

HINDSIGHT

by Jack Williamson

SOMETHING WAS WRONG WITH THE CI-GAR.

But Brek Ve-ro-nar didn't throw it away. Earth-grown to-bac-co was pre-ci-o-us, he-re on Ce-res. He to-ok anot-her bi-te off the end, and pres-sed the ligh-ter co-ne aga-in. This ti-me, im-per-fectly, the ci-gar drew—with an ac-rid, puz-zling odor of scorc-hing pa-per.

Brek Ve-ro-nar—born Wil-li-am Webs-ter, Earth-man—was sit-ting in his big, well-fur-nis-hed of-fi-ce, adj-o-ining the ar-se-nal la-bo-ra-tory. Be-yond the per-du-ri-te win-dows, mag-ni-fi-ed in the crystal-li-ne cla-ri-ty of the as-te-ro-id's synthe-tic at-mosp-he-re, lo-omed a row of the im-men-se squ-at tur-ret forts that gu-ar-ded the Ast-rop-hon ba-se—the-ir mighty twenty-fo-ur-inch rif-les, co-up-led to the Ve-ro-nar auto-sight, co-ve-red with the-ir the-ore-ti-cal ran-ge everyt-hing wit-hin Jupi-ter's or-bit. A squ-ad-ron of the fle-et lay on the fi-eld be-yond, se-ven tre-men-do-us de-ad-black ci-gar sha-pes. Far off, abo-ve the rug-ged red pa-li-sa-des of a se-cond pla-te-au, sto-od the many-co-lo-red do-mes and to-wers of Ast-rop-hon it-self, the Ast-rarch's ca-pi-tal.

A tall, ga-unt man, Brek Ve-ro-nar wo-re the bright, clo-se-fit-ting silks of the Ast-rarchy. Dyed to con-ce-al the inc-re-asing stre-aks of gray, his ha-ir was per-fu-med and cur-led. In ab-rupt cont-rast to the for-ce of his gray, wi-de-set eyes, his fa-ce was whi-te and smo-oth from cos-me-tic tre-at-ments. Only the ci-gar co-uld ha-ve bet-ra-yed him as a na-ti-ve of Earth, and Brek Ve-ro-nar ne-ver smo-ked ex-cept he-re in his own loc-ked la-bo-ra-tory.

He didn't li-ke to be cal-led the Re-ne-ga-de.

Curiously, that whiff of bur-ning pa-per swept his mind away from the int-ri-ca-te dra-wing of a new roc-ket-tor-pe-do gyro-pi-lot pin-ned to a bo-ard on the desk be-fo-re him, and back ac-ross twenty ye-ars of ti-me. It re-tur-ned him to the uni-ver-sity cam-pus, on the low yel-low hills be-si-de the an-ci-ent Mar-ti-an city of To-ran—to the fa-te-ful day when Bill Webs-ter had re-no-un-ced al-le-gi-an-ce to his na-ti-ve Earth, for the Ast-rarch.

Tony Grimm and Elo-ra Ro-nee had both obj-ec-ted. Tony was the freck-led, ir-res-pon-sib-le red-he-ad who had co-me out from Earth with him six ye-ars be-fo-re, on the ot-her of the two an-nu-al en-gi-ne-ering scho-lars-hips. Elo-ra Ro-nee was the lo-vely dark-eyed Mar-ti-an girl—da-ugh-ter of the pro-fes-sor of ge-ode-sics, and a pro-ud des-cen-dant of the first co-lo-nists—whom they both lo-ved.

He wal-ked with them, that dry, bright af-ter-no-on, out from the yel-low ado-be bu-il-dings, ac-ross the rol-ling, stony, oc-her-co-lo-red de-sert. Tony's sun-bur-ned, blue-eyed fa-ce was gra-ve for on-ce, as he pro-tes-ted.

"You can't do it, Bill. No Earth-man co-uld."

"No use tal-king," sa-id Bill Webs-ter, shortly. "The Ast-rarch wants a mi-li-tary en-gi-ne-er. His agents of-fe-red me twenty tho-usand eag-les a ye-ar, with ra-ises and bo-nu-ses—ten ti-mes what any re-se-arch sci-en-tist co-uld ho-pe to get, back on Earth."

The tan-ned, vi-vid fa-ce of Elo-ra Ro-nee lo-oked hurt. "Bill—what abo-ut yo-ur own re-se-arch?" the slen-der girl cri-ed. "Yo-ur new re-ac-ti-on tu-be! You pro-mi-sed you we-re go-ing to bre-ak the Ast-rarch's mo-no-poly on spa-ce trans-port. Ha-ve you for-got-ten?"

"The tu-be was just a dre-am," Bill Webs-ter told her, "but pro-bably it's the re-ason he of-fe-red the cont-ract to me, and not Tony. Such jobs don't go beg-ging."

Tony ca-ught his arm. "You can't turn aga-inst yo-ur own world, Bill," he in-sis-ted. "You can't gi-ve up everyt-hing that me-ans anyt-hing to an Earth-man. Just re-mem-ber what the Ast-rarch is—a su-per-pi-ra-te."

Bill Webs-ter's toe kic-ked up a puff of yel-low dust. "I know his-tory," he sa-id. "I know that the Ast-rarchy had its be-gin-nings from the spa-ce pi-ra-tes who es-tab-lis-hed the-ir ba-ses in the as-te-ro-ids, and gra-du-al-ly tur-ned to com-mer-ce ins-te-ad of ra-iding."

His voice was injured and defiant. "But, so far as I'm concerned, the Ast-rarchy is just as respectable as such planet nations as Earth and Mars and the Jovian Federation. And it's a good deal more wealthy and powerful than any of them."

Tense-faced, the Martian girl shook her dark head. "Don't blind yourself, Bill," she begged urgently. "Can't you see that the Ast-rarch really is no different from any of the old pirates? His fleets still seize any independent vessel, or make the owners ransom it with his space-patrol tax."

She caught an indignant breath. "Everywhere—even here on Mars—the agents and residents and traders of the Ast-rarchy have brought graft and corruption and oppression. The Ast-rarch is using his wealth and his space power to undermine the government of every independent planet. He's planning to conquer the system!"

Her brown eyes flashed. "You won't aid him, Bill. You—couldn't!"

Bill Webster looked into the tanned, intent loveliness of her face—he wanted suddenly to kiss the smudge of yellow dust on her impudent little nose. He had loved Elo-ra Ronee, had once hoped to take her back to Earth. Perhaps he still loved her. But now it was clear that she had always wanted Tony Grimm.

Half angrily, he kicked an iron-red-denied pebble. "If things had been different, Elo-ra, it might have been—" With an abrupt little shrug, he looked back at Tony. "Anyhow," he said flatly, "I'm leaving for Ast-rop-hon tonight."

That evening, after they had helped him pack, he made a bonfire of his old books and papers. They burned palely in the thin air of Mars, with a cloud of acrid smoke.

That sharp odor was the line that had drawn Brek Ve-ro-nar back across the years, when his nostrils stung to the scorched-paper scent. The cigar came from a box that had just arrived from Cuba, Earth—made to his special order.

He could afford such luxuries. Sometimes, in fact, he almost regretted the high place he had earned in the Ast-rarch's favor. The space officers, and even his own jealous subordinates in the arsenal laboratory, could never forget that he was an Earth-man—the Rene-gade.

The cigar's odor puzzled him.

Deliberately, he crushed out the smoldering tip, peeled off the brown wrapper leaves. He found a tightly rolled paper cylinder. Slipping off the rubber bands, he opened it. A glimpse of the writing set his heart to thudding.

It was the hand of Elo-ra Ronee!

Brek Ve-ro-nar knew that fine graceful script. For once Bill Webster had trusted a little note that she had written him, when they were friends at school. He read it eagerly:

DEAR BILL: This is the only way we can hope to get word to you, past the Ast-rarch's spies. Your old name, Bill, may seem strange to you. But we—Tony and I—want you to remember that you are an Earth-man.

You can't know the oppression that Earth now is suffering, under the Ast-rarch's heel. But independence is almost gone. Weakened and corrupted, the government yields everywhere. Every Earth-man's life is choked with taxes and unjust penalties and the unfair competition of the Ast-rarch traders.

But Earth, Bill, has not completely yielded. We are going to strike for liberty. Many years of our lives—Tony's and mine—have gone into the plan. And the toil and the sacrifices of millions of our fellow Earth-men. We have at least a chance to recover our lost freedom.

But we need you, Bill—desperately.

For your own world's sake, come back. Ask for a vacation trip to Mars. The Ast-rarch will not deny you that. On April 8th, a ship will be waiting for you in the desert outside Toran—where we walked the day you left.

Whatever yo-ur de-ci-si-on, Bill, we trust you to dest-roy this let-ter and ke-ep its con-tents sec-ret. But we be-li-eve that you will co-me back. For Earth's sa-ke, and for yo-ur old fri-ends, TONY AND ELO-RA.

Brek Ve-ro-nar sat for a long ti-me at his desk, sta-ring at the char-red, wrink-led she-et. His eyes blur-red a lit-tle, and he saw the tan-ned vi-tal fa-ce of the Mar-ti-an girl, her brown eyes imp-lo-ring. At last he sig-hed and re-ac-hed slowly for the ligh-ter co-ne. He held the let-ter un-til the fla-me had con-su-med it.

Next day fo-ur spa-ce of-fi-cers ca-me to the la-bo-ra-tory. They we-re in-so-lent in the ga-udy gold and crim-son of the Ast-rarch, and the vo-ice of the cap-ta-in was su-ave with a tri-ump-hant ha-te:

“Earthman, you are un-der tech-ni-cal ar-rest, by the Ast-rarch's or-der. You will ac-com-pany us at on-ce to his qu-ar-ters abo-ard the *War-ri-or Qu-e-en*.”

Brek Ve-ro-nar knew that he was de-eply dis-li-ked, but very sel-dom had the fe-eling be-en so openly shown. Alar-med, he loc-ked his of-fi-ce and went with the fo-ur.

Flagship of the Ast-rarch's spa-ce fle-ets, the *War-ri-or Qu-e-en* lay on her crad-le, at the si-de of the gre-at fi-eld be-yond the low gray forts. A tho-usand fe-et and a qu-ar-ter of a mil-li-on tons of figh-ting me-tal, with sixty-fo-ur twenty-inch rif-les mo-un-ted in eight bul-ging sphe-ri-cal tur-rets, she was the most po-wer-ful en-gi-ne of dest-ruc-ti-on the system had ever se-en.

Brek Ve-ro-nar's con-cern was al-most for-got-ten in a si-lent pri-de, as a swift elect-ric car car-ri-ed them ac-ross the fi-eld. It was his auto-sight—other-wi-se the Ve-ro-nar ach-ro-nic fi-eld de-tec-tor ge-ode-sic ach-ron-integ-ra-ti-on self-cal-cu-la-ting ran-ge fin-der—that di-rec-ted the fi-re of tho-se mighty guns. It was the very figh-ting bra-in of the ship—of all the Ast-rarch's fle-et.

No won-der the-se men we-re je-alo-us.

“Come, Re-ne-ga-de!” The ble-ak-fa-ced cap-ta-in's to-ne was omi-no-us. “The Ast-rarch is wa-iting.”

Bright-uniformed gu-ar-ds let them in-to the Ast-rarch's com-pact but lu-xu-ri-o-us su-ite, just aft the con-so-le ro-om and for-ward of the auto-sight ins-tal-la-ti-on, de-ep in the ship's ar-mo-red bo-wels. The Ast-rarch tur-ned from a chart pro-j-ec-tor, and crisply or-de-red the two of-fi-cers to wa-it out-si-de.

“Well, Ve-ro-nar?”

A short, he-avy, com-pact man, the dic-ta-tor of the Ast-rarchy was vib-rant with a ruth-less energy. His ha-ir was wa-ved and per-fu-med, his fa-ce a ro-uged and pow-de-red mask, his silk-swat-hed fi-gu-re lo-aded with jewels. But not-hing co-uld hi-de the po-wer of his hawk-li-ke no-se and his bur-ning black eyes.

The Ast-rarch had ne-ver yi-el-ded to the cons-tant pres-su-re of je-alo-usy aga-inst Brek Ve-ro-nar. The fe-eling bet-we-en them had grown al-most to fri-ends-hip. But now the Earth-man sen-sed, from the cold in-qu-iry of tho-se first words, and the pro-bing flash of the ru-ler's eyes, that his po-si-ti-on was gra-vely dan-ge-ro-us.

Apprehension stra-ined his vo-ice. “I'm un-der ar-rest?”

The Ast-rarch smi-led, grip-ped his hand. “My men are over-ze-alo-us, Ve-ro-nar.” The vo-ice was warm, yet Brek Ve-ro-nar co-uld not es-ca-pe the sen-se of so-met-hing sharply cri-ti-cal, de-adly. “I me-re-ly wish to talk with you, and the im-pen-ding mo-ve-ments of the fle-et al-lo-wed lit-tle ti-me.”

Behind that smi-ling mask, the Ast-rarch stu-di-ed him. “Ve-ro-nar, you ha-ve ser-ved me lo-yal-ly. I am le-aving Ast-rop-hon for a cru-ise with the fle-et, and I fe-el that you, al-so, ha-ve ear-ned a ho-li-day. Do you want a va-ca-ti-on from yo-ur du-ti-es he-re—let us say, to Mars?”

Beneath tho-se thrus-ting eyes, Brek Ve-ro-nar flinc-hed. “Thank you, Gor-ro,” he gul-ped—he was among the few pri-vi-le-ged to call the Ast-rarch by na-me. “La-ter, per-haps. But the tor-pe-do gu-ide isn't fi-nis-hed. And I've se-ve-ral ide-as for imp-ro-ving the auto-sight. I'd much pre-fer to stay in the la-bo-ra-tory.”

For an ins-tant, the short man's smi-le se-emed ge-nu-ine. “The Ast-rarchy is in-deb-ted to you for

the auto-sight. The inc-re-ased ac-cu-racy of fi-re has in ef-fect qu-ad-rup-led our fle-ets.” His eyes we-re sharp aga-in, do-ubt-ful. “Are furt-her imp-ro-ve-ments pos-sib-le?”

Brek Ve-ro-nar ca-ught his bre-ath. His kne-es felt a lit-tle we-ak. He knew that he was tal-king for his li-fe. He swal-lo-wed, and his words ca-me at first uns-te-adily.

“Geodesic analy-sis and in-teg-ra-ti-on is a comp-le-tely new sci-en-ce,” he sa-id des-pe-ra-tely. “It wo-uld be fo-olish to li-mit the pos-si-bi-li-ti-es. With a suf-fi-ci-ently de-li-ca-te pick-up, the ach-ro-nic de-tec-tor fi-elds ought to be ab-le to tra-ce the world li-nes of any obj-ect al-most in-de-fi-ni-tely. In-to the fu-tu-re—”

He pa-used for emp-ha-sis. “Or in-to the past!”

An eager in-te-rest flas-hed in the Ast-rarch’s eyes. Brek felt con-fi-den-ce re-tur-ning. His bre-ath-less vo-ice grew smo-ot-her.

“Remember, the prin-cip-le is to-tal-ly new. The ach-ro-nic fi-eld can be ma-de a tho-usand ti-mes mo-re sen-si-ti-ve than any te-les-co-pe—I be-li-eve, a mil-li-on ti-mes! And the ach-ro-nic be-am eli-mi-na-tes the ti-me lag of all elect-ro-mag-ne-tic met-hods of ob-ser-va-ti-on. Ti-me-less, pa-ra-do-xi-cal-ly it fa-ci-li-ta-tes the exp-lo-ra-ti-on of ti-me.”

“Exploration?” qu-es-ti-oned the dic-ta-tor. “Aren’t you spe-aking rat-her wild-ly, Ve-ro-nar?”

“Any ran-ge fin-der, in a sen-se, exp-lo-res ti-me,” Brek as-su-red him ur-gently. “It analy-zes the past to pre-dict the fu-tu-re—so that a shell fi-red from a mo-ving ship and def-lec-ted by the gra-vi-ta-ti-onal fi-elds of spa-ce may mo-ve tho-usands of mi-les to me-et anot-her mo-ving ship, mi-nu-tes in the fu-tu-re.

“Instruments de-pen-ding on vi-su-al ob-ser-va-ti-on and elect-ro-mag-ne-tic trans-mis-si-on of da-ta we-re not very suc-ces-sful. One hit in a tho-usand used to be go-od gun-nery. But the auto-sight has sol-ved the prob-lem—now you rep-ri-mand gun-ners for fa-iling to sco-re two hits in a hund-red.”

Brek ca-ught his bre-ath. “Even the ne-west auto-sight is just a ro-ugh be-gin-ning. Go-od eno-ugh, for a ran-ge fin-der. But the de-tec-tor fi-elds can be ma-de in-fi-ni-tely mo-re sen-si-ti-ve, the ge-ode-sic in-teg-ra-ti-on in-fi-ni-tely mo-re cer-ta-in.

“It ought to be pos-sib-le to un-ra-vel the past for ye-ars, ins-te-ad of mi-nu-tes. It ought to be pos-sib-le to fo-re-tell the po-si-ti-on of a ship for we-eks ahe-ad—to an-ti-ci-pa-te every ma-ne-u-ver, and even watch the cap-ta-in eating his bre-ak-fast!”

The Earth-man was bre-ath-less aga-in, his eyes al-most fe-ve-rish. “From ge-ode-sic analy-sis,” he whis-pe-red, “the-re is one mo-re da-ring step—cont-rol. You are awa-re of the mo-dern vi-ew that the-re is no ab-so-lu-te fact, but only pro-ba-bi-li-ty. I can pro-ve it! And pro-ba-bi-li-ty can be ma-ni-pu-la-ted, thro-ugh pres-su-re of the ach-ro-nic fi-eld.

“It is pos-sib-le, even, I tell you—”

Brek’s rus-hing vo-ice fal-te-red. He saw that do-ubt had drow-ned the flash of in-te-rest in the Ast-rarch’s eyes. The dic-ta-tor ma-de an im-pa-ti-ent ges-tu-re for si-len-ce. In a flat, ab-rupt vo-ice he sta-ted: “Ve-ro-nar, you are an Earth-man.”

“Once I was an Earth-man.”

The black, flas-hing eyes pro-bed in-to him. “Ve-ro-nar,” the Ast-rarch sa-id, “tro-ub-le is co-ming with Earth. My agents ha-ve un-co-ve-red a dan-ge-ro-us plot. The le-ader of it is an en-gi-ne-er na-med Grimm, who has a Mar-ti-an wi-fe. The fle-et is mo-ving to crush the re-bel-li-on.” He pa-used. “Now, do you want the va-ca-ti-on?”

Before tho-se ruth-less eyes, Brek Ve-ro-nar sto-od si-lent. Li-fe, he was now cer-ta-in, de-pen-ded on his ans-wer. He drew a long, uns-te-ady bre-ath. “No,” he sa-id.

Still the Ast-rarch’s se-arc-hing ten-si-on did not re-lax. “My of-fi-cers,” he sa-id, “ha-ve pro-tes-ted aga-inst ser-ving with you, aga-inst Earth. They are sus-pi-ci-o-us.”

Brek Ve-ro-nar swal-lo-wed. “Grimm and his wi-fe,” he whis-pe-red ho-ar-sely, “once we-re fri-ends of mi-ne. I had ho-ped that it wo-uld not be ne-ces-sary to bet-ray them. But I ha-ve re-ce-ived a mes-sa-ge from them.”

He gul-ped aga-in, ca-ught his bre-ath. “To pro-ve to yo-ur men that I am no lon-ger an

Earth-man—a ship that they ha-ve sent for me will be wa-iting, on Ap-ril 8th, Earth ca-len-dar, in the de-sert so-uth of the Mar-ti-an city of To-ran.”

The whi-te, lax mask of the Ast-rarch smi-led. “I’m glad you told me, Ve-ro-nar,” he sa-id. “You ha-ve be-en very use-ful—and I li-ke you. Now I can tell you that my agents re-ad the let-ter in the ci-gar. The re-bel ship was over-ta-ken and dest-ro-yed by the spa-ce pat-rol, just a few ho-urs ago.”

Brek Ve-ro-nar swa-yed to a giddy we-ak-ness.

“Entertain no furt-her ap-pre-hen-si-ons.” The Ast-rarch to-uc-hed his arm. “You will ac-com-pany the fle-et, in char-ge of the auto-sight. We ta-ke off in fi-ve ho-urs.”

The long black hull of the *War-ri-or Qu-e-en* lif-ted on fla-ring re-ac-ti-on tu-bes, le-ading the squ-ad-ron. Ot-her squ-ad-rons mo-ved from the ba-ses on Pal-las, Ves-ta, Thu-le, and Eros. The Se-cond Fle-et ca-me plun-ging Sun-ward from its ba-ses on the Tro-j-an pla-nets. Fo-ur we-eks la-ter, at the ren-dez-vo-us just wit-hin the or-bit of Mars, twenty-ni-ne gre-at ves-sels had co-me to-get-her.

The ar-ma-da of the Ast-rarchy mo-ved down upon Earth.

Joining the dic-ta-tor in his chart-ro-om, Brek was puz-zled. “Still I don’t see the re-ason for such a show of strength,” he sa-id. “Why ha-ve you gat-he-red three fo-urths of yo-ur spa-ce for-ces, to crush a hand-ful of plot-ters?”

“We ha-ve to de-al with mo-re than a hand-ful of plot-ters.” Be-hind the pa-le mask of the Ast-rarch’s fa-ce, Brek co-uld sen-se a ten-si-on of worry. “Mil-li-ons of Earth-men ha-ve la-bo-red for ye-ars to pre-pa-re for this re-bel-li-on. Earth has bu-ilt a spa-ce fle-et.”

Brek was as-to-nis-hed. “A fle-et?”

“The parts we-re ma-nu-fac-tu-red sec-retly, mostly in un-derg-ro-und mills,” the Ast-rarch told him. “The ships we-re as-semb-led by di-vers, un-der the sur-fa-ce of fresh-wa-ter la-kes. Yo-ur old fri-end, Grimm, is cle-ver and dan-ge-ro-us. We shall ha-ve to dest-roy his fle-et, be-fo-re we can bomb the pla-net in-to sub-mis-si-on.”

Steadily, Brek met the Ast-rarch’s eyes. “How many ships?” he as-ked.

“Six.”

“Then we out-num-ber them fi-ve to one.” Brek ma-na-ged a con-fi-dent smi-le. “Wit-ho-ut con-si-de-ring the furt-her ad-van-ta-ge of the auto-sight. It will be no bat-tle at all.”

“Perhaps not,” sa-id the Ast-rarch, “but Grimm is an ab-le man. He has in-ven-ted a new type re-ac-ti-on tu-be, in so-me re-gards su-pe-ri-or to our own.” His dark eyes we-re som-ber. “It is Earth-man aga-inst Earth-man,” he sa-id softly. “And one of you shall pe-rish.”

Day af-ter day, the ar-ma-da drop-ped Earth-ward.

The auto-sight ser-ved al-so as the eyes of the fle-et, as well as the figh-ting bra-in. In or-der to gi-ve lon-ger ba-se li-nes for the auto-ma-tic tri-an-gu-la-ti-ons, ad-di-ti-onal ach-ro-nic-fi-eld pick-ups had be-en ins-tal-led upon half a do-zen ships. Tight ach-ro-nic be-ams bro-ught the-ir da-ta to the im-men-se ma-in inst-ru-ment, on the *War-ri-or Qu-e-en*. The auto-sight ste-ered every ship, by ach-ro-nic be-am cont-rol, and di-rec-ted the fi-re of its guns.

The *War-ri-or Qu-e-en* led the fle-et. The auto-sight held the ot-her ves-sels in ac-cu-ra-te li-ne be-hind her, so that only one cir-cu-lar cross sec-ti-on might be vi-sib-le to the te-les-co-pes of Earth.

The re-bel pla-net was still twenty mil-li-on mi-les ahe-ad, and fifty ho-urs at nor-mal de-ce-le-ra-ti-on, when the auto-sight dis-co-ve-red the enemy fle-et.

Brek Ve-ro-nar sat at the cur-ving cont-rol tab-le.

Behind him, in the dim-lit vast-ness of the ar-mo-red ro-om, bul-ked the ma-in inst-ru-ment. Ban-ked tho-usands of gre-en-pa-in-ted ca-ses—the int-ri-ca-te cells of the mec-ha-ni-cal bra-in—whir-red with ge-ode-sic analy-zers and in-teg-ra-tors. The ach-ro-nic fi-eld pick-ups—sen-se or-gans of the bra-in—we-re ho-used in in-sig-ni-fi-cant black bo-xes. And the web of ach-ro-nic trans-mis-si-on be-ams—instan-ta-ne-o-us, ult-ras-hort, no-ne-lect-ro-mag-ne-tic wa-ves of the sub-elect-ro-nic or-der—the ner-ve fi-bers that jo-ined the busy cel-ls—was qu-ite in-vi-sib-le.

Before Brek sto-od the twenty-fo-ot cu-be of the ste-re-osc-re-en, thro-ugh which the bra-in

com-mu-ni-ca-ted its fin-dings. The cu-be was black, now, with the crystal black-ness of spa-ce. Earth, in it, ma-de a long misty cres-cent of wa-ve-ring crim-son splen-dor. The Mo-on was a smal-ler sci-mi-tar, blue with the daz-zle of its ar-ti-fi-ci-al at-mosp-he-re.

Brek to-uc-hed int-ri-ca-te cont-rols. The Mo-on slip-ped out of the cu-be. Earth grew—and tur-ned. So far had the auto-sight con-qu-ered ti-me and spa-ce. It sho-wed the pla-net’s Sun-ward si-de.

Earth fil-led the cu-be, inc-re-dibly re-al. The vast whi-te disk of one low-pres-su-re area lay upon the Pa-ci-fic’s glin-ting blue. Anot-her, blot-ting out the win-ter brown of North Ame-ri-ca, re-ac-hed to the bright gray cap of the arc-tic.

Softly, in the dim ro-om, a gong clan-ged. Nu-me-rals of whi-te fi-re flic-ke-red aga-inst the ima-age in the cu-be. An ar-row of red fla-me po-in-ted. At its po-int was a tiny fleck of black.

The gong throb-bed aga-in, and anot-her black mo-te ca-me up out of the clo-uds. A third fol-lo-wed. Pre-sently the-re we-re six. Watc-hing, Brek Ve-ro-nar felt a lit-tle stir of in-vo-lun-tary pri-de, a dim numb-ness of reg-ret.

Those six ves-sels we-re the mighty child-ren of Tony Grimm and Elo-ra, the figh-ting strength of Earth. Brek felt an ac-hing ten-se-ness in his thro-at, and te-ars stung his eyes. It was too bad that they had to be dest-ro-yed.

Tony wo-uld be abo-ard one of tho-se ships. Brek won-de-red how he wo-uld lo-ok, af-ter twenty ye-ars. Did his freck-les still show? Had he grown sto-ut? Did con-cent-ra-ti-on still plow lit-tle fur-rows bet-we-en his blue eyes?

Elo-ra—would she be with him? Brek knew she wo-uld. His mind saw the Mar-ti-an girl, slim and vi-vid and in-ten-se as ever. He tri-ed to thrust away the ima-ge. Ti-me must ha-ve chan-ged her. Pro-bably she lo-oked worn from the ye-ars of to-il and dan-ger; her dark eyes must ha-ve lost the-ir spark-le.

Brek had to for-get that tho-se six lit-tle blots rep-re-sen-ted the li-ves of Tony and Elo-ra, and the in-de-pen-den-ce of the Earth. They we-re only six lit-tle lumps of mat-ter, six tar-gets for the auto-sight.

He watc-hed them, ri-sing, swin-ging aro-und the hu-ge, lu-mi-no-us cur-ve of the pla-net. They we-re only six mat-he-ma-ti-cal po-ints, tra-cing world li-nes thro-ugh the con-ti-nu-um, ma-king a ge-ode-sic pat-tern for the analy-zers to un-ra-vel and the in-teg-ra-tors to pro-j-ect aga-inst the fu-tu-re—

The gong throb-bed aga-in.

Tense with ab-rupt ap-pre-hen-si-on, Brek ca-ught up a te-lep-ho-ne.

“Give me the Ast-rarch... An ur-gent re-port... No, the ad-mi-ral won’t do... Gor-ro, the auto-sight has pic-ked up the Earth fle-et... Yes, only six ships, just ta-king off from the Sun-ward fa-ce. But the-re is one alar-ming thing.”

Brek Ve-ro-nar was ho-ar-se, bre-ath-less. “Alre-ady, be-hind the pla-net, they ha-ve for-med a cru-ising li-ne. The axis ex-tends exactly in our di-rec-ti-on. That me-ans that they know our pre-ci-se po-si-ti-on, be-fo-re they ha-ve co-me in-to te-les-co-pic vi-ew. That sug-gests that Tony Grimm has in-ven-ted an auto-sight of his own!”

Strained ho-urs drag-ged by. The Ast-rarch’s fle-et de-ce-le-ra-ted, to circ-le and bom-bard the mot-her world, af-ter the bat-tle was do-ne. The Earth ships ca-me out at full nor-mal ac-ce-le-ra-ti-on.

“They must stop,” the Ast-rarch sa-id. “That is our ad-van-ta-ge. If they go by us at any gre-at ve-lo-city, we’ll ha-ve the pla-net bom-bed in-to sub-mis-si-on be-fo-re they can re-turn. They must turn back—and then we’ll pick them off.”

Puzzlingly, ho-we-ver, the Earth fle-et kept up ac-ce-le-ra-ti-on, and a slow ap-pre-hen-si-on grew in the he-art of Brek Ve-ro-nar. The-re was but one exp-la-na-ti-on. The Earth-men we-re sta-king the li-fe of the-ir pla-net on one bri-ef en-co-un-ter.

As if cer-ta-in of vic-tory!

The ho-ur of bat-tle ne-ared. Tight ach-ro-nic be-ams re-la-yed te-lep-ho-ned or-ders from the Ast-rarch’s chart-ro-om, and the fle-et dep-lo-yed in-to bat-tle for-ma-ti-on—into the sha-pe of an

im-men-se shal-low bowl, so that every pos-sib-le gun co-uld be tra-ined upon the enemy.

The ho-ur—and the ins-tant!

Startling in the hu-ge dim spa-ce that ho-used the auto-sight, crack-ling out abo-ve the whir-ring of the ach-ron-integ-ra-tor, the spe-aker that was the gre-at bra-in's vo-ice co-un-ted off the mi-nu-tes.

“Minus fo-ur—”

The auto-sight was set, the pick-ups tu-ned, the di-rec-tor re-lays tes-ted, a tho-usand de-ta-ils chec-ked. Be-hind the cont-rol tab-le, Brek Ve-ro-nar tri-ed to re-lax. His part was do-ne.

A spa-ce bat-tle was a conf-lict of mac-hi-nes. Hu-man be-ings we-re too puny, too slow, even to comp-re-hend the play of the ti-ta-nic for-ces they had set lo-ose. Brek tri-ed to re-mem-ber that he was the auto-sight's in-ven-tor; he fo-ught an op-pres-si-on of help-less dre-ad.

“Minus three—”

Sodium bombs fil-led the vo-id ahe-ad with vast sil-ver plu-mes and stre-amers—for the auto-sight re-mo-ved the ne-ed of te-les-co-pic eyes, and enab-led ships to fight from de-ep smo-ke scre-ens.

“Minus two—”

The two fle-ets ca-me to-get-her at a re-la-ti-ve ve-lo-city of twel-ve hund-red tho-usand mi-les an ho-ur. Ma-xi-mum use-ful ran-ge of twenty-inch guns, even with the auto-sight, was only twenty tho-usand mi-les in free spa-ce.

Which me-ant, Brek re-ali-zed, that the bat-tle co-uld last just two mi-nu-tes. In that bri-ef ti-me lay the des-ti-ni-es of Ast-rarchy and Earth—and Tony Grimm's and Elo-ra's and his own.

“Minus one—”

The so-di-um scre-ens ma-de lit-tle puffs and tra-ils of sil-ver in the gre-at black cu-be. The six Earth ships we-re vi-sib-le be-hind them, thro-ugh the ma-gic of the ach-ro-nic fi-eld pick-ups, now spa-ced in a clo-se ring, re-ady for ac-ti-on.

Brek Ve-ro-nar lo-oked down at the jewe-led chro-no-me-ter on his wrist—a gift from the Ast-rarch. Lis-te-ning to the ri-sing hum of the ach-ron-integ-ra-tors, he ca-ught his bre-ath, ten-sed ins-tinc-ti-vely.

“Zero!”

The *War-ri-or Qu-e-en* be-gan qu-ive-ring to her gre-at guns, a sal-vo of fo-ur fi-ring every half-se-cond. Brek bre-at-hed aga-in, wat-ching the chro-no-me-ter. That was all he had to do. And in two mi-nu-tes—

The ves-sel shud-de-red, and the lights went out. Si-rens wa-iled, and air val-ves clan-ged. The lights ca-me on, went off aga-in. And ab-ruptly the cu-be of the ste-reo scre-en was dark. The ach-ron-integ-ra-tors clat-te-red and stop-ped.

The guns ce-ased to thud.

“Power!” Brek gas-ped in-to a te-lep-ho-ne. “Gi-ve me po-wer! Emer-gency! The auto-sight has stop-ped and—”

But the te-lep-ho-ne was de-ad.

There we-re no mo-re hits. Smot-he-red in dark-ness, the gre-at ro-om re-ma-ined very si-lent. Af-ter an eter-nal ti-me, fe-eb-le emer-gency lights ca-me on. Brek lo-oked aga-in at his chro-no-me-ter, and knew that the bat-tle was en-ded.

But who the vic-tor?

He tri-ed to ho-pe that the bat-tle had be-en won be-fo-re so-me last chan-ce bro-ad-si-de crip-pled the flags-hip—until the Ast-rarch ca-me stumb-ling in-to the ro-om, lo-oking da-zed and pa-le.

“Crushed,” he mut-te-red. “You fa-iled me, Ve-ro-nar.”

“What are the los-ses?” whis-pe-red Brek.

“Everything.” The sha-ken ru-ler drop-ped we-a-rily at the cont-rol tab-le. “Yo-ur ach-ro-nic be-ams are de-ad. Fi-ve ships re-ma-in ab-le to re-port de-fe-at by ra-dio. Two of them ho-pe to ma-ke re-pa-irs.

“The *Qu-e-en* is di-sab-led. Re-ac-ti-on bat-te-ri-es shot away, and ma-in po-wer plant de-ad. Re-pa-ir is ho-pe-less. And our pre-sent or-bit will carry us far too clo-se to the Sun. No-ne of our ships ab-le to un-der-ta-ke res-cue. We'll be ba-ked ali-ve.”

His per-fu-med dark he-ad sank ho-pe-les-sly. “In tho-se two mi-nu-tes, the Ast-rarchy was dest-ro-yed.” His hol-low, smol-de-ring eyes lif-ted re-sent-ful-ly to Brek. “Just two mi-nu-tes!” He crus-hed a soft whi-te fist aga-inst the tab-le. “If ti-me co-uld be re-cap-tu-red—”

“How we-re we be-aten?” de-man-ded Brek. “I can’t un-ders-tand!”

“Marksmanship,” sa-id the ti-red Ast-rarch. “Tony Grimm has so-met-hing bet-ter than yo-ur auto-sight. He shot us to pi-eces be-fo-re we co-uld find the ran-ge.” His fa-ce was a pa-le mask of bit-ter-ness. “If my agents had emp-lo-yed him, twenty ye-ars ago, ins-te-ad of you—” He bit blo-od from his lip. “But the past can-not be chan-ged.”

Brek was sta-ring at the hu-ge, si-lent bulk of the auto-sight. “Per-haps”—he whis-pe-red—“it can be!”

Trembling, the Ast-rarch ro-se to clutch his arm. “You spo-ke of that be-fo-re,” gas-ped the agi-ta-ted ru-ler. “Then I wo-uldn’t lis-ten. But now—try anyt-hing you can, Ve-ro-nar. To sa-ve us from ro-as-ting ali-ve, at pe-ri-he-li-on. Do you re-al-ly think—”

The Ast-rarch sho-ok his pa-le he-ad. “I’m the mad-man,” he whis-pe-red. “To spe-ak of chan-ging even two mi-nu-tes of the past!” His hol-low eyes clung to Brek. “Tho-ugh you ha-ve do-ne ama-zing things, Ve-ro-nar.”

The Earth-man con-ti-nu-ed to sta-re at his hu-ge cre-ati-on. “The auto-sight it-self bro-ught me one clue, be-fo-re the bat-tle,” he bre-at-hed slowly. “The de-tec-tor fi-elds ca-ught a be-am of Tony Grimm’s, and analy-zed the fre-qu-en-ci-es. He’s using ach-ro-nic ra-di-ati-on a who-le oc-ta-ve hig-her than anyt-hing I’ve tri-ed. That must be the way to the sen-si-ti-vity and pe-net-ra-ti-on I ha-ve ho-ped for.”

Hope flic-ke-red in the Ast-rarch’s eyes. “You be-li-eve you can sa-ve us? How?”

“If the high-fre-qu-ency be-am can se-arch out the de-ter-mi-ner fac-tors,” Brek told him, “it might be pos-si-ble to al-ter them, with a suf-fi-ci-ently po-wer-ful fi-eld. Re-mem-ber that we de-al with pro-ba-bi-li-ti-es, not with ab-so-lu-tes. And that small fac-tors can de-ter-mi-ne vast re-sults.

“The pick-ups will ha-ve to be re-bu-ilt. And we’ll ha-ve to ha-ve po-wer. Po-wer to pro-j-ect the tra-cer fi-elds. And a ri-ver of po-wer—if we can tra-ce out a de-ci-si-ve fac-tor and at-tempt to chan-ge it. But the po-wer plants are de-ad.”

“Rebuild yo-ur pick-ups,” the Ast-rarch told him. “And you’ll ha-ve po-wer—if I ha-ve to march every man abo-ard in-to the con-ver-si-on fur-na-ces, for fu-el.”

Calm aga-in, and con-fi-dent, the short man sur-ve-yed the tall, ga-unt Earth-man with won-de-ring eyes.

“You’re a stran-ge in-di-vi-du-al, Ve-ro-nar,” he sa-id. “Figh-ting ti-me and des-tiny to crush the pla-net of yo-ur birth! It isn’t stran-ge that men call you the Re-ne-ga-de.”

Silent for a mo-ment, Brek sho-ok his hag-gard he-ad. “I don’t want to be ba-ked ali-ve,” he sa-id at last. “Gi-ve me po-wer—and we’ll fight that bat-tle aga-in.”

The wreck drop-ped Sun-ward. A sco-re of ex-pert tech-ni-ci-ans to-iled, un-der Brek’s ex-pert di-rec-ti-on, to re-const-ruct the ach-ro-nic pick-ups. And a hund-red men la-bo-red, be-ne-ath the ruth-less eye of the Ast-rarch him-self, to re-pa-ir the da-ma-ged ato-mic con-ver-ters.

They had cros-sed the or-bit of Ve-nus, when the auto-sight ca-me back to hum-ming li-fe. The Ast-rarch was stan-ding be-si-de Brek, at the cur-ved cont-rol tab-le. The sha-dow of do-ubt had re-tur-ned to his red-de-ned, sle-ep-less eyes. “Now,” he de-man-ded, “what can you do abo-ut the bat-tle?”

“Nothing, di-rectly,” Brek ad-mit-ted. “First we must se-arch the past. We must find the fac-tor that ca-used Tony Grimm to in-vent a bet-ter auto-sight than mi-ne. With the high-fre-qu-ency fi-eld—and the full po-wer of the ship’s con-ver-ters, if ne-ed be—we must re-ver-se that fac-tor. Then the bat-tle sho-uld ha-ve a dif-fe-rent out-co-me.”

The ach-ron-integ-ra-tors whir-red, as Brek ma-ni-pu-la-ted the cont-rols, and the hu-ge black cu-be be-gan to flic-ker with the pas-sa-ge of ghostly ima-ges. Symbols of co-lo-red fi-re flas-hed and va-nis-hed wit-hin it.

“Well?” an-xi-o-usly ras-ped the Ast-rarch.

“It works!” Brek as-su-red him. “The tra-cer fi-elds are fol-lo-wing all the world li-nes that in-ter-sec-ted at the bat-tle, back ac-ross the months and ye-ars. The analy-zers will iso-la-te the smal-lest—and hen-ce most easily al-te-red—essen-ti-al fac-tor.”

The Ast-rarch grip-ped his sho-ul-der. “The-re—in the cu-be—yo-ur-self!”

The ghostly sha-pe of the Earth-man flic-ke-red out, and ca-me aga-in. A hund-red ti-mes, Brek Ve-ro-nar glimpsed him-self in the cu-be. Usu-al-ly the sce-ne was the gre-at ar-se-nal la-bo-ra-tory, at Ast-rop-hon. Al-ways he was dif-fe-rently gar-bed, al-ways yo-un-ger.

Then the backg-ro-und shif-ted. Brek ca-ught his bre-ath as he re-cog-ni-zed glimps-es of bar-ren, stony, oc-her-co-lo-red hills, and low, yel-low ado-be bu-il-dings. He gas-ped to see a freck-led, red-ha-ired yo-uth and a slim, tan-ned, dark-eyed girl.

“That’s on Mars!” he whis-pe-red. “At To-ran. He’s Tony Grimm. And she’s Elo-ra Ro-nee—the Mar-ti-an girl we lo-ved.”

The ra-cing flic-ker ab-ruptly stop-ped, upon one fro-zen tab-le-au. A bench on the dusty cam-pus, aga-inst a low ado-be wall. Elo-ra Ro-nee, with a pi-le of bo-oks prop-ped on her kne-es to sup-port pen and pa-per. Her dark eyes we-re sta-ning away ac-ross the cam-pus, and her sun-brown fa-ce lo-oked ten-se and tro-ub-led.

In the hu-ge dim ro-om abo-ard the wrec-ked wars-hip, a gong thro-b-ed softly. A red ar-row fla-med in the cu-be, po-in-ting down at the no-te on the girl’s knee. Cryptic symbols flas-hed abo-ve it. And Brek re-ali-zed that the hum-ming of the ach-ron-integ-ra-tors had stop-ped.

“What’s this?” ras-ped the an-xi-o-us Ast-rarch. “A scho-ol-girl wri-ting a no-te—what has she to do with a spa-ce bat-tle?”

Brek scan-ned the fi-ery symbols. “She was de-ci-ding the bat-tle—that day twenty ye-ars ago!” His vo-ice rang with ela-ti-on. “You see, she had a da-te to go dan-cing in To-ran with Tony Grimm that night. But her fat-her was gi-ving a spe-ci-al lec-tu-re on the new the-ori-es of ach-ro-nic for-ce. Tony bro-ke the da-te, to at-tend the lec-tu-re.”

As Brek watc-hed the mo-ti-on-less ima-ge in the cu-be, his vo-ice tur-ned a lit-tle husky. “Elo-ra was angry—that was be-fo-re she knew Tony very well. I had as-ked her for a da-te. And, at the mo-ment you see, she has just writ-ten a no-te, to say that she wo-uld go dan-cing with me.”

Brek gul-ped. “But she is un-de-ci-ded, you see. Be-ca-use she lo-ves Tony. A very lit-tle wo-uld ma-ke her te-ar up the no-te to me, and wri-te anot-her to Tony, to say that she wo-uld go to the lec-tu-re with him.”

The Ast-rarch sta-red ca-da-ve-ro-usly. “But how co-uld that de-ci-de the bat-tle?”

“In the past that we ha-ve li-ved,” Brek told him, “Elo-ra sent the no-te to me. I went dan-cing with her, and mis-sed the lec-tu-re. Tony at-ten-ded it—and got the germ idea that fi-nal-ly ca-used his auto-sight to be bet-ter than mi-ne.

“But, if she had writ-ten to Tony ins-te-ad, he wo-uld ha-ve of-fe-red, out of cont-ri-ti-on, to cut the lec-tu-re—so the analy-zers in-di-ca-te. I sho-uld ha-ve at-ten-ded the lec-tu-re in Tony’s pla-ce, and my auto-sight wo-uld ha-ve be-en su-pe-ri-or in the end.”

The Ast-rarch’s wa-xen he-ad nod-ded slowly. “But—can you re-al-ly chan-ge the past?”

Brek pa-used for a mo-ment, so-lemnly. “We ha-ve all the po-wer of the ship’s con-ver-ters,” he sa-id at last. “We ha-ve the high-fre-qu-ency ach-ro-nic fi-eld, as a le-ver thro-ugh which to apply it. Su-rely, with the mil-li-ons of ki-lo-wat-ts to spend, we can sti-mu-la-te a few cells in a scho-ol-girl’s bra-in. We shall see.”

His long, pa-le fin-gers mo-ved swiftly over the cont-rol keys. At last, de-li-be-ra-tely, he to-uc-hed a gre-en but-ton. The con-ver-ters whis-pe-red aga-in thro-ugh the si-lent ship. The ach-ron-integ-ra-tors whir-red aga-in. Be-yond, gi-ant trans-for-mers be-gan to whi-ne.

And that still tab-le-au ca-me to sud-den li-fe.

Elo-ra Ro-nee to-re up the no-te that be-gan, “De-ar Bill—” Brek and the Ast-rarch le-aned for-ward, as her tremb-ling fin-gers swiftly wro-te: “De-ar Tony—I’m so sorry that I was angry. May I co-me with you to fat-her’s lec-tu-re? To-night—”

The ima-ge fa-ded.

“Minus fo-ur—”

The me-tal-lic rasp of the spe-aker bro-ught Brek Ve-ro-nar to him-self with a start. Co-uld he ha-ve be-en do-zing—with con-tact just fo-ur mi-nu-tes away? He sho-ok him-self. He had a qu-e-er, unp-le-asant fe-eling—as if he had for-got-ten a night-ma-re dre-am in which the bat-tle was fo-ught and lost.

He rub-bed his eyes, scan-ned the cont-rol bo-ard. The auto-sight was set, the pick-ups we-re tu-ned, the di-rec-tor re-lays tes-ted. His part was do-ne. He tri-ed to re-lax the puz-zling ten-si-on in him.

“Minus three—”

Sodium bombs fil-led the vo-id ahe-ad with vast sil-ver plu-mes and stre-amers. Sta-ring in-to the black cu-be of the scre-en, Brek fo-und on-ce mo-re the six tiny black mo-tes of Tony Grimm’s ships. He co-uldn’t help an une-asy sha-ke of his he-ad.

Was Tony mad? Why didn’t he ve-er asi-de, de-lay the con-tact? Scat-te-red in spa-ce, his ships co-uld harry the Ast-rarchy’s com-mer-ce, and in-ter-rupt bom-bard-ment of the Earth. But, in a he-ad-on bat-tle, they we-re do-omed.

Brek lis-te-ned to the qu-i-et hum of the ach-ron-integ-ra-tors. Un-der the-se con-di-ti-ons, the new auto-sight ga-ve an ac-cu-racy of fi-re of forty per-cent. Even if Tony’s gun-ner-y was per-fect, the odds we-re still two to one aga-inst him.

“Minus two—”

Two mi-nu-tes! Brek lo-oked down at the jewe-led chro-no-me-ter on his wrist. For a mo-ment he had an odd fe-eling that the de-sign was un-fa-mi-li-ar. Stran-ge, when he had worn it for twenty ye-ars.

The di-al blur-red a lit-tle. He re-mem-be-red the day that Tony and Elo-ra ga-ve it to him—the day he left the uni-ver-sity to co-me to Ast-rop-hon. It was too ni-ce a gift. Ne-it-her of them had much mo-ney.

He won-de-red if Tony had ever gu-es-sed his lo-ve for Elo-ra. Pro-bably it was bet-ter that she had al-ways dec-li-ned his at-ten-ti-ons. No sha-dow of je-alo-usy had ever co-me over the-ir fri-ends-hip.

“Minus one—”

This wo-uldn’t do! Half ang-rily, Brek jer-ked his eyes back to the scre-en. Still, ho-we-ver, in the sil-very so-di-um clo-uds, he saw the fa-ces of Tony and Elo-ra. Still he co-uldn’t for-get the odd-ly un-fa-mi-li-ar pres-su-re of the chro-no-me-ter on his wrist—it was li-ke the soft to-uch of Elo-ra’s fin-gers, when she had fas-te-ned it the-re.

Suddenly the black flecks in the scre-en we-re not tar-gets any mo-re. Brek ca-ught a long gas-ping bre-ath. Af-ter all, he was an Earth-man. Af-ter twenty ye-ars in the Ast-rarch’s ge-ne-ro-us pay, this ti-me-pi-ece was still his most pre-ci-o-us pos-ses-si-on.

His gray eyes nar-ro-wed grimly. Wit-ho-ut the auto-sight, the Ast-rarch’s fle-et wo-uld be ut-ter-ly blind in the so-di-um clo-uds. Gi-ven any sort of ach-ron-ic ran-ge fin-der, Tony Grimm co-uld wi-pe it out.

Brek’s ga-unt body tremb-led. De-ath, he knew, wo-uld be the su-re pe-nalty. In the bat-tle or af-ter-ward—it didn’t mat-ter. He knew that he wo-uld ac-cept it wit-ho-ut reg-ret.

“Zero!”

The ach-ron-integ-ra-tors we-re whir-ring bu-sily, and the *War-ri-or Qu-e-en* qu-ive-red to the first sal-vo of her guns. Then Brek’s clenched fists ca-me down on the ca-re-ful-ly set key-bo-ard. The auto-sight stop-ped hum-ming. The guns ce-ased to fi-re.

Brek pic-ked up the Ast-rarch’s te-lep-ho-ne. “I’ve stop-ped the auto-sight.” His vo-ice was qu-i-et and low. “It is qu-ite im-pos-si-ble to set it aga-in in two mi-nu-tes.”

The te-lep-ho-ne clic-ked and was de-ad.

The ves-sel shud-de-red and the lights went out. Si-rens wa-iled. Air val-ves clan-ged. The lights ca-me on, went off aga-in. Pre-sen-tly, the-re we-re no mo-re hits. Smot-he-red in dark-ness, the gre-at

ro-om re-ma-ined very si-lent.

The tiny ra-cing tick of the chro-no-me-ter was the only so-und.

After an eter-nal ti-me, fe-eb-le emer-gency lights ca-me on. The Ast-rarch ca-me stumb-ling in-to the ro-om, lo-oking da-zed and pa-le.

A gro-up of spa-ce-men fol-lo-wed him. The-ir stric-ken, angry fa-ces ma-de an odd cont-rast with the-ir gay uni-forms. Be-fo-re the-ir ven-ge-ful hat-red, Brek felt cold and ill. But the Ast-rarch stop-ped the-ir omi-no-us ad-van-ce.

“The Earth-man has do-omed him-self as well,” the sha-ken ru-ler told them. “The-re’s not much mo-re that you can do. And cer-ta-inly no has-te abo-ut it.”

He left them mut-te-ring at the do-or and ca-me slowly to Brek.

“Crushed,” he whis-pe-red. “You dest-ro-yed me, Ve-ro-nar.” A tremb-ling hand wi-ped at the pa-le wa-xen mask of his fa-ce. “Everyt-hing is lost. The *Qu-e-en* di-sab-led. No-ne of our ships ab-le to un-der-ta-ke res-cue. We’ll be ba-ked ali-ve.”

His hol-low eyes sta-red dully at Brek. “In tho-se two mi-nu-tes, you dest-ro-yed the Ast-rarchy.” His vo-ice se-emed me-re-ly ti-red, stran-gely wit-ho-ut bit-ter-ness. “Just two mi-nu-tes,” he mur-mu-red we-arily. “If ti-me co-uld be re-cap-tu-red—”

“Yes,” Brek sa-id, “I stop-ped the auto-sight.” He lif-ted his ga-unt sho-ul-ders de-fi-antly, and met the me-na-cing sta-res of the spa-ce-men. “And they can do not-hing abo-ut it!”

“Can you?” Ho-pe flic-ke-red in the Ast-rarch’s eyes.

“Once you told me, Ve-ro-nar, that the past co-uld be chan-ged. Then I wo-uldn’t lis-ten. But now—try anyt-hing you can. You might be ab-le to sa-ve yo-ur-self from the unp-le-asant-ness that my men are plan-ning.”

Looking at the mut-te-ring men, Brek sho-ok his he-ad. “I was mis-ta-ken,” he sa-id de-li-be-ra-tely. “I fa-iled to ta-ke ac-co-unt of the two-way na-tu-re of ti-me. But the fu-tu-re, I see now, is as re-al as the past. Asi-de from the di-rec-ti-on of ent-ropy chan-ge and the flow of cons-ci-o-us-ness, fu-tu-re and past can-not be dis-tin-gu-is-hed.

“The fu-tu-re de-ter-mi-nes the past, as much as the past do-es the fu-tu-re. It is pos-sib-le to tra-ce out the de-ter-mi-ner fac-tors, and even, with suf-fi-ci-ent po-wer, to ca-use a lo-cal def-lec-ti-on of the ge-ode-sics. But world li-nes are fi-xed in the fu-tu-re, as ri-gidly as in the past. Ho-we-ver the fac-tors are re-ar-ran-ged, the end re-sult will al-ways be the sa-me.”

The Ast-rarch’s wa-xen fa-ce was ruth-less. “Then, Ve-ro-nar, you are do-omed.”

Slowly, Brek smi-led. “Don’t call me Ve-ro-nar,” he sa-id softly. “I re-mem-be-red, just in ti-me, that I am Wil-li-am Webs-ter, Earth-man. You can kill me in any way you ple-ase. But the de-fe-at of the Ast-rarchy and the new fre-edom of Earth are fi-xed in ti-me—fo-re-ver.”

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