

Futures

One hundred and fifty-seven

A moment of calm. By Diana Juncher



ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY

I check the time and take a deep breath to calm and focus my mind. As if on cue, the speakers jump alive in a flurry of hissing and crackling noises that really have no place in today's modern, faster-than-light communication systems.

"Houston ... Houston, come in. Are you there?" A faint voice calls out from within the static storm, and I clear my throat and push the button.

"Houston here. Go ahead." I grab a pen and draw two short vertical lines on the notepad next to me.

"Oh, thank God! This is Lee ... uh, Flight Engineer Lee." His voice is shaking from a mix of fear and relief. I draw two more vertical lines and a diagonal that cuts across all four as he continues: "There was an explosion." I listen as my hand almost instinctively moves across the notepad paper, drawing lines in a familiar pattern. "I passed out, I think ... I don't know, everything is so fuzzy ... I don't know how long I ... oh God, everything hurts, and ... and ... the ship! We found something! I was ... I don't

remember ... but there was an explosion, and now ... I am all alone. I can't see the ship, did it blow up? Oh God." His maelstrom of words are punctured by sharp gasps for breath. He hasn't realized yet that panic is not the only reason his body is struggling for air.

"Roger that, Lee. Calm down, everything is OK. I have contact with the ship," I lie and scribble a few more lines. "Please stand by for a second." I pause for a moment, just long enough to let him absorb my words and feel the rush of relief, but not long enough for him to realize my bluff. It is a fine balance, one that I mastered months ago. Three lines, almost four.

"Lee, this is Houston," I continue, using the strict radio protocol as a trick to keep him calm. Well, as calm as possible. "The ship was hit by a small meteoroid during your EVA. That is the explosion you remember – you were close enough for the blast of air to snap your tether and knock you out." I pause for half a line. "Don't worry, nobody got hurt, but it did send the ship off on a wild trajectory leaving you behind. Talk about bad luck." I chuckle,

another one of my tricks.

"Uuuuh ... Roger." My relaxed attitude confuses him. Good, better confused than scared. Two more lines, one of them a diagonal.

"They have the ship under control and are on their way back to you. Won't be long, they are almost there."

"Really? I mean Roger, that ... that is ... I can't believe it, that is amazing!"

I did well, I think, as I add a few more lines. He knows he will be rescued, he feels safe. Still, his breathing is getting increasingly strained, and I brace myself for the final part of our conversation.

"Lee, this is Houston," I say again. This part is tricky, but I need to tell him before he finds out on his own. If I don't, I know he will spiral into a panic attack that I cannot pull him out of, and he will die full of fear and pain and alone. And I will have failed.

"Listen, Lee, it looks like your suit is leaking oxygen, that blast must have damaged it after all." I speak quickly as I fight to hold his attention and keep his mind from thinking about

Futures

what happens if he runs out of oxygen. As if to reflect the urgency, my lines get a little sharper and cut a little deeper into the paper. “You might be feeling a bit out of breath already, but don’t worry. The ship will reach you in time, I promise.”

“O-OK.” His voice is a bit shaky, but he is still with me. Three more lines.

“They are very close; they say they have a visual of you now. Can you see them?”

I listen to him heaving for air as he looks around. A diagonal line finishes another block of five.

“No ... no ... not ... yet,” he whispers between gasps.

“They are probably just behind you,” I assure

him, my hand picking up the pace to keep up with him. “Look, I can see all your vitals here, you are doing great. I know you are a bit dizzy, that’s normal, just try to relax. And don’t get too startled when they grab you from behind.” I give another one of my well-practised chuckles. I hope it helps, but I will never know. He never says another word and a few minutes later even the hissing and crackling noises die out as the speakers go completely silent. I put down my pen, there are 157 lines on the notepad, one for each of his final breaths.

I lean back in my chair and let out a long sigh. Mission accomplished. Wherever he was, whatever he was going through, my presence gave him comfort in his final moments. He did

not die alone and scared. Not this time.

I look at the strange schedule I have spent years deducting. I have a couple of days before his voice again will call out to me, to anyone, from that dark place he is stuck in. An infinite loop outside time and space. I don’t know what his ship found all those years ago, or what happened to the rest of the crew. Maybe he was the lucky one, for I will never let him die alone.

Diana Juncher has a PhD in astronomy, loves science fiction, and absolutely believes we are not alone. She likes to make up stories and write them down. Her only weakness is puppies.