

PLANET STORIES



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Through The Asteroids —To Hell!

BY LEROY YERXA



Instinctively he grasped her and held her tightly against him.

Blair Freedman had torn that tunnel through the grinding asteroid wall—with the mighty Cutter . . . he'd die readily enough now to keep it open—but not with the girl he loved!

BLAIR FREEDMAN pushed the jet control slightly, sending the X-26 into a wide slow arc toward the asteroid tunnel. He sighed and glanced at the chart on the desk. Trip number seven thou-

sand twenty-two. For the rest of his life. "Come over here, Jerry," he called.

Jerry Graham, short, slight of figure, smiled and left the navigation desk. Graham's face was black where his razor had

left heavy hair just below the surface of the skin. His smile was mild and the brown eyes behind heavy spectacles were gentle. "What is it, Blair?"

He stood beside Freedman, watching the solid, moving wall of the asteroid belt.

Blair Freedman sighed.

"Did you ever have the urge to deliberately miss the entrance of the tunnel? To hit full on against the asteroids?"

Graham stiffened, feeling ice water sluice suddenly into his veins.

"Are you nuts?"

Freedman relaxed. His grip on the control lever became lighter, more expert.

"No," he said slowly. "No, I'm okay. For a minute I was crazy, I guess. That's why I called you."

Graham studied the face of the younger man. Freedman was tall, rather slim. Graham could never decide just what made Blair Freedman attractive to the opposite sex, unless the secret lay in his deep, gray eyes and that shock of alarmingly red hair.

"I don't get it," he said. "Sure, the old routine gets tiresome. But it's a job and someone has to do it. We can't *all* be in the Warrior Patrol."

Freedman had seemingly come to his senses now. He sent the ship straight at the dark maw of the tunnel, flashed his colors to the guard ship that hovered near the entrance with its big guns trained on him, and then they were in the darkness.

The brilliant lamps of the X-26 sent splashes of light along the walls. Blair Freedman shuddered.

"Walls," he said idly. "Walls of twisting, gyrating death. I wonder what really happens when a ship hits them?"

He was talking half to himself, but Graham shuddered. Blair Freedman needed a rest, he decided. Needed to straighten himself out with the world.

"You'd be torn to dust in ten seconds," he said. "That is, if you weren't riding in the Cutter."

The Cutter was the huge ship designed by Planet Control, to keep the asteroid tunnel open.

Freedman nodded.

"And that's *another* thing I've got on my mind."

Graham wanted him to talk, until all the bitterness was out of him.

"What's another thing?"

They were deep in the tunnel now. Graham's eyes checked the mileage. Fifteen miles in. Ten minutes before they would see light again.

Blair Freedman said, "I'm damned tired of running that ploughhorse. Pete Folley's got to get another man for the job. I'm quitting."

Both men continued to look straight ahead. Freedman kept his eyes on the controls. He had said it now. Said what he had wanted to say for a month. A war was coming. He wanted "out" from the tunnel patrol. He was good enough for the warrior ships. He wanted to fly them. Get out into space where there was excitement, and a chance to show that he was ready for something better.

"Look here, Blair," Graham said slowly. He had a helluva lump in his throat. He felt lost. "Me, I'm not fit for the service. Too old. I couldn't fly in here with anyone else. We been a team for years. You can't . . ."

Freedman interrupted.

"I thought it all out, Jerry. You haven't got the confidence because you've never had to do the work. You've leaned on me. You can handle this ship *and* the Cutter. Folley will never fire you."

A speedy luxury ship swished past them, coming from the opposite end of the tunnel. There was light far ahead.

"I dunno," Graham said hesitantly. "You made up your mind? You're leaving for sure?"

Freedman took a deep breath.

"I'm leaving," he said.

Graham turned and went back slowly to the navigation desk. He was acting like a damned fool, he knew. Still, losing Blair was like losing your arm, losing part of your brain and soul. He sat down and tried to study the mapping sheets.

The figures and lines jumped up and blurred his eyes. Cautiously, so Blair Freedman wouldn't see, he lifted his specs and rubbed a hand across his eyes.

"Dammit," he said suddenly in a furious voice. "Go on then, and be cussed. Sure I can fly alone. You can go to hell and see if I care."

Freedman swung around, startled. Graham's back was to him, his head bent over the desk. "You don't have to get tough," he said mildly.

"You heard me," Graham said. "Go to hell."

They flashed out into the bright, clear void above the satellite Parma, and Freedman changed his course for the home port. Behind them, the solid, bulking group of asteroids barred them once more from the main satellite group. There was only that single, carefully cut tunnel through the wall. Freedman remained by the controls, a frown on his thin pleasant face.

What was wrong with Jerry, acting like that? Sometimes he thought Jerry was a little nuts.

OLD MAN FOLLEY leaned back in his chair behind the desk in the Operations Office. Peter Folley was his full name and he had mild, washed out blue eyes that regarded Freedman in a puzzled manner.

"But Blair—" he protested quietly, in answer to Freedman's outburst.

"I've made up my mind," Freedman said. "I've threatened to leave a dozen times. It isn't you. It isn't anyone. Or, for that matter, anything special. I'm fed up on the job and I want something exciting. The Warrior Patrol is my meat."

Folley found a cigar and lighted it. He seemed to relax a little. He was getting ready to argue the case.

Freedman knew he couldn't escape the argument. He had too much respect for Pete Folley to walk out on him.

"Remember, Pete," he said, "I've made up my mind this time. The old pep talk won't do any good. I'm fed up."

Folley was stubborn. He found a piece of paper and a pen-stick.

"Watch this, Blair," he said, and made a little *x* in the right side of the paper.

"Vestena," he said, pointing to the *x*. "The strongest satellite in the outer area. On the left side of the sheet he put another *x*. "Parma," he said. "The gold satellite—power of the system."

He blacked in the center with a heavy series of lines.

"Now then," he said slowly, "I'm trying to show you that this job *is* important. Get me straight. I know it's no cinch to go through that damned tunnel twice a day, week after week. To blast the Cutter through, pushing aside asteroids and slaving in the dark.

"But listen to me, Blair. You got it all wrong. You say yourself that there's a war heading up between Parma and Vestena. If war comes there'll be a lot of glory for the Warrior Patrol. You'll be big stuff. You'll be a great guy. *But did it ever occur to you how Vestena plans to attack Parma?*"

He paused dramatically, then plunged on with his story.

"Vestena fighters have to fly the long route, fifteen thousand miles around the asteroid belt. They can't do that. The supply line is too long. They think they're coming through the tunnel."

Freedman shook his head.

"Simple problem," he said. "We'll close the tunnel. They haven't the brains or equipment to re-open it again."

Folley shook his head.

"We can't do that, son. When Planet Control gave us the contract for the tunnel, it collected vast sums of money from the fifteen associated satellites. Now war is coming between *two* of those satellites. The others still hold a huge interest in the tunnel. Business has to go on as usual between those other satellites. It can't stop. The tunnel has to be kept open. It will be."

"How?" Freedman asked.

"By an independent fighting group. By Tunnel Control."

Freedman shook his head.

"Sorry, Pete. It's a good argument, but it just isn't good enough. I need lots of void to move in, Pete. I need the thunder of guns and the taste of flame. Can't get it out of my system. Maybe, when it's over . . . ?"

Pete Folley swore.

"Graham told me it was no good arguing with you," he said in a low voice. "Okay, Blair, desert us. Run away and join the damned army. But don't come sniveling back to me when it's over. We'll fight our battles without you. When we've finished, there'll be no place for a guy who walked out on us."

Freedman felt a cold stab go up his back. He had never thought it would be like this. Jerry Graham, and now Pete. Old Folley who had raised him since he was a kid. He straightened his shoulders.

"If that's the way it is," he said.

"That's just the way it is," Folley said.

and looked down at the desk top with brooding eyes.

Freedman turned and went out.

BLAIR FREEDMAN'S room was barren. His things were packed neatly into three trunks in the center of the floor. Freedman stood near the window looking down into the street. The car from the Warrior Patrol would be here shortly to pick him up.

He looked around the place for the last time. A queer feeling of homesickness swept over him. This room at the Setric Hotel had served him for the past ten years. Now he was leaving it to take over quarters in the splendid barracks of the Warrior Patrol of the Parma Air Force.

A knock sounded on the door. Thinking the boy had come up for his bags, he called:

"Come in."

Freedman didn't look up as the door opened. He heard footsteps near the door, then a quiet, feminine voice said:

"Do you usually ignore your visitors?"

Freedman straightened, his face red, to stare with surprise at the slim, honey-haired girl inside the door. She wore the uniform of the Space Merchants of Vestena. Her neat figure seemed molded into the scanty leather breeches and gold-cloth vest. A small light-gun hung loosely from the belt around her waist. Was it his imagination, or did the fingers of her right hand poised lightly over the gun?

"Hello," he said slowly. "I don't think I know you. I had expected . . ."

She nodded.

"The porter," she said. "Yes, I had to bribe him to let me come up."

Blair Freedman felt new warmth in his face. Anger, rising slowly, made his fingers clench.

"Why was it so necessary to see me?"

He didn't like it. The Space Merchants were neutral, but the satellite Vestena was stalling waiting to declare war. Could she be a spy?

The girl walked across the room and looked down on the busy square below. Her back was turned to him. She had a way of coolly going about her business as though he didn't exist, and speaking to him only when she was ready to do so. He watched the slim, well-built figure, the

maze of fluffy gold that hung about the back of her neck.

"You're Blair Freedman," she said, without turning around.

"You knew that before you came up here."

Silence.

"You're going to join the Warrior Patrol?"

"If that's any of your business, yes." He was blazing mad. Mad because she had the nerve to walk calmly into his room and question him.

"See here," he snapped, "I've got work to do. You've said your piece. Now get out of here before I call the management."

She whirled around, facing him, solemn blue eyes staring into his.

"You asked for it," she said. "You're joining the Warrior Patrol to make yourself a big-shot. You've got to have glory and blood. *I'll* tell you something. You bored the tunnel through the astroid belt. You handled the 'Cutter.' You've done the job three times now and it's a job that one man in a thousand has the courage to tackle. Now you're walking out on the Tunnel Patrol."

She hesitated, panting, catching her breath.

"Well, *Mr. Big*, you're walking right out into the open where they can take a pot shot at you, and don't think they won't do it."

He took two strides toward her and grasped her wrist. He must have held it tightly for tears started from her eyes.

"Go ahead—hurt me. You can. You're very strong."

"Who's taking pot shots at me?"

She jerked away from him violently.

"It's none of your darn business. You deserve to be shot. You're a tin horn sport, running away from a real job to get your wings covered with star dust."

She backed away from him, holding her wrist, her eyes blazing.

She reached the door and opened it quickly.

Freedman, completely bewildered by what had happened, started after her. The light-gun shot into her hand and its barrel pointed at his stomach.

"I came here to help you," she said coldly, "but I think I could shoot now, you bull-headed, star-chasing hero."



The Z-1000 moved stolidly ahead, its blades roaring.

He stopped short. The girl was beautiful, and so angry that her eyes seemed to shoot flame.

"Who are you? Why did . . .?"

"I came because I thought I loved you," she clipped the words off with an utterly matter of fact voice. "Now I find that you're so much in love with yourself that there isn't room for anyone else."

She was gone, and the room was silent. A Parma housefly zoomed across the room and lit on the door knob. Freedman jerked the door open and the fly buzzed away. The hall was empty. He listened. Not a sound.

✓ He went back in, shaking his head slowly. "Well I'll—be . . ."

A girl who came from nowhere. A girl he had never seen before, and she had come to say that she loved him, and in the same breath, threatened to shoot him through the stomach.

Freedman sat down on the edge of the bed. He felt a little shaky . . .

LIETENANT BREECHER made a wide, sweeping gesture with his free hand. "The Warrior Patrol of Parma." Blair Freedman sat in the cramped, efficient little fighter rocket, following Breecher's hand as the Warrior Patrol swept in toward the entrance to the Asteroid Tunnel.

"I'm proud to be in the force," Freed-

man said. "I've watched you men for years. Always had the feeling that I had to desert those pluggy patrol ships and get into the fighters. It's a great feeling. A clean feeling, as though I've dropped the slow, dull life and kicked up my heels for a real run in the void."

Breecher's head came around slowly, where he could study Freedman's face more easily.

"Those thousand ships out there are all that lie between Parma and destruction," he said slowly. "Yet, if it weren't for the tunnel, you know, they would have to travel too damned far to get at us. They can fight their war two ways. Plan a series of battles with the Warrior Patrol, or blow up the tunnel and seal Parma behind that ungodly range of Asteroids. Either way, Parma would choke in a few months. The tunnel is important."

Freedman nodded. It troubled him, all this reference to the tunnel. First Folley, then the girl, and now, even Lieutenant Breecher of the Warrior Patrol.

"Strictly routine stuff, though," he said, almost in self-defense. "A hundred men, a few patrol ships, and an occasional trip with the Cutter to clear out debris. That's the tunnel patrol, year after year."

The Lieutenant let well enough alone. The Warrior Patrol had swept past now. The dull, war-painted heads on the rockets

were business-like and ready. The Lieutenant nosed his own ship into the tail of the formation and opened his jets. They swept back toward Parma.

"There, I've shown you the boys and their ships," he said. "Tomorrow you'll fly with them."

The ugly static of the relay-screen broke in.

"Calling Warrior Patrol—Calling Warrior Patrol."

"That's Leader Van Nordast," Lieutenant Breecher said in a low voice. "Something's up."

Van Nordast's face was on the screen. He looked powerful, compact, businesslike.

"The Warrior Patrol will not come to base tonight. It will protect the outer entrance to the asteroid tunnel.

"A hundred extra ships are being sent at once. They will join the Patrol near the Tunnel Patrol ship, and base there until further orders come from this office.

"Post guards and *watch that tunnel*. By tomorrow, news will be up to date and I will give you further instructions."

The image on the screen sighed.

"You may as well know tonight. Vestena didn't wait for us to make plans. It tried to destroy the tunnel today. Sabotage, with a few suicide ships.

"A few men were killed but the attempt failed. That is all. Proceed to base."

The screen was empty again, and Blair Freedman was cussing and wondering if maybe Jerry Graham had been right.

He could fight now. He had the best equipment in the planetary system.

A few men were killed . . .

He remembered Van Nordast's words. Grim words that probably applied to the boys he had known since childhood. Maybe Jerry was one of them. Jerry Graham with his gray-black hair, wrinkled kindly face and gentle eyes peering from behind his specs.

The Lieutenant hadn't spoken since the message flashed off. Now he said:

"Well, you're going to get your baptism of fire sooner than I expected."

"Yes," Freedman said. "Yes, that's right."

He was wondering if it made any difference. If Jerry was dead, he'd have to kill a couple thousand soldiers to revenge that one kindly man.

THE GUARD SHIP on the outer end of the Asteroid Tunnel was anchored in space a short distance from the tunnel itself. It had to carry its own supplies, heavy armament and ammunition. Normally, it was capable of holding off a dozen space fighters, sending them reeling back with the heavy punches from its cannon.

The Warrior Patrol came in on a sweeping arc, and slowed to circle about and finally hide the rugged, stocky mother-ship that guarded the tunnel. Orders were given. Ships and pilots were warned not to fly too close to the heaving mass of asteroids. They looked solid. Actually, they were in motion every second, tons of ragged, grinding metal and stone, heaving a few inches this way or that, destroying anything that touched their surface.

It was through this terrifying belt of death that Blair Freedman had first dared point the prow of the "Cutter" and had, by sheer guts, torn a tunnel through the asteroids that served to demolish the thousands of miles of impossible flying by the outside route to Parma.

In peace, the asteroid belt had been pierced by the needle-like tunnel and through it commerce poured to the other worlds. It was the Panama Canal of space. In peace time, a simple job of patrolling. In war, it might become a hell-spot of intrigue and battle.

The Warrior Patrol had come to protect it, keep it open, and to prevent the fighting ships of Vestena from using it to conquer Parma.

A vast set for a chess game. The pieces were placed, alert and waiting, about the tunnel head. When would the opposing player make his first move?

Lieutenant Blair Freedman left his ship, moved carefully up the deck of the mother-ship and entered the air lock. In five minutes he was talking to fat, easy going Captain Stew in the mother-ship. Captain Stew wasn't the pudgy old gentleman's real name, but he had been called by it for so many years that any other he may have had was long forgotten. The Captain, with his home-made, blue denim uniform and enormous black pipe, led Freedman into his cabin and offered him the place of honor on his bunk.

"Sit, Blair," he said. "Suppose you heard the news?"

Freedman nodded. He hated to ask what had happened. Captain Stew was a tough old warrior. He could hold off half an army with this big, well armed ship. He knew how to fight and how to live. He hated to part with men.

"What happened here?"

Stew puffed mightily on his pipe and laid it down. "Nothing much, if they hadn't shot two of my gunners."

A tiny sigh escaped Blair's lips. Then Jerry Graham was safe.

"Night work," Stew said briefly. "Two ships passed and signalled with our flags for permission to enter. I gave them the okay after checking their numbers and the flight charts. They didn't go into the tunnel. I saw them start heaving stuff out into space at the tunnel mouth.

"It was pretty dark, but I recognized the stuff they were tossing out," He paused, then said, "Space mines."

"They planned to blow the head of the tunnel?"

Stew nodded.

"I opened fire and blew them straight to hell."

"But your men?"

Stew grunted.

"They had time to put one shot across my forward deck. Knocked out one gun. Killed a couple of good boys."

He stood up, emptied his pipe and put it back into his mouth with bowl upside down.

"Graham and his men came through on routine patrol just a few seconds after those damned ships blew up," he said. "If they had hit one of them space mines . . ."

Freedman stared ahead of him at the smoke darkened walls.

"That would have been tough," he said. "Well, the danger's over now."

He stood up.

"I think the Warrior Patrol is strong enough to protect the tunnel, don't you, Captain?"

Captain Stew looked thoughtful.

"Strong enough," he said, "if the rats will come out in force and fight. Take my word for it, though, they'll make more attempts like the one last night. This isn't the . . ."

Captain Stew was cut off suddenly by a mighty explosion that seemed to come from directly below. The mother-ship

took a quick lurch that sent them both to the floor. Stew, in spite of his size, was the first to regain his feet.

"What the . . ."

They stumbled out onto the deck. The darkness was sliced with orange and red flame. The entire fleet, it seemed to Freedman, had opened fire at a dark object disappearing toward Vestena.

He watched the object for fifteen seconds, then saw it dissolve in white hot flame.

The guns became quiet. The decks of the mother-ship stopped shaking. Captain Stew howled something at the top of his voice and a gunner came running up.

"Why in the name of the Seven Ton God of Hate didn't you call me?" Stew shouted.

The soldier, grim faced, sooted by the cannon smoke, did his own share of cursing.

"Didn't have time," he fumed. "One ship. It sneaked up to the tunnel mouth and didn't even show a light. It tossed out enough stuff to seal that tunnel for keeps. Captain Stew, there's a patrol ship due through from Parma in fifteen minutes. The tunnel's sealed tight."

FREEDMAN KNEW the ship. *His* ship was due, with Graham at the wheel. Freedman knew where the radio was on the mother-ship. He dashed down the deck.

The radio man was flashing signals to Parma, warning all flights to wait for approval to come ahead.

Freedman slammed himself down at the board.

He plugged in the tunnel speaker. The power board showed zero. The mighty voice that could speak to anyone in the tunnel was dead.

"The guns shook some wires loose," the control man said. "We'll try the electro-screen."

They worked swiftly, trying to contact Jerry Graham. Finally his voice came on to the screen. He had a cheerful grin on his face.

"Hey," he said, "what's wrong at tunnel head? I'm getting a whistle on the screen but I can't tune you in. Something wrong with your transmission."

"For Heaven's sake, Jerry," Freedman

shouted, "turn back, don't come through."

Graham looked puzzled.

"Seems like I hear a voice," Graham was saying. His eyes were bright and sparkling behind his specs. "You guys playing a joke on me? I can hear something that sounds like a voice, but I can't hear words. Just a jumble."

"Jerry," Freedman shouted. "The tunnel head is blown out."

The control man was working furiously with the set.

"Sure, we'll have a blow out," Graham said. The smile was broad on his lips. Five minutes to the tunnel head. Five minutes between that smile—and sudden death.

"What the hell," Freedman said. "We've got to get this set running."

"Hey," Jerry Graham was saying, "what is wrong with your sender? The screen is blurred. The static is awful. Clear it up, will you?"

"Can't," Freedman mumbled to himself. Perspiration stood out on his face. "Can't, Jerry. Can't."

The control man continued to work.

"Never had this happen before," he said. "Guns were raising hell for a while. They blew out the tubes on both sets. Wire shorted somewhere. Can't find it."

Freedman looked at the clock.

"One minute," he said in a humble, frightened voice. "One minute of life for Jerry." He paused and then put his face close to the screen.

"Jerry," he shouted, "Jerry, for God's sake, go back. The tunnel . . ."

It wasn't any use. Before he stopped talking, Graham said:

"Wow, this is *too* much. You guys sound like a bunch of wailing banchees. I'm signing off until you get that sender running again."

"Jerry . . ."

There was something wild and uncontrolled in Freedman's plea.

The screen clicked and was white. Dead white, like a sheet drawn over a corpse.

Freedman sat there, idly holding his watch, his face pale, eyes vacant. The control man kept on working, patiently, carefully. After a long time Freedman looked at his watch. He stood up. He walked unsteadily toward the door, to meet Captain Stew coming in.

"Guess everything is okay up there," Stew motioned back toward the deck. "Did you contact Graham?"

Freedman couldn't hear him. He pushed Stew aside and went out, staring across the void at the line upon line of fighters, grouped like soldiers at attention.

Behind him, Captain Stew spoke to the control man.

"What the hell's burning him up?"

The control man's head came up slowly from the set.

"He ain't feeling so good," he said. "Seems like he deserted a pal a while back, and now his pal's dead. I think he's kinda sorry he wasn't on the job when it happened."

Stew nodded slowly.

"That's tough," he said. "I guess I know how he must feel."

BLAIR FREEDMAN stood rigidly before the desk, arms at his sides, eyes on Peter Folley. Folley didn't look up. He gripped Freedman's release papers in his hand. He wasn't reading them.

"So you came back?"

Freedman didn't answer.

"I suppose on account of Jerry, huh?" Folley said. "You were talking to Jerry just before he died, they said."

Freedman found his voice.

"I tried to warn him."

Folley nodded slightly.

"If you had been with him, you'd have known the tunnel head was blocked. You had that gift, the sense of feeling pressure changes. You would have saved Jerry."

Freedman didn't answer. He had left the Warrior Patrol and come back to his old job again. He had to carry on for Jerry Graham.

"Well," Folley said suddenly, "I know what you want, and I don't need you. You quit once. That's enough. Go back and get all the glory you can out of army life. We'll get along."

He stood up and turned his back to Freedman.

Freedman picked up the release papers and put them into his pocket slowly. His hands shook.

"Pete," he said, "I was a fool. It took Jerry's death to make me see it. I came back to say I was sorry. Jerry Graham was like a brother to me. I want the old job

back. I want to open the tunnel and keep it open."

Pete Folley faced him slowly. He looked very tired. His face was pale and dark pockets stood out under his eyes.

"I'm giving up," he said desperately. "I can't fight alone. Ten of my best men have been killed in a week. As fast as we open the tunnel, an enemy ship darts in and commits suicide to blow it closed again. I haven't got the men or the guts to keep on fighting. It's up to the Warrior Patrol to protect the tunnel. Your place is with them."

Freedman wanted to help Folley then. Wanted to prove his worth all over again.

"Pete, you and I started the tunnel. We always have kept it open. If we work together now, I think we can do it again. You, I and—Jerry."

There was a brief flash of hope in Folley's eyes. Then it faded and he looked glum.

"Okay," he said, "You know where the Cutter is. Take it out in the morning. You're on the payroll, as long as there is one."

THE TUNNEL PATROL, in spite of its homely name and lack of dignity was a big organization. Its field and hangars housed a hundred speedy patrol ships, tons of special earth moving equipment, and last but most powerful, the ship referred to as the Cutter.

Freedman came down the field to the huge building that housed the Cutter. He slipped quietly into the side door, still shivering from the cold morning fog that had settled on the port. He paused, old memories surging through him. Memories of the long days and nights he and Jerry had spent behind the instrument board of the huge craft.

The Cutter was officially labelled Z1000. Its vast bulk filled a space equal to a city block. Its bulky, blade covered nose wasn't graceful. In fact, the whole ship looked like a vast, bloated sausage with spiral blades attached to its bow, and a number of stove pipe lengths at the stern which shot out thunderous potions of fire and gas.

It was a special job, the Z1000. It was a working man's ship. A ship that you couldn't batter and destroy. The Z1000 could take it. It had taken unbelievable pun-

ishment already and it was ready for more.

Freedman mounted the ladder and went into the belly of the ship. It was like coming home again. He half expected to hear Jerry Graham shout to him from the navigation room above.

"Damned imagination," he said aloud. He said it bitterly.

His voice came back to him, a hollow thing echoing through the interior of the Cutter.

He climbed the series of steps and came out on the platform behind the blades. He entered the navigation room. Already the doors of the hangar were rolled back by the electric-finger he had touched as he came in.

No use waiting for anyone or anything. He was flying alone. Freedman adjusted the fuel indicators. Folley had told him last night that the lanes would be open and no ships were maneuvering this side of the tunnel. He drew back the rocket release levers, sat back and adjusted the delicate headphones that would tell him what the blades on the ship's nose were doing. Then, as though riding behind a plugging work horse, he started to doze.

This, he thought, hasn't the speed or the flash of the fighting ships. It's a tough job to do. But I'll do it.

The job wasn't a pleasant one. Freedman knew that near the far end of the tunnel, wedged into the debris of the wrecked tunnel, his old ship, the X26, was laying. In the control room, if there was still a control room, Jerry Graham's crushed corpse would be stretched across the instrument panel.

An endless hour passed.

The flight was no longer routine. He was nearing the end of the tunnel. The Cutter, Z1000 had taken the grinding, tearing trip easily, and her plates were hardly heated by the occasional edges she had to rip from the tunnel. He slowed the huge sausage-like ship and watched the instruments closely. Fifteen miles—then only ten.

He braked the ship and paused. Here, according to the instruments, the X26 would be wedged.

Grimly, Freedman donned the oxygen suit, turned on the powerful lamps that would light his way in the inky black tun-

nel, opened the forward hatch and went out. Ahead and all around him were the dense metals and rocks of the tunnel. The crushing, tearing sounds, always present in this weird place, seemed worse today. He climbed carefully out on the huge cutter blades, down the emergency ladder and jumped to the X26. It wasn't as badly wrecked as he had feared. That didn't mean that it would fly again, or that there was any hope of Graham being alive. He knew that the X26 had hit with a speed that would insure at least a broken neck for near-sighted Jerry.

No sense kidding yourself, Blair, he thought.

He worked his way into the broken hatch of the X26, found a heavy emergency bar and tore the door to the main cabin open. It was as he he thought. Jerry hadn't known what happened. The accident had come too fast. Jerry had been thrown to the floor. There were no marks on his body. His lips were parted in amazement, but no horror.

Freedman choked back a sob, picked Graham up tenderly and went back along the wrecked corridor. In the Z1000 he placed Graham on one of the emergency bunks, strapped him down and covered the body with a blanket. His teeth were gritted tightly together. His knuckles were white. He felt little emotion, or rather, tried to steel himself against feeling it.

Back in the control room, he sat down, pulled out the special valve release that ran the Cutter blades and waited for their steady, powerful rhythm to tell him that they were ready to cut.

This was a part of the business that had always thrilled him. Today it was just a job. A dirty, routine job. There wasn't any pleasure in it.

He thought of Jerry. Jerry who had laughed and gone to his death because a certain Blair Freedman had deserted him and tried to find glory.

The cutters were gyrating at a terrific speed now. The nose of the Z1000 was hot with the movement of the bearings. Freedman turned on the oilers. Long, thick jets of oil started to shoot out ahead of the ship, glancing off the blades, oiling the rocks.

Savagely, as though this was a personal battle, Freedman turned on the forward

power. The Z1000 hit the remains of the wrecked patrol ship, ripped through it and into the sullen, slow moving mass of metal and rock. It shuddered once, then settled down, matching its blades against the mass.

It moved stolidly ahead, and the roar of the blades drowned out everything else.

The wall wouldn't be thick. Freedman grimaced. He remembered the months he had spent ripping through the first time.

He'd like to go on tearing and gouging, fighting the only way he knew—fighting nature.

Those slim, tube like army ships weren't for him. His job was to slog along, ripping away at the barrier that at once protected and cut off his home satellite from the other satellite nations.

The Z1000 was a fighting ship that would never enter the war directly, and yet affected its course more vividly than any single unit of the fleet.

Never enter the war directly?

Freedman wondered. Listening to the inhuman power of the Cutter, he wondered. It might be feasible. He had never studied speeds and pressures. Just how much punishment could the big ship take?

Suddenly, with a lurch, the Z1000 tore itself from the wall and flew out into space.

Swiftly, as the cutters were already whirring upward toward a breaking speed, Freedman cut the power and idled in space. To his left, the fleet was drawn up in neat battle lines. Captain Stew's guard ship was floating about, and he knew that Stew himself would be watching him coming. They had been listening to his thunderous battle with the rocks for some minutes.

For a second Freedman felt elation because he had once more battled with nature and won. Then he remembered Jerry Graham, stretched lifelessly on the bunk in the room below.

The fight was just starting.

THE GIRL stood on the apron near the hangar. Though it was dark, he knew her at once. In the light of the moon, she seemed more like a ghost than a woman. Her hair was like a soft gold crown. Her dress, cut close to her body, was white and of rare Vestena silk.

Freedman wanted to avoid her, and yet

there was that mystery that clung to her and forced him to walk toward her.

"You've come back from the tunnel," she said.

Her voice was low.

He nodded. He was tired. He had just called the authorities and asked them to remove Graham's body from the Z1000. The tunnel was open again and the fleet guarded it. He needed rest.

"The tunnel is open. You told me I was a tin-horn sport. I don't know who you are, but you were right. I'm working in the tunnel again. That's what you wanted."

Though he had seen her only once before, he was anxious to please her. She was like an angel, appearing only when he needed her, and slipping away into the night again.

"You're still feeling very much like a hero, aren't you?" she challenged. "You've just opened the tunnel. You're tired and you want to be alone. You've done something big and wonderful."

He didn't try to explain to her. He didn't tell her of Jerry's crushed body in the ship and how he, himself, felt crushed and weary.

"No . . . I . . ."

"Don't talk to me," she said scornfully. Fire danced in her eyes. The fresh wind sent her hair, the flimsy gown, flying in the wind. "I told you I loved you once."

"I don't even know you," he protested. Why have you chosen me?"

Her voice was steady now. Steady and like a whip lash.

"Because I knew you from the time you entered the patrol as a boy," she said. "I worshipped you from afar, and I know of everything you did. I talked to my father every day, sometimes more often than that. He thought the planet system would have fallen apart if you hadn't been here to steady it."

Her father?

"You seem determined to punish me," he said unsteadily. He could hear the ambulance car rocketing across the field now. They were coming for Jerry.

"I'll go on punishing you," she said. "If it hadn't been for you, Dad wouldn't be dead now, laying over there in that ship."

Dad? Jerry Graham?

"You're not . . .?"

Her nod was barely discernible.

"Jerry Graham lived on Vestena for many years," she said. "When mother died, he put me into a community school. He came here. He never told anyone . . ." Her voice broke.

"Through my father, I worshipped you. It's all dead now. If I can find a way to hurt you, I'll do it."

She whirled and was gone, a slim, wind-swept figure in the vast darkness of the field.

He started to run after her. Then he saw the tiny, sport-model rocket plane parked at the edge of the apron. She was in it and the rockets were exploding before he could reach her.

She waved her arm at him as the ship leaped forward. She shouted something that was drowned in the roar of rocket exhaust. Then she was gone.

PETER FOLLEY was talking. "The jig's up, Blair. The Vestena merchants have signed an oath to refuse further trade with Parma. You know what that means?"

Blair Freedman nodded. It didn't make any difference to him now. Not, at least, until he found Sheila Graham and made her understand how he really felt about Jerry's death.

"I suppose we'll close the tunnel?"

Folley shook his head and frowned.

"No, that's the bad part of it. We've got to hold the tunnel open."

He leaned forward, tapping his pencil.

"United Satellites, comprising fifteen powers, accepted a contract to open the tunnel, on the promise that we would *keep* it open. Now there's a war between Vestena and Parma. The Merchants of Vestena won't buy from us, and the tunnel was used mostly by their ships. Yet, even if the other powers no longer use the tunnel, we promised to keep it open in the event they do. They won't release us from that contract. Now we've got to keep open our most vulnerable approach. We've got to protect it from the people who will leave no stone unturned in their effort to destroy us by attacking through the tunnel. It's a nasty mess."

It was nasty. Freedman realized it. But this was an army job. A job for the Warrior Patrol.

He stood up.

"I'll keep my end going," he said. "I'm doing three patrols every day. When you need the Z1000, you know where to find me."

He was half way to the door when Folley stopped him.

"What's eating you, Blair?" Folley asked abruptly.

Freedman whirled around.

"Jerry's death for one thing," he said. Folley shook his head.

"I know," he said. "There's something else. I'd almost swear you were in love, with that miserable, whipped pup look you've been carrying on your map."

Blair didn't answer. Damned nonsense, he thought. He wanted to see Sheila Graham. But not because he was in love with her. He wanted to explain about Jerry, and tell her that he felt as miserable about it as she did.

She, supposedly, was on Vestena, the enemy satellite.

CAPTAIN STEW strode up and down the cabin, his huge paunch moving ahead of him like an anchored balloon. Stew was angry. Angry clean through. He showed it with his frown, the set of his lips. He said:

"The damned army isn't getting anywhere. Look here, Freedman, what's gonna happen when the Vestena fleet attacks and enters the tunnel?"

Blair Freedman had been with Stew for several hours. He was almost ready for the return patrol trip now. He stood up wearily.

"That's the worry of the Warrior Patrol," he said. "My orders are to keep the tunnel open."

Captain Stew stopped pacing the floor.

"Sure," he said. "Sure, you're in the clear. Look at it like I do. Eight times now, Vestena suicide ships have shot in here and dropped explosives into the tunnel mouth. Eight times you've plowed them out again. Not once has the Vestena army attacked.

"When they do, they're going straight through to the other end of the tunnel. There isn't room *inside* the tunnel to fight. There isn't any Parma fleet at the other end."

"Damned if we can stop them here.

They'll be in the tunnel before we have time to strike."

Freedman shrugged.

"Blow up the tunnel."

"Sure," Stew bellowed, "and have every satellite in the system on our neck. This ain't war boy. It's politics, and Parma has its political neck stuck out right over the block."

FREEDMAN READ the note a dozen times. He propped it up near the mirror as he shaved, trying to figure out why Sheila would trouble herself again with him. *Blair Freedman, it said, meet me at the Z1000 hangar tonight at moonrise.* He scowled at the mirror as he shaved. The girl had admitted that she lived with the Space Merchants on Vestena. Admitted that she was actually from an enemy country. It took nerve, he thought, for her to come here alone.

He was undecided about the proposed meeting at the hangar. Was it some sort of a trap? She had threatened him. Freedman smiled. Threatened by a girl. He washed his face, donned a fresh tunic and laced it. He found his space pistol, always worn in these unstable days, and strapped it on.

Moonrise, he thought, and made a mental calculation. Half hour to ten. Here I come, Miss Graham, and no tricks please.

He locked the door behind him and went down to the rocket car in the hotel court.

The Z1000 bulked huge and secure in the semi-darkness of the hangar. The low moon was coming up slowly, and the high moon already shot its pale rays from the Larr Mountains in the opposite direction. This was one of those rare, beautiful nights when Parma seemed to bask proudly in the light of its moons. A night for peace, Freedman thought, and Vestena ships probably already on the prowl.

He walked up and down in front of the Z1000. A tiny ship shot over the far edge of the field and landed daintily near the hangar apron. It rolled up until the shadow of the hangar almost hid it. Sheila Graham jumped out and came toward him. She was at his side before he saw the frightened look on her face.

She took his hand.

"You're a man of honor," she said in a clipped, matter-of-fact voice. "I've had

to change my mind about you. You're doing a good job."

She let go of his hand and stared earnestly into his eyes.

"You know nothing of me. Perhaps I'm not Sheila Graham. I come from enemy territory. Would you trust me on a very important mission?"

He stared at her. It didn't make sense. He saw the fright in her eyes. He knew that she had something of great importance on her mind. Something that she must do and yet feared to try without his help.

"I don't understand," he said. He was careful not to show his true feelings toward this childlike, delicate girl from Vestena. She wasn't born to fight, yet she seemed to be a fighter. "First you hate me, then you ask for help. What changed your mind?"

Her face was tinged with sudden color. "I don't hate you," she said, and turned away, staring toward the moon that had just touched the top of the Larr Range. "I think you made a mistake. That mistake cost my father's life. Since then, you've done a loyal job. I can't tell you what we're going to do, but I know that with your help we can do it."

He waited, saying nothing.

"The ships of Vestena attack tonight," she said in a shaking voice. "We—you and I are going to stop them."

"Attack the whole army? Why didn't you notify the Warrior Fleet at the tunnel head? They could have been ready."

He wheeled away from her, but she caught up and put her hand on his arm.

"They can do nothing," she said. "The Vestena fleet sent a decoy army. The Warrior Fleet of Parma is thousands of miles out in space, pursuing a dummy army—an army of empty, robot-controlled ships that left Vestena hours ago."

"Now the true fleet is somewhere near the tunnel head, poised for a quick dash through."

"How do I know you're telling the truth?"

Her eyes were steady on his.

"*You've never doubted a word I've spoken.*"

Odd, he thought, but I never have. Why? Then he knew why. He was looking into Jerry Graham's eyes. The eyes of a man he had trusted above everyone else. This

was his daughter. There could be no doubt.

"I've got to warn the command at the city," he said.

She shook her head.

"There is no time. They can do nothing. The important thing is to stop the Vestena fleet from getting through the tunnel."

She started to run toward the Z1000. Over her shoulder she called to him.

"I have a plan. You must help. I can't operate the Cutter."

THEY were in the tunnel, and Freedman was confident once more. At the controls of the Z1000, he felt at ease. At his side, Sheila Graham was asking hurried questions.

"What speed can the blades carry?"

He told her.

"And the hull. How thick is it?"

He chuckled without humor.

"If you hit it with a city block at a thousand miles an hour, it might break."

She was figuring with a pen-stick on the smooth surface of the control board.

"How far are we into the tunnel?"

He consulted the mileage chart.

"Half way. It's . . ."

"Good," she said. "Turn on the blades. Use all the power you have."

There was an undercurrent of fear in her voice. He was sure that she struggled with herself at this moment to keep from breaking down. When she spoke again, the howl of the rotating blades drowned all other sound. Without stone or metal to work on, the blades were screaming at top speed, cooled only by the oil. The Z1000 was a strange, rumbling giant, stumbling ahead in the darkness.

"Blair," Sheila Graham said quietly, "Are you afraid to die?"

He felt cold beads of perspiration stand out on his forehead. The cabin was growing very hot. Deep down he had known all along but now, as he faced it consciously, he had to fight for control. His hands were clammy on the wheel.

"I told you I loved you very much once," she said. He didn't dare turn and look at her. This wasn't any time to go soft. "I haven't changed my mind. This was a very strange love affair, wasn't it?"

She didn't wait for his answer, but stumbled on, her voice eager.

"I haven't very much time to talk. Blair, I fell in love with you when I saw your picture. When Vestena became hostile, I was declared an orphan. I couldn't see Dad and he couldn't reclaim me. A rich man adopted me. He was a high member of the Space Merchants organization."

She sighed.

"I used to read about the work you and Dad did. That's why I was so badly hurt and angry when you left him to his death."

"I could get away from Vestena when I wished. My foster-father owned three ships. I learned the plan of the Vestena fleet from him. I waited until I knew how and when they would strike. Then I came back to you. I knew you'd be the only one to help."

He was silent. Then:

"It seems like old times," he said, slowly. "Seems as though Jerry and I are together again."

Her fingers touched his neck. She kissed him on the cheek. Her lips were soft and very warm. "Dad is here, I think. I'm a pretty important part of Jerry. We loved each other very much."

He was busy now. Busy keeping the Z1000 in one piece. If he kept up the dizzy power rate long, and the blades didn't meet an obstruction, they'd fly off and destroy the ship.

"How long do we have?"

She sighed.

"The fleet will be in the tunnel in two minutes. We should meet them in three."

"We'll stop them," he said in a harsh whisper.

OIL WAS sloshing and flying over the Cutter's blades. He listened to the unholy roar of the motor, then pushed the power lever down as far as it would go. The Z1000 leaped ahead a little faster. The blades sang a song of destruction.

In the cabin the heat became stifling. No longer able to see through the steamed windows, he turned out the lights. In the darkness, the red hot plates over the motor shaft made the place glow like a tiny hell. The extra power from the batteries hummed madly.

"Sheila," he turned toward her. In the glow of the hot plates, he could see her face, as pale as glistening shell. Her eyes

were moist and her face was close to his.

Then he could say no more, because her lips were pressed tightly to his.

"Blair, is there a chance . . . any chance at all?"

"The Z1000 was designed to cut rock and metal," he said. "I don't think the engineers ever planned to stop an army with it."

Two minutes. Then fifty seconds. Would the Vestena army be on time?

The blades were good for another five minutes at most. After that . . .

"Blair."

It was Sheila, her lips parted by a startled cry. Instinctively he grasped her and held her tightly against him in the heavily padded chair.

Ahead of them, bright fingers of light probed the darkness; lights that expanded rapidly, blindingly. The blades found something. There was a sound of ripping and tearing as metal shrieked against metal in deafening protest. The Z1000 stopped.

Still the hurtling lights of the Vestena fighters came on. One after the other, like blind fireflies, they flashed into the tunnel to be ground to bits by the screaming blades of the Cutter. Then the Z1000 lurched sickeningly. The enemy ships, ripping through the now broken and slowing blades, pounded at full speed into its hull. Blair Freedman, staggering and half-unconscious from the shock, sought for the controls. He was too late. The Z1000 had stopped running. He reached blindly for Sheila . . .

Outside, the tunnel was a hell of noise. Showering sparks cast an eerie red glow that was occasionally punctuated by the blinding white flash of an explosion. Ship after ship pelted into the buckling plates of the Cutter until the cavernous maw of the tunnel became a molten mass of smashed, twisted scrap.

Then, gradually, the noise died down as the last Vestena ship hurled itself into oblivion. The shriek of mangled metal was stilled. The fires flickered into darkness.

And in the control cabin of the huge Z1000, Blair Freedman and Sheila Graham, battered almost beyond recognition, lay in each other's arms—united in the final sacrifice of death.