



The Last Hurrah

By Martin J. Dougherty

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Chapter One: Off Vander, 2173 AD

Lieutenant John Ritchie peered over the Gun-Captain's shoulder as the Ready lights came on.

"Slew to Port. All weapons will fire as they bear," he ordered, settling his peaked Navy cap more firmly with his right hand as he gripped a brass stanchion with his left. Around him, deck plate groaned as the Terran Confederation Navy Sloop-of-War *Saberwolf* turned hard to Port, threatening to send her Master and Commander reeling across the bridge and into the Battle Plot pedestal despite his grip. The compensators weren't working properly, but then nothing else aboard the hard-used vessel was, either.

"Firing!" Lieutenant Israel Jaice, *Saberwolf's* Second Lieutenant and Gun-Captain, reported. His right fist clenched and unclenched above his repeater screen. Under his black beard, his jaw was tense.

Saberwolf's lights dimmed and her turbines screamed as her Portside battery went to Maximum Rapid Fire, sending a welter of charged particles after the missile salvo already closing on the pursuing Imperial squadron. She rolled to present her Starboard batteries. Again the turbines howled as her medium-weight particle weapons drained their capacitance banks faster than the engines could replenish them. Then *Saberwolf* was showing her tail again, accelerating hard away from her pursuers.

Ritchie glanced across the bridge at the Battle Plot. He tried to shut out the distant whining roar from the turbines, the harsh smell of ozone and the constant thrumming of the deck. He needed his full attention focussed on the tactical situation. Something was badly wrong here.

Something beyond being ambushed while waiting for a resupply ship. Something more than being picked up on sensors while the squadron lay powered-down, concealed in the ring system of the giant planet Vander, supposedly undetectable. Something more than a losing war against a fanatical opponent whose physical similarity to Humanity belied their genocidal brutality.

More than that.

Ritchie left his awkward position at the stanchion, instead stepping across the cramped bridge to his chair. He seated his tall frame carefully, lying the comforting weight of his Sword of Honor across his knees. It twisted the belt slings out of shape, but he had more important things to worry about.

"Reports?" he demanded.

"Engine room reports all drives running normally, though Reactor Five is giving some trouble," replied the First Lieutenant, David Walker, in his Kentucky accent. "Point-defense is ready. Gun deck is at optimum efficiency except for Port Three. Missile room reports all launchers ready and loaders standing by."

"Squadron?"

"Sir, *Puma* reports that she has been hit, but not severely. *Cheetah* and *Roskile* are undamaged."

"Enemy vessels?"

"Still firing at extreme range. Chances of a hit are minimal."

"Can we outrun them?"

"No, sir. They're fast patrol craft. Their speed is at least equal to that of our corvettes, and they're running light. *Saberwolf* could perhaps escape in a stern chase. The corvettes can't."

Ritchie stretched his long legs, settled his gold-hilted cutlass more comfortably. He frowned thoughtfully, still beset by the nagging feeling that the situation was sliding out of his control. "Mister Walker, what is the correct course of action? The standard Fleet Manual response to this situation?" he queried.

David Walker was not a tall man, but much more heavily-built than his captain. One of the few native Terrans aboard *Saberwolf*, he was very proud of his Kentucky gentry ancestors. Or maybe just his rich, Old Navy family. For an instant his gray eyes narrowed in puzzled thought, not at the problem the captain had presented him with but that he had asked at all. He forced his attention to the battle plot, as *Saberwolf* slewed to hurl another salvo at her distant foes.



"Captain, the correct course of action is to do whatever you order," Walker said loyally. He wore the same insignia as his captain; a sword-in-disc and silver starburst. They were both qualified First Lieutenants capable of acting as Executive Officer aboard any ship. The difference was that Ritchie, while he had not been - and probably would never be - awarded the golden starburst of a full captain, was Master and Commander of the vessel. Walker was his subordinate.

There were other differences, too.

"And what should I order, Mister Walker? What do our standing orders say I should do?"

Walker sighed, realizing he wasn't getting out of it that easily. "There are seven enemy craft - six System Defense Boats and a missile frigate," he said thoughtfully. "While we slightly outgun them, the chances of damage in a close-range engagement are very great, which could leave us stranded in hostile territory. Further, we are fighting a long-range action in which neither side is wasting missiles and not hitting anything."

"You're sure we're not hitting anything? The Plot shows one of the SDBs falling behind her consorts."

"My comments stand, Captain."

Ritchie closed his eyes, trying to blot out the throbbing of the turbines, and tried to pin down what was wrong here. "So what are our options, Mister Walker?" he asked offhandedly.

"Come about and close the enemy squadron rapidly, engage at point-blank range with the main batteries and point-defense lasers. Get this over with before we're pecked to death - risking disabling damage in the process - or admit that we're in real danger and break off completely."

"But won't Fleet Command call that that cowardly, David? A sloop and three corvettes chased off by a local defense squadron?"

"No sir, they won't. We need all the ships we have, and we're pulling back anyway - we're the last picket squadron in this region. Risking a crippling hit for the sake of defeating a few second-line vessels is foolish. We should withdraw and preserve the fleet in being. We're only passing through on the way home anyway. Our orders were to scout and test their strength. That we've done." He laughed wryly, then shrugged and nodded at the Battle Plot.

Ritchie nodded. "I agree. That's the logical choice," he said softly. "Which is why I'm wary about it. Astrogator!"

"Sir?" Petty Officer Michelle Porter, *Saberwolf's* Astrogator, glanced up from his plot. She was a new recruit fresh from the Naval College at Fenris, an unknown among the veterans of the crew and a potential liability despite her youthful enthusiasm. She was, after all, the only member of the crew who could destroy the entire ship with a single mistake. Other than the Captain, of course.

"How long to safe Jump distance?" Ritchie asked.

"We're running straight out, Captain, but Vander has a steep gravity well. I have several Entry Points marked and laid in - nearest is thirty-five minutes away."

Ritchie glanced at the Plot. It showed the huge gas giant Vander, along with her confused gaggle of moons, and the enemy squadron that had discovered their hiding place in the inner ring system. The enemy SDBs were gaining, but they had the choice of either maintaining full acceleration and firing part of their armament, or slewing as *Saberwolf* was doing, and losing acceleration in the hope of a lucky hit that might slow the fleeing vessels.

Ritchie knew that in the place of the opposing commander he would opt for full thrust, hoping to catch the Terran ships before they reached an Entry Point and the safety of Jumpspace. Bow chasers or whole salvos, there was little hope of a hit at this range, and a single hit would not be crippling. No, the opposing commander was either incompetent or not really trying.

Ritchie had fought the Vilani for fifteen years, participating in the early actions of the war as a Midshipman aboard the UN battleship *Resolve*. He had been promoted into dead men's shoes, rising to command first a corvette like *Puma* and her sisters, then the modern Sloop-of-War *Saberwolf*. His life had been war, and he knew the enemy as well as any man alive.

The Vilani weren't great fighters but they made up for that with a fanatical determination to exterminate anyone who opposed them. Nobody had ever really figured them out. Sometimes they'd accept a treaty, then launch a new offensive immediately. On other occasions they seemed desperate to avoid conflict, and fell over themselves to yield up a system in negotiations.

But when they did fight they were always extremely aggressive, and sometimes their tactics bordered on the desperate. They were competent, if not particularly brilliant. When they made mistakes, they usually erred on the side of psychotic lunacy and besides, this didn't have the feel of an honest mistake. It was more like cowardice. The opposing commander wasn't trying all that hard to catch up, was he?

Why?

Ritchie stood sharply, almost stumbling as the vessel turned to fire. "Make signal. Squadron To Come About. Sixteen Point Battle Turn On My Lead."



Walker looked up sharply, but Ritchie ignored him, speaking rapidly into his headset as he paced across the bridge. "Gun-Captain: overcharge the main batteries and hold fire." Lieutenant Jaice echoed his order down to the weapons room. Ritchie did not wait for the acknowledgment. "Engine room. I want Overload One on all reactors at my signal."

"That really isn't advisable, Captain," came the response from the comm.

"Do it," Ritchie paced slowly across the bridge, still refusing to acknowledge Walker's frown.

"Battle turn. Commence," Ritchie placed a hand on the Astrogator's shoulder to steady himself as the Sloop-of-War came about. "Full thrust directly at the pursuing squadron. Bring all reactors up to Overload One."

The hollow whine of the turbines grew yet louder as *Saberwolf* came about and her overloaded engines began to slow her. The Battle Plot showed the defense squadron scattering as the Terran vessels charged directly into the heart of their formation.

"Hold your fire," Ritchie ordered. "For your information, Mister Walker, I believe that the enemy somehow knows our standing orders and fleet procedures. I suspect that they are trying to drive us into a trap. There will be a squadron waiting at our Entry Point, having maneuvered there at idle speed. They'll be undetectable in the background radio noise of that damn giant. We must attack the enemy and defeat him in detail."

Ritchie saw Walker bite down on the words that almost burst out, his training keeping them inside. *Not in front of the crew.* Instead he stepped to the Sensors position and began to study the screens carefully.

In the Plot, Ritchie watched the enemy squadron decelerating frantically. The Vilani SDB that had earlier lost way now shot past her consorts, unable to decelerate as quickly. The three Terran corvettes opened fire, blasting the luckless vessel apart.

"Make ready for missile salvo," Ritchie directed at Gun-Captain. "Target is the enemy frigate. Salvo fire as weapons show ready."

Ritchie placed his hand upon the golden hilt of his cutlass, presented for his valor at the Battle of Haile Station. As a gunnery lieutenant aboard the armoured cruiser CSS *Seydlitz*, Ritchie had taken over what remained of her main particle lance battery and kept firing under local control when the bridge and main director were destroyed.

The wild career of the out-of control cruiser took her on a death-ride into the Vilani formation where she was battered to a wreck – but not before shattering a destroyer and putting the enemy flagship's main communications suite out of commission. The ensuing confusion lasted long enough for a Terran counterattack to scatter the invaders.

The accidental death-ride of the *Seydlitz* made her surviving crewmembers instant heroes, and earned Ritchie his first command. It would likely be as far up the career ladder as he would ever go, no matter what he achieved. He grimaced slightly at the thought.

The heavy blade rasped slightly as Ritchie drew it from its sheath. Placing the cutlass against his shoulder, Ritchie crossed the bridge in three paces to stand beneath the Confederation Battle Ensign in a piece of unconscious theater.

"Gun-Captain..." Ritchie began, watching the plot. The enemy vessels had slowed, so that the relative velocities of the two squadrons would be almost zero. The short-range gunfight would be brief, but hard-fought for all that.

And the first salvo would tell the most.

The ship shuddered, the hull ringing as hear from several hits stressed the armor plates. "Damage?" Ritchie asked as casually as he could manage.

"Light, sir," Walker responded. "Some slight external damage, a few sprung plates on the gun deck."

"Hold your fire," Ritchie said again. The frigate was clearly defined in the plot, flanked by two SDBs. The display hazed briefly as the three vessels hurled rapid fire at the Imperial squadron.

"Make signal. Battle Turn, Individual. Eleven Points Port, Eleven Gold. On My Lead. Break Through And Make For Alternative Entry Point."

"Signals acknowledged. *Roskile* reports minor damage," Walker reported calmly, then suddenly started. "Drive signature aft! Two... three... four craft. Three are standard SDBs. The fourth is... my God...."

"I want a report, not a prayer, Mister Walker," Ritchie said around the cold lump that was his heart.

"The fourth is a battleship... no, it's a sublight monitor. Thirty times our size! We'd have run right into...."

For a second Walker and Ritchie locked eyes. The Ritchie broke the silence with a smile and an I-told-you-so cock of his head. "Battle turn. Execute. Open fire."

The decking heeled violently as the *Saberwolf* came about, yawing to Port and pitching to Gold. The lights dimmed briefly as the guns discharged.

"Roll. Starboard batteries!" Ritchie snapped, fighting the shift in acceleration that made him stagger. The hull rang dully like some giant misshapen bell struck with a dozen huge hammers. The starboard guns spoke. Ritchie's ears buzzed.

"Mister Walker. Damage report."

"Slight. We have a cracked cooling pipe to Turbine Three, and a crewman down with vapor burns. Doctor Connelly is attending."

"Roll. Portside, fire when ready. Enemy vessels?"



"The frigate is hit. Looks like a hull breach and fuel leak. The SDBs are matching our course, firing rapidly."
The hull rang again, vibrating from end to end as more coherent photons struck the armor plate.
"Engine room. Bring the reactors up to Overload Two," Ritchie said into the comm.
"Captain, I protest that order!" came the reply. "We're still spilling coolant. If we increase the pressure we'll blow more pipes. I need time to make repairs! And Reactor Five has a jammed rod!"
"Oh-Two. That's an order!" barked Ritchie. "Status on the squadron?"
"All intact, staying with us. *Puma* has disabled one SDB, moving to assist *Cheetah*."
"Roll. Starboard, fire when ready. Gunner-T. Ready your weapons. Target is nearest enemy SDB."
"Acknowledged, Captain."
"Status?" Ritchie demanded.
"Enemy frigate is still firing. Infrared shows internal fires. Wait! She's launching missiles."
"Gun-Captain. Ready countermissiles. Point-defense will fire at discretion to intercept any leakers," Ritchie ordered.
"Roll."
"Rolling. *Cheetah* reports a serious coolant leak. Requests permission to reduce acceleration."
"Denied. What's our coolant pressure status?"
"Poor but holding."
"Where's that monitor?"
"Closing fast. At maximum acceleration we can make the Jump Point before she reaches effective gun range - just."
Ritchie nodded, then gestured with the cutlass, "Make signal. Squadron To Close Formation. Break Off And Make Best Speed For Translight Insertion Point."
"Divert power from weapons?"
"Negative. But signal the corvettes to do so. We'll provide cover. Update on the monitor?"
"Still out of effective range. Enemy frigate is trying to break off. The surviving SDBs are still with us."
"Let the frigate go. Concentrate fire on the nearest SDB. Make them keep their distance."
"Sir," Walker acknowledged.
"Missiles?"
"Still coming. Countermissiles ineffective."
"Time to impact?"
"Fifteen seconds."
"Helm! Random evasive pattern. Ready point-defense!"
Saberwolf heeled, then surged under high acceleration. Ritchie held his breath, fingering the peak of his cap with his left hand, feeling there the double line of scrambled-egg decoration. A full Captain's hat, not that of a mere senior Lieutenant, an acting Master and Commander. He wasn't entitled to wear it, but damn the regs. The hat was a gift made long ago, a symbol of trust.
He'd brought *Torchbearer* home like Kleist had told him to.
He'd do it again with *Saberwolf*.
Nine seconds.... eight.
The sloop turned hard to Starboard.
Five seconds.
Thrust shoved Ritchie back against the bulkhead. He jerked his Captain's hat down hard, jamming it on his head.
Two seconds.
Hullmetal clanged as a salvo from the nearest SDB slammed into *Saberwolf*'s hull. The agonizing seconds slid by. Someone said something in Ritchie's left ear... his headset, demanding attention. He must still be alive, then. The torpedoes had missed. "Bridge!" Ritchie replied sharply.
"Missile room here. Permission to switch back to anti-ship?"
"Granted. Fire when ready," Ritchie replied. "Squadron status?" he asked of Walker.
"*Roskile* reports heavy damage. She's lost a turbine and cannot maintain this acceleration. *Puma* has moderate structural damage. *Cheetah* reports similar."
"Reduce acceleration to match *Roskile*."
Ritchie walked slowly to the Battle Plot, taking in the desperate situation with a single glance. The monitor and her consorts were gaining fast. The nearby SDBs had fallen back, their work done in slowing the intruder squadron. They'd paid a heavy price, though. Only two of the patrol SDBs were fully intact, with two more limping away under reduced power. Ritchie calculated the distances mentally. They might just make Jump Point before the monitor reached optimum gun range.
The lights dimmed once again, even though the guns were not firing.
"Drive room! What's happening?" Ritchie demanded.



The reply was shouted through a screeching metallic moan, "Captain! Number Three Turbine has stripped a bearing - probably shattered it! I've shut her down!"

"Dammit man, I need full power!" Ritchie snapped back.

"You just can't have it, Captain. I can't even get at the turbine to make a repair. We'll have to wait until she stops spinning - assuming she doesn't tear herself to pieces in the process. I'll run a crash-cool - say ten minutes - and then strip out the damaged bearing. Say forty minutes at best for a jury rig. And I can't guarantee the turbine'll be in any fit state to run afterwards."

"We'll be dead in forty minutes, Colin." Ritchie said into the intercom. The screeching was quieter now. "Listen carefully."

"Captain?"

"There's a monitor closing on us. We need to reach a safe distance to escape. And if she gets a hit on us while we're entering Jump...."

"Yes, Captain."

"So what can you do?"

"I can redirect the coolant from Three to the other turbines. Give you maybe ninety percent of normal output. If I take the reactors to Overload Four you can have almost full power."

"I need more. Take the reactors as high as they'll go. That's an order."

"Captain, that's suicide!"

"If they melt, they melt. As long as we get out of here you can fix them in Jump. Do it, Colin," Ritchie said softly. "Please."

"Very good, Captain. Godspeed."

"Bridge out."

Ritchie closed the link. There was every chance that the reactors would overheat and melt their mounts a few seconds before blowing the ship to pieces. Or the coolant pipes to the turbines would rupture, sending killing-hot vapor throughout the ship. Or the turbines themselves would shatter and hurl fragments more deadly than point-blank laser fire about the ship's interior. But the alternative was certain death by decompression in the shattered hulk of *Saberwolf*.

Better to try.

"Status?" barked Ritchie sharply as the vessel regained way, surging forward as her tortured engines exceeded their recommended maximums. The throbbing scream of the turbines was unbearable.

"The monitor is still closing fast. The Plot says she'll be in effective firing range as we make Entry," Walker reported flatly. Everyone on the bridge knew what that meant.

"Close everything down. Weapons, recycling, the lot. We run for the Entry Point and either we make it or we don't. You a gambler, David?" Ritchie said cheerily.

Walker played along for the benefit of the crew, "I'll bet you a month's pay we don't make it."

Ritchie smiled slightly, "We DON'T make it? Your faith is touching."

"Not really. It's just that if we die, I get to be right for a change."

Ritchie laughed out loud at that.

Walker went on, "So how did you know about the monitor?"

"Just a guess. They'd had plenty of time to plot our best escape course while they searched the rings for us, and that little squadron seemed awfully bold in chasing us, then a bit timid in pressing the attack. It was all very suspicious. There was absolutely no reason not to do what the manual says... but all the same...." he shrugged.

"A hunch."

"That's about it," Ritchie replied. "I know you disagreed with me."

"That's my job."

"You were right to question me. You're a good First Lieutenant, David. I'm glad to have you."

Walker glanced sidelong at his captain. "You don't think we can make it, do you?" he said very quietly.

"No, I think this is about as bad as it gets. But while there's a chance to save the squadron - or part of it - it's our duty to try."

The minutes dragged on. Astern, the monitor hurtled closer, blasting out salvos from her bow chasers and spitting missiles. Ritchie felt the tension building until he felt that he must scream. He clenched his fist on the hilt of his still-drawn cutlass as the ship's acceleration fell away.

"Drive room. Colin, what's happening?" Ritchie demanded into the voice pipe.

"Reactor Five has jammed all its rods. I can't regulate it and it's way beyond its design tolerance. I've had to begin emergency shutdown. And I've pulled Number One Turbine off-line to let her cool a bit. You'll have power again in two minutes. The others are holding."

"Can we initiate Jump?"



"Yes, Captain. I've been trickle-charging the field generators. We're almost powered up. Just give the word."

"Astrogator, how long?"

"Still ten minutes."

"Too long. If we don't evade they'll blast us to pieces. If we do, they'll catch us and blast us to pieces," Walker said at Ritchie's elbow. "It was a brave try, John."

"It's not over yet," Ritchie replied harshly. "Helm. Cut drives completely. Come about to broadside position. Guns?"

"Sir?"

"Commence firing with all guns and give me all the area jamming you can. I want missiles launched at maximum fire rate, but coasting until you can get at least two full salvos converging on the monitor. Helm: once the missiles are running, you are to turn away and try to blind their sensors with our drive signature. They'll be on top of them before their point-defense can get a clear target."

Walker bared his teeth in a distinctly predatory smile, "A month's pay we escape," he said suddenly.

Ritchie clamped down on the sudden fighting joy that filled him, refusing to hope too fiercely. "Commence maneuver. Make signal to squadron. Continue Acceleration To Jump Point."

Saberwolf rolled, fired, rolled, spewing out a hail of carefully-aimed fire. The agonizing seconds trickled away. Ritchie paced the bridge, watching the Battle Plot. The wait seemed endless.

Then the ship shuddered under multiple impacts.

"Report!" Ritchie barked.

"Several hits. Hull penetrated on Engine Deck. *Puma* reports several hits, serious damage!" Walker replied.

"Missiles incoming!"

"Where from?" Ritchie all but shouted. The battle plot was fuzzy with interference.

"Aft Black quarter. Must be another powered-down ship!"

"Turn into them. Maximum power to the drives. Drive room - I need everything you have and I need it right now!"

"Acknowledged. All turbines back on line," the Chief Technical Officer's voice came over intercom.

Saberwolf slewed violently to Port and Black, Ritchie feeling like his brain was being pushed into the top of his skull. He saw the points appear in the Battle Plot, realized it was too late. Then the missiles struck home.

The hull rang to twin explosions, thunderous noise drowning out even the turbines. Ritchie felt his feet leave the deck, lost his grip on the cutlass. The plot pedestal came up at him, fast. His cheek struck it, snapping his head back. Then twisted gravity had him falling astern as the ship spun out of control, caught in the middle of her turn by the twin warheads. Ritchie crashed against a bulkhead, his head ringing. He fell away, flopped to the deck in a daze.

Saberwolf corkscrewed, her overcharged drives propelling her forward as her spin continued unchecked. Loose objects slid about the pitching deck; a coffee mug, a toolkit, the captain's cutlass. The captain himself lay slumped on the deck, most of the bridge crew strapped unconscious into their positions.

Ritchie's eyes opened. He tried to lift his ringing head, fell back to the deck. Movement caught his half-closed eye as Walker, his hat gone and his ship-jacket torn, crawled across the hot deck plate. He was trying to reach the helm controls.

A voice sounded in Ritchie's ears, or maybe it was just the scream of escaping coolant steam. He saw Walker reach the helmsman's chair, dig steely fingers into the padding, drag himself toward the console. He was carrying out that most basic command, drilled into him many years ago in training and never forgotten.

Save The Ship.

Walker reached the controls, jammed himself into the gap between the helmsman's unconscious body and the console. Corkscrewing acceleration dragged at him, but his hands closed on the controls, began to correct the spin.

A whooshing roar ripped through the bridge, the sound of coolant pipes rupturing. Ritchie raised his head, tried to focus. His headset was shouting at him. He tried to brush the voice away with a bloody hand. He raised it, gazed absently at the gashed knuckles. He must have grabbed something when....

Save The Ship.

Ritchie's eyes focused. Walker was still at the controls. But what was his headset saying? The words slowly began to make sense.

"....Five Reactor has gone critical ...jettisoned it. coolant pipes cracked ...are losing power. Bridge, please respond!"

"Bridge here," Ritchie said weakly. He felt sick, dizzy, sleepy.

"I repeat, Bridge, please respond!"

"Bridge here.... Colin? Lieutenant Downie?"

"Bridge?"

Ritchie realized that the CTO could not hear him. He tapped the headset uselessly, trying to make it work by fiddling with it.



"Captain!" the Gun-Captain gestured sharply for Ritchie's attention. He fought down nausea and glanced across the bridge.

"Heavy casualties on the gun deck. Master Director destroyed. Several of the guns are out, including the entire main Portside battery. Require major repairs."

"What have we left?"

"Just three Starboard particle lances, point-defense lasers, the stern chasers and a few missiles."

Ritchie grimaced. If the enemy hit them as they entered Jump, the result would be total annihilation for the entire ship. If they did not attempt to Jump, the result would be much the same, but at least the squadron might escape. The choice was obvious. There was only one thing to do.

Die fighting, like all the others before.

Ritchie put his bleeding hand to the ID tags around his neck, feeling the lump of metal there. A stainless steel nut; six cents' worth. The captain of one of the corvettes wore one too. The others had fallen in the line of duty or outgrown their friendship, but two had remained true.

Brothers to the end.

Ritchie swallowed the taste of vomit. For Vance Reuter, then. For an instant, he found himself wondering how Horatio was taking this. The ship's cat was probably asleep in the wardroom, oblivious of what was about to happen to him.

Better that way.

Ritchie forced his mind back to the present. He spoke into the intercom, "All hands, this is the Captain. The squadron is almost at the Jump point. The enemy is upon us. If they hit us with the Jumpgrid live, you know the result. We will slow the enemy as long as we can, then attempt to escape whatever the risks. All weapons are transferred to local control. Fire at will."

The bridge slowly came to life as crewmen regained their wits.

"Captain, signal from *Puma*," the signals rating reported bleakly.

"Go."

The ship noise of *Puma* filled the bridge speakers. Lieutenant Vance Reuter, Master and Commander of that vessel, hailed them personally.

"Vance. Report," Ritchie said.

"Sir, the squadron is about to enter Jump. As senior officer I've ordered the other two corvettes to make their entry. We're turning back to assist you."

"Negative, *Puma*."

"You need assistance, sir."

"Save your ship, Vance."

"John...!"

"*Puma* will enter Jump with her consorts. That is a direct order, Mister Reuter."

"John! We can't!" Reuter snapped. "Our fuel tanks are shattered. We don't have enough fuel to maintain the Jump field."

"You're sure?"

"Sir, of course I'm sure! If we try to Jump then we're dead. We can't escape and you can. We can cover your escape and die like heroes. For God's sake grant us that!" Reuter composed himself, and began again. "I respectfully request permission to engage the enemy squadron to cover your escape, Sir. The Confederation needs your ship."

Ritchie didn't hesitate. Reuter was talking sense and *Saberwolf* might still fight again. It didn't make the words come any easier, though. "Permission granted, Captain Reuter."

"Captain?" Reuter sounded puzzled. Walker looked sharply at Ritchie.

"Captain. Confirmed on my authority as squadron commander."

Reuter hesitated then answered, "Godspeed, *Saberwolf*."

"Godspeed," Ritchie responded, and cut the link. "Astrogator, ready the Translight plot. Link to the *Roskile* and *Cheetah*."

"Linked. Laid in."

"Begin Tunnel entry sequence," Ritchie ordered, turning to watch the battle unfold.

Puma streaked by, no longer caring if her drives melted. Bow chasers blazed, then she slewed to fire her main battery at a ship fifty times her size. Coherent photons hammered and tore at her hull, incandescent debris scattering out into space. The corvette shuddered but plunged on, straight into the heart of the Imperial formation, meaning to scatter them and gain time for the escaping Terran ships.

Ritchie watched the Jump countdown as the Vilani ships hammered the tiny corvette. She staggered bodily, spewing air and water from rents in her hull. Unconcerned with saving ammunition, her missile launchers spat a stream of squat tubes that streaked defiantly out at the enemy. Her guns blazed away under local control.



An Imperial SDB broke up under multiple missile hits. Another veered violently away, trailing wreckage. *Puma* lined up on the monitor, her surviving guns still firing at another SDB.

Another explosion lit her hull, then another. The SDB vanished in a flare of plasma and shattered hullplate, but *Puma* was nothing more than a flying wreck now. She fired again, a weak Portside salvo, rolled, launched point-blank missiles, fired her one remaining Starboard gun.

Then she swung to head directly at the monitor.

"Transmission from *Puma*," the signals rating reported. "Music... it's the Battle Anthem. And... Captain! Her Jumpgrid is live!"

"Dear God," Walker said softly. "The crew will stand."

The bridge crew rose, releasing straps to stand at their posts. Ritchie glanced at the timer. Just seconds to Jump. The viewport shields were sliding closed. As the gap narrowed, Ritchie saw *Puma* discharge one final shot from her bow chasers at the monitor. Savage fire raked the valiant corvette, but still she came in, unswerving. Ritchie willed her to turn away, to shave close past, firing point-blank into the monitor's hull.

But *Puma*'s Jumpgrid flared still brighter as she drove straight at the monitor. The huge warship fired desperately and began an emergency turn, but she was too big to evade.

"Signal from *Puma*, Sir," the signals rating said softly.

The Plot broke up as the Jumpfield began to form. There was silence as Walker and Ritchie faced one another across the wrecked bridge. Ritchie heard Walker say softly, "No roses grow on a sailor's tomb."

But Ritchie could say nothing, only stare at the last image graven on his mind as the plot faded. Laser and particle accelerator fire raking Vance's ship. Blue-white fire racing along the Jumpgrid lines, creating a corona of energy, a halo about the tiny ship as she plunged on. Then an eye-searing flash, visible out of the ports without the aid of magnification.

An expanding ball of fire and wreckage, scattering to the solar wind. A crew of nine officers and sixty ratings, gone in an eyeblink.

And the monitor, staggering away too. A second before she had been a fine, powerful warship. Now she was a wreck, shattered by the twisted energies of a close-in catastrophic misjump. Ritchie staggered to his chair and sat down heavily.

Vance Reuter. Gone. No more to tell tall tales in the wardroom, never again to get drunk and to sing loudly and badly. Nevermore just to be Vance Reuter.

Ritchie tried to make himself believe it, tried to console himself that Reuter had saved many lives by his actions. That he'd just misjumped his ship right into the halls of Valhalla.

But he could only think of a better time, of a group of young officers, a band of brothers who swore eternal friendship and loyalty to one another.

Vance Reuter had been the best of them, and the last.

"What did he say?" demanded Ritchie of the comms rating. He knew already what Vance Reuter's last words would be.

"Four words, Captain. In clear. Transmission reads...."

"Brothers To The End," Ritchie said softly.

"That's right, Sir. How...?" The rating fell silent as Ritchie turned and walked from the bridge.

Alone.