

The Brute Force Approach

by Michael Z. Williamson, 1967–

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"Mayday! Mayday! Mayday! FSS MAMMY BLUE calling *Rescue* or any ship!"

Lieutenant Rick Stadter jerked in his couch at the sound of a real call. That would break up the monotony, and probably by a bit too much.

Across the bubble from him, Astrogator Robin Vela was already replying. "ORBITAL RESCUE acknowledging FSS MAMMY BLUE. Dispatching rescue boat, please describe the nature of your mayday."

Stadter nodded, checked the grid and synched the blip to the ship's computer. Three seconds later the computer hit the grapple release. AUBURN slipped off the station's waist, using the centrifugal force as delta V. He brought engines up smoothly, and pushed them from free fall to 2 G standard. The couch gripped him through the acceleration.

The panicky, uneven voice replied, "Everything! I'm not a flight officer, I'm a purser. The flight crew are probably dead. Engines are boosting *hard*, we have at least one breach, and I'm hearing structural noises."

Vela still had the call. "Understood, MAMMY BLUE. We have a cutter en route. Stand by for further information. Do you need a talk-through on shutting down boost?"

"Rescue, I don't think I can! There was a loud explosion from aft. The whole boat bucked and all the alarms triggered. I mean *all* of them. Even stuff I can see is working is flashing at me. We responded and the co-captain went aft. A bit later we had a breach. The captain is back there now. Do you need me to find the time tick?"

Vela shook her head as she said, "Negative, MAMMY BLUE, just give me all the info you have—break—all craft, all craft, mayday mayday FSS MAMMY BLUE. Salvage and rescue. I show one-nine-seven passengers, one-nine seven passengers and one-nine crew. Any craft able to assist, respond on Rescue Channel Two—break—" She shouted over her shoulder, "Budd, get Channel Two, I'm handling damage report live on One. Purser, continue, describe all damage you can confirm."

"Rescue, I'm squirting full status. I can do that much. Stand by."

Astronautics Systems Senior Sergeant Peter Budd held all the non-Astrogation tasks, everything from life support to communication repair, and docking control. He also handled tracking for Astrogation, and logistics management. Budd knew his work well, and bent his big frame and smooth head over his controls. "They're at one point seven standard G," he said. "Runaway reactors, from the flux."

Stadter winced and turned to his console. It took effort in 2 Gs. He wanted information on his own screens. Two hundred and sixteen people, minus any who were dead already. From the sound of it, most of the officers were dead or incapacitated. The couch under him was itchy-damp with sweat, and it wasn't just the acceleration causing it.

Emergency calls happened every couple of days. Every couple of weeks one was significant: an engine failure, a navigation failure, a medical emergency onboard. The cutter was crammed with medical gear and spare parts, and crewed by a pilot, an astrogator, astronautics tech, an engine tech and a medic. Their suits could handle short EVA, and Medic Lowther's was meant for extended use.

This time, there were a possible two hundred and sixteen casualties and a large and substantially valuable ship. It was absolutely impossible for them to conduct a rescue of that magnitude with their boat. They had rescue balls for fifty, but any response assumed some kind of resources aboard the distressed vessel, or a failure so catastrophic none were needed.

Most of these people were going to die if they hadn't already. If they could reach lifeboats aboard their damaged ship, they'd have a chance. Otherwise...

"Vela, what are you working on?" he asked. Her hands flew across her screens. She was graceful despite her lankiness, and practiced, but tense under stress and acceleration.

"I'm trying to determine cause of failure. The engine damage could pose serious threats."

He'd suspected as much.

"That's important, but first is massive response."

"Sir, if we don't know what caused it—"

"Massive response," he repeated. "Then we revise details underway, and we'll also have more data to work with as ships get closer."

"Understood, sir," she agreed. "I'll scare up everything I can."

"Budd, keep me informed. You're taking sensors on those engines."

Budd replied, "Boost is erratic, averaging one point five G standard at a guess. It's hard to tell at this distance, but she looks bent ahead of the engines. Some struts must have failed. She's describing a complicated arc due to the varying thrust and increasing mass alignment shift."

Stadter wasn't going to ask what could happen next. He figured he'd find out.

Vela muttered, "Goddess, the kindest thing might be for it to explode."

"Quiet, please," he said politely but with some snap. She might be right, but they were not paid to hope for that.

"Understood, sir."

Budd said, "It's worse, sir."

As *expected*, he thought. "Tell me."

"Some of them have abandoned ship. I'm getting response on several lifeboats. However, I have fewer blips than I had launches, and two are already pinging as critical on oh two."

Stadter was Bahá'í. He wasn't sure how many religions he offended when he said, "We thank thee, God, for this disaster, accepting that it is not the disaster we would choose, but that it is better than no disaster at all." He drew in a deep breath after that.

Vela looked at him across the control bubble.

He said, "My phrasing was more diplomatic."

She shrugged, smirked, opened her channel and said, "Purser, what's your name?"

"Ben Doherty, ma'am."

"Mister Doherty, we're scrambling everything we have, military and civilian. If you can keep any information coming, please do. I'll need you to report when craft get close. If you need to don a suit, please do. Take care of your crew and yourself first, then respond to us as you can or need to. I will leave this channel open and will hear you at once."

He sounded perhaps five percent relieved.

"Thank you, ma'am. I hope they hurry."

"We are. If you need to just talk for reassurance, do so. I'll answer as I can. If I don't answer, it means I'm sending ships."

"I suppose that's a good thing. Yes, I'm terrified, dammit..." She switched the signal so only she could hear it, and pulled a hush screen from her headset. A moment later she pulled it aside.

She asked, "Sir, should we transfer command and control to the military side? Is this that bad?"

He considered that for half a second. "Possibly. Make sure they're copied on everything in case. However, we're already in motion, which means shorter response, and we'll have eyes on site. Budd, can you manage command and control while we try to do rescue as well?"

The man shrugged with an accepting grin, visible through gaps between control screens now opaque with data and images. "I guess I have to."

Medical Sergeant Brandon Lowther took that moment to stick his head up from the bay underneath. That was a safety violation under boost, but he knew the boat well enough not to overload the inertial compensators, and he had work to do. Stadter didn't mention it.

Lowther said, "Sir, got my gear, and I've got spare oxy, if we can get aboard."

"What do you think, Garwell?" he called down to the engineer directly below him with a mesh deck between. When he first came aboard, it was odd to hear voices through both headset and live, but one got used to it and expected it. It did clarify things sometimes.

"I suppose if we have to match, we do, but I'd rather shave my nads with a cheese grater." Garwell had a very cultured voice. Comments like that clashed with it.

"Budd, what do you have?"

"Not much concrete, sir. Their engine controls are destroyed. Power is suboptimal, efficiency is under forty percent, leakage in all directions and it's gammas and fuel. Some of the fuel is still fusing as it leaks. The plasma stinger's half melted. I'd say someone planted a bomb, except we've got that report on lifeboats and parallel systems. It looks like complete neglect. I have no idea how it's boosting that hard."

Garwell said, "The feeds on that model are capable of three G. It's a converted LockGen cargo boat. They must be wide open, though they're supposed to fail closed."

Stadter asked, "When was the last overhaul, and inspection?"

Budd said, "According to this, last year, but... it was by Vandlian."

Stadter said, "I see," and everyone stared at him. For him, that was profanity.

"Yes, I get it," he said. Vandlian Assurance Inspections was a subsidiary of Resident Service Labs. RSL were in the midst of punitive proceedings for massive fraud on quality ratings. This was probably one of those. Eventually it would get added into the numerous suits and billions of credits in settlement. For now, though, lives mattered.

"Vela, what do we have on response?"

"I've got every boat, ship and robot engine within range offering, and starting to match trajectories. But that by itself won't be enough. We're going to have to have EVA capability to get to the passengers, and enough rescue gear to get them out. Our boat is not intended for an operation that size. We need some serious backup."

"Timeframe?"

She continued, "There's a streak racer that will be there in six segs. He can take four. They'll have to get to him, though. He's got professional video and sensor gear, so he's offered to be recon if we can tell him what we need shot. Delta vee will last him twenty segs. Then he has to break off."

"How far can he push it if we send recovery after him?"

"I already assumed that, sir. He'll be near dry, except for life support."

"Well done, then."

She nodded, "Yeah, they're that far out already. He's boosting at seven G standard."

A priority chime pinged from Stadter's console. He turned to a screen to see Station Commander Captain Vincent. He'd obviously been asleep. He was rough hewn at the best of times. He looked like a warmed-over corpse now.

"Do you need a brief, sir?" he asked.

"No. I have the gist. What do you need from the military?"

"Everything."

Vincent nodded. "I already put the call out, after we heard Warrant Vela's All Hands."

Stadter said, "Response is one thing. The main problem is, it's falling apart now, and getting worse. Rescue will be operating in a hot environment and we have no idea when it will catastrophically fail."

"Yes, I caught that." Vincent nodded. "So we need to get in faster. But without killing everyone doing it."

"Right. How?"

Vincent tiredly shook his head. "That's not my field of expertise. But we've got a team coming from the BLACK WATCH who do things like that."

"They better damned well hurry."

"I think you can depend on that."

Right then, Budd said, "Well, I've got a *transponder* on a military vessel. Support boat, three zero four tons, named the BLACK WATCH." The information was straightforward, but Budd sounded confused.

"Something unusual with that, Tracks?" Stadter asked.

"Yeah. It just blinked on a few seconds ago. No sensor image. Radar, passive, optical, all blank, and then bam! Transponder. Whatever it is, it's stealthed stupid. Anyway, got it, got a Novaja Rossia freighter just left Gealach orbit. They're empty, so they're pulling significant G. Hope it's enough. Two more pleasure vessels offering."

"We'll take it," Stadter said. He pondered a moment. "We might... will... need to have a second recovery stage that involves getting fuel and oxy to all these little craft, before they exhaust delta V and go to dead drift. I'll start a chart for that."

"I'll do it, sir," said Vela. She looked very serious. Her usual sarcastic smirk had disappeared since the reports started piling in. "If Budd can feed me numbers, I can chart them and give them trajectories."

"Do it," Stadter nodded. Vela was perfect for the job. Obsessive on details, an asocial geek with figures to crunch, and very organized when it came to other people's stuff. Her own stuff...well, she'd have to work on that to get promoted. But right now... "Fuel, oxy, docking for transfer, rescue balls and inflatables for the mining craft and carriers." He turned and said, "Tracks, anything you decide can't make the initial rendezvous but has legs enough for the second stage, send to Warrant Vela." Back again, "Vela, stack them and pack them, ready to dispatch as soon as a primary is full. We might need to make a third wave, and that'll reduce transit time."

"On it, sir," she nodded.

Budd said, "Sir, I have military priority from BLACK WATCH. They want all intel and a quick face to face."

"Give them the data, I'll take it here. Lieutenant Stadter," he said as the image flashed in front of him.

"Warrant Leader Bowden, Fourth Special Warfare Regiment Blazer Team," his opposite said. Young, but with a wisdom to him. No cockiness. The man was lean as a snake and perfectly poised. "If you approve, we're going to try to board MAMMY BLUE. We'll pull out anyone we can, and give you realtime video and analysis of the structure."

"Well..." Stadter replied, "...the problem is she's falling apart as she boosts. Literally. Chunks are falling free, it was never designed for sustained thrust, the thrust is beyond current operating parameters, and I strongly suspect she's *never* had maintenance."

"That's our assessment, yes," Bowden nodded. He had a helmet under his arm and gear strapped to his suit. "But no one will be shooting at us." It was delivered deadpan, but had to be humor.

"If you think you can do it, I'll trust your expertise. You've boarded craft under acceleration before?"

"No, but we have boarded craft in space. Though not quite like this. One other significant difference."

"What's that?"

"Cutting our way in we've got lots of practice with. Keeping the occupants alive is something Combat Rescue does. That's not normally part of our mission. But we can do it."

Adrenaline shock rippled up his spine and prickled his scalp. *God, I've got Blazers about to blast their way into a derelict under boost with live passengers inside.* This had passed ridiculous to flat out insane. "Assure me you'll bring them out alive."

"That's the plan."

"Go. Please keep us informed on your schedule."

"I'll tell the pilot. Bowden out."

"Stadter out."

He sighed and tried to untense his body in the high G thrust. Two hundred and sixteen victims, and it was virtually impossible they'd all survive. Several were almost certainly dead already. They had to save as many as they could, fast.

"Tracks, what's our ETA?"

"We'll be there in forty-seven segs and some change."

Four thousand, seven hundred seconds of boost, while the ship itself fled at high acceleration.

"Vela, what do you have for second echelon?"

"I have the cutter HOLDEN out of Gealach orbit moving in, a military patrol boat from L-Four moving back, and Skywhip commandeered a freight load of oxygen. Someone will have to intercept it, but it'll be there about the same time the rest of us are."

"Tracks, what's our situation on arrival?"

"Reactor power will be adequate, fuel low, oxygen good. We can take fifteen ourselves if we have to. They'll be stacked like cargo."

"Assume we'll have to."

"Understood. MAMMY BLUE is increasing acceleration. It's a combination of less fuel mass, less structural mass as parts fall off, along with the departed lifeboats,

and probably leaking atmosphere is making a slight difference. The reactor may be running away. No sign of critical levels yet, but that's possible too."

"A fusing reactor would just make this so much more interesting."

"Otherwise it may just fail and lose all power, then tumble and leak."

"The bearer of bad news..."

"Yes, sir. I'll give you what good I have. But look at this, since you asked."

He looked at the image that popped up, and looked away fast. The ship was, in fact bent, and therefore boosting asymmetrically. The resolution wasn't great, but it was clear some hull panels near the reactors had peeled off. The structural failure had cracked and warped two long areas of the hull. It was a wonder anyone was alive, and he wasn't sure anyone would be when they got there, if they got there. The asymmetric trajectory was bad.

Vela said, "Sir, there's a mining tug from the inner Halo, RODNEY SIX, offering help. They're in Gealach orbit, freshly refitted and loaded. They can take fifty-three casualties with no margin, but will need help locking them through. They have big engines."

"Outstanding. Thank them and say yes."

"I already did. Also two more race boats. Apparently, they were doing early practice for something next month."

He said, "The Lagging to Leading Loop-de-Loop Rampage. They go from L-Five, orbit Gealach, whip around to L-Four and get points for speed and precision."

"That sounds like fun. They lack capacity, but can take two each short term, and both have an experienced EVA operator to help docking."

"Great. Do we have enough?"

She nodded. "It'll be very tight, but yes, and lots of boats are going to be critical after recovery. I have enough second echelon to fix that, but then we have to get everyone to the station, then we'll have to moor lots of them because there aren't going to be that many free and matching locks."

"Fair enough. What's your plan?"

"I have them scheduled by arrival time, number of victims, timeframe they need for secondary recovery, and I'm charting skillset. We want the military—BLACK WATCH—and us there first or it's largely a waste, unless someone else wants to try cutting in. I ordered them not to."

"Yes, we need to minimize coordination issues. Given the Blazers have done this before, I'm planning to let them do the EVA and entrance, we'll coordinate. It would be boast bait to talk about our heroics, but I suspect we'd be in the way."

Budd said, "Sir, much as I'd love to brag of being hands on, I think I'd spend more time gibbering than working."

"They also serve who only stuff the crate."

Lowther said, "If I can get over, I'll go."

"Of course," Stadter agreed. That's what combat medics did. They were their own brand of crazy. Lowther would never wish anyone harm, but he'd eagerly pile on to help if it happened.

Vela said, "One of the lifeboats is failing. Crewman aboard reports power dropping, using backup oxygen. Their transponder is for crap, too. I've got their trajectory tagged." She waved her screens. "At emergency max we could just reach

them within a seg of oh two exhaustion, but we'd have to get aboard and pop our own bottles, and we'd need backup within twenty segs."

Another flush rushed through his neck and brain. Emergency maximum meant they might get aboard a boat of panicky, hypoxic passengers, and might release enough O2 to keep them alive until someone else might arrive...in the meantime, people they definitely could recover would die.

He ordered, "Tag any small vessel with spare oxy to check them out if they're still hanging on at that time. Circumstances may change." His stomach roiled. He couldn't pray for them to die, but if it happened, it would make the practical and moral decisions about everything else a lot easier.

"Understood, sir," she said, in an emotionless monotone. Triage was part of reality, but that didn't make it pleasant.

Sergeant Lowther said, "Sir, I realize this may not be the best time, but it is in fact a good idea to eat something and drink a little. We're past mealtime and won't have time later."

He shuddered. "The thought of food makes me ill, but you're right. What's easy?"

"Chicken broth and orange electrolytes."

"Yes, I can muscle that down. Some for everyone. Hot, please."

Warrant Leader Rem Bowden felt a curious mix of thrill and fear. Every mission had an element of risk, and this one was passable for now, but would be high aboard that boosting bomb. At the same time, this was a real world mission. It beat the hell out of endless training.

"We get to earn our pay, boys and girls." His voice shook slightly, from the faint rumble as the boat torqued and increased boost. He and his five Blazers lay on a broad couch on a bulkhead, staring up at the hatch to the tiny bridge.

BLACK WATCH's Intelligence Specialist, Melanie Sarendy, said, "And ours." She had her own couch, to starboard as the boat was laid out, thought it didn't matter in micro G. It mattered now.

"Yes, I expect our noble steed and crew to perform as well. What do you have for me?"

The boat commander, Warrant Leader Ulan answered, "Well, Rescue has a crazy-sounding Warrant Vela who seems to know what she's about on coordinating vessels. We're inbound, you sled over, their medic will join you. Once in they'll tell you when to toss casualties out, and someone will net them out of space."

"Simple, really," he said. "Has anyone ever done this before?"

Sarendy said, "No. Nothing like it, ever."

"I would really like to cut the target's boost," he said. "Micro G would be ideal. But any reduction helps, or it's like mountain climbing with a roaring forest fire underneath."

From her couch on the other side, Special Projects Sergeant Becky Diaken said, "You have done that."

"And I don't want to do it again. Sarendy, is there a remote way to hack into their engine controls?"

"I already tried that," the lithe woman said, turning front into her couch. It made his spine hurt to watch, but she could face to face without twisting her neck, peering over the head rest. "It acknowledged the signal, but nothing happened. The controls are separated from the telemetry."

"Well," he sighed, "that just adds another level of interesting. How long?"

Sarendy said, "Seventeen segs. We'll beat AUBURN by three segs."

"Who actually runs this boat?" he asked, half seriously.

"Warrant Ulan runs it at your direction. I just know all."

Ulan took that moment to offer, "If you can get him aboard, Engineer Milton wants to try shutting off thrust physically."

"He's fucking insane."

"We've established that. Can you take him?"

"I can double up on a sled, yes."

Diaken turned back, "What about on several sleds?" There was no way someone with her figure would turn backward in the couch. She was sturdy, but fit.

"You're all insane. I shall file with my union for job interference. However, I can do it." He reflected that he had said the whole crew would be involved. He just hadn't considered they'd be involved in this manner. "I will only take people who have EVA experience, though."

"And who have suits," Milton said as he strained up the ladder from aft, now below. He carried a suit, and had removed his trademark shades.

Bowden said, "Well, don them now if you can. We'll sled as soon as we're close. Though I don't think anyone's ever locked out under boost before." He hadn't thought of that. The maneuvering sleds just didn't carry that much delta-V even if they could use it that fast.

Milton said, "You're locking out ahead in orbit, the plan being to meet at relative zero velocity. Diaken and I came up with ugly but workable grapples." He held one up to illustrate. It was a harpoon with barbs all over, pointing both ways. "You latch on, try to avoid smacking into the side, and work your way up. Of course, you'll be under acceleration then."

Bowden squinted. "The only way I can think of to do that is to climb the line while the sled smashes into the hull."

"Exactly. There are two side-lines you can grab, and swing in on a shorter arc. It's still going to be a hard landing."

"I think I'm glad I have a short team of six, not a squad of twenty, but with five of you nuts along as well..."

"Let me hack this rope off," Diaken said, pulling the long braid she wore into view above her headrest. "It won't work well in a helmet."

"Ah, the sacrifices you make," he said.

"Ever seen a double back flip, sir?" she asked, and made two rude gestures.

Stadter looked at the proposed schedule and said, "Sergeant Lowther, time for you to kit up. We'll line you over."

"I've been ready," the man said. He was suited, kitted and decked with gear, most of it conformal and close-fitting. He stood gripping a stanchion next to the recovery lock.

"You're going to be three hundred meters out the line."

"Understood. I have a beacon if needed. Harness checks. Say the word."

The man really sounded confident. Either he was, or he was reassuring Stadter. Either way, it helped.

Vela said, "BLACK WATCH reports they're commencing. We need to drop Lowther and clear the way."

"That's my cue," the medic said.

"Good luck."

He locked out, and his voice came over the net via wire.

"Ready to belay."

Vela said, "The controls are yours. I'm backup, listening."

"Roger. Extending."

Stadter kept his attention on course. They were barely ahead of MAMMY BLUE, barely off her ecliptic outside. Lowther had about eighty seconds of thrust in his harness to keep him at an oblique angle. After that, they'd have to cast off and reel him back fast to avoid irradiating him. Usually they docked with the calling craft. If not, he lined over while both ships were in free flight. Doing it under thrust was known to be dangerous and done only in theory before now.

It was nothing, though, on what the extremists from the Blazer Regiment were doing.

The insertion was terrifying.

Rem Bowden had done several boarding exercises in space, on vessels in orbit. Even from a distance, a vessel in orbit was relatively stationary. This one was under boost and unstable, shedding parts, changing thrust. There was no room for error, and he had little control over those potential errors.

The lock on a stealth boat took one man and one maneuvering sled at a time. Outside, he hooked onto a mounting carefully designed to be flush when not in use. He eased the line to full extension in the current 2 G acceleration, and hung as if off a cliff in open space. He then composed himself in patience, or as close as he could force himself, until the others made their way out. It would be eleven troops on six sleds, because the boat crew were not trained for it, and there were no spare sleds.

Sarendy was next out, even more shapely in a skinsuit. She was also lightly built and had a distinctive lope to her climb. She loosened her tensioner, zipped down, sending a hum through the line, braked, and then climbed over him. After latching onto the sled with two clips, she snaked a hand up and waved.

"Testing," he said.

"Ready," she agreed.

The primary crew, save the engineer, all remained aboard to manage recovery. That also left more room in the boat for casualties, though securing some of the more sensitive equipment was going to be a chore. It also meant he and the boarding party would be diverted elsewhere until all the boats could swap around in dock afterward.

That, however, was minor compared to the near-suicide they were about to embark on.

Far aft and out of view, MAMMY BLUE charged on her desperate flight into oblivion. If he could look, he might catch a reflection or a bare glow of her plasma stinger. Space was black with a few dots, when the polarizing helmet didn't blot them out.

"Boarding Party, report when ready."

"Ready," he said simply, eschewing any comments. For a real mission, commo silence would prevail. It would take effort to counter that training.

"Detaching in three, two, one..."

Acceleration stopped and they were in free orbit. BLACK WATCH simultaneously cut thrust so they'd not be exposed to her radiation. If the trajectory was correct, they'd be close to MAMMY BLUE in two segs, at similar velocity, assuming her acceleration was reasonably consistent. Then they'd try to board. If it went wrong, they were all lined together and would light a beacon for recovery, though that could take a day. He wasn't sure what emotional shape the crew would be in after that.

Actually, he wasn't sure what emotional shape he'd be in, even without having to keep them calm. This was not an exercise with excess manpower standing by for recovery.

None of the team or the crew said anything. He wasn't sure if it was discipline or fear, but he wanted to minimize the latter.

"Count off again, just so I know you're awake," he said. It was as much for his reassurance as theirs.

The team rattled off numbers fast. The crew called their names, some sounding a bit quavery. They all responded, though. "Milton." "Sarendy." "Diaken." "D'Arcy." "Aufang."

The projection on his visor said they were close to MAMMY BLUE. Now they had to find it and board. He took his bearings from Iota Persei and his nav system, and faced in the right general direction.

He saw nothing, and instinctively checked his O2 level. Fifteen divs, plus the emergency bottle. They'd be fine. No, it was nothing like an exercise, but they'd be fine. He lowered the ratio slightly. He didn't want to hyperventilate.

A reflected splash of light indicated Engineer Milton's searchlight had caught the derelict. Then he saw the faint glow of the plasma stinger. He used the active sensor retro-fitted to his sled to tag the target, and knew Hensley was, too, as was Sarendy. They couldn't miss.

"I have it, firing grapnel," he said. He reached up and armed the canister. Once back behind it, he swiveled the gun until the reticle lit, and fired.

They were actually very close; no more than two hundred meters. The question then was how well had they matched velocities?

He found out as the grapnel contacted and stuck and the line started spooling out with a thrumming vibration he could feel right through the sled and his suit. The drum friction brake engaged, and acceleration built quickly, blood rushing from his head to his feet.

In theory they were to string out in line, one behind the other. In practice, lines got tangled and they wound up in a clump.

Sarendy tried to grip the side line with a second, hand-held drum, but something didn't work. He cursed twice, then said, "We're going to impact. Everyone turn best you can and brace."

He said it just in time for them to smack into the side of the ship hard enough to bend some hardware and knock the breath out. He gasped and struggled for air, as gear and people buried him. Someone clutched at him, his right leg was pinned painfully at the thigh between two sleds, and he heard grunts, pants and whimpers over the air. It felt like hanging off a mountain, in darkness, while the mountain shook from a low grade earthquake.

Hensley said, "I have a second lock. We're secure."

Bowden firmly said, "No one do anything until told. First, I want at least two personal lines on padeyes, if anyone can reach. Four or five would be better." They were putting a hell of a strain on that harpoon, and it could fail, or the hull could, at any time.

"Linked." "On line." "Connected." "On line."

"Should I cut loose lines sir?"

"No cutting!" Gods, no. Cut the wrong one and they'd have a Dutchman.

They hung in a tangled mess of suits and sleds, lines all over. It took three concerted segs to weave in and out, disconnect and reconnect one careful line at a time, and ease the sleds aft. Eventually, they had two groups standing off the hull, hanging by line at what felt like 1.5 G. The crew had one attached bundle of their gear, the team another.

Milton asked, "Do you need us to wait on engine shutdown?"

"No, go ahead and do it. Sooner is better, just keep me in the loop. We need to go forward five frames and around two hundred mils."

"Good luck."

Just then, Diaken shouted, "Look out!" It wasn't a practical warning. It did alert everyone to take a look around. Another section was separating, pulling back and ripping free. It appeared to be just a skin plate of sheet polymer and metal, tumbling lazily in the Iolight as it fluttered delicately away. Of course, it was in orbit and might eventually collide with some other ship. The repercussions of this disaster would linger for years.

"And we're moving," Bowden said. "Time is short."

Once free of the sleds, the tangle of lines and the crew, it went quickly, even with the subjectively lateral G load. They lined together, swung around in bounds while linking to padeyes as they went. He insisted on at least three padeyes at a time, since he didn't trust this flying scrapyard.

That should save them against anything except another chunk of hull breaking loose with them on it, or half on it. Which, he tried not to dwell on, was entirely possible.

"Warrant Bowden, this is Sergeant Lowther. I am aboard, over our proposed entry point."

"Lowther, good to have you," he replied. It was. More professional help was welcome, as was knowing that area wasn't in the process of breaking up at this moment.

"Just so you know, I have a relayed message through AUBURN. Apparently, the owner wants us to avoid excess damage."

Bowden finally felt emotion other than fear.

"He knowingly operated a bomb, he can suffer. Likely he's going to die in a duel with one of the victims anyway."

"Or a victim's next of kin."

"Screw that. They're entitled to take justice out on this sewerweasel personally. I intend to see they all get that chance." His scowl was dark.

"Just so you know," Lowther repeated. He didn't sound particularly concerned about the owner's plight. "I'm ready when you are, and have marked five padeyes I think are strong enough to hold us."

"Excellent. We'll be around in a few seconds."

A helmet appeared as they swung over the curve of the hull. That had to be Lowther.

He said, "I'm over a lounge that's designated priority for rescue."

Bowden said, "Okay. Are the passengers centralized?"

"Some of them. It's full of kids."

"Kids?" Bowden asked.

"Yeah, daycare center. Or kid's lounge. Something."

"Triff. How are they going to respond to us busting in in gear?" It was largely a rhetorical question, but necessary.

"Either thrilled or terrified. And they're already terrified."

"Right. No adults in there?"

"Maybe. The crewman relaying the info wasn't sure, and the locks have all sealed."

"We need some phones on the bulkhead so we can talk."

Blazer Arvil said, "Will do."

While he did that, Bowden introduced his team. They each waved as he tagged them. "This is our medic, Sergeant Marchetti. Structural tech, Hensley. Arvil on life support and systems. Lemke on flight controls if we need that. Bulgov on everything else. He's Combat Air Control, but we don't need that at the moment."

"Pleased to meet you. I've got all the medical gear we had and fifteen rescue balls." That explained the bulky pack over his tank.

The acceleration was high and irregular. But it was ceaseless, which was putting a strain on an increasingly damaged craft, and it was a massive inconvenience outside the hull. Inside it might actually prove useful. But they weren't inside yet. They hung on their harnesses and waited, shifting to keep circulation moving and to minimize pressure numbness in the acceleration.

"Hensley, what's your take on the structure?"

Hensley was qualified on surface, air and space craft. "Holding for now. I think we can open it here without damaging struts, but any loss of material weakens the whole, and will affect mass ratio and tension under load. I can't guarantee it won't shatter what's left of it."

"Well, we're getting further away fast, so let's work faster. In, out, done."

Stadter didn't believe what he was hearing.

"Exposed?"

The BLACK WATCH's engineer, Milton said, "Yes, the feed lines are exposed, as are some of the valves."

"How's the radiation level? Those aren't made for adjustment in flight."

"Correct. We're lowering people by line and cut the line once they reach exposure limits."

That was too insane for words. Stadter felt nauseous himself, and not just because they were now shifting G to match the derelict.

He said, "They'll fall through the wash, and be lost as well."

"Yes, they'll need to kick off, then cut the line."

"I can't order anyone to do that. It's double suicide."

Milton said, "We volunteered."

"Of course you did. I can't see a logical argument against the shutdown, and it's less dangerous than doing nothing, may God help us all. Do it."

"Can you coordinate pickup?"

"Yes." That was part of the mission profile. However, juggling them aboard ships that could immediately have rad treatment available if needed would be harder. "Vela," he began.

"I'm looking for boats that will have at least emergency rad treatment," she said.

"Excellent."

"Okay," Bowden announced, "we're going to place cutting charges here and there," he splashed the hull with an intensely bright light. It could be a weapon if aimed at eyes, but here it served to illuminate for cameras. "Small for entry. Then we're going in in fireteam stacks just like a compartment clearing operation. Each troop will carry as many rescue balls as they can manage. Grab the kids, stuff them in, inflate them and bring them out. We blow the entire hull section for that. If you have to stun them or slap them to get compliance, do it. But we'd rather you took some bruising than the kids. Anyone worried about a few scratches?"

"Can't be worse than my bitch of a little sister," Arvil said. "Sharp nails."

"Good. But then we've got to clear the rest of the compartments, and do so *fast*. You can see the damage so far. Blowing those holes shouldn't hurt structural struts, but who knows what else is wrong with this piece of garbage. We can expect pressure cracks at least. There are bound to be more casualties, sorry, *passengers*, elsewhere, and they'll be going into anoxia fast. Open every hatch, clear every cubby, hit them with oxy and get them out."

Lemke said, "With active oh two depletion, brain damage starts in under eighty seconds."

"Correct. The longer they're in zero pressure, even if they have an oxy mask, the more risk of damage there is, right before death. Hopefully that won't be a problem." Even if they all knew it, it was good to go over the details. Every training exercise was a mission, and every mission a training exercise.

"I have phones up," said Arvil. "Talk away." He handed over a plugged wire.

Bowden clicked the plug to the patch on his helmet. He paused a moment to decide what to say.

"Hello onboard. This is Warrant Leader Bowden, Blazer Regiment. We are here to rescue you. Let me speak to someone in charge."

There was some shouting and crying, but not a lot. A teen voice, probably male, said, "There is no one in charge. They went to get help when the explosion happened. Do you want the oldest?"

"That will be fine. Anyone who can follow directions while we get you out."

"That's me, I guess. Gordon Rodriguez. What do you need?"

"Gordon, I need an accurate count of everyone in that compartment, and I need to know about anyone else in that air space, if you know what that means. That's first, more afterwards."

"Okay, hold on."

The crying and calling went on, distant sounding, but plaintive. Small kids were unhappy, slightly older ones were being bossy and scared, a few were trying to offer advice, and Rodriguez was counting out loud. "Twelve, thirteen, dammit, *stop!* The soldier wants me to count you, let me do it! One, two..." His voice faded with distance or pressure, then finally came back with, "Seventeen, officer. Can you hear me?"

"Seventeen, one-seven understood. Stand by."

"Yes, sir."

Stadter was glad he couldn't actually watch the engine shutdown procedure. On the far side of the hull from the Blazers, their boat crew proved themselves equally gutsy, or equally mad. He listened in as they began, and set a screen to track IDs. He didn't know how they'd do this without modern commo. He could tag one way or two way for anyone involved, or go through the chain, or listen in, and it would transcribe and tell him who each speaker was.

"Milton on winch."

Aufang: "Winch on."

Milton: "Four zero. Five zero. Six zero. Seven zero. Slow to one meter per second."

Aufang: "Slowing to one meter per second."

Milton: "Eight zero... nine zero. Slow to point five meters per second."

Aufang: "Slowing to point five meters per second. You have four-seven seconds safe exposure."

Milton: "Nine two... nine three... nine four... stop."

Aufang: "Stop. Four-two safe."

Milton: "Adjust down one zero centimeters."

Aufang: "One zero down. Three-nine safe."

Milton: "Set payout length. Images and data transmitting."

Pause.

Aufang: "Received. Three-two seconds. Length set."

A rich alto voice said, "Sarendy now on winch."

Aufang: "Winch on."

Milton: "Three-five millimeter connection at seven zero newton-meters torque."

Aufang: "Recorded. Two-five seconds."

Milton: "Sarendy will need to reach inside far left at once to have time to adjust Feed Number Two."

Aufang: "Recorded. One-eight seconds."

Milton: "Released locking clamp on Feed Number One. Expect gee boost before reduction."

Aufang: "Noted. One-two seconds."

Milton: "Two-three turns for full closure. Commencing."

Aufang: "Eight seconds... seven seconds... six seconds... five seconds..."

Milton: "Achieved four turns. Secure and clear of frame."

Aufang: "Kick and cut. Two seconds."

Milton: "Kicking. Cut. Clear. Dutchman, Dutchman, Dutchman!"

Whoever the man was, he'd voluntarily taken a lifetime safe dose of radiation, and cut himself free into space, trusting in others for pickup.

The female voice said, "Sarendy on station. Inside, far left. Will release locking clamp. Advise at one-five seconds."

A young male voice sounded. "D'Arcy on winch."

Aufang: "Winch on—Break—Sarendy, your exposure is increased inside hull. You are at two-zero seconds, one-nine, one-eight, one-seven, one-six, one-five."

Sarendy said, "Clamp released. Withdrawing. Stuck. Unstuck. Outside hull." She sounded mechanical, emotionless.

"Six seconds. Kick and cut."

Her voice was sharp as she said, "Kicking. Cut. Clear. Dutchman, Dutchman, Dutchman!"

"D'arcy on station."

Then it was, "Aufang on winch."

Diaken: "Winch on."

They were so calm it almost sounded like an exercise.

Vela cut in with, "Don't worry, sir, I have them both. Their own boat is intercepting, and will shadow for the others. Three of the MAMMY BLUE lifeboats are in tow. One was depressurized, and the one I mentioned earlier ran dry. There was no way to reach it in time. Twelve passengers in one, sixteen in the other. Fourteen survivors in process, some with anoxic brain damage. Third boat has fifteen alive."

"Understood. I trust you on this, just let me know if you need help." The endless tally of casualties, rad levels, elapsed times and coordinates were a blur he couldn't track. Perhaps those with brain damage could get reconstruction and save some function and memory. If not, it might have been kinder if they'd died. He shifted to relieve pressure on his spine. A wrinkle in his suit was irritating his shoulder, too.

"You won't like this. One was nothing but cabin crew and what passed for first class. They abandoned ship first."

Stadter felt conflicting emotions.

"Well, I guess the crew knew how crappy it was and bailed. They also probably aren't up to date on proper response. Nor can I believe the owner paid for good people."

"Most of them are dead."

He said, "That's something I'm not going to pass judgment on for now." He locked that down and concentrated on managing the disaster. Dead could be lashed outside, towed or buried in space worst case. That eliminated some capacity and O2 problems, leaving only some reaction mass problems.

On the hull over the youth lounge, Lowther said, "They're going to panic. I can't imagine they won't."

Bowden nodded. "Likely." His harness was tight under boost. His circulation suffered from the constriction. He wiggled to ease things.

"Any suggestions?"

Marchetti said, "Well, I was in Combat Rescue last assignment. I have one suggestion. You won't like it."

"I like it."

"One of the canisters in the standard boarding kit is SV Three. If we can vent it in there before we blow, they'll all be pretty well relaxed or even blotto."

That was unorthodox. "I like it."

Marchetti continued, "The side effects include some panic as they go under, and nausea. Good chance they'll puke all over the place, as we can't control the dose and it's made for adult combat troops, not youth."

"I still like it." Puke on a space suit wasn't bad. Puke in a space suit was bad.

"In that case we need a shipfitter and vacuum welding gear, fast."

"That would be Hensley."

From aft, Sergeant Hensley replied, "I heard. I have my gear. Roping that way now. I know where we keep it."

The ship vibrated again, and rolled a fraction. Everyone clutched lines and padeyes.

Arvil said, "I'm loose! Hull separation at radius two one zero, frame four zero. Dutchman, Dutchman, Dutchman!"

"Understood, Arvil. Got your transponder. Relaying to recovery ops. Ops, do you have him?" Bowden tapped IDs into the comm on his left forearm, hoping not to lose a good man.

Stadter said, "We have him. He's in range of something. I'll have whomever that something is grab him in about ten segs, if he can last that long." He sounded giddy with exhaustion.

"Yes." Yeah, ten segs wasn't a problem, assuming they did get him. There were lots of craft, so the odds were very good. Still.

"Good luck, Blazers, we'll do what we can."

Hensley said, "Approaching. I could use a line transfer to speed things up."

Bowden bent over, snapped another line in place and tossed the bag at Hensley as he came over the horizon of the ship's skin. Hensley caught it, pulled the free eye out, and clipped it to his harness. He popped the old one free and let it dangle, then fall in the acceleration. The lines cost better than Cr500 each, but they could gather them afterward, if time permitted. Even then, most were only proofed for one hard yank or one abrasion. Space was not the place for corner-cutting.

"Thanks much. Where do you need me?" the fitter asked as he climbed the metal cliff.

The ship shifted violently and they all grabbed lines, but it was a reduction in acceleration. Perhaps 1.2, close to surface normal for Grainne.

Bowden said, "Anywhere here you can make a hole and pass gas."

"One dutch oven coming up," Hensley joked. "Is that a bypass valve next to the emergency panel? When was this piece of crap built?"

Bowden looked where Hensley's light splashed. Yes, that was an archaic emergency fill pipe. Ancient, but convenient, if it was intact.

"It's forty-eight Earth years old, thirty-three of ours."

"Gods, this thing should have been lashed up as a museum or broken for scrap. Okay, I need five segs."

"Make it three."

"Five it is," Hensley agreed.

Bowden nodded to himself. Sometimes reality didn't bend. Hensley bent forward and took a bend in the line to hold himself steady. He pulled out a grinder, then contact fluid, then his portable inductor, and hermetically welded the hose fitting to the valve.

One of the trailing lines slackened and Marchetti sprang into view. He let his legs collapse and soak up momentum from the landing, while tightening a retainer. The man had enough experience he didn't even hop, but simply stood from the skin, maneuver complete.

"That should be enough gas to disorient them. I'm worried about brain damage or other ill effects, though."

Lowther pinged in and said, "I checked with the station medical officer. He said he couldn't hear my transmission and suggested we discuss hypothetical research questions after the fact."

Bowden felt a bit nervous, on top of the shaky and nauseous and icy and wired and adrenaline-soaked. He didn't think anyone would blame him for the attempt, but if anything exacerbated the disaster, he could wave his career a hearty goodbye. If he pulled it off, however...

He choked all that down. This was about saving a hull full of kids.

He heard an override chime, and Stadter cut in.

"Bowden, I need to know your timeline, and what you'll be doing with rescue balls."

"That depends on how these ships are going to catch them. We'll lash together and can tow them or drop them. Otherwise, someone has to get close enough to line them over."

"Just keep them out of the engine wash. Record. Cluster of three. Cluster of four. Cluster of four. Cluster of five. One single. Give them enough drift to clear the engines, and minimize other momentum. I'll tag ships to match departing velocity and recover, but Bowden..."

"Recorded, sir. Go ahead."

"We're rapidly reaching the point where all these ships will need secondary rescue on fuel, power and oh two."

Hensley took that moment to say, "Ready."

Bowden said, "Ops, we'll be flinging them in two hundred seconds, I hope. Stand by."

"Understood. Also, the ongoing loss of structure and mass is affecting trajectory and acceleration."

"Damn. I thought it felt a bit brisker again. Understood.—Break—Lemke, are you ready on charges?"

"Ready."

"Marchetti, ready on gas?"

"Ready. I need twenty-six seconds, per the medical officer, who advises against doing this." He waited at the gas bottle, with a metal shield they'd use to avoid sharp edges on the entry.

"Do it. My order." He tensed at that. God and Goddess, it better work. "Listen on the hull phones, and stand by to cut and breach." He clicked through to the hull phone again. "Gordon, I need everyone to hold still and relax. The atmosphere is going to change, and we're about to come in. Stay clear of the hull."

"Understood, sir. We're on the far side."

""Ready." "Ready." "Ready." "Ready." "Ready," echoed through his helmet. Five was correct. He hoped Arvil was okay. Lemke stood with his detonation controls, waiting.

Marchetti said, "Twenty-two, twenty-three, twenty-four, twenty-five, twenty-si-"

Lemke thumbed a pad, a nimbus of boiling debris, expansion-chilled vapors and particles illuminated by a searing flash erupted from the hull, and faded to glitters of gray.

Marchetti took the number one spot, lifting his feet and letting the acceleration slide the ship under him. He bent and twisted like a gymnast, planted his shield against the aft side of the breach, and swung in. Lowther followed quickly and smoothly, then Bulgov. Bowden twisted and threw himself down, glad of the .3 G after the torture of 3G. The hull was two thin plates perhaps six centimeters apart, and he glimpsed crumbled faramesh as he went past. One good solar flare might have done this beast in, too.

Then he was inside, as Hensley followed, and Lemke came last. Bowden made sure he wasn't going to crush anyone, and settled on the effective deck, the rear bulkhead. It was a deck under boost. However, that boost eased off enough to make his ears spin. Less than 1.2, he guessed.

The reduced gees helped, but the craft's motion was very irregular, shuddering and rumbling. Still, the kids were unconscious on the boost deck, rear bulkhead, from gas and hypoxia. Some of them had puked, and all looked rather wrung out.

Lemke slapped a balloon patch over the breach, and Lowther punched the emergency O2 canister. That, at least, worked. He then punched the one they'd brought with them. The pressure wouldn't be great, but it should be enough to prevent major brain damage, hopefully. This assumed any airtight doors in this section remained functional. You did what you could, and sometimes it worked.

The bulkhead shifted as if in an earthquake, but the acceleration dropped again. He recovered from his two seconds of thought and got to work.

The smallest kids were at greatest risk, and easiest to handle. They were first, when there was a choice. He scooped up a girl perhaps two years old, a delicate little thing, and slid her into a ball. He zipped and yanked and it inflated. Then he saw he'd missed her stuffed critter of some kind. He grabbed it and stuck it into his harness as he shook out another ball and reached for the boy next to her.

By the time he reached the next, the rest were all ready to go, bundled and with transponders already lit. The last one he handled was a teenage girl, and it felt somewhat obscene, the way he had to shove her legs and butt into the sack.

"Seventeen?" he asked.

"Seventeen."

"Is that confirmed from manifest?"

"No. Bulgov is searching aft."

Bowden considered. He didn't want to leave anyone behind. If need be, they could split into elements. But the ship was failing, time was running out, and the risk increased for the rest of them the longer they delayed.

The kids started waking up.

The teenagers figured it out quickly, except for the one girl, who was apparently a claustrophobe. She thrashed and kicked, realized intellectually the problem with that, and curled up to hug herself, sobbing and trembling.

Some of the small kids, however, did not like the enclosures, nor the disorientation of waking up from the gas, nor being away from their friends. Some of them put up a healthy tantrum.

Luckily, the balls were designed not to be torn. Panic response was one of the design criteria.

One little boy found the emergency lanyard, designed for escape in case of some bizarre circumstance where one had entered by accident, closed up and needed out before the onboard O2 supply failed. He yanked it, peeled out fast, then started gaping like a fish in the very thin atmosphere, which now had several more holes to leak from. He sprawled in the direction of one cabinet. Lowther grabbed him by the collar, got face to mask as the kid faded, stuffed him back into a new ball from his kit, and in a dive, grabbed an armful of assorted stuffed toys and threw them in with the child. Hopefully one was his, and the rest could be sorted out afterward. Bowden sighed. Such things were essential support items for kids, but a pain to deal with.

Bulgov called from aft, "Someone was clever and locked themselves in an airlock between sections. The safety is working and it won't open."

Lemke said, "Arriving," and dropped down the passage. A few second later, a rumble and bang indicated a breach of the door mechanism, shallow shrieks sounded just as Bowden glanced down, to see two disheveled teens, one male, one female, letting themselves gratefully be stuffed into rescue balls. They got limper as the rare atmosphere affected them.

As soon as he had green pings on his helmet readout from everyone, he ordered, "Hensley, we're done. Pull the plug."

They'd been inside the ship seventy-three seconds.

Hensley jabbed a sharp knife into the plug and sliced. It deflated, sucked through and stuck on a torn piece of hull, vibrating in an increasingly shallow flutter as the remaining atmosphere blew past. Then Lemke waved for attention and thumbed his detonator again.

Half the compartment hull disappeared in a flashing swirl, blowing out, peeling back, and ripping off into space. Some tatters blew in and tumbled down the companionway aft.

Stadter wished he could do more than listen and coordinate. His medic was over pulling kids out. His two flight crew were coordinating sequences of ships to recover people floating in space, and the technicians from the Special Warfare boat were diddling the engines. Management was important, but he wished mightily for hands on.

"Rescue, this is Diaken."

"Go ahead."

"Got it down to zero point six G. How's the structure looking?"

They'd done all they could, and it might have bought enough seconds to save a few people.

He said, "Bad. Complete spine failure was imminent. It's still visibly deflecting."

"I'm last on the line. I'll see what I can do. Can you monitor my vitals?"

Vela said, "I have you."

His screen flashed the tag DIAKEN as she said, "On winch. Winch on. Descending."

Vela said, "Rad levels are reduced. Looks like you have eight-seven seconds outside the access."

Diaken: "Well, it'll be less, because I'll be inside. I might have to break things."

Vela did have a good voice for reassuring people. "We've got your readings. Good luck."

Diaken: "Thanks. We'll see if it matters."

With the hull open like a cave, it was time. Bowden made the call.

"Rescue, this is Bowden. Ready to pitch on your order."

"Outstanding. Stand by in five, four, three, two, one, throw."

"Thrown," he confirmed, as Bulgov and Lemke tossed a lashed bundle of three balls out into space. God and Goddess help the kids. Then he realized they had two extras.

"Rescue, we found two extra, where do you want them?"

"Crap. Last. Three, two, one, throw."

"Thrown," he reported, as another bundle went out.

The two larger bundles took effort, the troops grunting as they heaved the masses out, being so very careful not to rip one open on the torn section of hull.

Bulgov said, "I'm hit! Suit tear on the edge. Bleeding, level two. Pressure tight, but damn, bleeding."

"Understood. Step out, apply aid. The rest of you finish throwing."

Stadter said, "Bowden, your last three tosses are delayed. Stand by."

"Holding," he said, and gritted his teeth. He pointed at Lowther, who nodded and climbed over to help Bulgov apply a pressure bandage. They wore skintight constriction suits, so there was no risk of suffocation unless the helmet was cracked, but vacuum drew bodily fluids out, too. Speaking of which, he found a safe direction, popped a valve and let loose a liter, to boil away into nothing. That felt better. The gees dropped again, as did the noise and vibration.

Stadter said, "Bundle that last pair together."

Lemke grabbed a short elastic cord, wove it through the grips and thumbed up.

"Ready."

"Ready in five, four, three, two, one..."

The last bundle rolled out and dropped aft into space.

"Rescue, that's them all. Proceeding aft and forward for other casualties."

"Good luck, Bowden. Thrust steady at zero point six gee, but structure increasingly compromised. Estimate five hundred seconds max."

"Is it really that close, or is that your safety margin, over?" He was moving as he asked, with a wave to the rest.

"I say four hundred, I figure you can handle five hundred."

"Understood."

"Rescue, I need a count," he called over Rescue channel.

"Current count is one four seven."

"There are theoretically seven zero people left aboard."

"Correct."

"Shit."

He left it at that, and led the way forward as Lemke and Bulgov went rear. It was much easier at .6 G, but only relatively. The wreck was a mess. Struts were bent and bending, panels buckling, and leaks increasing. It was hard to see through a haze of condensation in the dropping pressure. Lacking pressure, some areas of the hull were collapsing in. Others bowed out, lacking the structural tension to hold them. The first lock they came to was jammed closed, until Hensley slapped a ready charge on it and cracked the latch. Bowden moved through, and the override on the other side worked. Apparently, the lock had been holding atmosphere within. That seemed to run in this ship. Had the pressure switches ever been tested since it was built?

He swung the lock and jumped in startlement. A figure in an emergency mask stood just inside. He could see the man talking, but there was no atmosphere. In a moment, the man switched to pointing. Staterooms. He pointed at his mask with both hands, simulating donning it, and pointed at the compartments again.

Bowden nodded, and ordered, "Check the staterooms, have masks and balls ready."

The three men swarmed around him and the crewman, used demolition bars on the hatch-doors, and ripped into the staterooms.

Sharp thinking. They held partial pressure of atmosphere, and overpressure of bodies. Three staterooms had forty-three people, with their emergency masks, taking turns connecting to the emergency bottles. They hadn't fought each other in a panic over oxy, but from the relief on their faces, they would have soon.

"Bowden, this is Lemke. Aft is... bad. It's mostly evacuated, physically and radioactively hot, and structurally a mess. There are holes everywhere. I'm prepared to go by compartment on your order."

He checked time on his visor. There was no way to get everyone out in the allowed time. So they'd have to hope to beat the odds, because there was no way they could leave anyone behind. The nausea and heat came back, and he increased his oxy level. He needed it now.

"Lemke, copy Rescue, what do you see of the lifeboats?"

Lemke said, "They seem to be gone from this side."

Stadter said, "There are two not accounted for, but their bays are far back near the reactor. My call is not to go there."

Bowden said, "Agreed."

Stadter added, "You'll be glad to know there are some relieved parents. The engineering crew cleared the casino and lounge and forced them into the lifeboats. Tough call, but the right one."

"Good news. Lemke, Bulgov, come forward."

"Yes, sir."

"Rescue, this is Bowden. Four-three mobile casualties in masks. We can put some in balls. Is there any way to dock or catch?"

"Bowden, this is Rescue. Your team has planted charges on the reactor feeds. They plan to cut the lines the hard way and bremsstrahlung that way." His voice sounded tight.

"Understood. Will that be soon?" Stadter did not sound happy.

"If you consent, I do."

"Do it." That would take the strain off the structure. He felt relief and guilt. If they'd been able to do that sooner... but he'd definitely live.

A moment later a bang and a rumble shook the creaky vessel, but thrust dissipated at once, to nothing.

"Bowden, this is Rescue, we can dock at Frame One Zero, Radius Two Zero Zero."

"Do that, and we'll shuffle people in one at a time."

"We can take the worst one-five, absolute max. The rest will have to egress for recovery."

"Understood."

This was going to mean a fight.

Stadter didn't want to tell Bowden how the feeds had been cut. Sergeant Diaken was dying from massive radiation exposure, from hand-placing charges inside the danger radius. The other four were adrift in the dark awaiting pickup from amateurs in craft not equipped for rescue, along with Arvil. Bowden and his team were cutting their way through the inside...

"Rescue, this is BARLEY MOW. We have an extra recovery."

Budd said, "BARLEY MOW, this is Rescue, elaborate, please."

"Sergeant Arvil. He slapped against the hull. We got a line on him. He's got some impact trauma, but his suit armor took it, and he's alive if bruised."

Budd, Vela and Stadter stared at each other for a second.

Stadter said, "BARLEY MOW, that's ludicrous, but thank you."

Bowden wished they'd opened the staterooms one at a time. While the three crew had done a fine job herding people in, they'd reach panic level soon. Nor could he use command voice, there was almost no pressure in the forward end.

He used his map projector on the bulkhead, and Lowther and Marchetti matched him in the other rooms.

CHILDREN ARE ALIVE, he flashed. YOU WILL EVAC THROUGH FORWARD LOCK. SHIP WILL DOCK FOR WORST NEED. OTHERS WILL BE TOWED.

They nodded in worried understanding, but their confidence seemed a bit higher. He wasn't going to tell them how they'd be towed.

There was a pregnant woman, two more children, three people with minor but painful injuries—sprains and bruises from the runaway G—and seven people who, in his opinion, were near breaking point.

The schedule suffered again when Hensley had to spend long segs welding cracks in the airlock. To be fair, they seemed to be recent, but it was all part of the same utter failure. The owner didn't even deserve a duel. They'd found several patches aboard that were purely cosmetic. He'd known this wreck was subpar.

Lemke and Bulgov crawled up through the wreckage from below, looking fatigued, but functional.

With one troop in each room managing the oxygen, and three spare bottles from elsewhere, calm prevailed. That left him and Lemke to push forward.

The bridge lock was sealed from inside, and he rang the chime. He waited, and rang it again. The purser should be in there. He was about to call Rescue for relay when the latch moved.

The purser swung it open and the expression on his face was tragic.

Bowden gripped him and pressed helmets for conduction. "Mister Doherty, we're here for you."

Doherty maintained some composure. He spoke into his mic, probably to Rescue, then pulled the lead from his helmet. Inside his suit the man shivered. He let himself be led.

"Bowden, this is Rescue."

"Go ahead."

"Lowther and we came up with a plan. Take the passengers out singly. Stuff them into balls, toss them out. They'll be immediately available for pickup now that we're in free flight. All primary vessels are converging."

"That works. We can start now." The pregnant woman was already aboard AUBURN. The kids were lined up and ready, and after that it was just a case of moving fast enough with O2 running low. Of course, the lack of lights, gravity and heat was going to be a problem. He welcomed it to the alternative.

There was an attempt at chivalry, with some men hanging back while the women were moved. A couple of quite cute ones shivered in goosebumps, underdressed for an evacuated ship. He handled them professionally, but it was hard to move someone under these conditions without grabbing their ass and shoving.

"That's fifteen," Lowther said.

"Balls," he replied.

The next woman came up the line, looked at the ball, and clenched in fear. She didn't resist as they stuffed her in, but she wasn't helpful.

Then it became clear that some people were hanging back out of fear, letting others precede them. That meant the end would be interesting.

It was a good thing the engines were completely down. It took a lot longer than five hundred seconds to transfer everyone. More than half would have died on that schedule.

They passed people out, stuffed them into balls, and handled them through the wedged-wide lock, where Lowther and Marchetti lashed them to AUBURN. The passengers could see out the tiny windows, and they all looked frightened or frozen. It was going to be traumatic for them, but, Bowden observed, not as traumatic as dying. One by one, the medics played out sections of line, looped and lashed them, and occasionally peeked in a window to smile and give someone a thumb's up.

The last woman and last man clung to the stanchion next to the O2 supply. He was middle aged, in good shape, even athletic, but shivered like a lapdog. She was completely numb with a thousand meter stare. Both had to have their fingers pried loose, and be towed to the lock.

And that was that. After the earlier excitement, the ending was somewhat anticlimactic.

Lowther shook hands, swung back out, clipped and unclipped lines and monkey-crawled around his charges, letting them see that he was outside with them. He would ride that way until another craft matched course to take them off.

"We're clear. We'll mount. Transponders on, awaiting pickup sometime in the next four divs." He felt an odd mix of elated, satisfied, nervous, frightened and lethargic. They'd done it.

"Understood, and your sled transponders are still live. Tracking already."

"Thanks, Rescue." It would be divs before they were recovered, days before they filtered from ship to ship and back to their own craft, and then probably down for debriefing. One thing about real world missions; they beat the hell out of exercises for both value and intensity.

He'd say he never wanted to do it again, but he felt more alive than he ever had. Some people never knew if they mattered. Blazers didn't have that problem.

He checked his harness and prepared to line aft, leaving MAMMY BLUE cold and dead in space.

Stadter's guts flipped at the current exchange, but he had to do it.

"Rescue to Sergeant Diaken."

Her voice was raspy and ill-sounding. "Go ahead, Rescue."

"One-eight-six recovered. Four-three after you cut feeds."

"Glad to hear it. Thanks for all your efforts. Diaken out." The transmission ended in an odd fade.

"Rescue out," he said, needlessly. There was no way she'd live to reach the station after that dose, much less anywhere that could hope to do anything. It wasn't even safe to recover her body. That hiss had been her helmet unsealing to vacuum. There were no good ways to die, but that seemed so cold.

He turned his attention back to Bowden.

"Bowden, this is Rescue. I have an interim AAR if I can relay the good and bad."

"Rescue, go ahead. I can take it."

"Bowden, one eight six of two one seven recovered and expected to live. Those extra two you caught had to be towed outside and transferred to another ship. They're pretty shaken. I think most of the survivors are well-trunked."

He paused and continued, "One lost on recovery, we'll need to check your cameras to determine who. Bundle of five tumbled, one separated and caught in engine wash. I'm sorry."

There was momentary silence, then Bowden said, "Continue."

"Regret to relay that Special Projects Sergeant Diaken absorbed lethal dose, by choice, to effect shutdown on the feeds. She bought you the additional time."

"Then she saved at least forty lives. She was a good woman." The man sounded steely, but Stadter figured he'd be torn up as soon as his mic was closed.

"That's it for your watch. Other casualties due to lifeboat failing and no crew aboard to assist with backup O2. The bottle worked, they just couldn't figure it out in time. Some of the crew died aboard, and twelve passengers."

"On the whole, then, I guess we all did an amazing job. Thank you, Lieutenant, and your staff, for coordination."

"And you, Bowden. Stadter out, listening." He figured to leave the man to deal with his troops and his frustration, for the next half day.

Bowden would be the last man out of a powerless derelict, in free flight in space, awaiting pickup in the darkness. That took insane amounts of courage.

They spent a full day passing the passengers in the balls outside to other ships, swapping fuel and oxy, coordinating others. They breathed canned air, ate plastic-wrapped food bars and were grateful for both. The rescued passengers were stuffed into the two cabins of the small craft, making any movement a pain. Luckily, the pregnant woman wasn't close to labor. They all stank of fear, the filters couldn't keep up, and even the latrine was overloaded, despite venting to space twice. Garwell had to pretty well sit on top of them. Two were billeted under his couch and controls.

Eventually, they maneuvered into their cradle and docked. He hit the switches to cut power, dumped a reload request for supplies expended, and crawled out the hatch into the station. The alternate crew had lined up to cheer them, in both tribute and jealousy. A mission like this happened once in a career, though, he reflected, once was enough.

He shook hands with his opposite, Captain Brown, and said, "I need to debrief and rest. Thank you," he turned to the rest, "and thank you all. We'll catch up later."

He near staggered on his way to Station Control.

Captain Vincent, looked worn, satisfied and angry. It was an odd combination of expressions.

"Lieutenant Stadter. You're just in time."

"Yes, sir?" He didn't think there was a problem at his end, and Vincent wasn't one to string things out.

"Things are very good. I want to make sure you know that. Exceptional work all around. Among your crew, Warrant Vela is to be commended for outstanding traffic control."

"Thank you, sir."

"Just thought you'd like to know I have the ship's owner on another screen."

"That's interesting," Stadter said. He didn't want to make any assumptions about that. He was too edgy and likely to snap.

Vincent turned, lit the screen and looked into it.

"Mister Etzl, Lieutenant Stadter was in charge of the rescue effort."

Etzl didn't look like a cheap bastard, nor was he oily. However, he didn't waste any time.

"I'd like to thank you for recovering my passengers, sir."

"You're welcome. We all did the best we could. I directed a lot of professionals and dedicated volunteers."

"I'd like to discuss recovering my ship, and compensation."

Adminwork, the bane of existence, he thought. Though to a man like this, reports were everything. He saw figures. Stadter saw people.

"If you are asking for a report for your insurance, it will come to you in time, after it works through our system."

Etzl shook his head. "I'm not worried about that. But there's cargo and gear and supplies aboard. I understand it's in free flight. This wouldn't count as rescue, but recovery, and of course you're entitled to a share as salvage. But will you be able to get back out on that shortly? The sunk costs increase the further out it gets." He seemed agitated.

Stadter was too numb from the mission to get angry. It was just too surreal. Etzl needed to worry more about what would happen when charges started piling on him, and challenges to duel. If he was lucky, he'd only be indentured for life.

On the one hand, it would be nice if the passengers recovered any items of personal value. There was even a chance the cargo contained things that couldn't be replaced by money alone. At the same time, they'd already lost too many people, injured several, and one had volunteered to die to help save others and reduce the burden this scumbag faced. He really should be enraged. He should challenge the man himself, Bahá'í rules on dueling be damned.

He was just too wired, tired and overloaded to deal with it right now. He was giddy with fatigue, disoriented, and this didn't feel real. There was a policy that applied here, though. He went with that.

"Sir, you may contract whomever you wish for salvage. Neither I nor my crew are available. Your ship represents a hazard to traffic as is, so I recommend you move quickly on any recovery. I will officially recommend that the military use it for target practice if it's not dealt with in a week. This matter is closed. Good day to you."

He nodded to Vincent, who nodded back with a faint smirk. Then he turned, and headed for his cabin. He could pick up the anger later, if there weren't better things to do.

Afterword

I read a lot.

This house has several thousand books, mostly nonfiction, on a plethora of subjects. Somewhere in the section on ships is a story about a ferry in New York Harbor sometime in the 1890s, I recall.

This small vessel, in winter, was full of people traveling from island to island or mainland. Most of them were immigrant laborers.

This boat did have a boiler explode, rupturing one side, causing it to founder and sink. There were lifeboats, bought cast-off from some better vessel, not seaworthy. There were kapok life jackets, but the rubber had dry-rotted, the kapok mildewed, and they weren't in usable condition even if the water wasn't barely warmer than the freezing air.

Every craft in the harbor did respond, in a frenzy not seen again until Flight 1549 landed in the Hudson river more than a century later. I can't recall how many survived, but most did. The owner was held in very poor regard, and if I recall correctly, sued into poverty, as he should be.

From there, I wondered how such a story would work in the Freehold universe, which, despite some parties alleging it to be a "utopia," bears several significant resemblances to the era of robber barons and exploitative management. There are many things done better by the free market. However, some things actually do require government infrastructure to effect properly. Whether or not quality standards for spaceship inspections are among the latter probably depends in part on who's arguing the point, and if they intend to be aboard. Even if one can settle up economically afterward, duel or seek vengeance, it's probably better to have the intact ship in the first place.

