

Fly

© Copyright 1999-2000 by silli_artie@hotmail.com

This work may not be reposted or redistributed without the prior express written permission of the author

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.

We reached the release point; I wondered why we were here at all -- the two of us were babysitting the AI autopilot to the release point where we'd drop the autonomous AI probe. Jerry was in the pilot seat; she had a better view than I did. Pilots still got windows, so she could see the curvature of the Earth in our high-altitude twilight. I was in the back, wizzo, the baggage officer, minding our payload and other systems. Besides watching out for our safety, I watched our ship's AI talk to the probe's AI. The "experts" say data goes by way too fast for mere humans to interpret. But those experts haven't lived with wires in their skulls hooked up to these systems as long as we have. In one sense they're right; I couldn't interpret the data, but I knew what it "smelled" like -- there went a navigation update; that was satellite positions, there was a request from the probe followed by a reply that felt like weather data. As far as our bird and the probe were concerned, about the only thing I had to do was approve the launch order.

But we were working hard; I'd gotten the launch order and given my okay; I knew Jerry's status screen showed the same as mine; we felt the probe going full awake, slurping one last dataset from our onboard systems, and telling us it was ready to do its job. Whatever that was -- we weren't told what they do, we just deliver 'em. It would do its job and squirt the results back up through a satellite datalink; some of these missions are over before we're back in the hangar at Groom Lake.

We got a ten second release beep, then a nice chime and a little bump as the probe dropped away. With the time dilation caused by the flight drugs, that ten seconds felt like a few minutes. I said, "Let's go home," as we started our turn. Jerry must have taken over from the AI; I was pressed back into my couch and got a view of the earth through the little viewport they gave me in the back.

"Got breakfast plans?" I asked as we flattened out.

I heard her laughter in my head. "Nah -- just like to fly a little, remember what it feels like."

"Roger that," I told her. Jerry is a great pilot, one of the best. Hell, I'm one of the best at my job as well. It's quite a coup to crew these birds, they're still so new. And feel it she could -- I occasionally tagged along, experiencing what her link gave her, mapping our bird's status on to her senses, feeling the temperature of the chines and leading edges along your body, feeling fuel flow to the twin engines. And the augmentation works the other way, mapping her muscles and

reflexes back through the control surfaces, augmenting her already lightning-fast reflexes to let us dance in three dimensions. My link gave me similar sensations and control, mapping the spook and payload systems to my senses and body, a body drugged and wired inside a g-suit attached to a form fitting couch inside a hardened pod inside a bird flying so high we were technically astronauts. Only officially we didn't exist -- we'd taken off after dusk and would land before dawn, another flight that never happened, in a bird that doesn't exist, from a field that doesn't exist.

As long as everything works as designed, we're busy but bored. But that's what they train us for, pay us for, those few moments of excitement that may never come. Jerry, the pilot, the female half of the crew, with her faster reflexes and higher pain threshold, and me, the male half, the analytical training coupled with the protective instincts, that inbuilt drive to protect my mate, handling defensive and offensive systems and our payload.

I "looked" at nav, calling up the display in my mind. It appeared on a "real" display in front of me as well, but I hardly paid attention to that. I could bring up the primary display in my mind, assimilate the information, and move it off to a "corner" of my vision in about the same amount of time it took the physical, "secondary" display to update its screen. We were crossing the Atlantic, and would start our descent over Canada in about four minutes.

"Mind if I ride along, Jerry?" I asked. I knew I could just push a switch and switch my link over, but courtesy required me to ask; the specific sensory tuning and adaptation between a pilot and her craft is very personal; even between husband and wife.

Her happy voice filled my head. "Not at all, I'd like that."

This was one of the things that had to be done manually, as in with a finger on a physical control, rather than mentally, as was true with 90% or more of our bird's functions. And it was always jarring; disconnecting major parts of your sensorium from one link, a pause, and then being thrown into another sensory world. During that pause you were reduced to a mere human, no longer part of this glorious system with all its sensory enhancement.

I moved my hand; it was hard. Our bodies were mostly paralyzed by the flight drugs; that was key to overlapping our nervous systems with our bird. I took a breath and hit the switch, rolling my eyes up as high in my head as I could to get through the transition.

And was dumped into flight.... I could feel our bird, feel us flying, registering sensations. The engines felt grand; I got that overall glow of all systems nominal; there are definite sexual undertones to a well-flying bird. Then my "vision" switched up and out, to an incredible twilight. Unless it was an extreme emergency I could only monitor; Jerry was in control. What I "saw" was a sight you never get used to, never get enough of: stars above, curved Earth below. Then we started rocking gently side to side; I felt the rocking, gently back and forth, back and forth. "Thank you, darling," I said softly; she knows how much I love for her to hold me and rock me gently. "You're welcome, love," she replied, and rocked us across the Atlantic.

I let part of my mind drift, enjoying the sensations. The first time she'd done that, on a training flight, the flight dynamics people were coming unglued when we got back, looking for an "anomalous oscillation." It was hard to explain it to them -- especially since the group consisted of a bunch of single men. We finally talked to the Cartwrights directly -- the husband and wife team that had invented the augmentation systems that let these birds fly. They understood the intimacy of holding each other, rocking in each other's arms. Not only did they understand, they approved -- and got even more interested when the flight dynamics people told them what Jerry had done wasn't possible. We got another test flight, most of it spent rocking gently across the sky, rocking at Mach 6 plus. Jerry couldn't explain how she did it, how she got the bird to rock like that; it was something she just did. I felt the sexual undertones build; our lovemaking after a flight was always intense, trying to maintain the connection we felt while linked up, and rocking together like this made it even more so.

I felt a sharp jab behind my left ear, bringing me back to reality in a flash. With my "real" eyes I saw a threat display light up. Jerry quickly brought up her view of that display; it appeared in our minds. I needed to switch back to my systems and bad, but wouldn't do it until I had an idea of what was going on.

"Bogey coming up fast, had to be a sea -- no, air launch," I said, as I felt my body being thrown around as she took evasive maneuvers. I felt things "squirt" out of me as we launched countermeasures. I felt her take the engines to the max; it hurt like hell, it was probably supposed to, the burning feeling in my thighs and chest. It was hard to ignore the information flowing directly into my cortex and focus on the information from my "real" eyes, the threat displays in front of me.

"Jerry, cut me off, I can't hit the switch," I told her. I could run countermeasures with my right hand without having to move my arm, but I had to move my left arm to hit the switch, and our evasive maneuvers were preventing that; she could cut me out of her link with a thought, and she did.

The bogey was coming up fast. How the hell was it tracking us? Supposedly we had the radar cross-section of a bumblebee. We operated in radio silence, and when we did communicate, it was through satellite links on top of our airframe. Well, somebody had decided our payload wasn't worth the trouble, but we were. I initiated a priority satellite link, breaking radio silence; the data on our incident, including the position of whoever had taken a shot at us, would be streaming back to Command. We were sliding all over the sky, g-shifts distorting my vision.

Even without the augmentation I figured it out before our AI. "We've beaten it, you can ease up in three seconds." As I spoke I keyed my intelligence and countermeasures panel the old way, manually. I'd found what felt like the command link guiding the nasty coming up at us and initiated jamming through countermeasures. Someone was steering that thing, tracking us. "Command this is Colonel Marsh. Strongly suggest that when the pilot cuts payload officer out of her link he drops back into his automatically. And someone has figured out how to track us." I had a green light on the sat link; I knew they got that. If we'd had that feature and I'd been automagically dropped back into my link I'd have a lot more information right now.

And we'd probably both be dead; me being unlinked is what saved us. About the time I expected it to, the threat screen went from red to yellow. The bogey couldn't get us, and whoever it was, I doubted they had the balls to throw a nuclear warhead at us. I prayed they didn't have the balls....

I felt the engines ease off a bit; our ride got smoother. As I reached my left hand for the switch it happened.

They didn't have the balls to throw a nuke at us, but they did throw a pulse bomb. We were hit by an electromagnetic pulse. All my systems blinked, at least. The pulse probably wasn't strong enough to destroy normal systems, but we weren't a normal system. Even when we're "unlinked," we still have some neural connections open between each other and with the bird; speech, hearing, and an intimate presence that you can't explain, one of the reasons behind husband and wife teams. Jerry was fully linked, wedded body and soul to our bird. I heard her cry out in pain, felt her pain as well as my own flashing intensely through me, and felt her convulse and go unconscious. I felt us tumble; either the AI was scrambled, Jerry's twitching told it to do something unfortunate, or both.

"EMP hit! EMP hit! Lost my pilot!" I hollered, not knowing if I still had a hot line through the satellite or not.

As we tumbled I managed to flip the cover off the emergency link button and hit it, paralleling Jerry. In my stretched time sense, it took an agonizingly long time to reach and push the switch, feeling us tumbling through the sky until I had the link.

I hurt; I was filled with pain and nausea. I tried to bring up nav; it wasn't there. I brought up outside vision; things were spinning in a way I definitely didn't like. Even the images being fed to my visual cortex were damaged; jaggy edges, all sorts of bizarre artifacts; we definitely had problems. If the systems that synthesized images and fed them into my brain were damaged, we were in big trouble. I concentrated on slowing down the spin, stabilizing us. Our only hope was for my autonomies and the bird's autonomies to mesh and restore control. Our bird is "stability augmented," which is a polite way of saying that it's unstable in the air; it can't be flown without computer control. We have multiply redundant computer controls linked to our brains; part of what flies our bird is a link deep in the limbic area of our brains; our balance becomes the bird's balance. But now we seemed to have multiply dead or damaged redundant computer controls and an unconscious pilot; this isn't supposed to happen.

We spun for some interminable time, then all of a sudden righted, pinpricks of pain clearing, some replaced by numbness. The images I was "seeing" became crystal clear once again as systems came back on-line. I had nav back; part of my head felt numb, that must be part of the AI kicked offline. I still hurt in different parts of my body, different damaged systems reflecting their status on me. I brought up health as I called to her, "Jerry, Jerry, talk to me -- talk to me please..." We'd lost a lot of altitude, but were still above 50,000 feet.

Her heart and lungs were going; her cerebral activity display showed she was unconscious. Heart rate was high; blood pressure high but steady, about what it should be for the nightmare of drugs in us for these flights. At least her body was alive. Now back to getting the two of us home...

Nav was active -- we'd covered a lot of territory, horizontally and vertically. My left side hurt in so many places I couldn't tell what systems were damaged, which were offline. I brought up secondary displays and goosed the autopilot, felt it engage. "Command, this is Marsh. Pilot unconscious. Please disregard all previous suggestions about removing secondary displays."

"Marsh, Command is with you, we copy," I heard in my head. I had a Comm link at least! I recognized the voice; a tradition in our service is that another crew stays at Command during a mission, a tradition carried over from Blackbird and Aurora.

"Ellen, I'm getting too much input to understand my status. Can you brief me?"

Her voice was cool but concerned. "We only have a partial data link; your AI's higher order functions are down. You're green for nav, autopilot, fuel and engines. We think autoland is green. You've probably experienced some structural damage, although we aren't sure. Medical is looking over your pilot right..."

As she said "now" the bird shook and tumbled; I concentrated to right it, I had to fight; Jerry was overriding my commands.

"Marsh, sedate your pilot; sedate your pilot; she's having seizures," the voice said in my head. I raced through the command screens and the three separate steps I had to go through to shoot the sedative into her bloodstream; it felt as if it took forever. Finally we settled down.

"Command, this is Marsh. Strongly recommend getting rid of a couple of those 'are you sure?' checks in the sedation sequence."

Ellen calmly came back with, "Roger that. She's asleep now. We've gotten almost a complete link. You have major systems in single failure mode. I repeat: you have major systems in single failure mode. Do you want us to bring you in?"

"Not at this time, Command. Estimated on the ground ... eleven minutes."

"Roger that. We'll be waiting for you. We've identified the bastards that shot at you by the way."

"Save one of them for me..."

"You're at the front of the line, Marsh, but you may have to settle for little bits scraped off the sea bottom," Ellen's voice rang out.

The next few minutes were some of the longest days of my life. I didn't know how my wife was doing; I didn't know how we were doing. "Single failure mode" meant that we'd had enough damage in our multiply redundant systems that we were now running on one good module in a number of places. I brought up system status. If I'd had control of my bowels or anything solid in me, I'd have shit; the display showed we were running on one augmentation box. That's the major box that interfaces our brains to the bird; we usually have three running in parallel for each of us. If it failed, we'd be lucky if we could do an emergency pod separation. If that happened, it would be a real crap shoot; nobody had ever left one of these birds in flight before. I didn't want to be the first; it's considered bad luck.

Ellen and her husband Dave talked to me along the way. We went through systems, reviewing those that had major portions damaged or down. The airframe felt a little rough, but other than that things seemed to have stabilized. Early on the process I keyed the medical panel to give me a little more energy and alertness; I needed all the help I could get, even though I knew I'd pay for it later.

"Marsh, Chase should be with you shortly to escort you home. Chase squawking now," Ellen told me.

I powered up radar and focused on one blip as chase broadcasted its identifier. "Judy sighted. Contact in two minutes." By then we'd have dropped to just below Mach 3, and chase would be able to match us.

"Judy sighted" is standard pilot jargon signifying target acquisition. "It's Andrea flying chase," Ellen's voice said in my head.

Then I heard Andrea's voice. "I'm coming Tony. We'll have you home in no time."

"Thanks, folks," I said, bringing up health on a secondary screen so I could watch Jerry. She seemed to be resting comfortably, although her blood pressure was still high. My readings were all nominal; well maybe a couple were in high yellow. Well, maybe there were one or two that were a little on the red side, but I felt strong and I was going to bring us home. I had to.

I continued running the rest of the landing checklist with minimal AI help. Normally the AI would run the list with Jerry watching. Jerry would let it bring us in, taking over for the last minute or so for actual touchdown and taxi. Now I had to do it the hard way.

"Command, Chase, this is Marsh. I can't feel the gear. I'm giving the commands, but no feedback on primary or secondary displays, I'm feeling numbness and pain for those systems, hydraulic pressure feels good."

Andrea was too close for radar to be useful; I shut it down. We were almost home. After a few seconds she said, "Right below you Marsh. Gear is down and looks locked. You've got leading edge damage on the left chine, may have lost a RAM panel on the payload bay. Other than that you look clean."

I knew I could land us; I've practiced it countless times in the simulator, done it for real. But never with damaged systems, never with my wife unconscious in the cockpit in front of me.

"Right along side you now, Marsh," Andrea's voice rang out. "Keep flying the box, just like training."

I commanded vision to forward image enhanced with landing grid and flight kinetics superimposed. Luckily, the display came up. "Good news, I've got the full display," I said to nobody in particular.

I flew the velocity vector down, flew it in the box all the way. I knew that Andrea in chase, and Ellen and Dave in Command were seeing the same thing, with me all the way.

I eased us onto the long runway. You usually "feel" the landing in your feet, ankles, and knees -- I was still numb, only feeling a little tingle on the right side, but visual told me I was smooth and level. I cut back power and popped the chutes; it did feel like farting, then felt the tug of the chutes slowing us down.

"Marsh to ground control, request permission to taxi to hanger four." It was sheer bravado, but I had to go for it, rather than rolling to a stop on the runway. Our service always goes from hangar to hangar. I didn't want to be the first to break that tradition.

"Taxi approved, your party will meet you hanger four. Don't stop for sandwiches on the way."

I didn't recognize the ground control voice. I responded "Thank you. Rolling to four via taxiway golf. Initiating ground vent sequence. Negative vent sequence, repeat negative vent sequence." On landing we opened a series of vents in the bird to help cool down the skin and vent off remnants of our hypergolic fuels; we come home hot and nasty. Not surprisingly, it hadn't worked. I didn't know whether the actuators failed or the feedback failed. Not my top concern right now.

"Please Lord, let Jerry be okay, please..." Had I said that out loud? My image intensifiers cut back as we approached the hangar; I could "see" the flashing lights of the emergency crews.

"Marsh, you have partial vents," the ground control voice told me. "Roger, trying again." I mentally goosed the vent actuators once more, twice more.

"Thanks for walking us back home Chase, we owe you a big one," I said about a half mile from the hangar.

"Any time, Marsh," said Andrea, "Very nice landing -- you want to be a pilot?"

I laughed as I pulled into the hangar. "Thanks, but I'll stick to ballast."

I pulled into the hangar, switching vision to ground front. I rolled to the marks, cut engine power as Jerry had done so many times, coasted the last fifty meters, braking, braking, and stopped right on the lines. She'd be proud of me. I thought about her dime for a moment, but that was the least of my worries.

I sighed in relief as I pushed systems into ground standby.

"Ground, this is Marsh. Last three on the Hobbs are one four decimal two. Pushing systems to ground standby." Another tradition from the early days of flight is calling the elapsed time meter the Hobbs. Somewhere in this mass of engines, fuel storage, and digital electronics there probably was an old mechanical timer. I hoped so at least, something mechanical that dreamed of flight. A little over six and a half hours aloft, with a planned flight time of six forty three; our evasive maneuvers brought us in early. Add to that the two hours preflight with an hour of that to seal us in the pod, and half an hour to get us out, about nine hours total. With the time dilation caused by the drugs, it felt as if I'd been awake and working hard for three or four days; I was exhausted. After our flight we'd normally have four hours of medical debrief, two of that during the extraction process, two hours of mission debrief, and a week of recovery. Somehow I thought we were in for more than that.

I felt something cocooning my "body;" the cooling shields must be sliding into place to protect the ground crews from the heat of the airframe and residual toxics from our fuel. I felt a prod along my side, then a wave of dizziness and nausea; I stabbed the link disconnect switch.

"Sorry about that, Marsh," Ellen's voice said to me as I now lay in comparative darkness and isolation. "Do you want emergency extraction?" All I had to do was give the word, or grab two handles and pull. Explosive bolts would go off separating the skin of our bird and opening our pod. It was quick, but expensive, and would have our bird down for a while. The ground team could initiate it as well. Part of the sequence involved sedating us, something I never liked. I understood and agreed with the rationale, but that didn't mean I had to like it.

"Only if medical wants it; I can wait. How's Jerry?" I asked her.

A new voice popped into my head, a male voice. "Marsh, this is Doctor Curtis. Our initial analysis indicates the pulse sent your pilot into seizures. Flight medication should have prevented any physical damage. Her EEG traces are now consistent with normal sedation; we started backing her off flight medication during your descent. The good news is that we don't expect there to be any aftereffects..."

I had a hunch what the other shoe was... "And the bad news is?" I asked.

His voice returned, with a bit of laughter. "The bad news is you're going to be our guests for a while. We haven't had anyone go through an experience such as this before."

I felt coolness on my skin and the itchy-tingly sensation I get when the flight drugs are being flushed out of my system. Things were slowing down again, returning to normal. "Glad to be of service," I said, glad to be alive to tell the tale.

I relaxed, closing my eyes, breathing slowly, deeply, knowing the gas mixture I was breathing was also being changed. I heard and felt the small bumps of equipment moving around the outside of the bird, the whine of motors, the sounds of fans pulling air through and around the skin. They didn't sound quite right; we must have taken some damage. My own skin started to feel clammy, enclosed in the flight suit as sensation returned.

"Marsh, this is Ellen," her voice sounded a little strange; things usually felt weird in that interval coming off the drugs. "Support wants you to know Jerry gets her dime back. We may give you one as well."

I breathed a sigh of relief. "Roger that," I said. I could feel the muscles in my face move again as I smiled. I think that tradition started with Aurora. The story I heard was that during preflight inspection an Aurora pilot taped a dime to the concrete under one of the front wheels, betting the support crew he'd stop on it when he got back. He got his dime back at the end of the mission, and the safety people went nuts when they found out, horrified at the thought of what could have happened if that dime and a chunk of tape had been sucked into an engine; a top-secret airframe worth hundreds of millions of dollars trashed over a ten cent bet. But safety or not, a tradition was born. Pilots now use Mercury dimes -- old, rare, and expensive; I think our program added that to the tradition. Jerry was proud that she was still on her second one; some pilots have lost quite a few.

A shiver went through me and I had a period of mild hallucinations coming down from the flight drugs. My heart was racing, I felt like I'd been beaten with a stick from one end to the other. All in all nominal -- maybe a little worse.

"Marsh, this is Doctor Curtis. How are you feeling?" The sound was clearly coming from my ears now, not from inside my head as I was weaned from augmentation.

"This is Marsh. Feeling nominal, coming off flight medication." The med staff hated us saying "drugs;" one of their traditions I guess. We respect theirs and they respect ours.

"Marsh this is Ellen," I heard her join in. "Go ahead Ellen," I replied.

"Support is reporting problems with extraction due to systems and airframe damage; they may need to fire the explosive bolts."

I had a bad feeling. I was detached enough from augmentation that I couldn't bring up Jerry's health display in my mind, and it was really hard to move, I was so exhausted and sore.

"I don't buy it, folks. Is something wrong with Jerry? Tell me," I said.

I heard Ellen sigh. Then Curtis kicked in. "Marsh, this is Curtis. Your pilot is fine, it's you we're worried about."

That didn't help. I knew I felt like shit. But hey, I'd brought the bird home and we were both alive; mission accomplished and Jerry got her dime back. But before I could argue, he continued, making the decision for me.

"This is Doctor Curtis declaring a medical emergency. Support to begin emergency crew extraction on my command. Pilot already sedated. Initiating copilot sedation now. Initiate extraction in ten..."

As the buzzing started flooding me, I shouted as loud and as long as I could, "I love you Jerry. I love you Jerry. I love..."

I woke up; good news. I was on my back in a bed, in the medical wing of the base. Sunlight was coming in through the windows, so I'd either been out only a few hours, or more than a day. I took a cautious breath; I felt like shit, which was actually good. I'd expected to feel far worse.

One of the things you learn from training and from flying missions is not to move quickly right after a mission. There are a bunch of reasons why, but they boil down to pain and nausea. I heard something to my right, saw a shadow move. I turned my head slowly.

"Hello sleepy head," Jerry said to me. The most beautiful woman in the world was standing next to the bed. She was wearing her fatigues, obviously recovered. I guessed I'd been out a day.

I lifted my right hand slowly; I was still feeling a little weak. She took it. "I love you," I told her.

She smiled as she squeezed my hand. "I know, I heard you, I really did." She leaned over and gave me a kiss, that's how much she loves me. The flight drugs leave you with bad breath and a horrible taste in your mouth. Having a clan of diseased weasels crawl into your mouth, die, and rot for a month would be more pleasant.

When she straightened up and then sat on the bed next to me I asked, "Is that for getting your dime back?"

She laughed, shaking her head. How I wish she had long hair again; we all wear buzz cuts, it just works better with all the wiring they attach to us.

"No, that was for getting us back alive. I'll thank you for getting my dime back later, when you have more energy." She leaned over, looking me in the face, squeezing both my shoulders. I moved my tongue around a little. I looked over to the door, which was closed. "What are the chances of me getting some mouthwash?"

She chuckled a little, looking to the door herself. "I'll see what I can do. They're probably not going to let you out for another day or so."

Another flight tradition is our post-flight mouthwash; a double shot of Cuervo Gold Tequila, swished briefly and then swallowed -- something the med folks don't like, but put up with. Traditions are important to us.

"How's our bird?" I asked.

She sat on the bed and sighed. "A mess. I walked around her yesterday."

She must have seen my surprise. She told me, "You've been out for two days. They're still figuring out what that pulse did to us. It fried major systems, and whacked me but good. You were partially linked, and from what I can understand of the docs," she looked over her shoulder at the closed door, "it also caused some kind of reaction in your endocrine system. The airframe is okay, and the damaged systems are being dissected."

I grunted. "Better them than us. Water?"

She stood and moved to get me something to drink. "Amen to that."

I had a couple of sips of water through a straw. It must have been a couple of days; the water only tasted slightly vile.

"How about the bastards that shot at us?" I asked.

She sat down again and shrugged. "You know the story. The official word is that it was rogue action, someone acting on his own, outside the scope, you know -- total bullshit. They say they'll take appropriate measures against the commander in question."

I took another sip. I was feeling hungry -- a good sign.

She smiled and continued, "But to do that, they'll need something better than the Glomar Explorer, and a whisk broom -- their rogue and its support ships are in little pieces at the bottom of the Atlantic."

"That makes me feel better. Any guesses on how they tracked us?"

This time Jerry nodded. "The bright boys' best guesses are that they did it by tracking the occlusion we caused to radio and optical emissions of stars, geosat thermal tracking, or both."

"Just the kind of thing a rogue could throw together on short notice."

She nodded. "Roger that. That and a pulse bomb on a really fast interceptor. We should know better in a few days. The Brits caught one of the support ships and are bringing it in. It's evidently filled with some pretty funky equipment."

We heard the door open. Gordon, our Commanding Officer walked in, accompanied by a medical guy. Gordon walked up and held out his hand. "How are you feeling, Tony?" he asked.

I shook his hand, trying to squeeze as hard as I could. I probably could have squashed a piece of white bread. "Okay, sir. Tired and hungry."

The doc held out his hand. "I'm Doctor Curtis. Pleased to meet you."

I shook his hand. I had a little more strength. "Well, I'm not," I told him. We all laughed a bit.

Gordon said, "Tony, the systems geeks want to know how the hell you got that bird home. They say it couldn't fly, with all that was knocked out."

I shrugged my shoulders. "It was too far to walk. Besides, she wouldn't forgive me if I lost her dime." I nodded my head towards Jerry.

"Feel strong enough to join us in the mess for lunch in half an hour?" he asked.

"Yes, sir!" I replied with enthusiasm.

Curtis told me, "We'll send a chair for you in a while; give you a chance to get dressed."

Gordon must have seen the look on my face. He added, "And you'll use it."

Luckily, they left without asking me if I agreed.

I had some more water, and Jerry helped me into fatigues. She helped me stand up. Wow, I was shaky. I figured I could walk about ten feet, maybe twenty.

"You are NOT going to walk down there," Jerry told me.

As I sat back on the bed, I told her, "Yes dear. I'll ride in the chair until we get to the mess door. I have to walk from there. Okay?"

I could tell by the fire in her eyes, and her smile, that she understood and agreed. I pulled her on to the bed with me and we necked for a while. It helped build my energy levels.

We were interrupted by a knock on the door. Jerry answered it. An orderly brought in a wheelchair. He stood there.

"Thank you; that will be all," Jerry told him. He nodded and left. She helped me to the chair and we started on the way to the small mess hall.

"Good grief, I'm hungry," I told her. What with the duration of our flights and the lack of onboard plumbing, we go on what's euphemistically called a "low residue" diet three days pre-flight. We're told by the medical team that it's perfectly nourishing. Bullshit -- I don't see

any of *them* drinking that stuff. What with team rotations, about the only time we can pig out is after a flight.

“How long are we going to be out of rotation?” I asked Jerry.

I heard her sigh. She loves to fly. So do I. That’s the reason we’re here.

“They won’t give me a straight answer. At least two weeks. We’ll be going to the West Coast for tests once they give you clearance to travel.”

“Well hopefully not much longer than that. I guess one crew down won’t hurt. How about our bird?”

“Oh, I didn’t tell you -- Greg came down with the measles, so we’re down two crews.”

“Measles? Where the hell did he pick up the measles?”

“He and Susan were visiting her family after their last flight.”

“So they’re down for a week or so?”

“Yep, medics and everyone else are pissed. The worst part is they’re keeping him in quarantine, and she can’t go near him!”

I laughed, even though I knew how bad that must be for both of them. Something about the augmentation process brings couples closer. Another way of saying it is that we screw like minks -- whenever we can.

Jerry laughed a little and continued. “Our bird goes home tomorrow -- I get the feeling they’re going to take it apart.”

“Oh shit -- so we’re going to break in another bird? Did they manage to salvage the augmentation cores?” Getting fitted to the G-suits and flight couches was a simple task in comparison to fine-tuning the augmentation systems. Think of it like breaking in a new pair of shoes -- but they’re mental shoes. It can be quite ugly.

“They did, but I think that’s one of the things we’re going to the Coast for.”

I smiled. “We’re getting the first Block 2 bird?” We’d heard rumors of an improved bird. Jerry patted me on the shoulder.

“That’s my guess. We’ll see.”

We’d arrived at the door to the flight crew mess. Jerry parked the chair and set the brakes. She helped me stand, and we hugged. She pushed the door open.

We heard a voice call out, “Ten-hut!” The dozen or so people in the room stood at attention while we walked in. Jerry was at my side, holding my arm lightly, but I could tell she was ready to grab me.

I saw places for us at the CO’s table. We walked up to the table, stood behind our chairs, and saluted. Gordon grinned at me as he returned our salutes. Curtis scowled.

I had barely enough energy to move in front of the chair. My legs collapsed and I sat down a bit harder than I’d anticipated. Jerry laughed softly and pushed my chair in a bit.

As I picked up my napkin and put it in my lap, I noticed a Mercury dime next to my spoon. After placing my napkin, I picked it up. Part of the tradition is the pilot gets her dime back at the first meal in the mess after landing. I turned and started to hand it to Jerry.

She smiled, and said, “I got mine back at dinner yesterday.”

Gordon piped in. “That one’s yours, Tony. You earned it -- the hard way.”

I turned and shook Gordon’s hand. Then I shook our ground crew commander’s hand.

He said, “You saved the taxpayers a whole hell of a lot more than that by bringing that bird in.”

Also at our table were Ellen and Dave, and Doctor Ramashandran, head of the geek squad -- sorry, Augmentation Systems Group.

Ellen said, “Great flying, Tony. Andrea says so as well.”

I raised an eyebrow. Dave answered it. “Andrea and Doug are still in post-flight Medical -- they got back a few hours ago. We flew right after you. Both were milk runs.”

I thought they had that post-flight look about them. Come to think of it, Jerry and I seemed to bounce back about the fastest.

Our lunches arrived. My mouth was watering. The others had steak, potatoes, and veggies. I got a plate of tamales -- my favorite. So did Jerry.

I looked at her. “I’m sorry I couldn’t join you for dinner last night.”

She squeezed my hand. “That’s okay. I had some tamales for you.” The tamales are made off-base. We both love them.

Ellen sighed as she cut her steak. When I looked at her, she said, “Our last real meal -- we’re on rotation again after this.”

I shivered involuntarily, and Curtis gave me a mildly nasty look. I turned to Gordon.

“I understand Greg and Susan are off line. Jerry and I could ride out to the coast tomorrow with our bird and get things underway again.”

Gordon nodded and looked to Curtis. Curtis asked me, “Do you feel up to it?”

I smiled. “I could fly us out tomorrow.” My bravado got laughter from around the table.

Curtis looked at our boss and said, “We’ll run some tests this afternoon, but I can’t think of any reason why not.”

Gordon nodded and looked back at us. “I’m sure the Cartwrights will be happy to hear that. I’ll let them know.” He could see the surprise on our faces. We were going to see the Cartwrights?

He frowned. “You’re going to be spending your recovery time in the Cartwrights’ lab. They’ve been trying to get you two for a while, but I wouldn’t let them. Now I don’t have a choice.”

I put on my best face and said, “Sorry, sir.” He doesn’t like disruptions to his operation. Ellen popped in with, “We could go instead.” That brought another round of laughter. The Old Man scowled briefly, but laughed along with us.

We talked shop as we finished lunch. I could tell Doctor Ram was going down a list of questions for me. I answered as well as I could.

Before I could say anything after we’d finished, someone brought the wheelchair back in. I started to complain, but saw the rest of the table wouldn’t buy it. You have to know when to bluff, and when to fold. I folded and accepted help getting in the chair. Curtis said he’d see me at 1500 hours.

Ellen and Dave walked back to crew quarters with us -- they’d be running comm again that night, so they were going for a “nap.” Jerry squeezed my shoulder and told them we were going to take a nap as well -- more laughter.

We went to our room, the one we used for the two or three days before a mission when we worked comm, and then the first day or two post-mission. We were quickly naked and in bed. We kissed passionately, and she got me on my back. Damn pilots always want to run things. Actually, I don’t mind at all. She had a lot more energy than I did. It’s amazing how horny we both are after a flight, and how quickly and intensely she comes. When I came, I lost it for a while, just holding on. Then we snuggled together and had our nap.

I don’t remember her setting the alarm, but I heard it going off. We got up, cleaned up some, and walked over to Medical. I felt strong and rested enough to walk all the way.

I got a young lady doc I hadn't met before. She started out by peeking, probing, prodding, and sampling all my natural orifices, then did the ones I'd had installed. Then I was hooked up to the augmentation system for more tests.

Those first few seconds are a trip. We work with our own augmentation cores -- they glue us as individuals to the systems we work with. They're not static things. They change. That's part of what we're learning with these birds, tracking those changes. And I could tell from the first few seconds that I'd changed a lot in the last few days. The usual sensations were off a bit, but I knew how to ride it. It wasn't as bad as a cold start.

Cold starts are rough. It's rough if you don't get hooked up at least once a week. Things can be way off. You either experience things very slightly, or feel like someone is ripping your skin off, or running a blowtorch over you. Some of the ladies report mind-blowing orgasms, but I've never been that lucky. I felt some nausea, dizziness, and the feeling someone was crushing my knees. My vision was off as well, but it normalized fast and we proceeded into the usual tests. I ran through the patterns as they came up, responding to stimuli. It felt as if I was a bit faster than usual. I had some residual synesthesia -- bleed-over between senses -- and I liked it. The augmentation box evidently figured that out, as that bleed-over got sharper. When we got to the simulated attack/defense sequences, I could definitely feel things and react somehow before they came up in my synthesized vision.

That part of the sequence went on longer than usual, and we went through a couple of other tests I hadn't done in a long time. Finally they started pulling me out.

When I opened my eyes again, Jerry was there, along with Doctor Ram and two of his geeks (sorry, "specialists"). As I looked around, I moved slightly. I felt great.

Jerry helped me sit up. I said, "That was fun," to the group.

"Colonel Marsh," Doctor Ram said with wrinkled brow and his lingering Indian accent, "your augmentation parameters have shifted in a most unusual way."

I tried to explain what I'd felt, the sensory bleed-over, and the feeling that it had helped, and I'd been faster at things.

A voice from a computer speaker nearby startled me. "Colonel Marsh, this is Mary Cartwright. We monitored the process, and we have some questions as well."

I gave Jerry a wild look. I answered the Cartwright's questions as well as I could. She wanted to know especially about what I felt in the first few seconds. She signed off by telling us they were very interested in seeing us tomorrow morning.

I looked at Jerry with as much of a raised eyebrow as I could manage with the headgear still in place. They disconnected me from the augmentation systems. Jerry and the lady doc helped me back into fatigues as Doctor Ram and his geeks prodded me for more information, especially on the synesthesia I'd experienced. I answered them as best I could.

Jerry and I finally got out of there. It was early evening -- we had a while before dinner. "See our bird?" I asked. Jerry put her arm in mine, and we walked to admin where we caught a jitney ride to the hangar.

It was sad, seeing our bird. "Jim, I don't know whether you're happy or sad," I told our crew chief when he came up to us and shook my hand.

"I'm happy you brought her back, but amazed you did. We don't know how you did it."

I shrugged my shoulders and hugged Jerry. "Like I told the boss -- too far to walk. What was I supposed to do?"

He walked us around. She was already in sections for loading on a cargo plane for the flight back to the contractor. Sections looked as if they'd been struck by lightning. Places where electronics subsystems should have been now contained burned and fused blobs. It was scary.

Jim pointed to a bundle of fiber optic cables. "We figure having her run on fiber is the thing that saved you -- copper interconnects would have spread the pulse much farther."

A systems specialist popped her head out from the middle of things. "You the one who flew this thing back here?"

I stepped up and shook her hand. "Like I said, it was too far to walk."

She shook her head. "You're lucky the augmentation engines are separated physically. You can see the propagation pattern of the pulse by looking at fried systems." She swept an arm on an arc along the side of our bird. Jim helped her down. She shook her head again. "That's it for me. Thanks, chief." She turned to Jerry and I again. "Never met anyone who lived through an EMP hit before."

I hugged Jerry. "Neither have I. Want a lift back to civilization?"

She nodded. "Sure. Let me stow my gear."

We rode back to the other side of the base in a jitney. Jerry drove -- she's the pilot, after all. We talked to our young Captain -- double-doc from M.I.T. in electrical engineering and what they were calling "composite systems" -- our augmentation technology. We dropped her off, then headed over to our mess for dinner.

"Guess we had a closer call than we thought," I told Jerry as we walked down the hall.

"They don't know how you did it, and after looking at our bird, neither do I."

I stopped and held her. "That's how much I love you. I had to do it, so I did. It's simple."

We stood in the hallway and kissed.

We went in and joined the gang. Tonight was more normal fare -- meat and potatoes. We talked to Gordon about our walk-around. He gave us the sked -- the cargo bird arrived about 23:00, should be loaded by 06:00, with departure for the Coast at 08:30. We'd been cleared by Medical. We could almost sleep in! We were assigned to the Cartwright's lab for at least two weeks. Then he smiled and told us he expected us to bring back a new bird.

Andrea and Doug groaned, then smiled and congratulated us. This was their first post-flight meal -- they were lasagna fanatics. Their trip had been a milk run -- in and out on schedule. I assumed Andrea got her dime back. I asked about Ellen and Dave -- Gordon told us they weren't sure if they were going out tonight or not -- they were waiting for mission confirmation.

Andrea, Doug, Jerry, and I sighed at that. That was one of the hard things in our service -- prep for a mission, and then have it scrubbed. Especially when it meant another day of taking all your meals through a straw.

We thought we'd get some rest after dinner -- what a mistake. We spent two and a half hours in debrief, going over everything. We'd gone by the book, and when we ran out of book, we wrote our own, and were around to tell about it. Like they tell you in flight school -- takeoffs are voluntary, landings mandatory. We'd landed, and pretty much walked away.

They even insisted on going to the augmentation lab and hooking us up to our cores again, and running brief checks. Jerry's parameters had drifted a little -- mine hadn't had the time to move much since earlier in the afternoon.

When we finished, as we were being unhooked, they backed up our cores and put the originals in the carrying cases we use. We'd carry our souls with us to the Left Coast.

We left them scratching their heads and trying to figure out what had happened to mine -- sensory mappings were all messed up. Hey, I told them that, and told them I liked it that way.

We walked around a bit on our way to quarters. Ellen and Dave were go for their mission -- we waved to them through the window in the suit-up area.

We made love and went to sleep. We got up with the alarm, made love, and went for a run. Ellen and Dave had an easy time, and were in post-flight medical. We made love again, showered, and headed for breakfast.

After that, we checked in with Gordon. He thanked me again for bringing our bird home, and told us to bring another one home with us. "Yes, Sir!" we both told him. He'd flown Aurora -- when I'd learned about that bird, I was amazed anyone would get into it -- very scary.

We got a ride to the cargo bird and checked in with the flight crew. They saluted us, and we shook hands -- we outranked them.

“Thanks for giving us a ride,” Jerry told them. “How long is it going to take to get to the coast?”

Our pilot, Bill, rolled his eyes. We laughed. Our birds covered ground a bit faster.

Then Jerry asked, “Mind if we ride up front?”

Bill smiled. “We’d be honored.”

We rode in the cockpit jump-seats. Bill and his co-pilot, Kerry, were very good. We left on time and watched the autopilot work. They peppered us with questions on what it was like to fly our bird. We answered as best we could, probably giving them more information than we were supposed to, but they knew what we were carrying -- we’d seen them before.

Air traffic control was giving us the scenic route. Bill acknowledged the latest change, then turned to us and said, “Glad you’re patient -- bet you don’t go this slow.”

Jerry said, “Oh, we taxi pretty slow.”

They thought that was pretty funny.

I shook my head and said, “You guys get to eat real food.”

Kerry gave us an inquisitive look, so we told her about our “low residue” diet. After going on about how bad and bland it was, she looked at us and said, “I’d do it.”

Jerry and I exchanged glances and held hands. So would we, and we did. We live to fly.

We were finally vectored for final. Bill set us down on the runway very nicely. Jerry and I applauded. Bill gave us a thumbs-up as he taxied to the large hangar. Another successful landing.

WORK IN PROGRESS
rev 2009/03/09

Fly
by silli_artie@hotmail.com