

8-2011

Snowball

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Recommended Citation

Weaver, Robert, "Snowball" (2011). *Faculty Publications and Presentations*. 87.
https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/lib_fac_pubs/87

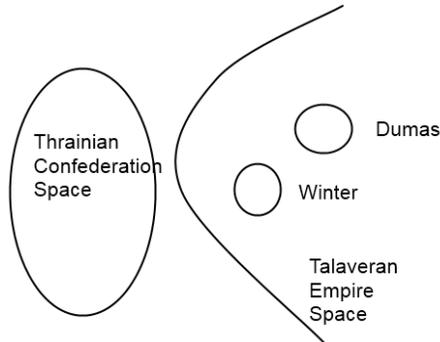
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SNOWBALL

BY ROBERT WEAVER

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March 27, 925, Stellar Age
Galactic Standard Time 0744 hours
Gentry-class Liner *Lady Caroline*
Outward bound from Winter, Talaveran
Empire



The *Gentry*-class space liner *Lady Caroline* accelerated smoothly on its way, departing the planet Winter, *en route* to the hyperspace limit from which it could safely jump the five light-years distance to the planet Dumas. The ship was small, as liners went in the space lanes of the Talaveran Empire. A long tube, rounded at either end, the *Lady Caroline* offered a selective passenger list and quiet comforts. Ships of her class were the choice of those who wanted to travel in comfort and not be disturbed. The Third Officer made his way along the narrow access corridor that ran the length of *Lady Caroline*'s port side. It was a cramped passageway, but it was the quickest way to get to Engineering. The basso hum of the fusion plant was louder here than in the passenger staterooms on the other side

of the bulkhead but the officer preferred it to tiptoeing around staring at the ceiling to avoid upsetting the privacy-conscious passengers with unwanted eye contact.

He came to a section of the corridor where the ceiling was lower, as it passed underneath where one of the ship's lifeboats was housed. As he ducked his head, the Third Officer noticed a large tool case against the exterior bulkhead. One of the maintenance crew must have left it here, he thought as he picked it up so that he could give it to the engineer. The crewman would get a stiff reprimand from the demanding engineer.

The officer never made it to Engineering. Instead he vanished as that section of the ship's hull was ripped open in a ferocious explosion. The blast wave tore down the corridor and into the engineering compartment, spraying debris. *Lady Caroline* shook from bow to stern as the explosion threw her into a wobbling roll to starboard. Her thrusters died as the debris peppered the machinery. The ship's power plant failed, then flickered back on a few seconds later. The emergency backup power was a fraction slow and the internal artificial gravity vanished for

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that second; crew, passengers and everything not bolted down were thrown against the starboard bulkheads as the ship rolled around them. In that mad second everything and everyone tumbled about like loose change in a clothes drier. Even when the power returned, damage to wiring and hardware left parts of the ship with little or no internal gravity so people and furniture continued to be tossed about. Damage alarms wailed in every compartment as *Lady Caroline* tumbled helplessly through space.

Meanwhile, Marek Kedasi slouched in the navigator's chair on the bridge of *The Nth Degree*, bored beyond belief. He stared around the 'bridge', which was too grand of a term for this small ship. *The Nth Degree* was the personal transport of Dr. Jackson Selker, retired professor of propulsion engineering at the State University of the Thrainian Confederation. Dr. Selker, Marek and the rest of the crew of friends were touring the Confederation and the Empire. They had been travelling for half a year now, and this part of normal space flight always bored him. Once they cleared jump space and set course for the system main world, there wasn't much to do until it was time to land. He

glanced over at his friend Tarrant Sai, relaxing at the helm a few yards away. Noting Marek's bored expression, Tarrant grinned. "I still don't get why you find this part so boring. You never know when a navigational hazard may materialize & you'll have to tell me how to get around it," he joked.

"Come on, Tarrant. That was one lousy little marker buoy that you managed to miss anyway. That was what, six months ago? Maybe I should pay attention, then I'll be the one to laugh when you screw up." They stared grimly at one another for a while, then both began to laugh. Marek got up and stretched.

"All right, how about I head down to the kitchen and grab us a snack. Think you can keep from flying into a gas giant without me?" Tarrant waved a hand in dismissal, but before Marek reached the hatch, a yellow light on his navigation panel began to flash, and a caution tone sounded. "Something on the radar?" Tarrant asked. He stepped across to the navigation panel as Marek took his seat again. Hoping for something interesting, Marek activated the holographic display. A civilian liner, one the sensors had detected over an hour ago, had suddenly changed course. Intrigued, Marek ran

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back the sensor log and played it again. The liner had been traveling a straight course at a nice steady acceleration of two gravities since they had detected it, but several minutes ago it abruptly turned 40 degrees and cut its thrusters. What was their captain thinking? "Hey Tarrant, what do you make of this?" Marek said.

With eight years of experience as a navy pilot and four more as a civilian one, Tarrant had seen all manner of odd piloting decisions. He instantly looked worried. "That's not good," he remarked. At that moment the communicator hissed to life.

"<wheeeen>. . .all vessels. This is *Lady Caroline*. Code 99! Code 99! We have collided with an asteroid and taken heavy damage. <brrrrzzk> <hrrsssh> are out of control! Code 99! Code 99!"

Recognizing the international signal for "ship in distress", twelve years of pilot experience took over and Tarrant dashed back to his chair. He called over his shoulder, "Marek, get me a least time course to match vectors, then let them know we're coming. And try to raise the Winter spaceport!" Knowing his friend would do that at once; he wasn't listening to Marek's "already on it!" as he brought *The Nth Degree* to full power

standby. He stabbed the intercom with his thumb. "Engineering, this is Tarrant. Anya, are you there?"

A smooth soprano voice floated out of the comm pad. "Anya here, Tarrant. What's up?"

"Anya, we just received a Code 99. We're the nearest ship so we have to respond. I need 110% on the maneuver drives, and I need it *now*."

Anya replied calmly, as if she heard distress signals every day. "You got it, Tarrant." Swiftly and efficiently she fed commands into the engineering computer.

"How long, Anya?"

"Overdrive will be available in 144 seconds. We can run it up past 110% but only for a few minutes, or we'll burn out the motivators. At 110%, we should have nearly an hour. How far off is this ship?" Tarrant repeated the question. "Marek, how long until we reach them?"

Marek switched on the intercom at his station. "They're at 1.324 million kilometers. At 110%, we need thirty-four minutes to get to contact range. Tarrant, I've got your vector, feeding to your panel now."

The Nth Degree's thrusters glowed brightly as the ship shot through space, racing down an invisible line towards

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the helpless liner. The normally inaudible *thrum* of the power plant rumbled through the ship's corridors.

They had been underway only a few minutes when Jackson Selker, Anya's husband and chief engineer, joined Marek and Tarrant on the bridge. Jackson had taught for sixteen years before taking this "extended sabbatical" with his friends. He was only half-dressed and still rubbing the sleep from his eyes. "Have you been able to contact them, Marek? We'll need to know how bad they're hurt to plan any repair jobs."

"I've had only intermittent contact. My guess is the communications rig was damaged in the collision. Hang on, I'll try to raise them again." Marek tapped the comm panel. "*Lady Caroline*, this is *Nth Degree*. Are you still receiving?"

The reply was full of static but understandable. "*Nth Degree*, this is Captain Hodgeman. I can hear you, but there's a lot of white noise. What is your position?"

"We are twenty-two minutes from intercept, about eight hundred thousand kilometers. Captain, I'm handing you over to our chief engineer, Doctor Selker. He wants a damage report so we can assess how we can help. Here he is," Marek got up and Jackson slid into the

chair. Marek returned to his nav console while they talked.

Tarrant contacted Kate and Dack on the comm and informed them of the situation. "Wally is down in the vehicle berth working on the air car's power unit," Dack said. "And if I know him, he's playing music too loud to hear anything else. I'll grab him and head up to the bridge.

When Kate arrived, Jackson waved her over. "Captain," he said, "Dr. Chiltern is here now. Maybe you can give her an idea of your crew and passenger injuries?" Kate put on a headset and pulled a data pad from her pocket. "Captain, Dr. Chiltern. I think I can guess as to the nature of the injuries you're facing, I'll need to know how many are on board total, how many injuries and any fatalities."

When she finished, Jackson took the headset unit from her and tapped information into the engineers' console as they talked. A few minutes later Marek heard him say "OK, Captain. We'll be there as soon as we can. Hang on, help is on the way." Jackson looked up as the bridge door slid open.

Dack Hollingsworth and Wally Sostus arrived on the bridge, along with Anya. Jackson tapped commands into

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his console and a monitor lit up with an outline-image of the *Lady Caroline*. Everyone except Marek gathered around, sitting on chairs and consoles. Marek stayed at navigation, fiddling with his calculations. "Eighteen minutes to intercept, Tarrant; and three minutes until your course change to line us up behind them," he announced as Jackson began to explain. "And I just raised the starport. A Navy recovery ship is launched and on the way, but they're at least another thirty minutes out. We're still the only ship close enough to assist."

"OK folks, here's the situation," In contrast to the urgency of his tone, Jackson's manner was easy, like he was teaching an introductory jump theory class back at the university. "The *Lady Caroline* is a civilian liner, double-headed cylindrical hull form with stub wings fore and drive pods aft. She's not big as liners go but still out-masses us by five to one. They report an asteroid collision on the port side aft, and a resulting explosion, possibly from fuel ignition or from the vehicle bay. In either case, the bay has been destroyed. The explosion also tore loose the port side thruster pod, and now the ship is in an irregular roll along its long axis, from

which they can't recover with just attitude thrusters. One of the ship's lifeboats was damaged in the initial collision and the other is inoperable for an unknown reason, so they're stuck on board. The hull breach has bled off some air, but bulkhead seals seem to be holding. The entire engineering compartment has been damaged; the plant is running at forty-percent capacity and maneuver thrusters are off-line. The priority is stopping the roll so we can attempt boarding and evacuate casualties. Their captain said that internal gravity failed momentarily, so everybody got thrown around; Kate, what casualties will you have to deal with?" Kate related the casualty figures coolly and professionally. "Forty-seven aboard, six injured but ambulatory, thirty-six non-ambulatory, three somehow unharmed and two unaccounted for. I won't be able to do much but hopefully the Navy will be here in an hour or so."

"Thanks, Kate," Jackson replied. "I have a plan for when we match vectors but maneuvering at close quarters with a rolling ship will be difficult," Jackson glanced around the group to see if everyone was following him.

"Marek, what's our angle of

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intercept?" Tarrant asked. Marek didn't answer, so Tarrant repeated himself, louder. Still no answer, and now everyone noticed that Marek staring at his plot, a look of horror on his face.

"Tarrant, we have another problem," he said finally.

"What now?" Tarrant asked.

"I plotted *Lady Caroline's* new trajectory as part of the calculations to match vectors, but I just noticed where they're going. They're spiraling, instead of going in a straight line, but they're 20 degrees down from their original flight path. They're heading in the direction of the system gas giant. They'll miss that but they're already being affected by its gravity. In about thirty-three minutes, they're going to tumble right into a Snowball."

"What's a Snowball?" Kate asked. Marek re-activated the navigational hologram. In front of the red dots marking *Lady Caroline* and *Nth Degree* was a huge expanse of dark blue marking the gas giant. Next to that was a smaller group. Marek zoomed in to focus on the cluster, which showed blue objects of varying shape and size. "It's more formally known as a Trojan point, a point in space between a planet and a satellite where the two gravitational

fields balance each other. Space debris like ice chunks and rocks tend to collect in them. This system's got one of the largest fields in the Empire."

"So it's like an asteroid field?"

"I wish. Most asteroid fields you can travel a thousand kilometers between rock chunks. In a snowball, you're lucky if there's one kilometer of space. It's mostly ice chunks, not rock, but some of the chunks mass in the tens-of-thousands of tons range. *Lady Caroline* will get pulverized if one hits them, which means that we will have only fifteen minutes to get the ship under control once we reach them."

"Ok, that's going to make our job harder, so we'll have to work really smart," Jackson said grimly. "Once we match vectors, we'll deploy the grapplers. Tarrant, you'll move us into a position relative above the liner. The grapplers will grab onto the undamaged starboard side, and at full thrust we will be able to stop them from rolling. There's no way we can bring the ship to rest or angle it away before it enters the Snowball, even on overdrive given that they outmass us. But we can slow them down a little which will give us more time. Once we stabilize them, we'll evacuate all personnel and let the Navy

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collect what's left of the liner."

Kate objected. "That will put a huge strain on our life support, Tarrant. We've been in space for nine days with fourteen day's oxygen supply, and there are more than 40 people aboard the liner."

"But they won't be with us for too long," Tarrant explained. "The navy ship will be along in less than an hour. Surely they'll have the life support capacity."

Dack raised his hand like a student. "How badly damaged are their drives? Once they stop tumbling you and Anya can hop across to give them a hand. Maybe you can jury-rig something so they can stop on their own."

"I'd like to, but there won't be enough time. From the captain's reports, it would take several hours to make even temporary repairs. Their captain says some machinery in the drive section tore loose from its mountings and is banging around the compartment."

"If we stay right with them, Dack and I can at least blast some of the smaller ice chunks in their way until you make some repairs," Wally offered. "That would give you more time."

"We may have to do that, but it'll be chancy." Tarrant cautioned. "Ice

chunks don't show up on active scans very well because they're not metallic. So you'd have to rely on visual acquisition. Don't get me wrong, Wally, you're a good shot, but without the computer to help you you'll have only seconds to acquire targets. And some of them will be too big to pulverize. I agree with Jackson, the best bet is to get the people off, and let the navy pick up the pieces."

The crew broke up to prepare for the operation. Marek relayed the plan to *Lady Caroline's* captain, Kate, Anya and Tarrant set up the ship's galley, which doubled as a medical berth. "It's actually quite simple, Kate," Anya was saying as they cleared the tables. "We have to match the liner's course and speed so we're stationary relative to them. Then, Jackson feeds out the grapples and Dack and Wally line them up to grab hold of the liner. The physics is complicated, but in simple terms the grapples act like giant magnets, only employing gravitational force instead of magnetism. Then Tarrant thrusts opposite to the direction of the roll, and the liner stops rolling. After that it should be easy to reposition and connect the airlocks; and we just evacuate the passengers over here."

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Dack and Wally got into their vacc suits and unpacked the airlock tube that would connect the two ships. Their main part was to guide the grapples to contact then connect the tube to *Lady Caroline's* airlock.

The time passed quickly. From the bridge, Marek spoke into the comm. "Heads up, everyone, we're coming up on intercept. We should have visual contact in about a minute. I hope we're all ready to do this." At the airlock's inner door, Dack spoke into the comm. "Hey, Marek, we were *born* ready." Wally pushed Dack aside so he could enter the airlock first. "I was ready before he was!" he laughed. Dack shoved back, saying "Oh, no you don't. I'm going out first." Hearing their scuffle, Marek said laughingly, "Guys, save the competition for later, OK? Let's get this done first."

Tarrant returned to the bridge just as the image of the damaged liner appeared on the monitor. Easing confidently into the helmsman's chair, he angled the ship's bow to match vectors with the other ship. He cautiously angled the ship downward, bringing them closer and closer to the spinning liner. After reaching the minimum safe distance, he rotated the *Nth Degree* to port so that he

could apply full thrust to counter *Lady Caroline's* rolling. "We're in position. Wally, Dack, out you guys go and be careful out there."

The bottom hatch opened and down in Engineering, Jackson began extending the half-meter thick cables which held the grappler pad. Dack and Wally hustled across the side of the ship, gravity boots thudding against the hull, and made a short leap across the open hatch to land on the frame holding the large grav plates. A quick pulse of air from their suit's maneuvering thrusters brought them to a stop as they reached the pad. As he got a grip, Dack spoke into the comm. "We're on, Jackson. Lower us into position."

"Hey Dack," Wally called. The radio speaker echoed inside Dack's helmet.

"What's up, Wally?"

"It just occurred to me. If Jackson is the engineering whiz, why are we the ones out here space-walking?"

"It's because Jackson is an old codger while *we* are young and adventurous," Dack replied with a grin.

"I heard that, Hollingsworth!" Jackson chuckled. "You do realize we've got the shipboard intercom on speakers?" Wally and Dack laughed as the large plates drifted towards the

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spinning hull beneath them.

Jackson ran out the grapppler cables as quickly as they would go. On the bridge, Anya, Marek and Tarrant gathered around the monitor watching through Dack's helmet camera. No one spoke.

The grapppler cables were almost fully played out when Wally called out, "Hold it here, we need a roll or two to get the timing down." He watched the spinning hull beneath him, trying to estimate how long it would take for his target, the starboard wing, to come around again.

Marek answered him anxiously, "We don't have much time, guys. Drop it on the next go-round."

"Don't rush me, Marek. You rush a rescue, you get rotten rescuing."

As the intact starboard wing swung by beneath them, Dack made some quick mental calculations. "All right, Wally, get set to drop the pads on my count. We'll go on this next pass. Get a good grip on the frame, Wally. When we make contact the cable's going to swing over pretty hard. Wish we'd thought to have Jackson install some safety tethers on this thing. Tarrant, get ready with the thrusters, here it comes!"

The grapplers activated, reaching out with artificial gravity to grab the

approaching wing. The pad slammed into the starboard wing as it swung past. Dack and Wally felt the force of impact like a sledgehammer blow. *Lady Caroline* kept rolling as if nothing happened, taking the cables, pads and them with it. Both of the men lost their footholds and swung up, clinging desperately to the handles. Tarrant countered by firing the *Nth Degree's* thrusters, and the grapppler cables quivered as they were pulled taut. The vibration from the cables caused Wally to lose his grip from his perch as the massive cables vibrated under the strain. He flew up and away from the ship, flipping end over end. Panic gripped him as he spun away. "Dack, help!"

Dack threw out a hand to grab him and missed, and almost lost his own grip. He launched himself forward onto the cables, but lost sight of Wally as the ship rolled over. He yelled out, "Your suit thrusters, Wally! Fire your thrusters!" His voice rang in his ears.

For a few seconds, Wally was too shocked to respond. Then, ignoring the heaving of his stomach, he clumsily groped at the chest-mounted control box and pressed the button. His first blast of compressed gas overcompensated for

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his spinning, and his stomach heaved again as he began rolling the other way. Fighting the urge to be sick, Wally righted himself and jetted back towards the cables, but again fired too hard and almost flew right by. At the last moment, Dack's magnet-gloved hand reached out and caught Wally by the leg. For a few seconds Wally's momentum threatened to pull them both free. They hung precariously in space; Dack's other glove the only thing holding them on. Wally recovered some balance, reached down and grasped Dack's arm. Together they crawled down the cables back to the pad frame. They stood helmet-to-helmet, staring at each other. Slowly they realized that the hull beneath them had stopped moving. *Lady Caroline* was still drifting through space, but stable for the moment. Through their helmet comms they could hear cheering, coming from the liner's passengers.

"Hey, Dack are you guys all right?" Marek's voice broke their daze.

"Yeah, if Wally would stop sightseeing and get on with it," Dack replied, putting more levity into his voice than he felt. "We're OK." They grinned at the weak joke.

"That's a relief. We're gonna cross into Snowball in nine minutes, you guys

get to target-shoot ice after all. Anya is extending the connecting tube, so get ready to attach and seal. We haven't got much time to get the passengers out."

Dack and Wally climbed down off the grappler pad and thudded onto the hull of the liner. "Anya," Wally said, "Go ahead and begin extending the tube. We're just gonna walk up the hull and meet the tube from this side."

As Wally started out, Dack turned aside. "I'll be just a second, Wally. I want to have a look at the collision site."

"This is no time for sight-seeing, Dack. Come on."

"Hey, I'm fast enough that I'll still beat you to the airlock."

"Says you," Wally retorted, breaking into as much of a trot as was possible while wearing gravity boots.

Tarrant repositioned *Nth Degree* again, and began thrusting backwards. Jackson began slowly reeling the cables back in, pulling the two ships close enough for the airlock tube to reach across. *Lady Caroline's* bow swung to starboard from the off-center pull, but began slowing immediately. But Tarrant had already calculated that their existing velocity would propel them into the Snowball before they could stop.

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Kate stood at the front end of the airlock tube clutching her triage kit as the tube extended towards *Lady Caroline's* airlock. "Caroline, this is Dr. Chiltern. Open your outer airlock door. We're ready to connect the tube. Have you got your wounded standing by to transport?"

"Dr. Chiltern, this is Dr. Benz. We're trying, but even with the gravity back on; it's been hard to move people with the artificial gravity flickering on and off. It's a miracle no one's been killed. We're getting the worst cases to the airlock now. Almost everyone's got some injuries, but the worst five are coming first."

The outer door to the airlock slid back noiselessly. Dack and Wally worked quickly to secure the tube and seal it. "You know, Wally," Dack said as they waited for the pressure to equalize, "The hole in the hull looked pretty odd. I didn't see anything that looked like a typical asteroid strike. All the hull plating was pushed out, not in. I took some video, if you want to see it later."

Forgetting the comm for a moment, Wally pounded on the inner door with his gloved fist. Dr. Benz, a studious-looking man in his fifties, who was already wearing his space suit, opened

the door and handed him a young teenage boy with a pressure dressing on his head and his entire torso in a magnetic cast. As Wally carried him off, Dack stepped out of the airlock and scooped up an unconscious older woman with a circulatory constrictor clamped to a large gash on her abdomen. It occurred to him briefly that the woman must have been old money – even lying on the deck she radiated culture and poise. 'I bet she's an aristocrat,' he thought. Kate and Dr. Benz lifted a man on an immobilization tray and hurried across to the *Nth Degree*. Two more passengers followed, assisting another who had both legs splinted.

As they arrived in the galley/infirmary, Kate saw that Dr. Benz looked exhausted as Anya took his end of the litter. As they hoisted the patient onto a table, she considered how long Benz had been working triage in difficult and hazardous conditions, with the care of forty people on his mind. She pointed towards her supply locker and said, "You stay here and get started with these people. Anya's here to help now. I'll take charge of getting the rest of them across. Dr. Benz smiled briefly, and then turned to the man on the table.

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Anya found the equipment he asked for in the locker while Kate rushed out of the infirmary and headed back to the airlock.

Halfway across the tube she stopped and turned back. ‘Always shut the outer door,’ she chanted to herself, recalling the safety rules Anya had drilled into her head. That accomplished, she trotted along the tube but suddenly stopped again. Something had thudded against the outside of the tube. A second later there was another thud, and another. Another thud was accompanied by the sound of a metal strut bending. With a rush of fear Kate realized suddenly what was happening. As she sprinted for *Lady Caroline*’s airlock the tube wall started vibrating from multiple thuds, making the tube echo like a popcorn popper. “Tarrant, we’re going through a meteor shower, it might rupture the tube! Get us out of here!” Kate yelled over the din. She jumped the last two meters through the airlock outer door and slapped the control plate with her hand. It snapped shut instantly behind her. Kate looked out the ‘window’ next to the airlock, actually a video display tied to an external camera, and watched in horror as the tube collapsed under the battering of a swarm of ice chunks the

size of watermelons. It broke apart in the middle, the two attached ends swinging backwards against the ships’ hulls.

“Kate, are you all right?” Tarrant’s voice rang in her helmet. She shook her head, and inhaled deeply. She had not noticed that she had been holding her breath. “Tarrant, I’m OK. I made it to *Lady Caroline*, but the tube’s been shredded. I think I’m stuck over here.”

“I’m sorry. That cloud was too small for the radar to pick it up and we were through it too fast for me to change course. At least you’re safe for the moment. Now we’ve got no choice but to ride into the Snowball with you.”

With a final glance out the ‘window’, Kate turned and began sizing up the cluster of injured people lining the hallway. The liner’s captain approached her, wearing his space suit with the helmet open. “Dr. Chiltern, we should get everyone we can into suits in case we lose hull integrity. The crew suits are just down here,” he said, directing her to a storage locker. The rest of the crew must have already donned suits, as there was only one left. It didn’t fit well, but Kate struggled into it and got back to work. Surveying the passengers clustered by the airlock, she decided the

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most serious case was an unconscious young man with contusions over half his face. She knelt beside him and began to work, trying not to think about what was happening outside.

“Preliminary checks complete. Tarrant, we are ready to go weapons hot,” Dack reported. He and Wally were squeezed into the fire control center, a small room just forward of engineering.

Tarrant turned to Jackson. “Jackson, they're ready in fire control. They need you to release the weapons.” Jackson pressed a different intercom key and said, “Computer, go weapons hot. Authorization Jackson Selker. Now Wally, be careful what you shoot at. If you hit the wrong thing, they're going to hold me responsible.” His forced joviality did not disguise his apprehension.

The monitors in front of Dack & Wally lit up, showing sensor images of their turret's field of fire. *Nth Degree* mounted two x-ray lasers in turrets on the 'top' and 'bottom' of the ship. While they were too small for military vessels, they were enough to threaten pirate ships which were a problem in certain parts of the Confederation.

“That's it. We've entered the Snowball,” Marek announced to the

people gathered on the bridge. His holographic projector displayed the two ships and the large, dark masses on every side.

Invisible beams of energy stabbed outward at a chunk of ice the size of a house. It shuddered, and large pieces of it broke loose and drifted out of the way. *Nth Degree* slowly banked to get around it, moving cautiously to keep *Lady Caroline* from drifting into her. It was so quiet that it seemed that everyone on board was holding their breath. Suddenly the communicator beeped and a new voice broke the silence.

“Assisting ship, this is the Navy rescue vessel *Damascus*. We are approaching your position, please identify yourself.”

Tarrant waved his arm to quiet the spontaneous cheers so he could hear to answer. “*Damascus*, this is Confederation ship *Nth Degree*, tail number 27B-94E. We can't see you, our sensors can't see through all the ice. Where are you?”

“*Nth Degree*, this is *Damascus*. We are above you to port aft. Break off to bearing 212 by 037 and get out of there. We are deploying grapplers to recover *Lady Caroline*. She's in good hands, get clear before you get yourselves killed.”

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“Thank you, Damascus! We are on our way out.” Tarrant responded with a sigh of relief. Cheers went up from the crew and passengers. Smiling at the celebrating crowd, Tarrant thumbed the grapples release button dramatically. The grin quickly faded as the ENGAGED light went out and the MALFUNCTION light came on. He thumbed the button again, frowning now, and the MALFUNCTION light blinked at him. The knot in his stomach returned suddenly. He grabbed frantically for the comm panel.

“Wally, something’s wrong with the grapples. They won’t detach!” He let loose a vulgar phrase that brought the cheering to a halt. Everyone stared dumbfounded at the news.

“*Damascus*, our grapples won’t detach! There’s some kind of malfunction in the pads. I’ve cut the power but they haven’t let go. Can you pull us both out?”

“Negative, *Nth Degree*. We’re big enough to move you both, but there’s too much risk of causing your ships to collide if we try a double grab. Can you release the grapples manually? We will try to provide covering fire to clear your path while you do.”

“We’ll try it, *Damascus*,” Tarrant

answered. “Wally, the manual release is on the grapples pad, can you get to it?” Dack, who was seated closer to the doorway, answered first. “I’ll get it, Tarrant. Wally, you keep blasting us a path. I’ll be outside in under a minute.” He sped out the door, heading for the airlock at a dead run. Tarrant jabbed the release button again, then slammed his fist onto it in frustration.

Outside, another ice chunk shattered into fragments as Wally kept up the fire to keep their path clear. Blindingly bright bolts of plasma arced from *Damascus’* gun ports, flashing down onto the frozen chunks of ice and rock. As each bolt struck, it created huge billowing clouds of steam as the ice vaporized then instantly refroze into tiny ice pellets that coated the hulls of both ships. Small fragments scattered in all directions, making smothered thumps when one bounced off the hull.

A small chunk that the active sensors didn’t pick up smashed into *Lady Caroline’s* bow. The hull plates buckled but did not break. An alarm whined as some more air escaped through the cracks then ceased as environmental controls patched the leak. Wally swore, Marek grumbled and the rest of the crew sweated a little more.

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Dack climbed down the cable; hand over hand as fast as he could go. Several times he had to stop to avoid small chunks of ice and rock as they floated past. Looking at the grappler pads, the problem was immediately apparent. “Blast! Tarrant, the pads are actually wedged into the hull! The plates must have buckled when we made contact. There’s no way I can pull them off. Get Anya out here with the fusion torch, we have to cut the cable!”

Jackson’s voice came through the radio. “Dack, I’ll be out in two minutes with the cutter. You get back inside; we need you at your guns. Let the old codger take care of this. Get going!”

Wally’s voice broke in. “Move your can, Jackson! I don’t know how much longer we can last in here. Dack, I just missed another one. I need you, now!”

Dack and Jackson met at the airlock. Without saying a word, they quickly ran through the depressurization cycle to let Dack in and Jackson out. Jackson gave Dack a look that said “We’re counting on you.” Dack returned one that said “Don’t get dead.”

“Good luck.”

“You too.”

Then they moved on quickly to the tasks at hand.

Jackson slung the heavy fusion torch over his shoulder and climbed out the airlock. All around him tiny ice chunks splattered against the hull, spraying his suit and blurring his visor. He ran across the hull and towards the grappler hatch. His boot magnets clamped tight against the hull plating as he heaved the fusion torch into place. He ignited the torch, his visor automatically polarizing against the white-hot glare of ionized hydrogen. The thin beam of star fire bit into the first cable, sending a trail of vaporizing alloy streaming away from the ship. Despite the temperature controls in his suit, Jackson’s forehead beaded with sweat as the beam slowly worked its way through the heavy cable.

On the bridge and in the galley, everyone gathered around the communicator panel, waiting for Jackson to give them a word. Seconds ticked by, Wally and Dack fired madly again and again at the barrage of ice in their way. Anya sat in the comm chair, anxiously clenching the spanner in her hand.

“The first cable’s free!” Jackson shouted into the comm. The loose cable swung away from the ship, snapping like a whip. He felt the ship under his feet shudder as it tried to pull away from the

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liner. As Jackson pulled the torch up to begin on the second one, out of the corner of his eye he saw an ice fragment coming straight at him. Without thinking, he swung the fusion torch up and a miniature sun vaporized the chunk. Water particles splashed over him, refreezing instantly. Ice chips flaked off his suit as the torch tore into the second cable. He scraped at his facemask with a glove to clear away the ice.

More seconds ticked by, then he cried out, "Second one's gone! Get us out of here, Tarrant! I'm already on my way inside!" Anya sprinted off the bridge to meet him at the airlock.

Marek plotted the vector, and *Nth Degree* banked hard to starboard, climbing to get clear of the field. "Very well, *Damascus*, we are pulling out. She's all yours. Please take good care of her, we have one of our own people aboard."

"No worries, *Nth Degree*. I dare say we're rather good at this."

The rescue ship activated its forward repulsor bays, and two invisible beams of focused artificial gravity stabbed downward from *Damascus*. They merged 20 meters ahead of *Lady Caroline's* hull, creating an invisible

screen of incredible strength. A small ice chunk shattered against the unseen wall and larger chunks bounced away to smash into splinters against still larger ones. The wedge of gravity plowed ahead, creating a tunnel through the field. *Damascus's* grapplers snaked out and clamped decisively to *Lady Caroline's* hull. Using the screen for protection, the two ships banked sharply upwards into the empty space 'above' the *Snowball*, into clear space.

Sometime later

Dack walked into the ship's lounge where Marek and Tarrant were relaxing, holding a data pad. "Hey, are you guys free? You said you wanted to see the video I got of the liner. Good thing I made a backup before the Navy took it away to examine."

"Sure, punch it up on the big display," Marek said with a sigh. "I still think you're chasing space pixies, though."

"Hey, give him a break, Marek. I think he may be on to something," Tarrant countered. "And so do Wally and Jackson. There was stuff that didn't make sense about this. How come one of their lifeboats was suddenly inoperable just when it was needed? The engineer I

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talked to said that it had passed the company's safety inspection just two days before. Power systems don't just fail like that for no reason. Then the 'asteroid' strike just happens to destroy the other lifeboat? Odds are long enough of just getting an asteroid strike. One that strikes and disables the only means of escaping the ship is extra-long odds."

"Yeah," Dack agreed. "And what about Kate's space suit that didn't fit? She said it was the only one left in the locker, but an officer and a drive man had disappeared, so there should have been two left. Where'd the other one go?"

"A passenger could have grabbed a crew suit, if they didn't trust the survival suits they issue passengers," Marek argued.

"Well, here, take a look at this," Dack insisted, pointing to the holographic image glowing brightly before them. It displayed a section of hull, poorly lit but visible. There was a hole of more than a

meter radius torn in the metal surface. The edges were blackened and curled outward from the hull surface. "Now what kind of asteroid hits a ship, *disintegrates* so there's no fragments left over, and pushes the edge of the hull outwards?" He asked triumphantly.

"The asteroid fragments could have been blown back into space by the escaping atmosphere and a subsequent explosion could account for the outward turn of the hull plates." Marek observed. "Sorry, guys but I'll still need more than that to believe this wasn't an accident. The Navy people are all treating this as an accident, so why shouldn't we?"

Marek then turned his attention back to his book reader. Dack shrugged, ejected the data pad from the holo-player and left, shaking his head in frustration. He was sure that there was more to this incident, but he had no idea how to prove it.

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