



The Last Hurrah

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Chapter Two: En Route to Xanadu Station

Safe in her Jump field, the Sloop-Of-War *Saberwolf* sped onward. For the first two days after entering Jump space entry the crew had worked around the clock to prevent a catastrophic breakdown of the ship's systems. After those two fraught days, the pace of repair work became merely urgent, allowing some of the crew to stand down from the fever-pitched bustle.

After five days in transit, *Saberwolf* had begun to resemble a warship once again. Non-essential systems were fired up, crewmen were able to eat a hot meal and sleep for more than four hours at a stretch. Shipboard routine slowly began to return to normal.

On the sixth day they held the funerals.

John Ritchie presided over the memorial service, as was his duty. A ship as small as *Saberwolf* could not spare the room to carry a Chaplain, so those duties were passed to the Captain for ceremonial occasions and to the Surgeon for all others.

With stations manned by a skeleton watch, the remainder of the crew gathered on the gun-deck to hear Ritchie's words. The Gunnery and Engineering Lieutenants stood with their divisions, along with Lieutenant Walker. Lieutenant Tasker, the Operations officer, was absent on bridge watch, and Doctor Connelly remained in sickbay ministering to the injured.

Of a hundred ratings, sixteen stood to posts, five were confined to sickbay, and twelve were dead. The remainder formed a forlorn triple rank as Ritchie entered the gun-deck via the shaft from Officers' Country. At a word from Walker the divisions crashed to attention.

For this occasion the crew had removed their vacuum-tight duty crewsuits and wore dress black, with a sleeveless overjacket of sky blue, orange or green according to their department.

Ritchie strode to face the parade. His cutlass tapped at his calf as he walked. The yellow-faced crimson pelisse jacket worn over his dress blacks was heavy and uncomfortable, and he knew his officers were suffering the same discomfort.

But at least they were alive to feel it. That seemed like some kind of miracle, given the pounding that *Saberwolf* had taken. Several crewmembers wore borrowed or undress uniform, their finest destroyed along with their personal possessions by coolant spillage, hull penetration or spallation as fragments of armor plate were scattered in a razor-edged blizzard when hullplate stressed and distorted under weapons fire.

Ritchie faced the assembled crew, hating this of all his responsibilities. The letters to bereaved families were already composed, waiting to be sent upon their arrival in port. But to stand here and acknowledge that the dead were really gone, to admit to himself and to others that he had failed to bring his crew home safe... it was the hardest of all duties.

Ritchie glanced at the twelve coffins lying on the loading ramps of the portside missile tubes. The dark plastic, dully shining in the overhead lights, accused him wordlessly. There were men and women in there, he found himself thinking. Human beings who less than a week ago had a life beyond patrol duty in the war zone; people with something to go home to, loved ones to miss during the long nights on watch. Living, breathing, people with hopes and dreams and prospects. Now their future had come to an abrupt end.

In a moment, the missile tubes would slide shut, the outer bay would open and the coffins would begin their short flight to the edge of the Jump field. Breaking through into the howling chaos beyond the little electromagnetic bubble of reality that protected the ship, they would be destroyed in some manner that Ritchie did not understand. Atoms that had once been human beings would scatter into deep space and be gone forever.

Ritchie wondered how long the custom of Burial in Jump had existed, found himself thinking of Walker's grim quote, "No roses grow on a sailor's tomb." He started to wonder how long it would be before they buried him, too.

Ritchie turned back to the silent crew, wondering how long he had stood, lost in contemplation. He tried to recall the words of the burial ceremony, but they had fled from him, driven out by raw emotion. Instead he gazed at his loyal



crew, thinking of how he had almost chosen to spend the lives placed in his care. He had been willing to sacrifice them to shield the escaping squadron, before Vance Reuter had taken the cup from his hands and bought their survival at the cost of his own precious existence.

And suddenly there were words.

They were not the words of a written ceremony, empty rote-parroted. They came from Ritchie's own soul. He stood on the gun deck and spoke of the bravery and sacrifice of those who had laid down their lives for others, not with the trained rhetoric of a hired priest but with the humble and heartfelt gratitude of a man who knows that he lives only because another chose to die in his place. The crew stood, riveted to the spot as Ritchie spoke. Finally he came to the end of the service, and the officers formed an honor guard around the missile launchers. Ritchie glanced along the silent black-and-crimson line, noted the white-lipped tension in Leading Crewmember Tavney's face, the rigid control of Chief Petty Officer London.

"And so we commit their bodies to the Deep of Space," Ritchie began as the torpedo tubes slid closed. "And with them go our prayers." He was speaking for all the dead, those for whom there were no shipmates to perform the final ceremony.

"From Corruption you came, and to Corruption you shall return."

The mournful notes of a Piper's Lament sounded as the tubes recoiled. Hissing pressurized gas cold-launched the coffins on their final flight.

There were other words to speak now, but Ritchie could not say them. Instead he whispered, "Dismissed" in Walker's direction and walked quickly from the gun-deck, leaving his First Lieutenant to oversee the running of the ship for a few hours. Walker knew where to find him if a crisis developed.

Hours passed as the ship's returned to normal.

Ritchie drummed his fingertips on the scarred oak tabletop, making the whiskey bottle chink softly against the pair of heavy lead-crystal glasses he had brought from his cabin. He glanced around the tiny officers' mess. The room was comfortably worn, the furnishings expensive but scuffed from long use. The fake-oak-paneled walls were hung with real oil paintings of sailing vessels along one wall and starfaring craft around the others.

Ritchie's gaze fell upon the painting of the *Resolve*, once the mighty flagship of the Sixth Battle Squadron. He smiled thinly, remembering his days as a midshipman aboard that vessel. Long ago, it seemed, in an age of colonial border incursions and diplomatic saber rattling as the UN of Terra gradually became the Terran Confederation; a time of seceding colonies and intermittent border skirmishes with the Vilani Imperium. A time of excitement as both sides danced around the possibility of renewed war, neither apparently willing to make the first strike. Months of skirmishing, chasing shadows in deep space. Exciting times, but not excessively dangerous for the crew of a large warship.

Better days.

Days when Ritchie had served alongside his band of brothers, junior officers sworn to lifelong friendship and loyalty. Days of ceremony and pride, of shining brass fittings and honor-guards, of wild shore leaves and sharp interviews with the Officer Of The Day.

Where were the Brothers now? Some had risen high in the ranks, drifting away from their comrades, forgetting or disdaining the childish oath they had taken. Others were dead in the line of duty, with no monument but a cloud of debris and a few words spoken by shocked comrades. Ritchie had just spoken those words for one of them, committing Vance Reuter's remains to their final rest among the stars. There were no bodies to wrap in linen and launch from the missile tubes, of course. Reuter and his comrades were gone; their atoms scattered among the uncaring heavens, blown hither and yon by the solar wind.

Ritchie's sad smile faded. He had done his duty, as had Vance. He had fought to bring the squadron home to Earth. He had commemorated the fallen and requested an update on the repairs that *Saberwolf* would require if she was to survive the Jump emergence. Then he had gone to the wardroom to be alone for a while.

Ritchie glanced up as a firm knock sounded at the door. "Come in, David," he called.

Walker entered, still wearing his dress uniform and ceremonial cutlass from the funeral service. He looked as tired and worn as his captain but he remained standing, waiting to be invited to sit.

"Take your hat off, David," Ritchie said softly. "Sit down and have a drink. You look like you're ready for one." Ritchie reached for the bottle he had brought from his quarters, spun the top off and poured two generous glasses.

Walker sat, eyeing the whiskey bottle with a slight smile. "Aren't we supposed to wait until we're off duty?" he asked half-humorously.

"So you don't want any?" Ritchie replied, pretending to take back the glass.

"I didn't say that." Walker almost grabbed at the whiskey, "I'd better have some. That way neither of us can arrest the other for breaching regulations..."

Ritchie chuckled, but it came out dry and harsh. He sipped his drink, savoring the warm glow of real Irish whiskey shipped out at fabulous expense - but worth the price, Ritchie decided - spreading down his throat. For a moment



there was silence. Finally Walker put his glass down and spoke directly to his captain, "I know how much you wanted to honor Lieutenant Reuter, but your promotion wasn't legal. You don't have the authority...."

"Technically, I do. As Squadron Commander I have the authority to elevate any officer to any post within my command," Ritchie replied evenly.

"That's not what I meant. You don't have the political rank to make that promotion stick. Full Captaincy is unofficially reserved for the Old Navy families. You were tacitly elevating the whole Reuter clan, and you can't do that. It breaks with too many traditions...."

"Which is why commoners like me can only hold Acting senior rank, in charge of a scratch squadron running picket duty in the backwaters?" Ritchie's tone was a little short of bitter.

"We both know it's true," Walker said.

"Tradition!" snorted Ritchie.

"It's the basis of our culture. It's how we do things," Walker responded.

Ritchie said nothing, just glanced at the paintings again. It was fine for the nephew of the officer commanding the Ninth Deep Space fleet to sit there calmly explaining why men not of the 'right family' could not hold flag rank, nor any high office. But to Ritchie, with his poor family and lack of Navy forbears, there was no justice in the situation. He had reached the pinnacle of his career as a lieutenant, Acting Master and Commander of a small war vessel. All that he could hope was to serve well enough that a title be someday granted, and that his sons would rise higher. Assuming of course that he survived long enough to have any.

That really didn't seem likely.

Ritchie took another sip of whiskey, collecting his thoughts. After a moment, he said, "David, tell me the repairs are going well. Give me some good news. Any good news."

Walker nodded. "Is that an order? Very well. We struck oil on the Gun Deck this morning, and the quartermaster says there's a pile of gold bars in Dry Stores that someone seems to have forgotten about. I have here a list of all the Xanadu Station lottery results for the next three months, and...."

"Lieutenant Walker!" Ritchie said warningly, but the faint smile was back.

Walker shrugged. "The repairs are going well overall. Reactor Five was jettisoned and one of the turbines is still causing some problems. The crews are working flat-out to replace the coolant pipes. There was some problem with radioactive contamination in the coolant, which Colin tried at some length to explain to me. He says he can fix it so I left it at that. All the turbines will be functional within a day or so, and we should be combat-ready when we leave Jump. Are you happy yet?"

"David...." Ritchie said, but he was smiling more broadly now.

"Crew casualties were surprisingly light, and Doc Connelly has performed some kind of miracle with the ones who did manage to get injured. Speaking of which," Walker pointed at the bloody rag that still wrapped Ritchie's right hand, "When are you going to get that looked at?"

"Soon."

"You've been saying that for days. Is 'soon' to be before or after infection sets in?"

Ritchie chuckled. "Before seems reasonable," he said.

"Try to remember, won't you? I can't have you dying of septicemia before you pay me that month's salary you owe."

"Sorry?" Ritchie said, surprised.

"I bet you a month's pay we escaped, remember?"

"That was AFTER you bet me a month's pay we didn't!" Ritchie protested.

"Never bet against a Kentuckian," Walker shrugged as he spoke, then quickly became serious, "I said we'd be combat-ready at Emergence. Do you think we'll need to be?"

"I hope not, but how can we know?" Ritchie said softly. "At the rate we're losing territory, I can't help but wonder how long it'll be before we're defending Xanadu Station or Terra itself."

"It's that bad?" Walker did not have access to the classified information that Ritchie, as a warship commander, had.

"Almost. The Imperials have taken back just about everything we gained from them in the last three decades. If they've got non-Jump-capable ships in Vander, that means they're consolidating their gains, freeing their TL ships for a push elsewhere."

"Not good," Walker agreed. "I suppose that means the Ninth fleet is cut off?"

"Could be. Maybe not. Your uncle might have fought his way out, like we did."

"He's got a lot farther to go than we did, and we only just made it," Walker said gloomily, "And there's these new ships the Imperials have supposedly deployed."

Ritchie shrugged. "The Ninth Fleet has a lot more ships than we do. I can't see them stopping a whole fleet from breaking out, even with these new ships - if they're anything more than an analyst's nightmare."

"Their ships can already fly rings around ours... and these are supposed to be better! How do you fight an enemy like that?"



"With missiles and particle lances, like we do now. Look, David. Maybe they have these new ships like our analysts claim, and then again maybe they don't. We still haven't figured out why their equipment is so much like ours, nor for that matter why they seem determined to kill us all in the first place. So I have little faith in analysts. Maybe the Imperials haven't got so many ships after all. We can't just give up in the face of what may be no more than scaremongering. Besides... we can't give up at all, can we?"

"I know," Walker said in reply. "Maybe I need a rest. I'm still a bit shell-shocked."

"Me, too. And half the crew. We'll have to make a tour, I suppose. Once that's over with we'll stand down as many crew as we can, and open a few bottles - we'll hold a 'great victory over the enemy' party. After all, we got more of them than they got of us. But first we'd better visit the repair crews and see how they're getting on." Ritchie finished his whiskey and stood, "Coming?"

The tour did not take long, not on a small ship like *Saberwolf*. First were the wounded, crowded into the small sick bay. Doctor Peter Connelly tended his patients, moving busily from man to man as the two senior officers entered. Three crewmen had serious burns and another had sustained multiple puncture wounds from spallation. The helmsman was still suffering from concussion. Ritchie exchanged words with the helmsman as Walker spoke to the heavily-bandaged drive hand. The others were sedated, their bodies encased in burn-treatment tanks.

"I haven't had time to run the payroll," Connelly said offhandedly from across the sick bay. Aboard *Saberwolf*, all the officers except the captain had more than one job. Connelly was paymaster as well as surgeon and ersatz chaplain. He was a skinny young man who resembled a wire coathanger upon which someone had hung an old and threadbare Navy uniform. His clothing was always awry, usually creased and missing buttons. His shock of curly flame-red hair was matched by a pointed beard.

If Connelly had not been such a talented surgeon and medical equipment technician - there was no room for a dedicated technical crewman aboard - he might have been dismissed the service. Instead he was doomed to be forever a Reserve Sublieutenant, called up straight from medical school for Hostilities Only duty. Advancement meant nothing to him. And neither did regulations, for much the same reason.

"How are the patients?" Ritchie asked quietly.

"They'll live, if I have anything to do with it."

"Good," Ritchie tried to think of something else to say but could not.

"Go away, Captain. You and this oaf of a first officer are cluttering up my nice tidy sickbay. Not to mention upsetting my patients."

Ritchie smiled to himself. The patients were in good hands, and if the Doctor wanted to be rude, well, that was his privilege. Ritchie had long ago discovered that Connelly was not only a medical genius, he was God Almighty in his domain. That domain ended at the sickbay door, and Connelly was willing to be polite to his superiors in the Outside World. But in here... in here he expressed his outrage at the Navy for plucking him from a promising career in neurosurgery and placing him in the firing line by good-naturedly taunting any career officer foolish enough to enter sickbay with anything short of a life-threatening injury.

Ritchie kept him well away from visiting admirals, which wasn't hard. Few flag officers deigned to visit lowly sloops.

Next was the Engine Deck, which lay between the upper, command, deck and the gunrooms. Here crewmen toiled to replace shattered machinery, to weld and patch burst pipes, to find circuit faults and replace the damaged components. Ritchie and Walker listened attentively to the Chief Technical Officer's updates, offered a few words of encouragement, then wisely left the technical crew to their duties. As they left the drive Section, Ritchie heard the CTO call softly after him. He turned back.

"Yes, Colin?" he asked.

Colin Downie, a broad-shouldered, blue-eyed Viking throwback from Richter, held the post of Chief Technical Officer, which made him Third Lieutenant aboard *Saberwolf* and thus part of the command crew. This was obviously a crew matter as much as a technical one. He said nothing until they stood in the corridor outside the drive rooms.

"Captain, there's something I'd rather not report publicly."

"This is private enough," Ritchie responded, glancing up and down the empty corridor.

Downie sighed. "Very well," he began. "We discovered some damage to the Jump drive a few minutes ago. It's very minor, or we'd already know all about it."

"Exactly how 'minor' is it?" demanded Walker.

"Some fragments from hull spallation got into the machinery somehow and messed up the fuel feed control circuitry. Like I said, it's not much."

"But?" Ritchie said.

"But I'm not sure that the Jump field has been completely stable for the whole trip. We're going to need a major overhaul."

Ritchie turned to Walker, reading the same cold spacer's dread of anything going wrong with the Jump engines. The rest of the ship was a marvel of technology to the typical spacer, but one he or she could understand, at least in



part. But the Jump drive was half-miracle and half-threat, a magical, semi-mystical device whose vagaries could lose a ship forever. Damage to the J-drive was bad news of the worst sort. They might emerge from the protective field early - before entering real space. Or they might re-enter real space late - perhaps weeks after the supplies had run out. They might emerge in the wrong place.

Or they might never emerge at all.

Ritchie bit down on that thought. He shrugged in what he hoped was a rueful but unconcerned manner.

“Better cancel the party.”