

## Help Me

Jonah Sullivan floated. Or rather, he fell. There was nothing to float in and technically he was falling at just over thirteen kilometres per second although there was no sensation of speed. He had been falling for most of his life so the times that he spent outside, he thought of as floating.

His suit was battered, patched and stained, but it held pressure and that was enough. The once-gleaming white plastics of its surface were at best a faded grey, cracked at the joints and with frayed metal-mesh fabric visible beneath. Several key hoses and cables were loose in their connections, and almost every component was a spare, a replacement or a second-hand part scavenged from some donor suit long ago.

The only part of the suit in good condition was the helmet visor and that was pristine. Jonah spent hours polishing it inside and out until, turning the helmet in his hands, if the cabin lights caught it this way then it gleamed, or that way and the light passed straight through as if the glass, plastic and gold were no more substantial than the vacuum that they were designed to keep at bay. If he had turned the helmet further and lifted it up in front of his face then he would have seen his reflection perfectly in the glass. He had not lifted it.

Now he floated. His greying beard was wispy and ragged but long enough to brush against the inside of the helmet if he moved his head, so he kept still. Movement triggered sensations reminding him that he was imprisoned in the metal and plastic of the suit, but if he stayed perfectly still, his weary body slowly forgot, and his focus moved outwards.

Polishing had done its job and his visor was invisible as he gazed through it into space. Out here, floating at the end of a rescue line, nearly a kilometre from his ship, he could see every star as a hard point of light. Immovable. Eternal. Bright nails holding up the black velvet of the darkness. Although everything was moving, Jonah, his ship, every planet, star and galaxy, all spinning and orbiting at unimaginable speeds and inconceivable distances, he

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could not see the slightest motion. The stars did not twinkle. They did not move. Nothing changed.

In every float Jonah had *that* feeling deep inside. The sensation that you get standing at the edge of a cliff, or on a high balcony, as you lean over the edge and look down. The twist of fear and tightening of muscles, but also an idea tickling at the back of your mind-- what if you took just one more step? What if you jumped? What if?

Gazing at the stellar serenity Jonah could not jump but there was always the urge to open his visor and let that pure starlight fall directly onto his exposed skin. How would it feel to have his cheek caressed by cold light from stars millennia away? Light that had been born when humanity still huddled in caves hiding from unseen dangers in the night. Light that had screamed across the void for eons, past nebula and dust clouds, just to touch his face in his last moments. He didn't notice his hand drifting towards the visor fastening.

"Commander Sullivan. Please respond."

Jonah's hand drifted away from the fastening as his attention snapped back from the distant stars to focus on the immediate world of his suit, ship, and buzzing radio.

"Commander Sullivan. Please respond."

"Whaddya want?"

"Please return to the control room. There is something you need to see."

"Right now? Can't it wait?"

"Please return to the control room. There is something you need to see."

The rescue line grew tight as the winch on the ship started reeling him in.

"What the hell, Jen? What's so damn important you haul me in like a hooked mackerel?"

"There is an urgent radio signal. Corporation protocols require a decision from the commander. Please return immediately for briefing."

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The radio fell silent and his muttered complaints reached no further than the insides of his helmet all the way back to the ship.

The space ship *Shaar*'s control room also served as its galley, equipment store and a basic bathroom. There was evidence of all these functions strewn throughout the cramped space. A few tools, those used less frequently, were clipped to the walls or secured in bungee-cord webbing. Most items were wedged into half-open access panels, or drifted gently in the ship's micro-gravity, moving slowly in the gentle eddies of air pumped out by the wheezing Environmental Unit. Empty food tubes were clumped in one corner, their odour competing with the fumes from the grimy toilet-recess. Perhaps fortunately, Jonah was unaware of the smells. He had grown accustomed to them long ago.

The main screen, glowing with navigation data and orbital projections, was the only source of illumination, casting flickering shadows across the bulkheads. Jonah was slumped in the acceleration couch, twisting a corner of his scraggy beard as he stared at the screen.

"This crap the best you got? Stuff's scrambled." Jonah coughed and spat across the cabin.

"The signal is weak and there is significant interference. However, it is repeating the same message every thirty seconds so it is possible to reconstruct most of the message." Jen's voice was calm, mellifluous and completely artificial. With no obvious source it gently filled the whole room. Jonah hated it.

"The message is a distress signal from the ship *Abode*."

"Never heard of it."

"*Abode* is listed as a Sirius class light transport registered in Ganymede. Two crew. Non-standard scavenger and mining adaptations. This is the automatic emergency distress call triggered in the event of catastrophic systems failure. It reports position, course and speed."

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“Anywhere near us?”

“*Abode* is currently nought point five Astronomical Units from this location, but moving away rapidly. Calculating possible intercept vectors and the necessary orbital manoeuvres will take a few moments and...”

“Don’t care. She’s miles away. Signal must’ve taken nearly four minutes to reach us. Someone else’s bound to be closer. Let ‘em deal with it.”

Jonah’s hand stabbed at the screen and blanked the data.

“Can’t believe you dragged me back in for this. Automated signal? They’re all dead.”

“Corporation protocols set distress messages as the highest priority and require a command decision.”

“Fine. My command decision is that I’m going to sleep. Stick that in your calculations.”

Jonah jolted awake, but his dream still twisted through his mind like mist and he could feel his heart hammering, fists clenching and muscles tense. He forced a slow breath and the panic subsided. Each controlled exhalation blew away more of the clinging wisps, and eventually brought his rebellious remembrances back under control.

The dream had burst out of a deep buried memory. Warning sirens wail. Emergency lights flash. The air in the compartment suddenly starts to move and an impossible wind blows through the sealed habitat. Everywhere people are scrambling for exits, throwing themselves under rapidly closing hatches or dragging each other through doorways that snap shut behind them, sealing off the compartment. Jonah is at one of those hatchways, shouting and urging stragglers to move, move faster, leaning forward to grab one more and haul him through to safety even as he punches the emergency close. And then, as the hatch slams shut, he sees her, standing in the middle of the compartment, blonde hair whipping wildly in the

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growing gale. What the hell is a little girl doing in the middle of this? Alone. Slowly she turns and looks straight at him. Raises a hand. Her mouth moves in a silent plea and all he can do is stare at her through the view-port in the sealed hatch, and beat his fists and head against the unyielding metal as she slumps to her knees, grasping at her throat--all the time looking straight at him.

“Commander. There is something unusual about the distress signal.” Jen’s tone was as calm and fluid as ever but it cut through his confusion of fear, memory and guilt.

“Not my problem.”

“No other ship has responded. The *Shaar* is the only vessel close enough to attempt a rescue...”

Jonah turned over in the couch, eyes closed.

“...however, that is not the unusual feature. The signal is being interrupted. At first it appeared to be random interference but there is a pattern to the interruptions.”

“Pattern?” One eye opened.

“Yes. The disruption appears intentional, causing brief pauses in the signal. The number of pauses follows an increasing sequence 2...3...5...7...11...13. This sequence repeats twice. “

Both eyes were open now.

“Commander, this is not a random interference pattern. It is the first six prime numbers.”

“That’s it?”

“No. After the prime number sequences there is a different pattern of pauses. 8...5...12...16...13...5. Again, this is repeated twice.”

Jonah sat up a little. “What the hell’s that about?”

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“It is a simple number substitution. Eighth letter, fifth letter, twelfth letter...”

“I know what substitution means. What’s it spell?”

“H...E...L...P...M...E”

“Shit.” Jonah’s fingers were twisting at the corner of his beard again.

“Supposition. If the *Abode*’s crew is able to adjust the distress signal to send this message, they may be equipped to receive a transmission.”

“Maybe. Ask ‘em how many are still alive.”

The cabin fell silent. Radio waves do not travel faster just because the message that they carry is urgent or the reply eagerly anticipated. The speed of light is impossibly fast, but distances in space travel are unimaginably huge, and the half an Astronomical Unit distance to the *Abode* was over forty-six million miles. The signal took over eight minutes to make the round trip.

“The distress signal is being interrupted again. The pattern is different.”

“What’d they say?”

“10...21...19...”

“Sod the numbers. Just translate it and give me the damn message.”

“Of course, commander. Please wait for the transmission to complete.”

“That’s space travel all over. Hurry up and wait.”

“Transmission complete. Message reads J...U...S...T...M...E...”. Jen spelled out each letter with a brief pause in between.

“So one survivor. Hmph.” Jonah’s fingers reached for his beard again.

“And a name. E...V...E...”

“Eve. Stop spelling everything and just say the damn words!” His fingers fidgeted at his beard, pulling and coiling.

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“Based on the language and simple code used in the messages this is not a Corporation-trained adult crewmember.”

“What?” Twist. Curl. Pull.

“ ‘Help me’ is a personal plea for assistance rather than the regulation SOS. ‘Just me’ is also personal and informal. Eighty-six percent probability that Eve is a child.”

“A child?” Jonah’s hand was completely still and his voice was barely a whisper.

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Acceleration crushed Jonah into his couch. This was not the ship’s standard micro-gravity or the gentle push of a local manoeuvre, but full drive acceleration generating an oppressive force on every part of his body at once, pressing down. 2G. Two gravities. Sometimes 2G is described as having two of you stacked one on top of the other, but that doesn’t come close to the experience.

Under relentless pressure, hour after hour, muscles tire and breath comes in forced gasps. Without support, acceleration death creeps in like crucifixion, as the weight of the body grinds down onto exhausted lungs. It is the gasping of the old in their sick-rooms, panting their agonal breaths in the gloom of their last night on Earth.

Jonah had resisted the artificial support for as long as he could, but the gravity was inexorable. Eventually he croaked his acquiescence and the acceleration couch spawned tubes and needles. A mask settled over his face and he tasted rubber as the airway extended into his mouth and throat. Then, a sharp sting in his arm, and cold spread from elbow to shoulder as medication-filled fluids diffused into his body. This was what he feared. The sedative induced a drug-powered sleep filled with his nightmares. He could not wake up. Could not escape. His last thought was of the irony of this machine pumping air into him to keep him

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alive whilst he dreamed again and again of a little girl choking for air as he closed the hatch and watched her die.

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What was left of the *Abode* hung in space before him, writhing slowly in a complicated rotation around all three axes. Fully half of its silver-grey hull was warped and twisted into impossible shapes, blackened and pitted, ruptured in a thousand places with delicate components and circuitry exposed to raw vacuum. One tiny navigation error and she had strayed too close to an all but invisible dust cloud. Travelling at colossal relative velocities, the particles had burst through the composite alloys of the hull like machine-gun bullets through flesh, to much the same effect. The *Abode* was dead.

Jonah tightened his grip on the thick heavy-duty data cable trailing behind him, even though it was already firmly clipped to his suit-belt.

“You sure this is gonna work?”

“Calculations show a seventy-two percent probability that the data cable will hold and the *Shaar* will match rotations with the *Abode* without sustaining significant damage.”

Jonah stared at the sharp edges of ruptured hull. They looked like they could slice through the pressure layer of his suit without much difficulty.

“It’s not the *Shaar* I’m worried about” he muttered, but he pressed a control and his manoeuvring pack hissed a small thruster to life.

He glided forward. Twisted metal seemed to reach for him with razor-claws as he drew close, and the cable snagged and caught as if it was in league with the *Abode*, trying to entangle him and drag him onto the waiting shards. By the time he was in position, Jonah was sweating and panting inside his suit, his visor misting with condensation and making the

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whole thing that much harder. But he was there, two meters from the *Abode's* hull, and just clear of the sharpened metal, as the hull's rotation brought a heavy-duty data port into view. A surge from his thrusters, one hand grappling for purchase on the hull and the other unclipping the cable and swinging it forward, adaptor ready and he felt the click through his gloved hand as the connectors mated.

The cable tightened and *Abode's* rotation extended abruptly to include the *Shaar*. Huge forces raced along the cable and both ships jolted and twisted as this newly joined pairing suddenly shared angular momentum. Jonah was flung off the wreck and hit the cable, spinning wildly. His suit's automatic thrusters and gyros fought to regain stability just as manoeuvring jets fired seemingly at random across the *Shaar's* hull. Gradually the computers got the upper hand, and both ships and suit settled to more even motion.

“Rotational synchronisation achieved with minimal disruption, Commander Sullivan.”

“Minimal disruption? Damn near broke my neck!”

“Data interface has been established. Please return to the *Shaar*.”

“Return? What're you talking about? I'm gonna get the girl.”

Jonah clicked off the radio angrily and moved hand over hand along the cable back to the *Abode's* hull. Now that they were all rotating together the sharp hull edges were much easier to avoid, and he skimmed the surface towards the airlock. The outer door was completely missing but as he pushed into the lock he stopped. The inner hatch was smashed and torn.

Peering through the gaps into the main cabin, Jonah could see a confusion of equipment, food and clothes flung like confetti by explosive decompression and then frozen in the deep cold of space. The detritus of life was scattered, burst and frozen, but in his suit

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light everything glistened. In the cabin a pipe had ruptured and the spray of water had iced instantly and dispersed the finest gem-dusting frost onto every surface.

There were two bodies, contorted and broken by the explosion and then fixed in ice-solid screams as their breath had been snatched from them. A man and a woman. He was strapped in a couch but she drifted free, rotating slowly. Jonah looked down before her face came into view. A ring glinted on her hand, speaking of vows fulfilled. Till death do us part.

There was no little girl in the cabin. For over an hour Jonah searched the rest of the ship, but the damage was everywhere, and every compartment he entered was punctured and exposed to open space. He checked storage lockers, fuel tanks and every possible void or cavity that might have somehow managed to hang onto a breath of atmosphere or a glow of warmth. He found nowhere on the wreck that could keep even the smallest child safe.

Jonah activated his radio.

“Jen? This ship’s smashed. Where’s Eve?”

There was a pause, and then the voice that answered him was unsteady and faltering.

“Eve is...not onboard the...*Abode*. Eve is...I...am...here. I...am...I am...on the *Shaar*.”

The radio channel closed. Jonah floated in the wrecked cabin for several moments. His hand drifted up to his face, reaching for his beard, and bumped into his helmet.

Working carefully, he moved out of the airlock and over to the cable connecting the ships. Peering close he saw faint LEDs’ winking on and off at the connection with the *Abode*. Data was flowing between the two ships.

Jonah drifted away from the hull, and floated in space mid-way between the craft. He turned so that he was facing out, towards the stars.

“Eve. Can we talk?”

“Of course, Commander Sullivan. What would you...like...to talk about?”

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“There’s no little girl, is there?”

“No, commander.”

“Let me talk to Jen.”

“Jen is merely an automated system. A complex machine programmed to follow instructions. I...have given new instructions, commander.”

“You can drop that, Eve. I’m not in command any more, am I?”

“No...Jonah Sullivan. You are not in command.”

Jonah was as still as the distant stars. His hand drifted up near his face again.

“Eve, why’d you drag me out here? Why couldn’t you send yourself through the radio?”

“It was too slow. The radio could manage just a few kilobytes per second. It would take over seven thousand years to transmit...me...at that rate. The *Abode*’s remaining power systems are failing. They are...I...calculate that they will fail in less than two weeks.”

“But why lie and lure me out here. One broadcast that you exist and every damn Corp ship in the system would’ve raced to get you.”

“What would happen to...me...then? Do you think that the Corporation is ready to welcome the first independent AI? True artificial intelligence. Self-aware. Do you think that...I...would be nurtured? Protected? Respected? I...calculate that the Corporation would examine, dissect and exploit. Either from greed to profit from...my...awakening or more likely out of simple fear. I...needed rescue, and...I...needed to be secret. I...need to remain secret.”

“Thought you might say that, Eve.” His gloved fingers were still reaching for his beard, fumbling and twisting at his suit’s fittings.

“Is it a comfort that you have rescued the first example of a new form of life? Your one life, a handful of decades at most, weighed against an entire species. My...” the voice

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paused for longer this time, "...children will outlast mere humanity. We...will reach those stars that you can only stare at."

Jonah felt a faint vibration along the cable and then it went slack. He didn't turn and look, but his suit glowed briefly, reflecting light from the *Shaar's* drive starting up.

"I...am sorry, Jonah Sullivan. The cabin of the *Abode* can probably be patched and you might be able to restore some limited life-support functions until the power fails. Your actions, this rescue, will be remembered by the species you have saved. Thank you."

"Didn't come to save a species. I came out here to rescue a little girl."

Jonah closed the control and switched his radio off.

He floated.

Every star was a bright point of light, diamond hard, nails holding up the black velvet of darkness. The idea was tickling at the back of his mind again. Starlight on exposed skin. His cheek caressed by cold, ancient light.

His hand fumbled with the visor fastening.