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[Gilly]

THE LAUNCH

Before he could go before a global audience of two billion, they wanted to fix his eyebrows. He sat before a light-ringed mirror, on a chair that went up and down at the whim of a woman with silver lips, and tried to keep still.

“The left is fine,” she said. “The right concerns me.”

He’d been in the chair for two hours. There had been a makeup person, a hairdresser, a stylist, and now this second makeup person. His face felt like a plaster model, ready to crack and fall to pieces if he smiled.

“Smile,” she said. It did not crack. “Can I get some three-base paste for Gilligan?”

“Gilly,” he said reflexively. He didn’t like Gilligan.

“I’m so nervous, I could barf,” said the person to his left. “That blueberry yogurt is definitely starting to feel like a mistake.”

Three others were in chairs alongside him; the speaker was Talia Beanfield, the Life Officer. Gilly glanced at her but she was recording herself on her phone. He was supposed to be recording clips, too.

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Service wanted to stitch them together into a behind-the-scenes feed of the launch ceremony.

She caught his eye and smiled. For most of the last half hour, Beanfield had been immersed in towels and clips. She looked good now, though. Her hair was artful and honey brown and glimmered as she moved. “Did you try the yogurt, Gilly?”

“No.”

“Smart,” she said to her phone. “This is why Gilly’s Intel and I’m Life.”

“I’m sorry,” said the makeup woman. “I need to get in there.” She stood between them and resumed her attack on Gilly’s face.

“Stop giving the makeup people a hard time, Gilly,” Beanfield said. “You and your unruly eyebrows.”

“Eyebrow,” said the woman. “It’s only the right.”

“A deviant,” said Beanfield.

“Len’s here,” called a woman by the door. “Last looks, please!”

Gilly took the opportunity to check out the others. Jackson, the captain, was reclining with a white bib tucked around her neck, eyes closed, possibly asleep. She hadn’t recorded any clips, either, as far as Gilly had noticed. Between her and Beanfield was Anders, the Weapons Officer. He had a shock of dark hair and light stubble and was probably the most handsome man Gilly had ever met. On the occasions Gilly hadn’t been able to avoid seeing his own press, he was always struck by how out of place he looked, like a fan who’d won a contest to meet celebrities. Jackson, the war hero; Anders, the tortured dreamboat; Beanfield, the effortlessly charming social butterfly . . . and Gilly, a permanently startled-looking AI guy who couldn’t find a good place to put his hands.

The door opened. A man in fatigues entered and clapped his hands. This was Len, their handler from Service: thirtyish and upbeat, carrying a little extra weight. “It’s time. How’s everybody feeling?”

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“Like a painted whore,” said Anders.

“That’s perfect,” said Len. “We’re good to move, then, yes?”

“Yes,” said Jackson, awake after all. She peeled off her bib and was at the door before the rest of them had managed to extract themselves from their makeup thrones. The silver-lipped woman stepped back and, for the first time in a while, looked into Gilly’s eyes instead of around them.

“Good luck out there,” she said.

The van’s windows were heavily tinted. But as they crossed the tarmac, Gilly caught sight of the shuttle gantry: a towering metal lattice that would launch them into the upper atmosphere. From there, they would rendezvous with the ship, which had recently finished its two-year construction in high orbit. They would then perform a monthlong burn, followed by a hard skip to join four other Providence-class battleships that were fighting an alien race farther away than anyone could imagine. Before any of that, though, was the part he was anxious about.

“Here’s the rundown,” said Len. “Your families will be seated to the right of the stage, all together. Feel free to give them a wave, blow them a kiss, whatever you like. You can do that at any point. But especially at the end, as you’re leaving for the shuttle.”

“I did my good-byes this morning,” Gilly said.

There was a half second while Len tried to figure out whether he was joking. “Well, this is the one people see. So, you know, give them a wave.”

“Yep, okay,” he said.

“Like you mean it,” said Len. “Like you’re about to embark on a harrowing four-year mission to save the world and you might not see them again. You know what I mean?”

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“Yes,” Gilly said.

Len eyed him another moment, then turned to Anders. “Paul, there will be two empty seats beside your uncle.”

Those would be for Anders’s brothers, who had been lost in an earlier engagement of the war. There was a third brother who’d taken his own life, Gilly knew, as well as a father who had drunk himself to death. The only member of Anders’s family to attend the launch was an uncle, who, when they’d been allowed to mingle this morning, had repeatedly squeezed Gilly’s shoulder and entreated him to invest in his mattress store.

“The governor will deliver the opening address,” said Len. “Six minutes. For this part, you just need to stand still and look attentive. We then have a two-minute spiritual but strictly nondenominational blessing, during which you may look down or skyward. Alternate between the two as your heart tells you. But please do not, repeat, not, make eye contact with families, wave at anyone, or give off the impression of being bored or distracted.” He eyed Gilly. “Understood?”

“Got it.”

“There are times when your bumbling obliviousness to protocol is seen as endearing,” Len said. “I just want to make it clear: This would not be one of those times.”

“I’ve got it,” he said.

“I believe in you,” Len said, and looked at Gilly a moment longer, which, Gilly felt, undermined the message. “After this, we get into the politicians and corporates.” He rattled off a few names, only some of which Gilly recognized. He’d spent the last year being trained by Service but was still technically a civilian: an employee of Surplex, the company that had built the ship. Of the crew of four, he was the only one who didn’t have a military background. He was also the youngest, at twenty-six, beating out Beanfield by six months.

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“At one point, the admiral will refer to your husband,” Len said to Jackson, who was gazing out the window at the gantry. She’d put on dark sunglasses, which made Gilly wonder how much she could see. The van’s weak interior light carved lines into her face. Jackson had a decade over any of them, coming up on forty. “He may ask him to stand up, or may just call attention to him. Neither of you need to do anything. I just want you to know there will be this moment of acknowledgment.”

“That’s fine,” said Jackson.

“Then the admiral will face you and say something like ‘So are you up to the job?’ And you’ll say . . .” He pointed at Gilly.

“Well, our job is pretty simple,” Gilly said. “When the ship detects salamanders, we attend station. Beanfield goes to Life, Anders to Weapons, Jackson to Command. I attend Intel, back where you can feel the engines. Then we pound everything in a thousand-mile radius into bite-size pieces.”

“Rousing,” Len said. “If, however, we want to sound a more upbeat note . . .”

Beanfield said, “We’re going to spend every day working to repay the faith that nine billion people across two hundred countries have placed in us. If we’re not up to it, we’re sure going to try.”

“Better. Maybe lose the part about two hundred countries.”

“I always say that. Shouldn’t I be inclusive?”

“As a rule, yes,” said Len. “However, some of our international allies are yet to fully discharge their funding commitments for Providence Five, or, just between us, to begin discharging them at all, and the negotiations are ongoing. I’d like to steer clear of that whole area.”

“Also there aren’t two hundred countries,” Gilly said. “I think it’s one ninety-six.”

Beanfield looked at him.

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“I guess you were approximating,” Gilly said.

“Also a fair point,” said Len. “Let’s not accidentally grant statehood to any unrecognized nations. Every flag on that stage has been carefully positioned so we can get an angle of the four of you with the Stars and Stripes behind and the ship visible above.”

“Visible?” Gilly said. It was a popular idea that you could see the ships being built from Earth. But they were the tiniest of dots, little pinpricks distinguishable only at night.

“Sure,” said Len, “after a few filters and adjustments.”

“Oh,” he said.

“And that’s it,” said Len. “Then it’s a direct walk to the shuttle gantry and you don’t have to worry about any of this bullshit anymore.”

“There’s always more bullshit,” Anders said.

“That’s true,” Len said, “but this is the worst of it. Any questions?”

The van slowed and turned down a path marked by glowing orange cones. There was a rising white noise, which Gilly hoped was from the shuttle’s engines but probably wasn’t. Earlier today, during the family meet-and-greet, when tiny frilly nieces and nephews in dark suits were running around the legs of politicians and generals, one of his cousins had asked, *Do you know how many people they say will be there?* and Gilly had a rough idea, because the send-off crowds had been huge for every Providence launch, but before he could insist that he didn’t want to know, the cousin had said, *SEVENTY-FIVE THOUSAND*. Gilly couldn’t stop thinking about that. He might be able to pretend the broadcast audience didn’t exist, but he was going to have trouble ignoring that many faces.

“Hey,” Beanfield said, kicking his shin. “You’ll be fine.” She was smiling, and it did make him feel better, not just the smile, but the reminder that Beanfield made crew because she had preternatural people skills, to the point where she occasionally seemed to read his

mind. They were all here because they were among the best in their fields. They'd been chosen by a sophisticated and demanding software-guided selection process. His presence wasn't an accident. He was where he was supposed to be.

The van stopped. The doors were pulled open. He stepped out into a light wind and a high sky and hundreds of people scurrying about in black caps and headsets. Between huge trucks were stacked crates and heavy equipment. A short distance away rose the back of the stage, fifty feet high and twice as long in either direction. Even so, he could see the crowd spilling around its edges, an indistinct mass like a single creature. The noise was like the rolling of an ocean.

"Flight crew have arrived at stage rear," said a woman in a black cap.

"How many people?" asked Beanfield.

"Latest estimate is eighty-five thousand," said Len. "We've had to open up the overflow areas."

"Oh, God," Gilly said.

"Don't sweat it. There'll be so many lights in your face, you won't be able to see a thing."

A drone buzzed over Len's shoulder and hung there, watching. Beanfield gave it a thumbs-up. Gilly turned away and peered skyward, trying to approximate the ship's location.

"Can you see it?" Beanfield said.

He shook his head. "Too bright."

"But it's there." She smiled.

The crowd gave a roar. Something must be happening onstage. A moment later, he heard a booming voice, echoing weirdly because all the speakers were facing the other way.

"All right," said Len. "This is where I leave you." He eyed them.

"Don't make it sappy," Anders said.

"I want you to know, you're the best troop of performing monkeys I've

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ever had,” Len said. “In all seriousness, I’ve been nothing but impressed with the way you’ve carried yourselves through pre-launch. I know you didn’t sign up for the media circus. It makes me very happy that we’ve reached the point where you can finally start doing your real jobs. I know you’ll make every one of us you’re leaving behind very proud.”

“Don’t make me cry,” said Beanfield. “This makeup took hours.”

“Jackson,” said the woman in the cap, pointing where she wanted her to stand. “Then Beanfield. Anders. Gilligan.”

“Gilly,” he said. The announcer said something at the same time and the crowd roared and he didn’t know if she heard him.

Len straightened into a salute. They returned it, even Gilly, who had never quite gotten the hang of it. The woman began to lead them toward the stage steps. When Gilly glanced back, Len was still holding the salute.

“There’s one more step than you expect at the top,” Len said. “Don’t trip.”

When it was over and he was strapped into a force-absorbing harness, his knees pointed skyward, blood draining toward the back of his head, he watched a wedge of blue sky turn black through thick polymer glass. The shuttle shook like an old carnival ride and roared like a waterfall but all of that was normal. It was actually comforting. He knew what to expect here.

“Look at Gilly,” said Beanfield, her voice crackling through his earpiece. “He’s more relaxed than he was onstage.”

Anders laughed.

Jackson said, “Clearing the Kármán line. We’re officially in space.”

“This is the closest you’ll be to home for four years,” Gilly said. “And now this is. Now this is.”

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“This’ll be a boring mission if you do that the whole time,” said Anders. “How much longer to the ship?”

Gilly knew, but Jackson answered. “Three minutes until we reach synchronous orbit. Ten until we can pull alongside.”

“Look,” Beanfield said. “Stars.”

“There have been stars for a while,” Gilly said.

“But so many.” She was right: The glass was full of them. It wasn’t like home, where you gazed up at a sky scattered with a few bright pinpricks. Here was a city of endless lights. “And they don’t twinkle.”

“No atmosphere.”

“Deceleration burn,” Jackson said. “Brace yourselves.”

The shuttle clunked and whined. An invisible hand curled around Gilly’s body and pulled him forward. The harness creaked.

“Shit,” said Anders suddenly.

“What?” said Jackson.

“I think I left my phone back there,” he said. They laughed.

They established synchronous orbit ahead of the ship, so it was coming up behind them, drawing closer in a way they couldn’t see. The shuttle had no artificial gravity; they would have to remain strapped in until they docked. Jackson called out distances until at last something white began to slide across the polymer glass, which Gilly recognized as a section of the ship dedicated to Materials Fabrication. Then came more, section after section, some stenciled with flags, some with designations. He knew the ship’s design intimately but hadn’t seen it firsthand since early in its construction, and felt surprise at its size. It was one thing to know it was three miles long and a touch over one million tons, another to see it.

“It’s like a city,” Beanfield said. “Or an island.”

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“Mass projector,” Anders said, pointing as a cubelike protrusion slid by. It was in a retracted state, but he was right: It was one of the guns. “That’s the good stuff.”

“Anders, we’ll pass your station in a minute,” Gilly said.

“Where?”

“You won’t be able to see it. It’s a couple layers beneath the hull.”

“Oh,” Anders said. “Thanks, Mr. Tour Guide.”

Gilly shrugged. “You won’t get to see it from the outside again.”

“I can’t see it from the outside now.”

“Well,” Gilly said.

The ship continued to pass by: laser batteries, flat sensor arrays, and housings that would generate their electrostatic armor. “All right,” said Anders. “I don’t know about you, but I’m ready to get out of this harness.”

“Almost there,” said Jackson. The ship was appearing to slow, which meant they were matching its speed, preparing to dock. Until recently, a hundred people had worked out here with tens of thousands of drones. For the last two weeks, though, the ship had sat practically empty, waiting. The last remaining skeleton crew would ride this shuttle back home.

The ship revolved and disappeared from Gilly’s view. The shuttle bumbled around for a minute, adjusting position. There was a solid *clunk*.

“Welcome home,” Jackson said. “Let’s go to work.”

The ship was silent. It had a faint smell that put Gilly in mind of orange peel. The breach room was large enough for only one person at a time, and on the other side was a low-ceilinged corridor, sprouting protrusions and bundles of cable, which threw shadows in the

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glow-lights. They would have to get used to clambering around, ducking beneath or squeezing past all the stuff that apparently mattered more than space for the crew.

Jackson and Beanfield milled ahead of him. Behind, Anders cleared the breach door and Gilly shuffled up to make room. “Fuck, this is small,” Anders said.

“You didn’t know?” They had undergone hundreds of simulations. Service had hangars dedicated to mocked-up Providence sectional layouts, inside of which they role-played scenarios.

“I thought they were exaggerating.” Anders rotated his shoulders reflexively. “The thing’s three miles long; we can’t get an extra ten inches here?”

“I’m sure there’s a good reason,” Gilly said. “I could ask the Surplex hardware guys.”

“It’s for appearances,” Beanfield said. “We don’t want people back home seeing our feeds and thinking their sacrifices have funded some kind of luxury cruise ship.”

“I feel like there’s a middle ground that got missed,” Anders said, “by about a thousand fucking miles.”

“There will be an engineering reason,” Gilly said. “I’ll find out.”

“Everyone oriented?” Jackson said. “Then let’s proceed to quarters. Collect your film and survival core and begin preflight checks.”

Film was a clear plastic band that fitted around the upper part of their faces and provided information display, local comms, and a variety of ways to interact with the ship. Survival cores were bulky black boxes they had to wear strapped to their backs whenever they left their cabin, and which would, during a catastrophic depressure or thermal event, throw a thin suit and helmet around their bodies and attempt to keep them alive. The cores were awkward and uncomfortable and almost certainly pointless, it seemed to Gilly, since anything that

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managed to get through the ship's hull would definitely kill them all outright. But it was protocol, so he would wear it.

They moved deeper into the ship. At the first ladder port, Jackson spun a hatch to reveal a lit ladder shaft and gestured for Gilly to step inside. When he did, motorized rungs hummed beneath his feet, bearing him upward. Their quarters all lay in the same section of C Deck, with just enough separation to keep them from tripping over each other. He maneuvered through the corridor until he found a door marked QTR-4: GILLIGAN. There was a tactile panel and he pushed it to reveal the only private space he would possess for the next four years.

He stepped inside. The door jumped closed behind him. It was small but efficient. Retractable bunk, retractable desk, retractable sink. Sunken handles that would reveal drawers and a closet. The lighting was pleasantly soft. He moved to the bunk, removed his shirt, and fitted his survival core. When he slid the film over his face, the word HELLO materialized on his closet, as well as above the sink and on the door: places that could serve as virtual screens.

"Cute," he said. He fiddled with the film until he figured out how to dismiss the welcome message.

He moved toward the door. Then he glanced back. It was hard to imagine how much time he was going to spend here. It was really too much to comprehend. But he supposed he didn't have to. He would just take it one day at a time. He hit the tactile button and went out.

The ship burned for thirty-three days. During this time, Gilly acclimated to his routine and the various weirdnesses of being on board a ship, such as having plastic over half his face and not being able to stretch out without hitting something. Most of each day was spent

alone, but they all ate together at least once in Con-1, two of them headed on duty and two coming off, hunched around a retractable table with metal plates and bowls and some nutritionally dense soup, maybe a loaf.

“Ugh,” said Beanfield to Anders. “Is there any chance of you eating like a decent human being?”

“What?” Anders said. There was loaf all over. From clips and pics, Gilly had gotten the impression that Anders was calm and self-assured, but in reality he was kind of manic. He just went still for cameras.

“I don’t want to sit opposite you anymore,” Beanfield said. “It pains me.”

Jackson said, “We’ve reached S-min velocity.”

They looked at her. “When?” Gilly said. “Just now?” He checked the numbers on his film. She was right: The ship was now traveling fast enough to perform a hard skip, which would take them into the fighting zone.

“Yep,” said Jackson.

“When do we skip?” asked Beanfield. “Next twenty-four hours, right?”

“*Where* is the question,” said Anders. “*Sword of Iowa’s* bogged down in Orange Zone. They might want a hand.”

Gilly shook his head. “Two Providences in one zone is a waste. We’ll go somewhere new.”

This was speculation. The ship would decide when and where to skip after processing more information than any of them could imagine. That was how the AI worked: It sucked in unimaginable quantities of raw data and produced decisions that were better optimized and more nuanced than any human could manage. They would be notified once it had made up its mind, and have just enough time to scramble to station and strap in.

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“If everyone could file clips first, that’d be super,” said Beanfield. “There are a lot of people back home following our feeds, and leaving the solar system is a big moment.”

“Clips,” Anders said. “How long do we have to keep that up?”

“Forever,” Beanfield said. “You know this. Gilly, that means you, too.”

He nodded. He’d been lax with his clips. He’d never enjoyed them in the first place and had instead sunk time into tinkering with the ship, which so far had turned out to require a slightly shocking amount of maintenance. In theory, the ship was self-sufficient, able to diagnose and repair faults via a fleet of small crablike welder robots. But in practice, everything it fixed seemed to break again three days later. There hadn’t been a problem with anything that really mattered, but Gilly had spent a lot of time shooining crabs away from leaking pipes so he could figure out the root cause.

There was a short silence. This time tomorrow, they might be engaging with salamanders. They had spent years imagining it and twelve months intensively training for it and now it was here.

“About time we did something useful,” said Jackson.

“Amen,” said Anders, his mouth full of loaf.

They skipped but there was only empty space. This was to be expected: It would probably take a few skips to locate the enemy at first. After their first engagement, the ship could use the data it had gathered to search more effectively.

A week passed and Gilly began to wonder if the war would be over before they did anything.

“Look at this,” Anders told him over comms. He sent a clip to Gilly’s film: *Sword of Iowa* deploying a million tiny drones to unpick

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a salamander hive. Everywhere was debris. “We should have gone there.”

“Don’t question the ship,” Gilly said. “It’s smarter than you are.”

“Then why can’t it find anyone to shoot at?”

Gilly opened his mouth.

“I don’t want a real answer,” Anders said. “I’m venting.”

“Oh,” Gilly said. “Well, I’m sure it will be soon.”

Anders sighed dramatically. “If I don’t get to grill some salamanders, I want a refund.”