiles. It was easy now, like she was just reaching out with her hand. It was equally easy to crush them in her invisible grasp.

"How about you let me back in my mech?"

"G6, you'll be lucky we don't airlock you if you don't behave."

"Behave? Behave!? I'm the first one to ever come back—"

"Except that you aren't. Whatever happened kept the others safe."

The screen flickered on. Two other girls were huddled together under guard as well. One was in a white plug suit with golden accents. The other appeared to be chrome and silver. Emily? Yuna? How were—

"As you can see, Echo-Four and Epsilon-Nine are just fine." The screen switched back to 'Sound Only'. "They're also completely unaltered. It's as if they never even activated their systems."

Wait, had she controlled all three of them at once? That seemed like the implication.

"Now, the fact of the matter is you're the only variable we have to work with, G6. So why not work together to solve this matter instead of throwing a tantrum and destroying all of my drones?"

"Wait, *I'm* the one who survived, and you think *my* demands for answers are just some sort of temper tantrum? Fuck yourself, old man."

Why was she being this aggressive? What he was asking wasn't unreasonable, but she also had to get back to her pilot's seat. Back to her sanctuary. Surely, she could figure everything out there. She tugged the comm drone to her and launched off of it, intending on using the other drones as a pathway through the low-grav.

As she did, her fingers glowed green, and she suddenly had wicked-looking claws instead. They tore into the casings of her prey and accelerated her towards the lift. Claxons went off, probably alerting others to the danger of trying to detain her.

As she closed the distance, she could hear her partner's larger self calling out. Well, they *were* a pair. Pilot and mech. Human and something beyond comprehension. Why not be partners?

The open walkway to the lift came into view as she crashed into the wall that turned the corner. A dozen heavy drones hovered, shoulder-to-shoulder, between her and her destination. She could sense that others were coming from behind her in a pincer formation. A rubber bullet cracked into the panel just shy of her hand. Another hit the carbon-fiber and ceramic armor that was part of her arm and bounced off. There was a crackle as the intercom came to life.

"Please, Gigi, stand down..." Emily said, pleading with her.

“Yeah,” Yuna added. “Calm down before they blow ya to bits and we get sent out again without you!”

She had seen them alive, but it still went against everything she understood about the whole thing. Starting to feel overwhelmed, Ginger’s electrokinetic senses went into overdrive, and she curled into a ball, still clinging to the wall. Nothing made any sense. No one had ever come back. Now an entire group had survived? What in the damned galaxy had she done? What had she become?

[Perfection. Obviously.]

The intercom squeaked a third time. “Forget the quarantine!” The Major? “Let her go. That’s an order. We’ve got issues on the surface, and no one else prepped.”

“But, sir,” one of the drones replied, conveying its operator’s voice. “She’s—”

“--Our only hope right now. Get her in that seat. Now.”

The blockade moved aside. Her hands reverted to normal. She put her fingertips to the zip-panel that would take her across the space. She floated in. The elevator hissed behind her. When her mech came into view this time, it was covered in gunk and there were parts of the blue scales missing. The blue sheen was lost beneath the grime of combat she only remembered as sense memories.

Then something stirred as squiggles began to appear all over the machine. They looked unreal. It was like something was drawing them on the nano-glass between her eyes and the unit. Then the eye formed. That same eye as before. By the time she reached launch level, the inky, sketchy tendrils were everywhere. She grabbed hold of one and rode it to the entry plug.

[You return.]

“I do.”

She took position on the motorcycle-like seat and initiated the start-up sequences. As she did, cables that had been replaced with shadowy, gooey tendrils plugged into her various input ports. Monitors appeared all over in front of her. They all showed a creature that was easily the same size as they were. It was attacking what appeared to be a colony on a planet. Wait, they had managed to get settled? Why keep that a secret?

Around her, the mech systems seemed to bristle with anticipation. That creature was their prey. They would destroy it.

The synchronization was nothing like before. Her new sense expanded as the interface fluids rose up around her. She could literally feel the mech’s extremities as if it were her own limbs. As she adjusted position, dents and rends in the armor began to repair. The slight girl from before manifested in the cockpit.

She kissed Ginger. [Good luck.] Then, they were falling. There was no noise. No air. Only cold and the force of the catapult launch. Ginger’s consciousness stretched out as the planet’s gravity well grabbed hold of them. On instinct, energy waves projected in front of them to slow their descent. Another manifestation of her new abilities?

A black square appeared to her left. “Gigi?”

“Emily?”

“Oh, Gigi! I’m so glad it’s you in there and not – Anyway, your target is –”

“Northwest of my location, I can tell. Somehow. How are you –?”

“Civilians have evacuated to sectors twelve through fourteen,” Emily said, talking over her.

“So keep the fighting to one through five.”

“No idea what that means, but okay.”

Another box appeared this time to her right. It was probably Yuna. “I’m uploading the schematics to your HUD. You should have them... now.”

There was a ringing and then a wireframe of the entire facility came into view over the main visual sensors. How many people were living planetside? How dangerous were these things if they were being kept in space instead of on the ground?

[We are death. They fear us. That is all.]

Ginger and her machine body let out a howl and rushed off on all fours toward its prey. As it did, it reshaped into something far less humanoid and more canine.

“It’s never done that – ”

“ – sync is off the charts!”

“Is that even possi –?”

There was so much more chatter coming in from Emily and Yuna’s open channels. The Coats were panicking. Good. Let them panic.

[You're so vindictive now, mistress.]

"Well, I survived and I don't even have any idea why."

[You know why.]

The creature on the attack was like the inverse of her suit. It was translucent and semi-crystalline. It did seem to have a torso and arms, but they were constantly altering in size. It had a dozen bits of shell that floated on a body that continued to shift and waver. As she approached, half of them turned to regard her.

[Look out!]

She dodged to the left just as a sphere of space the size of her extended body vanished with a sizzle. There was no obvious means of attack, just the aftermath. Then a ringing sound crashed through her senses.

She felt it happen again, and the energy barrier went up. She launched forward with a growl and grabbed one of the shell pieces. A simple squeeze made it crack in her grasp and it crumbled away. A voice that pierced her mind screamed in pain and she was thrown to one side when the creature lashed out.

Rolling to her feet, her body had become humanoid once more. There was a wet noise and she drew a knife from her elbow. The creature tried to vaporize her for a third time, but she parried the otherwise invisible attack like it was second nature. She sent the knife flying and then chased after it.

The blade bit into the creature's morphic flesh and she jumped with her feet out to shove it in further. The blade went clean through and the creature seemed to solidify.

Again, that scream pierced her mind. She lost connection with her body for a second and then her partner was there, holding her. Keeping her tethered to reality.

Her prey was focused on her entirely now. Every bone-like fragment was turned in her direction. She licked her lips. Her new body opened its maw. Her comrades' chatter intruded on her awareness. The panic in their voices, however, did not phase her. If anything, it encouraged her.

She reached back as if drawing a rifle. Another wet noise responded as the weapon she visualized rose out of her flesh. Her shield went up to repel an attack and she fired back, shattering a handful of fragments.

It was the creature's turn to close the gap as it melted into a wave that flowed over the ground and then crashed into her. She could feel it trying to penetrate her mind, but her partner was more than a match for it.

Ginger tore a piece of the creature off with a bite. Then another and another. It was sweet to her, and she could feel herself getting carried away by the rush. She grabbed hold of it and took a deeper bite. Again, the creature seemed to solidify for a moment.

Abandoning its attempt to assimilate her, the creature pulled itself together so that the remaining fragments formed one single piece of bone. It swung the shield-shaped mass and hit her square in the head, sending her reeling and leaving her stunned. Then it thrust forward.

Ginger felt a jerk in her right shoulder, then nothing, then pain that made everything go white. Even though her actual arm was fine, she clutched at the stump all the same. Her partner whimpered in her ear. Meanwhile, the creature took to the sky above her and then vanished into a ripple in space. Ginger stood there panting as the world opened back up.

"Gamma-Six, do you read?"

"Aye, but not sure for how much longer."

The deployment clock had only counted a minute and forty-five seconds. One-forty-five? It'd felt like an hour. Everything ached, and that wasn't counting still-screaming pain of the dismemberment. How was she going to recover from that? How was her partner going to recover from that?

She disengaged from the system and rushed over to her co-pilot. She grabbed the being that looked like a young woman and embraced her. "Don't worry, I've got you."

[It hurts... I never expected it to hurt.]

“I’m sorry it happened! I am! I let you get hurt—”

[We’ll get them for this. The Coats, as you call them will answer for what they’ve done to me. For now though...]

Her partner melted in her arms and sank into her skin, which is when the entry hatch opened. Starlight streamed in as the liquid around her drained out. Just out there was a new world. One that few even knew about. A world that probably wanted to kill her. A world she was fighting for.