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REVOLT OF



THE OUTWORLDS

by Milton Lesser

Alan Tremaine knew Mars received its water via the space warp from Venus. If this life-line were cut it meant war — and mankind's destruction!

A MPLIFIERS swelled the clarion call of the trumpet above the keening Martian wind which swept into the great central plaza of Syrtis Major City. Two hundred thousand outworld citizens, the entire population of Syrtis, huddled together in the cold and watched the blue and gold



banner of the Outworld Federation run up the pole to flutter proudly beside the globe-and-stars flag of Earth.

There was a tremendous roar from the crowd as Alan Tremaine climbed the long flight of steps leading to the platform in the center of the plaza. *It's really my father they're applauding*, Alan Tremaine thought. The elder Tremaine, dead these two weeks, had made the dream of independence a reality for the Outworlds. Then, on the eve of success, he had been struck down by a still unknown assassin. Alan had been rushed from New Washington University on Earth by the Outworld Federation, to bring the magic name of Tremaine to the ceremony on Mars.

Above him now, Alan could see the military governor of Mars, Lieutenant General Roderick Olmstead, waiting alongside the banks of huge television screens which showed similar scenes on Venus, on Saturn's great moon Titan, on the four large Jovian satellites. But the eyes of all the Outworlds were here on Mars as Alan Tremaine mounted the platform to accept the Declaration of Sovereignty from the governor.

A hush descended on the crowd as General Olmstead unrolled the scroll and held it before the television cameras. "On behalf of the

government of Earth," he said, his voice booming across the Syrtis plaza on the amplifiers, "I present this Declaration of Sovereignty to the people of all the Outworlds. The five hundred million citizens of Mars, Venus, Titan and the Jovian Moons will hereafter march alongside the peoples of Earth in Equal Union."

Two hundred thousand voices rose in a thunderous peal of acclaim.

"It is to your everlasting credit," General Olmstead went on, "that your great struggle for freedom bears fruit today bloodlessly. History shall long remember this moment, for the grim alternative of war was always present but shunned by your very great leader, Richard Tremaine."

There was not a sound now in all the vast crowd. Alan Tremaine thought it must be the same elsewhere, with half a billion Outworld citizens watching on their television screens across the solar system.

"The one tragedy of your greatest moment," General Olmstead concluded, "is that Richard Tremaine did not live to see it become a reality. I now place this scroll in the hands of his only son, Alan Tremaine."

His eyes suddenly misty, Alan accepted the Declaration of Sover-

eignty from General Olmstead. The long political struggle, climaxed today on the windswept plaza of Syrtis Major City, was not his. Attending New Washington University on Earth, he had missed the dramatic sequence of events which led to this day. Almost, he felt like an outsider. But he believed in their fight even if he had had no active part in it. And the name Tremaine was now lifted into the pale sky above Syrtis Plaza on two hundred thousand voices.

"Tremaine! Tremaine! Speech! Speech!"

Alan took a deep breath and cleared his throat. Faces as numerous as the desert sands of Mars gazed up at him. Untold millions more watched their television screens on the other Outworlds. Seated beside her father, Laura Olmstead smiled at him.

"I humbly accept this Declaration of Sovereignty on behalf of all the Outworlds and on behalf of my father," Alan said. "I'm sure that on this day my father would offer thanks to God that our freedom was achieved without violence."

JUST then the television screens depicting smaller ceremonies on the other Outworlds erupted into violent activity. There was muted thunder from the Venus screen.

People could be seen running about wildly, the drone of jets was heard. Brilliant light flared, blanking the screen momentarily. When it could be seen again, a mushroom-topped atomic cloud was rising from the crater which had been the Governor's Headquarters on Venus. The scene was the same on Titan and the four Jovian Moons.

A voice blared: "Attention! Attention Mars. This is Government Station, Ganymede. Seconds ago, the Outworld Federation met freedom with treachery. Even as tactical atomic weapons were used on the Government Headquarters, their speakers were proclaiming peaceful union. But now the masses have risen behind the spectre of military violence. 'Equal Union is not enough,' their leaders cry. 'We're ready to fight for total independence!' The traitorous Federation militia is marching on the underground Government Station here. Protect yourself, Mars!" Abruptly, the staccato blast of an automatic hand weapon could be heard. The voice from Ganymede was stilled.

General Olmstead rushed to the microphone, pushing Alan roughly aside. "All Martian units!" he cried. "Prepare for war. Directive A-2, this headquarters, put into immediate effect. Martial law is proclaimed. All civilian authority is

hereby terminated. Protect the spacefield and the government station. All commissioned leaders of the Outworld Federation on Mars will surrender themselves, weaponless, to the military authorities. Those who resist face immediate arrest." All at once, the microphone squawked into silence. Someone had cut off the generators below the platform.

"Tremaine," General Olmstead raged, "your father is better off dead. Seeing this happen would have killed him. Your name will go down in history, all right—as the worst traitor since Benedict Arnold."

Alan shook his head. It all had happened so fast, his senses were still numb with shock. The Federation had told him nothing about this. The Federation had been content with Equal Union, his father's dream. True, a militant minority group within the Federation had longed for total independence, through violence if necessary, but Richard Tremaine had always opposed this. Now, it had happened.

Military control of Venus, Titan and the Jovian moons was inadequate. In hours, the governments would fall. The same was true for the smaller centers of Martian population, but Earth maintained its strongest military garrison in Syrtis Major City. Here the Earth

forces, under General Olmstead, could probably hold their own.

But it was open revolt now, something which the dead Richard Tremaine had opposed as steadfastly as he had opposed Earth domination of the Outworlds.

"I didn't know," Alan began. "Nobody told me . . ."

His voice was drowned in a swirling sea of sound as Federation militiamen threw their wind cloaks and revealed the uniforms beneath them as they charged up the steps toward the platform. Government soldiers, storming up the other side, waited for them. As yet, not a weapon had been fired in Syrtis.

"Stop!" Alan cried, rushing to the edge of the platform. "Are you insane? We wanted Equal Union. We've been granted Equal Union. Put down your weapons and go home."

THE front rank of the militiamen, three abreast on the stairs, paused. This was a Tremaine talking. There was a difference between father and son, of course, but a Tremaine had made this day possible.

The leader of the militiamen, a bearded fellow in the uniform of a major, shook his head. "You don't know, Mr. Tremaine. You weren't here when your father spoke his last words. We're carrying out

the orders of Richard Tremaine!"

Two government soldiers who had mounted the other side of the platform came up behind Alan and pinned his arms to his sides. "Go ahead and fire," one of them said. "Kill Tremaine's son, why don't you?"

The front rank of militiamen was being pressed up the stairs from behind, but had returned their weapons to their sides. Alan struggled with the soldiers who held him. Below the platform, the vast crowd was seething restlessly, watching the drama unfold above them. The thin sprinkling of government soldiers in their midst could be swept under in seconds unless government station reinforcements were sent at once.

Alan thrust his elbow back, felt it jar against the ribs of one of the soldiers. The man gasped as the air was forced from his lungs. Still gasping, he was spun around by Alan and hurled down on the militiamen mounting the stairs at the head of the platform. Alan whirled, but the second soldier was on him, circling his neck with a powerful arm. They went down together, thrashing and rolling across the platform.

Something roared overhead. Alan was aware of General Olmstead, his daughter Laura huddled behind him, pointing up at the sky. Then

a shadow passed swiftly over the platform, came back—and hovered. The roar was replaced by a loud clattering. Still wrestling with the soldier, Alan could see a jet-copter, switching from jets to rotors, hanging half a dozen feet above the platform like an enormous black grasshopper.

More militiamen leaped from the copter to join those swarming up the stairs, their hand weapons spitting death at the first rank of government soldiers which had come up the other side of the platform. The revolution in Syrtis Major City was an actual fact now.

"Get down!" General Olmstead told his daughter. "Flatten yourself."

But the brief firing atop the platform had cleared it of government soldiers. Rope ladders were dropped from the jet-copter.

"Tremaine," someone called from above. "Climb up quickly."

To remain here in Syrtis Major City was madness. Alan could accomplish nothing in the chaos of revolt. Besides, the militiaman had said this was his father's final wish. Armed rebellion for total independence. He had to find out. He caught the swaying rope ladder in his hands and mounted it. At the same moment, General Olmstead and his daughter were forced up another rope ladder at atomic pis-

tol point.

Its passengers securely inside, the jet-copter rose a hundred feet above the platform on its flashing, clattering rotors. Then the jets were cut in and the craft streaked north from Syrtis Major City at supersonic speed.

CHAPTER II

“LIES,” General Olmstead said bitterly. “Don’t tell me anything. It’s all lies.”

“I swear I knew nothing about this,” Alan insisted.

“Do you realize what you’ve done? Thousands of innocent people must have died already in the atomic explosions on the Outworlds. Millions more will perish before this war comes to an end. For it’s war you’ve brought to the solar system, Alan Tremaine. Is that what your father would have wanted?”

“I brought nothing,” Alan said. “I don’t know what my father would have wanted.”

“I believe him, Dad,” Laura Olmstead said. Alan had met her for the first time two weeks ago on the spaceship from Earth. She was going to join her father on Mars for the Declaration of Sovereignty ceremony. Alan had struck up a quick friendship with her in his darkest moments—when the

death of his father had seemed so tragic, bringing Alan’s world tumbling down about him. Laura Olmstead’s understanding, her frank sympathy, then her cheerful talk and companionship as the two week space journey wore on, had done much to help Alan. They had parted at the Syrtis Major spaceport, to meet again three days later as revolution unexpectedly engulfed Mars and the other Outworlds.

“Alan Tremaine is a traitor to Earth and his own people as well,” General Olmstead told his daughter now. “I won’t hear anything more about it.”

Half a dozen militiamen sat about the cabin of the jet-copter with them. Up front, a pilot and a co-pilot were at the controls.

“Alan’s new on Mars, Dad. He’s been at school on Earth, remember that.”

The leader of the militiamen turned to Alan and said, “We’re approaching Red Sands now, sir. Do you wish to go right down or look over the fortifications from the air?”

“Red Sands?” Alan asked. “What’s that?”

“Operation Headquarters, sir. Your lieutenants are waiting for you to take charge of the revolution, sir.”

“So he’s new on Mars,” General Olmstead told his daughter. “So

he doesn't know a thing about this. He's running the whole show, Laura. He's got us for hostages, too, or didn't you realize it? Earth will think twice about attacking Federation Headquarters with us prisoner there."

Alan was going to tell General Olmstead and his daughter they wouldn't remain hostages long if he could help it, but the militiaman was waiting for his answer. He said, "Let's go right down. Who's in charge of the Headquarters, soldier?"

"Why, you are, sir."

"No. I mean right now."

"Bennett Keifer, sir. Your father's right-hand man."

"Let's go down and meet this Bennett Keifer," Alan said. And, to Laura: "Don't worry about anything, Laura. It's going to be all right."

But when he reached for her hand, she withdrew it and would not meet his eyes directly.

THERE was nothing but the ochre wastelands of Mars, the dunes marching, windswept, from horizon to horizon. Far away to the east, a thin green line knifed across the rusty sands where vegetation clung precariously to the banks of a Martian canal, nurtured by the waters it brought down from the melting polar cap.

The militiamen flanked them on either side as they walked across the desert, two uniformed figures remaining behind long enough to cover the jet-copter with an ochre-colored tarpaulin which would effectively camouflage it from the air. It was like something from the Arabian Nights, Alan thought as they approached a low, rocky escarpment thrusting up through the sand. The leader of the militiamen placed his hand against a polished spot on the surface of the rock, which pulsed with the contact as a hidden device checked the pattern and whorls of the militiaman's fingerprints. The effect was the same as the Open Sesame of the Arabian Nights, for a great slab-like section of the escarpment rolled ponderously aside, revealing a dark cavity.

"Red Sands," the militiaman said proudly, and led the way inside.

Alan was totally unprepared for what happened next. The door in the rock rolled shut behind them. Lights blazed inside the cavern, brighter than the pale Martian day. A throbbing, busy city was spread out before them below the surface of Mars.

Throngs of men, women and children lined the short road to the city on both sides. A great cry went up from them as Alan, the militiamen, General Olmstead and

his daughter approached.

"Hail, Tremaine!" The cry echoed from the rock walls of the underground city. "Hail, Tremaine!" It rolled from the far throbbing reaches of the bustling city. "Tremaine, Tremaine, Tremaine!"

Not for me, Alan thought. *For my father*. What, actually did he know about all this? Perhaps a revolution directed from the secret base here at Red Sands *had* been his father's secret dream. The adulation with which the people of Red Sands greeted him filled him with a sense of pride. Not for his own accomplishments, but for his father's. Laura Olmstead was, quite suddenly and unexpectedly, part of a different world. Alan shrugged, deciding to suspend judgment until he met and talked with Bennett Keifer.

Now there were cries of: "He looks like his father!" "See, the same brow, the same bearing!" "The eyes are the same, I tell you. We have Richard Tremaine with us all over again!" And always, from all sides: "Hail, Tremaine!"

Alan caught Laura's gaze and tried to smile at her. She was on the verge of tears. "The sycophantic hypocrites," she said. "It's disgusting, carrying on like this while people are dying all over the solar system."

"It isn't for me," Alan told her desperately. "It's in memory of my father."

Laura's eyelids squeezed shut. Tears on her cheeks, she walked blindly ahead, supported by her father's arm. "I hate you, Alan Tremaine," she said.

"TREMACHINE," Bennett Keifer said half an hour later, shaking his hand with vigorous enthusiasm. "You look so much like your dead father I could have picked you out of any crowd. Sit down, boy."

Alan shook his head. "Thanks, but I'll stand." General Olmstead and his daughter had been left off elsewhere while Alan had been ushered into the Administration Center of Red Sands, a great rectangular structure carved from the subterranean rock of Mars. Finally, he had stood face to face with Bennett Keifer. A big, handsome man in the uniform of a Federation colonel, Keifer had flashing eyes and a direct manner which Alan found disarming.

"I'm sure you have many questions," Keifer said.

"Just one. Did my father sanction this armed revolt?"

"What a 'strange question. Of course he did."

"Nobody told me before."

"We couldn't reveal it today,

Tremaine. Not even to you. We couldn't chance revealing it until our forces had moved on all the Outworlds."

"In his letters, my father always said the glorious thing about the Outworld Federation was how it had achieved its ends bloodlessly."

"Tremaine, I'm telling you. I was here. They brought your father here after he was shot. He died with me at his side. He died saying that the Earth government was trying to trick us. Equal Union was a farce, he said. Equal Union—with Earth bleeding the Outworlds dry of their resources! Don't you see, Tremaine? Earth needs our mineral wealth—heavy water from Venus, iron from Mars, lithium and cobalt from the Jovian moons and Titan. They'll bleed us dry and pay next to nothing for our mineral wealth. Since theirs is the only market, we have no choice. The only alternative was armed revolt for the full freedom Earth wouldn't grant us."

"But in Equal Union we had an equal, representative vote for the first time. This Earth granted us."

"Representative vote, Tremaine. There's the catch. There are ten people on Earth for every Outworlder. What kind of equality is that?"

"I don't know," Alan admitted.

I think my father would have—"

"I'm telling you what your father said. I was there. Why don't you do this, Tremaine: get acquainted with our city. I don't want to rush you. When you're ready to take over and make the decisions, I'll step aside. How does that sound?"

"I don't want to usurp your authority just because my name's Tremaine," Alan said. "I don't understand this, not yet. I'm going to try, though." He was suddenly weary. It was the same feeling he had when news of his father's death had reached him on Earth. The world tumbling down about his shoulders. Atlas trying to hold up the globe but shorn of all his strength.

He said, "Is there someplace I can go to clean up? My head feels like it's spinning."

"Someplace to go," Keifer repeated the words, smiling. "Your father's apartment here in Red Sands is yours. I'll have one of our enlisted men show you the way. And take your time about things, Tremaine. No one is rushing you."

Alan thanked him and said, "What about General Olmstead and his daughter?"

"Don't you worry. Naturally, they're prisoners of war. But they'll be well-cared-for here. We're civilized people, Tremaine."

THEY shook hands again, then Alan followed a militiaman outside, through the corridors of Red Sands to a large apartment quarried in the rock wall of the underground city. He dismissed the enlisted man and found a bent, elderly figure waiting for him inside.

The man had gray hair and thin, stooped shoulders—as if he had spent the better part of his life pouring over books. He spoke in a thin, reedy voice, choked with emotion. “Is any one waiting for you outside?” he inquired.

Alan shook his head.

“Then listen to me. I shouldn’t be here. If Keifer knew—” the elderly man shrugged “—I don’t know what might happen. Alan, I am Eugene Talbrick. Does the name mean anything to you?”

“Yes,” Alan nodded. “My father wrote about you often. He said you were always a pillar of strength to him, a . . .”

“No matter,” said Talbrick. “You have heard of me. Alan, the good name of Tremaine is being used to bathe the solar system in blood!”

“What are you talking about?”

“Keifer. He says your father secretly wanted armed revolt. It’s not true, Alan. And do you realize what Keifer plans to make of you?”

Alan frowned. Eugene Talbrick,

his father had always written, was an inspirational figure behind everything the Outworld Federation stood for. If Richard Tremaine had been the eloquent spokesman for freedom, Talbrick was the thinker. If Tremaine could be compared to Washington historically, then surely Talbrick could be compared to an older Thomas Jefferson, or Ben Franklin perhaps. “No,” Alan said. “I’ve only just met Keifer.”

“You’ll be a figurehead, Alan. Listen.”

Talbrick walked to a television screen on the wall and soon had it working. A grave-faced news commentator was saying, “. . . riots all over Syrtis Major City. The magic name of Tremaine is on everyone’s lips, Richard the father, Alan the son. If Richard Tremaine had not sanctioned this revolution, the people say, their forces never would have struck all over the solar system. If Alan Tremaine was not here to lead them, they might have accepted the Declaration of Sovereignty. But with the memory of one Tremaine and the leadership of another, they will fight now for total freedom.

“Elsewhere on the revolution front, search jets are sweeping wide over the Martian desert for some trace of Governor General Olmstead, who was kidnapped by

Federation forces along with his daughter. Up to this moment, no trace of them has been found . . .

"Here's a bulletin from Earth. Government warships have been dispatched to Venus, Titan and the Jovian Moons to put down the provisional Federation governments which have risen there. Heavy casualties on both sides are feared."

Talbrick blanked the television screen. "Believe me, Alan," he said. "Civilization may depend on your decision. Your father never sanctioned this armed uprising. Keifer lied. Keifer dreams of an independent Federation which can drive Earth to its knees economically. Or worse. You're to be in command, but he'll pull the strings behind you."

Alan paced back and forth without speaking. He hardly could believe Talbrick any more than he could believe Keifer. The one had been behind his father, offering strength from deep, philosophical wisdom. The other had been beside Richard Tremaine in all his stormy political fights.

Alan smiled without humor. "Charge and counter charge," he said. "My ears will probably be ringing with them. Do you have any proof?"

"Yes," said Eugene Talbrick. "A letter from your father to you. It's in my own quarters now. I

wouldn't mail it for fear it would be intercepted on its way to Earth."

"A letter?"

"He knew it was the end. He knew he was dying. He wrote the letter and gave it to me because he had seen through Keifer too late. Will you come with me now?"

"Of course," Alan said, and followed the old man from his father's apartment.

"HERE we are," Eugene Talbrick told him a few minutes later. He opened the door to his own quarters and stepped inside. Alan followed him into darkness, heard the old man groping ahead of him for the switch which would fill the windowless, rock-hewn apartment with light.

The door clicked shut behind them.

"That's funny," Talbrick's reedy voice was close at hand. "The light doesn't work."

There was a soft series of repeated thuds, someone moving across the carpet quickly.

"Who's there?" Eugene Talbrick called.

"Look out!" Alan cried, suddenly wary. He brushed past the old man and collided with someone there in the darkness. Briefly, they struggled, then something struck the side of Alan's head. He fell to his

knees, groping blindly ahead. His arms wrapped about a pair of legs, clung there grimly. Something lashed out at his chest, spilling him over on his back.

"Alan, where are you?" Eugene Talbrick said. "What's the matter?" Then Eugene Talbrick screamed once and was still. A weight fell across Alan, pinning him to the floor. Half-conscious, he rolled the heavy thing off him and scrambled unsteadily to his hands and knees. The door opened and closed swiftly, light from the corridor streaming in, then fading. Alan staggered to the door, opened it.

Outside in the corridor, there was no one.

Inside, the slender form of Eugene Talbrick was stretched out on its back. A red pool of blood was spreading on the carpet under him. Alan knew he was dead without feeling for the pulse.

A knife had been plunged into Eugene Talbrick's side, immediately below the heart.

CHAPTER III

"**N**OW, just a minute, Alan," Bennett Keifer said later. "Before you go off half-cocked like that—"

"Eugene made some accusations, then died," Alan insisted, "before

he could show me the proof."

"We're all grownups here, Alan," Keifer said easily. There was no mistaking his tone. He would *assume* Alan was a grownup. "You're twenty-five," he went on. "One day soon you'll take over the Federation movement, so you can't afford to be impetuous. You tried to find that letter, didn't you?"

"Yes," Alan admitted. "It wasn't there."

"Of course it wasn't. It never existed. Alan, listen to me. Talbrick was an old man. Our viewpoints differed diametrically. He couldn't reconcile himself with the fact that your father agreed with me."

"But—"

"But that isn't important. This is. Someone, some unknown person, killed your father. Someone killed Talbrick. Richard Tremaine, then Talbrick. I'm next in line, Alan. Or maybe you are. Someone is out to wreck the Federation from the inside, by killing off its leaders."

"If what you say is true, why didn't they finish the job in Talbrick's apartment? They could have killed me, too."

"You frightened them off."

"I'll be frank," Alan said coolly. "Let's assume *you* were responsible. You couldn't afford to kill me. You need me for a fig-

urehead.”

Keifer smiled. “I should be angry. I’m not.” He flipped the intercom toggle on his desk and said, “Haddix, come in here, please.”

The door opened. A tall, gangling man in the uniform of a Federation captain entered the room. He moved with easy, feline grace. When he spoke, he purred like a great cat. “Yes, sir?” he said saluting Keifer. “You sent for me?”

“Alan, this is Captain Haddix, the Internal Security Officer here at Red Sands. Captain, will you tell Mr. Tremaine where I was for the past three hours?”

“Right here, sir. You had a brief interview with this man, then remained here with me, discussing the water ultimatum.”

“You see?” Keifer said. “Right here.”

Perhaps he had jumped to an unwarranted conclusion, Alan thought. He said, “What is this water ultimatum?”

Keifer dismissed the Internal Security Officer, then explained, “We’re in trouble, Alan. An hour ago, the Earth colonial office contacted us with an ultimatum. Either we lay down our arms and tell the provisional governments on the other Outworlds to surrender their authority, or Mars’ water supply is cut off. We were given one

hour.”

“But Earth’s own military forces here on Mars would die of thirst.”

Keifer shrugged. “Apparently they’re expendable. Of course, I rejected the ultimatum.”

“What can you do?”

“I don’t know,” Keifer said. “They can do what they say, unfortunately.”

It would be simple, Alan knew. Arid Mars had depended for water which flowed in an adequate trickle from the polar caps until the coming of the Earth colony. For the past twenty years, though, water-surplus Venus supplied Mars with its water. A warp had been opened in space from the Venusian orbit to the Martian, with life-giving water flowing through from the second planet to the fourth at the rate of fifty thousand gallons per second. It had been a stupendous sub-space engineering feat, for the warp varied in length from sixty to two hundred million miles, depending upon the orbital positions of the two planets. Earth could shut the warp at any point along its vast length. Parched, arid Mars would be forced to lay down its arms in a matter of days.

“Captain Haddix is taking a ship along the warp-route,” Keifer said, “assuming the ultimatum is in earnest. He might be able to find the break, but I doubt if he could

repair it. Would you care to go along?"

"Yes," Alan said. He still didn't believe Earth would subject millions of people, its own military garrison included, to killing thirst.

"Very well. I—"

At that moment, a buzzer sounded on Keifer's desk. "Yes, what is it?"

The voice was frantic. "This is the reservoir, sir. The water's stopped flowing. The warp is closed!"

"We'll ration what we have left," Keifer said grimly. "Two quarts per person, effective immediately." Then, to Alan: "I'll make arrangements for you with Captain Haddix. They weren't fooling, Alan. They gave us exactly one hour."

Alan met Captain Haddix outside, where plans were made for their flight to the spacewarp route. If Earth did this, Alan thought bleakly, then maybe Keifer was right. For Earth would thereby condemn itself in the eyes of the Outworlds with such blatant disregard for human life.

"THEY haven't touched us so far, Dad," Laura Olmstead told her father. "Alan won't let them."

"We're prisoners in this room. But I think Alan's a prisoner, too. Up here." General Olmstead tapped his head. "They've got the boy

fooled, Laura, if what you told me is the truth."

"I'm sure it is. I'm sure Alan wouldn't have betrayed his own father like that. You've got to trust him, Dad."

General Olmstead grunted. "We don't have any choice, do we?"

Laura was thinking: *Please, Alan. Please. They've got you confused. You didn't do this intentionally. Please.*

The door to their prison chamber suddenly slid, with much grating and creaking, into the wall. A tall, distinguished-looking man in the uniform of a Federation colonel came into the room. "I am Colonel Bennett Keifer," he introduced himself, "second in command to Alan Tremaine here at Red Sands. How do you do, Mr. Olmstead?"

"General Olmstead," Laura's father said coldly.

"We recognize no Earth titles here in Red Sands, Mr. Olmstead. We recognize your importance, though."

"Exactly what does that mean?"

"There are certain things Alan Tremaine would like to find out. The strength of the Earth garrison at Syrtis Major, the number of jet-copters at your disposal, your plans for putting down the insurrections at the smaller Martian settlements."

"You'll get nothing from me," General Olmstead promised.

"Perhaps. Your daughter is a lovely woman, Mr. Olmstead. Quite lovely."

"If you as much as touch her, I'll kill you with my own hands!"

"Theatrics, Mr. Olmstead. You are in no position to do anything of the sort. You can save us both a lot of trouble if you answer my questions."

"Get out of here," General Olmstead said.

Shrugging, Keifer called over his shoulder: "Guard!"

Two strapping figures entered the chamber and waited for orders.

"Take Mr. Olmstead to another room, please. I wish you were more reasonable, Mr. Olmstead. We need that information badly."

STRUGGLING and cursing, General Olmstead was borne from the room. "Don't worry about me," Laura called after him. "We both have a duty to Earth."

"This is ironic," Keifer said after the door had closed. "I had planned it thoroughly. We have men here who are experts in an art which was old when civilization was young."

"Torture?" Laura said. "My father won't—"

"I said it's ironic. I never expected you, Laura. The General has

a daughter, a common, ordinary girl. He loves her. He sees things in her no one else does. But you—you are beautiful. Listen to me, Laura. Your father is an experienced professional soldier. We can use him here in Red Sands. If we make an alliance, the Federation could hold all of Mars in a week."

"What kind of alliance?"

"There are few women in Red Sands," said Keifer. "None of them as pretty as you. I'm restless, Laura. That kind of alliance." Quite objectively, he let his eyes study her slowly, starting at the top of her head and working down without passion, without hurry. When he finished, she was blushing. "Exactly that kind of an alliance," he said.

"You're crazy if you think I—"

"Your father expects the worst. He thinks we're going to hurt you. We're not. We're going to hurt him.

"Plans can change. Your father will be tortured, while you are sitting here with me. We can break a man, Laura, physically and mentally. We can make him talk. Or—you can save us the trouble."

"How?"

"By telling your father you believe this is the winning side. By telling him you're going to live with me."

"To—what?"

"To live with me."

"I wouldn't marry you if—"

"My dear young lady. I never said anything about marriage. Perhaps later, I don't know. I'm a cautious man. You're still an unknown quantity, you see."

"You can just get out of here."

"As you wish. But let me tell you something: here in Red Sands we're subtle when we have to be, crude when we must. Now, take your father. There are ways of hurting a man, of pulling out his fingernails slowly, of applying pressure to certain nerves at the base of the skull, of a slow, steady pounding of the soles of the feet, of breaking bones, starting with the toes and—"

"That's enough!" Laura cried. "Don't say any more."

Keifer shrugged. "Also as you wish. Your father will not be harmed, I promise you. Tonight, you may come to my quarters if you wish. If you don't my promise will no longer be valid. In a day or two, perhaps we can tell your father of our alliance. Will I see you tonight?"

"Yes," Laura said. "Just get out of here now."

"Tonight," Keifer told her, and left the room.

"THIS is Colonel Keifer calling warp-ship seven. Come in please."

"Warp seven, sir?"

"Captain Haddix?"

"A moment, sir."

Keifer waited impatiently, then saw Haddix's gaunt face on the viewscreen. "Where are you now, Haddix?"

"Starting out along the warp-route, sir. Has there been a change in plans?"

"Yes. I want you to return tonight, Captain Haddix. Without Alan Tremaine."

"But I thought—"

"Don't. We still need Tremaine's name, but the boy is suspicious. No one has to know he has been killed. This is one case where we want the name but *not* the game. You understand "

"Yes, sir."

"One more thing, Captain. How would you like to attain your majority?"

"Yes, *sir!*" Haddix beamed.

"Good. Return tonight without Tremaine and you'll be promoted. Good luck, Captain."

* * *

Alan felt awkward in the cumbersome spacesuit, clomping along the hull of warp ship seven with Captain Haddix. Ahead of him,

Haddix looked like some grotesque monster in the shapeless, inflated suit. But Haddix had learned to slide his feet along in their magnet-shod boots and could move with comparative ease.

"There's the warp station," Haddix called over the suit intercom, pointing with one gauntleted hand toward a black globe which obscured the starlight overhead. From the globe, an incredibly straight black line darted out across the gulf of space like a bridge to infinity. From here it seemed only inches thick, but Alan knew it was actually fifty feet across.

"That's the warp," Haddix said. "It bends space as if space were a sheet of paper with Venus at one corner and Mars at another. You fold the sheet of paper across to place Venus and Mars in juxtaposition. In the same way, this warp folds space, aligning Venus and Mars in sub-space."

"Why can't men travel the same way?" Alan asked. "It's almost instantaneous, isn't it? It takes almost a month by spaceship from Mars to Venus."

Haddix's laughter purred over the intercom. "Uh-uh," he said. "The stresses in a space-warp are tremendous. Water has no shape to lose, so it doesn't matter. A man would be mangled. Well, are you ready, Mr. Tremaine?"

"I guess so."

"Fine. Just point yourself in the direction of the warp station, unmagnetize your boots and switch on your shoulder jets. Once you get the hang of it, it's a cinch. Here we go."

Ahead of him, Alan saw Haddix's form suddenly lift from the hull of the spaceship and rocket up toward the warp station. Alan followed him, feeling utterly no sensation of movement after the initial acceleration.

A FEATURELESS black globe several hundred yards in diameter, the warp station floated toward them. Following Haddix's lead, Alan alighted on his hands, cutting his shoulder jets and cartwheeling into an upright position. The warp-station, he knew, was merely a terminal point for the space-warp itself. Untended, it housed the tremendous atomic power plant which unfolded the water on the Martian end of the warp from sub-space to normal space.

"As you can see," Haddix said, "the station is working. But there's no water."

Alan could feel the pulsing of great machinery underfoot. But the black tube of sub-space, yawning awesomely half a hundred feet to his left, was empty.

"Want to take a look?" Haddix

demanded.

Alan nodded through the glassite helmet of his space suit, then fell into dragging, magnetized step beside Haddix. Soon they approached the lip of the sub-space tube, where sub-space intersected normal space in a fifty foot wide channel.

"It doesn't look dangerous," Alan said.

"For water, it's not. The pressure would crush a man to jelly."

Alan peered over the edge. Below him perhaps a dozen feet, a white line had been painted. Over it in stark white letters was the word CAUTION. Beyond that point, apparently, the actual space-warp began. "Look out!" Alan shouted. "What are you trying to do?"

Haddix was leaning against him, their two bulky suits in sudden, dangerous contact. Alan could feel himself slipping over the edge. Yelling now, his own voice deafening him inside the glassite helmet, Alan groped with clumsy, gauntletted hands for Haddix. He clutched the shoulder of the man's space-suit, then felt himself tumbling over the edge into the tube.

There was a jolting sensation above him. He was sliding down the inflated body of Haddix's spacesuit, sliding, sliding. He wrapped his arms about the legs of the suit and clung there. Below his

dangling feet was the white line and the word CAUTION painted there. Immediately below that, the space-warp itself.

"Let go of me! Haddix screamed. "You'll kill us both."

Alan looked up. Haddix was clinging to the lip of the tube with both hands. Suddenly, Haddix began rocking back and forth in an attempt to dislodge Alan.

"Don't try it," Alan said. "All I've got to do is yank at your legs a little harder and we'll both fall down there."

"I can't climb up with you hanging on like that. I—I can't hold on much longer. This warp-station's at Earth normal gravity, Tremaine. My hands are slipping!"

"Listen to me," Alan said. "We can still get out of this. I can climb up your back, then pull you up after me."

"How do I know you will?"

"You don't. If we just hang here, we're as good as dead." Alan could feel the strain in his arms as he clung to Haddix's suit. For Haddix, the strain was double. Haddix could not be expected to hang there more than a few moments.

"I'm coming up," Alan said. "Don't try anything foolish."

HANGING by one arm, Alan reached up with his other hand

and grasped the belt of Haddix's suit. Suspended there by both arms now, he reached up again for the flange of metal at the neck of Haddix's suit, where the glassite helmet fit. He got the gauntleted fingers of one hand around it, then almost lost his precarious grip. He swung sickeningly over the abyss for one harrowing moment, then held the flange with both hands. Taking a deep breath, he reached for the lip of the tube itself and soon clambered up and over. He lay there briefly, panting. He had never been nearer death in his life.

"Help!" Haddix gasped. "I can't hold on much longer."

Alan crouched there, looked over the edge. Haddix still clung with both hands.

"Why did you try to kill me?" Alan demanded. "Did you kill my father and Eugene Talbrick too?"

"It was Keifer!" Haddix cried. "Keifer thought you were suspicious. He was going to get you out of the way and keep using your name."

"Did he kill my father?"

"I don't know. Honest."

"And Talbrick?"

"One of my men did it. At Keifer's orders. Get me out of here, I'm begging you."

"O.K.," Alan said. He braced himself and hauled Haddix up out

of the tube, then turned and jetted back toward the waiting warp-ship. They entered the airlock together, waited for the green safety light which announced the return of normal pressure and air, then stripped off their deflated space-suits and glassite helmets.

Cat-quick, Haddix yanked an atomic pistol from his belt.

Instinctively, matching reflex for reflex, Alan slapped it from his hand. The weapon roared, blasting the air over Alan's head as he dove for Haddix. They went down together, rolling across the floor. Alan was aware of Haddix shouting for help, of the man's long fingers closing on his throat, of a knee driven painfully into his groin.

The inner lock door swung open. The warp-ship's pilot crashed through and scrambled on the floor after the atomic pistol. "Get out of the way, Captain," he said. "I've got him covered."

But Haddix was a growling, choking, feline animal now, trying to squeeze the life from Alan's throat. Desperately, Alan groped blindly with his fingers. His thumbs found Haddix's eyes, gouging. Haddix screamed and tumbled clear, clawing at his face.

Alan sucked air into his lungs and sprang to his feet as the atomic pistol was discharged. He felt a sudden, burning numbness in his left arm,

then was grappling with the pilot chest to chest, the atomic pistol between them. When the weapon went off, Alan was flung across the airlock, slamming against the wall. The pilot went down to his knees slowly, disbelief on his face as he died trying to stuff entrails back into his belly.

Haddix and Alan went for the atomic pistol at the same time. The Security Officer got his fingers around it and turned, snarling, toward Alan.

"All right, you no good son—" he began.

Alan stepped on his wrist, pinning it on the floor with the weapon. He kicked Haddix in the face with his other foot and retrieved the atomic pistol as Haddix slumped forward.

"Now listen," Alan said, breathing in great sobs, "we're going forward. You'll call Keifer and tell him I'm dead. Try anything else and I'll kill you. Understand?"

Haddix understood.

Alan followed him, stuffing his numb left hand into a pocket of his blouse as a temporary sling. By the time they reached the control cabin, the left side of his blouse was soaked with blood.

"GOOD dinner, wasn't it?" Bennett Keifer asked Laura.

"Yes," she said.

"Did you like the wine?"

"Yes."

"I'm glad you decided to accept my invitation. Are you?"

"Yes."

"Is that all you have to say, 'yes'?"

"What do you want me to say?"

"Come here. Laura."

Dad, she thought. *It's for you. Alan, Alan, where are you?* She walked to where Keifer was sitting.

"Sit down, Laura."

She sat.

"You still don't like me," he said, as if it were both regretted and unexpected. "But you're all alone now. I've given you the opportunity to start a new life here with me. Your father can't help you. And Alan Tremaine—"

"What about Alan?" Laura asked eagerly.

"I want ours to be a frank relationship. No lies. No deceptions. Alan Tremaine is dead."

"What — what did you say?" Laura cried.

"Tremaine is dead. I got word this afternoon. An accident at the warp-station."

"It isn't true," Laura whispered. "It can't be true. Please. Please. . ."

"Listen to me, Laura. I'm going to win. I can't be stopped now. I'm offering you half, a woman's share of empire. Not just the Out-

worlds. I believe I can force Earth itself to its knees."

Alan, Alan, forgive me. I said I hated you . . .

"It isn't madness, Laura. With Tremaine's name and my plans, the Outworlds will rally behind me. And after they hear how Earth has sundered the space-warp from Venus—"

"Earth wouldn't," Laura said mechanically.

"It's on every Martian's lips," Keifer said.

"Then you did it yourself."

"Laura, Laura. I said a woman's share of empire. Don't worry yourself over the details. Wealth and jewels and importance, that's a woman's share. It's yours if you want it."

"My father—"

"Is a prisoner. Will you come here now?"

Laura looked at him, at this man who would carve a solar empire for himself by twisting the legitimate motives of the Outworld people. *It's for Dad*, she thought. She tried to fill her mind with that and nothing else. For her father. Otherwise, he would be tortured. For her father. For her father . . .

But when Keifer smiled down on her, calmly sure of himself, she thought of other things, of Earth, which did not yet understand the full extent of Keifer's madness, of

Alan, who had been slain treacherously . . .

"That's for my father!" she cried, and slapped Keifer's face.

He caught her hands, pinning them at her side. "You little vixen," he said. The imprint of her fingers was on his cheek. There was quick hatred in his eyes, but just as well. "Why don't you cry for help?" he taunted her. "My guards will hear you."

Laura freed one of her hands and slapped him again, then watched as rage swept the lust from his eyes. "I'll break you," he promised, biting off the words one at a time. "You'll come crawling." He forced her down slowly on the couch.

They both looked up as the door to the room slid noisily into the wall.

Alan stood there.

CHAPTER V

"GET up," Alan said, jerking the atomic pistol from his belt.

"But Haddix said—"

"Your guards welcomed me, Keifer. You couldn't afford to tell anyone else I was dead. Laura, are you all right?"

"Yes, Alan. I thought you . . . he said . . ."

"We're getting out of here. Kei-

fer, call your guards. Tell them to bring General Olmstead here. If you try any tricks, I'll kill you." Alan's head was whirling. He'd lost too much blood, he thought vaguely. There were two Laura's and two Keifer's swimming before his eyes.

"You can't desert your own people," Keifer told him. You don't like my policies, but—"

"Shut up. You told Haddix to kill me. One of Haddix's men killed Eugene Talbrick, at your orders."

"I—"

Alan jammed the atomic pistol against Keifer's chest. "One question," he said. "I want the truth. Who cut off the space-warp?"

"Earth—"

"I'm going to Earth to find out. I just want to know where I stand, that's all."

Keifer shrugged. "We did it, Alan. The Federation."

"You mean *you* did it. But why?"

Keifer remained stonily silent.

Abruptly, Alan found himself down on one knee. It took an incredible effort of will to stand up again. He needed a blood transfusion and could sleep around the clock and still wake up exhausted. Laura ran to him and said, "You're badly hurt, Alan. You ought to have that treated."

He smiled bleakly. "Tell me how?" he said, and handed her the pistol. "If Keifer does anything except send for your father, use this." He staggered to the couch and sat there, letting his head slump forward and down almost to his knees to renew the flow of blood to his brain. Dimly, he was aware of Keifer crossing the room to a video screen and asking someone at the other end to bring General Olmstead—Keifer said *Mr.* Olmstead—to his quarters.

Then there was a roaring in Alan's ears, the distant, far off pounding of surf on a water world like Venus, not arid Mars. It came closer, it swept down upon Alan in a surging, foaming tide and engulfed him . . .

"**A**LAN! Alan! Dad is here." "Laura " He blinked his eyes. Groggy, he stood up. Laura was on one side of him, General Olmstead on the other, pointing the atomic pistol squarely at Bennett Keifer.

"Just how do you expect to get out of here?" Keifer demanded.

"That's easy," Alan said. "You are coming with us."

"To Earth? You'll never make me."

"Get this straight," Alan said. "I could walk clear across Red Sands without anyone trying to

stop me. I'm Alan Tremaine, remember? But we're going to do it the hard way because I want to turn you over to the authorities on Earth. Let's go."

Outside in the corridor, a few guards were loitering. They came to attention and saluted smartly as Keifer and Alan Tremaine came into view with General Olmstead and his daughter. They never suspected that General Olmstead held a pistol, hidden by the folds of his tunic, at Keifer's back.

General Olmstead told Alan as they followed the narrow corridor to a larger one, "My place is with the defenders of Red Sands. I wouldn't feel right going to Earth with you."

"We're taking the warp-ship," Alan said. "It's not really built for interplanetary travel, but it will have to do. We could drop you at Syrtis. But sir, I'd rather take Laura with me. Let's get her safely out of this war."

"Wait a minute!" Laura cried. "If you think—"

"I do," her father said, "and so does Alan. You'll go to Earth with him. He needs someone along to help watch Keifer, anyhow."

"But Dad!"

"But nothing."

"Alan, I want to go with you, but—"

"You heard your father. But

nothing."

Fifteen minutes later, they were putting on insulated surface garments at the quartermaster supply depot near the great stone portal which separated Red Sands from the Martian desert.

The clerk said, "Going up to the warp-station?"

"No," Bennett Keifer told him.

"Yes," Alan said.

The clerk scratched his head, but saluted as they marched toward the stone portal. "Open it," Alan told him.

The portal slid away. The fierce Martian wind blasted them with swirling, choking sand. The intense cold cleared Alan's head. Five hundred yards across the ochre sand, they could see the black bulk of the warp ship. The portal groaned and scraped shut behind them. You could see nothing but a bare escarpment of Martian granite.

"Haddix is tied up in the ship," Alan shouted over the shrieking wind. "We'll put him outside, then blast off."

Now the warp ship loomed over them, balanced black and ugly on its tail. Alan worked the airlock mechanism with numb fingers. The lock swung in.

Haddix was there, all right. Haddix stood in the airlock with another uniform'd figure on either

side of him.

Haddix was pointing an atomic pistol out at them.

“HE left me here,” Haddix told Keifer. “I got loose and called for help. I figured he was planning to use the ship again or he would have taken me out with him. So we waited right here. Smart, huh?”

“That was ingenious, *Major* Haddix,” Keifer agreed.

Haddix climbed out of the airlock and stood with them on the ochre sand. His two men emerged behind him with coils of rope. “Sit down,” Haddix said. “A trick I learned on Venus. We’ll tie them back to back.”

Nodding, Keifer asked General Olmstead for his weapon.

Alan crouched, facing Haddix. Once they were tied, they were as good as dead. Rallying the Outworld people behind Alan’s name, Keifer would certainly dominate the Federation planets and might even go further. Haddix stood there warily, feet planted wide apart, ready for anything. It hardly seemed a calculated risk Alan thought. It seemed like suicide.

But there was nothing else he could do.

He scooped up a handful of sand and flung it in Haddix’s face, leap-

ing for the Security Officer with the same motion. Then several things happened at once. Laura screamed. Keifer was grappling with General Olmstead, fighting a grim tug of war with him for the pistol. Haddix’s weapon blasted air just above Alan’s face, the searing flash of energy momentarily blinding him. Alan hit Haddix low with his shoulder, striking the man’s knees, he thought. Haddix tumbled over on top of him, flattening Alan against the sand.

Alan got two handfuls of sand, then drove his fists at Haddix’s face and opened them, rubbing the sand into his eyes. Haddix screamed like an animal in sudden, unexpected pain. There was a sudden wet warmth on Alan’s left arm as the wound opened and began bleeding again, but Haddix had fallen away from him and Alan’s energy-blinded eyes were beginning to make out shapes again.

He found Haddix’s weapon in his hand as the two soldiers charged down upon him. He fired once and blasted a hole in the first one’s chest. Haddix was scrambling over the sand toward him, groping blindly, cursing. The second soldier swung his coil of rope like a flail, whipping it down across Alan’s face. He felt blood flowing in a quick torrent from his nose. He held the atomic pistol in both

hands as the soldier lifted the rope overhead again. The second blast of energy from Alan's weapon decapitated the soldier. The head tumbled away. The body took two steps toward Alan as if it could not believe this had happened, then pitched forward on the sand, staining the ochre with a deeper red.

Alan gagged but did not have time to be sick. He stood up and saw Haddix fleeing toward the escarpment which hid Red Sands. He fired once, but the range was too great, the wind too strong. Keifer and Laura were fighting for the second atomic pistol, Laura kicking him, raking his face with her fingernails and keeping him away from General Olmstead, who lay motionless on the sand. Keifer struck her brutally across the jaw with his fist, then turned, fired once in Alan's direction without aiming, and sprinted toward the escarpment.

Laura was unconscious. General Olmstead was unconscious or dead. Alan's limbs were like water. He knew Keifer would bring help. He had perhaps three minutes.

Somehow, he managed to drag Laura and her father inside the warp ship. He slammed the outer airlock door, closed the inner door, staggered to the controls. Figures, tiny black dots against the barren

ochre wilderness, were running toward the ship when Alan took it up into space under five G's acceleration.

Everything was going to be all right, he thought, and fainted.

SOMETHING cool was stroking his forehead, bathing the caked blood from his face. He was aware that his tunic and blouse had been removed, aware of a clean white bandage on his arm. Laura's face swam in and out of focus before him.

"Where are we?" he asked.

Laura did not answer.

He looked at the controls. Seventy five thousand miles out from Mars, heading toward Earth. Present speed, thirty eight miles per second, still increasing. He could feel the gentle acceleration pressure, probably one and a half G's, tugging at him.

"Are we being followed?" he asked Laura.

"No. I don't know. Please. Please!"

"What's the matter?"

"Dad. He's—dead. Alan, Keifer killed him." Laura was crying silently, her shoulder shaking with sobs, her eyelids closed tightly, the tears streaming from them down her cheeks. "He's—dead . . ."

Alan stood up and walked to where he had dragged General Olm-

stead's inert form. A hole in the General's tunic revealed the wound. There was no pulse beat in his wrist.

First my father, Alan thought. First Richard Tremaine. Now General Olmstead. They were on opposite sides, the one championing freedom for the Outworlds, the other opposing it. But there had been nothing violent about their disagreement. It had been a political battle, waged in the arena of politics. And when Richard Tremaine had been granted Equal Union for his people, General Olmstead had bowed graciously to Earth's decision. Under other circumstances, they could have been friends, Alan's dead father and Laura's.

Now they were dead.

Both struck down by Bennett Keifer.

Alan wondered if it were always that way. The bad people rising to the top, like scum on water, employing treachery and violence to achieve their ends.

"It will be more than a vendetta," he said out loud.

"What did you say?"

"I'm going to get Keifer. My whole life will stand still until I can get him. Not because he killed them, not entirely for that. Because of who he is and what he stands for and how he'll use treach-

ery and violence like this for his own ends. Because Equal Union and parliamentary routine never satisfied a man like him and never will. Because he can stop the flow of water to Mars and watch his own people crying for water if it serves his purposes to incite them against Earth. I'll get him, Laura. I promise you that."

He wrapped General Olmstead's body in an old Federation flag which he found in a rear cabin of the warp ship. "It isn't the globe and stars of Earth," he said softly, "but it's the Federation my father stood for, the real Federation."

Laura nodded. "Dad would have wanted it that way."

Alan carried his flag-draped burden to the airlock, placed it in the chamber, then stepped back and bolted the inner door. Laura stood silently for a moment with her head bowed while Alan recited what he could remember of the 23rd Psalm. Somehow, it cleaned some of the hatred from his system and left cold clear purpose in its place. The prayer was for his father too and all the free people who had ever died and would ever die fighting tyranny.

"Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I shall fear no evil, for Thou are with me. Thy rod and Thy staff, they com-

fort me . . . ”

Alan pulled the lever which, controlled the outer door of the airlock. General Olmstead found his final resting place in the deep void of space where he had spent most of his life in the service of his fellow men.

CHAPTER VI

“FIVE hundred thousand miles out from Earth,” Laura said, two weeks later.

“I still don’t get it,” Alan admitted. “They didn’t even try to follow us. It’s as if Keifer suddenly didn’t care whether we escaped to Earth or not.”

“Maybe he believes we’re going to have our hands full trying to get Earth to repair the space-warp. Maybe he knows we won’t be able to bother him or interfere with his plans.”

But Alan shook his head, his brow creasing into a frown. “No that’s not it. I just can’t figure it.” He walked to the fore viewport and gazed at the legions of stars against the black velvet immensity of space. In the upper right hand corner of the viewport he could see the Earth-moon system, the larger sphere pale green, mottled with white and brown, the smaller a dazzling white. He realized all at once that he had two

homes. The Mars of his boyhood, the Earth and New Washington University, where he had spent his young manhood. He could never forsake one for the other. He was as much of Earth as he was of Mars, the verdant green richness of the one tugging at him with no less force than the arid, wild frontier of the other.

“See if you can get anything on the radio,” he told Laura. The warp ship’s receiver was a small one not meant for interplanetary distances, but Alan guessed it could pick up the more powerful Earth stations beamed to space through the Heavyside Layer.

The radio squawked and whistled, then they heard an announcer’s voice faintly. “. . . of Alan Tremaine’s Federation forces. All Earth is still shocked over Tremaine’s ultimatum. The International Security Council has been meeting in closed session for two days now, with no announced decisions.

“Authoritative sources close to the Council say that President Holland has admitted the Earth is helpless. It has been known for more than a century that man’s science was capable of building a cobalt bomb which, with a weight of perhaps four hundred tons, could poison all life on Earth with radioactivity.

"As we all have known since last Wednesday, this is precisely what Tremaine has in mind. The cobalt bomb is actually a hydrogen bomb with a layer of cobalt isotope surrounding it. While radioactive cobalt tritium from the H-bomb trigger is quickly dispersed and rendered harmless because the half-life of tritium is so short, radioactive cobalt can spread through the Earth's upper atmosphere on the jet-stream, raining lethal gamma rays from pole to pole.

"It is this terrible force which Alan Tremaine has threatened to unleash on the Earth."

"That's a lie!" Laura cried. "You are not even there. It's Keifer, using your name."

Alan nodded grimly. "He couldn't give such an ultimatum himself. The Outworld people wouldn't listen. But if they believe it's my decision . . ."

The commentator was saying: ". . . brief review of the points of Tremaine's ultimatum. One, unconditional surrender of all remaining Earth forces on the Outworlds. Two, repair of the space-warp bringing water from Venus to Mars. Tremaine claims Earth broke the warp, but the government has denied this right along. It is believed Tremaine is instilling hatred for Earth in the Federation peoples with this diabolical lie.

Three, total independence for the Outworlds. Four, Tremaine threatens that if the first three conditions are not complied with by tomorrow night, twenty-three hundred hours Greenwich Time, he will unleash the cobalt bomb.

"Since Tremaine's Federation has sundered the space-warp itself, Earth is unable to comply with the second of Tremaine's points. While radar defenses are being alerted on a planet-wide basis, an unmanned rocket with a cobalt-bomb warhead, approaching the Earth at interplanetary speeds, could not be stopped. The Earth government has continued its hourly appeal to Tremaine not to destroy the civilization which has carried mankind out to the planets. So far, Tremaine has not responded."

"He—he wouldn't dare," Laura said as Alan shut the radio. But her voice lacked conviction.

"He might, Laura. He just might do anything. The radioactivity wouldn't last forever. Keifer might be planning to wait until it's dispersed, then return to Earth and extend his plans for empire there. All life would die, but he could replant crops, bring his hand-picked leaders to settle with him, and govern the solar system as a small totalitarian state."

"But I thought he wanted to take

over Earth and all its people.”

“He might figure they won’t listen to him. If they do, he takes over. If they don’t, he goes through with his ultimatum. Either way, he has Earth.”

“But Alan. Five billion people . . .”

“I’m going down there,” Alan said. “I’ve got to find out all the details.”

“Alan, they’ll kill you! They think it’s *your* ultimatum, your cobalt bomb.”

“If anyone can stop Keifer, I can. The Federation is loyal to me.”

“They won’t listen to you. They won’t let you talk. They’ll kill you.”

“My father died for what he believed,” Alan said. “So did your father. As long as there’s a chance, I’ve got to go down there. Keifer’s ultimatum is set for tomorrow night.”

IMPULSIVELY, Laura took his hands and squeezed them. “I won’t let you throw your life away. I can’t lose you now, Alan. I can’t. I . . .”

Alan tilted her chin with his hand and looked into her eyes. Her lips were trembling. She was going to cry, he thought. “Darling,” he said, “you’ve got to listen. I love you. I . . . I think I was falling in love with you on the

Mars liner, before all this started to happen. I never had a chance to tell you. I’m telling you now.”

“Then you can’t . . .”

Their lips came together, gently at first, then fiercely, as if this were their first kiss of love and perhaps their last. “Oh, Alan. Yes, Alan. I love you. So you can’t . . .”

“No,” Alan told her quietly. “I’ve got to. Once a great poet of Earth put it so clearly, so much better than I could ever say it. ‘How did it go? Something about ‘I could not love thee, dear, so much, lov’d I not honor more.’ Do you think for a minute we could live with ourselves or ever look each other in the eye again if we let this happen without trying to stop it?”

“I’m begging you, Alan. They will kill you as soon as you set foot on Earth.”

“I said I’m going down there. I am going. But not before I convince you.” He spoke long and persuasively. He told her about other lovers, everywhere, about the men and women of Earth, the five billion helpless people who had a right to live their own lives too and fall in love and marry, about the hundreds of millions of Outworlders whose minds and hearts would be fettered by Bennett Keifer if he had his way, about how a man had this double allegiance all his

life, to the people he loved and to freedom and democracy and the ideas in which he believed. How the one allegiance might make a man think of an island somewhere or a small asteroid where the rest of the world wouldn't matter but how the other allegiance always brought him back to the crowded places, the dangerous places.

Laura kissed him again, sobbing, clinging to him. When finally he let her go, she whispered so low he hardly could hear the words: "You are right, Alan. It's your duty to go."

"Whatever happens, Laura, I love you."

"Keep telling me that all the time, Alan. I don't want to hear anything else. I'm going with you."

He smiled, then shook his head. "You're going to Earth all right. But you're going where you'll be safe."

Then Alan took the ship down, watching the great green globe of Earth swelling up toward them and then the wondrous sight of the continents swimming into view and the vast blue-green seas and the white cottony puffs of cloud formations and wondering if he soon would be saying goodbye to Laura for the last time.

IT was night in New Washington. Outside, you could hear the

familiar street sounds, the jet-cars rushing by, the muted talk of people after the theater down the street closed for the night, the gentle sighing of wind in the trees which spanned the avenue.

Inside the fraternity lodge, everything was quiet. New Washington students were studying in their small rooms; some of them had already retired. Bill Graham, who had been Alan's room-mate in the good days, said: "You know I want to believe you, Alan. We've been friends ever since we started through college together."

"All I want you to do is watch Laura. Don't let her out of your sight."

"But everyone says you gave Earth the ultimatum."

"Would I be here now if I did? I'm trying to prevent it, Bill. You've got to believe me."

"All I have to do is watch her?"

"Yes. I'm going straight to the President if I can. Something's been bothering me about this ultimatum of Keifer's all along. Now I think I know what it is. I think we have a chance to stop him, Bill. Just a chance, but we can try."

"What about your ship? How did you get through the radar net?"

Alan smiled grimly. "I remembered your registration number, Bill. I had to give it to them. They'll think it was your ship."

"Holy Mac!" Bill Graham cried. "Then they'll think I—"

"If Keifer wins, we'll all be dead tomorrow night anyway. It was the only thing I could do Bill. I had to get through."

Bill Graham chuckled softly, as if it all were very funny. But he reached out and shook Alan's hand. "I'll watch her, Alan."

Alan nodded, turned to Laura and kissed her quickly without saying goodbye. That way, he thought, he had to see her again . . .

Everything was so normal on the streets of New Washington, it almost made Alan think the Federation uprising, the death of his father and Laura's father, Keifer's ultimatum to Earth—all were part of some wild, impossible dream. The boys and girls were walking hand in hand. The old men were walking their dogs or taking their evening constitucionals or stopping on street corners to talk with their friends. The theater marquees were gay and well-lighted. It was only when you studied the faces and saw the lines of worry, the furrowed brows, the thoughtful, furtive looks, only when you listened to the conversations and heard "Tremaine's ultimatum" . . . "nothing we can do" . . . "helpless" . . . "he wouldn't dare" . . . "I'm going to pretend nothing's wrong and just go right on living till tomorrow

night" . . . "what else can you do?" . . . "dear God, what else?" . . . it was only then that you knew.

Alan took a bus to the center of the city and fell in with a group of reporters converging on the White House. One of them was saying, "About time they let us in on this. That International Security Council hasn't uttered a peep since the ultimatum, but they've been meeting continuously."

"Ought to make a few banner headlines," another man said.

"So what? After tomorrow night, there won't be any more headlines—or anything. If I could just get that Tremaine here, how I'd love to choke the life out of him with these two hands."

"You and about five billion other people."

THEY entered the White House grounds. Ahead of them, the stately white building was ablaze with light. Guards were stationed at all the entrances.

The reporters began to queue up in single file as two uniformed men examined their credentials. His heart pounding, Alan let the line carry him forward. All the doors were guarded. If he could not get in this way, he could not get in at all.

Finally, he was saying: "Adams, New York Times."

"Your press card, Mr. Adams?"

"I left it at the hotel."

The guard shook his head. "Sorry. You'll have to get it."

"I don't want to miss the press conference."

The guard looked up and shouted, "Anyone else from the New York Times here?"

A man behind Alan nodded.

"You know this fellow?"

The man studied Alan, then shrugged. "Don't think so. I never forget a face."

"He says he's from the Times."

"The devil he is."

"Who are you?" the guard asked Alan.

For answer, Alan shoved him out of the way and plunged inside the building. His feet pounded a loud tattoo on the polished marble floor as he sprinted down the corridor. There were shouts and the pounding of more feet behind him. He followed an arrow which pointed straight ahead above the words PRESS ROOM. He climbed a broad marble staircase. The voices were louder behind him, the click-clacking feet closer.

Breathing harshly, he charged through the doorway to the press gallery. He stopped in his tracks.

The International Security Council was assembled in special session, ready to meet the reporters and their questions. Alan rec-

ognized the faces, the gaunt, weary but somehow intensely warm features of President Holland, the other faces, all grave and tired, about the horseshoe-shaped table.

The guards sprinted up behind Alan, pinning his arms to his sides.

The Secretary General of the International Security Council, seated at President Holland's right, looked up and said, "What is the trouble here?"

"Begging your pardon, sir," the first guard explained, "this man has no proper identification."

President Holland glanced up at Alan, the deep-set eyes studying him. "I've seen that face before," he said. "I don't know where, but I'm sure I've seen him."

"Come on, bud," the guard told Alan. "You're going to answer some questions downstairs." He led Alan back toward the door.

Wrenching his arms free, Alan ran back toward the horseshoe-shaped table. The eyes of the ministers of all the federated Earth states were on him. He took a deep breath and said, "Gentlemen, I am Alan Tremaine."

CHAPTER VII

ALAN remembered only vaguely what happened then. Side-arms were whipped out by the guards. One dignified member of

the Council lunged across the table, dignity forgotten, and tried to slap Alan. The reporters, sensing something important when Alan had broken away from the guards downstairs and plunged inside the White House, had entered the room. Now the television cameras were grinding. There was not a friendly face in the room.

"Listen to me!" Alan shouted. He could not make himself heard over the babble of excitement in the room. He pounded on the table and cried, "You've got to listen! Do you think I came here to die with all of you and all Earth tomorrow night? Do you?"

The guards held him again, one of them wrenching his right arm up and back painfully. The members of the Security Council were grim-lipped and silent. One of them restrained the Minister from France, who was still trying to get at Alan. "You . . . you are the worst traitor since Judas Iscariot," the Minister from France told Alan.

"I never sent that ultimatum," Alan shouted. "I wouldn't be here if I did. Are you going to listen to me?"

There was an angry murmuring from the horseshoe-shaped table. A reporter broke away from his companions and swung his fist awkwardly at Alan's face. "You have

that coming," he said "from five billion Earthmen."

Even the members of the Council seemed to approve. Some of them stood up and came around the table toward Alan menacingly. Laura's words screamed inside Alan's skull—*they'll kill you.*

"Stop!" President Holland's firm voice boomed across the room. "Are we all animals here? Tremaine has the right to speak. With the Earth about to die, are we not even going to clutch at straws? Tremaine knows we can keep him here until tomorrow night, yet he came. I want to hear him. I will hear him if I have to do it alone."

The Ministers assumed their places at the table sheepishly. The television cameras panned closer to Alan. He could sense it: five billion people were watching him.

He talked rapidly. He didn't know how long they would listen. He told them how he had gone to Mars to take his father's place, told them how Richard Tremaine, then Eugene Talbrick had been murdered in cold blood by Bennett Keifer because he favored violence and complete dissolution of the union and they did not. He told them how Keifer still intended to use the name of Tremaine because Alan's father had been loved by the Outworlders and respected by the government of Earth. He

told them how General Olmstead had been taken and eventually killed. They were listening now. Still doubtful, but listening. He could sense that some of the hostility had gone from them. They were weary now, and without hope in their eyes.

He went on, "I still think more than half the Outworlders would rally behind me. Maybe I don't deserve their faith, but they remember my father who spent his whole life and finally died in their cause. Let them know I'm here. Beam it to the Outworlds. Tell them I renounce Keifer as a traitor to his own people and to the Earth that spawned them. I'll talk if you want. I'll go on the air."

"Fool!" cried the Minister from France bitterly. "Even if it would work, what does it matter? Tomorrow we all die."

"There's a chance you won't," Alan said. "I'm coming to that. To bring you up to date, I landed on Earth a few hours ago and left General Olmstead's daughter with a friend at the PBT Fraternity House of New Washington University. You can check everything I said with her."

"You said there was a chance . . ."

"Yes. When did Keifer give his ultimatum?"

"Forty eight hours ago."

"That's what I figured. Unless the cobalt bomb was on its way to Earth for at least eight or ten days, it couldn't reach here from Mars or Venus by tomorrow night!"

"Then you mean it's all a bluff?" the Secretary General demanded, hope springing into his eyes.

"NO," Alan admitted. "It's no bluff. Two weeks ago, Keifer shut the flow of water through the space-warp from Venus to Mars. Now I realize why. He did it partly to get the people of Mars behind him when he issued his own ultimatum. He didn't want a revolution on his hands. But he did it for another reason, too.

"Gentlemen, if you know your astronomy, you'd know that a fairly rare astronomical event has happened. Venus, Earth and Mars are all in conjunction on the same side of the sun. To put it another way, Venus, with the shortest, fastest orbit, has overtaken the Earth's orbital position with respect to the sun. That's known as the synodic year. Earth has likewise overtaken slower Mars, so the three planets are lined up . . ."

"Imbecile!" screamed the Minister from France. "Here you stand, giving us astronomical puzzles, while Earth hovers on the brink of disaster."

"It's important," Alan said patiently. "Venus, Earth and Mars are in a line right now, Venus and Earth separated by some twenty-eight million miles, Earth and Mars by less than forty million. What I'm saying is this: Keifer didn't block Venusian water from the space-warp merely to rally the Outworlders behind him when he claimed you were responsible. He did it because the space-warp now passes within a couple of hundred thousand miles from Earth. He did it because he intends to transport the cobalt bomb here through the space-warp. I say that's the only way he can get it here in time!"

President Holland stood up, his face white, excitement in his eyes. "Yes," he said. "Yes, it's possible. We'll check the data with the New Washington Naval Observatory at once. If what you say is true, Tremaine . . ."

"It almost has to be true, sir. Keifer will need a launching site for his cobalt bomb after he takes it from the space-warp, but I have a hunch you'll find when you call the observatory that the moon's orbital position at this time passes within a few hundred miles of the space-warp. I say Keifer will launch his cobalt bomb at the Earth from the moon."

Now the reporters suddenly

friendly, were asking Alan so many questions that President Holland had to drag Alan away from them. A special jet took Alan, the President and a few advisors to the Naval Observatory, where Alan's theory was confirmed. One of the astronomers told President Holland jubilantly, "All you have to do is send a fleet out to where the space-warp intersects the orbit of the moon and . . ."

"How can we?" President Holland groaned. "We've dispatched almost all our ships to Mars, Venus and the Jovian moons to help put down the Outworld insurrections. We're left with a few obsolete, ancient ships."

"It doesn't matter," Alan said. "Keifer's in the same boat. His own ships have to defend the Outworlds. He'll only have a small fleet there, if any. He's depending on surprise, don't you see? Even if your ships couldn't get through, I'd have a chance. I'm Alan Tremaine. Tremaine. The Outworlders still think I'm in charge. They'll have to let me through."

"You'll leave at once," President Holland told him. "In the three hours since you've been here, Alan Tremaine, you've given us new hope." He placed his hand on Alan's shoulder, looking at him long and searchingly. "All Earth

must put its hope in you now. We don't have time to check your story thoroughly. We can't. Tremaine, never did so many people put their fate so completely in one man's hands as all Earth is putting its fate in yours. If you're lying, if you're telling the truth but wrong in your theory, life on Earth perishes. All life, Tremaine."

"I've got to be right, sir," Alan told the President. "I've got to."

President Holland smiled. "I'm tired, Tremaine. We're all tired, but we've got to go on. What ships we have will be ready to leave in an hour."

An hour, Alan thought. Now was the time to say goodbye to Laura. Now, with Earth solidly behind him. Now he could tell her of his hopes for the future, which did not seem so bleak. He must see her before he blasted off for the final reckoning with Keifer.

NO sounds came from the fraternity house in New Washington University. He called Bill Graham's name, but heard nothing. "Laura?" he said. "Laura, where are you?" The place seemed completely deserted.

"Alan Tremaine, is that you?" He whirled—and grinned. Mrs. Moriarity, the fraternity house mother, stood below him on the stairs.

"I thought I recognized your voice, young man. My hearing isn't so good anymore."

"Where's Bill Graham?"

"Upstairs, I suppose. He had some visitors before, Alan. Two men. I . . . I didn't like them. I didn't think Bill would have such friends. And Alan, they came downstairs with a lady. A woman! She must have been in Bill's room. There was an awful rumpus up there, then they came down. I'm going to give Bill Graham a talking to, you can bet."

Alan rushed upstairs without answering. Mrs. Moriarity was still talking, her voice carrying up from below. "How did you like your trip to Mars, Alan? I meant to ask you." Her own small world went on. The bigger world hadn't mattered for years, still didn't matter, even now.

Bill Graham's room was a shambles. Furniture turned over, the desk on its side, the bed . . .

Bill Graham was on the floor. He lay with his hands in front of his face. His final gesture had been an instinctive one of protection. Half his face had been sheared away horribly by an atomic blast.

Laura was gone.

Final reckoning with Keifer, Alan thought. Bill Graham. Happy-go-lucky. A big kid who hadn't quite

grown up yet. Give you the shirt off his back. Now he was dead.

How? Alan thought of it briefly and vaguely. It hardly mattered. It seemed impossible, too—but other things were more important. Except for Bill Graham and Alan, only the reporters, guards and Ministers at the Security Council meeting had known where Laura was. Alan had told them.

There was a traitor among them.

The traitor had come here and taken Laura, killing Graham when he tried to prevent it.

Laura was bound for the moon, Keifer's final trump card.

Alan shook his fist impotently, then slammed it down on the overturned desk. *I'm coming, Laura*, he thought.

I'm coming, Bennett Keifer.

CHAPTER VIII

“SIX ships,” President Holland told Alan at the New Washington Spaceport. “That’s all we could make ready in time, Tremaine. Six battered line ships, out of commission for five years. It’s all we had.”

“I’m sorry, sir,” a man in the uniform of a four star general told the President. “We sent all our power to the Outworlds.”

“You couldn’t do anything else, General,” President Holland said.

“We had received no ultimatum then. It seemed incredible Keifer or anyone would dare attack the Earth.”

“I’ll get through,” Alan said.

Flood lights stabbed out across the dark field, criss-crossing it with brilliant beams of light. Ground crews scurried like insects caught in their glare, fueling the six spaceships, checking them, trying to accomplish an extensive re-conditioning job in minutes.

Soon the spacecrews were jogging out on the field in bulky blast suits, small gleaming figures in the light of the floods. On one of the ships Alan saw the blue and gold symbol of the Outworld Federation, freshly painted, side by side with the globe and stars of Earth.

“You’re blasting off for the good people of the Federation as well as for the Earth,” President Holland explained. “We’ve radio’d the Outworlds and told them. We don’t know the effect, if any.”

“Keifer will have his hands full,” Alan said. “I hope.”

The jogging figures of the spacemen had separated into six groups of half a dozen men each, one group for each of the battered old ships.

“There’s a launching site at the old, abandoned Terra Mines in Tycho Crater on the moon,” President Holland told Alan. “If you

don't get Keifer at the space-warp and stop him there, you'll probably find him in Tycho."

President Holland and the four star general were walking across the dark field with Alan now, toward the lead ship, standing on its tail in the glare of the flood lights. "All Earth is blasting off with you, Tremaine," the President said.

He shook hands solemnly with Alan. So did the General. Alan closed the airlock door behind him, heard a popping sound as the airtight rubberoid fabric of the circular door gripped the hull and sealed it. The spacemen were at their stations, not talking, not smoking. Waiting.

Through the viewport, Alan watched President Holland and the General trotting out of the blast-off area.

Alan walked into the control room, past the grim, silent crew, each man stationed at his obsolete equipment. Half a dozen overage ships, with Earth's fate in the balance.

And Laura up there somewhere. "Let's go," Alan said.

The rocket engines whined and shrieked into life. Alan and the pilot strapped themselves into blast chairs. The roar was deafening. Alan could feel his face contorted by eight G's pressure as the ancient spaceship blasted off. Then, his

muscles bunched in agony, he blacked out.

DAZZLING white with reflected sunlight but pock-marked with craters, shadowed with deep valleys and gorges, sundered by great rock faults, puckered with vast bleak mountain ranges the moon swept up at them.

"That reporter wants to see you now, Mr. Tremaine," the pilot told Alan.

"I haven't time for — what? What reporter?"

"The one President Holland sent along to cover the story for Earth."

"He didn't tell me—" Alan began, then shrugged. The reporter would be a nuisance, but it hardly mattered. "No interviews now," Alan said. "Tell him we're not going to land on the moon—yet. Tell him we're looking for the space-warp."

Gem-bright, unblinking, the stars of space gleamed through the viewport. Star-maps were spread on the floor of the small control cabin, crew members pouring over them. Somewhere out there, space should look different. Somewhere, starlight should be cut off by a narrow band of blackness—the space-warp. They had to find it, and they had to hurry. It made good sense to tell the Outworlders Alan had denounced Bennett Keifer as a traitor,

for some of them might not fire on Alan's six small ships. But it also presented a danger: Keifer would probably abandon the hour of his ultimatum and rush ahead with his plans. They had mere minutes to find the space-warp. Perhaps already it was too late.

With the pilot taking over, Alan kneeled on the floor and studied the star-maps, calling out grid-coordinates while a man at the viewports checked them against space itself. Soon his head was swimming with the multitudes of white dots on the blueprint paper, with the white graph lines, the swarms of stars. "Sixteen-eleven," he said, "Deneb, Vega, Altair . . . Sixteen-twelve, Pollux, Procyon, Sirius . . ."

"Check . . . check . . ."

"Seventeen, one, Achernar, Canopus . . ."

"Check . . ."

Check, *check*, CHECK!

"Nineteen, three, Capella, Regulus, Alpha Centauri . . . Nineteen, four . . ."

"Hold it! Wait a minute, Mr. Tremaine. If you draw a line from Capella through Regulus to Centauri, what else should you cross?"

Alan looked at his map. "You come close to Castor and Pollux, close to Cancer, you cross the constellations Crater and Corvus."

"Not out here, you don't."

Then Alan was running to the viewport. Between bright, unblinking Regulus and even brighter Alpha Centauri was—nothing. A hole in space. A long, narrow path of intense, unbroken blackness.

"That's it!" Alan shouted. He felt like laughing, like pounding the man's back, like dancing a jig. They had found the space-warp.

Alan ran to the pilot chair, swinging the small ship around almost ninety degrees. In the rear viewscreen he could see the five other ships wheeling about and following.

And something else—in front of them. Specks moving across the firmament in tight formation, growing.

Keifer's fleet.

HE counted fifteen ships, each larger and with more firepower than his own, guardians of the space-warp, rocketing down toward them from where Corvus should have been, from the hole in space behind which the constellation Crater hid.

Alan flicked his radio toggle to the on position, said into it: "This is Alan Tremaine calling the Outworld fleet. Tremaine calling! Do you hear me?"

"Go back to Earth, Tremaine.

We don't want to kill you."

"I'm flying the flags of Earth and the Federation. If you listen to me, it still isn't too late for Equal Union. I denounce Bennett Keifer as a traitor to Earth and the Outworld Federation, as my father would have done."

"Go back to Earth, Tremaine."

Alan shook his head, then scrambled the radio frequency to his small fleet's band. "Flagship calling," he said. "We're heading for the warp. Hold off the Federation fleet at all costs."

And, to the pilot: "Take her in, Stan. I'm getting into spacegear."

Five obsolete ships against the Federation's bigger fleet. A sixth ship to reach the warp and hover there while Alan explored. The odds against them seemed tremendous, but Alan brushed them from his mind. Swiftly, he climbed into a bulky spacesuit, inflating it while one of the crew secured the glassite helmet over his head. He tested the suit radio, secured a set of personnel jets to his shoulders, then clomped into the airlock with an atomic rifle, slamming the ammo pan into place in the breech. He stood impatiently at the outer door of the airlock, looking through the small viewport into space. Spinning in a great wheel formation, the three-dimensional equivalent of the ancient naval

maneuver called crossing the T, the Federation fleet spun toward them.

Out to meet it—five ships, darting like silver midges at the giant wheel.

All at once, energy erupted searingly before his eyes as the fleets met. Two ships in the Federation wheel darkened and fell, tumbling end over end, out of rank. But one Earth ship was blown to pieces. If the rate of attrition continued . . .

He didn't think about it. He spun the mechanism which controlled the outer airlock door and pulled himself out on the hull of the ship. The battle formations were drifting behind him now. Ahead—the black tube of the space-warp.

Pointing himself toward the blackness, Alan fired his shoulder jets.

HERE along the vast track of the warp, a station hung in space. As it swelled up toward him, Alan could make out three tiny figures, three men in spacesuits, watching him.

Space erupted violently about him as two of the figures raised atomic rifles to their shoulders and fired. Switching his jets on and off, Alan darted erratically through space to present a difficult target.

He was a hundred yards from

the warp-station now. Overhead, his flagship was hovering on the sunward side of the station, casting a huge black shadow across it. Aiming carefully, Alan fired his own atomic rifle.

One of the figures collapsed on the surface of the station. The second was still firing at him. The third, unarmed, was watching. Alan swung quickly around to the dark side of the small globe, strapped the rifle to his shoulders, alighted on his hands and cartwheeled upright. Without pausing for breath, he unstrapped the rifle, held it ready at his hip and sprinted around the station.

Two heads bobbed into view on the incredibly close horizon. Alan and the Federation soldier fired simultaneously. Alan could feel the heat of the blast through his space-suit. Before his eyes, his glassite helmet fused. A bare slit remained for him to see through.

But the second Federation soldier had fallen.

"I'm unarmed!" the third man screamed over his suit radio.

Alan recognized Captain — no, Major—Haddix's voice. "Lead me to the warp, Major," he said. "No tricks."

Seconds later, Alan was following the spacesuited figure across the smooth black surface of the warp-station. He passed one of the

fallen soldiers, a gash torn in the fabric of his spacesuit. The body and head had swelled horribly against the suddenly unequal pressure. The thing inside the suit did not look human.

Major Haddix stopped at the brink of the space-warp, waiting for Alan with his back to the pit.

"Has the bomb come through yet?" Alan demanded.

Major Haddix made a lewd gesture, but his face paled behind the glassite helmet when Alan raised the atomic rifle and calmly began squeezing the trigger.

"Wait! I'll tell you. Don't point that thing . . ."

"Talk, damn you."

"It's already on the moon, Tremaine. Keifer changed his plans when he knew you were coming. But take it from me, you don't have a chance."

"What about General Olmstead's daughter?"

"She's with him, I think. Listen, Tremaine. Go easy. I'm only a professional soldier. I do what I'm told."

At that moment, a second shadow darted across the surface of the warp-station. Instinctively, Alan looked up. A Federation ship had come to do battle with the Earth ship hovering there, flashing by it and unleashing a salvo of raw energy. The Earth ship was

swinging around to bring its own atomics to bear . . .

And then Haddix was upon him, clawing for the atomic rifle. They struggled there at the lip of the space-warp, the weapon between them. Slowly, Alan felt himself being forced around, felt nothing but space below his left foot as he tried to step back. Immediately behind him was the warp, and instant, horrible death if he fell in.

Haddix's gauntleted fist struck his glassite helmet, jarring him. Alan swung his arms wildly for balance, then remembered his personnel jets and switched them on, pivoting around at the same instant. Borne aloft by his shoulder rockets, Alan and Haddix spun dizzily over the abyss.

It was Haddix's own blind fury that killed him.

He swung his fists at Alan, trying to shatter the already damaged glassite helmet. He forgot that Alan alone wore the jets.

Alan watched the figure tumbling below him, head over heels, slowly, as in a dream. Haddix's voice came to him once over the radio in a hideous scream. Then the spacesuited form was swept into the warp, where it twisted, was bent and broken . . .

Overhead, the Earth ship hovered. Far away, the gutted hulk of the Federation craft which had

come to challenge it was drifting off into space. Alan jetted for the Earth ship.

HANDS lifted the helmet from his head, deflated and unfastened the spacesuit. "How are the others making out?" Alan gasped.

"They're gone. All gone. Five ships, five brave crews . . ."

"And the Federation?"

"Three ships left."

"Can we beat them to the moon?"

"We can try."

Just then the reporter joined Alan and the two crewmen in the companionway. "You'll reach the moon, all right," he said.

He was pointing an atomic pistol at them.

CHAPTER IX

COLD and lifeless, the surface of the moon expanded before them. The six man crew of the spaceship sat in the control cabin. Alan was at the controls. The reporter stood at the door, facing them with his back to the companionway. The atomic pistol was unwavering in his hand.

"You were at the Security Council meeting," Alan said bitterly. "You're working for Keifer. You sent those men to kidnap Laura. Then, in the confusion at the

spacefield, you claimed the President had designated you to cover the story for Earth, and—”

The reporter nodded. “A man’s a fool not to join the winning side while he can. You’ll take this ship down in Tycho crater. You’ll land near the old Terra Mines dome. They’ll drag you in through the domelock with a tractor beam. You’ll be able to watch them launch the bomb to Earth.”

Jagged, pock-marked and buried in its mantle of pumice, the surface of the moon sped by below them. Dark, somber *maria*, the broad deep valleys of the moon, appeared, were reached and left behind. Rills cut tortuously across the moonscape; rays like molten gold radiated from some of the craters.

Finally, the great ringwall of Tycho crater flashed into view. At one side, just inside the ringwall of the crater and more than two-score miles from the lonely central peaks, the glassite dome which had housed Terra Mines in the early days of space travel could be seen.

Alan brought the spaceship down on its tail, its rocket exhaust blasting the pumice below with blistering heat.

There was still time, Alan thought.

But they were helpless.

He wondered if, in decisive mo-

ments, history was full of such traitors—men like the reporter who would soon bring civilization on Earth, life on Earth, to an end when he returned Alan and his crew over to Keifer’s Federation forces within the dome. He shrugged — then wondered also how strongly a man had to believe to forfeit his life for a principle.

For if he tried anything, the reporter would kill him.

If he didn’t, you could count the time remaining for Earth in hours.

Abruptly, he slapped his hand across the firing lever, heard the surge of sudden power at the same moment that the ship rocked and plunged moonward on its side. There were shouts behind him in the cabin. There was a split-second of confusion.

Alan spun around and dove across the room for the reporter. The man had fallen and was just climbing to his feet when Alan reached him. He must have decided there was no time to fire. Instead, he hurled the heavy weapon at Alan.

It struck his shoulder, fell away. Then he was on the reporter, reaching for his throat, choking him, strangling . . . Hands dragged him clear.

“He’s unconscious,” someone said. “Lay off, Tremaine.”

There was a lurch as tractor beams from the dome caught and held the spaceship. They were tugged through the domelock but all were heavily-armed with atomic rifles and pistols when the ship came to a stop inside.

ANOTHER ship lay on its side within the half-mile-in-diameter dome. A dozen men stood about, waiting for them to be delivered like sheep.

Alan led his men outside into the cool, canned air of the dome. Their concentrated fire was unexpected and deadly, dropping the Federation men where they stood. Three or four of them managed to crawl behind the second ship, from where they returned the fire. One of Alan's men fell.

"Quick!" Alan cried. "Three of you cut around the front of the ship. Stan and I will slip around the tail rockets."

Without waiting for an answer, he led the pilot through a fierce barrage of atomic pellets toward the rear of the spaceship. As the missiles struck the ground on all sides of them, they exploded violently, kicking up man-tall geysers of luna pumice.

"You're covered from both sides!" Alan shouted, poking his head cautiously around the rocket tubes. His answer was a stream

of atomic pellets, which struck the tubes and fused them. Ignoring the deadly fire, Alan plunged on, feeling the kick of his own atomic rifle as he triggered shot after shot blindly ahead of him.

There were two men left alive back there, standing back to back, trembling, their hands high over their heads.

"Where's Keifer?" Alan barked at them.

One pointed vaguely outside the dome. "The central mountains," he said.

"What are you talking about?"

"A shipload of technicians brought the bomb there from the space-warp. That's where Terra Mines had its launching equipment. Honest. I swear it's the truth."

"Is Keifer there too?"

"Yes. With the girl. They went out in one of Terra Mines' old luna tanks to watch the launching."

"When is it?"

"Half an hour, maybe less," the Federation soldier said. "You couldn't stop them. You'll never get there in time."

"Is there another tank?"

The soldier nodded, pointed across the pumice to a squat green vehicle with caterpillar treads. Alan was already running for it and calling over his shoulder. "Stay here. If the remaining Federation

ships try to come down, use the dome-guns on them. Stan, you come with me."

The pilot sprinted after him. Together they entered the moon tank, which was not airtight. They found Terra Mines spacesuits inside, the ancient, long-unused type that looked like deep sea suits. The tank's rocket engine sputtered and caught. The tank lumbered toward the domelock and through it while they donned the spacesuits.

Then they were bouncing soundlessly across the airless surface of Tycho crater, leaving the dome far behind them. Earth was above them in the sky, in the quarter-phase. You could see part of North America reflecting sunlight. Blue-black, the Pacific Ocean was in shadow.

Ahead loomed the central mountains of Tycho crater, biting into the black sky, saw-toothed, for fifteen thousand feet. On labored the moon tank, climbing now, its old engine whining a protest against the steep grade, the sound echoing strangely inside the vehicle because outside in the luna vacuum it could not be heard at all. They crossed the first peak of the range, looked down on a great cauldron in the rock, a crater within the crater, a mile across.

At one end was a Federation spaceship, standing on its tail rock-

ets and pointing up at the sky like a gleaming needle.

At the other end was the launching platform, massive, indistinct in the gloomy shadows of the mountains. On the platform, partially out of shadow, rested the cobalt bomb, big as a small spaceship.

Another tank sped toward them across the uneven moonscape. Two men were perched atop it in red spacesuits, firing already although they were still out of range.

ALAN tapped Stan on the shoulder, told the pilot he was going outside. He slipped through the hatch and climbed on top of the lurching tank, squatting there and slamming a fresh ammo pan into his atomic rifle.

The trip across the crater had consumed ten minutes of the time left for Earth. What remained—twenty minutes? Twenty-five?

Suddenly, the moon tank shuddered beneath Alan's feet. They had come within range sooner than he had expected. He felt himself hurled away, and tumbled across the rocks as the tank burst briefly into flame, devouring in seconds the oxygen stored in the fuel tanks. With an eerie, noiseless blast, the tank exploded.

Alan scrambled forward across the rocks. Somehow, he had managed to hold his atomic rifle. He

wondered if the mechanism had been damaged by his fall.

He didn't have time to think about it. The other tank, now less than fifty yards away, was coming toward him. He fired once, forced to reveal his position. A space-suited figure fell from the tank, but another climbed up through the hatch to join the man still kneeling there.

The tank was thirty yards away now, still coming.

Concealed partially behind an out cropping of rock, Alan fired again, saw a second figure tumble off the roof of the tank, rolling down a steep incline. The third man was returning his fire, but wildly. At the last moment he tried to scramble within the hatch, but his glassite helmet exploded as one of Alan's pellets caught it.

The tank was upon him, its caterpillar treads rolling soundlessly across the rock. Flinging his rifle out of the way, Alan dove between the two great treads and clung there. He could feel the jagged rocks cutting into his spacesuit, scraping it, weakening the fabric. In seconds, the fabric would rupture.

There was a hatch on the underbelly of the tank. Dragged along, Alan held on with one hand and pried at the hatch with the other. He was bruised and shaken by the

rocks.

The hatch swung clear.

Alan chinned himself into the tank. A spacesuited figure sat over the controls. Another one was staring at Alan through the glassite helmet of a modern spacesuit.

It was Laura.

He didn't know if she would recognize him through the visor of his ancient suit. She screamed, "Alan! Look out!"

Keifer was rising from the controls, plunging toward him. Alan met him half way over the open hatch, grappled with him there. In Keifer's hand was an atomic pistol. He couldn't bring it down to bear on Alan, but was beating him across the head with it, the sound of metal striking metal booming in Alan's ears. If his helmet had been glassite, he thought, Kiefer could have killed him.

He lost his footing and slipped, spread-eagling over the open hatch. Kiefer fell on him, pushing, trying to force him through. "You can't stop the bomb," he said, his voice cold and metallic over the suit radio. "It's all automatic now."

For answer, Alan swung his metal-shod fists at Keifer's glassite helmet. He felt himself slipping. In seconds, Keifer's weight would drive him through the hatch. He pounded the glassite helmet above him. Blindly, he kept on pounding

it. His legs were slipping, dangling through the hatch over the jagged rocks. The slightest rip in the fabric of his suit would bring instant death.

All at once, a crack appeared in Keifer's helmet, running from crown to chin. Alan struck again with his right fist. The crack became a hole. Keifer opened his mouth to scream, but then his face was swelling, bloated—became a shapeless thing which no longer could fit within the helmet.

Trembling, Alan stood up and rushed to the control. He saw that Laura was already heading the moon tank back toward the launching platform. He had a few seconds in which to play . . .

The tank lurched to a stop beside the platform.

HAND over hand, Alan was climbing the scaffold. He reached the platform with the tank's atomic rifle strapped across his shoulders. Half a dozen technicians were preparing to leave.

"Shut it off!" Alan shouted. "Don't launch that bomb!"

"We can't stop it now. The mechanism is set."

"I'll kill you if I have to."

"We can't, don't you understand? The bomb will be launched in five minutes—no, four minutes and fifty seconds now. Once set, it's fully

automatic. We didn't want to set it. Keifer made us do it. You're Alan Tremaine, aren't you?" the technician asked. "We're on your side, Tremaine. Most of the Outworlds are, ever since Earth's broadcast. But Keifer came here with a hard core of his followers in a small fleet and—"

"Never mind the talk. Can't you render the bomb harmless?"

The technician shook his head within the glassite helmet.

Overhead, the quarter-phase Earth was shining brightly, waiting helplessly.

"It's the radioactive cobalt that will do the damage," Alan said. "An atomic trigger for the hydrogen bomb, a hydrogen trigger for the cobalt, right?"

"Essentially, yes."

"Then strip off the cobalt, you fools!"

"Three minutes," someone said. "We've got to get out of here. The after-burners of the launching charge will cremate us."

"It can be done," one of the technicians told Alan, "but I don't think you have the time."

"How, man? Tell me how!"

"Use your rifle. There's a seam running around the bomb. See? See it. If you can cut around the whole seam, the cobalt should fall away in two hemispheres. A hydrogen bomb alone would be launch-

ed at Earth, but it should fall harmlessly into the Pacific Ocean.”

“Two minutes, forty seconds.”

The technicians moved about uneasily. Two of them began to climb down the scaffold. The rest remained to watch Alan. They would save the Earth or perish with him.

Alan raised his atomic rifle to his shoulder, aimed at the thin welded seam about the huge bomb, and began to fire. At first there was nothing. The pellets hit the bomb, which could only be triggered by an atomic implosion at its core, and exploded there.

“A minute and a half,” someone said, his voice hoarse over Alan’s suit radio.

The seam was widening, became a gap a foot across. Alan continued firing, the rifle slapping back against his numb shoulder. The crack spread around the circumference of the bomb.

“One minute to blast-off!”

Alan fired his last volley, stood there in despair. He had run out of ammunition.

The cobalt outer skin of the bomb shook, spread apart, fell away in two equal hemispheres. The technicians were plunging down the scaffold, Alan right behind them. They tumbled inside the moon

tank.

Laura didn’t have to be told. The tank bounced away at full speed.

Behind them, a brilliant flash lit the lunar sky. For a moment, Alan could see the hydrogen bomb streaking Earthward, a silver speck against the blackness. Then it was gone. It was a vast trigger now, and nothing more. Harmlessly, it would explode in the Pacific Ocean, like dozens of tests which had been conducted there.

The Outworlds would agree to Equal Union now. Alan knew that. The technician had told him. They had never liked the war. They were ready to rally behind his name. There would be some ugliness between Earth and the Outworlds for a time, because of what had almost happened. But it would pass.

The Lunar Mines dome loomed ahead of them. The dome-lock opened to admit them.

“I wish we were inside already,” Laura said, “where there’s some air.”

“What for?” Alan asked her.

“So I can take off this helmet and kiss you.”

Nothing would suit Alan better. Now, at last, they were inside. He took off his helmet.