

Per Stratagem

By Robert Chilson

To the true barbarians, Truth and Justice mean supporting a strong, victorious leader. It's not that they lack loyalty—they are loyal to Truth and Justice.

The sound burst on Rahjika at the speed of light, swelling from an infinitesimal whisper he had not consciously heard, to an ear-straining, wide-ranging yell in mere seconds—as if the others were hurtling toward him at appalling speeds. Which might, he thought grimly, be the case. However, once the sound reached that incredible volume, it grew no louder. It was coming from somewhere above him—ahead of him on his line of flight—and from south of the ecliptic. About thirty degrees off, in both directions, he thought, scanning space swiftly. The sound was not as loud as it seemed; much of the volume was illusion: it had to be *very* loud to be heard at this distance. There were no ships near.

For it had to be a ship. It had to be more than that—it had to be one of the ships from Outside. The output from it was all amplitude modulated, sounding like an agonized cry, or a roar of anger, or a bellowing mating call—some intense emotion of some titanic beast. There was no intelligence in it, and though it varied second by second, it remained curiously the same.

Rahjika cut his exhaust, then his acceleration. His cone-shaped head eased in its circular collar, but he held it rigid, not to lose his bearings. His body elongated from the spherical high-acceleration shape into its normal egg shape. At his posterior end, his exhaust jet, a conical bone and horn organ, turned sideways at right angles to his line of flight. A short, sharp spurt of exhaust caused him to tumble slowly, anterior and posterior tentacles extending, their receptors listening to space.

Another spurt of exhaust stopped his rotation, a cloud of steam expanding, instantly shot through with crystals of ice and carbon dioxide, which latter as quickly evaporated. He applied a tiny fraction of his normal cruising acceleration, just enough to keep him from tumbling; it would take hours to brake down to zero from his velocity, even at full. The Outsider ship was now somewhere below him. He raised his head on its long neck and tilted it to look after over the swelling horny curve of his body.

His posterior tentacles picked up the astonishing vocal range of the ship; much of it was of too long a wavelength to be detected by the ears in his head.

He took time out for thought. If this was indeed an Outsider ship, it was important that it be captured for the Sidilikah Swarm. It was known that two other such ships had been captured—by none other than the Swarm's worse enemy, the Dahjilahdim Swarm. It was only a matter of time until the larger of the two be brought against the Sikah. This could not be it; the Dahdim were still fighting among themselves. The smaller one was known to have been destroyed accidentally, along with a number of the Dahdim Swarmheads. The ships obviously had great powers, but how much of what they'd learned was truth, exaggeration, or outright lie could no be known.

He made up his mind, fully aware of the consequences of error: he would attempt to seize this ship—alone. True, his very ignorance might kill him. But he was familiar with the language of the Outsiders; he, of all the Sikah's Intelligence Offices, had penetrated closest to the Dahdim's Outsider ship—though he had never seen it. And lastly, he was Rahjika, the Sikah's youngest, ablest, and most ambitious Captain of Intelligence.

His hearts began to race, sending energy-rich blood swirling through his vocal organs. Straining every nerve, he forced his voice up to the incredibly high frequency of pulses the Outsiders used, a shrill

scream, one word repeated: "Help! Help! Help!" Pulse-modulated; unmistakably intelligent. Its volume was as nothing to the output of the ship, but it should be detectable thought it. Sending out that shrill call, he had time for a few moments of uneasy wonder as to what kind of animals could be making such fantastic noise.

He suppressed the incipient fear. He had reached his present high position partly because, early in life, he had developed the ability to push all doubt and fears into the lower part of his mind, allowing him to deal with the situation on a rational basis. Once the situation had been resolved the doubts rarely recurred.

It was obvious, he told himself, that the Outsiders had bred up some very special draft animals to propel their ships. He had heard that, unlike the ships of the didahdin, they could actually accelerate *faster* than a lone individual.

Pounding back through the bellowing of the ship's draft animals came a cold, hard, precise voice; a voice so utterly emotionless that even Rahjika of Sidilikah Intelligence all but quailed. Even as his tentacles extended, their nerves picking up and triangulating on the beam, another quaver of uneasiness uncoiled in him. This was the antithesis of that mindless bawling. Those knife-edged signals might have been impressed on the ether by cold steel and crystal rather than blood, nerve, and horn. He literally could detect *no* rounding of the pulses; they were as absolutely square as it was possible to be. Had the Outsiders also bred animals for communicating? Surely it must be, he thought, shaken.

The signal, in Outsider code, was : "Identify yourself. Identify yourself."

He hesitated for several seconds, then sent back "Rahjika of Sidilikah Swarm." On every repetition he used a different synonym for "Swarm." There were a number of these in the book he had stolen from the Dahdim, but as none had been translated satisfactorily, he had no idea which was nearest. He guessed that the Outsider's social organization was quite different from that of the more advanced didahdin. Aside from that, only the operator "of" would be meaningful to them, but the structure would suggest a name. They would undoubtedly be suspicious-they'd lost two ships in the Inner Sphere within a Sika year-but this encounter should also suggest an opportunity to learn of them.

"What are you? What are you? What are you?"

Rahjika listened to it, shaken. Triangulating again on the beam, he calculated that the other ship was making somewhere between ten and a hundred times his present velocity. At his top acceleration-both of them-it would take a week of maneuvering for them to match velocities. He couldn't begin to survive a week of high acceleration without food.

He was taking a desperate enough chance as it was, though he was not given to worrying much about such things, in taking this hop across the system. He was taking a chord across the Inner Sphere, foregoing the possibility of stopping and eating on the way. Even drifting for days between cutoff and reverse would still leave him exhausted and ravenous when he braked down to zero in Dahdim territory. Only his superlative physical development made it possible.

His only hope must be that the Outsiders really could maneuver at very high accelerations-high enough to offset the difference in their velocities.

Again he answered. Their question had two possible meanings; he gave the answer least damaging to himself. It was also the one they'd be most interested in hearing, he thought; it was a question how much the Outsiders knew of the people of the Inner Sphere. It was important that he stay near to the truth until he knew how much they knew. "A member of the didahdin-the Fifth Race," he said.

A comparatively long time passed, and he thought of the captain and staff officers discussing the encounter. The conference would be exhaustive, in view of the strangeness of the situation to them, but it could only have one conclusion.

Another signal came long before the conference could have ended. Naturally they would attempt to learn as much as possible before taking action.

"Are you in danger?"

"Negative. Alert only." Rahjikh repeated that several times while he considered his next words. "I have information of great value to Outsiders," he added.

"We wish to learn of other Outsiders in this System," came the cold voice. "Have you any information on them?"

"Affirmative. General knowledge only. Can you match velocities with me?"

"Affirmative. Matching velocities; contact, twenty-five minutes. You know our code," came that chill voice, "yet you have only general knowledge of other Outsiders."

"I learned it from a book," he told them absently. He had translated the Outsiders' time measurements into didahdin and was aghast. It was not possible; flesh and blood could not stand it. It meant accelerating at hundreds of times his absolute top. Perhaps his original estimates of distance and direction were off. In that case it must be a very loud, small ship close to him. He could not yet pick up an echo form it, but surely its exhaust would be visible. The draft exhaust would be visible. The draft animals would have considerable exhaust, and they were close enough to the sun for it to be clearly visible.

He had been hearing pulses form the Outsider's echo-sounding organ for some time-it must be another specially-bred animal. Like the voice, the pulses had absolute precision. To the limit of his detection, the pulses were exactly as long as one wavelength of the continuous wave. It would be marvelous for doppler.

Presumably the ship had better detection than he did, but as he was quite small and it large, he expected to detect it before it did him.

The bellowing of the draft animals had been growing louder and louder, seemingly, astonishingly, to be coming from half the sky, as if the ship was hundreds of miles in diameter, but then it abruptly faded to half its former strength, continuing to fade to a mere murmur. The weak pulses from the ship grew noticeably stronger, but were still as weak as I it were at an enormous distance-but his own pulses began to be echoed back to him from close by, seeming very strong and very fuzzy beside the ship's. Rahjikh had a moment of pure astonishment as he realized that the ship probably had had him in detection probably from the moment he first heard its sounding pulses. On such low volume!

Then he was overwhelmed by his own echoes, proclaiming the ship to be huge beyond comprehension. He glared in its direction, made out a star, moving. At that distance he saw it. Even if it was mirror-plated for some insane reason, it shouldn't be so visible. But as it drove deliberately toward him, swelling and swelling apparently without limit, he was forced to admit that it was as big as it seemed. Its density was not too high, about twice that of ice, yet it must have massed a million of the Outsider's tons. It literally was as big as some inhabited islands he had seen. Sidilikah Central and such large planets were millions of times as missive, of course, enough to hole comae of gas around them. But this was a ship!

His thoughts were interrupted by a sudden feeling of disorientation. Space seemed to pulse around him, as if a wave-front of electromagnetic distortion from a solar flare had swept through the area. In that

moment of mental blankness, the faint sounds of the draft animals seemed to pass through his position and were pinched off. Groping in astonishment, he noted vaguely that the magnetic field had changed and had a moment of panic as he realized that his automatic awareness of his relation to the Sun was no longer valid.

Then the spherical Outsider ship loomed awesomely below, and beside him. Shoving back his fear for the moment, he signaled, "Cutting acceleration."

"matching. Cut acceleration."

He did so and it grew slightly, performed a tiny wobble, and froze. No ship he had ever seen could have cut acceleration so smoothly. Without even the slightest roll; every draft animal must have cut in the same tenth of a second!

Space rang with eerie silence, in which the tiny, precise pulses from the ship's echo-sounder seemed lost. Rahjika took several seconds to assimilate all that he had seen, re-think his earlier thoughts, and come to the same conclusion: he must take this ship. The Sikah Swarm would be exterminated if the Dahdim brought such a ship against them. Besides, *if* he could seize it...

That conclusion was grimmer than ever now that he had an idea of what he was going up against—there must be thousands of Outsiders inside—but the hope of advancement became a flare of intense excitement at the thought of having such a ship at his command. What he could do!...

"Opening forward air lock," came the ship's voice, every pulse at this rang, like being struck by a micrometeoroid. A hole appeared in the featureless armor near the upper pole of the sphere.

The term meant nothing to Rahjika; he had assumed that the smooth hull was armor, to ward off boarders, and was feeling rather critical as he dived for the "air lock"; he preferred *his* ships with less armor to get in the way of the catapults and gearguns. Presumably they'd have to shift armor plates to shoot. The ship would have to maneuver as fast as he thought it could—he was still uncertain just how fast that was to avoid being boarded. But a crew of Dahdim could not stand that. He's have to make some alterations, he decided, after he took it.

The instant he entered the "air lock," the massive ship leaped forward at bear his top acceleration, nearly crushing him against smooth deck. The opening in the hull snapped shut like a mouth, armor sliding in from every side to seal it. And at the same instant, gas poured into the room from some undetectable source.

It all happened so fast that only Rahjika, perhaps, of all the Sikah Swarm outside of the Innermost Orbit, could have survived the trap. He slammed on full acceleration along the axis of the ship, ignoring the closing of the entrance and the gas until he had adapted to the acceleration. He cut his acceleration little by little, extending his four posterior tentacles, coiling their ends into feet, allowing his weight to come on them. He had to line them straight down rather than out at an angle, accepting instability to achieve load-bearing capacity. The most he could carry was half his weight. He knew that he could not take such acceleration for many days.

The gas came next. The Dahdim were equipped with chemosensors. He extended his anterior tentacles and sniffed. Oxygen. High percentage, perhaps a quarter. There was something inert there, but it was odorless and unfamiliar. Water vapor, carbon dioxide—there ought to be much more of them if this was the exhaust from the ship's draft animals. And what kind of animals excreted oxygen? Further, there was nothing sulfurous or nitrogenous. No; it must, as he had at first thought, be meant to kill him.

It might do just that, given time enough. Elemental oxygen was vicious stuff, worse than ammonia. But his armor and tough skin could take it for a while. The gas was more dangerous for two other reasons. One was the pressure, already at incredible heights and going higher. His horny exoskeleton creak as pressure forced the plates together; the almost painful pressure in his bladders eased—he had cut all exhaust when the Outsider began to match velocity. He felt the pressure in his head; even his armor did not keep his gut from being squeezed.

And the heat! His body temperature, already high since he had cut his exhaust, began a slow but inexorable climb, accelerated by the brutal exertion he was under merely to stand, that could only have one end. Already he was feverish. The combination of physical assaults was too much. He cracked his armor open, expanded his radiators between the shields, feeling the psychosomatic burning as the gas reached them. His relief was slight; the gas did not take up energy very fast, though his body was above its temperature.

And then entered the Outsiders and his mind steadied to his grim purpose, made more intense now by the absolute necessity of seizing control of the ship *soon*.

Snapping his armor shut again, he stared at them a moment before speaking. Instead of a normal animal shape for the Inner Sphere—roughly spherical or oval—they were shaped roughly like narrow cylinders, bulging here and punched there, with blocky cubes for heads on short, thick necks. He had at least expected a rational shape—hell, he had expected them to be *people!* Like himself, a thick five-foot spine, consisting of an organic gravitronic motor of specialized nerve matter strung through a rigid lattice of bone, around which was wrapped slabs of electrogenerative tissue fed by massive arteries and from which came great metaliferous leads to the top and bottom ends of the spine. Circular collars at both ends, connected to the spine by bone yokes, from which extended the spars or vertical ribs. At the shoulder curves two more circular collars of bone yoked to the spars, and the horny shields of the exoskeleton suspended from them. The armor was echinodermous.

Conical head with rounded base, exactly fitting the curve of horn over the collar bone; the top two thirds of the head was mouth, with razor-sharp edges to the three jaws. The jaws made a perfect cone, heavily armored with horn and bone and powerfully muscled. Below it, the two eyes, shaped like capsules in cross section and wrapped each a third around the head, giving him a full circle of vision. They were black and horny appearing, with deep-shot yellow lights. Upper brain in the base of the skull, of course; lower brain just below the collar bone. Digestive apparatus wound around and around the spine, under the armor and spars. Eight tentacles, carried coiled under shields at the corner of his body, anchored to anterior and posterior shoulder bones.

His body was radially symmetrical for balance, whereas these, he concluded numbly, were bilaterally symmetrical. The irregular cylinders that were their bodies were carried on two massive limbs bulging with muscles. Adding to them the wide of the skeletal yoke and attendant muscles that attached to the Outsiders' spines, nearly half their length and mass was made up by these massive support limbs.

The bodies flattened at the anterior end, the should not a circle but a straight line at right angles to their line of flight. From them hung two anterior limbs, though these were shorter than Rahjika's tentacles, the larger Outsider's were as massive and strong as any three of them. The small one's anterior limbs were perhaps as massive as two. Or perhaps they were stronger than they seemed. He had two quite prominent bulges near the point at which they were connected. They could be driver muscles. This one also had much more prominent bulges associated with the support limbs, and those were definitely muscles.

For they were utterly without armor of any sort, and even their skin seemed soft. The skin of the big one was a uniform dull gray, a curiously difficult color to focus on except at the ends of the anterior tentacles

and the neck, where it changed to an even paler color, a light, light brown like that of some tender plants. The smaller one was amazingly brilliant green.

The heads were covered with a strange substance, perhaps artificial; it resembled plant fibers but was so ordered as to seem all of a piece. In the case of the smaller one it was a deep glossy black with a high sheen, pulled sharply down by the acceleration almost to the shoulder. On the larger it was dark brown, about the shade of his armor, and was much shorter, following the shape of his head.

The front part of their heads-if they were bilaterally symmetrical like plants, they must have front and back-was flat, with two holes containing gleaming organs that might be eyes, plus a confusion of fleshy organs. A slit-shaped, very small mouth was carried near the neck.

They entered the room by *striding*, folding one support limb and reaching forward with hit while remaining precariously balanced on the other, not unlike the locomotion of plants and lower animals with rudimentary motors on planets. But he was struck by the clumsiness of it; a fall under the acceleration would be fatal-the heads were on top and would be moving quite rapidly by the time they reached the deck, though the biggest one's only came up to his shoulder bone. Too, their size, considering the smallness of the mouth, indicated that the brain was in one unit-and that not even armored. Or armored only lightly; there was bone all around it, but he thought it must be very thin.

The momentary silence had drawn out into a number of seconds as he and the Outsiders absorbed the details of each other's appearance. Then Rahjikhah, his urgency returning with a rush, said, "Quickly! Take me to your captain! I have important information!"

The echoes of his harsh, strained voice were partially absorbed by the walls, which appeared to be of bone or horn; no armor of any sort here. The outer hull was different. But he could tell that there were no voice pipes open here; he would not be overheard, though there might be periscopes.

After a moment, the big one's mouth worked oddly and simultaneously he began to speak, his voice-that incredibly cold voice-coming from his anterior limb, near the end of it. Rahjikhah noted that the Outsider's voice lacked much of the precision of the ship's com animal's; the pulse length was not equal to the wavelength. Even so, it was utterly emotionless.

"I am Captain Marshal Irons. Mark for short. And this is Sheila Evica."

Rahjikhah uncoiled his tentacles at that word, even as the other Outsider began to speak. He was wearing no mail; steel was too heavy to drag a quarter across the Inner Sphere; he had in fact only a couple of knives, a dart gun, and a noosewhip for hunting slung over his shoulder. But even as he gripped them, his digits and whole tentacle straining under their new weight, a thought as to the softness of the Outsider's skins recurred.

He tipped his exhaust jet up toward them against that brutal drag and sprayed them with his overheated exhaust. His temperature dropped appreciably, though he had been afraid the jet would merely dribble under this pressure. Certainly the gas in the small room cut deeply into its efficiency. But it disabled the Outsiders completely.

Blinding or confusing with exhaust was the oldest gambits in combat, one so common he had never known it to have much effect. But as droplets of liquid water, held in suspension by the gas and its temperature, evaporated, he saw that they were, amazingly, down on the deck, having fallen backwards, and were still conscious. Their whole bodies had bent in the middle and he realized that they had caught themselves before their heads had hit the surface.

Their bodies were wracked by convulsions and at first he was alarmed, but the damage, though serious, did not seem to be either fatal or permanent. Perhaps they had swallowed some of the exhaust. Certainly it affected their eyes, from which streams of water, or a similar fluid, came.

"Do not move," he told them grimly. "You are my captives. Any attempt at resistance will bring instant death." He wished uneasily that he knew their language well enough to make his threats seem more effective to them.

"Well, now we know what happened to the other ships," came the big one's voice, sounding unmoved though his body was still heaving with pain.

"What do you want? What are you going to do with us?"

Only the fact that this voice came from the smaller one's limb enabled Rahjikhah to tell that it was his voice. The voice was not just as emotionless and unmoved as the captain's, it was identical to it. Every single nuance was duplicated.

Rahjikhah pushed away the discovery for the moment, saying "I am seizing this ship. If you cooperate, you will live. If not..."

"But there's-"

"Very well, what are your orders-Rahjikhah of Sidilikah Swarm?"

Ignoring the small one's-Sheila Evica's-abortive comment, he said, "First, we must seize control of the bridge. How many-of you-are there in it?" This captain, Marshall Irons-was that name translated right?-was a more dangerous one, he reminded himself. Already he had adapted to his new situation, as rapidly as Rahjikhah himself could have.

"There is only one man-we call ourselves-in it."

Rahjikhah was dumbfounded; on so large a ship there should have been hundreds in the bridge. But after all, the captain had come alone, or nearly so, to meet him. Perhaps there was only a small crew. Or he was seeking for something of immense value and could not trust his subordinates.

As he teetered between alternatives, he noticed that the captain's mouth was moving again. Sheila Evica's also moved frequently. The captain's eyes-Outsiders' eyes, he noted, were mobile-had been shifting from point to point, taking in Rahjikhah. Particularly the dully-gleaming steel knives, the steel-spring, bone-barreled dart gun, the noosewhip. He had thrown a coil of tentacle around the gun, not wanting them to know it was only a single-shot, but he got the impression that the other was learning more about him than he was about the Outsiders.

He hesitated, considering all the discrepancies he'd seen, thinking of all the things he wanted explained. But there wasn't time. At any moment, others of the crew might come. He could not expect to overpower them all. Bold action, he felt, was called for; explanations could come later. Fortune favors the bold, he thought; and it was now. All through his life, boldness had been his pattern, and it had always succeeded. His few failures were marked by caution and temporizing.

Question: could he move against this acceleration?

He found that he could, with difficulty; driving against it to reduce his effective weight to nil, then stringing with only his posterior tentacles. He could not, of course, lean over parallel to the deck and stride normally with anterior and posterior tentacles. His tentacles scrabbled at and slipped over the deck. He cut his drive enough to give himself some traction, and found that he made slow but steady progress.

"Take me to the bridge at once!" he commanded, gesturing them toward the wall by which they'd entered.

Both their mouths were moving and his irritation grew; it was almost as if they were communicating with each other. Then he was alarmed by the speed and ease with which those enormous limbs lifted their bodies against the acceleration. The captain strode over the nearly featureless wall briskly, Rahjikhah straining himself to match his speed. He did not comment on it. The captain touched a small circle on the wall with one of his many digits—he had twice as many as the didahdin—and the door opened instantly.

The gas in the room did not *whoosh* out, as Rahjikhah expected. Nothing happened. Astonishingly, it was normal to the ship.

It seemed a long way to the bridge via this clumsy means of locomotion, and Rahjikhah was feverish with fear they'd meet a group of crewmen, but this part of the ship seemed deserted. It was eerie. The only sounds he'd heard since entering were his and the two Outsider's voices. Even the draft animals were silent.

The bridge was quite a small room, about five by three by one and a half body-lengths tall. It seemed even smaller, confined as he was to the deck. One of the long bulkheads was much more reflective than the others; it was literally coated with glass and ceramic instruments extending out on a board at right angles to the acceleration. Judging by the way it reflected their voices, there was metal behind the more nearly transparent surface. These instruments extended onto the two adjacent bulkheads, though without covering them, but not onto the overhead. As in all the rooms and flightways he had seen, the overhead was covered with a luminous material, probably a plant.

The lone occupant of the room, a "man" nearly identical to Captain Mark Irons, did not seem surprised to see Rahjikhah. He had been folded into an odd-shaped piece of furniture, apparently resting, if that was possible under acceleration. He came automatically to his feet, casually ignoring that brutal drag, nodded his blocky head to his captain, looked silently at Rahjikhah.

Already Rahjikhah was feverishly estimating the potential. This room could hold more than a dozen even of the small Outsiders without crowding them too close together to work. There was little probability of their being discovered accidentally; few of the crew could have any duties here. It also indicated that there might be but few crewmen on the whole ship, perhaps only a hundred or so. It really began to seem possible that he might seize the ship. The fewer there were, the greater authority the captain would have. He might even be able to order them all to surrender.

"How many officers do you have?" he demanded of the captain, rotating plans for seizing the staff.

"None."

Rahjikhah's mind jerked to a stop and he stared. "Explain that!"

"There are only six crewmen on the *Bowling Along*," said the other. "No officers are needed."

"How can six men control so vast a ship as this?" demanded Rahjikhah harshly.

"They can't. They merely give orders. The orders are carried out by the robots."

"What are robots?"

"Controlling brains, immobile, built into the ship. They control the minutest details of every operation. They obey only their controls."

That last was a little ambiguous, but Rahjika connected "controls" with the bulkhead of instruments even as he spinning mind tried to imagine a *living* ship. Yet the evidence was there; even before entering he had wondered at the ship's precise maneuverability.

His racing mind began to put together various details and came up with a reasonably complete world. Draft animals in their driving stalls, com animals, and so on, probably scavengers, plants for light, plants to dispose of the animal exhaust, probably trained working animals like the subintelligent dedahdiform animals of the Inner Sphere that were cousins to the Five Races. All these plants would require energy input-sunlight. But in the Outer Sphere, it was calculated, sunlight was nil; the Sun was merely a bright star. So they must get their energy from another source; here, from the heat content of the gas inside the ship. That explained why the gas was so low in the nitrogenous and sulfurous components and why his own exhaust dissipated so rapidly even inside the small air lock.

It was not impossible that they had bred up animals with considerably intelligence to handle specific tasks-brain animals. Such an animal, properly trained to do its job, would ignore everything outside it. They were no danger to him except those whose job was defense. And the slip about immobile brains-if it were true-coupled with the ship's completely armored hull and high maneuverability, indicated that the Outsiders had nothing to fear from boarders. So there would be no means of dealing with an enemy actually inside the ship.

Even as he considered what they might bring against him-so far it had been much too easy-his temperature jumped. His feverish urgency to get at the center of the ship and capture and cow the controlling staff had been so great he had not given more than passing thought to his captives. On reflection, it occurred to him that none of them had spoken to the others. None had spoken except to him. And one of these was the captain! Further, the officer on duty had asked no questions, when it must be apparent to him that his captain had been captured.

His former wild thought that they were communicating undetectably with their mouths recurred. It must be true. At first he thought it must be a visual signal code, then he recalled that vibrations could be impressed on matter as on the ether. He had a nightmarish vision of the other crewmen moving swiftly to bring weapons to bear on him, kept in touch by undetectable voicepipes transmitting vibrations instead of radiation.

He brought his dart gun to bear on the captain. "Order all other crewmen to report at once to the bridge."

The captain obediently went to the board on the instrument bulkhead and touched several square and round panels which glowed under his fingers. "All crewmen, report to the bridge," he said.

At a gesture he backed away from the instruments while Rahjika looked curiously at them. He had reached no conclusions when the officer on watch turned away from him toward one of the doors. Rahjika turned to bring his dart gun to bear on it and at that instant it happened.

The ship cut its acceleration instantly and without warning. He had time to notice that no one had touched any instruments before his straining tentacles and motor hurled him against the coldly glowing plants on the overhead. It was a tough life form; it didn't damage under his impact. Before his dazed sense could recover, the acceleration came back on, slamming him the rest of the way back down against the deck.

He landed heavily, still gripping his dart gun, but so was Captain Mark Irons. Rahjika had a moment of fear as he remembered the strength of those blocky limbs; the Outsider could tear off his tentacle without strain; but then he brought his dagger over, parallel to the floor, and managed to score on the other. Mostly because of his soft skin; between the drag of the acceleration and his unfamiliarity with fighting under it, Rahjika was not making a very good showing.

Rolling helplessly on the floor, he twisted the dart gun around and fired at the watch officer. The gun kicked back slightly in their grasp and the dart made an eerie curving orbit, quite slowly, across the room to glance off the other's front plate. Only he had no plate there. Instead of outgassing, black-read fluid leaked out of the Outsider, flowing down his front under the drag of the ship.

*The Rahjika*h lucks holds, he thought fleetingly. Coming suddenly into this hot environment might have crystallized the spring. He relinquished the dart gun and was desperately trying to lever himself up parallel to the ship's line of flight so his spine could support him, when again the acceleration was cut.

This time only his tentacles threw him up, and he twisted himself expertly around, reversed his motor-it could drive in reverse, but weakly-and leaped back to the deck, catching himself with his tentacles. He couldn't risk driving across the small room lest he be stranded helplessly on his side again. He snapped two tentacles around Sheila Evica and pressed a knife to him, saying, "Do no move or this one dies!"

He had a moment of fear that the captain would sacrifice his crewman, wishing that quick-thinking man had been near enough to be seized himself.

Not gibing him time to think, Rahjika

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snapped, "Cut acceleration to zero!" Acceleration had returned as suddenly as before.

Hesitation, and then the watch officer's mouth moved briefly and the acceleration died. So it was done by vibrations. That must be their voices. That in turn reminded him that all their audible voices sounded alike. He instantly demanded an explanation of that fact, careful not to let them guess he knew the secret of their real voices.

The captain, who had been bent by the acceleration-no, he was just crouching to spring!-now straightened and approached him easily, seeming neither tired from the fight nor disconcerted by zero acceleration. Yet Rahjika

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realized only now that the men did not have motors in their spines. Truly this captain had brains and nerves. He had deduced the existence of Rahjika

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's motor and foreseen the consequences of suddenly cutting the acceleration: only the didahdin had driven against the overhead.

Fortunately he had only flown half his length, and fallen not much farther afterward; he was groggy as it was, rather surprised that he was still conscious. But cutting acceleration ended the strain on his hearts and as they speeded up under damage-stimulus, his brain began to clear.

With a deft movement the captain removed a strap from the small point of his anterior limb, just above the point at which the heavy digits spread. The strap, of leather or intestinal lining, was welded to a construct, or tool, like nothing Rahjika

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had ever seen. One side was glass, the other ceramic. Holding a tentacle to this side, he probed at it with his echo-sounded and found it highly reflective. Probably metal powder in the ceramic. The tool was quite thing, and he gripped it with his three digits, two on the glass side and one on the other. He distinctly felt it quiver when he probed at it, and duplicating the process several times, he understood.

The tool was a resonator, only instead of reflecting waves, it transmuted vibrations into wave form and vice versa. It was a coupling effect, he concluded, requiring close contact and some special ceramic. It could be turned off, no doubt; they must have had them off most of the time, while Captain Mark Irons gave his orders.

Rahjika

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caught one end of the strap between two of his armor plates. "The other four crewmen," he said, tightening his grip on Sheila Evica as he stirred. "Tell them to hurry up. Where are they?"

The captain was staring at the crewman in Rahjika

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's grasp. His mouth was not moving, and the

vibrator/radiator made no sound, but he remained suspicious, or perhaps it was his fear of those powerful limbs. His motor was of little use to him in this confined space. He brought the knife blade to the Outsider's neck, reasoning that any interruption in the blood flow would cause immediate death, unlike the didahdin.

The captain checked his forward motion with a limb extended to the glowing overhead, twisted to face the instrument bulkhead, and said "Neruda! Atkins! Rothgar! Selz! Report on the double!"

The vibrator transmitted a series of sounds as the men answer incoherently. Rahjika's suspicion leaped to a peak at that enigmatic "on the double!" and he braced himself for a desperate attack, wising for a big war bow.

But then one of the doors opened and the four men stood in it. All stood on the deck, heads tipped back to see the occupants of the bridge. They entered one at a time, propelling themselves in gently, easily, using a mere fraction of the enormous strength of their limbs. Four separate times Rahjika saw the unbearable load come off them and four separate and distinct times his brain rejected what his eyes reported. The flightway was just outside the bridge was under brutal acceleration-the bridge orbiting free.

His head spun, but he did not spend time arguing with himself about impossibilities. His free anterior tentacle pushing against the overhead and his posterior tentacles again the floor, he strode clumsily over to the door, which had snapped shut like a mouth. At the door he started to ask how to open it, then found a small round horn plate, about twice the diameter of one of his digits. Pushing at it, he watched the door snap open, powered by some small animal. Probably one with no brain at all; a shell animal.

The flightway was definitely under acceleration. He pushed Sheila Evica out into it, watched him catch himself on all limbs, bending at the yoke that joined the posterior limbs to the spine. He pushed casually with anterior limbs and was erect, facing Rahjika.

Shaken, Rahjika started to speak to Captain Mark Irons when suddenly Sheila Evica leaped backward, tugging him toward that fatal flightway. He thrust with the dagger, but as it entered the flight way it was jerked down by the drag. Only by catching his conical jaws on one side of the doorway and pressing his free tentacles on the other did he manage to save himself.

Even as he hung from the door against the Outsider's vicious tugging, he saw the captain and the two other crewmen double themselves up and uncoil their posterior limbs against the bulkheads below them-one against the great sheet of glass on the instrument bulkhead-driving at him as fast as any animal with a motor. Instantly he slammed into full acceleration.

For an agonizing moment his armored curve of shoulder hung on the doorway, then he bumped free, feeling Sheila Evica's grip loosen. He glanced off the overhead as the four men tangled in the doorway, extending his anterior tentacles, braking as hard as possible in reverse-not very hard-and glanced again off the opposite bulkhead, head ringing.

The door was shut and but one Outsider remained in the bridge. That one was the watch officer, whose front, though without a break in the skin, was soaked with what was obviously blood. And damn if the man wasn't pointing his own dart gun at him!

Rahjika drove at him instantly, the other uncoiling and propelling himself weakly out of the line of flight, firing a dart, to Rahjika's utter astonishment. Then he remembered that there was one loose one in the room. The dart struck harder under free orbit conditions, but it merely glanced off his armor.

Rahjika braked and caught himself expertly, close enough to the watch office to seize him; the man was

stringing weakly along the overhead under the impetus of his flight. He threw the dart gun at Rahjika, who ducked, thinking, *now if this one had been Mark Irons, that would have been the dart-into my eye*. He pushed them away from all surfaces so the Outsider could not use his great strength against him. Rahjika had become uneasily aware that the men were far and away his superior in rough-orbit contact fighting and probably at archery as well. Only in free space might he have any advantage expert for his armor. And it could be a liability, too; his inertia was too great.

Before he could peak-before his head cleared-his dazed brain got one last jolt. The bridge leader under full acceleration again, just as he had put his knife to the Outsider's neck. Before the deck could strike them the watch officer barked, "Cancel!"-his voice coming eerily from both their vibrators.

The acceleration ended just as Rahjika's motor reached full drive; he cut just in time to keep them from bouncing. They took the remaining shock lightly. The Outsider heaved in Rahjika's tentacles, his mouth opening and his exhausting.

He had learned another thing about the vibrators, he thought; he picked up vibrations only from close by, whereas the men's ears could detect them from farther away.

Striding quickly over to the control bulkhead, he said, "Quickly! Show me how to work these controls!" The man was dying, exhausting convulsively; his blood was beginning to spread into the room.

"What do... what do you want to know?"

"How do I contact the captain?"

"Captain Irons speaking. What do you want?"

It was unsettling, having his voice come from both vibrators. Rahjika thought rapidly. He had the bridge, but his ignorance negated most of that advantage. His hostage was dying-that might take hours or days, but the captain might not consider him salvageable. He had only one other advantage.

"Perhaps it is time to talk of truce," he began. "You have earned your freedom from me."

"What would this truce involve?"

"I hold the bridge and one hostage. I shall continue to occupy the bridge, but your crewman is seriously wounded. I cannot medically treat him. To begin with, I suggest an exchange of him for another crewman, to main the present balance-which is in your favor. It is no secret to me that your brain animals obey voice commands as well as these controls. At least the primary one does. Say, Sheila Evica; he is your smallest crewman."

An incoherent rumble greeted this, the watch officer stiffening faintly in his grasp, his convulsive exhausts easing.

Mark Iron's voice cut through the rumble. "Sheila Evica is a woman-a female man. Far from being our least useful crewman, she is the most."

No wonder they had frozen at sign of peril to her. That made her even more valuable a hostage than the captain himself. Rahjika filed the datum away; he had noted from the beginning her difference from the men.

"Name the crewman yourself; you say you have no officers, so one should be as valuable as another. It may not be possible to save this one's life if you delay too long."

The silence grew long and Rahjika pictured them retreating from pickup range of the voicepipe and discussing it. Or more likely, Mark Irons giving orders to his crewmen. Perhaps by other voicepipes; they might already be deployed. So large a ship, especially with so small a crew, would have many voicepipes; it meant he could keep in close touch with them

"Before you take any irreversible action, Captain," he said, "remember that I have information about the other Outsider ships in the Inner Sphere."

"What do you know about them?"

"Truce information-exchange, Captain; I will answer a question for every one you answer."

"Agreed. Where are these ships?"

"in Dahjilahdim Swarm territory. How can the flightway be under acceleration while the bridge is not?"

"Neither the flightway, the bridge, or any part of the ship has been under acceleration since we matched your velocity. The effect of acceleration is duplicated by artificial gravity. Are any of the Outsider crewmen still alive?"

"Some of them must have lived for some little time and may still be alive; they taught the Dahdim their language. Gravity is an effect of mass; presumably artificial gravity would duplicate that effect. But while I can detect the mass of your ship, I could not detect even the illusory presence of the enormous mass it would take to give the effect of fill-of the acceleration felt in the ship. I could detect such a mass millions of miles away."

"Presumably you detect the curvature of space with a mass-sensing organ. But artificial gravity is generated by a motor dived into tow plates or poles. Anything of sufficient mass between them is driven against one plate. Thus plumb lines or lines of fall in an artificial gravity field are parallel rather than converging as in a gravity field. There is no curvature of space, then, and the effect is of acceleration. Is the Dahjilahdim Swarm an enemy of the Sidilikah Swam?"

"Affirmative." Rahjika hesitated between long-term and short-term advantage, decided on the latter. "What controls on this bulkhead govern the artificial gravity?"

"Narayan, show him. You wish to use the *Bowling Along* against the Dahjilahdim, don't you?"

"Ultimately," he admitted, watching the man keenly. Narayan indicated a line of little circular horn-shelled animals. Pressing their shells caused them to glow and presumably send a signal to the animal or animals generating the gravity. That might be by means of electricity; it had been shown the electricity could be transmitted over metal wires, and electrogenerative animals were well known in the Inner Sphere-trapsters and the like.

The whole back of the bulkhead must be a multiple feeding device. Same for all the decks and overheads, and all of the lined with animals.

He decided not to ask how to control it by voice-vibrations.

"Show me how to accelerate the ship," he demanded.

"Just a moment. We're sending Rothgar to take Narayan's place."

Rahjika looked around. The dart gun had drifted near. He recovered it, cocked it with four quick strokes of the lever, and reloaded it, wishing again he had better weapons along. The other man entered

shortly, Rahjikhah resolutely ignoring the acceleration of the flightway. Narayan left clumsily.

Holding the dark gun steadily to Rothgar's head, Rahjikhah uncoiled his whip. The oxygen had already begun to attack it. He lashed the posterior limbs other, then the anterior limbs to the slender body, leaving the lower part with the digits free. Should acceleration-gravity-be suddenly returned to the bridge, he would be as helpless on the deck as Rahjikhah.

"Very well, Captain. Do you wish to continue the exchange?"

"Affirmative. Rothgar, show him the drive controls."

These controls consisted of an arc of horn inset into the instrument board, with another of the omnipresent circle controls at the center of the circle defined by the arc. Below this was a straight bar, glowing at one end. The arc was divided into tenths by lines, each tenth numbered in Outsider code. Rahjikhah concluded that there was a trapster animal perhaps as big as his head behind the board. Here, sections of its outer shell had been cut away and lines and numerals inlaid in the translucent inner shell.

"The first division on the left is equal to the acceleration you have felt here. The tenth division is ten times as great. For fine maneuvering, less than one gravity, we use these controls." He indicated a rod beside a group of the small squares that were the same type of control as the circles. There were arcs and straight strips of horn here, several animals mouthed close together under the board. The rod, when moved, determined acceleration. The controls determined line of flight. None of the controls would obey unless a circle here was first pressed; pressing it again would cut acceleration.

That was plain enough. Rahjikhah first pressed the small circle by the rod, then, bracing himself, pressed the first division of the first arc, the main drive controls. Instantly that division lit with cold animal phosphorescence, but nothing happened.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"Nothing. We're accelerating at one G. But the gravity plates are coupled to the drive controls. When the drive animals push, the grav animals reverse their motors and push against them, according to how they're set. Here in the bridge they're set to maintain free fall."

Free orbit. Tat made sense. It also indicated how the Outsiders were able to accelerate so brutally. He doubted that even their great strength would keep them alive for long at ten times his top acceleration. It meant, then, that he could ferry a considerably army at terrific acceleration. The only thing that could dispute his control of the entire Inner Sphere was the Dahdim's ship.

"How do you see out?" he asked. "Where are the sounder pipes?"

"My question, Rothgar," came Mark Irons' voice. "Rahjikhah, what do you intend to do with this ship?"

The question reminded him uneasily that he was not yet in control of it. "One of the first things I must do is capture or destroy the Dahdim's Outsider ship," he said. "I gather that you concur at least partly. At least, you wished to locate it, did you not?"

"It? What happened to the other? Which of the two are you speaking of?"

Rahjikhah damned himself for his slip, but he'd have to have told them some time. "One ship, the first, small one, was destroyed in an accident that took off half a dozen of the top Dahdim Swarmheads," he told them, hoping it was the big ship they were interested in. "That accident has definitely thrown the Swarm into confusion. A savage struggles has developed for control of the Swarm. The Outsider ship

has been neutralized, and is now guarded by representatives of all factions. That gives us our opportunity."

"How do you know all this? You claimed to be of Sidilikah Swarm, their enemy."

"I am a captain in the Sikah Intelligence. I have not seen their ship, but I know its general location. It was from them I stole the book from which I learned your language. It was a well kept secret among them." He did not add that though he had passed the book on to his superiors, he had concealed from them his own knowledge of the Outsider code.

"We agree to your plans up to the seizure of the other ship. Its name, by the way, is *Veni Vidi Mensui*. *Venny* for short. How do you propose to recapture it?"

"I must first learn how to control this ship. We are now under one-gravity?-of acceleration, braking down along my line of flight, unless the line has been changed."

"It hasn't. Rothgar, show him the vision controls."

The great sheet of glass reaching across one bulkhead disappeared and Rahjikhah nearly fell through the hole it left in the ship. Then he realized that it was the most superlative optical periscope he had ever seen; the sheet of what had seemed cloudy translucent glass was the final lens element. Truly the Outsider's craft were advanced. He noted after a moment that the view was ahead along the line of flight, though beside him on the bulkhead. That was an odd feeling.

Rothgar touched other controls and the scene shrank to half its former size and the rest of the lens gave views to the sides and even aft. It took him a moment to assimilate the picture. Fine cross lines indicated the ship's direction of acceleration and its actual line of flight, which was, of course, aft.

They were under acceleration already. Bracing himself, Rahjikhah reached over and pushed the tenth division in the drive control arc. It lit up, but he felt nothing. Rothgar reported, "Captain, we're decelerating at max."

"Our present line of flight is toward Dahdim territory," he told them. ""In one of your hours, if we really are braking at then gravities, we will be at rest. An hour after that we can go free, but we are not very far from Sikah territory; within a few hours-three, I think-we will want to brake down again, to come in slowly and quietly. It will not take very many hours, perhaps a day-one of your days-to assemble my allies and take them aboard."

"I presume they will attempt to board the *Venny*," said the captain. "That may not be possible unless someone inside opens the air lock as we did for you."

That was true. Rahjikhah had two alternative plans for that eventuality. However, he said, "True. Is there any likelihood that the crewmen are alive?"

"Too early to say."

"It's worth the gamble," Rahjikhah pointed out the obvious. They'd come all this way to find out what happened. That brought up a point that bothered him though. The Outer Sphere, from which came the ice islands known as comets, was estimated at roughly a light-year away from the sun, halfway out to the Stellar Globe. Presumably the first ship had beamed a warning back to the Outer Sphere. But that warning should only now be arriving. The second and third ships must have been following in cascade; why, the trip would take years even at then times his top acceleration, and, of course, the draft animals

couldn't push constantly.

There were still important things about the *Bowling Along* he hadn't learned.

He said, "Are we allies, then? At least until, say, just before the battle begins?"

"Very well, Rahjika, we will play along until we're near the *Venny*. And don't get any ideas then. You do not know enough about the *Bowling* to run it without our aid."

That was true. What was the routine for feeding the animals, for instance?

"Acknowledged, Captain. I will, therefore, continue to occupy the bridge and operate the ship. You will attend to the ship's necessary functions. If any of them require orders to be given from the bridge, Rothgar will attend to it. But as you say, Captain, the balance is heavily in your favor, at least until I have taken aboard my allies. I suggest, therefore, that you prove your good faith by sending me another hostage. Later, when my allies come aboard, we can discuss a new balance. I do not anticipate needing hostages then."

Mark Irons argued, but Rahjika stood firm. "Alone you cannot even find the *Venny*," he told him. "You will search for a long time before finding another *didahdin* who speaks your language, and much longer indeed to find one who happens to know the *Venny's* location." The other agreed at length, and sent him Atkins.

Rahjika undid part of the whip around Rothgar and tied Atkins up with that end of it, having no intention of cutting up what was left of a good hunting whip. It left the two of them tied tightly together, side by side.

That took care of the immediate situation. He made an arrangement with Mark Irons for another parley in five hours. Fortunately he had slept just before beginning this trip and would not need to again soon. And he was now resting in free orbit and his energy consumption would fall. That would cut his body temperature; he had been exhausting involuntarily at intervals. This lull would also permit him to use his radiators. But between the gas in the ship and the vicious radiation of the plants on the overhead, he only hoped he could relax. The light reached far down into the soft X-ray region, to the point just above where it began to penetrate the skin. He guessed that the Outsiders saw farther down into the ultraviolet than the *didahdin*. This light was a vicious blue-white, like a blacksmith's oxygen torch, totally unlike the orange-yellow light of the Sun. Too long continued and it would cause permanent vision damage and probably skin cancer as well. Like drifting too close to the Sun.

Rahjika braced himself lightly between deck and overhead, carefully keeping his spine parallel to the ship's line of acceleration, and relaxed into semi-somnolence. As an Intelligence Officer, he had been trained to keep part of his mind alert.

Five hours later, drifting free near one end of Sikah territory, Rahjika questioned the captain on how to operate the sounder and communicator organisms. Mark Irons refused to give him the information and after a brief argument Rahjika retreated to the farthest corner of the bridge while Atkins, or Rothgar, did it by voice. The sounder's echoes were thrown somehow on the periscope's lens. The pulses would be heard half across Sikah space, but no one would believe the creator of them could be hearing the echoes.

Studying the visual display—at least it wasn't in vibrations; he wondered how it was done—he located numerous islands he recognized and two planets. One of them was an ice-and-stone planet with a gas coma, *Tiwahdilit*; a big place and a heavy food producer. It had been raided by the *Dahdin* within the year and the defenses had not yet been rebuilt. *Pahlakih* had been assigned to this region, and if Rahjika knew him, he was on *Tiwahdilit* right now, taking advantage of the remaining confusion.

Again he retreated while the men made the necessary arrangements. The com animals-or instruments?-were ordered to shout a beam at Tiwahdilit in one of Rahjika's private codes. He spoke in the control room and the exact pattern of pulses was transmitted to the com animals. He made his message brief. It merely ordered Pahlahkih-not named, even in code-to go at once to a certain island they both knew. There was only one such island in this area and it would take him half an Outsider day to get there. Outsider days were much shorter than solar days.

At Mark Irons' suggestion, the *Bowling* was held to two or three gravities to minimize the noise level. Rahjika noted the suggestion, remembering the bawling he had heard before coming aboard but asked no questions. The little island was a hunk of stone with a few tiny companions, about the mass of the Outsider ship, all completely covered with the great sails of plants open to the sun. These were quite large. Rahjika had not been here in several years, but at a guess it had been that long since any large mobile grazer had been here. The usual group of shell and crawling animals were here, of course, no doubt filling space with a weak, cheerful babble of noise. He was not yet hungry, would not be for a week at this rate, but the thought of a few bites of fresh meat was appealing.

The men at his direction aimed a cone of code at Tiwahdilit-the word "answer... answer" over and over-as a beacon for Pahlahkih, as, of course, he could not be sure of the exact present location of the island. The beam was too weak to be heard at Tiwahdilit.

Hours later, a faint, dying answer came from somewhere north of Tiwahdilit-"coming... coming... coming" in Rahjika's code. He ordered the sounder on, got a bearing on Pahlahkih, and took the *Bowling* out after him. AS he had expected, the army lieutenant had brought a group of reliable warriors with him. The incredible voice that spoke in Rahjika's code suggested he had actually seized the Dahdim's Outsider ship and wanted some associates to share the conquest of the two Swarms.

For Rahjika had no intention of turning this great ship over to the Sikah.

Pahlahkih was a tough, competent officer who might go far unless he alarmed one of the Swarmheads enough to have him assassinated. He lacked Rahjika's own stability and circumspection, but was a good plotter for all that and a ruthless infighter. In a situation such as this, however, he would have intelligence enough to keep any reasonable agreement at least until all external enemies were captured or devoured./ Rahjika could think of many didahdin he could trust farther, but trustworthy people lacked drive.

The *Bowling* swept out to get them, having little trouble getting them to come aboard. Pahlahkih sent in one group first, as the air lock was too small for the dozen warriors he had brought. They were mercenaries, criminals, ambitious soldiers, and the like, in light mail-steel helmets with flanges that cut into vision ahead but protected the eyes, and bone or horn shields, some faced with metal, one with decorative copper. They carried steel bows, lances that wouldn't fit into the air lock, and knives. Whips and dart guns had no place in battle.

Rahjika had arranged with the captain to open a flightway to the bridge, to be maintained at free orbit conditions. Still, when the warriors appeared in the bridge they were exclaiming over the devouring gas and numbing light. When Pahlahkih entered, Rahjika briefed him rapidly about the ship, careful not to show him how to work the controls or let him know that men communicated by matter vibrations. That ambitious one realized Rahjika's position of half-conquest quite well enough without having it spelled out.

In one thing he confirmed Rahjika's conclusions. "This gas is high in oxygen. Is that where the heat that feeds the plants comes from?"

He said, "AS lot of the heat must come form the animals; the ship is stuffed with them/. But no such cycle could be one hundred percent efficient. No doubt they have to take n food occasionally. But burning waster in oxygen would make up most of their losses, all right." Oxygen was known as the ultimate energy element. It would consume anything.

Rahjika ordered his hostages freed, enjoying the shaken sound of his fellow-adventurers' voices as they discovered that adjacent rooms and flightways were under acceleration. He had told them, but seeing is feeling. When the hostages had had time to report, Rahjika got Captain Mark Irons on the voicepipe and expounded his plan to him and the didahdin.

Several of the short Outsiders' days later, Rahjika, wearing armor and carrying two each of bows and lances, emerged from the *Bowling Along's* monstrous cargo hatch and drove into Dahjilahdin space. Inside that same hold was a little army and a pair of galleys loaded with supplies raided from Tiwahdilit. That was a calculated risk; Tiwahdilit was close to Dahdim space and they'd soon hear of the raid of the Outsider ship and take precautions.

This mission, too, was a calculated risk. Pahlahkih might attempt to take the *Bowling*, but he thought he could trust Mark Irons to defend himself; the man would not deal with Pahlahkih unless the other could show him the *Venny's* location. This monomaniacal insistence on finding the *Venny* and especially any crewmen from it made Rahjika uneasy. He realized there were undercurrents here. It made it impossible to predict what the men would do.

Crossing this end of Dahdin territory was a minor risk, thought it was full of criminals, mercenaries out for loot, barbarian tribes, and similar bandits. As long as he did not stop at any island for food he'd be all right.

One group of bandits did try to intercept him—a primitive tribe, so primitive they still talked on FM rather than PM. His velocity was simply too great for them. When he braked down at last, it was Lirahmahnid, a metallic planet much like Tiwahdilit but bigger and sparser. Much of its stone had been imported. It was a more cohesive place being better defended than Tiwahdilit. Several tiny stony island had been pulled near to it. There were no icy planets near; this was in the tropic zone. Nearby space was full of forges and foundries.

Rahjika had an identity here as a Dahdim which he now drew on. Officially he was a mercenary soldier, but he had explained to the baron here that he was actually in Dahdim Swarm Intelligence. Ass an Intelligence Officer he was worth cultivating and had met Silinih's daughters. He had business with them now.

As he had expected, the baron was away—probably at Dahdim Central, fighting over the Swarmheadship. The girls were here. However, and they were just as keen and hard when it came to their own interests as he had remembered. They were also as magnificently endowed as he remembered, the best singers in the Inner Sphere, but he hadn't time to make love, assuming Silinih's loyalists didn't run him through first. Their armor was gold-chased and there were jewels set in their jaws, above the eyes; it was a rich planet.

Claiming to have a message from their father, ha managed to see them alone briefly and explain urgently that he had a rare chance to seize the Swarm's Outsider ship granted only that there was someone inside who could be trusted to open the doors when the guard had been cleared away. They understood the implications at once; with the ship he's make himself master o Swarm, which would make them the most important females in it-bearers of the Swarm-Sun's heirs. He found, as expected, that their father's

faction had guards in the ship who could be tricked into opening. In fact, they could also have a small raiding party ready to attack the guards outside.

That was the kind of cooperation he had expected from Silinih's daughters-full-driven. They set the date and time for this diversionary attack, then he had to leave and so did they.

The *Bowling* was at the new rendezvous; he had trusted Mark Irons with the bridge. The raiders were all right; drunk, most of them. The cargo hold was always under free orbit conditions and free of as. He had found that between the oxygen and the UV light, his skin was peeling away in while flakes. Even his armor was etched and roughed. He was running out of energy, too, but they had laid in a supply of food and gut gravel. He cleaned out his digestive tract, which now contained only roughage and spent gravel, and stoked up, feeling a familiar bloating sensation; they had found a good vein of gravel.

Rahjika, talking to Mark Irons, was interested to learn that unlike the *Bowling*, the first two ships-the little ten man scout, *Televue* and the scout mother-ship, *Venny*-were units of the Exploration Service's fleet. He could see how a company might be formed for the purpose of exploration; with a diameter of two light years and its planets not confined to an ecliptic, the Outer Sphere could not be explored haphazardly. Much of it must remain unknown despite such marvelous ships as this. The antipodes of the sphere were twice as far away from a given point on it.

Rahjika did not tell Pahlakih what he had learned from Silinih's daughters and passed on to Mark Irons: one man remained alive in the *Venny*.

At the appointed date Rahjika drove the *Bowling* to the *Venny*'s hiding place, braking down at maximum. Mark Irons had explained that the bawling noise was caused by a kinetic shield, another version of the gravitronic motor. Anything with a high relative motion was turned aside miles away, which caused it to radiate noise. The Dahdim guards must have heard the bellowing of the ship a million miles away, but its high acceleration permitted it to get close before braking.

And the diversion was proceeding nicely, Rahjika reported to the waiting raiders. Mark Irons had arranged a voicepipe connection between bridge and hold-a voicepipe utterly without echoes. Rahjika alone occupied the bridge, the rest going on the raid. He could not trust any of Pahlakih's warriors.

Rahjika braked nearly to zero relative to the *Venny*, rolled the ship until the cargo hatch was on their line of flight, and ordered the raiders out. They still had a considerable velocity, so it wasn't necessary to accelerate the galleys. The *Bowling* braked steeply behind them. They were in a little cluster of icy and stone island in the arctic zone. Few people, or even animals, came so far out from the Sun.

Around the *Venny* was a confusion of rough-orbits, a beautiful little outgasser in progress. He actually saw a faint haze of gas, but that was probably exhaust rather than blood. The fighting was mostly lance and knife, too close for bows. Since there wasn't room to get up good velocity before contact, wounds were pretty mild; the fight just kept on and on. The girls had done a good job.

When the galleys were clear of the ship and it decelerated behind them, two galleys were held back by the raiders, allowing one to pull ahead. Rahjika was alarmed at first, but then he realized that the third galley was a mock-up of wood. It would collapse at the first impact; plants don't need the strength and impact-resistance animals do.

Soldiers dropped out of the galleys trailing ropes, braking savagely, tugging. Iron balls sprayed out the front into the milling confused guards. None of the galleys bothered with catapults, of course.

The guards began to rally but they had only seconds as the galleys dropped on them. Some made the mistake of trying to match velocities and board; that'd take too long. Arrows lanced into the galley's

armor, bullets storming back lavishly. The seconds ticked past and still the galleys did not brake. A free-orbit corpse, or wounded man, was struck by the mock-up and was apparently swallowed, no doubt crashing through its insides. The guards hovered nervously by the *Venny*, waiting for the galleys to brake.

Then the raiders spilled out of them, braking savagely, some tugging ropes. They dropped behind their ship, forming into a double cone-the mock up was largely unmanned. Shouted commands filled space. The guards leaped to the attack, gripping lances with four tentacles each.

Pahlahkih's strategy was brutally simple. He had to brake down to zero at the *Venny*, couldn't afford any doubling back, and the others knew it. They, therefore, knew roughly what his velocity would be at any point between the two ships; the calculation was automatic and instantaneous to brains that could predict meteorite collisions.

The Dahdim could accelerate, lance him going free, brake down, and lance him from behind if there was time. The Dahdim could send their men out in waves; they could skirmish, withdrawing a little ahead of them; they had all the advantages, because the Sikah raiders must constantly decelerate at a known rate.

Pahlahkih did not attempt any foolish niceties; he slammed them in as close as necessary, braked down as hard as possible to minimize exposure, and trusted the on-plunging galleys, the bullets from the garguns, and their arrows to take them through the defenses. The galleys at least would break up any formation of offensive defenders.

Contact! The raiders were moving quite slowly now, trying to hold off lancers with arrows; they were moving so slow that the arrows didn't have much punch. But the Sikah gripped two steel bows each in their posterior tentacles, spraying arrows ahead of them; though they were outnumbered between two and three to one, most of the Dahdim had dropped their bows. This time, the gas he saw as the warriors came together with lances was definitely blood.

And two or three of the big hatches on the *Venny* were open, the Dahdim jamming around them, still fighting sporadically among themselves. The raiders would soon make entry. About time, too; the *Bowling's* echo-sounder had picked up what looked like an army in formation an hour or so ago, quite close and driving hard. And it was about time for him to be moving.

He drove for the car that would take him to the cargo hold. This shaft was long the axis of the ship, and presumably the only means of access to the various holds. The car itself acted as a miniature air lock, taking about three didahdin at once. At the hold, he darted inside and caught up some whips and a massive spar. The big hatch was still open, a great square section folded out. Good.

Sending the car back to the top of the shaft, he manually opened the door from the shaft-which was evacuated of gas-into the section just above what he had identified as the oxygen-furnace section. The evacuating gas almost took him with it, but he fought his way in, helped by the gravity of the deck, and wedged the spar in so that it would jam both the door and the descending car. With the gas gone from this flightway, he turned off the gravity-which, he had learned, was controlled locally-and drove down it. At every lateral flightway, he manually opened doors that had automatically sealed; his gamble, that the mindless door animals would obey an override order, paying off.

At length he had evacuated all the flightways on this deck. The only vertical flightways he had seen on the ship were stepped ramps at intersections of lateral flightways. It had to be that way because of the artificial-gravity animals. Accordingly, the men were now trapped on this deck.

For he had deduced they could not live except in their gas. Further, he concluded that, amazing as it

seemed, there must be planets in the Outer Sphere so massive their gravity was equal to his top acceleration. They would hold enormous gas comae about them, but animals that adapted to such life would have no use for a motor. Animals that came to grave would develop some terrific motors. Perhaps such giant planets explained the puzzling sounds that came from the sky; either from the Stellar Globe or from the Outer Sphere. Certainly from nothing living. But triangulating on them had been so far inconclusive; it reported infinite distances.

Rahjika had also deduced the existence of another bridge, one that controlled internal affairs rather than astrogation and drive. Mark Irons had heard and probably seen everything that happened in the bridge, and probably in most of the rooms and flightways around it; perhaps also in the hold. But such a concentration of voicepipes and periscopes would not be established everywhere. Such a second bridge would have to be near either the draft animals or near the oxygen furnaces, and he had concluded that the animals were between the hold bulkhead, where their noise could be shielded off.

Opening a door to a room, he waited until the gas was out, entered, switching off the gravity, and opened a door on another wall. Gas entered. He opened enough doors to give him near normal pressure and called Mark Irons. No answer. Going to another room, standing near the flightway, he called again. Finally the captain answered. Another gamble had paid off. No matter what arrangements they had made with whom-and they'd had a week to make arrangements with Pahlahkih-they'd how to know the outcome of the battle before they did anything. Hence they'd be group before a periscopic view of the bridge. He had made a habit of leaving and returning to it irregularly, and hoped that they would not notice his absence until too late.

"Captain, you now have the alternative of surrendering or dying. If you do not surrender, one at a time, beginning immediately, I shall let the gas out of every room on this level."

Longish pause while Rahjika waited, body temp climbing, hoping that his deduction had been right. They were: Mark Irons answered, "It seems we have no choice. What are your orders?"

"Can you now reach flightway intersection-he gave its designation in the visual squiggle code the Outsiders used for writing; his own writing was reflective metallic dots-"without crossing a flightway?"

They could.

"I will seal off that intersection and open adjacent doors to fill it with gas. Be ready to enter it one at a time on my command."

After all his worry and driving hurry to seal off the Outsiders, they came out quite tamely, one at a time, to be tied. He counted carefully, but there were seven of the including the captain. Had Rahjika been less well-controlled, he'd have sung quietly as he returned to the shaft, sent the downward straining car back up, and removed the spar. He noticed then that the big hatch was closed, which he should have expected. The gas had merely entered the hold, and if he tried to evacuate the whole deck, it would just have decreased the pressure by half. The ship's bank of gut-gravel would soon replace the little loss.

Rahjika made a mental note to watch Pahlahkih; his capture of the *Venny* and its man was partly offset by his own capture of Mark Irons, which should scramble his plans to a degree, but still the other was rapidly gathering strength. And now that he thought it over, he was not satisfied with his easy capture of the men. Mark Irons should have put up a battle, bringing out some of the Outsider's weapons. They must have terrific weapons. Rahjika might not be in as complete control of the *Bowling* as it seemed.

By the time Rahjika had them up to the bridge-tied together and pulled slowly up the acceleration-free flightways-the battle around the *Venny* was clearly over. One galley was crumpled wreckage, the others

gone. Corpses and wounded littered space in a haze of gas and ices. And now Rahjika had time to appreciate the size of the other Outsider ship. It had about a thousandth of the volume of the *Bowling*. He wondered, amused and delighted, what Pahlahkih was thinking. He hadn't expected such a stroke of luck.

Abruptly the view of the sphere of battle was replaced by a view of a small room on the periscope lens. After a moment he identified it as a bridge, seen from the instrument board. The gravity was off there, too. His astonishment that vision could be transmitted across space in this manner was enormous, but better concealed than those in the other bridge.

One of them was Pahlahkih. On was an Outsider. Sheila Evica spoke agitatedly on seeing him, so rapidly Rahjika could not understand what she said. She seemed greatly moved; he had brought her and Mark Irons into the bridge, leaving the others in the flightway, out of the way but in view.

Her exclamation brought silence to the bubble and the other Outsider's answer was clearly audible. "Hello, Sis, good to see you again/ I suppose this means you have all kinda of good news. That seems a little irrelevant now."

The man talked like Mark Irons. It was important to remember that he had kept himself alive for months while telling the Dahdim almost nothing about the ship. He could be dangerous. But that was another problem for Pahlahkih.

That individual had said nothing, but he gestured with a tentacle and several didahdin were crowded out of the bridge to make room for others. They came in singing and Rahjika recognized them instantly; Silinih's daughters. Four of them; was the fifth killed in the battle or being held hostage? He should have expected the m to take charge in person.

Pahlahkih abruptly rumbled a laugh in AM, then sag a few words in an FM language Rahjika did not recognize. IT seemed an odd time for poetry, but the cold admiration was plain in the other's voice when he said, "Congratulations on your capture of the *Bowling Along*." Pahlahkih knew what the sigh of a bound Mark Irons meant.

"But perhaps we can make a deal," he said meaningfully.

Rahjika had already written the girls off; Pahlahkih had had only a few minutes to talk to them, but he could no longer trust them. Pahlahkih, he thought, had already some unknown agreement with Mark Irons. He signaled a blunt negative that choked off the girls' victory song. After a moment it began again, a low wailing, and his speculation that their signing was a code was confirmed. It would not be possible to set them against each other, then. If they survived his settlement with Pahlahkih, he would take them by force; until then he dismissed them from his thoughts.

"It would be well to be away from here before the approaching army of Dahdim arrives," he told them, "considering the unsettled state of matters here."

Pahlahkih agreed. He could not trust the girls either.

When orders were given to him in his own language, the Outsider said, "We've got plenty of time. Enough to settle a few things." He looked at Rahjika and said, "I am Victor Evica and in the Outer Sphere I'm a hunted man."

Sheila Evica interrupted, "We've obtained a pardon for you, Vic; you can come home any time."

Victor Evica was unmoved. "It would merely mean I would no longer be hunted. What could a man with

my reputation make of himself? But it puts me in a position to have my own way here. For instance, what is there in all your plans for us Outsiders?"

Nothing, of course.

"If you want my cooperation, you'll have to pay for it. One of these ships must be sent back to the Outer Sphere with my sister and the crew of the *Bowling*. For myself, I demand nothing."

There was a moment of silence, then Rahjikh asked, "Is there anyone over there who can handle the ship?"

"Negative," said one of the Silinim. "Only a few of the Dahjilahdim were taught how, and they all died in the *Television*. Since then we have been too busy to have him teach any of us."

Pahlahkih grunted, "And Victor Evica has been too evasive for them. The man's dangerous. Did you notice how he said he asked nothing for himself? He has some scheme in mind."

Rahjikh Agreed. "He taught only the high Swarmheads how to operate the little ship, and with his instructions they proceeded to kill themselves, throwing the Swarm into confusion. Don't let him near the controls, and make him explain everything fully before any action is taken."

Pahlahkih, baffled, was silent, Rahjikh enjoying the other's discomfiture fully. "At least we have a hostage," Pahlahkih finally said. "Sheila Evica is evidently some kin of his; and that explains the *Bowling's* mission to the Inner Sphere."

Rahjikh agreed, having come to the same conclusion; he had wondered about Mark Irons' insistence on recovering any survivors.

Presumably the Evica clan had hired him to recover Victor Evica. He shoved aside a stray thought that brought up and said coldly, "Not exactly; I have a hostage, true, but unless your plans exactly respond with mine, you do not."

"Your attitude does not surprise me," said Pahlahkih. "I suspected all along you intended me to do the fighting and you the ruling-"

During this speech, Mark Irons had doubled himself up and pushed Sheila Evica out of the bridge into the flightway. Rahjikh instantly cast his hunt whip, ignoring both Pahlahkih and Mark Irons. Despite its stiffness and stickiness, the loaded end whipped around her several times in a perfect throw. Before he could pull he back one of the crewmen reached the door control and it snapped shut on the whip, severing it.

Mark Irons, during this diversion, had got his digits around the rope that bound him and was pulling. The rope gave visibly, though it did not break, but he gained a lot of slack. AS Rahjikh turned to him quickly, another door snapped open and a strange man, one Rahjikh had never seen before launched himself into the bridge. Gravity came back on as the stranger's outstretched digits closed around the base of Rahjikh's head. They both went to the deck and rolled over, Rahjikh's armor and mass his only protection. His tentacles were not strong enough to harm the man, though with tow of them wrapped around his neck he managed to slow and weaken him. But he couldn't get a grip on anything with the tips of them and so couldn't squeeze very hard.

Mark Irons ended it before the rest of the crew joined. He produced a knife from somewhere and cut the cords that still held him. His great strength and the weakness of the corroded ropes had almost freed him already. Despite Rahjikh's frantic efforts he was quickly subdued. His exhaust did not seem to

trouble them this time. With two men at work, they managed to pry his head far enough of his collar to get a grip on his neck, and presently the world dimmed around him.

By the time his vision returned, he found himself tightly trussed and more than a little surprised to be alive. At first he could not imagine why they would bother; then he remember that only he spoke the Outsider' language. Numbly, he noted that the men had done a better job of binding him than he had of them. They produced a series of straps that could take the oxygen and had carefully strapped his shields shut with his tentacles inside. He did not bother t try to open them; even a very weak harness would hold them against the tiny leverage he had from inside.

The men paid no particular attention to him, having bundled him into one corer of the bridge out of the way. Only Mark Irons spoke to him in a low tone, tucking the folded knife back into a slit in his skin. "Thanks for leading us to the *Venny*, but we'll take it from here."

Pahlahkih spoke triumphantly, "Not exactly; it is I who have the hostage," then turned his attention to Mark Irons. Rahjikh reflected that the other would not make a good leader; he was too quick to boast. He wondered vaguely, as if it no longer mattered, whether Mark Irons had already put into action his plans for Pahlahkih's downfall. It was obvious that the other still did no see, despite this demonstration, just how formidable Mark Irons was.

Now that he had time to think, he realized that he should have known sooner that there was another crewman abroad. Mark Irons had taken advantage of his, Rahjikh's, mistake in assuming Sheila Evica to be a crewman to conceal one of them. AS soon as he realized that she was kin to Victor Evica and had arranged the mission of the *Bowling*, he should have known there was a man concealed.

Whatever Mark Irons' plans for Pahlahkih were, he decided to cooperate, his head clearing. It would afford revenge on Pahlahkih, and it would help keep his mind off the knowledge that for him, life was in short supply-only so long as he remained useful.

Pahlahkih was sounding rather like a didahdin who had bitten down on a nugget of nickel-iron in what he had thought was sorted gut-gravel. It seemed that while he was not noticing, the warriors of the Silinim's diversionary attack and their faction of the guard had entered the *Venny*. Victor Evica was explaining that the Dahdim Swarmheads had had him fix one of the air locks so that it could not be locked form the inside. To hold it, he should have detailed a guard, but neither the Silinim nor Victor Evica had told him. He was no longer sole master of the *Venny*.

Furthermore, Victor Evica was stubbornly refusing to move the ship, and there was every possibility that the Dahdim army, now entering the cluster of islands, would simply drive in and retake it. Naturally Mark Irons would not put pressure on him by threatening Sheila Evica.

Mark Irons did not give time to think. "What we must have are assurances that Victor Evica will be released," he said. "If not, it is a matter of indifference to him whether he is held by you or by the Dahdim."

Victor Evica translated this for Pahlahkih. Pahlahkih, Rahjikh noted grimly, was too pressed to realize that Victor had, therefore, understood every word of their former conversation.

"What sort of assurances?" asked Pahlahkih.

"Hostages, of course," said Mark Irons promptly. "About four of them."

Startled, Pahlahkih considered it. With the Silinim gone, it would leave him in control of the *Venny* except

for Victor Evica. He put it to them, adding that Victor Evica was also hostage for them. He did not add the advantages it gave them—a potential stronghold in the *Bowling*, a far more valuable ship than the *Venny*. They discussed it in code, Rahjikh realizing that they had still another alternative; they could launch an attack on Pahlahkih's raiders, trusting the Dahdim army to the battle, and emerge as heroines in their own Swarm. But playing along would gain them more.

"As addition assurance," said Victor Evica shrewdly, "you may wish to have a number of Pahlahkih's warriors confined, leaving your own in the majority here. The Dahdim Swarmheads arranged for places of confinement to be prepared in the ship for hostages from other Swarms."

Pahlahkih did not much like that, but it was the deciding factor. He agreed.

Mark Irons skillfully maneuvered the *Bowling* alongside the *Venny* and opened an air lock. The girls made their transfer quickly, and were promptly tied up.

"And now," said Pahlahkih, "it is time to be moving. The Dahdim army is already entering this cluster, if I read this periscope correctly."

"The *Venny* can't accelerate," said Victor Evica. "Captain Chen burned out all the auxiliary furies before they got him. All she's got is the overdrive."

"What's the overdrive?" demanded Pahlahkih in exasperation. For once he caught on as fast as Rahjikh; if the ship couldn't accelerate, it couldn't maneuver. His victory seemed to dwindle more with each minute.

"The effect that permits the ship to exceed the speed of light, reducing long voyages to a matter of weeks," explained Victor Evica.

There was an unbelieving silence. "Explain that," said Pahlahkih.

"It's a sub-etheric function," said Victor Evica. "You know that heat, light, and noise radiation are all vibrations in the ether, and that phlogistons are vibrations in a sub-ether. These phlogistons, though your philosophers have not guessed it, travel at a speed much greater than light. The difference in speeds is a function of the size of the atoms of the medium, vibrations in matter are quite slow. Phlogistic radiation permits us to communicate with the Outer Sphere with less lag than your communication in the Inner Sphere. The overdrive converts the matter-atoms of the ship to atoms of the sub-ether. Thus it can travel, ultimately, as fast as the phlogistons. In practice, no ship can be driven so fast, but we can get many light-speeds."

Pahlahkih thought rapidly, suspiciously, probably feeling that he was seeing only that part of an army his enemy wished him to see. But Rahjikh, at least, could see nothing wrong with the explanation. Everybody knew that the crystal Stellar Globe absorbed etheric radiation such as light and transmuted it into phlogistons which were radiated back to the Sun, except for those caught by such things as oxygen torches or rough spots—starts—on the Globe. If phlogistons traveled faster than light, it would explain how the last two ships came after the first before an etheric signal could have arrived.

Pahlahkih questioned Victor Evica further about the workings of the ship, learning that the furies were small furnaces that delivered power in the form of electricity, which was fed into the drive motors—said motors being mechanical rather than biological. Rahjikh had never dreamed of such a thing, and began to realize dimly that the whole ship must be a giant mechanical unit. But Pahlahkih did not have time to consider all the implications of mechanics, a field the Dahdim were largely ignorant of. He learned that the overdrive had to be powered by special furnaces called matter converters which sounded right. To

start the matter converters would require all available stored power.

He did not ask for any further explanations, but had the man give him directions on how to start the matter converters. Victor Evica did so, explaining casually that the ship, on overdrive, would have a resultant velocity in its former line of flight—a tangent to its orbit. But since the orbital speed was so low, the overdrive speed would be relatively low. It would take some little time to get out of the vicinity.

After several minutes of complicated operations, he was ready to warp. Victor Evica gave him the final instructions, he set the final controls, and instantly the periscope in the *Bowling* switched to a view of the island cluster. Mark Irons wasted no time, but with a few rapid motions, warped the *Bowling*. The view outside vanished, replaced by a red and blue haze.

A few seconds later, the haze was again replaced with a view of the *Venny's* bridge. "The overdrive radio only works when the ship is on overdrive," Victor Evica was saying. Rahjikhah could imagine how impatient that made Pahlahkih to get off overdrive. But all he said was, "Let me see the Silinim."

They had been left in the flightway. The men brought them in, one by one, and they told him they were unharmed. Satisfied, Pahlahkih said, "We now have time to settle our differences. You, Victor Evica, and the other Outsiders, insist on being allowed to return to the Outer Sphere. I, on the other hand, have captured this ship and therefore have earned at least it. It was my action that freed you from the Dahdim. But I demand the *Bowling*," he said to Mark Irons. "Your holding the Silinim puts no restraints on me, whereas I do have a hold on you in Victor Evica. You cannot leave him, even with his permission, after having come as far to recover him. The Evica family would probably take action against you."

At this point he had to shout down the captain of the girls' guards. He finally managed to convince him that they were in no danger. Victor Evica helped by declaring that it would serve no purpose to kill them, since it would not move Pahlahkih; and it would antagonize a powerful faction among the didahdin.

"Very well, then," said Pahlahkih when that was settled. "What procedure do we follow in changing ships?"

"The question is, do we change ships?" said Mark Irons. "The *Bowling* is my only ship and the sole support of me and my men."

"The Evica family will pay you for it, Captain," said Victor Evica. "We will see that you lose nothing."

Mark Irons agreed reluctantly, Rahjikhah somewhat surprised and filly appreciating his feelings. Pahlahkih actually seemed to relax a little when that agreement was made. The fool did not realize that if Mark Irons was dangerous before, he was ten times as dangerous now that his ship was threatened.

Victor Evica suggested sending Pahlahkih's raiders over first, but Mark Irons vetoed it sharply. Pahlahkih also turned down the proposal after thought; it would leave the Silinim in control of the *Venny* and Victor Evica, even though hostages. But he insisted that his warriors be released from confinement while he made the transfer. That was allowed, and his lieutenant, a noncom in the Sikah army, took the bridge beside the captain of the girls' guards.

Mark Irons brought the *Bowling* alongside the *Venny* in warp, the other ship appearing as a pale blue haze on the lens, growing paler and paler the closer they came together. At last it covered most of the lens and he nodded to Pahlahkih in the other lens.

"Two objects in warp tended to repel each other," he explained, "so you'll have to move fast the instant the air lock door opens. Ours is already open. You may have a little trouble finding it—things look different

in warp-but we can't open the hatch doors without pushing the ships farther apart. But transferring in warp will save us hours of waiting until we can cut warp."

His transfer would leave the two leaders of the *didahdin* in the *Bowling* and all their followers in the *Venny*, thought Rahjikhah. Presumably then the men would transfer to the *Venny*, placing themselves in the power of the *didahdin*, but leaving Pahlahkih and the girls without assistants. It came to him then that Mark Irons had foreseen this, and kept him alive because he knew a little about operating the *Bowling*. Pahlahkih must have seen it, too, he thought, from the way the other had ignored him.

While these thoughts were going through his mind, it occurred to him that Pahlahkih was taking his time about the transfer. The outer air lock door on the *Venny* had been opened by his lieutenant, but Pahlahkih was not in sight. Mark Irons nodded in satisfaction, closed his air lock, and spoke to the two *didahdin* in the *Venny's* bridge.

"Prepare to cut warp," he said. "Better yet, get out of the way and let Victor do it. Pahlahkih is dead."

Rahjikhah and the *didahdin* were dumbfounded. Victor Evica explained that unprotected matter couldn't exist in a negative space warp. "When positive matter enters a negative warp, the warp cancels the bonds that hold its atoms together. They cease to exist, their energy fields flowing back into the energy fields that make up the structure of the universe."

Even Rahjikhah took seconds to adjust to this sudden development, trying to assimilate the new explanation of the overdrive warp; the other two took much longer. After a couple of minutes of blankness, the *Sikah* tried to make some protest against relinquishing control.

"You have no choice," Mark Irons told him bluntly. "Pahlahkih is dead, and Rahjikhah and the *Silininim* our prisoners. Surrender and no harm will come to you. You may have noticed that, though we had the opportunity, we did not kill Rahjikhah; and I have already saved your lives by refusing to permit you to transfer to the *Bowling* against Victor's urging. The fact is, I think we can do business. If you don't object to following an Outsider."

It occurred to Rahjikhah with catastrophic suddenness that if he had been kept alive to trick Pahlahkih into trying to take the *Bowling*, his usefulness was over with the other's death. He could only hope that for some unimaginable reason Mark Irons did have a use for *didahdin*. As for himself, he suddenly discovered that he had not the slightest objection to following an Outsider-if that Outsider was Marshall Irons.

"He's right," cut in Rahjikhah. It was the first time he had spoken since being captured. Having been casually defeated in full career, despite his utmost efforts, had left him numb; it had destroyed the egocentric axis of his orientation. Now that he had all but unconsciously decided to follow Mark Irons all his old force, craft and drive were at once revived-in Mark Irons' interest.

"You have no one else to follow, now; you cannot return to the *Sidilikah* Swarm after the raid on *Tiwahdilit*, and the *Dahdim* will not have you. And the same applies to you," he added to the captain of the *Silininim's* guards. "More so, as your mistresses are hostage. Harming Victor Evica would bring brutal reprisals on them, so you have no hostage; thwarting him can be extremely dangerous, as should be obvious now."

"Enough!" said the *Sikah*. "Sir, Pahlahkih is dead, and while we knew him better than you, we've heard of you. What are your orders?"

"Obey all orders of Victor Evica or Mark Irons," said Rahjikhah promptly.

The Dahdim was wavering. "Let me speak to the Silinim," he said, and the girls were brought it. They had heard the conversation and had been singing to each other quietly.

They consulted briefly and ordered their guards to rake orders from Victor Evica, Mark Irons-and Rahjika-as if they were the Silinim.

Victor Evica was already at the controls, and a moment later the red and blue haze was replaced by the starred black of space. While the ships were being maneuvered together, Mark Irons removes the straps from Rahjika's shields. "Many thanks," he said briefly, "for saving their lives for us. We'll need those boys." Rahjika followed him uncertainly and helped release the girls.

Presently Victor Evica entered the crowded bridge with Sheila Evica, their anterior limbs wrapped around each other. To Mark Irons, he said, "Thanks for the rescue; a brilliant piece of work. Not that I expect it to do me much good. I only wish there was something I could do for you when I get back to civilization, but I'll have trouble enough looking after myself."

"You can do plenty," said Mark Irons promptly. "But, except for brief visits, you'll not be going back to civilization for a while. If you agree, that is."

"Agree? Agree to what?"

"To repay me by helped me make money. There'll be money in it for you, too, of course. Not a fortune, but even the wealthy Evica family, I think, won't turn down a good investment. Do you realize what we have here?" he asked resting one anterior limb against one of Rahjika's shields.

"It's the kind of break every tramp skipper dreams of," he declared. "The didahdin are the perfect space prospectors. Instead of a fleet of clumsy one-or two-man boats with elaborate life-support apparatus, a company of didahdin merely needs the instruments to examine hunks of rock and a mother ship like the *Bowling Along*."

"Your job," he explained to Rahjika, "will be to organize your fellow didahdin into a company and recruit more, teaching them all Standard English; you'll have Victor here to convince them that there are such things as Outsiders. We'll borrow Exploration Serve's ship to start with; we can spare some furies for it. When we're properly organized, We'll hire out as surveyors to space-borne mining companies. You see, most of our minerals come from star systems with areas like the Inner Sphere here-full of floating junk. Digging minerals out of a planet is too expensive; they have too low a surface-to-volume ratio."

Rahjika understood dimly; prospecting was no small business in the Inner Sphere, though not one an ambitious person would enter. It rather surprised him that so obviously capable a being as Mark Irons would bother with it.

"We will do whatever you say; you know best," he said slowly. "But I assumed that you had a need of trained warriors."

Mark Irons laughed and struck him gently on one shield. "Rahjika, if you think your society-warriors and all-was cutthroat, wait till you've seen our peaceful competition in interstellar trade."