

# PLANET STORIES



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# Battlefield In Black

By **GEORGE A.  
WHITTINGTON**



**The Avenger was waging its deadliest fight—in a battlefield where weapons were useless.**

**A** LOVELY IMAGE shimmered on the visaphone screen in Captain Jon McPartland's cabin. He stood before the instrument, drinking in the vision with his eyes, and feeling it race through his blood like a

rocket wash. But his square jaw was set in a determined line, and his big hands were clenched hard.

The vision was Almira Denton, whose hair was a red-gold nebula, whose eyes were the cool green of Terra itself. To Jon McPartland, she was much more than just the daughter of his superior, Marshal Denton, Supreme Commander of all Solar System forces.

A memory of her soft lips had been with him through long weeks of dangerous outer planet patrol. Now, bringing his sleek battle cruiser, *Avenger*, howeward, he reached toward her over maximum visa-phone range. Jon tried to keep anger from his blue eyes as he answered her suggestion.

"Almira, I don't care if you are a full-blown psychologist now and aching to qualify for the Congress of Specialists! You can't make a case report out of me."

"Now, Jon, dear," pleaded the girl softly, "you know how father needs help with Congress. Our scientists make the laws—but they think of science, and neglect System Defenses. I could make them listen!"

There was persuasion in her throaty voice that convinced McPartland she could do exactly that. He knew, too, there was real cause for worry about System Defense. The planets had long been disarmed. Only the Congress of Specialists had power to maintain armed forces.

It had neglected bases and fighting units for years. The Space Patrol alone remained as a weapon for law and safety—and it took all the fighting heart of Marshal Denton to get purchase credits for that! If invaders ever struck—

Jon shuddered, his anger slipping away. "I know, Almira," he murmured, "I know. But why serve me up to the Specialists on a platter? You can psychoanalyze somebody else."

Almira shook her radiant head in dissent. "The Eligibility Committee only certifies candidates for election if they present outstanding work.

"An analysis of you would be outstanding because you're a popular hero, Jon. You've just destroyed a powerful alien ship—been promoted! I'd be certified. Earth would elect me to Congress!"

SHE STOOD before the visa-phone in the Denton home. Jon McPartland visualized her among the Specialists. He could see her slim, perfect figure in abbreviated formal dress, arresting attention like a shaft of warm sunshine in a musty vault. The Specialists would listen to her!

An emotion from below his consciousness pushed the realization aside. He was a man, and this was the woman he loved! "Almira," he said slowly, "I wouldn't mind if it were someone else—but I can't—I won't be just a guinea pig to you!"

The girl came closer to the screen, her eyes alight with eagerness. "Think of what it would mean to the Marshal, Jon—and to the Patrol! You'd be a perfect subject Jon. You're—well, impulsive, and—"

"Before you studied psychology," he flared. "You called me quick-tempered, maladjusted!"

McPartland felt the muscles bunch along his jaw, and drew anger from the memory of a long forgotten quarrel to force back a sick heaviness in his stomach. "Maybe I am all that, Almira—even atavistic, you said then. But I'm more than a specimen in a glass box."

He stopped suddenly. Almira's beautiful face had faded from the visa-phone screen. There had been no cut-off click from her instrument, but she was gone.

"Almira," Jon called sharply, "Almira." There was no answer. His screen remained grey and empty. The connection was broken.

McPartland's blue eyes narrowed, as he shot out a big hand to pick up the intra-ship phone. He jabbed the Radio Room button vigorously.

"Holdern speaking," came the Radio Officer's crisp, efficient voice.

"I was talking to Terra over visa-phone," snapped the Captain. "Did you cut me?"

"No, sir!" came the instant reply, with a shocked intake of breath. "The ether is yours, Captain," Holdern added, recovering his dramatic flair in the next second.

"Then why is my instrument dead?"

"My controls are in order, Sir," said the Radio Officer. "May I send a machinist's mate to look at the instrument?"

"Carry on, Mister," agreed McPartland, smiling suddenly. Best crew in the System, he told himself. His officers acted

fast, without hesitation or alibi. "Report progress to the Control Room."

With a last disgusted frown at the visaphone, McPartland left his cabin and walked through the narrow corridor to the Control Room. As he entered, Lieutenant-Commander Clemens turned from the view screen, his face achieving a masterpiece in worry.

"I was about to inform the Engineer, Sir," said the second-in-command, "The view screen is not functioning properly."

Engineer McTavish looked up from a chess game with Ray Control Officer Reynolds. Neither of the two had much to do in the way of duty, now that the patrol trip was ended. But the Control Room gave them an alert feeling to spice their chess board feud.

At the Lieutenant-Commander's words, McTavish rose with an alacrity that suggested a game not going to his liking. He reached the view screen with McPartland.

Most of the screen seemed normal. The three curved segments, representing joined fields of space extending around the sides and aft of the *Avenger*, showed the normal inky, star-studded black. But it was different with the forward screen. In the center, where the growing image of their green home planet should have been, was only blackness—unrelieved emptiness.

"From the looks of that, Mister McTavish," the Captain said sternly, "you have a few stalemated wires."

**T**HE ENGINEER'S thin face flushed. His long nose twitched, and his grey eyes smouldered with professional indignation. "Begging your pardon, Sir," he objected. "If any coordinates had failed, the entire screen would blank out—and stay blanked, until I was notified. I would authorize partial operation only while the condition was being adjusted, Sir."

"Do you mean," asked Lieutenant-Commander Clemens, his voice dropping ominously, and one arm gesturing heavily at the empty blotch, "that—that—"

"That whatever you see is there," finished McTavish. "Or isn't there," he amended drily.

Captain McPartland saw Ray Control Officer Roberts get up quietly from before the chess board, and walk over to his station. Roberts, his round face impassive,

brown eyes thoughtful, slid into the chair before his microphone, and ran long, slim fingers lovingly over his calculators.

The Engineer, too, at a nod from Jon moved over to his station. His grey eyes were soft with pride as they looked over the exact scale replica of the *Avenger* on the table before him. Within the transparent hull, vari-colored filaments glowed with the pulse of the ship, tracing out the perfect functioning of every mechanism.

McPartland looked at the other, then back at the view screen, and his full lips tightened. He could feel the tenseness of the three officers as he spoke into the intraship.

"Get me Terra Patrol Base on the ship visaphone," he ordered Radio Officer Holdern.

"Sorry, Sir," was the crisp response, "I've been trying to raise Terra since the machinist's mate found your instrument in perfect order. Terra doesn't answer!"

Jon's blue eyes hardened. "Get Mars Patrol Base!" he said softly.

As he moved to the visaphone, Clemens took over the intraship, plugging in his headset. His gloomy expression deepened when the instrument buzzed immediately.

"Navigation reports integrators acting improperly, Sir," he relayed. "Radar shows negative from direction of Terra."

"Impossible!" the Captain gasped, face suddenly wooden.

"Lieutenant Parek's exact comment, Sir," Clemens said sadly. He ran a nervous hand through thinning blond hair beneath his headset. His pale eyes were expectant.

"Tell Navigation to hold course," McPartland said calmly. Something in his voice super-charged the already taut atmosphere of the Control Room, bringing an eager smile to the face of Engineer McTavish.

As though in response, the visaphone hummed, and its screen glowed. The image formed was a young officer, an officer with a wisp of blond mustache and a pale face forced into disciplined blankness by a straining will.

**S**OME of the weariness left the younger man's haunted eyes as he saluted Captain McPartland. He spoke, his lips moving rapidly, but the words were gibberish.

"Radio, scramble for ship code," Lieutenant-Commander Clemens said into the intra-ship. He turned to the Captain. "I hope they have the right code, Sir."

"—extreme emergency, Sir," came the voice of the officer from Mars Base. "Deemed it advisable to use code."

"Very commendable, Mister," McPartland acknowledged, tersely. "My compliments to the Admiral, and may I speak to him at once."

"I'm sorry, Sir," said the other, "the Admiral is at Terra Base with the major fleet units. I am Lieutenant Browne, commanding."

"Commanding!" exploded Jon. "Then the base must be almost empty!"

"There is only a maintenance crew here," admitted the Lieutenant wearily, and added defensively, "It's the same at Jupiter Base, Sir."

"All ranking officers are at Terra Base with the battleships, to receive instruction in the use of new equipment, the Specialists have perfected— You know, Captain, defense against mono-charge rays."

"Yes," groaned McPartland, "I know. The Specialists strip our Bases to make a big ceremony—of the only thing they've done for the Patrol in decades. And now—" He squared his broad shoulders, biting back the rest. "I have an urgent report. Who is ranking officer outside of Terra?"

"You are, Sir. I was about to radio you, when your call came through." Browne saluted again and drew himself up rigidly, as he went on: .

"I beg to report, Captain, that we have lost radio contact with Terra Base. Telescopic observation reveals—" his voice faltered and the lines worked more deeply into his white face—"reveals, Sir, *no trace* of Terra, Luna, or the stars and planets normally visible—throughout a spherical area six-hundred-thousand miles in diameter."

The Lieutenant paused. McPartland said nothing. His square jaw was straining, as though to knot his face into the same hard fist as each of his great hands.

On the face of Engineer McTavish, the eager smile had frozen. Ray Control Officer Reynolds let his restless fingers fall motionless on the table before him. Clemens' small, regular features were swept

blank by an apprehension too intense to be mirrored.

All of them strained to hear Browne's concluding words, in a voice that was suddenly a whisper: "Within that area is an absolute blackness we cannot penetrate by radio, radar, or telescope!"

"Thank you, Mister," the Captain acknowledged, "that checks with our own observation." He was not aware of his own voice, the cold, slow words could have been spoken by some one else. "Have you contacted Jupiter Base?"

"Yes, Sir," Lieutenant Browne answered eagerly, "they too agree."

"Very good," McPartland said. "Stand alert. I will contact you later." His hand reached for the switch.

Alarm leaped into Browne's face. "Captain! Sir! Are there no further orders? Four Patrol ships are on outer patrol—May I suggest—"

McPARTLAND'S full lips curved into a tight, mirthless smile, below the sudden flame in his blue eyes. "Mister, the Fleet is at Terra Base. If it can't—" He let the sentence stop unfinished, and added quietly: "This ship can handle more than those light cruisers."

"I beg your pardon, Sir," Lieutenant Browne murmured. A second later, his image faded from the screen.

From the corner of his eye, Jon saw the others watching the empty screen, as though waiting for the vanished officer to ask the question that was in their minds. Lieutenant-Commander Clemens, however, shook his head mournfully, anticipating his superior's next act, and stepping aside from the intra-ship.

The Captain reached for the instrument, punching down the lever for Navigation. "Lieutenant Parek," he said clearly, "take absolute solar bearings at once—plot a blind course for Terra Base."

He heard McTavish release his breath in a soft satisfied, whistle, even as Parek's monotonous tenor replied: "Bearings taken, Sir. Course plotted, Sir. Ready to proceed."

"Good man! He's ahead of us," exclaimed Engineer McTavish, his gray eyes dancing. "There's a brain behind that sing-song voice, after all! Begging your pardon, Sir," he added to Jon.

McPartland shot the Engineer a quick glance and nodded. The two of them shared their pride in the *Avenger*: McTavish in the ship itself, the Captain in the officers and crew as well. And both of them sensed, with Clemens and Roberts, that the whole, delicate, balanced entity, the *Avenger*, would find battle in the blackness ahead.

The Captain turned back to the intra-ship. "Proceed on course, Mister," he ordered. "Full speed ahead! Reduce to quarter-speed when we enter the area. Be prepared to operate ship in absolute lack of visibility!"

"Yes, Sir," the Navigation Officer acknowledged, laconically.

"Begging your pardon, Sir," McTavish said fiercely, as his commanding officer turned away from the phone, "absolute lack of visibility. We will have interior lights, Sir—I guarantee it—at least the emergency circuits."

Clemens turned his pale blue, worried eyes of the Engineer. "Light, Mister? Light, if we can see it! There's light in and beyond that—that place ahead, but we can't see it!" he said mournfully.

"Man, there's an interference screen," the Engineer snapped. "Once we're through it, we'll see what's going on." He jerked his lanky frame up from his chair suddenly, his thin nose twitching excitedly, and turned to McPartland. "The screen may play merry havoc with our machinery, Sir. Perhaps we should hit at full speed and let our momentum crash us through."

Ray Control Officer Reynolds answered the other's first assertion. "A spherical interference screen, Mister?" he asked quietly. "Six hundred thousand miles in diameter! We know how much equipment it takes for a protective screen around this ship—and that screen doesn't stop light or radio."

McTavish's grey eyes widened. "Man, that's right! It would be a fantastic job." But he insisted stubbornly: "As long as there's ether in there, we'll have light!"

"I don't believe there's ether in there," Jon interposed thoughtfully. "That's the only answer. Radar waves would be reflected from a screen of any sort—but our beams simply vanish."

Clemens gasped. "Then the fluorescent markings on our controls—we won't see

them!" he said anxiously. "Light travels through ether—"

"Mister McTavish," McPartland interrupted curtly, "get your men and rig up a fixture for Lieutenant Parek. "He'll have to work by touch—everything must be at his fingertips."

"Yes, Sir," the Engineer responded briskly. He glanced respectfully at his commanding officer; McTavish's thin face brightened as he saw the strength of the Captain's reasoning, and found himself with a job he could handle. He started out of the control room.

"There won't be much time, Mister," Jon reminded him.

"Begging your pardon, Sir, we won't need much."

With that, the officer was gone.

Again Jon smiled proudly, and turned to where his Lieutenant-Commander waited. "Mister Clemens, open all switches on the intra-phone, and order all stations switched open to the control room. You will relay any necessary messages between stations."

Clemens clamped on his headset, and his hands went over the switches rapidly. "Attention, all stations. All stations."

"You may inform the men of the situation and our plans," Jon added, quietly.

Ray Control Officer Reynolds caught his gaze, his large brown eyes thoughtful. "May I suggest, Sir, a fixture for the ray guns? I can operate my calculators, and know the results by sound—but the gunners—"

"Disintegrator rays," Jon reminded him, "travel through ether, as does light. So do your range-finder beams."

"Of course, Sir!" Reynolds said, his round face startled and dismayed. He ran his fingers over his keyboards slowly. "That means, Sir, that we—"

"We will be weaponless in there," McPartland finished grimly. "A lifeboat with an old fashioned powder cannon and explosive shells could finish us off." He laughed harshly. "If it could find us!"

THE FORWARD view-screen was entirely blanked out. A line was rapidly moving along the side screens—a line that erased the stars and drew a portent for the men in the control room of the *Avenger*.

Jon McPartland's steady gaze flicked from that line back to the empty forward screen. His blue eyes burned into that emptiness. Somewhere in there was Terra Base—and at Terra Base was *Almira Denton*!

Whatever the force that had closed silently around the Earth, it had stilled the heart of the solar system. The planets waited, Jon knew, restlessly, breathlessly; for the whole intricate, interworld civilization drew its life from the great industries of Terra. Let those industries stop, or be taken over by enemies, and all the planets would be at the mercy of those enemies.

And the only military power which the Supreme System Congress could call upon was at Terra Base. McPartland imagined the great space battleships—cramped into overhaul cradles—the crews dispersed on leave. Slight chance to get them off in the blackness—even if crews could be assembled—even if they had any place to go!

But the *Avenger* had some place to go! McPartland's ship had a crew—and it could fight!

"We'll fight," Jon told himself savagely. "We'll win! And *Almira*—if—" He didn't finish even the thought. Instead he visualized the lovely oval of her face—with the green eyes set in like twin, glowing emeralds.

The sudden jarring blast of the forward rockets brought Jon's gaze around to the side screens. They were almost completely blanked out. Only a thin slice of normal space remained. They were entering the area, and Lieutenant Parek was braking.

"Man, that wasn't too soon," McTavish said tensely. Clemens said nothing, his face carefully set in a harried expression he would retain even when invisible. Reynolds looked up dejectedly from his desk, his hand resting protectively on the calculators that would be useless to them. The Captain moved over to the intra-ship, standing close beside his Lieutenant-Commander.

They waited silently. Jon was looking at the Engineer's eager smile, as the retarding rocket blasts died away. McTavish nodded, counting the drumming explosions from the stern and feeling the vibration of the ship with an intimate knowledge.

"We're at quarter speed, Sir," he said, as the Captain heard the Navigation Offi-

cer's clear, even voice over the intra-ship speaker:

"Quarter speed, Sir. On course."

The last two words fell into complete blackness. Jon felt the pupils of his eyes straining, opening for the least trace of light. There was none. He could hear the slow breathing of the others, and a few low exclamations through the open switches of the intra-ship.

"Carry on, Lieutenant," he ordered, and let his breath out of his lungs slowly. "Mister McTavish," he added, "here's something to add to your technical knowledge: electricity does not need ether—whether it travels around or within wires."

"Thank you, Sir," came the Engineer's ironic reply like a sound without origin in the well of blackness that closed in on Jon from every side. "I had reached the same conclusion, Sir."

"We are running on batteries, Sir," Clemens relayed from beside him. "The cyclotron has stopped functioning."

"The batteries will be enough, Sir," came the Engineer's voice. "I arranged an automatic out-in, Sir. I knew electrons couldn't bombard atoms without ether to travel through."

"Good work, Mister!" said McPartland.

"Thank you, Sir."

**T**HE CAPTAIN said nothing more. He was listening to the steady drum of the stern rockets. The explosive charges were fired by electric spark. All the functional mechanism of the ship was operated electrically.

His ship could travel. They would reach Terra. There was nothing to do but wait—wait in an emptiness that brought a man to the edge of insanity.

It was eerie, this feeling of isolation. Only the rocket jets seemed alive, pushing the *Avenger* ahead. Jon put out his hand and felt the phone. It was warm under his fingers. He shivered in the warm air of the control room. Suddenly he had to speak, to reach the others in this Stygian pit.

"It must be bitter cold on Terra," he said evenly, "without sunshine, without heat drawn from the central power beams."

Near him, Clemens sighed heavily. Reynolds' fingers drummed over his keyboard. It was McTavish who answered:

"Aye, Sir," he said, his words edged with rage, "a few days of this and Terra would be a frozen wasteland."

McPartland clenched his great fists harder. "There won't be a few days!" he grated. "Whoever's behind this will want Terra and her industries—and her people—in working order."

"You think it's human beings?" came the Engineer's question. "I hadn't thought—"

"It has to be," Jon reasoned. "The timing is perfect, and so is the strategy. Striking the heart of the Solar System—when the Patrol is there and helpless. They knew."

"Outlaws." Reynolds commented quietly.

"More than that, man!" exploded McTavish. "There's science here. It takes science—genius—to eliminate the ether! It's never been done before!"

"I think you're right, Mister," McPartland said. His words fell with an inflection as soft and deadly as the impenetrable blackness about them. "There's science here—and outlaws, armed desperate men who would dare to try this.

"It's treason. Specialists and outlaws in an unholy alliance, trying for a *coup d'etat*—for power over the whole system! There'll be a demand for surrender."

"A black plot," quipped McTavish. But the others could hear the angry quickening of his breath.

"What choice will the Congress have but surrender?" Clemens asked sadly.

The Captain smashed the flat of his hand against the intra-ship phone before him. "*WE* have the choice! We are fighters! There can't be many of them in the plot—or it would have leaked out. They need the blackness for protection."

"Your logic is sound, Sir," said the calm voice of the Ray Control Officer. "But how will we reach them—how will we fight them?"

The others couldn't see McPartland's broad shoulders sag momentarily at the question. He thought of Almira Denton somewhere in Terra Base, and bunching muscles snapped his shoulders back.

"We'll find out when we land," he answered slowly.

"That'll be soon, man!" McTavish cried suddenly.

They felt the *Avenger* lurch, and quiver

as port and forward rocket tubes thundered. Jon looked upward to where the view screens hung. Those screens should be splashed with a riot of color as the ship changed course and plunged through the jet wash. But nothing was visible to Jon's straining eyes. He heard the Engineer explaining:

"Parek has a mechanical timer rigged with an alarm, to tell him when to correct course."

McPARTLAND thought for a moment of the officer down below, sitting motionless, his hands strapped into fixtures. The empty seconds would be eternities, while he listened to the monotonous ticking of the timer. Then the strident alarm would shatter his nerves, and his fingers search the guide wires for the right controls.

"Can he do it?" Clemens murmured anxiously, as though reading his commander's thought.

"If he can't, there isn't a Navigator in the System who can," the other said tightly.

All of them could feel the deck sloping. The *Avenger* was heading down. Parek was feeling for Terra Base, balancing the forces of the retarding and propulsion jets, listening to the beat of the timer.

McTavish, too, was feeling for their goal. "Steady, man, steady," he said aloud, his sense attuned to the ship's familiar vibrations. "Landing speed, now," he added.

All of them braced their legs against the increasing tilt of the floor. They rocked on their feet, as Parek poured a richer mixture into the blast tubes.

For a long second the *Avenger* hung balanced on her jets. Every spaceman aboard her felt his heart stop. Then the ship settled. There was a bump. A moment of rocking, and they had landed!

McPartland spoke into the intraship phone: "Attention all stations! All hands remain at their posts until further orders." He turned from the instrument, trying again to find those about him. "Mister McTavish. You will go out with me.

"Mister Clemens, you are in command. Take no action without orders from me—or Marshal Denton himself."



"Very good, Sir," replied the Lieutenant-Commander.

"I am at the door, Sir," said the Engineer.

"Good. Mister Reynolds will close the port behind us. No one is to enter the ship, Mister Clemens, unless accompanied by myself or the Marshal. We don't know what the situation is here, and we can't take chances. Is that clear?"

"Very clear, Sir." Clemens answered, his tone anxious. "Mister Reynolds will remain at the port, and open it only as instructed."

The three of them groped down the passage. At the port, McPartland spoke into the blackness: "I've switched on audiophone, Mister Reynolds. You will open the port only to my voice or that of Marshal Denton."

"Yes, Sir," was the answer, the words spoken almost into his ear.

Jon reached out and found the other's arm. The Captain's fingers gripped hard, biting into muscle. "We'll soon have the answer to your question," he said softly. "If the Patrol still holds the Base—"

"Good luck, Sir," replied the Ray Control Officer quietly. "We'll be waiting to follow you—anywhere."

The Captain found his Engineer in the well of pitch about him. There was reassurance in the other's tense, firm shoulder. Together, they went through the port, and heard Reynolds shut it behind them.

**A** SHARP RATTLE of explosions sounded in the distance, off to their left. "Man!" gasped McTavish, "that sounds like—"

"Like a machine-gun," finished his commander. "An old-fashioned explosive powder weapon. Ray guns are useless, of course, without ether."

"There's fighting," the Engineer cried eagerly. A single louder explosion came from the left. The sound hung in the air, muffled and distorted. "A grenade," McTavish added mechanically. "It was thrown into a building—you can tell by the echoes."

"The repair docks," Jon said. "The walls are thick enough."

"That's where the battleships are," the Engineer said dully, his excitement draining into apprehension. "Who's got them,

and who's attacking? If the plotters have taken the docks and the fleet—"

"The fleet's useless," snapped the Captain, "in this blackness. The plotters can't man it anyway—they'll want to immobilize it, and keep it intact until they've won.

"It's the old arsenal I'm thinking about. We need that for—"

"Hist, man!" warned McTavish, suddenly. "There's someone near us."

"Who goes there?" challenged a voice sharply. "You're surrounded, and you'll get cold steel if you don't surrender."

Jon laughed. "Did you surround the *Avenger*, too, Marshal?" he asked ironically. "We're standing directly beside it."

He heard a sudden feminine sob of relief, and soft words that sent the blood throbbing to his temples: "Oh, Jon—Jon darling."

Another voice cut in brusquely: "This is no time for melodramatics, daughter.

"Jon, I was sure it was you. Who else would try to fly a ship in this? But we couldn't take chances. We had to find out and warn you before you blundered into the enemy!"

"We were on the lookout, Sir," the Captain assured him. He could imagine Marshal Denton; sturdy, tall, handsome. The Marshal's gray eyes would be flashing there in the blackness, and the snow-white hair piled on his massive head would make him look more than ever like a noble old lion.

"What have you to report, Captain?" Denton asked tautly.

Jon told him briefly of their position and actions since he'd first found communications with Terra cut. As he spoke, a soft hand found his. Jon slipped his arm about Almira's slim waist, and drew her close. Her head sank to his shoulder.

He felt her stir with amazement, and her little hands gripped his arms, as he told the Marshal his suspicions of an alliance between outlaws and some of the Specialists.

"It might be," murmured Denton. "There's a small bloc that has consistently opposed requests for credits to enlarge and strengthen the Patrol."

"What's the situation here, Sir?" McPartland asked eagerly. "Has there been an ultimatum—a demand for surrender? Where is the Congress?"

"The Specialists are in session," Marshal

Denton told him. "You can imagine the confusion! They're getting nowhere.

"There's been no demand made yet—though I think you're right and one will come!"

He was silent for a minute. Jon's hands clenched. "What about here at the Base, Sir?"

"When the darkness fell, the repair crews and guards in the docks were attacked immediately by men armed with grenades and firearms," Denton explained. "Most of our personnel there was captured or driven out.

"Fortunately I was here. I armed a squad with firearms from the old arsenal, and attacked. We've got them pinned in the docks. They can't get out—and we can't get in."

"The plotters must have overlooked the arsenal," Jon mused aloud, "or they didn't know about it." He could imagine the tense hurried minutes that Denton described so calmly.

**T**HE MARSHAL had thought and moved rapidly. Squads were needed to lay cables or ropes to mark paths in the blackness. Men were armed and moved up to attack the docks. It was a brilliant mind that had surrounded the attackers and organized communications and supplies for the Patrolmen.

"Congratulations, Sir," McPartland said admiringly, and added soberly, "I imagine there isn't much news from the rest of Terra."

He heard Marshal Denton sigh heavily. "No, Jon. There's some communication over old electric-type instruments. In some places there's rioting. Everywhere, it's cold, and people are frightened and disorganized. There hasn't been time for lack of food to make itself felt."

"Stuff could move over the railroads, Sir," cut in McTavish.

"The Specialists have forbidden that," the Marshal told him. "Because of danger of accidents."

"Accidents!" snapped the Engineer scornfully. "Worrying about accidents at a time like this!"

Jon spoke impatiently. "May I suggest Sir, that you send a body of men to Congress. Surround the building, cut outside communications. When the darkness lifts,

search every Congressman, and arrest any found with firearms. You can bet the plotters will be armed. But the Congress will have to be suspended until every member is thoroughly investigated!"

He felt Almira stiffen in his arms, and heard McTavish exclaim: "Good, man!"

"Suspend the Congress—" Marshal Denton repeated, shocked. "Jon, you—"

"It's an emergency, Sir," McPartland urged. "It's war. You're the supreme military commander. You have the right to act on your own initiative whenever the Congress of Specialists cannot function. They can't function now! You can't let them be stampeded into surrender. There must be no surrender!"

For a long minute, there was silence in the blackness about him. "I'll do it, Jon!" Denton said at last. "Captain Wendall!"

A man answered somewhere beyond him. Denton gave swift orders, and the other moved away. "My men will be at the Congress in five minutes, Jon," the Marshal said. "Now, just how do you propose to fight this thing? We have to be right, now, you know. We must win—or be executed as traitors!"

"I want the *Avenger* loaded with space torpedoes, Sir. We have hundreds in the arsenal," McPartland explained. "I believe the logical place for the ether dissipating machinery would be on the far side of the moon. The outlaws and their Specialist friends could have worked there without fear of discovery."

Denton was already giving orders to another officer. "We'll have your ship loaded in minutes, Captain," he said. "You're right about the moon—we don't even patrol that side. You intend to—"

"To blast every square inch of its surface," Jon said fiercely, "from space. Once we destroy the machinery, and lift the blackness, we'll make short work of the plotters. The *Avenger* could do the job alone!"

"Good!" said the Marshal. "I hope your theory is sound. We haven't much time to experiment."

"No," said Almira suddenly. "Millions of people would die in rioting, accidents, from starvation—if light—if the ether isn't restored! We'd have to surrender before that happened."

"What would those millions gain," Mc-

Partland demanded savagely, "better than death—under the rule of outlaws and traitors?"

ALMIRA pulled away from him. Her fingers slipped from his. "It is modern," she said coolly, "to preserve life, not throw it away in hopeless resistance! If you fail, we must surrender."

"I'm afraid she's right, Jon," Marshal Denton's voice added quietly.

Jon's angry retort stopped on his tongue, as a strong hand clamped his arm. McTavish whispered, somehow finding his Captain's ear: "We'll still have the *Avenger*, Sir, to fight in—let them surrender who will."

McPartland fought back his rage. The Engineer was right. It was no time to debate. It was time to start the fight. "I'll instruct my men, Marshal Denton," he said, "about the space torpedoes. The things haven't been used in battle for decades, and they'll be tricky to handle."

"We've laid a cable line directly to the ship, Sir," an invisible officer beside him said respectfully. "You can follow it with your feet."

"Thank you." Jon made his way back, McTavish at his heels, and gave necessary orders to Reynolds at the port. McTavish went inside to superintend the loading, and Jon followed the cable to the Marshal's office.

It was a long, almost silent wait, while the loading went on. There was little to say. Denton received reports, and issued orders. There was the murmur of detached voices, and the sound of slow, careful footsteps in and out of the room.

Jon sat quietly out of the way. Almira was there somewhere. She did not speak to Jon, although he heard her soft voice in occasional snatches of conversation with her father. Jon could imagine her, pale with the strain of this nightmare, lovely, her green eyes angry and scornful. She was angry, he knew, angry at his will to resist—to waste, as she thought, blood and lives in a fight that would seem vain if the darkness weren't lifted. Almira couldn't know what kind of men the outlaws were. Jon knew; he'd fought them!

Restlessly, he started to rise from the chair. The *Avenger* should be ready. His feet sought for the cable on the floor, and

his eyes found it first. It took a full second to realize that dim light had returned.

Denton exclaimed suddenly. The light was growing brighter. Then it was full daylight, and the Marshal was starting for the door. From outside came the rattle of firearms, and a hissing that told of many heat rays flaring into action. The battle for the repair docks!

"Wait, Sir," McPartland cried to the Marshal, "the visaphone! This must be it. The plotters have let the ether back to broadcast their demands."

The news channel button on the visaphone glowed brightly. Denton snapped the instrument on, and adjusted the wave length. The screen glowed—empty! Whoever was broadcasting was not projecting his image. The voice that spoke was harsh, cruel:

"Citizens of the System," it said bluntly. "The Terra Council for Freedom has struck for your liberation. We are citizens of Earth who rise in indignation against the corruption, hypocrisy, and inefficiency of the Congress of Specialists. Most especially, we rise against the dictatorship of the man who has used the Congress as his tool—the man who today holds your alleged representatives prisoner—Marshal Denton, your ruler, unmasked, at last, in this moment when we strike for your freedom!"

The voice paused. For a space there was no sound from behind that glowing, empty screen.

"DICTATOR!" Marshal Denton bel-  
lowed. His handsome face colored, and he took an involuntary half step toward the visaphone. "Dictator! Of all the—the—" He choked off the rest, regaining his poise.

"Very nice, Jon," murmured Almira. "Your suggestion certainly played into their hands."

"One lie is as good as another," he answered. "You should know that propaganda works on lies." He grinned at them suddenly. "We can guess from that tirade, that we have the leaders—or some of them imprisoned with the Congress."

Almira flushed, and was silent. Denton nodded. "Yes, Jon, I think we have. But how did they communicate with the others."

The Captain shrugged. "Probably telegraph. An instrument could be hidden there, and wires laid well in advance. Listen—"

From the visaphone, the hard voice spoke again: "We, the Terra Council for Freedom demand the immediate surrender of the Congress, and of Marshal Denton. When Denton has informed the Congress of his acceptance, our committee will communicate further instructions."

Another long pause, before the speaker concluded. The words were deadly with menace: "Citizens of Terra, revolt and overthrow your oppressors! Until they surrender, Terra will remain a dark, silent world. If they do not surrender, it will become a dead world soon!"

The screen brightened suddenly. A man's head and shoulders formed. The shoulders were broad, powerful. Above them, the face was strong, bronzed. There was a scar across one cheek that was known throughout the system. Black eyes blazed with reckless courage, out of deep sockets. Full, thick lips curved in a crafty smile.

Jon McPartland clenched his huge fists helplessly. He knew the trail of murder and robbery behind that animal courage, that scheming smile. The man was Mark Baron, the most notorious and deadly outlaw still at large!

"Someday," Jon said savagely, "I'll catch you, Baron!"

The outlaw was fading from the view, as the screen dimmed. Outside, the daylight, too, faded. Blackness crowded in again.

"Very clever," came Almira's voice. "Many people are foolish enough to think of Mark Baron as a modern Robin Hood."

"He's the worst kind of criminal," Marshal Denton said bitterly. "But the ridiculous legends about him will help their propaganda. There will be panic and rioting now!"

"Jon, we can't let this go on! We've got to—"

An officer entered to report. Outside, the firing had dropped off. Ray guns were again useless. There hadn't been time to recapture the docks.

"The *Avenger* is ready, Sir," Jon said, when the officer had left. "We'll take off at once."

"Good luck, Captain," the Marshal said

dully. "Almira, will you go—" He left the question unfinished. Jon knew he was thinking of his daughter, in a world ruled by men like Mark Baron. "Jon!" The older man said fiercely, "we can't give up!"

"I'll stay with you, Father," the girl said quietly, refusing Denton's unspoken plea. "We'll have to be realistic—have to think of the millions whose lives—" Her soft voice caught. "But, Jon—Jon, good luck!"

**O**UT IN SPACE, the starlight was bright and clean. The four men in the Avenger's control room glued their eyes on the side view screens. They felt their spirits lift out of the black nightmare that still covered the forward screen. They were silent, loving the stars and planets shining back at them, untouched by the evil that blotted out Terra.

"It's wonderful, man," said McTavish at Jon's shoulder.

McPartland nodded. He was surprised somehow to find the control room unchanged. Reynolds still sat before his calculators. Clemens stood beside the intraship, headphones clamped over his ears.

The Lieutenant-Commander shuddered with every lurch of the ship. "Those torpedoes, Sir," he muttered anxiously. "One would blow this ship apart."

"Don't worry, Mister," the Engineer reassured him, "we'll get rid of half of them on the moon." He added to McPartland: "We're launching them from Ray Station Six."

"Good! You'd better get down there, Mister McTavish. We'll be heading in for the moon—but quick!"

"Yes, Sir." The Engineer left the control room.

As he passed through the door, McPartland heard the even voice of Lieutenant Parek on the intraship: "Course plotted, Sir. Ready to proceed."

"Proceed," the Captain ordered. "Full speed ahead."

"Full speed?" groaned Clemens, as the ship swung, and they felt the pull of acceleration. "The vibration, Sir! Those torpedoes."

Jon grinned. "You know you don't give a hang about those torpedoes, Mister Clemens—just so we land them where they'll do the job."

The Lieutenant-Commander looked pained. "Of course, Sir," he agreed quickly, and added with an effort: "But full speed with no visibility!" He started as an excited voice rang in his headset, and automatically relayed the message McPartland could hear clearly through the still open switches of the intraship: "Radio reports Mars Base has observed us, and is asking for orders."

"No orders," Jon snapped. "They can't help."

"Lieutenant Browne's compliments, Sir," responded Radio Officer Holdern eloquently, "and good luck."

His words were followed by low exclamations from stations all over the ship. The *Avenger* was again enveloped in the pitchy nightmare. Jon put his hand on the ship phone, aware that Reynold's fingers once more were drumming his calculator keys, and Clemens was breathing quickly, lightly, in time to the quickened beat of the rocket jets.

There wasn't long to wait this time. The Navigation Officer's unhurried, emotionless words floated into the Control room: "Ready for run, Sir."

McTavish was cut in on a three way connection. "Ready to fire torpedoes, Sir," he said immediately.

"Fire at positions," Jon told him.

He felt the sweep of the ship as she turned, and imagined Parek, waiting quietly for his alarm.

"Position one," warned the Navigation Officer, paused, and added flatly, "dead."

"Torpedo away," sang the Engineer from Ray Station 6. "Ready again."

"Position two," Parek responded as his alarm spoke again. "Dead."

"Away," McTavish told him jubilantly. "Ready."

**T**HE PROCEDURE was repeated over and over. Below them, on the cold dead surface of the moon, carefully plotted explosions cut a swath of destruction that could destroy any man-made structure ever raised. Space torpedoes were slow, easy to dodge or hit with a ray beam. They had been abandoned in modern combat. But they were the most powerful explosive force ever created by human science.

In the control room there was nothing to hint at success, or failure. But Mc-

Partland knew the torpedoes couldn't be seen or destroyed with ray beams in this etherless black. Nothing could halt the methodical blasting. Jon grinned. The super-science of the plotters made it possible to use an obsolete weapon against them.

"What if some miss the edge?" asked Clemens anxiously. The *Avenger* was running around the circumference of the satellite, following a course that drew ever-tighter circles until the last torpedo was delivered in the exact center.

"The fuse is set to explode them before they reach the Earth," McPartland told him. "But none will miss."

There was silence then in the room, except for the unending duet of Parek and McTavish, coming sharp and clear through the ship phone. The three officers braced their legs hard against the deck, as the ship raced at maximum speed into sharper turns.

In the end, the *Avenger* seemed to whip around almost in its own length. Jon balanced himself with effort, his stomach rising within him. He was giddy and nauseated. His eyes strained for something to focus on, to give him perspective. There was nothing. He was still blind.

**"WE** BLASTED every foot on that side of the moon," McPartland said bitterly, "but we didn't get the machinery."

"No, man," agreed McTavish who had come up to the control room again. "That cursed devil's mantle is still there!"

The Captain's blue eyes burned into the forward screen. "They're waiting on Terra Base, too," he grated. "But we'd see the break first. The light would come back at the edges, and—" he stumbled over the implication of the next words, "work-in-toward-the-center!"

McTavish's grey eyes blazed suddenly. "In toward the center, man! Right! But the moon isn't at the center!"

Jon was already shouting into the phone: "Observation Officer. Locate the exact center of that area, in relation to this ship, Terra, and Luna.

"Navigation! Get bearings from Observation, and plot torpedo course for dead center."

"This will do it, Sir," shouted the Engineer. "I should have thought of it, Sir, Begging your pardon."

"It may be well protected, Sir," Clemens suggested.

Clemens quietly relayed the report from Observation: "Impossible to locate exact center, Sir. Whole area is shifting constantly, unpredictably." He shot a look of glum satisfaction at McTavish, and added: "The approximate center is on the far side of Terra and Luna, Sir."

"A space ship," McPartland said savagely, "flying an erratic course. We don't have much chance finding it with a torpedo."

"The torpedoes can be adjusted for magnetism, Sir," said the Engineer.

McPartland smiled. "If the torpedoes were floating free in space and we can adjust them to do that—the field would attract them to any ship within a Spacial Unit.

"Mister McTavish, I want to sow a hundred of them as magnetic space mines in the approximate center of your devil's mantle."

**M**cTAVISH released his torpedoes into the blackness. One by one they blasted off. The three in the control room watched their fiery jets disappear into the emptiness of the forward screen.

"They'll go dead and float," McPartland told Clemens, "and explode on contact." He clenched his big hands, and laughed harshly. "If we could only see it!"

"How long, Sir?" Reynolds asked quietly. "Will it be soon enough?"

"It's got to be soon enough," the Captain snapped.

"If Marshal Denton surrenders, Sir," Clemens pointed out, "and the light is restored, the outlaws would see the mines. They could—"

The Engineer's voice rang in his headset, and he winced. The others heard McTavish's words over the phone: "The light! The light, man! They hit one of the torpedoes!"

"We hope—" Clemens said.

Jon's glance swept to the forward screen. Starlight was cutting into the edges of the blackness. He watched that hated black-

ness shrink—shrink, until Terra floated blue and beautiful on the view screen.

"Terra," Jon whispered, half to himself, "Whose Terra?"

The Lieutenant-Commander winced again as another voice rang in his ears, and he relayed without an attempt at pessimism: "Observation reports wreckage of ship, Sir, and presence of ninety-eight floating mines."

McPartland spoke into the phone himself: "Navigation. Course for Terra Base. Pass through mined area. Mister Reynolds would like a little practice—destroying the extra mines."

Reynolds, a grateful smile on his round face, ran his finger lovingly over the calculators, and spoke into his mike: "All ray stations. Fire on command only." The calculators clicked. "Station Six, range—"

**A**LMIRA DENTON looked up at Captain Jon McPartland with eyes that were the soft hue of Terra itself.

"Almira," he said, "about that—that case report."

She smiled, and the curve of her soft lips was as it had been in his mind since he left on patrol "Jon darling," she laughed. "We can forget that. When the Congress gets through ferreting out its traitors, and hearing your report, father won't need my help with them."

"But I want you to analyze me," he insisted.

"I mean to, Jon," she agreed gently. "But only for my own information."

"And mine, too, darling," he said. "I want you to analyze a dream," McPartland said firmly. "I keep seeing a little asteroid—one I explored when I had a one-man Patrol scout, way back. I keep seeing it with an atmosphere unit installed, and a Terra-gravity unit. There's a house, and a beautiful woman with red-gold hair and gorgeous eyes, and a little boy named Patrick, and a little girl named Kathleen."

He paused, watching her eyes as the puzzlement was replaced by understanding. "What do you suppose the dream means?" he asked.

"Tell me more about it, Jon," Almira asked softly.