

"RETREAT TO THE STARS"

Leigh Brackett

Arno was just entering the big common hall when the lights blinked. One-two. One-two. That meant ships landing on the icy field outside. And ships meant only one thing this time. Ralph's squadron had come back.

He stopped beside the doorway to let the mob stream through from the dormitories, workshops and kitchen. Everything stopped when those lights blinked, except the ceaseless hammering from the place where the rebels labored on their great ship. Arno watched them come; the men whose drawn lots had said No, the erect, brazen women, the children, the old and the maimed.

They would make my world like that! thought Arno. The hate, unveiled for a brief moment, made his straight, strong features like marble. Those people, streaming into the big, barren hall to wait, breathless, until the ships landed and brought news of the raid—they would bring their dissonance into his ordered, patterned world; their restlessness, their pagan heresies, their eternal striving.

It made him feel savagely good, that tall blond man standing in the shadow, to know that through him, the State held their destiny to its own pleasure.

Marika came striding from the workshop, the sweat and grime of labor dark on her naked arms and legs. Arno noted her broad shoulders, her wide brow and clear, authoritative eyes, with distaste. The women of these incorrigibles offended him far more than the men. And yet Marika, dressed in her brief leather kirtle, her tawny mane falling heavy on her shoulders

Arno hated himself for having to control even the slightest impulse toward Marika. There should be none in him. And yet

"They're back, Arno!" she said. "Ralph's back!"

She caught his arm, and they fought their way together toward the doors on the far side. The spy, his mask of friendship slipped easily into place, still could not stop the question that rose so often in his mind.

"It would matter a lot, wouldn't it, if Ralph didn't come back?"

"It would matter everything!" said Marika softly. "Everything. But he has, this time. If anything ever happens to him, I'll know."

Arno wondered how, and shook his head mentally for the thousandth time. The mechanics of this barbaric relationship between men and women he accepted, but he could not understand. Though he was only twenty-five, he had already given the State three sons and a daughter, and he couldn't conceive of either one of his appointed mates caring more for him than he did for them. If his life should be snuffed out, it wouldn't change their lives any. Woman's sole duty was the bearing of children and the keeping of the living quarters, wherever the State saw fit to send her.

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The hall was full now, silent as nearly seven thousand people can make a place. The distant clangor from the mysterious ship-building echoed loudly.

Arno could follow the operations outside as clearly as though he saw them; battered ships roaring in one after the other from the dark space, landing on the frigid, airless field, being towed by ancient tugs into the camouflaged

dome of the hangar.

Arno well knew how the ships of the Tri-State, combing the Solar System for this last outpost of anarchy, had passed by the savage Trojans, over the very structures that housed their quarry.

A slender, dark girl with a child in her arms came to Marika, and again Arno, acknowledging her shy smile with a friendly, "Hello, Laura," was stricken with the wastefulness of these rebels. They cheerfully coddled and supported people unable to do their full share of work—women like Laura, crippled men who should have been eliminated as deterrent factors.

Laura said, "I'm frightened, Marika. I'm always frightened, for fear Karl . . . He has come back, hasn't he, Marika?"

"Of course!" Marika took woman and child in the curve of one sturdy arm. "Listen. That's the lock opening."

The crowd surged forward just a bit. Heavy double doors swung back. And there was Ralph, with his men shouldering through behind him.

Ralph, fighting leader of the rebels, was neither tall, nor handsome, nor powerfully built. One's eyes slid past him, were caught somehow, forced back to see the compact, challenging strength of him, the tough, indestructible something that looked from his reckless blue eyes, spoke in his harshly vibrant voice, laughed from his cynical mouth. And once seeing, they never forgot.

Ralph wasn't laughing now. The crowd knew the instant he came in that something was wrong. He was white with weariness, his stubbled jaw set and ugly. Arno felt a little pulse of excitement stir in his heart; he knew so well what was coming.

A wave of sound swept the hall, people shouting questions, names. Ralph raised his hand, and the clamor died.

"We lost three ships," he said quietly, but the words rang to the far corners. "Vern, Parlo, and Karl. The raid was a failure."

There was a moment of utter silence. Arno saw Laura's white face, saw Marika's strong arm ease her sudden fall. Somewhere a woman sobbed, a child sent up a wail.

Then a man, one of the weary, hard-driven scientists, shouted, "But damn it, Ralph, this is the third time! We've got to have supplies, equipment, if we're to go on!"

"You'll get them," said Ralph. The stubborn fire of his gaze swept them. "Go easy on what you have. We'll try again."

He turned to Marika, his men mingling with the crowd.

"Poor kid," he muttered, looking down at Laura. "I wish it had been"

"No!" blazed Marika. "Never wish it had been you! It may be soon enough." She kissed him, with a strange, bitter fierceness.

Ralph smiled.

"Black becomes you," he said mockingly. "Don't you want to be a hero's widow?"

He stopped her lips with another kiss. Laura's boy was squalling. Ralph gave him to Marika and picked up the white, still girl. "Come on. I want food and a shave. Arno, will you get Frane and Father Berrens and bring them along?"

"Of course." A small flame of triumph was burning behind Arno's mask. Ralph had lost three ships, thirty men—ships and men he could ill afford to lose. Fools, to think they could defy the State! The scar on his temple, placed there by Tri-State's skillful surgeons, reddened with the flow of blood to his brain, and he put his hand up to hide it, lest it betray him. That scar kept him from being assigned to fighting duty, kept him at base, where the information was.

Before he found the two men who, with Ralph, controlled the destinies of the Trojan base, therefore of all the rebels in the System, Arno retired to his own small room. Concealed in the heavy buckle of his belt was a tiny, incredibly powerful radio, operating on a tight beam that changed synchronization automatically every fourth second. Only the receiver of the People's Protector, back on Terra, could catch that beam.

Arno gave his call letter and waited until the cold, precise voice of the People's Protector, head of all the anti-revolution activities of the Tri-State, answered him.

Then he said, "They are much upset over the failure of the raid. They need supplies, metal especially, for fuel and repairs. I am being drawn daily more close to the heart of things; Ralph and Marika are particularly friendly. I will transmit information as I receive it."

"You have not yet found the secret of the ship they build?"

"No. They guard that carefully."

"Nor the location of their planetary headquarters?"

"No."

"These things are most important. The destruction of these anarchists must be complete, to the last man." The Protector's voice altered just the faintest trifle from its emotionless inflexibility. "You are in a unique position. The State would find it most difficult, under the circumstances, to replace you. Remember your duty, your faith, and be cautious. There must be no failure."

The contact broke with a click, and Arno was conscious of a small, uneasy twinge. Strange that in these eight months he hadn't quite realized that. Accustomed from birth to consider himself merely a more or less efficient cog in a machine, replaceable at a moment's notice, he hadn't quite understood how his status had changed. He had a moment of positive vertigo, as though the firm ground on which he stood had suddenly given way.

And then he recovered himself. There would be no failure. The State had classified him as Brain-type 1-04, best adapted to this type of work. The State had assigned and trained him. He couldn't fail. All he had to do was follow orders.

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Twenty minutes later he sat in the cubicle that served Ralph and Marika as home. Frane, the head of the scientific group, sat on a metal chair taken from a wrecked ship; a stringy, tired man with grey hair. Berrens, civilian chief, occupied the table. He was a priest of their pagan religion, and wore a bit of cloth about his throat to show it. His big frame showed the universal signs of

underfeeding, but his chin and eyes were stubborn, his mouth twisted in a smile that wouldn't die. Ralph, with his usual restlessness, paced the floor, puffing savagely at a battered pipe.

That left Arno to sit with Marika on the worn remains of a couch. She had changed her working leather for a carefully mended dress of sultry red that offended Arno's eye, yet provoked a buried something in him. Time and again he found his gaze straying back to her. She was so different from the colorless, broad-hipped women of his world. He could feel the unwomanly strength of her, see it in the sweeping lines of her body.

She never took her eyes off Ralph. What strange thing was it that made a woman look at a man like that?

Ralph swung about abruptly. "Sorry, Arno. Council of war. Come and have dinner with us."

"Right." Arno smiled and rose.

Marika jumped up too.

"I'll go with you. I'm anxious about Laura."

The door closed behind them, shutting them out of that council. Arno felt a moment of rage. If only he could get at the heart of things, instead of relying on generalities picked up from Marika, with an occasional specific bit about the raids.

Marika sighed and thrust back her tawny mane with work-hardened fingers. "It must have been wonderful in the old days! To have lived in real houses, walked on real earth, with sunlight and real air! To have had pretty clothes and silk stockings, and something to do besides work and worry and shake hands with Death every morning!"

Her vehemence startled him. "Why, Marika"

"Two thousand years ago. Why couldn't I have been born two thousand years ago?"

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The strangeness of it came over Arno—how Marika could look back to the Twentieth Century as day before darkness, and he as darkness before dawn. In the Twenty-first Century the last Terran rebels had fled to Venus, and from there to Mars, and from there to the state where they were now. The all-encompassing strength of the State had followed them, driving out their heresies, their anarchies, their haphazard individualism.

Now there was peace and system everywhere, except for the hidden plague-spots on the planets and this barren asteroid, which, through him, the Tri-State would soon destroy.

"I wonder," said Marika, softly, "what it would be like to be full fed, and full clothed, and to kiss your husband goodbye knowing that he'd live to be kissed hello?"

Her mouth quivered, and there were tears on her lashes. Arno's heart gave a strange, sudden leap, quite beyond his comprehension. He downed it firmly.

"What will Ralph do now?"

"Do!" said Marika savagely. "He'll go out again, and again, and again, until he dies, like Karl." She stopped and faced him, almost defiantly under the dim radium light. "I've got to cry, Arno. I've held it in and held it in, but I can't hold it any longer. We're fighting a losing battle, Arno. Ralph's going to die for it. All of us. And just once, I've got to stop being brave!"

And all at once she was crying, with her hands painfully tight on his arms and her tawny head thrust hard against his shoulder. In spite of himself, some tiny crack was made in the armor surrounding his brain, and he saw this place as she saw it; a tomb of dead hope, dead glory, dead life. What made them struggle on, knowing this?

He found his hands on Marika, his arms around her. He didn't remember putting them there. She was like an animal, warm and vitally alive.

He caught his hands away, shaken with sudden fear. It was as though he recoiled from the brink of a chasm, from the unknown. He stood silently while she cried herself out, still silently when she had her breath again and moved away from him. His arms ached where her fingers had gripped.

Marika dashed an arm across reddened eyes and swore. "Damn me for a sniveling ass! But I feel better. Guess a woman's got to be one once in a while, even if she is a mechanic! Don't tell Ralph, and--well, thanks, Arno."

He watched her go, down the corridor to Laura's home. Her red dress was almost black in that light, her hair dull gold. Arno tried to think about that meeting back there, about his duty. But his eyes followed Marika.

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On the other side of the locked door, Ralph paced restlessly in a cloud of smoke.

"Something's wrong," he said. "With that new invisible paint, we should have been safe, since the ships are non-magnetic. But they took us in the back, as though they knew where to look."

Both men eyed him sharply. "You know what you're saying?"

"I know!" Ralph rumpled his short brown hair with impatient fingers. "It's incredible that one of our own people No, Tri-State may have planted a spy."

"A possibility. Remote, but a possibility." Father Berrens shook his head wearily.

"If there's a spy," said Frane grimly, "we'll have to catch him quickly. We need supplies."

"How long can we last without them, Frane?"

"Three weeks, possibly a day or two longer. No more."

"Good God." Ralph's strong-boned face tightened; the knowledge took him like a blow over the heart. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"You were doing your best," said Father Berrens gently. "We didn't want to make it harder."

"Three weeks! My God, has it come so close to the end? To fight for two thousand years, and nowThree weeks!"

Berrens managed a smile. "You'll make a successful raid."

"But if I don't! If I don't!" Ralph paced savagely. Responsibility, weariness, a sense of futility weighed on him like a leaden cloud. The room was silent for a long moment. Then, "The ship, Frane. You've got to have it finished in ten days."

Frane nodded. "I'll triple the shifts. I'll have to strip the domes for the metal."

"Anything, as long as we can still breathe. But get that ship finished!"

"Perhaps," said Frane somberly, "it would be better to call the people in from the planetary bases, without waiting."

"No! This Solar System belongs to us. I'm not going to surrender it without fighting!"

"But we've fought so long, Ralph." Father Berrens' voice was infinitely tired. "The Tri-State has twenty centuries of rigid weeding and training behind it. It's hard to break through that wall. And their people are at least housed and fed. When a man's belly is full it's hard to stir him, even if his brain and soul are starved."

"Granted. But damn it" Ralph came to a truculent stand, his eyes reckless and uncompromising. "We've got to hang on! Their machine is running down of its own weight. They've lost their best brains to us; that, or purged them. They're beginning to stagnate, and stagnation means retrogression. Without their science they wouldn't have stood two centuries. Now even their science is failing them. They've produced nothing new in the last ninety years."

"If we can just hang on a little longer"

Frane's mouth shut hard. "You can't fight without men and weapons."

"We can do with the men we have. And I'll bring you the metal you need. Give me four hours to sleep, and I'll go out again. This time I'll try Titan."

"Titan! You're mad, Ralph! It's the strongest mining center in the System. You'll be destroyed!"

"Perhaps. But that needn't worry anyone but me. I'm going alone, in the old Sparling."

Ralph knew, as well as the others, that he had one chance in a thousand. The Sparling was a relic of other days, an intricate fighting mechanism capable of being controlled by one man and equipped with tractor beams for hauling prizes back to base. But it needed a super-man to fly it. It was tricky and temperamental and capable of an infinite variety of misdeeds. That was why they hadn't built any more after the first ten. They lost nine in a month.

Ralph went on. "They won't be looking for me near Titan. There'll be less chance of detection with one ship. If I'm not back in ten days, start loading."

Berrens said, "Try once more with the squadron."

"There isn't time if we fail. And the way the last three raids have gone,

there isn't much use anyway. Understand, I want no one to know where I've gone, or when. Not even Marika."

"But," said Frane, "if there is a spy here, Tri-State knows the location of the base. Why don't they simply bomb us out of the sky?"

"They want information," said Ralph grimly. "But they may bomb us yet. However, that's something we'll just have to pray about. Find the spy if you can. But get ready, and don't wait for me!"

Father Berrens shook his head. Barring a miracle, they'd never in three weeks catch a spy clever enough to have evaded all their safeguards and actually penetrated the base.

"It seems a case for prayer," he admitted. "We'll try, Ralph. Be careful—and for all our sakes, come back."

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It was more than four hours later that Arno, checking a series of reports for the commissary and exulting over the shortness of supplies, looked up to see Marika standing by his desk. She was white and rigid, her hands locked tight, every bone in her face gauntly clear. "Arno," she said, "Ralph's gone. He wouldn't tell me where, but I checked his men. He's gone alone, and I found out that the old Sparling is missing. Arno, I'm afraid."

Ralph gone on a lone raid! He'd have to tell the Protector. He'd play out his part as Marika's good friend until he could get rid of her, and then . . .

What was it that made a woman look that way about a man? What barbaric emotion was it that the State had taken out of its people?

He had lived among these rebels for eight months, and viewed them as impersonally as a scientist views a microbe. He had been a coldly efficient machine, carrying out orders in the most effective way possible to him. He had not understood these people, nor wished to understand them. His whole devotion had been to the State, the will of the State, the needs of the State.

But the machine that was Arno suddenly was not responding as it should. Things were growing in him, impulses, the strangeness and power of which frightened him, the more so because they were inexplicable by his philosophy.

"Arno," whispered Marika, "I'm frightened. I've been frightened too often. I'm not strong any more. Ralph's gone. He's going to die."

She's a rebel, thought Arno. She sets herself above the State. He told himself that it was only because he had a part to play that he stepped forward. Her arms went out to him, quite naturally, like a child that needs comforting. He felt the life flowing through her, meeting something that leaped in himself. Her lips were close to his, cut full and clear in the marble of her face.

He kissed her. And was stricken with horror, with self-hatred. He had never kissed a woman before. It was treachery—a weakening to the individual, a subtle challenge to the State.

He broke roughly away and left her standing, staring after him.

Arno locked his door and took the radio from his belt. Twice he started to send out his call letter, and twice he stopped. He was aghast at his own hesitancy, but Marika's face kept coming between him and the radio. What would she do if Ralph didn't come back? Would she be like Laura, like so many of the

women who lost their men? Why did he care? He felt unsteady, lost, shaken.

The tiny thing in his hand looked up at him accusingly, and it steadied him. These rebels and their barbarisms were no concern of his. The State had given him certain orders. The entire end and aim of his life was to serve the State, without question or thought.

The words of the Creed, taught from infancy, came to him. "I believe in the State, which protects me, and deny all faiths but this, that my life may be spent in obedience and service."

What greater end could a man have than to serve the State?

Arno's voice was steady as he spoke to the People's Protector.

"The war leader has gone on a lone raid in an obsolete ship—a Sparling. Destination unknown, but the rebels are desperate for supplies."

"All mines will be warned," said the Protector. "Continue to follow orders."
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Frane was as good as his word. Shifts were tripled, taking every available man, woman and youth. Even Arno, still pleading his simulated head injury, was pronounced fit for light work and sent to the hangar. Because of the need for haste, much of the veil of secrecy was discarded. Only the ultimate purpose of the ship and the design of the engines were kept quiet.

Arno gasped at his first sight of the ship. It was enormous. He estimated that it could hold fully ten thousand people and concentrated supplies. There was nothing like it, even in the trade lanes of the Tri-State.

Gossip was rife among the people, of course. These rebels were terribly lax; anyone might talk as he pleased. All kinds of rumors circulated. The ship was a weapon of offense. It was going to destroy the planets. It was going to become a floating world. It was going to haunt the space-lanes, picking off the State ships.

Arno reported all this, but got no nearer to the truth. Nine days passed with no word from Ralph. There was no ship-to-base radio, because of the danger of triangulation and subsequent discovery of the Trojan base. Rations were cut. Fuel for light and heat was cut to a minimum, but the food synthesizers clacked and roared incessantly. The domes were stripped of everything metallic save the walls themselves and the pumping units. Forges worked day and night. Endless streams of men and women labored, carrying, welding, hammering, fitting. Sleep was reduced to four-hour periods, pitifully inadequate for exhausted bodies.

And on the tenth day, it was finished.

Men dropped in their tracks to rest. Frane and Father Berrens spoke to Marika beneath the huge loom of the ship, and Arno, who took care never to be far from his source of information, overheard.

There wasn't much to overhear.

Frane said dully, "Ten days. I'll have to begin calling them in."

Marika, too tired even for emotion, stared at them. "Ralph's not coming back, is he?"

Father Berrens put a hand on her shoulder. "It's not too late to hope. We don't leave for nearly two weeks yet."

Arno kept his eyes from Marika's face. Call who in? Leave for where? He must watch, and report carefully. The Rebels were planning some desperate attempt; the State must be warned.

He remembered the Protector's words: There must be no failure.

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The Sparling hung motionless, an invisible mote in utter darkness. Saturn wheeled its flashing rings against infinity. Ralph, cramped with fourteen days of close confinement, red-eyed with lack of sleep, hunched over a telescopic view-plate in the midst of a bewildering tangle of instruments.

He was following Titan, watching the rocket flares of ore carriers as they took off. For the ten days he had hung here not one had been sufficiently under-convoyed so that he might have the faintest chance of succeeding.

"There must be a spy at base," he said aloud, for the hundredth time. The sound of his harsh voice echoing against metal was some relief for the ghastly silence. "He's not getting intimate information, but he doesn't need it. Just general movements, and the Tri-State can blanket everything. Oh, God, give Frane and Berrens the wit not to let him sabotage that ship!"

Ralph's cynical mouth twisted to a short laugh. "He can't sabotage it. Short of an atomite bomb, he can't touch it, and he couldn't have got an atomite bomb past the searchers when he entered base. The only thing he can do"

He shook his thoughts savagely away from that possibility. Mustn't for a second let himself believe that. Somehow, they'd get through all right. God wouldn't let them down, not after all the centuries they'd fought.

Gnawing hunger forced his attention away from the view-plate. He let one of his meager supply of food capsules dissolve slowly, thinking of the things he'd read about in the old books. Real steaks, fresh vegetables, juicy fruits. The concentrate broke through to his tongue. He swallowed hurriedly, cursing.

Through the view-plates he could see Earth, Venus and Mars, flying in wide-flung orbits about the tiny, distant Sun. He'd been born on Trojan base. He'd never seen sunlight, or blue skies, or grass, or breathed air that didn't come from a chemical tank. All those things the State had taken from his people, except for the gallant handful that lived and preached in hiding on the planets.

"Someday," said Ralph softly, "we'll have them back."

His reckless blue eyes, the fire of them dulled with weariness, went back to Titan. The chronometer clacked off the hours. Five ore carriers went out into the void, heavily convoyed. Inevitably, sleep overtook him. When he woke, the fifteenth day was gone.

"I've got to go, if I'm going with them. Four days to get back." He cursed bitterly. It was hard to give up after all this time. Hard to be beaten because of a few tons of metal. Unwillingly, his hand went out to the starting lever.

And then he stiffened. A streak of flame shot across the view-plate, up from Titan. An ore carrier, with only a three-ship convoy! A chance! A mad,

tempting chance!

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Too tempting. Why, having sent six fighters out with the others, cut the guards to three? A trap, perhaps. They couldn't know he was here, but they might be doing the same thing at all mines. And then again, they might have relaxed vigilance, thinking he'd given up.

He thought of that ship at base and all it meant to him. He thought of Marika. Most of all, he thought of Marika. And then he looked at those three worlds that had once been theirs, and at the ore carrier that meant they might have them again. He knew he was right about the Tri-State. If they could only hold on

"Come on, sweetheart," he whispered to the Sparling. "Let's see what you can do!"

Like a wild meteor he plunged down on that ore carrier, his hands flying over the banks of keys before him. One convoy ship burst into flame under his ray. Another shot fused the tubes of the carrier, so that she hurtled on at constant velocity, a mere hulk.

The Sparling bucked dangerously under his hands. He cursed it, whirled it toward another fighter. The third was maneuvering for a tube shot. Ralph's heat-ray raked out. The fighter, hulled, reeled away as her men died in the vacuum.

The Sparling wrenched frantically aside, and the stern shot took her briefly in the ribs instead. In spite of himself, Ralph screamed with the searing heat. Half blinded, he fought the ship to safety, and then he poised for his final attack.

And then he saw them—Tri-State ships pouring out from bases on Saturn's moons. It had been a trap! No chance to fight now. No chance to hitch a tractor beam to that ore carrier. Just run. Run—and pray!

The Sparling danced perversely. Ralph cursed it, cursed the man who invented it, cursed himself for a fool. A mad angle shot fused the tubes of the remaining fighter.

A beam raked his hull, heating it cherry-red, and then he was free.

He poured speed into the Sparling, but she wobbled. One of those heat-beams had damaged some filament in her intricate controls. He could hear a change in the rhythmic vibration of the ship, and she handled more and more sluggishly. The Tri-State ships were coming up fast.

For just a moment he sat quite still, staring at his hands spread over the keys. After all, he'd known this day would come. He'd chosen this career of his own free will, knowing that. It hurt like hell, now that it was here—knowing Marika was waiting, knowing about the ship. But

He could afford it now. He swallowed his remaining capsules and opened the cock on the oxygen tank. He'd go out at least with a full belly and his lungs full of air.

Swinging the bucking Sparling around, he headed back toward Saturn and that flight of ships.

His mouth twisted, and his harsh voice said, quite conversationally, "Hold the

airlocks open, God. Here comes a free man."

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The eighteenth day had come and gone. The domes were cold, almost too cold to endure. The air was thin. One pump had stopped entirely, worn out, so that ten thousand men, women and children huddled gasping in the hangar and the workshops. Hidden in a far corner behind a massive pillar, Arno was speaking in a low voice.

"They're all here. All the people from the planetary bases. The last ship came in an hour ago. The purpose of the big ship is still unknown, but all loading has been completed. They're waiting for Ralph, but they must do what they plan to do within the next two days. Fuel is almost gone."

Then he asked, because he couldn't help it, "Is Ralph dead?"

"Yes." The voice of the People's Protector was precise, cold. "There is no need to know the purpose of the ship. Since all the Rebel population of the System is collected in the Trojan base, it can be destroyed at once."

Arno nodded. That meant a fleet, of course, and bombs. His work was done.

"How will I be taken off, Excellency?"

There was just the faintest note of surprise in the Protector's voice. "Taken off? The task for which the State chose and prepared you is done. The State has no further use for you."

The tiny radio in Arno's hand was abruptly silent. He stood staring at it, with a spinning cloud across his eyes.

But of course. He'd given three sons and a daughter to the State. He'd done his job. He was a specialized cog; he wouldn't fit anywhere else. And the State had no dearth of cogs.

Terra was the nearest Tri-State base—a two-hour trip for their fast bombers at the present orbital intersection. Two hours. The rebels would wait until the last minute for Ralph, who was dead. That meant at least another day.

Two hours! If only it had been at once! The waiting, the tension—!

The bombs would destroy the domes, shatter them to cosmic dust, and the asteroid with them. Two thousand years of agitation would end, and there would be peace in the Tri-State.

The whirling cloud steadied as Arno saw the truth, the logical, inescapable truth. He himself was nothing. His usefulness to the State was ended. What matter if he died?

He was still staring at the useless radio. Now he saw the hand that held it—a strong, young hand, corded with sinews, the healthy blood ruddy under the skin.

His hand. The Tri-State directed it, but he felt the pain if it was injured.

The radio smashed on the floor, but he didn't notice it. He was looking at his body as though he had never seen it before, running his fingers along the hard curve of his thighs, feeling the breath lift his lungs, hearing the beat of his blood along his veins. Then he looked out, across the vast, barren dome, with those ten thousand men, women and children waiting under the loom of the

ship.

A group of young men were singing off to his right, an old, old forbidden song about a girl named Susannah. Here and there a family—that anarchistic word never heard in the Tri-State—pressed close together, talking softly. Arno searched their faces. Some were happy, some sad, some frightened, some eager, but each face was different. There was no unit of so many males, so many females, so many young. There were ten thousand people.

Arno caught fiercely at his creed. And then he realized that these people had a creed too, and served it with their lives. Like Karl, and Ralph. Ralph—on whose return ten thousand people waited.

* * *

Two hours! How would these people feel if they knew that in two hours they would die? Maybe they did know. They knew the ship meant something strange. They guessed it might mean something impossible. But they were going.

The State chose . . . the State prepared . . . the State has no further use . . .

Arno put his hands to his head to stop its blasphemy, and his touch only made him more conscious of his own flesh.

He plunged out into that sea of humanity, stumbling over legs, catching at shoulders.

Bodies, and eyes that looked at him, and brains behind them! He could feel the tension that filled the dome, feel the queer life-wave that always comes with a large crowd.

Marika's tawny head and broad shoulders rose against the black mass of the hull, and Arno went toward her. Men cursed him as he stumbled over them, but he had to get to Marika. He didn't know why, only that he had to.

He saw Laura beside her. Laura had her son clasped in her arms. She spoke to Marika. Then she kissed the boy and smiled.

Arno thought, I gave three sons to the State, but I never kissed them. It was a duty.

Duty! It was his duty now to die for the State. That duty had been so well understood he'd never thought of it subjectively. How had these rebels poisoned him, that he found it strange now?

He was close to Marika now.

She was pale, and her face was lined, but she asked, "What's the matter, Arno? You look ill."

"I—I don't know."

He stared at her, and suddenly he knew what was the matter with him. He'd read all about it in the forbidden books given him to prepare him for this duty. He was in love.

Out in space, Tri-State bombers were thundering up. His duty was plain before him. And he was in love—in love, like a pagan rebel!

Marika's strong hand caught his ragged tunic, shook him. "What's the matter,

Arno? Tell me!"

He couldn't meet her eyes. And then Father Berrens' voice rang out over the audio system, and every head in that vast place turned to listen.

"It is time," said the priest quietly, "to explain why we've called you here, and why we've built this ship. We have kept it secret for two reasons. We wished to take no chance of having our purpose reported to the Tri-State, and we saw no reason to upset all our people while there was still a chance that we wouldn't have to use it. Now"

Bombers, thought Arno. How long now?

Father Berrens went on. "We'll wait till the last minute for Ralph, but we must be prepared. In four hours we'll begin shipping you. Please listen, and try to understand. Have courage and faith! We need them both now, more than ever before.

"For two thousand years we've fought against tyranny, against regimentation, against the destruction of God and man as an individual. We've been weak; the State has been strong. We waited too long in the beginning. Now, just as it began to seem we might have a chance, just as the machine of the State was bogging down in the mire of its own creation, we learned we might have to go—because of a few tons of metal.

"If there is truly a spy among you, I congratulate him. The State should reward him well. Our men have died trying, but we have no metal. All that's left is flight—or death at the hands of the State."

Arno heard him through a haze. The minutes ticked away with his heartbeats. His heartbeats—which the State could destroy but not control.

* * *

Marika's hand was half throttling him. Laura was standing motionless beyond her, the child held tight, whimpering. He could feel those ten thousand people, listening, waiting.

"Don't wait any longer for Ralph," he said.

He didn't want to say it. It was because Marika was looking at him so.

Her hand tightened. "Why not, Arno?"

"I—nothing. It's foolish, that's all."

"Foolish! When he's out there, alone, trying Arno! What do you know?"

Her hands were hurting his arms now, as they had that day she cried in the hall.

In a little while even pain would be gone.

The State has no further use

But suppose he did? Suppose he, Arno, wanted his body, wanted to know what it felt like to love a woman and father a child that was his own and not a cog in a machine? He looked wildly away from Marika, putting up a last battle for his belief, his religion.

And he saw ten thousand people—waiting.

He met Marika's eyes.

"Ralph's dead," he said. "I killed him. I killed Karl and all the others. I'm the spy."

She fell away from him. Laura cried out, a strange, high-pitched wail, and Father Berrens stopped talking.

"Ralph!" whispered Marika. "Ralph But I knew it. A spy!"

Arno gasped, stricken with horror at what he had done, lost in the chaos of shattering standards. He could still destroy them. He had only to keep still about the bombers, and it wouldn't matter.

Ten thousand people Frane and Berrens and Laura Marika, with a cold, terrible something growing in her eyes, something he had put there because he'd killed Ralph. His own mates would never miss him. They'd bear children patiently for some other unsmiling cog in the machine of State.

Marika. Always Marika. She was his downfall, and his answer. She was everything. Looking at her, watching what was growing back of her eyes, Arno shivered with awe and bitter longing. If only he could have known, before

"Father Berrens!" he shouted.

It seemed the words came out of themselves. And though some stubborn part of himself recoiled in horror, he spoke more words and more words. When he was finished, Berrens' face was grim, his voice unfamiliarly harsh as he issued orders.

There was chaos about Arno, and then a kind of frenzied order. In a world miles beyond him, lines of men and women formed and streamed into the ship through vast ports. But all he could see was Marika.

It would be nice to believe, as the rebels believed, that a man lived after his body died.

That was blasphemy in the State. But it would be nice.

Father Berrens came up, breathing hard. "Time! Time! But we may do it. God helping, we may do it!"

Then Berrens was shouting, "Marika!"

He couldn't stop her. The gun she had taken from Frane's belt was already aimed. Arno saw it coming.

The poisoned needle made a fiery prick over his heart.

He had a last glimpse of Marika's broad-browed face, her tawny mane lying heavy on her wide shoulders. She was like a thing of stone. She watched him fall, dispassionately, as she would have watched a roach die in strangling powder. Then she turned and went steadily into the ship.

A dark mist rolled across his brain, dulled the sound of exodus. Through it he heard Laura's voice.

"But Father! All the planets are closed to us. Where can we go?"

"For the time, we've lost the planets, yes. But the ship was built to go beyond them. My daughter, the stars still remain."