

CLASSICS TO GO

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LEROY YERXA



Amazing Stories

Volume 58

Leroy Yerxa

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Through The Asteroids—To Hell!

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 X26 into a wide slow arc toward the asteroid tunnel. He sighed and glanced at the chart on the desk. Trip number seven thousand 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 X26 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 poise 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 asteroid 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.



Instinctively he grasped her and held her tightly against him.

"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."

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....

Lieutenant 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," Freedman 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, business-like.

"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 banshees. I'm signing off until you get that sender