

Samantha looked up, into the pulsating array, its incredible movement mesmerising her, as it floated, impossibly, in mid-air. Soon, the platform would lift her into that impossible heart, where the suit was all that stood between her and annihilation.”

General Kaelen spoke to her through a two-way speaker system from the other side of the glass. Typical of the Generals, Samantha thought, there’s always something between them and whatever’s dangerous.

“Captain, the suit may feel... invasive,” said Kaelen. “But without it, the Array will unmake you before you take a single step.”

The soldier approached, cradling what looked like two pieces of gear—oversized, slick boots glistening with a faint inner light. Except... they pulsed. Slowly. Like something breathing.

“Place one on each foot,” the soldier instructed. His voice was steady, but there was tension there—as if he’d seen this before and it never stopped feeling wrong.

Samantha took one. Warm. Supple. Almost soft, yet firm in her grip. It quivered faintly, like an animal testing her touch. A ripple shuddered across its surface when her fingers tightened.

She slid her foot inside—and gasped. The thing *closed*. Not fast, not slow, but with the eerie patience of something alive. It gripped her ankle,

then climbed, liquid muscles knitting into strands, strands braiding into plates. The other boot did the same.

They didn't stop at her knees. They met high on her thighs with a wet *click* and fused, a single sheath wrapping her hips, her spine, her ribs. It hugged her tight enough to steal her breath, like being sealed inside a second skin that didn't quite trust her yet.

The surface hardened as it moved, shifting from pliant flesh to a seamless carapace of black opal threaded with veins of silver light. Her heart hammered; every beat echoed faintly inside the suit as if it were... listening.

When it reached her collarbone, it paused, quivering like it wanted more. The soldier stepped in, holding the last piece—a helmet grown from the same living alloy. Its visor shimmered with ghost-light.

"Breathe deep," he said, though his own lungs sounded tight.

She took the helmet. It pulsed once, like a heartbeat, before she slid it over her head—and the world narrowed to darkness shot through with veins of blue fire. Ba-dum. Ba-dum. The sound of her own heart—or the suit's—filling the void.

The visor had a display, just above her eyeline. Her vital statistics. Her heart rate was fast, but

slowing, back to normal. Her chest moved in and out with each breath, but she couldn't tell if she was breathing, or if the suit was doing it for her.

The soldier came to her again, and handed her the weapon she had seen herself holding in the photographs.

Nothing about what she was about to do felt right to Samantha. It was against her very nature to step into a situation that she wasn't absolutely certain about. There was zero certainty about this.

The suit felt wrong. It felt alien, alive around her body, like it was listening to her insides. The Array felt completely wrong, everything about it was impossible, its movement, its colours, its hanging in mid-air.

As the platform started to rise, she shouted at the General,

“How many of you have made this jump before me?”

Just as she was about to enter the Array, the point of no return long gone, his answer came, turning her mind inside out. She screamed for them to stop.

“Nobody has done this before Captain, this Array was made for you, you're the first.”

The platform kissed the Array—and reality broke.

*Sound imploded into silence, then surged back like a tidal wave inside her skull. Beneath it throbbed another rhythm—slower, heavier, not hers.”*

Her vision bent—angles folding, colours sliding like oil on water, shapes warping in ways her brain rejected.

Her heart hammered. Then it wasn't in her chest anymore—it was everywhere, pulsing in the suit, in the light, in the floor beneath her. Another pulse answered, slower, patient, *watching*.

She tried to breathe, but every breath tasted like electricity. Static fizzed on her tongue as the Array gripped her, pulling her forward—or *inside*—and something brushed her mind. Curious. Cold.

Then everything went white.