

Blumlein

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A work of fiction, meant for adults. Read something else if you are not an adult, or are offended by stories with sexual content. Then again, if all you're looking for is in-out, in-out, in-out, you should probably read something else. I welcome constructive comments. Enjoy.

The whole station went nuts after the last shot; I was still in the med bay, still doped to the gills. Somehow, I know that's part of it, that I'm part of it. I'm sure. They're supposed to tell me more today.

Don't ask me what's going on, I'm just a worker bee, hired for my size (I'm short, under 5 feet), diving experience, and construction skills. Well, that and security clearances. A year ago I'd been working on the sea bottom, placing and retrieving "instrument packages" around fiber optic cables, occasionally doing some fairly intrusive and skilled work on those cables. Small hands, small frame, good with tools, good eyes, doesn't freak out easily, good in tight spaces.

Now I'm floating in space, part of The Next Big Thing (the next Big Secret Thing). Eight weeks of intense training that washed out a lot of very skilled guys, one of a bunch of unlisted passengers on a shuttle flight, then months of construction work. I don't know if I'm one of the lucky ones or not -- they kept me on after the final construction phase, part of the maintenance and support crew.

Can't be because I'm putting out -- six women on the station and I'm the only non-geek. I made it quite clear during training that I don't fool around. Add "fast and nasty" to my qualifications.

I get along good with the brains. Mills and Nakamura like me. Pennoyer and Neff don't give me any grief. I do what they tell me to do, up to the point where things don't feel right, and then I stop and ask questions. Neff got bent out of shape at me when I questioned a procedure, but when he called in Nakamura, she agreed it wasn't right. Turned out if I'd gone ahead, I'd have messed up one of their prize Blumlein tubes.

God, what a weird setup! Officially, we're the "L2 Research Station," but I suspect that officially we don't exist. Nakamura told me the "L" stands for "Lagrange," and it has to do with the orbit we're in. Okay by me. And the equipment -- Marx/Fisher Generators connected to Blumlein tubes aimed at the Target Assembly. Beats the hell out of me! Never seen the inside of the TA, and don't want to. Been inside the Blumleins and all over the MFs plenty of times.

So weird -- when I'm "outside," I'm working in full vacuum, concerned about my tether, about *everything* being tethered. I may not know the difference between mass and weight like the brains do, but I know how to get my job done, and how to tighten fittings in zero-g.

And when I'm working "inside," which is about half the time, it's a diving job again, sealed in a different suit, swimming through the insulating liquid that fills the Blumleins. I asked Nakamura once,

how can it be that “something” like the insulating liquid can be a better insulator than “nothing,” the vacuum out here? Why not build the thing out in the open? She told me the driver ladders -- the stuff behind the solar arrays, and parts of the Marx/Fisher banks -- were out in the vacuum, but the energy densities they worked with in the MF final stages and Blumleins were too high for a vacuum.

Not a lot scares me. Doing position welds on the sea bottom or using a scalpel to pick away cable jackets without nicking a fiber? It's not a walk in the park, but I know my equipment, and check my equipment. And double-check my equipment. Same with working outside -- it's a suit, right? Only the pressure works the opposite way. When they told me what the MFs generate, and the Blumleins carry -- millions of volts at hundreds of millions of amps in a pulse so short I don't understand it, that's scary. They showed us a movie of an Earth-based Blumlein exploding, and the damage it did, all because of a nick on one of the polished silver surfaces. And ours are running at millions of times more energy? That's why they seal me in a suit and put me through a half hour of decon before I can swim into the entrance lock. Any contamination in the fluid, any disturbances on those surfaces, and we've got a problem. I told Jill (Nakamura) I felt like a bug flying around inside a bug zapper -- come too close to those surfaces, and that would be it. She pulled up some diagrams and showed me the “shorting member” that's supposed to be in place before anyone goes into a Blumlein or MF. I recognized it -- I told her it's a bar about twenty feet long and half a foot in diameter. She did that weird brainy thing, looking up into nothing for a moment, then smiling; she told me, “Yeah, it would be.” They designed this thing, but they don't have a feel for it, for the scale of it!

What's it do? No clue. It charges and it fires, that much I know. For weeks, they did pre-charges, firing the Blumleins separately. Pre-charge, fire, then send Duncan and me in to inspect, adjust, and repair. Duncan is the only other person who's small enough to swim -- he's just a tad taller than me, another ex-gymnast who learned quick.

We did weeks of test firing. When they did single tubes, Duncan and I switched off. When they started doing multiples, for a while we'd both suit up to swim, and wait for them to tell us which tubes to go to. Then it changed to inside and outside work, so we tried switching off, one of us pre-suited for inside, the other for outside. Worked for a while. Then we got caught on a number of runs where they wanted us both inside, or both outside, and one of us had to re-suit.

The bastards yelled at us for wasting time -- they didn't realize we'd been pre-suited to save them time! I explained it to Jill, who explained it to the rest of them. We got an apology, and from then on they told us what they expected we'd be doing, and understood if we needed more time to re-suit when a test didn't go according to plan. Occasionally they'd even admit they didn't know where we'd be needed, and let us hang loose until after the shot.

The shots -- even though we built the damn thing, we (us maintenance and support people) aren't allowed anywhere near the control room during a shot. At first we were supposed to stay in our quarters, just in case. In case of what? Jill hadn't yet told me the energy levels they were working with; I figured it was standard solar flare or micrometeorite storm precaution.

Then the suit-up area was okay; that gave us something to do other than float in zero-g. You'd have thought, with so many supposedly smart folks up here, they would have figured out why all of a sudden we were able to go in or go out an hour or two quicker after a shot. Gradually most of the station

was cleared for precharge and charge, and only a few areas off-limits during a shot.

We started the push for all tubes full power a few weeks ago. Jill didn't believe it at first when I told her, but she and I rigged an experiment and they learned it's true. When all the tubes fire, I can *feel* the shot somehow. Anything over a certain energy density (that's what they say), I feel it. Nobody else on-station can, or at least nobody else admits to it. We even tried it with me sealed in my suit, floating in the decon tank -- as close to sensory deprivation as you can get. I called the shot when it happened.

Floating -- in the decon tank, floating outside, in the shadow of the solar panels, looking at the stars so far away. Even the Earth looks small from here.

Floating -- I'm one of the people who loves it. Some people can't take it, it just bugs them. I spend my required time in the exercise bay, and more -- I know I'll be headed downstairs eventually, so I need to keep my bones and muscles in good condition. Jill is getting used to it. I think part of the problem is Jill's too brainy; I've told her so. I know why we have the little electric fans all over the place, but I don't freak out, worrying they'll stop and I'll suffocate in my sleep because a cloud of CO₂ accumulates around me in zero-g.

Swimming through the Blumleins, so disorienting. No up or down. Swimming through the last MF stages, the lights from my suit help, and I can maneuver easily. Once in the Blumleins though, all that curved reflective silver, things get very strange.

Been spending more and more time in the Blumleins, at the tip near what they call the diode feed into the Target Assembly. How many hours to get in and out of the suit, go through decon, swim to the tip, and make a 3 centimeter adjustment? Hope it's worth it to you folks!

Oh, I understand parts of it -- I may not be the brightest bulb in the box, especially up here, but I'm not dumb. I get that the whole thing is awesomely symmetric from the MFs to the Blumleins and into the TA. I get that even light takes time to get places. And yeah, the adjustments we're making, an n-hour trip to turn an adjusting screw a turn and a half, I figure it's to get things to line up *perfectly*.

What ever it is, we're getting closer to it, I can tell. When I feel a shot, I tell Jill -- we still keep track of things. Last week, maybe ten days ago, I told her when I felt the shot, and I told her it felt different, it felt, I don't know, balanced or whole or something.

Then two days later, I was floating in the decon tank, all suited up to go swimming again, and called out over my headset, "Bang! And it felt crummy!" Five minutes later, she called me back and told me I was right -- and both of us had to go outside to inspect one of the ladders.

They're so bright, why can't they agree on names for things? To Jill, they're "ladders," but to other brains, they're "multipliers" or "multiplier stages." Whatever. Part of one had been holed by a micrometeorite; it worked well enough during the charging phase, but crapped out in firing. Five hours to take down, repair, rebuild.

Then when we were back aboard, I was "invited" to talk to the whole geek group! They wanted to know what the shots "felt" like, and what made this last one different. I tried to explain it as best I

could. It was just something I felt inside. The good ones felt balanced, even, rounder, something like that. And it felt like they needed to be stronger. Not faster, but stronger, and it felt like they were really close to something, the last few shots, but I didn't know what, it's just the way it felt.

Three days ago, I was outside and Duncan was taking a breather -- just minor adjustments on one of the MFs. I was on my tether, ready to go back in, when all hell broke loose. Alarms sounded over my comm channels. I thought I saw a flash of light, but then it was all pain. It was hard for me to think straight. My suit alarmed that I was losing pressure on the right. It was so hard for me to move my hands, my arms, but I hit the emergency seals and then kicked on my reserve tank to boost suit pressure. They were coming for me, just hold on -- their voices sounded so far away.

Inside the station, inside the lock, alarms sounding everywhere, red lights flashing. Doc and Nakamura rush me to sick bay, still in my suit. Stripped out of my suit, floating naked, they moved me around. Jill apologized so many times, but I forgive her -- when they got me positioned just so, everything lined up. We'd been hit by a micrometeorite swarm. I'd been hit -- one went through my right arm and through my torso. That's what Jill laughed at, everything lining up.

They stopped laughing when they figured another one went all the way through my skull, nearly invisible entry and exits in the suit, and in me. Oh, and another through my left thigh.

They didn't know what to do. They still don't. I was in pain, in shock. They sedated me.

I started coming back a few days later. It would take weeks to get a shuttle up, even if... Not gonna happen. Hell, we knew that when we signed on -- that's why they insisted everyone lose their appendix and wisdom teeth. But I'd already done that as part of the submarine service. Ground support figured it was something like a stroke. They'd used some of the inspection equipment to image my brain; they had a standby plan to use it for that. The images they could get looked nominal, nothing visible in terms of clots or damage. I remember Doc and Jill explaining that to me, and nodding, signing that I understood, even though I was having trouble speaking at that stage.

I got better. I could feed myself, gross and fine motor skills returning. One morning I woke up and I could talk again.

The station was recovering, as well. Duncan was busy, he visited me every few shifts to keep me up on things. Jill visited me, even Penoyer and Neff.

Test firing resumed. I had a relapse -- was it related? Even partially sedated, I knew when the shots happened. I knew when the charge cycle hit a certain point, about 90%. I could feel it. But the shots felt good, balanced. I told them so.

I could feel it, and it did something weird to me. They put me in light restraints, a suit with really long sleeves and legs, lined with soft fleece stuff, almost like a fake fur, my hands in mittens. Part of me understood what they were doing. But I'm not sure any of us understood it all. Do we now?

Part of it was the drive to full power, to whatever the thing was supposed to do.

Full power shots, oh, I felt them -- I saw, felt, tasted them -- so many senses all at once. I guess I was babbling, especially as they went through precharge, then the commit to firing. Like that instant before you sneeze -- you know it's going to happen, and it does.

Doc didn't like it, how I got all excited. They didn't want to flat out sedate me, though, because that could interfere with my breathing, and that's trouble you don't want to have in zero gee. I also think they wanted the info, whatever it was I was giving them. Almost like I was another instrument for the shot. I joked with Jill about that -- being an uncalibrated, wacky instrument. She smiled and nodded and told me quietly I was giving them insights that no other instruments did, and we were getting close.

Jill and Doc talked to me about it. It was almost funny -- some of the brains Earthside were getting interested in how I experienced the shots. Doc wanted to try a different approach, giving me what she called a dissociative -- I'd be loopy, like being stoned. Was I okay with that? Sure, let's do it.

I thought full power was the top. It wasn't. As Doc shot me up with the new drugs, Jill explained that this next shot was a big one -- Q power, extra long precharge and charge times. They were going to record me, not just audio, but video as well, just to see. She'd come down and check on me as soon as she could after the shot.

I'll always remember -- I was feeling stoned, like Doc said, fuzzy and warm in the restraints, and Jill kissed me on the forehead before she left.

It was like I was a little kid again, in my bed at home, all wrapped up with my favorite fuzzy teddy bear, the teddy bear I loved so much. It was almost as big as I was, and I hugged it and slept with it. It was such a good dream being back with teddy again.

But the dream changed -- my skin was crawling and my muscles felt funny. Part of me knew what it was and I tried to say it was the charge level, I think I did, and I wanted to wake up from the dream, but I couldn't.

I couldn't wake from the dream -- I was little, and I was sick, holding teddy, needing teddy, and the feelings on my skin and in my muscles just got stronger and stronger.

I remembered when I was little -- I didn't want to remember -- I'd been sick, so sick, and someone wanted to take teddy away from me. No, don't take teddy! Mommy and daddy yelling, pulling at teddy -- leave him with me! But I was feeling so strange, and something was going to happen, so soon now. Don't take teddy! But mommy held teddy, and me, and daddy grabbed teddy, or he tried, and he pulled at teddy, but he only got the head, and teddy's head almost came off, only holding on to his body by a little strip of fur.

Don't take teddy! I need teddy! I *need* teddy! And that's when it happened, the shot.

I've seen the video, with some of the shot traces superimposed on the edge of the screen. Just before the shot, I'm crying for teddy, that I need him so much, and then my eyes opened so wide, and I made a sound as the shot went off, and then I was unconscious. Doc ran down to me as soon as they allowed movement. Jill was right behind her.

When I woke up, I still wasn't right in the head. I wanted teddy!

That's when others started coming in. Questions, so many questions -- I tried to answer, but I was still doped up. I needed teddy! Where is teddy!

Jill held me, Jill and Doc. They held me and told me it was all right. I think Doc gave me something different, and I slept for a while.

They let me straighten out for a day and a half -- no drugs, plenty of oxygen, Doc fussing over my diet and electrolytes and Jill staying close by. Jill looked scared and confused; I'd never seen her like that. Did something happen? With the shot? The way she responded, I knew that had to be it -- something to do with the shot.

Jill, Doc and I talked. They ran me through some standard evals, which I passed easily. They showed me the tape, and we talked about it. I had some memories of the whole thing, but they were fuzzy -- fuzzy like teddy. Oh yeah, I remembered the precharge and the ramp-up; I'd felt full, too full, uncomfortable like eating way too much only worse.

It was weird, the video of the shot. I'm crying that I need teddy, and suddenly I go quiet and my eyes go wide open -- just as they start final sequence for the shot. I make a noise as the shot goes off, twitch, and I'm out.

Some other folks wanted to talk to me as well. Jill and Doc would be there. Okay? You mean I have a choice? I was trying to be funny, to ease some of the tension, but it didn't work. Sure, let's do it.

The CO of the whole shebang came in -- I'd only spoken to him maybe three times since I'd been up, and the last time had been when he'd apologized to Duncan and me when they found out we'd been presuiting to save them time, and they hadn't realized it.

He tried to explain it to me. He called it the Gadget. It was supposed to recreate the conditions of the Big Bang, the start of Everything. But some of them were arguing that it wouldn't re-create the Big Bang, but create it anew -- and all bets would be off.

What was that supposed to mean to me, a diver?

He shook his head and shrugged. They weren't sure -- back to when all things were possible?

He had some strange questions for me -- did I remember how old I'd been when I was really sick? Around five, I thought. And where was I living? That I wasn't so sure of -- we moved around a lot. Gulf coast somewhere? I think I was in kindergarten, so you might be able to check school records. Yeah, kindergarten -- kids were teasing me about teddy, about how he was bigger than me.

He smiled and nodded. Had teddy been important to me?

I closed my eyes for a moment, remembering teddy, and remembering teddy being taken away.

Looking back, I know that incident shaped my life in so many ways. I opened my eyes, looked at him, and said simply, "Yes."

He looked at Doc and Jill, then back to me. They were still arguing about it, about whether to tell me or not. Initially when I'd told Jill I could feel the shots, nobody believed it. But we'd proven that I could, and more. I'd demonstrated that I could sense energy levels and target balance.

He smiled, a strange smile, and his eyes got watery. They didn't know how it happened, or why, but maybe we'd discovered something even more important -- that we were the product of intelligence.

What does that mean? I didn't understand.

He shook his head. He didn't understand either. Was there a God? Had we found the Hand of God? His footprints at the beginning of Time? Or the other view, that it was all Illusion, all a Dream -- but then who was the Dreamer?

I didn't understand.

He took a page out of the folder he was carrying. They were still running tests, but those would be done in another day, and he didn't care what the idiots on the ground said.

At the instant of the shot, so many things happened -- with me, with the Gadget. There inside the TA -- were we recreating the Beginning? A new Beginning? They didn't know. But they did know, in spite of what the idiots on the ground said, that I was connected to it, deeply connected.

After the shot, when they looked in the Target Assembly, and the spot which should have held the Beginning of Everything, this is what they found.

He showed me the page.

Floating inside the TA was teddy, head hanging on by those threads, by that thin strip of cloth.

Jill held me as I cried.

FIN
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