



The Last Hurrah

By Martin J. Dougherty

Copyright ©2002 Martin J. Dougherty

All rights reserved, including the right to reproduce this novel or portions thereof in any form.

First Electronic Publication, October 2002 by QuikLink Interactive, Inc. for the Citizens of the Imperium webzine.

<http://www.TravellerRPG.com/CotI>

This is a work of fiction. All the characters and events portrayed in this book are fictional, and any resemblance to real people or incidents is purely coincidental.

Chapter Three: Liberty System

Ritchie resisted the urge to pace as the bridge ports slid open. Finally they would discover how badly off course they were and if it would be possible to get home from here.

Wherever 'here' might be.

Saberwolf's emergence from her Jump field had gone flawlessly, but still her Captain was uneasy. They had spent an extra two days in the electromagnetic madness that humans called Jumpspace for want of any better label, and that was never a good sign. With no known instruments able to punch through into the real universe to communicate or seek navigational data, the sloop had hurtled on, blind and deaf, to an unknown destination.

The protective field faded and died, and the data flooded in. Ritchie stared out of the viewports at foreign stars and tried determinedly not to fret.

"Astrogator?" Walker prompted from his seat near the battle plot.

"The computer is processing spectral data for the star.... I think we have a match," she said. Her voice took on a puzzled tone. "Hot little Yellow Subdwarf.... Chart comparison says.... Sir, we're in the Liberty system."

Ritchie blinked, then smothered his surprise. That was fairly bad, but it could have been worse. They could have kept going, right out of Terran space altogether, instead of catching this far-flung arm of expansion. *Saberwolf* was drastically off course, which meant that her Jump drive needed a major overhaul before they dared use it again. But at least they were alive, and in friendly territory. More or less.

"Battle Plot? What else is in-system?" Ritchie asked.

Walker tapped out a rapid series of commands, then glanced up from the Plot. "Captain, I read several vessels around the second planet - Liberty Colony - and some orbital defense activity. First-match suggests several cutters or similar craft and a small monitor."

"Let me know if the refined data is any different," Ritchie replied. "Anything from the planet?"

"We're about a light-minute out. They should be detecting our exit from Jump about now, and possibly having a bit of a panic when they realize we're a Confederation vessel."

Ritchie shrugged. "They'll get over it. Send a standard greeting and docking request."

"Done, Captain," said the comms tech.

Ritchie nodded and smiled slightly. "Get me an open channel to their port authority, would you? I'll take it in the wardroom."

"Sir," the comms tech turned back to his station.

"Mister Walker, you have the bridge. Try not to break anything," Ritchie said good-naturedly.

"Not that there's much left TO smash... You and the Vilani were pretty thorough," Walker responded, straight-faced. "Captain."

Ritchie snorted and crossed to the access hatch, ducking through to make the short walk through Officers' Country to the wardroom. The hatch opened automatically as he approached. Ritchie ducked through and walked around the long table to his chair, which faced the door. He placed his cap on the table top and engaged the comms relay station. The screen fizzled into grainy life.

Ritchie faced the small screen, mentally composing his message. With only lightspeed microwave transmitters available the lag time made communication annoyingly slow. He tapped the Send key.

"This is Terran Confederation Defense Force vessel *Saberwolf*, Lieutenant John Ritchie commanding. We are off course and have battle damage. Under Article Eleven-Ninety-Two of the Secession Charter, I request docking and repair facilities. Weapons are deactivated, and I hereby agree to comply with all treaty obligations and duties. We do not need assistance to make dock."

He snapped the unit to Receive and stood to make a cup of coffee.



Seconds dragged before the grainy screen lit up with a familiar face. Ritchie almost dropped his coffee mug. Color drained from his face as he gaped at the screen, not daring to believe what he saw. He felt sick, light-headed, dazed by sudden blinding hope, and then bitterly outraged at the universe for playing such a cruel trick.

For looking back at him from only a light-minute away was a dead man. It couldn't be Carter. Couldn't be any of the Brothers. They were all dead or distant... it was just that the resemblance was so shockingly close that...

"Hello, John," Carter Hughes said with a wry smile. "Bet you're a little surprised to see me." Carter chuckled; a deep bass sound that couldn't come from anyone else. Then he went on, "It's a long story, but I'm somewhat less dead than the Navy Board seems to think. Came pretty close though. I'll tell you all about it later. But formalities first. I am System Admiral Hughes, commander, Liberty System Defense Command. Welcome to Liberty, allied vessel. Your requests are granted. Shore leave privileges are extended, though that'll cost you a bottle of that Irish poison of yours. Two cutters are breaking orbit as an honor-escort. I know you don't need them, but appearances are important."

Ritchie felt a joyful smile break through as his old friend spoke. "Admiral? What happened to you? Last we heard was the *Hercules* was lost with all hands," He settled down to wait for the reply, barely able to contain his eager frustration at the lag.

On the screen, Carter Hughes fidgeted with the collar of his white shirt, trying to straighten it while smoothing his hair. He wasn't in uniform; indeed, he was sweating and a little out of breath, like he'd come running from a tennis game or fencing bout when *Saberwolf* dropped into normal space.

"John, I tried to get a message to you," Carter's image said. "But, well, communications aren't so good from this far out at the best of times. And this isn't the best of times. The short version is that the squadron got pasted, as you no doubt already know. The *Hercules* took some good hits. She started to break up. The rest of the squadron had to abandon us and run for it. The Imperials chased them and left us for dead."

Hughes shrugged, obviously trying to suppress evil memories. After a moment he went on, "A Secession ship rescued a few of the crew. And me, obviously. I now have an artificial leg, enough ceramics in my rib cage to make a dinner service, and somebody else's lungs. But here I am, alive. They even offered me a job, which obviously I took. They were very short of good officers. Anyway... I'm truly sorry I couldn't contact you, John. How are the Brothers? Last I heard there were four of us left."

"Carter," Ritchie grimaced as he spoke. "Vance is dead." He looked away from the screen for a long moment, seeing the fireball once again, then went on, "We were ambushed by an Imperial squadron. They cornered us. They had one of those big sublight monitors they use for system control - *Santa Christina* class we call them. Vance rammed it. No roses...."

Ritchie paused a moment, gathered himself. "Sorry. Vance is dead. Sarah turned privateer. Frances and I... don't speak any more. Peter left the service. I don't know where he is. The others you know about. They're gone or they've forgotten. That leaves you and me, and Carl of course, if you want to count him. I saw him at a briefing a while back. He's commanding an Armored Cruiser squadron now. Last time I saw him, I asked him if he'd go for a drink. He just looked down his nose at me, said something like, 'flag officers don't drink with lieutenants.' What happened to us, Carter?"

Ritchie drank his coffee slowly, waiting as the message sped back and forth. Finally the screen lit again.

"We got older, John. Older and war-weary. Some of us got dead before that happened. We were so young then," he said wistfully. "Remember the first party after we got back aboard the *Resolve*? Carl still has a split toenail where you dropped that bottle on it. We swore loyalty forever, but we were just children then. We thought we'd change the world. But you can't. Take Carl... his family are Old Navy - New Nobility. So he rises fast and leaves us behind. Is that really a surprise? You and me... we get lieutenantcies for merit. Master and Commander of a little ship for Duration Of Hostilities and then back to lieutenant or on the beach once we're not needed. They won't let us get above our station, John. But Old Navy is different. Carl can go as far as he likes. Did we really think our oath could survive that?"

Ritchie felt every word hammer home, reinforcing his own heartfelt knowledge. He faced the screen and said harshly, "I believed it, Carter. I still do. What about you?"

He expected to have to wait, but Hughes was still speaking, "You and me, then. We're the last. 'Brothers to the end' we said, and I still believe," he quoted the promise with a bitter fervor that echoed Ritchie's. "You and me, John. To the end."

Ritchie had to look away, to wipe what couldn't possibly be a tear from his eye before responding. "To the end." he said. He raised the empty coffee cup in salute, lost for a better gesture. "*Saberwolf* out."

He snapped the comm unit off and sat alone in the wardroom with his ghosts.

Saberwolf coasted closer to her destination. Liberty was a young water-bearing world, with its own ecosystem well on the way to developing vertebrate life when humans first showed up and saved the planet any further effort by importing Terran species wholesale.



With a population of only a few million, the world had little industrial importance, no great trade significance, and thus saw little traffic through its little port. Liberty was remarkable for only two things: it was the very farthest inhabited point from Terra, and it was one of the Secession Worlds.

Liberty was a Secession World, a member of the loose alliance of colonies that had declared independence from their owning governments, claiming the right to be recognized as a sovereign nation-state. Distant Liberty had been untouched by the Secession War that followed, but Confederation (or “Loyalist”, as the Secession worlds liked to call them) ships were rarely welcome on any Secession World. Ritchie doubted that Liberty would be much different, despite his old friend’s words.

Not that there was any choice. A dockyard could make all the repairs *Saberwolf* needed in a matter of hours. Without a yard, the timeframe was sometime between weeks with spares and never without them. And he already knew they didn’t have the spares they’d need aboard.

Ritchie cocked his head, frowning. The pitch of the deck vibration had changed. That meant that Walker had commenced deceleration to enter orbit without informing the captain. It was a major breach of protocol, but Ritchie was more glad than annoyed. He must have been sitting in the wardroom alone, staring at the blank comm screen, for... how long? Walker had assumed the captain was busy and dealt with the mundane task of orbital insertion himself.

Ritchie smiled wryly to himself. His first lieutenant seemed to be developing a knack of reading the captain’s mind and doing what was needed without being told. Damn the man, he should have wasted hours waiting for Ritchie to pull himself together and start giving orders again. THAT was how the Navy did it!

That’s why we’re losing.

Ritchie’s smile went away.

The bridge was the scene of quiet bustle as Ritchie returned. The Battle Plot showed two local cutters flanking the larger *Saberwolf*. Their weapons were unpowered, and they flew an honor formation rather than ready-fire positions. All the same, Ritchie didn’t like having them there at all.

“Insertion to orbit complete, Captain. We have flight clearance to surface dock,” Walker said, rising from the command chair. Ritchie waved him back down.

“You do it, David. Take us down.”

Ritchie ignored Walker’s slightly puzzled look and walked to the main viewports. Strictly speaking there was no need for windows in a starship - in fact there was a strong argument against them for structural integrity reasons. But personnel without a direct view of the stars sometimes lost touch with their environment, forgot that they were aboard a starship and became either complacent or overly nervous. There was some indefinable need among humans to see out of their vehicle. The ports were also very occasionally useful in low-speed maneuvering.

Ritchie stared out through the armored ceramic of the port, watching Liberty gyrate below. The world had one broad belt of habitation, a few outlying settlements, and vast expanses of unspoiled wilderness. It was a beautiful planet, Ritchie decided, like Terra might have once been before she began to choke under a blanket of human pollution and waste.

As a child, Ritchie had spent hours in the Serenity City public observation dome, watching the Earthrise over the Lunar surface. There the fleecy clouds had been tinged a dirty brown, but here they were pure white. This was Terra as she had been. As she might again be if the war would end and the war chest could be put into cleaning up humankind’s mess, restoring mother Earth to health and beauty. Or how she might be after the Vilani had exterminated every last inhabitant and left their bones to bleach in the sun.

Ritchie felt the internal gravity field shift as the sloop began her descent. A blunt cylinder like *Saberwolf* was unable to maneuver rapidly in atmosphere. Even with gravity set to neutral she was difficult to handle, prone to yaw in crosswinds and slide sideways off her approach vector. Planetary landings were not a favorite pastime of her flight crew.

The need for a surface landing puzzled Ritchie. Liberty Orbital had limited dock space; that was obvious from the size and shape of the station. But *Saberwolf* was not a big craft, and besides, she could easily moor alongside. So why the planetary approach? Carter wouldn’t deliberately make life difficult for him, which meant that the government of Liberty wanted the ‘Loyalist’ ship on the ground for some political reason. Ritchie’s lips curled in a slight sneer. He was in no mood to play games with politicians. Especially ones who wanted to score points off his misfortune.

The approach went flawlessly despite a gusting crosswind. *Saberwolf* set down in the exact center of the designated bay, locked her controls down and began systems checks, all with barely a word from her captain.

Ritchie called up a damage report on his personal datapad as the crew worked. The damage was heavy, and full repairs would require that some of the jury-rigging done by the crew after the battle would have to be undone, a lengthy task in itself.



It seemed like every system aboard the ship had suffered some kind of damage. Some of it would require weeks in a fleet dockyard. The most critical systems could be fixed up well enough to get them home, assuming that spare parts were available. And assuming the Liberty government was willing to hand them over to a Confederation ship.

Ritchie was pondering that particular question when the signals rating suddenly broke into his thoughts with a sharp exclamation.

“What is it?” Ritchie demanded testily.

“Sir! Priority One message on the Confederation Command Channel!”

“What? Here? Give me a feed,” Ritchie slid into his command chair and activated the private comms screen. He found himself looking at Carter Hughes, who wore a distinctly furtive expression.

“John,” Hughes said urgently. “Can you talk?”

Ritchie didn’t even glance around at his bridge crew. “Yes. Go.”

“I’m using the command channel because I don’t think the locals can monitor it. I’m on my personal comm, in my quarters, and technically they can shoot me for this.”

Ritchie nodded understanding. Hughes had something private and important to say. There was no need to ask any questions.

“John, something is happening around here,” Hughes said urgently. “I’ve always been welcomed and honored here. They trust me to command the system defense force – you can’t get a better vote of confidence than that!”

“But?”

“But suddenly – since you arrived – things have changed a little. Some of my officers are colder towards me, like they’re steeling themselves to do something I’ll not like. Or to do something to me.”

“This is since we arrived?” Ritchie asked.

“Yes. Or at least I’ve noticed it since then.”

“Specifics?”

“I don’t have any. Just a few officers acting like... like when you and I were at the Command School and we found out one of our classmates was going up in front of the Commission of Peers.... What was his name?”

“Jacobs. Bill Jacobs. I remember. We knew he was going to appeal against his washout. And he’d ask us to back him. Only they were right to kick him out. He was clueless,” Ritchie said.

“Yeah. But we bunked in the same room for a year. We knew it’d be hard, refusing to back him up. So we cut him out to make it easier on ourselves. Maybe that was cowardly of us,” Hughes said reflectively. “But I sense the same thing here.”

“Are you in danger?” Ritchie asked harshly.

“No!” Hughes said sharply. “No, you are not coming into the capital with an armed party to escort me out.”

“If you’re in danger....”

“I’m not. I don’t think so, anyway. It’s just that something odd is happening. Perhaps they’re just a bit nervous I might up and leave aboard *Saberwolf*.”

Ritchie leaned forward and said conspirationally, “Carter, I’ll take you if you want to get out.”

“No. I like it here. I plan to retire to a country estate and live my life here. And meantime I plan to give everything I have to keep these people safe.”

“They don’t know what an asset they’ve got,” Ritchie said. “I hope they don’t do anything stupid.”

“They won’t,” Hughes said with a slight smile. “We’ve been made very welcome here. A couple of the *Hercules* survivors left on a transport – they had families back home – but the rest have settled. We all have posts in the system flotilla, and there’s no distinctions made. John, we love this world and we’ll die to protect it. It’s home now.”

“So why this call?”

“I’m worried about you, that’s all. I can’t help wondering if they plan to seize your ship to add to the defense flotilla. I’d never go along with that, and they know it. Maybe that’s what this is all about. I can’t think of anything else.”

“That’s pretty serious. Let’s hope you’re just insanely paranoid, Carter. Meanwhile I’ll mount a guard and stand ready to lift off. If you or anyone else wants out, I’ll come and get you myself.”

“I know you would, John,” Hughes said sadly.

“When can I see you?”

“Soon, I hope. I have to go now. Take care.”

“And you, Carter.”

As the link went dead, Ritchie saw Walker gesturing at the outside monitors. He took one look at the diplomatic party forming up by the control buildings and sighed.

“David, it’s time I played politician. I want the ship secure, but not overtly. Watch for attempts to infiltrate us. Try to maintain readiness to lift. Meantime, get me a couple of ratings as an honor guard – swords and sidearms – and liaise with their docking authority for the spares we need. Unless you’d rather kiss babies?”

Walker chuckled. “Your privilege, Captain,” he said with a shrug. “I’s jes’ a lil’ ol’ country boy.”



“Welcome to the hillbilly navy,” Ritchie said, shaking his head at Walker’s appalling impression. “Fix my ship while I’m gone, you hear?”

Walker threw him a half-hearted salute with one hand, gesturing at the scrolling list of damage on his monitor with the other. “So which of us has the toughest job?” he asked mildly.

“Me,” replied Ritchie. “They’re going to make me sweat for these spares.”

“You want to put money on that?”

“Not if you’re involved.” Ritchie shook his head and went to change.