

Tracy Island, 7:30 a.m. June 1st.

"Pod selection complete, lowering main frame: now."

The vibration of Thunderbird Two lowering down on the pod echoed around the hangar. The resounding 'thump' followed and Dom immediately announced, "Electromagnetic docking clamps secure."

Elise sat in the seat just behind and to the right of the pilot. She noted how calmer Dom seemed and more confident he was since they had gotten together to go over some issues. Virgil was standing to Dom's left and softly talked to him every now and again, coaching him along.

The huge hangar door opened and they taxied to the takeoff strip. The engines roared to life as Dom continued to verbally check off his take-off procedure. Elise knew it by heart; she'd done it enough times. Thunderbird Two pushed forward and upwards and in no time Dom was leveling her off and banking around to the left.

"We'll circle the island a couple of times to warm up and then we'll bring her down for the drop," Virgil said. Dom nodded trying to show a confidence he really didn't feel. "Once we've done a drop, we'll move off, circle and return for the pod pick up. Then you guys can switch and Frankie can do her drop and pick up... with velvet gloves. After that, she can return Two to base." Virgil grinned.

"HEY! I'm still here ya know!" Gordon added. He'd been listening in on his radio to Virgil's instructions and Virgil knew it.

"Just making sure you're taken care of little brother!" Virgil replied. A not-so-polite grunt was Gordon's answer.

Dom did great banking slowly around then leveling the transporter for a slow descent to the spot where the drop would take place.

"Thunderbird Four from Thunderbird Two, approaching drop zone, ETA 2 minutes."

"F-A-B, Thunderbird Two. Ready for drop on your word." Gordon replied all business now.

~Amazing how he does that, thought Elise. ~From clown to serious rescue operative in .5 seconds~ Then she remembered when she and Gordon had been in New York after the accident. He'd been playful one minute and dead serious the next.

She glanced out the window and a sudden wave of fear washed over her, causing her to catch her breath. The ocean was moving up towards them and it threw her off her momentum for a second.

Virgil heard her and turned around. "You okay, Elise?" he asked, genuinely concerned.

She looked at him, not sure what to say, but she needn't have said anything because Virgil immediately knew what had startled her. He walked back to stand closer to her, out of Dom's earshot.

"It'll be okay, Elise, I promise. You'll do fine, just try not to think about it, okay?" His words were gentle and she smiled weakly at him.

"I'll try."

"Good girl." He winked, smiled softly, and returned to his position next to Dom.

Without much coaching, Dom powered down the turbine engines to operate as turbo fans at hovering speed. He advised Gordon to prepare for the drop and announced "Releasing pod: NOW!" He flipped the small switch and the sound of the magnetic bolts releasing the pod from the main frame could be heard in the cockpit.

"GERONIMO!" Gordon's voice crackled over the radio.

"Knock it off, Cousteau!" warned Virgil.

"Sorry, Dak," answered the voice on the radio.

"Not a problem. Are you down safely?"

"Yep! I'll just bob around down here 'til y'all come and get me!"

"F-A-B, Thunderbird Four."

Dom powered the engines up and moved off slowly, but as he increased the thrust Thunderbird Two shot forward faster than he'd anticipated.

"Bloody Hell! What just happened?" Dom suddenly became a little panicked.

"It's okay, Dak. You forgot to take into account that, with a pod no longer attached, there's a significant weight change in the main frame."

"Ah, is that what it was then? Scared the bejzus outta me!" Dom managed to collect himself and settle down to flying Two around the island.

Elise had been taking mental notes the entire time. ~Damn, I'd completely forgotten about the fuselage weight differential. Poor Dom. She made a note to herself to apologize to him later.

In no time at all they were back hovering over the pod.

"Thunderbird Four from Thunderbird Two, preparing to pick up pod now."

"F-A-B," Gordon replied.

Dom took a deep breath and lowered the aircraft. Reading his computer guidance system, he steered the main frame onto the pod. Once again securing the magnetic bolts, Dom made the green monster whole. Remembering what Virgil had just said about weight adjustments, he was careful not to thrust the engines too quickly.

As the craft moved away, a cheer could be heard from Gordon.  
"Woo-Hoo, Dak!"

Virgil clapped him on the back and praised his performance. Dom, visibly relieved, smiled and said, "Ah, 'twas nothing!"

"Yeah, I'll bet!" added Elise as she switched places with Dom. Once in the pilot seat, she immediately became the professional pilot she'd always been. Virgil watched admiringly as she maneuvered the controls with ease, totally settled now with flying his baby, after such a rocky start with her training.

"Thunderbird Four from Thunderbird Two, approaching drop zone in 1.5 minutes. Be ready." Down in Thunderbird Four, Gordon was quite taken back by the female voice of authority which was now sitting in his brothers' seat!

"YES MA'AM!" he immediately replied.

"Smart ass." said Elise under her breath, but loud enough to make sure Gordon heard.

"Hey, I heard that!" complained the aquanaut.

Elise smirked, "You were meant to. Now get ready, we're over the drop zone." She glanced at Virgil, who looked very impressed with her quick wit with his brother. She grinned.

"Hey, Cousteau?"

"What?"

She lowered her voice and said, "I just want you to know I'm putting on my velvet gloves now... just for you... and like I promised, you won't feel a thing!" Virgil started laughing and Gordon didn't have time to think of a reply before she announced "Releasing pod NOW!"

Pod 4 hit the water gently and started bobbing up and down.

"Damn! That was smooth, girl! What d'ya say we do it again?" Gordon suggested provocatively.

"In your dreams!" Virgil interjected bluntly.

Elise shook her head, laughing softly. "You boys are a mess!"

"Boys? Did you hear that Van Gogh? She called us boys!"

"Don't go there, Cousteau," his brother warned.

The bantering stopped as Elise suddenly heard an alarm on the control panel. Scanning quickly she said, "Possible shut down in starboard vertical take-off ram jet." Virgil scanned the control panel for further indications of the problem.

"Shutting down starboard ram-jet," Elise continued "Vertical take-off power now controlled by port ram-jet. Hold on, I'm taking her up."

Elise gave the port ram-jet full throttle and the aircraft lurched upwards to the left, almost knocking Dom out of his seat. Once they'd recovered and were at low level cruising, Virgil was able to work on the computer interface and re-set the faulty ram-jet via the sophisticated flight controls. Once he confirmed that all was ok, Elise banked around again, and advised Gordon to prepare for pick up. When the pod was safely retrieved and Thunderbird Two was on approach to base, Gordon appeared in the cockpit.

"Everything okay, Virgil?"

"Yeah, starboard ram-jet cut out on us. I'll get Brains to check it out and run diagnostics on it when we get home."

Gordon nodded in agreement.

Elise landed smoothly and despite having to turn twice to line up for the reversal into the hangar, she shut down Two with ease and the four team members made their way down to the hangar. They waited for Brains and his verdict on what had happened. The engineer wasted no time in correcting the problem and assured the pilots that they had followed protocol to the letter.

As they walked toward the elevator to the main villa, Virgil and Gordon both let the two 'wonder-pilots' know what a great job they'd done. Now all they had to do was practice it for real!

From: FrankieCTB2 Sent: 11/10/2005

---