SIR GEORGE AND THE DRAGON DAVID WEBER Demon wind greeted pallid daylight with hell-howl fury. It was no true daylight, although somewhere above the clouds of seething black the sun had heaved itself once more into the heavens. It was only the devil's own twilight, slashed with body-smashing sheets of rain and spray, the rolling concussion of thunder, the bellow of wind, and the endless keen of rigging and sodden percussion of torn canvas flailing to destruction. Sir George Wincaster, Third Baron of Wickworth, clung to a stay, feeling it quiver and groan with strain while he kept to his feet by raw, hopeless force of will alone. The lifeline the vessel's captain had lashed about him when the hideous gale burst upon them yesterday morning had ringed his chest in bruises, salt sores stung his lips, and rain and spray had soaked into his very marrow. He felt as if heavy horses had charged over him and back again, and despair was a leaden fist about his heart. He had been too ignorant to understand the captain's terror when first the weather broke, for he was a soldier, not a sailor. Now he understood only too well, and he watched almost numbly as the battered cog, creaking and groaning in every frame and stringer, corkscrewed down yet another mountainous, slate-gray wave, streaked with seething bands of spray and foam, and buried its round-cheeked prow deep. Water roared the length of the hull, poison-green and icy as death, plucking and jerking at his limbs and groping after every man on the staggering ship's deck. The hungry sheet of destruction smashed over Sir George, battering the breath from him in yet another agonized grunt, and then it was past and he threw his head up, gasping and hacking on the water which had forced itself into nostrils and eyes. The cog fought her way once more up out of the abyss, wallowing as the water cascaded off her deck through buckled rails. Broken cordage blew out, bar-straight and deadly as flails on the howling torrent of wind, and he heard the hull crying out in torment. Sir George was a landsman, yet even he felt the ship's heavier motion, knew the men—and women—laboring frantically at the pumps and bailing with buckets, bowls, even bare hands, were losing ground steadily. The vessel was doomed. All the ships of his expedition were doomed . . . and there was nothing he could do about it. The unexpected summer gale had caught them at the worst possible moment, just as they were rounding the Scilly Isles on their way from Lancaster to Normandy. There had been no warning, no time to seek shelter, only the desperate hope that they might somehow ride out the storm's violence on the open sea. And that hope had failed. Sir George had seen only one ship actually die. He was uncertain which, but he thought it had been Earl Cathwall's flagship. He hoped he was wrong. It was unlikely any of them would survive, but Lord Cathwall was more than the commander of the expedition. He was also Sir George's father-in-law, and they held one another in deep and affectionate respect. And perhaps Sir George was wrong. The dying ship had been almost close enough to hear the shrieks of its doomed company howl as it was pounded into the depths, even through the storm's demented scream, but the darkness and storm fury, broken only by the glare of forked lightning, had made exact identification impossible. Yet even though it was the only ship he had seen destroyed, he was grimly certain there had been others. Indeed, he could see only one other vessel still fighting its hopeless battle, and he ground his teeth as yet another sea crashed over his own cog. The impact staggered the ship, and a fresh chorus of screams and prayers came faintly from the men and women and children packed below its streaming deck. His wife Matilda and their son Edward were in that dark, noisome hellhole of crowded terror and vomit, of gear come adrift and washing seawater, and terror choked him as he thought of them once again. He tried to find the words of prayer, the way to plead with God to save his wife and his son. He did not beg for himself. It was not his way, and his was the responsibility for bringing them to this in the first place. If God wanted his life in exchange for those so much dearer to him, it was a price he would pay without a whimper. Yet he knew it was a bargain he would not be permitted. That he and Matilda and Edward would meet their ends together, crushed by the soulless malice and uncaring brutality of sea and

wind, and deep within him bitter protest reproached the God who had decreed that they should. The cog shuddered and twitched, heaving in the torment of overstrained timbers and rigging, and Sir George looked up as the ship's mate shouted something. He couldn't make out the words, but he knew it was a question, and he shook himself like a sodden dog, struggling to make his mind function. For all his ignorance of the sea, he had found himself doomed to command of the ship when a falling spar killed the captain. In fact, he'd done little more than agree with the mate's suggestions, lending his authority to the support of a man who might—might!—know enough to keep them alive a few hours more. But the mate had needed that support, needed someone else to assume the ultimate responsibility, and that was Sir George's job. To assume responsibility. No, to acknowledge the responsibility which was already his. And so he made himself look as if he were carefully considering whatever it was the mate wanted to do this time, then nodded vigorously. The mate nodded back, then bellowed orders at his exhausted, battered handful of surviving sailors. Wind howl and sea thunder thrashed the words into meaningless fragments so far as Sir George could tell, but two or three men began clawing their way across the deck to obey whatever the mate had decreed, and Sir George turned his face back to the sea's tortured millrace. It didn't really matter what the mate did, he thought. At worst, a mistake would cost them a few hours of life they might otherwise have clung to; at best, a brilliant maneuver might buy them an hour or two they might not otherwise have had. In the end, the result would be the same. He'd had such hopes, made so many plans. A hard man, Sir George Wincaster, and a determined one. A peer of the realm, a young man who had caught his monarch's favor at the siege of Berwick at the age of twenty-two, who'd been made a knight by Edward III's own hand the next year on the field of Halidon Hill. A man who'd served with distinction at the Battle of Sluys eight years later—although, he thought with an edge of mordant humor even now, if I'd learned a bit more then of ships, I might have been wise enough to stay home this time!—and slogged through the bitterly disappointing French campaign of 1340. And a man who had returned with a fortune from Henry of Denby's campaign in Gascony five years later. And a bloody lot of good it's done me in the end, he thought bitterly, remembering his gleaming plans. At thirty-five, he was at the height of his prowess, a hard-bitten, professional master of the soldier's trade. A knight, yes, but one who knew the reality of war, not the minstrels' tales of romance and chivalry. A man who fought to win . . . and understood the enormous changes England and her lethal longbows were about to introduce into the continental princes' understanding of the art of war. And one who knew there were fortunes to be made, lands and power to be won, in the service of his King against Philip of France. Despite the disappointments of 1340, last year had proved Edward III his grandfather's grandson, a welcome relief after the weakness and self-indulgence of his father. Longshanks would have approved of the King, Sir George thought now. He started slow, but now that Denby's shown the way and he's chosen to beard Philip alone, the lions of England will make the French howl! Perhaps they would, and certainly Edward's claim to the throne of France was better than Philip VI's, but Sir George Wincaster would not win the additional renown—or the added wealth and power he had planned to pass to his son—at his King's side. Not now. For he and all the troops under his command would find another fate, and no one would ever know where and when they actually perished. The corpse light of storm-wracked afternoon slid towards evening, and Sir George realized dully that they had somehow survived another day. He was too exhausted even to feel surprised . . . and though he tried to feel grateful, at least, a part of him was anything but. Another night of horror and fear, exhaustion and desperate struggle, loomed, and even as he gathered himself to face it, that traitor part wanted only for it to end. For it to be over. To rest. But there would be rest enough soon enough, he reminded himself. An eternity of it, if he was fortunate enough to avoid Hell. He hoped he would be, but he was also a realist—and a soldier. And the best of soldiers would face an arduous stay in Purgatory, while the worst . .

. He brushed the thought aside, not without the wistful wish that he and Father Timothy might have argued it out one more time, and made himself peer about. The second ship was still with them, further away as darkness gathered, but still fighting its way across the heaving gray waste, and he could actually see a third vessel beyond it. There might even be one or two more beyond the range of his sight, but— Sir George's stumbling, exhaustion-sodden thoughts jerked to a stop, and his hand tightened like a claw on the stay. A cracked voice screamed something, barely audible over the roar of wind and sea yet touched with a fresh and different terror, and Sir George clamped his jaws against a bellow of matching fear as the shape burst abruptly and impossibly through the savage backdrop of cloud and rain. He couldn't grasp it, at first. Couldn't wrap his mind about it or find any point of reference by which to measure or evaluate it. It was too huge, too alien . . . too impossible. It could not exist, not in a world of mortals, yet it loomed above them, motionless, shrugging aside the fury of the gale as if it were but the gentlest of zephyrs. Gleaming like polished bronze, flickering with the reflected glare of lightning, a mile and more in length, a thing of subtle curves and gleaming flanks caparisoned in jewellike lights of red and white and amber. He stared at it, too amazed and astonished to think, the terror of the storm—even his fear for his wife and son—banished by sheer, disbelieving shock as that vast shape hung against the seething cloud and rain. And then it began to move. Not quickly, but with contemptuous ease, laughing at the gale's baffled wrath. It drifted over the more distant of the cogs he'd seen earlier, and more light appeared as portions of its skin shifted and changed.

No, they're not "changing," Sir George thought numbly. They're opening. And those lights are coming from inside whatever it is. Those are doors, doors to chambers filled with light and— His thoughts stuttered and halted yet again as more shapes appeared. Far smaller this time, but with that same unnatural stillness as the storm howled about them. Some were cross shaped, with the grace of a gliding gull or albatross, while others were squat cones or even spheres, but all were of the same bronze hue as the huger shape which had spawned them. They spread out, surrounding the half-foundered cog, and then— "Sweet Jesu!" Sir George turned his head, too shocked by the lies of his own eyes to wonder how Father Timothy had suddenly appeared there. The snowy-haired Dominican was a big man, with the powerful shoulders of the archer he'd been before he heard God's call decades before, and Sir George released his death grip on the stay to fasten fingers of iron on his confessor's arm. "In the name of God, Timothy! What is that thing?!" "I don't know," the priest replied honestly. "But—" His voice chopped off abruptly, and he released his own clutch on the cog's rail to cross himself urgently. Nor did Sir George blame him. "Holy Mary, Mother of God," the baron whispered, releasing Father Timothy and crossing himself more slowly, almost absently, as an unearthly glare of light leapt out from the shapes which had encircled the other ship. Leapt out, touched the heaving vessel, embraced it . . . . . and lifted it bodily from the boiling sea. Someone aboard Sir George's own vessel was gibbering, gobbling out fragments of prayer punctuated by curses of horrified denial, but the baron himself stood silent, unable to tear his eyes from the impossible sight. He saw streams of water gushing from the ship, draining straight down from its half-flooded hold as if in a dead calm, only to be whipped to flying spray by the fury of the wind as they neared the sea below. Yet the shapes enfolded it in their brilliance, raising it effortlessly towards the far vaster shape which had birthed them, and he winced as someone aboard that rising vessel, no doubt maddened by terror, hurled himself bodily over the rail. Another body followed, and a third.

"Fools!" Father Timothy bellowed. "Dolts! Imbeciles! God Himself has offered them life, and they—!" The priest broke off, pounding the rail with a huge, gnarly fist. The first plunging body struck the water and vanished without a trace, but not the second or third. Additional shafts of light speared out, touched each falling form, and arrested that fall. The light lifted them once more, along with the cog, bearing them towards those brilliantly lit portals,

and Sir George swallowed again. A mile, he had estimated that shape's length, but he'd been wrong. It was longer than that. Much longer, for the cog's hull finally gave him something against which to measure it, and the cog was less than a child's toy beside the vast, gleaming immensity that rode like a mountain peak of bronze amidst the black-bellied clouds of the gale's fury. "Were they fools?" He didn't realize he'd spoken—certainly not that he'd spoken loudly enough for Father Timothy to hear through the crash of the sea and the wind-shriek, but the priest turned to him once more and raised an eyebrow. Even here and now, the expression brought back memories of the days when Father Timothy had been Sir George's tutor as he was now Edward's, but this was no time to be thinking of that. "Were they fools?" Sir George repeated, shouting against the storm's noise. "Are you so certain that that . . . that thing—" he pointed a hand he was vaguely surprised to note did not tremble at the shape "—was sent by God and not the Devil?" "I don't care who sent it! What matters is that it offers the chance of life, and while life endures, there is always the hope of God's mercy!" "Life?" Sir George repeated, and Father Timothy shook his head, as if reproaching his patron and old student's slowness. "Whatever its ultimate purpose, it clearly means for now to rescue that ship, and possibly all of us who remain alive." "But . . . why?" "That I do not know," Father Timothy admitted. "I've known enough of God's love to hope it is of His mercy, and seen enough of man's evil to fear that it is not. Whatever its purpose, and whoever sent it, we will find out soon enough, My Lord." Sir George's cog was the last to be lifted from the sea. He had regained at least the outward semblance of his habitual self-control and hammered a shaky calm over the others aboard the vessel by the time the lesser shapes surrounded the ship. Now he stood at the rail, gazing at the greater shape with his wife and son beside him. It might strike some as less than heroic to cling to his wife, and he tried to look as if the arm wrapped so tightly about her sought only to comfort her, but the two of them knew better. As always, Matilda supported him, pressing her cheek proudly against his shoulder even as he felt her tremble with terror, and he turned his head to press a kiss into her sodden, wind-straggled hair. For fourteen years she had stood beside him, one way or another, always supporting him, and a vast, familiar tenderness swelled within him as he drew strength from her yet again. He kissed her hair once more, then returned his eyes to the vastness hovering above them. His people knew that he knew no more about what his they faced than they did, but the habit of obedience ran deep, especially among the men of his own household and their families, and the need to find some fragment of calm in pretending their liege knew what he was doing ran still deeper. He felt their eyes, locked upon him as the light flooded down and the scream of the wind and the thunder of the sea were abruptly shut away. There was no sense of movement, and he kept his own gaze fastened on the huge shape awaiting them rather than let himself look over the rail and watch the sea dropping away in the sudden, unnatural silence. He dared not look, lest the sight unman him at the moment when his people most needed him. Their uncanny flight was rapid, yet their passage sent no breeze across the deck. It was as if the air about the ship had been frozen, locked into a stillness and quiet which had no place in the natural world. Sheets of rain continued to lash at them, yet those sheets burst upon the edges of that tranquil stillness and vanished in explosions of spray. For all its swiftness, the journey seemed to take forever, and Sir George heard the rapid mutter of Father Timothy's Latin as they soared above the tumbling waves. But then, abruptly, it was their turn to pass through the opened portal, and Sir George swallowed as he saw the other cogs sitting like abandoned toys in the vastness of the cavern inside the huge shape. There were a total of nine ships, including his own. That was more than he'd dared hope might have survived, yet little more than half the number which had set out for France, and he clenched his jaw. Whether or not it had been Earl Cathwall's ship he had seen die, the earl's vessel was not among those in the cavern. The cog settled on the cavern floor, and Sir George tightened his grip on the rail, expecting the ship to

list over on its rounded side when the light released it. But the vessel did nothing of the sort. It sat there upright, still quietly gushing water from its sodden interior, and he made himself release the rail. "Let's get a ladder over the side," he told the mate. "I don't—" the man began, then stopped himself. "Of course, My Lord. I'll have to rig something, but—" He broke off again, this time with an undignified squeak, and Sir George had to lock his jaws to withhold an equally humiliating bellow as some unseen hand lifted him from his feet. His arm tightened about Matilda, and he heard Edward's gasp of sudden terror, but neither shamed him by crying out, and his heart swelled with pride in them both. The invisible hand was as gentle as it was irresistible, and he drew a deep, shuddering breath of relief as it set them on their feet once more. Everyone else from the ship followed, floating through the air like ungainly birds, all too often flapping arms or legs in panic as they floated, until all stood beside the beached cog, bewildered and afraid and trying not to show it while they stared at Sir George in search of guidance. "You will walk to the green lights on the inboard bulkhead," a voice said, and, despite himself, Sir George twitched in astonishment. "Witchcraft!" someone gasped, and Sir George fought the urge to cross himself in agreement, for the voice had spoken in his very ear, as if its owner stood close beside him, yet there was no one to be seen! And there was something very strange about the voice itself. A resonance and timbre such as he had never heard . . . and one which, he realized from the expressions about him, had spoken in every ear, and not his own alone. "Witchcraft or angelic powers, we seem to have little choice but to obey, for now at least," he made himself say as calmly as possible. He offered Matilda his arm, glanced at their son, and then turned to survey the others from the ship. "And since that seems to be the case, let us remember that we are Christians and Englishmen." "Well said, My Lord!" Father Timothy rumbled, and then bestowed a fierce smile—one much better suited to the archer he once had been than the pacific man of God he had since become—upon his companions. "If it be witchcraft, then God and His Mother will surely protect our souls against it. And if we face some force of the mortal world, why, what mortal force has there ever been that Englishmen could not overcome?" Several voices muttered agreement—no doubt as much in search of self-reassurance as Sir George himself at that moment—and the baron led the way towards the green lights blinking ahead of them. It was a lengthy walk, and almost despite himself, he felt his pulse slow and some of his own undeniable terror ease. In part, he knew, that stemmed from the distraction of his inveterate curiosity. He couldn't stop himself from looking about, marveling—and wondering—at all he saw. The gleaming floor was some strange sort of alloy, he decided, although he doubted any smith had ever even dreamed of such a huge expanse of metal. It wasn't the bronze it resembled, he felt certain, yet it rang gently under his boot heels and had the smooth, polished sheen found only on metal. It was preposterous, of course. He was only too well aware of the expense of a chain hauberk or a cuirass. It was absurd to even suggest that something as vast as the shape within which they found themselves could truly be made of metal, and yet that was the only conclusion he could reach. The lights were equally strange, burning with a bright steadiness which was profoundly unnatural. Whatever provided their illumination, it wasn't burning oil or tallow. Indeed, there was no sign of any flame, as if the builders of the shape had somehow captured the light of the sun itself to release when they required it. He blinked, wondering why he was so certain that the shape had been "built." Surely witchcraft—or, perhaps, the hand of God—was a more reasonable explanation than that any mortal being could have constructed such a wonder. Yet for all his confusion and remaining fear, Sir George discovered that he had become somehow convinced that all of this was, indeed, the work of hands neither demonic nor divine. It was a conviction which found itself abruptly challenged when they reached their destination. The passengers from the other cogs were already gathered there. Like Sir George, all of the knights and most of the men-at-arms clearly had snatched up their personal weapons before they left

their ships. Many of the archers carried their bow staves, as well, but none had strung them. Hardly surprising, given the state their bowstrings must be in. Yet even without the bows, there were weapons in plenty in evidence among the crowd of men which had coalesced between the "bulkhead" and the expedition's women and children. That should have been a source of some comfort to Sir George, he supposed. It wasn't. His hand tightened on the hilt of his own sword, and his nostrils flared as he came close enough to see what held all the rest of the English frozen. So much for "mortal hands," he told himself with a queer sort of calm, and made himself release his hilt and straighten his shoulders. The . . . beings lined up along the bulkhead were not human. Far from it, in fact. The shortest of them must have stood at least a foot taller than Sir George's own five feet and ten inches, and Sir George was one of the tallest men in the expedition. Yet that was the smallest, least significant difference between them and any man Sir George had ever seen.

All of them went on two legs and possessed but two arms each, but that was the end of their similarity to men. Or to one another, really. Indeed, the creatures were so utterly alien that their very strangeness had prevented him from immediately realizing that there were two different sorts of them. The first was clad in armor-plate which certainly looked like steel rather than the combination plate and mail Sir George wore—and armed with huge, double-bitted axes. Despite their height, they were almost squat for their size, and the opened visors of their helmets showed huge, bulging eyes and a depressed slot. The slot was set far too high in their faces to be called a nose, although there was nothing else it could be, and fringed on either side with hairlike fronds which stirred and crawled uncannily with their breathing. The wide, froglike slit of a mouth below the nose-slot and eyes was almost reassuringly homey compared to the rest of the ugly, orange-skinned and warty face in which it was set. The second sort wore seamless, one-piece garments, predominately deep red in color, but with blue sleeves and legs. Those garments covered them from throat to toe and shoulder to fingertip but could not hide the fact that they had too many joints in the arms and legs they covered. It was as if God—or the Devil—had grafted extra elbows and knees into the creatures' limbs, and their hands and feet were larger in proportion to their bodies than those of any human. But there was worse, for the garments stopped at their throats. They offered no covering or concealment for the gray-green hide—the glistening, scale-covered gray-green hide—of the creatures' faces, or the vertical, slit-pupilled eyes, or the lizardlike crests which crowned their snouted, reptilian heads. Yet for all their grotesqueness, they lacked the somehow malevolent air of menace which clung to their wart-faced companions. "Demons!" someone behind Sir George gasped, and the baron swallowed hard. His hand clamped tighter on his hilt, and it took all his self-control to keep the blade sheathed, but— "Dragons!" someone else exclaimed, and Sir George drew a deep breath and nodded hard. "Aye, dragons they are, like enough!" he said loudly enough to be sure all of those about him heard it . . . and choosing not to look too closely at the wart-faces. The label was probably wrong even for the scale-hides, of course. At the very least, dragons were born of Earth, and he felt a deep, sudden and instinctive assurance that wherever or whatever these creatures sprang from, it was not Earth. Yet, however inaccurate, the label was also correct. And the men may be less prone to panic over "dragons" than "demons," he thought with something like detachment. He drew another breath, sensing the fragile balance between terror, discipline, caution, and ignorance which held the armed men about him precariously still. In many ways, he was astounded such a balance could have held even for a moment, for these were trained fighting men. Trained, English fighting men, soldiers every one of them. But this threat was so far outside their experience that even Englishmen might be excused for uncertainty and hesitation, he told himself . . . and thank God for it! Whatever else those wart-faces and dragon-men might be, they were obviously part and parcel of whatever power had created the shape in which they all stood. Assuming they truly were mortal, Sir George never doubted that his men could swarm them

under, despite the wart-faces' armor, but he had no illusions about the efficacy of edged steel against the other defenses such a power could erect to guard itself. For that matter, we have no reason—as yet—to think our rescuers might be hostile in any way. After all, they were under no obligation to pluck us from the sea. If they wished us ill, they had only to leave us there. We would all have been dead soon enough. He felt the silence stretch out as those from his own cog joined the rear ranks of the crowd. He gave Matilda a final hug, then stepped forward. Men who had stared fixedly at the grotesque creatures started and looked over their shoulders as they sensed his approach, and he heard more than a few muttered prayers (and curses) of relief as he was recognized. He was as stained and ragged as any of them, but his dark spade beard and the scar down his right cheek were well known, almost famous, even among those who had followed Earl Cathwall or Sir Michael rather than Sir George. More to the point, perhaps, Earl Cathwall was dead, and Sir Michael was awaiting them in Normandy . . . where even the slowest must realize they were unlikely to arrive. Which meant every one of those men looked to Sir George Wincaster for leadership and guidance. Now they drew apart, opening a path for him. One or two, bolder than the others, actually reached out to touch him as he passed, whether to lend him reassurance or to draw confidence of their own from him he didn't know. Sir Richard Maynton stood at the very front of the crowd, and his head turned sharply as Sir George stepped up beside him. With the losses their command structure had taken, Sir Richard had almost certainly become Sir George's second in command, which was unfortunate, in a way, for Sir George knew him less well than he might have liked. On the other hand, he couldn't misread the relief in Sir Richard's eyes. "Thank God!" the other knight said quickly. "I feared you, too, had perished, My Lord!" "Aye?" Sir George managed a chuckle. "I can understand that well enough. I thought I had perished a time or two, myself!" Several others chuckled at his feeble joke, and he clapped the other knight on the shoulder.

"Indeed," Sir Richard agreed. "In fact, My Lord, I—" The knight closed his mouth with an almost audible click, and a chorus of muffled exclamations rippled through the crowd facing the dragon-men and wart-faces as a brighter light flashed. An opening appeared in the bulkhead, snapping into existence so abruptly that the eye almost missed the way the panel which formed it flicked aside, and another being stood within the sudden doorway or hatch. If the wart-faces and dragon-men were alien, this being was even more bizarre, although, in many ways, it seemed more comical than menacing. Its garment was the same deep red as the dragon-men's, but its garb was solely red, without the blue sleeves and legs, and a gleaming pendant hung about its neck to dangle on its chest. It was also short, its head rising little higher than Sir George's chest, and the exposed portion of its face and throat was covered in plushy purple fur. Like the others, it went on two legs and had two arms, but though its hands had only three fingers, each had been given an extra thumb where a man would have had his little finger. All of that was odd enough, but the creature's face was more grotesque than a mummer's mask. It was broad and flat, with two wide, lipless mouths—one above the other—and no trace of a nose. Worse, it had three golden eyes: a single, large one centered in the upper part of its face, and two smaller ones set lower, flanking it to either side. And, as if to crown the absurdity of its appearance, its broad, squat head was topped by two enormous, foxlike ears covered in the same purple fur. Sir George stared at it, shocked as even the wart-faces and dragon-men had not left him. They, at least, radiated a sense of watchfulness, even threat, he felt he understood, but this creature—! It might as easily have been a demon or a court jester, and he wondered whether he ought to smile or cross himself. "Who leads this group?" The voice was light, even delicate, with the piping clarity of a young child's. It spoke perfect English, and it appeared to emerge from the upper of the demon-jester's two mouths, although the lipless opening didn't move precisely in time with the words. Hearing it, Sir George was tempted to smile, despite all that had happened, for it seemed far more suited to the jester than to a demon. But the temptation was faint

and brief. There was no expression in that voice at all, nor, so far as he could tell, did any hint of an expression cross that alien face. Yet that was the point—it was an alien face, and that was driven brutally home to Sir George as he realized that, for the first time in his life, he could not discern the smallest hint of the thoughts or wishes or emotions of the being speaking to him. "I do," he replied after a long still moment. "And you are?" the piping voice inquired. "I am Sir George Wincaster, Baron of Wickworth, in the service of His Majesty Edward III, King of England, Scotland, Wales, and France." There was a hint of iron pride in that reply, and Sir George felt other spines straighten about him, but— "You are in error, Sir George Wincaster," the piping voice told him, still with no hint of expression. "You are no longer in the service of any human. You are now in the service of my Guild." Sir George stared at the small being, and a rumbling rustle went through the men at his back. He opened his mouth to respond, but the demon-jester went on without so much as a pause. "But for the intervention of my vessel and crew, you all would have perished," it said. "We rescued you. As a result, you are now our property, to do with as we choose." An inarticulate half-snarl, fueled as much by fear as by anger, rose behind Sir George, but the demon-jester continued unperturbed. "No doubt it will take you some time to fully accept this change in status," its expressionless voice continued. "You would be wise, however, to accustom yourself to it as quickly as your primitive understanding permits." "Accustom ourselves—!" someone began furiously, but Sir George's raised hand cut the rising tide of outrage short. "We are Englishmen . . . sir," he said quietly, "and Englishmen are no one's `property.' " "It is unwise to disagree with me, Sir George Wincaster," the demon-jester said, still with that calm, total lack of expression. "As a group, you and your fellows are—or may become, at any rate—a valuable asset of my Guild. None of you, however, is irreplaceable as an individual." Sir George's jaw clenched. He was unaccustomed to being threatened to his face, and certainly to being threatened by a half-sized creature he could have snapped in two one-handed. Yet he made himself swallow it. The wart-faces and dragon-men behind the demon-jester were ominous evidence of the power which backed him. Even worse, Sir George was achingly aware of the presence of his wife and son. "Unwise or not," he said after a long, still moment, "it is I who command these men. As such, it is my duty to speak for them. We are all grateful for our rescue, but—" "I do not want your gratitude. My Guild and I desire only your obedience," the demon-jester interrupted. "We require certain services of you—services you should find neither difficult nor distasteful, since they are the only ones you are truly trained or equipped to provide."

Sir George's hand clenched once more on the hilt of his sword, but the demon-jester ignored the movement, as if the very notion that something as childish as a sword might threaten it was ludicrous. "We require only that you fight for us," it went on. "If you do, you will be well treated and rewarded. Your lives will be extended beyond any span you can presently imagine, your health will be provided for, your—" The three eyes looked past Sir George, and the creature seemed to pause for a moment, as if searching for a word. Then it continued without inflection. "Your mates and young will be cared for, and you will be granted access to them." "And if we choose not to fight for you?" Sir George asked flatly. "Then you will be compelled to change your minds," the demon-jester replied. "Analysis indicates that such compulsion should not prove difficult. You are, of course, primitives from a primitive and barbaric culture, so simple and direct methods would undoubtedly serve best. We might, perhaps, begin by selecting five or six of your mates and young at random and executing them." A ball of ice closed upon Sir George's stomach. The threat was scarcely unexpected, yet he had not counted on how the emotionlessness—the total lack of interest or anger—in the demon-jester's piping voice would hone the jagged edges of his fear. He forced himself not to look over his shoulder at Matilda and Edward. "If such measures should prove insufficient, there are, of course, others," the demon-jester continued. "Should all else fail, we could attempt complete

personality erasure and simply reprogram you, but that would probably prove excessively time consuming. Nor would there be any real point in it. It would be much more cost effective simply to dispose of all of you and collect a fresh force of fighters. One group of barbarians is very like another, after all." "But these barbarians are under arms, sirrah!" another voice barked.

Sir George's head snapped around, and he felt a stab of dreadful certainty at what he would see. Sir John Denmore was barely twenty years old, young and hot-blooded, with more than his fair share of arrogance, and he punctuated his fierce statement with the steely slither of a drawn blade. His sword gleamed under the unnaturally brilliant lights, and he leapt forward with a vicious stroke. "God and Saint G—!" He never completed the war cry. His sword swept towards the demon-jester, but the creature never even moved. It simply stood there, watching with its alien lack of expression, and the young knight's shout died in shock when his sword struck some invisible barrier, like a wall of air. It flew out of his hands, and he gaped in disbelief as it spun end over end away from him. Then he shook himself, snarled, and snatched at his dagger. "Hold!" Sir George shouted. "Put up your—" But he was too late. This time the demon-jester made a small gesture, and Sir John gurgled and stopped dead. His eyes bulged wildly, his expression one of raw terror as rage turned into panic, but he could not even open his mouth. He was held as though in a giant, unseen spider's web, dagger half-drawn, utterly helpless, and the demon-jester gazed at Sir George. "It is well for you that you attempted to stop him rather than joining in his stupidity," it informed the baron, "but I see you truly are primitives and so require proof of your status. Very well. I will give it to you." "There is no need—" Sir George began. "There is whatever need I say there is," the demon-jester piped, and held out a two-thumbed hand to the nearest dragon-man. The dragon-man's eyes touched Sir George for just a moment, but then it reached to its belt and drew a strange device from a scabbard. It extended the thing to the demon-jester, and the shorter creature adjusted a small knob on the device's side. "You only think you are armed, Sir George Wincaster. Your swords and arrows do not threaten me or any member of my crew. Our own weapons, on the other hand—" It raised the device in Sir John's direction almost negligently, and then Sir George cried out in horror. He couldn't help himself, and neither then nor later did he feel the shame he perhaps ought to have. Not when the terrible ray of light, like lightning chained to the demon-jester's will, crackled from the device and smote full upon Sir John Denmore's breast. Its touch was death . . . but not simply death. The young man's chest cavity blew apart as if from the inside, and heart and lungs exploded with it. A grisly storm front of blood and shredded tissue flew over those about him, a stink of burning meat filled the air, and men who had seen the most horrible sights war could offer recoiled with cries of horror. But worst of all, Sir George realized later, was the dead man's silence. The fact that even as the hell weapon was raised, even as his expression twisted—first with terror, and then in agony—the young knight never made a sound. Was unable even to writhe or open his mouth. He could only stand there, frozen, more helpless than any lamb before the butcher, while the demon-jester calmly blew his body open. Even after death, Sir John was not allowed to fall. His corpse stood upright, face contorted with the rictus of death, blood flooding down from his ruptured chest to puddle about his feet. Had it not been for the proof that no one could touch the creature, Sir George would have attacked the thing himself, with his bare hands, if necessary. But he had that proof . . . and he had his responsibilities, and his duty, and his wife and son stood behind him. And so he did something much harder than launch a hopeless attack. He made himself stand there, with the blood of a man under his command dripping down his face, and did nothing. His motionless example stilled the handful of others who would have attacked, and the demon-jester regarded them all for a long, deadly silent time. Then it reached out and, without taking its triple-eyed gaze from Sir George, handed the lightning weapon back to the dragon-man. "I trust this lesson is not lost upon your warriors, Sir George Wincaster," it piped then.

"Or upon you, either. You may speak for these men, and you may lead them in combat, but you are no longer their commander. I am. Unless, of course, someone wishes to challenge that point." It made a gesture, and the mutilated corpse which once had been an arrogant young knight thudded to the metal floor like so much dead meat. At least this ship's decks didn't pitch and dance like the decks of those never to be sufficiently damned cogs. The thought wended through a well-worn groove in Sir George's mind as he leaned forward to stroke Satan's shoulder. The destrier shook his head, rattling the mail crinnet protecting his arched neck, then stamped his rear off hoof. The shoe rang like thunder on the deck's bronze-tinted alloy, and Sir George smiled thinly. He and the stallion had been through this all too many times since that horrific storm. By now both of them should be accustomed to it, and he supposed they were. But neither of them was resigned to it. The warning gong sounded, and Sir George rose in the stirrups and turned to regard the men behind him. A score of orange-skinned wart-faces stood beyond them, lining the bulkhead separating this cargo hold from the rest of the ship, once again armed and armored, but their function was not to support the Englishmen. It was to drive them forward if they hesitated, and to strike down any who attempted to flee. Not that any of Sir George's men were likely to flee . . . or to require driving. Many of the men behind him had once been sailors, but that had been before they found themselves with precisely the same choices—or lack of them—as Sir George's soldiers. By now there was no real way to distinguish them from any of the professional troops who had been their passengers. After all, they were professionals now—professionals who had seen more battles than any soldier who'd ever served an Earthly master. Their experience showed in their expressions—not relaxed, but calm and almost thoughtful as they recalled their prebattle briefings and waited to put them into effect. The mounted men-at-arms and handful of knights sat their mounts closest to him, forming a protective barrier between the still-closed wall of metal and the more vulnerable archers. Some of those archers were more heavily armored than they had been, but even the most heavily protected wore only helmets, short chain hauberks, and, here and there, a steel breastplate. Protection was welcome, but they knew as well as Sir George that their true protection lay in mobility, the devastating fire of the longbow, and the wardship of his more heavily armored knights and men-at-arms. And they trusted those knights and men-at-arms as totally as they had come to trust their commander. So they stood now, their faces showing grim confidence, not uncertainty, and returned Sir George's regard with level eyes. "All right, lads." He didn't raise his voice to a bellow as he would have back home. There was no need, for their masters' magic carried his voice clearly, as if he were speaking into each man's private ear. "You know the plan . . . and Saint Michael knows we've done it often enough!" His ironic tone won a mutter of laughter, and he gave them a tight grin in reply. "Mind yourselves, keep to the plan, and we'll be done in time for dinner!" A rumble of agreement came back, and then there was the very tiniest of lurches, the metal wall before Sir George hissed like a viper and vanished upward, and he looked out upon yet another of the endless alien worlds he and his men were doomed to conquer. The sky was almost the right shade, but there was something odd about it—a darker, deeper hue than the blue he remembered (and Sweet Mary, but did he remember? or did he simply think he did?) from home—and the sun was too large by half. The "trees" rising in scraggly, scattered clumps were spidery interweavings of too-fine branches covered with long, hairy streamers for leaves, and leaves and grass alike were a strange, orangish color like nothing anyone had ever seen in any world meant for men. Not that there were any men in this world. Not born of it, at any rate. An army of not-men, too tall, too thin, and with too many limbs, had drawn up in a ragged line well beyond bowshot of the ship. They carried large wicker shields and spears, and most wore leather helmets. Aside from that, they were unarmored, and only a very few bore any weapon other than their spears or quivers of javelins. He saw maces and a handful of swords, but no decent pikes or other true polearms, and

none of the not-men were mounted. Square placards on poles rose above them at ragged intervals—banners, he realized—and he wondered how long they'd been gathered. Clearly they were there to fight, but had they come for an open battle, or simply to besiege the ship? He remembered the first time he had seen the ship, hovering motionless in a storm-sick sky, and barked a bitter, humorless laugh. Surely the thing was huge enough to be mistaken for a castle, albeit the most oddly formed one any man—or not-man—could ever imagine!

Whatever had brought them hither, a stir went through them as the side of the ship opened abruptly. Spears were shaken, a handful of javelins were hurled, although the range was too great for that to be anything more than a gesture, and he had no need of magically enhanced hearing to recognize the sound of defiance. It was a thready, piping sound beside the surf roar a human army might have raised, but it carried the ugly undertone of hate. Strange, he thought. How can I be so certain it's hate I hear? These aren't men, after all. For all I know, they might be shouting cries of joyous welcome! He grimaced at his own fanciful thought. Of course it's hate. How could it be else when our masters have brought us here to break them into well-behaved cattle? But this was no time to be thinking such thoughts. And even if it had been, a nagging inner honesty pointed out, subduing these not-men wasn't so terribly different from what he'd planned to do to Frenchmen—who, whatever their other faults, at least went about on a mere two legs, not three, and were fellow Christians and (provisionally) human. He scanned them one more time, confirming his masters' briefing, and snorted much as Satan had. He and his men were outnumbered by at least ten-to-one, and the wart-faces would do nothing to change those odds. Their job was to insure that none of this world's not-men eluded Sir George's men and entered the ship through the open hold. Which wasn't going to happen. Sir George drew a deep breath, feeling the not-men's hatred and sensing the confidence they felt in their superior numbers. Pity the poor bastards, he thought, then slammed the visor of his bascinet, drew his sword, and pressed with his knees to send Satan trotting forward.

It hadn't really been a battle, Sir George reflected afterward, tossing his helmet to Edward and shoving back his chain mail coif as he dismounted beside one of the mobile fountains. The metal creature was half the size of an ox but wide for its length, and the merry chuckle of the water splashing in the wide catcher basin made a grotesque background for the wailing whines and whimpers coming from the enemy's wounded. There were few moans from his own wounded. Partly because there'd been so few of them, compared to the not-men's casualties, but mostly because the hovering metal turtles—the "air cars," as their masters called them—had already picked up most of his injured. And all of the handful of dead, as well, he thought with a familiar chill. How many of them would stay "dead" this time, he wondered? Father Timothy had pondered the matter at length, and prayed at even greater length, before he pronounced that the men who had been seemingly returned from death were not, in fact, the demons or devils some of their fellows had feared. Sir George trusted the priest's judgment in matters religious implicitly, and he'd supported Father Timothy's pronouncement to the hilt, yet even he found it a bit . . . unsettling to see a man who had taken a lance through the chest sit down to supper with him. He put the thought aside—again. It was easier than it once had been, despite his lingering discomfort. Partly because he'd learned to accept that much of their masters' magic was, in fact, no more than the huge advancement in matters mechanic that the Commander claimed, but even more because he was too grateful to have those men back to question the agency of their resurrection, or healing, or whatever it was. Any decent field commander did anything he could to hold down his casualties, if only to preserve the efficiency of his fighting force, but Sir George had even more reason to do so than most. His men—less than a thousand, all told, including the smiths and farriers and fletchers, as well as his soldiers and knights—were all he had. In a sense, they were all the men who would ever exist in the universe—or in Sir George's universe, at least—and that made every one of them even more precious than they would have been had

he and they ever reached Normandy. He snorted, shook himself, and thrust his head into the fountain. The icy water was a welcome shock, washing away the sweat, and he drank deeply before he finally raised his head at last to draw a gasping breath of relief. His right arm ached wearily, but it had been more butcher's work than sword work at the end. The not-men had never imagined anything like an English bowman. That much had been obvious. Even the Scots at Halidon Hill had shown more caution than the not-men, and not even French knights would have pressed on so stubbornly—and stupidly—into such a blizzard of arrows. But the not-men had. Sir George sighed and turned from the fountain, surrendering his place to Rolf Grayhame, his senior captain of archers, as he surveyed the field. There had been even more of the not-men than he'd first thought, not that it had mattered in the end. Each of his six hundred archers could put twelve shafts in the air in a minute and, at need, hit picked, man-sized targets at two hundred paces. Their broadheaded arrows inflicted hideous wounds at any range, and their needle-pointed pile arrows could penetrate chain or even plate at pointblank ranges. Against foes who were totally unarmored, that sort of fire produced a massacre, not a battle. The only true hand-blows of the entire affair had come when Sir George and his mounted men charged the broken rabble which had once been an army to complete its rout, and he grimaced at the thought of what that charge had cost. Only two of his mounted men had been seriously wounded, and neither of them too badly for the magical healing arts of their masters to save them, but they'd lost five more priceless horses. All too few of their original mounts had survived the brutal storm from which their masters had plucked them. Satan had been one of them, praise God, but there had been far too few others to meet Sir George's needs. At least the Commander had seemed to grasp their importance, however, for his ship's metal minions had raided a half dozen manors somewhere in France for almost two hundred more of them, and he had instructed the healer—the "Medic"—aboard the ship to breed them. But few of the horses so acquired had been destriers; most were suitable only for light or perhaps medium horse, and unlike humans, horses took poorly to the long periods of sleep their masters imposed. Nor did they reproduce well under such conditions, and whatever arts brought dead archers or men-at-arms back to life seemed unable to do the same for them. There were fewer of them for every battle, and the time would come when there were none. The thought did not please Sir George, and not simply because Satan had been with him for so long and borne him so well. Sir George was no fool. His grandfather had been the next best thing to a common man-at-arms before he won Warwick under Edward I, and neither his son nor his grandson had been allowed to forget his hard-bitten pragmatism. A professional soldier to his toenails, Sir George knew that a mounted charge against properly supported archers was madness. Well, against English archers, at any rate, he amended. True, the shock of a horsed charge remained all but irresistible if one could carry it home, but accomplishing that critical final stage was becoming more and more difficult. Although he'd never faced them, Sir George had heard of the pikemen produced in distant Switzerland, and he rather wished he had a few of them along. A pike wall, now, formed up between his archers and the enemy . . . that would put paid to any cavalry charge! There was no way to know what was happening back home, of course, but surely by now even the French and Italians must be discovering the cold, bitter truth that unsupported cavalry was no longer the queen of battle. Yet for all that, he was a knight himself, and perhaps the proudest emblems of any knight were his spurs. The day when the horse finally did vanish forever from the field of battle would be a terrible one, and Sir George was thankful he would never live long enough to see it. Or perhaps I will live long enough . . . now. Assuming I might ever see Earth again. Which I won't. He snorted again and rose to his full height, stretching mightily. For all his inches, his son Edward bade fair to overtop him with a handspan and more to spare when he reached his full growth. The young man stood beside him, still holding his helmet, and Sir George eyed him with unobtrusive speculation. That Edward was with him—yes, and Edward's mother, praise

God!—was one of the few things which made this endless purgatory endurable, yet he wondered at times how old his son truly was. He'd been thirteen when they sailed to join King Edward in France, but how long ago had that been? Sir George had no answer for that question. The Commander had spoken nothing but the truth when he promised to extend their life spans. His claim that it was to reward their loyal service, on the other hand, failed to fool even the most credulous of Sir George's men. It was merely simpler to extend the lives of the men they had rather than spend the time to return to Earth to catch still more of them. Not that voyages to Earth were the only way their masters could secure more manpower, the baron thought sourly. He'd concluded long ago that only coincidence had caused the Commander to sweep up their womenfolk and children with them. Whatever else the Commander was, he had no true understanding of the humans under his command. No, perhaps that was unfair. He'd gained at least some understanding of them; it was simply that he had never—and would never—see them as anything more than animate property. He didn't even feel contempt for them—not truly—for they weren't sufficiently important to waste contempt upon. They were exactly what he'd called them: barbarians and primitives. Valuable to his Guild, as he'd said, but lesser life forms, to be used however their natural superiors found most advantageous. Sir George refused to make the mistake of regarding the Commander with responsive contempt, yet neither was he blind to the peculiar blindnesses and weaknesses which accompanied the Commander's disdain. For example, the Commander had come to Earth solely to secure a fighting force (though it had taken Sir George a long, long time to begin to understand why beings who could build such marvels as the ship should need archers and swordsmen). The baron had no doubt that the Commander would have preferred to secure only a fighting force, unencumbered by "useless" women or children. But like any expeditionary force of its time, the Englishmen he'd actually stolen had been accompanied by dozens of women. A few, like his own Matilda, were the wives of knights or other officers. Others were the wives of common soldiers or archers, and still more had been the wives of convenience and outright prostitutes found among any army's camp followers. Sir George was certain that the Commander had seriously considered simply disposing of those "useless" mouths, and he thanked God that the alien had at least recognized the way in which wives and children could be used to insure the obedience of husbands and fathers. What the Commander had been slower to recognize was that the presence of women and the natural inclinations of men offered the opportunity to make his small fighting force self-sustaining. Although Sir George's age had been frozen at the thirty-five he had been before he'd been snatched into servitude, many of the youngsters who'd been taken with him had grown into young manhood and taken their place in the ranks, and still more children had been born . . . no doubt to follow them, when the time came. By Sir George's reckoning, he and his men had spent something close to fifty years awake and aware, but the time had been less for their families. All of them were returned to their magical slumber between battles, of course. Voyages between worlds, Sir George had gathered from conversations with the Commander, took years, and it was simpler to wrap them in sleep while the huge ship sailed among the stars. But their families were not always awakened when the soldiers were. Much depended upon how long they would remain on any given world before their masters were satisfied with their control of it, but the Commander had also learned to dole out reunions as rewards . . . or to withhold them as punishment. The result was that far less time had passed for Matilda and the other women than for Sir George and his troops, and for many years, Edward had been kept to his mother's calendar. He was old enough—or physically mature enough—now to take his place on the field as his father's squire, and now he woke and slept with the rest of the men. Sir George was glad to have the boy with him, yet he knew Matilda was in two minds. She didn't miss her son when she slept, but not even their alien masters could heal all wounds. They had lost men, slowly but in a steady trickle, ever since they had been stolen away from hearth and home forever, and she did not want

Edward to become one of those they lost. Nor did Sir George. But they had no choice—less even here than they might have had at home. They fought, or they perished. That was their reality, and it was unwise to think of other realities, or how things might have been, or to long to return, however briefly, to the world of their birth. He knew all that, yet he sometimes wondered how long had truly passed since he and his men had set sail. What year was it, assuming that the years of Earth had any meaning so far from her?

He had no idea. But he suspected they were far, far away from the twelfth day of July in the Year of Our Lord Thirteen Hundred and Forty-Six. The silent dragon-man stopped and stood aside as they approached the glowing wall, and Sir George glanced sideways at the creature. He'd seen enough of them to know that they, like the wart-faces, were flesh and blood, for all their oddness in human eyes, and not simply more of his masters' mechanical devices, but even now, he had never heard one of the dragon-men make a single sound. The wart-faces, yes. He hadn't learned a word of their language of grunts and hoarse hoots—in large part because his masters clearly didn't want the English to be able to converse with them—but he and his men had been given ample proof that the wart-faces at least had a language. Not the dragon-men. The wart-faces were properly called "Hathori," or that, at least, was what the Commander called them, and they had far more contact with the English than the dragon-men did, for they were the Commander's whip hand. They were the prison guards, charged with driving and goading the English outside the ship, and there had been some ugly incidents in the early days. At least one of them had been killed by the Englishmen they guarded . . . and half a dozen of Sir George's men had been slain by the Commander's order as retribution. There was no love lost between the English and the Hathori—which, Sir George suspected, was precisely what the Commander wished—and the wart-faces were almost as stupid as the Commander seemed to think the English were. Indeed, the Hathori were exactly what they seemed: brutal, incurious enforcers, smart enough to obey orders and individually powerful, but with no interest in anything beyond their orders. Which, Sir George had concluded, was the reason the Commander had needed his own Englishmen. As individuals, the wart-faces were formidable killing machines, but they lacked the cohesion, the discipline and ability, to fight as soldiers. But the eternally silent dragon-men, he suspected, were a very different matter indeed. He had no idea what they called themselves—if, in fact, they called themselves anything at all—and the Commander never even mentioned them directly. They were simply always there, looming in the background, and unlike the axe-wielding Hathori, armed with their deadly lightning weapons and guarding the Commander and the crew of the huge vessel. Now the dragon-man returned Sir George's glance impassively, motionless as a lizard on a stone and with the same sense of poised, absolute readiness. The glowing wall sealed the English into their own portion of their ship prison, and none of them had yet been able to discover how the portal through it was opened or closed. They had discovered a great deal about other controls in their quarters, ways to turn devices on and off, and Sir George and Father Timothy were certain that the glowing wall must be controlled in some similar—or at least comparable—fashion, yet they'd never been able to detect how it was done. Which was as well for their masters, Sir George thought grimly, and nodded to the dragon-man as he stepped past him into the corridor beyond the wall. As always, the towering creature did not react in any way to the human gesture, but somehow Sir George felt certain the dragon-men recognized it as an acknowledgment and a courtesy of sorts. Whatever else they were, they were obviously capable of thought, or the Commander's Guild would have replaced them with more of its clever mechanical devices. Equally obviously, it regarded both the Hathori and the dragon-men much as it did the English: as more or less domesticated, moderately dangerous, useful beasts of burden, although the Commander clearly placed greater faith in the loyalty of the dragon-men. Sir George had often wondered how the dragon-men regarded the English. Did they, like the Commander's kind, regard them as primitives and barbarians, beneath their own

notice? Certainly they possessed and used more of the wondrous tools of their masters, but that didn't seem to make them their masters' equals. So did they see the English as companions in servitude? Or did they cling to the need to look down upon the humans as a way to make themselves appear less wretched by comparison? It seemed unlikely to make a great deal of difference either way, as neither Sir George, nor Father Timothy, nor any other human had ever discovered a way to communicate with the dragon-men. Their masters gave them precious little opportunity to experiment, but it was impossible to completely eliminate all physical contact between humans and dragon-men. Not if the dragon-men were to be useful as guards against the humans, at any rate. Most of the other humans had completely abandoned the task, but Father Timothy continued to try, and Sir George shared his confessor's hopes, although he lacked the priest's patience and dogged faith. Not even Father Timothy, on the other hand, still sought to communicate with the Hathori. Sir George snorted at his own cross-grained nature as he followed the guiding light down the empty passageway. He shared Sir Timothy's hopes yet lacked the other's faith, a contradiction if ever he'd heard of one. Yet he couldn't quite turn off that tiny sprig of hope, and he often found himself dreaming of the dragon-men. Indeed, he'd dreamed of them more often during the last few periods of wakefulness than in quite some time. His thoughts broke off as the guide light reached another hatch and stopped. It bobbed there imperatively, as if impatient with his slow progress, and he grinned wryly. Such guides were necessary, for the architecture of the ship could be bewildering, especially to one who spent virtually all of his time aboard it locked into the portion assigned to the English. He couldn't be positive, but he was privately certain that the layout of the rest of the ship changed between his infrequent visits here, as if it were not fixed and his masters rearranged it with casual ease whenever they tired of the current arrangement. He had been told by the Commander that the guide lights were only another of the endless mechanisms available to his masters, and he supposed he believed the alien. Yet he often wondered, especially at times like this, when the lights twitched so impatiently, scolding him for dawdling and eager to be off about some fresh business of their own. He stepped through the indicated hatch, and the light whisked off with a final bob and dodge. He watched it go, then stepped back as the hatch closed. The chamber was no different from the one to which the lights had guided him the last time the Commander summoned him, although they'd followed nothing remotely like the same path to reach it. It was octagonal, with hatches in each wall, and perhaps fifteen feet across. A glowing table at its center supported one of the marvels his masters called a "light sculpture." Sir George had no idea how the things were made, but they always fascinated him. All were beautiful, though the beauty was often strange to human eyes—so strange, sometimes, as to make one uneasy, even frightened—and almost always subtle. This one was a thing of flowing angles and forms, of brilliant color threaded through a cool background of blues and greens, and he gazed upon it in delight as its soothing presence flowed over him. There are times, he thought dreamily, when I could almost forgive them for what they've done to us. Our lives are longer, our people healthier, than they ever would have been at home, and they can create such beauty and wonders as this. And yet all the marvels we've received are nothing but scraps from the table, dropped casually to us or—worse!—given only because it benefits them for us to have them. To them, we are less important, although not, perhaps, less valuable, than the things they build of metal and crystal, and—

"You did well. But then you English always do, don't you?" Sir George turned from the light sculpture. He hadn't heard the hatch open, but one rarely did aboard this ship. The main hatches, big enough for a score of mounted men abreast, yes. Not even their masters seemed able to make something that large move without even a whisper of sound, but the smaller hatches within the ship proper were another matter. Not that most of his men would know that from personal experience. Only he, Sir Richard Maynton, and—on very rare occasions—Matilda had ever been permitted inside the portion of the vast

ship reserved for their masters and their masters' nonhuman henchmen. Even then, they must come totally unarmed and submit to the humiliation of a search before they passed the glowing wall between their section of the ship and the rest of its interior. Now he cocked his head, gazing at the Commander, and tried to gauge the other's mood. Despite the years of his servitude, he still found the task all but hopeless. That was immensely frustrating, and it was also dangerous. But the Commander's piping voice remained a dead, expressionless thing, and the three-eyed face remained so utterly alien as to make reading its expression utterly impossible. Certainly Sir George had never seen anything he could classify as a smile or a frown. And the fact that the Commander didn't truly speak English (or Latin, or French) complicated things still further. Father Timothy and Dickon Yardley, Sir George's senior surgeon, had concluded that the upper of the Commander's two mouths was exclusively a breathing and speaking orifice, but as Sir George had noticed the very first day, that mouth didn't move in time with the words the Commander "spoke." Instead, the Commander spoke in his own tongue—whatever that was—and one of the many mechanisms of the ship translated that into a language Sir George could understand and made it appear to be coming from the Commander. Sir George had often wondered whether that artificiality was the true reason the voice sounded so expressionless. He couldn't be certain, but he had concluded that the Commander's failure—or refusal—to learn the language of his captive troops was another indication of his sense of utter superiority to them. It was, however, a foolish decision, unless whatever translated his words into English did a far better job of communicating nuance and emotion when it translated English into his own language. But however ridiculous the demon-jester might still look, and despite the foolishness of any decisions the Commander might make, Sir George would never underestimate him. He dared not, for his own life, but even more for the lives of the men and women for whom he was responsible, and that was the true reason he found his inability to read the Commander's mood so maddening. He must watch his words with this creature far more closely than he'd ever watched them with any other commander, yet he was never quite free of the fear that he would choose the wrong one simply because he'd misunderstood or misinterpreted the Commander. Still, he knew he'd made some progress, and at least the Commander appeared to choose his words with care, as if seeking to make his meaning completely clear through what he said since he couldn't communicate fine shades of meaning by how he said it. And, of course, there's also the fact that we're valuable to him and to his "trading guild." Very valuable, if he's to be believed. And I rather think he is, given the lengths they went to to steal us all away. Sir George would never be so stupid as to assume that that value would preserve any human foolish enough to anger or appear to threaten their masters. Sir John Denmore's fate on that very first day would have been enough to prevent that, but there had been a handful of other deaths over the years. Two men who'd attempted to desert on a beautiful world of blue skies and deep green seas, another who'd simply refused one day to leave the ship, the six executed for the wart-face's death, another who'd gone berserk and attacked the dragon-men and the Commander himself with naked steel . . . All had been slaughtered as easily as Sir John, and with as little apparent emotion. Yet the Commander's actions and normal attitude (as well as Sir George could read the latter) were those of a being well pleased with his investment . . . and aware that his own masters were equally pleased. He would shed no tears (or whatever his kind did to express sorrow) over the death of any single human, but he valued them as a group and so took pains to avoid misunderstandings which might require him to destroy any of them. Or any more of them, at any rate. Sir George realized the Commander was still gazing at him, waiting for a response, and gave himself a small shake. "Your pardon, Commander," he said. "The aftermath of battle lingers with me, I fear, and makes me somewhat slow of wit. You were saying?" "I said that you English had done well today," the Commander said patiently. "My guild superiors will be pleased with the results of your valiant fighting. I feel certain that they

will express that pleasure to me in some material form quite soon, and I, of course, wish to express my own pleasure to your men. Accordingly, I have instructed the Medic to awaken your mates and children. We will remain on this world for at least another several weeks while the details of our agreements are worked out with the natives. It may be that I shall need your services once again—or to trot a few of you out to remind the natives of your prowess, at least—during my negotiations. Since we must keep you awake during that period anyway, and since you have fought so well, rewarding you with the oppor tunity for a reunion seems only just." "I thank you, Commander." Sir George fought to keep his own emotions out of his voice and expression. The fact that he was unable to read the Commander's feelings didn't mean the Commander or one of his fiendishly clever devices couldn't read Sir George's. He doubted that they could, but he might be wrong, and so he throttled back the mixture of elation, joy, hatred, and fury the news sent racing through him. "You are welcome, of course," the Commander piped back, and gestured for Sir George to seat himself on the human-style chair which had suddenly appeared beside the table of glowing light. Sir George took the chair gingerly, unable even after all this time to completely hide his discomfort with furnishings which appeared and disappeared as if out of thin air. Nor did he much care for the table. He had no idea how it had been created, but he knew its top was actually as immaterial as the air about him. It was indisputably there. He could lay a hand upon it and feel . . . something. Yet he could never have described that something. It supported anything set upon it, but it was as if he couldn't quite place his hand on its actual surface, assuming it had one. It was more as if . . . as if he were pressing his palm against a powerful current of water, or perhaps an equally powerful current of air itself. There was a resistance as his hand approached what ought to be the surface of the table, yet there was no sense of friction, and he always seemed on the brink of being able to push just a little further, just a bit closer. He put the thought aside once more and watched another of the ship's small metal servitors move silently into the compartment and deposit a crystal carafe of wine and an exquisite goblet before him. Another goblet and carafe, this time filled with some thick, purple-gold, sludgelike liquid was placed before the Commander, and Sir George managed not to blink in surprise. The Commander had offered him what amounted to a social meeting only five times before, and as closely as he could estimate, each had followed on the heels of some particularly valuable coup which the English had executed for the Guild. Which seemed to suggest that the hapless not-men Sir George and his troops had slaughtered the day before must be the source of some commodity vastly more valuable than he would have believed this world could offer to anyone with the capabilities of his masters. "You are wondering what brings us to this world, are you not?" the Commander asked, and Sir George nodded. The Commander had learned the meaning of at least some human gestures, and he made an alarming sound. Sir George wasn't positive, but he'd come to suspect it was the equivalent of a human chuckle, although whether it indicated satisfaction, amusement, scorn, impatience, or some other emotion was impossible to say. "I am not surprised that you wonder," the Commander went on. "After all, these aliens are even more primitive than your own world. It must be difficult to grasp what such barbarians could possibly offer to civilized beings." Sir George gritted his teeth and made himself take a sip of the truly excellent wine. He had no idea whether or not the Commander realized how insulting his words were, and the voice in which they were delivered gave no clue. He suspected the Commander wouldn't have cared a great deal if he had known, and he could even admit—intellectually—that there was some point to the other's attitude. Compared to the Commander's people, humans were primitive. On the other hand, Sir George had come to suspect that the Commander's Guild wasn't actually so very different from guilds or other powerful groups of Sir George's own experience. He would have given a great deal, for example, to see how the Commander would have fared bargaining with a Cypriot or a Venetian. Without the advantage of his "technology," he strongly suspected, the

demon-jester would be plucked like a pigeon. "In actual fact," the Commander continued, seemingly oblivious to Sir George's silence, "this planet does not offer us any physical commodity. Some of the worlds which the Guild has used you to open to them have offered such commodities, although normally only in the form of resources the primitives who live upon them are too stupid to exploit themselves. In this case, however, it is the position of the world which is of such value. It will provide us with a location for . . . warehouses, I suppose you might call them, and one from which we may fuel and maintain our vessels." He paused, looking at Sir George with that impossible to read face, then raised his goblet to tip a little of the purple-gold sludge into his lower mouth. "You may think of it as a strategically located island or trading port," his piping voice said after a moment, issuing from his upper mouth while the lower one was busy with the goblet. "It will bring us many advantages. And of particular satisfaction to me personally, it will cut deeply into the flank of the Sharnhaishian Guild's trade network." Sir George pricked up his ears at that. Impossible though he found it to reliably interpret the Commander's tone or expression, he'd formed some conclusions about the other's personality. He knew it was risky to draw parallels between such unearthly creatures and the personality traits of humans, yet he couldn't help doing so. Perhaps it was simply that he had to put it in some sort of familiar framework or go mad. Indeed, he often thought that might be the best explanation of all. But he also felt certain that he'd read at least one aspect of the Commander correctly: the thick-bodied little creature loved to brag . . . even when his audience was no more than a primitive, barbarian English slave. Perhaps even more importantly—and, again, like many boastful humans Sir George had known—the Commander seemed blissfully unaware of the weakness such bragging could become. A wise man, Sir George's father had often said, learns from the things fools let slip. Fortunately, the Commander had never met Sir James Wincaster. Sir George realized the Commander had said nothing for several seconds, simply gazing at him with that disconcerting triple stare, and he shook himself. "I see . . . I think," he said, hoping his suspicion that the Commander wanted him to respond was correct. "I suppose it would be like capturing, oh, Constantinople and seizing control of all access to the Black Sea." "I am not certain," the Commander replied. "I am insufficiently familiar with the geography of your home world to know if the analogy is accurate, but it sounds as if it might be. At any rate, there will be major bonuses for myself and the members of my team, which is one reason I wish to reward you. You and your kind are a very valuable guild asset, and unlike some of my guild brothers, I have always believed that valuable property should be well cared for and that assets are better motivated by reward than by punishment alone." "I have observed much the same," Sir George said with what might charitably have been described as a smile. He managed to keep his voice level and thoughtful, whatever his expression might have briefly revealed, and he castigated himself for that teeth-baring smile, reminding himself yet again that his masters might be—indeed, almost certainly were—better versed at reading human expressions than he was at reading theirs. Unlike humans, they at least had experience of scores of other races and sorts of creatures. They must have learned at least a little something about interpreting alien emotions from that experience, and even if they hadn't, it was far better to overestimate a foe than to underestimate one. "I suspected that you might have reached the same conclusion," the Commander said with what Sir George rather thought might have been an expansive air had the Commander been human. "Yet I must confess that for me, personally, the fact that we have dealt the Sharnhaishians a blow is of even greater satisfaction than any bonus." "You've mentioned the . . . the—" Sir George snorted impatiently. He simply could not wrap his tongue about the sounds of the alien name, and the Commander made that alarming sound once again. "The Sharnhaishian Guild," he supplied, and Sir George nodded. "Yes. You've mentioned them before, Commander." "Indeed I have," the Commander agreed. There was still no readable emotion in his voice or face, yet Sir George suspected that if there

had been, the emotion would have been one of bitter hatred. "I owe the Sharnhaishians a great deal," the Commander went on. "They almost destroyed my career when they first produced their accursed `Romans.' " Sir George nodded again, striving to project an air of understanding and sympathy while he hoped desperately that the Commander would continue. The other had touched upon the Sharnhaishian Guild—obviously the great rival of his own trading house—in earlier conversations. The references had been maddeningly vague, yet they had made it plain that the Sharnhaishians were currently ascendent over the Commander's own guild, and their success seemed to have a great deal to do with the Romans the Commander had mentioned more than once. Sir George found it all but impossible to believe, even now, that the "Romans" in question could be what it sounded as if they were, but if he was wrong, he wanted to know it. It might be ludicrous to believe he could hope to achieve anything against his alien masters, yet Sir George had seen too much of purely human struggles to surrender all hope, despite the huge gulf between their physical capabilities. There were times when a bit of knowledge, or of insight into an enemy's thoughts and plans (or fears), could be more valuable than a thousand bowmen. And given all the marvels the Commander and his kind possess, knowledge is the only thing which might aid me against them, he reminded himself. The Commander ingested more purple-gold sludge, all three eyes gazing at the "light sculpture" as if he'd completely forgotten Sir George was present, and the human had a sudden thought. The wine in his goblet was perhaps the finest vintage he'd ever sampled, and potent, as well. Was it reasonable to guess that the sludge was equally or even more potent for the Commander's kind? The more he considered it, the more possible—and probable—it seemed, and he smiled inwardly, much as a shark might have smiled. Truth in the wine, he reminded himself, and took another sip—a very small one this time—from his own glass. "It was the Sharnhaishians and their Romans who kept me from being appointed a sector commissioner long ago," the Commander said at last. He moved his eyes from the light sculpture to Sir George, and the Englishman hid another smile as he realized the flanking eyes had gone just a bit unfocused. They seemed to be wandering off in directions of their own, as well, and he filed that fact away. He could be wrong, but if he wasn't, recognizing the signs of drunkenness in the Commander might prove valuable in the future. "How was I to know they might come up with something like the Romans?" the Commander demanded. "It must have cost them a fortune to bribe the Council into letting them buy the damned barbarians in the first place." Sir George cocked his head slightly, and the Commander slapped a double-thumbed hand on the table top. On a normal table, such a blow would have produced a thunderclap of sound; on this table, there was no noise at all, but the Commander seemed to draw a certain comfort from the gesture. "Oh, yes." He took another deep sip of sludge and refilled his goblet once more. "The Federation has rules, you know. Laws. Like the one that says none of us can use modern weapons on primitive worlds. The `Prime Directive,' they call it." He slurped more sludge, but his upper mouth never stopped speaking. "Bunch of hypocrites, that's what they are. Carrying on like the thing is supposed to protect the stupid primitives. You know what it really is?" His large, central eye fixed on Sir George, and the Englishman shook his head. "Fear, that's what," the Commander told him. "Stupid bureaucrats are afraid we'll lose some of our toys where the barbarians can find them. As if the idiots could figure them out in the first place." He fell silent again, and alien though his voice and face might be, Sir George was increasingly certain that he truly was as moody as any drunken human. "Actually, it makes a sort of sense, you know," the Commander went on finally. He gave the table another silent thump and leaned back in the oddly shaped, bucketlike piece of furniture which served his kind as a chair. "Takes years and years to move between stars, even with phase drive. One reason the ships are so damned big. Don't have to be, you know. We could put a phase drive in a hull a tenth the size of this one—even smaller. But size doesn't matter much. Oh, the mass curve's important, but once you've got the basic

system—" He waved a hand, and Sir George nodded once again. He didn't have the faintest idea what a "mass curve" or a "phase drive" was, and at the moment, he didn't much care. Other bits and pieces did make sense to him, and he listened avidly for more. And, he thought from behind his own masklike expression, it doesn't hurt a bit to watch the Commander. "Truth in the wine," indeed! His voice and face may not reveal much, but his gestures are another matter entirely. Perhaps I've been looking in the wrong places to gauge his moods. He filed that away, as well, and sat back in his chair, nursing his goblet in both hands while he listened attentively . . . and sympathetically.

"Thing is, if it takes decades to make the trip, better have the capacity to make the trip worthwhile, right?" the Commander demanded. "You think this ship is big?" Another wave of a double-thumbed hand, gesturing at the bulkheads. "Well, you're wrong. Lots of ships out there lots bigger than this one. Most of the guild ships, as a matter of fact, because it doesn't cost any more to run a really big ship than a little one like this. But that's the real reason for their stupid `Prime Directive.' " "The size of your vessels?" Sir George made his tone puzzled and wrinkled his forehead ferociously, hoping the Commander had become sufficiently well versed in human expressions to recognize perplexity, although if his estimate of the other's condition was accurate it was unlikely the Commander would be noticing anything so subtle as an alien race's expressions. But whether or not the Commander recognized his expression, it was quickly clear that he'd asked the right question. "Of course not," the Commander told him. "Not the size, the speed. Might be fifteen or twenty of your years between visits to most of these backwater planets. Maybe even longer. I know one planet that the Guild only sends a ship to every two and a half of your centuries or so, and the Federation knows it, too. So they don't want to take any chances on having some bunch of primitives figure out we're not really gods or whatever between visits. Want to keep them awed and humble around us. That's why they passed their `Prime Directive' something like—" The Commander paused in thought for a few seconds, as if considering something. "Would have been something like eighteen thousand of your years ago, I think. Give or take a century or two." He made the alarming sound again, and Sir George was certain now that it was his kind's equivalent of laughter. For just a moment, that hardly seemed to matter, however. Eighteen thousand years? His alien masters' civilization had existed for over eighteen millennia? Impossible! And yet— "Even for us, that's a long time for a law to be in effect," the Commander said. His piping voice was less clear, the words beginning to blur just a bit around the corners as he leaned towards Sir George, and the baron had to fight back a chuckle of his own as he realized that whatever did the translating was faithfully slurring the translation to match the drunken original. "We don't like to change things unless we have to, you know, so once we write a law, it stays around a while, but this one's made lots of trouble for the guilds, because it's meant we couldn't just go in and rearrange things properly. Actually had to bargain with barbarians so primitive they don't have a clue of the value of the things they're sitting on top of. Couldn't violate the damned `Prime Directive' after all, now could we?" Another thump on the table. This time, it wouldn't have made any sound anyway, because the Commander missed the table top entirely, and Sir George began to wonder how much longer the creature would last before he passed out. "So what did the Sharnhaishians do?" the Commander continued. "I'll tell you what. They went out and found another primitive world—one the Council didn't even know about yet—and they bought their damned `Romans.' Never occurred to any of the rest of us. But the Prime Directive doesn't say we can't use force. All it says is that we can't use our own weapons. It just never occurred to any of us that there was anything we could do without using our weapons except negotiate and bribe." He lowered his goblet and peered down into it for several seconds, then made a sound suspiciously like a human belch and returned his central eye to Sir George. "Not the Sharnhaishians, though. If they want a primitive world, they just send in their Romans. Just as primitive as the local barbarians, so the Council can't complain, and I'll

say this for the Romans. They're tough. Never run into anything they couldn't handle, and the Sharnhaishians've used them to take dozens of backwater worlds away from the other guilds. Whole trade nets, cut to pieces. Strategic commodities sewn up, warehousing and basing rights snatched out from under us, careers ruined. And all because the Sharnhaishians acquired a few thousand primitives in bronze armor." He fell silent for a long time, swirling sludge in his goblet and peering down into it, then looked back up more or less in Sir George's direction. "But they're not the only ones who can play that game. They thought they were. The other guilds got together to complain to the Council, and the Council agreed to take the matter under consideration. It may even decide the Sharnhaishians have to stop using their Romans entirely, but that may take centuries, and in the meantime, Sharnhaishian is shipping them from one strategic point to another and taking them away from the rest of us. And they slipped someone on the Council a big enough bribe to get your world declared off-limits for all the rest of us." Sir George stiffened, and hoped the Commander was too drunk to notice. He wasn't surprised that the other guild could have bribed the Council the Commander was yammering about. Bribing a few key rulers was often more efficient—and cheaper—than relying on armies. Although if His Majesty had spent a little more money on his army and a little less on trying to buy allies in his first French campaign he might have been on the throne of France by its end! But if the Commander was telling the truth, if the Council to which he referred had the authority to declare that contact with Sir George's home world was no longer permitted and had done so, then the Commander's Guild must have violated that decree in order to kidnap Sir George and his troops. And if that was the case—if their servitude was unlawful in the eyes of what passed for the Crown among these creatures—then they were in even more danger than he had believed. "It took me two or three of your centuries just to figure out where your world was," the Commander went on, and now Sir George seemed to sense an air of pride. "Some of the other guilds recruited their own primitive armies, like the Hathori. But none of them have been able to match the Romans. I still remember the first time we sent the Hathori in against a bunch of natives." The Commander stared down into his goblet, and his ears flattened. "Damned aborigines cut them to pieces," he said after a long moment. "Cost them a lot of casualties at first, but then they swarmed right over the Hathori. Butchered them one by one. I doubt we got one in twenty of them back alive at the end, but that wouldn't have happened against the damned Romans. Those aren't just warriors—they're demons that carve up anything they run into. So it occurred to me that what we needed were Romans of our own, and I managed to convince my creche cousin to convince his sector commissioner to speak to the guild masters for me. I needed all the help I could get, thanks to the Sharnhaishians and their Romans. Of course, it helped that by then they'd done the same thing to dozens of other guildsmen, and not just in our guild, either. So they gave me a chance to reclaim my career if I could find where the Romans came from, get past the Council ban, and catch us some Romans of our own. And I did it, too." This time his slap managed to connect with the table top again, though it was still soundless, and he threw himself untidily back in his chair. "But we're not Romans," Sir George pointed out after a moment. He was half afraid to say another word, for if the Commander remembered any of this conversation—and realized all he was letting slip—at a later date, there would be one very simple way to rectify his error. "Of course not," the Commander said. "Good thing, too, in a way. It surprised me, of course. I never expected to see so much change on a single planet in such a short period. Couldn't have been more than eight or nine hundred of your years between you and the Romans, and just look at all the differences. It's not decent. Oh," he waved a hand again, "you're still primitives, of course. Haven't changed that. But we got there in just the nick of time. Another five or six of your centuries or so, and you might actually have been using true firearms, and we couldn't have that. Unlikely, I admit, but there you were, already experimenting with them." The Commander eyed Sir George. "I have to wonder how you stumbled on the idea

so soon. Could the Sharnhaishians have slipped up and suggested it to you?" "The idea of `firearms'?" Sir George frowned. "Pots de fer, I believe you call them," the Commander said. "Fire pots?" Sir George blinked in genuine consternation. "But they're nothing but toys, Commander! Good for scaring horses and people who never encountered them, perhaps, but scarcely serious weapons. Even bombards are little more than noisy nuisances against anyone who knows his business! Why, my bowmen would massacre any army stupid enough to arm itself with such weapons. Crossbows are more effective than they are!" "No doubt they are—now," the Commander replied. "Won't stay that way, though. Of course, you've still got another thousand years or so to go before anyone develops truly effective small arms. Still, I suppose it's a fairly good example of why they passed the Prime Directive in the first place. If the Sharnhaishians hadn't somehow contaminated your world, you never would have come up with gunpowder at all—not so quickly." He took another deep swallow, and Sir George decided to stay away from the question of where gunpowder came from. He himself knew only a very little about the subject—such weapons had become available in Europe only during his own lifetime and, like most of his military contemporaries, he'd had little faith that they would ever amount to much as effective field weapons. Certainly such crude, short-ranged, dangerous devices would never pose any threat to the supremacy of his bowmen! Yet the Commander seemed to find their existence deeply significant and more than a little worrying. It was almost as if the fact that humans had begun experimenting with them was somehow threatening, and Sir George had no intention of suggesting that the Sharnhaishians hadn't had anything to do with the development. Besides, how did he know the rival guild hadn't? "Anyway," the Commander said, the words more slurred than ever, "it's a good thing we found you when we did. Couldn't have used you at all if you'd been armed with firearms. Would've been a clear violation of the Prime Directive, and that would've gotten questions asked. People would've noticed, too, and the Council would start asking questions of its own." He leaned back towards Sir George again, and this time he patted the Englishman on the knee with what would have been a conspiratorial air from another human. "As it is, nobody really cares. Just another bunch of primitives with muscle-powered weapons, nothing to worry about. None of the Council's inspectors even knows enough about humans to realize you and the Romans are the same species, and if any of them ever do notice, we know where to put the bribes to convince them they were mistaken. Besides," another pat on the knee, "you're all off the books." Sir George frowned, puzzled by the peculiar phrase, and the Commander thumped his knee a third time. "No document trail," he said, the words now so slurred that Sir George found it virtually impossible to understand them even as words, far less to grasp the concept behind them. "Grabbed you out of the middle of a storm. Everybody on your stupid planet figures you all drowned—would have without us, too, you know. But that means even if the Council investigates, they won't find any evidence of contact between us and your world, because aside from picking you out of the water and grabbing a few horses in the middle of the night, there wasn't any. So we've got our own little army, and unless some inspector does get nosy, nobody will ever even ask where you came from." The Commander leaned back in his chair once more and reached out for his goblet. But his groping hand knocked it over, and he peered down at it. His central eye was almost as unfocused as the secondary ones now, and his strange, sideways eyelids began to iris out to cover them all. "S' take that, Sharnhaishian," he muttered. "Thought you'd wrecked my career, didn' you? But who's going to . . ." His voice trailed off entirely, his eyes closed, and he slumped in his chair. His upper mouth fell open, and a whistling sound which Sir George realized must be his kind's equivalent of a snore came from it.

The human sat in his own chair, staring numbly at the Commander, until the door opened silently once more. He looked up quickly then and saw one of his masters' guardsmen in the opening. The dragon-man beckoned imperatively with one clawed hand, and Sir George noted the way that its other hand rested on the weapon scabbarded at its side. Could that be what the Commander actually

meant by "firearms"? he wondered suddenly. Not even a true dragon could hurl hotter "fire" than they do . . . and they're certainly far more dangerous than any stupid fire pot! The dragon-man beckoned again, its meaning clear, and Sir George sighed and rose. Of course they wouldn't leave him alone with the senseless Commander. No doubt they'd been watching through some sort of spyhole and come to collect him the instant the Commander collapsed. But had they paid any attention to the Commander's conversation before he collapsed? And even if they had, had they guessed that Sir George might realize the significance of what the Commander had told him? He hoped not, just as he hoped the Commander wouldn't remember all that he'd let slip. Because if the others had guessed, or the Commander did remember, Sir George would almost certainly die. After all, it would never do for their pet army's commander to realize that if anyone from the Council—wherever and exactly whatever it was—did begin to question that army's origins, the entire army would have to disappear. Forever . . . and without a trace that could tie the Commander's Guild to a planet which the "Council" had interdicted. "Are you certain, my love?" Lady Matilda Wincaster reclined against the cushion under the brightly colored awning and regarded her husband with a serious expression. Despite the difficulty in reading alien moods, the Commander's incredulity had been obvious the first time Sir George requested permission for the English to set up tents outside the hull of the vast ship. That had been long ago, on only the third world to which they'd been taken, and the Commander had regarded Sir George very closely as he warned against any thought that the English might be able to slip away and hide from their masters. Sir George hadn't doubted the warning, and he'd taken steps to impress it equally strongly on his subordinates. He'd also been able to understand why the Commander might be astounded by the notion that anyone could prefer a tent in the open to the always perfect temperature and luxurious marvels of the ship. To be sure, the English undoubtedly had far fewer of those luxuries than their masters did, but what they did have surpassed anything any king or emperor might have boasted back on Earth. They were well aware of the wonders, and, despite their captivity, they weren't so stupid as to reject them. But they also had an inborn hunger for open skies and natural air . . . even the "natural air" of planets which had never been home to any of their kind. In clement weather, many of them actually preferred to sleep amid the fresh air and breezes, the sounds of whatever passed for birds on a given planet, and the chuckling sounds of running water. And even those who invariably returned aboard ship for the night enjoyed the occasional open air meal. Indeed, the picnic feasts often took on the air of a festival or fair from Earth, helping to bind them together and reinforce their sense of community. And they were a community, as well as an army. In many ways, they were fortunate that there were so few gently born among them, Sir George had often thought. He himself was the only true noble, and aside from himself and Maynton, only one other knight, Sir Henry de Maricourt, could claim any real highborn connection. The rest of his men were of common birth . . . and so were their wives. Which meant that, especially with Lady Matilda to lead the way, they had decided to overlook the dubious origins of many of the unwed camp followers who'd joined them in their involuntary exile. Most of those camp followers, though by no means all, had acquired husbands quite speedily. A few had chosen not to, and Father Timothy had agreed, under the circumstances, not to inveigh against them. There were a great many more men than women, and the one thing most likely to provoke trouble among them was that imbalance in numbers. No doubt Father Timothy would have preferred for all of the women to be respectfully wedded wives, but he, too, had been a soldier in his time. He understood the temper of men who still were, and he was able to appreciate the need to adapt to the conditions in which they found themselves forced to live. As a result, not even those women who continued to ply their original trade were ostracized as they might have been, and a tightly knit cluster of families formed the core of the English community. The steadily growing number of children (both legitimate and bastard) helped cement that sense of community even further,

and for all the bitterness with which Sir George chafed against his servitude, even he had to admit the awe he felt that not a single one of those children had perished in infancy. That was undoubtedly the most treasured of the "luxuries" their masters had made available to them. The strangest, however (though it was hard to pick the single most strange), was the fact that so few of those children's mothers remembered their births. It had caused some consternation and even terror and talk of "changelings" at first, but as time passed, the women had adjusted to the fact that their babies were almost always born during one of their sleep periods. The Medic had explained the process, pointing out that it only made sense to get such time-consuming worries as pregnancies out of the way when they were asleep anyway, and after an initial period of extreme uneasiness, most of the women had come to agree. Led in almost every case, Sir George had been amused (but not surprised) to note, by the women who had birthed the most babies the "old-fashioned" way. He smiled even now, at the memory, but his attention was on his wife's question. One of the real reasons he'd requested freedom from the ship for his people was his certainty that anything which was said aboard the ship would be overheard by one of their masters' clever mechanical spies. It was probable that those same spies could eavesdrop upon them outside the ship, as well, but he hoped it would at least be a bit harder. And he rather suspected that even the most clever of mechanisms would find it difficult to keep track of several hundred individual conversations out in the open against the background noise of wind and water. Which meant such excursions were the only time he felt even remotely safe discussing dangerous matters. Although even then, he reflected, the only person with whom he truly discussed them was Matilda. "Yes, I'm certain," he said at last, meeting her gray eyes as he answered her question. God, she's beautiful, he thought with a familiar sense of wonder and awe. Seven years younger than he—or seven years younger back on Earth, at least—her huge eyes and the golden glory of her hair had delighted him from the moment he laid eyes upon her. She was better born than he, but his own soldier grandfather and father had been thrifty men, and Wickworth had been the sort of manor to please any nobly born father. Their marriage had been one of political advantage, yet it had also been more, which had been one reason for the warm relationship with Earl Cathwall which Sir George had treasured so highly. The earl had been a doting father. He had refused to marry his daughter off for his own advantage, for he'd wanted her to marry for love, and he had been satisfied that she'd done just that as he watched her with his son-in-law. He had also actively encouraged his daughter's pursuit of an education, which was almost unseemly, and Sir George was devoutly grateful that he had. Matilda's love was the core of his own strength, but she'd also become his wisest and most trusted advisor, as well. "I don't think he realizes he revealed so much," the baron went on now, raising a wine goblet to hide the movement of his lips and speaking very quietly, "but I'm certain of it. More certain than I like." "But surely there's no longer any doubt that we truly are as valuable to his Guild as he's suggested," Lady Matilda pointed out. "They would not lightly discard a tool whose worth they hold so high." "Um." Sir George set the goblet aside, then stretched in an ostentatious yawn. He smiled at his wife and moved to lay his head in her lap, smiling up at her as she tickled the tip of his nose with a stalk of local grass. To the casual eye, they were but two people—people miraculously young and comely—in love, but his eyes were serious as he gazed up at her. "We are valuable," he agreed, "but we're also the very thing you just called us: a tool. You haven't spent as many hours with him as I have, love. I wish I hadn't, but I have. And in the spending, I've learned that we have absolutely no value to him except as tools. He sees us as we might see a horse, or a cow. Certainly with less affection than I hold for Satan!" "Because we aren't of his kind?" Lady Matilda murmured, her expression troubled, and Sir George shrugged. "In part, perhaps, but I think not entirely. At least he loves to boast, and I've gleaned what bits and pieces I can from his bragging. As nearly as I can tell, there are several kinds of creatures in the `Federation'

of which he speaks. His own kind is but one sort of them, and there are great physical differences between them. But they seem much alike in spirit and outlook. All consider themselves `advanced' because of the machines and other devices they build and control, just as they consider us `primitives' because we lack the knowledge to construct such devices. And to the Federation, primitives are less than French serfs. As primitives, we have no rights, no value, except as tools. We aren't remotely their equals, and most of them wouldn't as much as blink at the thought of killing us all. So if our value in the field should suddenly find itself outweighed by the potential discovery that the Commander's Guild violated a Federation edict—" He shrugged again, and she nodded unhappily, glorious eyes dark. He felt the fear she tried to hide and smiled ruefully as he reached to pat her knee. "Forgive me, dear heart. I should never have burdened you with the thought." "Nonsense!" She laid a small hand across his mouth and shook her head fiercely. "I am your wife, and you are not a god to carry all the weight of our fate upon your shoulders alone. There may be nothing I can do to help beyond listening, but that—and sharing your burden—I can do, at least!" "Perhaps," he agreed, reaching up to caress the side of her face. She leaned down to kiss him, and he savored the taste of her lips. She broke the kiss and started to say something more, but he shook his head and drew her gently down beside him, pillowing her head on his shoulder as they lay on the cushions, gazing up at the sky. She accepted his unspoken injunction to change the subject and began to talk more lightly of their children—first of Edward, and then of the four younger children born to them aboard their masters' ship. As far as Matilda was concerned, that was the greatest wonder of all, for back in Lancaster, she'd been unable to conceive again after Edward's birth, and her children were the one unblemished joy of their captivity. They were Sir George's, as well, and so he listened with smiling, tender attentiveness, gazing at her face and never once, by even so much as a glance, acknowledging the presence of the dragon-man who had drifted out of the spidery trees. The creature paused for a long moment near the awning under which the baron and his lady lay. It stood there, as if listening intently, and then, as slowly and silently as it had come, it drifted back into the forest and was gone. The Commander seldom appeared among the men of "his" army, but the demon-jester made a point of summoning them all before him in his own portion of the huge vessel on the day after they'd won yet another victory for his Guild. In turn, Sir George had made a point of seeing to it that none of those men ever revealed how they felt about those summonings, for the Commander would have reacted poorly to their scorn and soul-deep anger. The baron had never been able to decide how even the Commander could be so utterly ignorant of the men who fought and died for him because they had no choice, but that he was seemed undeniable. Who but a fool who knew nothing of Englishmen would appear before those he'd stolen from their homes as his slaves to praise them for their efforts in his behalf? To tell them how well they had served the Guild they'd come to hate with all their hearts and souls? To promise them as the "reward" for their "valor" and "loyalty" the privilege of seeing their own wives and children? Yet that was precisely what the Commander had done on other occasions, and it was what he did today . . . while dragon-men surrounded him protectively and armored wart-faces stood stolidly along the bulkheads of the huge, octagonal chamber, watching frog-eyed through the slots in their visors. Sir George gritted his own teeth until his muscles ached as that piping, emotionless voice wound its monotonous way through the endless monologue. He felt the invisible fury rising from his men like smoke and marveled once more that any creature whose kind could build wonders like the ship and all its marvelous servitors could be so stupid. It was as if the Commander had read some treatise which insisted a commander of barbarians must inspire his troops with flattering words and was determined to do just that. " . . . reward you for your courage and hardihood," the piping voice went on. "I salute your loyalty and bravery, which has once more carried our Guild's banner to victory, and I hope to grant you the rewards you so richly deserve in the very

near future. In the meantime, we—" "Reward I deserve, hey?" Rolf Grayhame muttered. He stood beside Sir George, his voice a thread, leaking from the side of his fiercely moustachioed lips. "Only one reward I want, My Lord, and that's a clean shot. Just one." Sir George elbowed the archer sharply, and Grayhame closed his mouth with an apologetic glower. He knew Sir George's orders as well as any, but like his baron, he felt only contempt for the Commander. The demon-jester was far from the first arrogant lordling Grayhame had seen in his career, but he was arguably the stupidest. Secure in the superiority of his mechanisms and guards though he might be, he was still witless enough to infuriate fighting men by dragging them out to hear this sort of crap. Not even a Frenchman was that stupid! "Sorry, My Lord," the archer captain muttered. "Shouldn't have said it. But not even a Scot would—" He clamped his jaw again, and Sir George gave him a stern look that was only slightly flawed by the smile twitching at the corners of his mouth. That small lip twitch emboldened Grayhame, and his gray-green eyes glinted for just a moment. Then he shrugged his shoulders apologetically and returned his attention to the Commander. " . . . and so we will spend several more of your weeks here," the demon-jester was saying. "The craven curs you have whipped to their kennels will offer no threat," he seemed completely oblivious to how foolish his rhetoric sounded to human ears delivered in his piping, emotionless voice, "and you and your mates and children will have that time to enjoy the sunlight and fresh air you so treasure. Go now. Return to your families, secure in the knowledge that you are valued and treasured by our guild." Sir George started to follow his men out, but a gesture from the Commander stopped him. Grayhame and Maynton paused as well, their eyes meeting Sir George's questioningly, but a tiny shake of his head sent them on after the others. He watched them leave, then turned to his master. "Yes, Commander?" "Not all of this planet's primitives have been sufficiently cowed by your defeat of the local clans," the Commander said. "They appear to grasp that their local colleagues' forces have been utterly destroyed, but they do not seem to believe the same could be done to their own. Apparently they feel that those you have defeated were poorly led and motivated—unlike, of course, their own warriors. While cautious, they have not yet accepted that they have no choice but to do as we bid them or be destroyed in their separate turns." He paused, his three-eyed gaze fixed on Sir George's face, and the human tried to hide his dismay. Not from concern over what might happen to his own men, but because the thought of butchering still more of the local not-men for the benefit of the Commander's guild sickened him. "I see," he said at last. "Will it be necessary for us to destroy their forces in the field, as well?" "It may," the Commander replied in that emotionless voice, "but I hope to avoid that. We would be forced to move the ship in order to transport your troops into reach of their warriors. That would be inconvenient. Worse, it might actually encourage them to resist. Such primitive species have exhibited similar behavior in the past, particularly when they believe their numbers are greatly superior. My own analysis suggests that moving the ship from point to point, thus emphasizing the fact that we have but one of it and but a limited number of you English, might encourage some among them to overestimate their ability to resist us. In the end, of course, they would be proven wrong, but teaching them that lesson might require us to spend much longer on this single world than my superiors would like." "I see," Sir George repeated, and this time he truly did. Before he had fallen into the hands of the Commander's Guild, he, too, had sometimes found himself looking over his shoulder at superiors who insisted that he accomplish his tasks with near-impossible speed. Not that understanding the Commander's quandary woke any particular sympathy within him. "No doubt you do," the Commander replied. "I hope, however, to avoid that necessity by demonstrating their inferiority to them. Accordingly, I have summoned all of the principal chieftains from within reasonable travel distance from our current location. They will begin arriving within the next two local days, and all should be here within no more than twelve. While your bows are clumsy and primitive in the extreme, the locals

have nothing which can compare to them in range and rate of fire. When the chieftains arrive, you will demonstrate this fact to them, and the leaders of the clans you have already defeated will explain to them how your weapons allowed you to annihilate their own troops. With this evidence of their inferiority before them and demonstrated before their own eyes, they should be forced to admit that they cannot, in fact, withstand you in open combat and so have no choice but to accept my terms." He paused once more, waiting until Sir George nodded. "Very well. I will leave the details of the demonstration up to you. Be prepared to describe them to me in two days' time." The Commander turned away without another word, and most of his dragon-man guards closed in around him. One remained behind, obviously to escort Sir George from the ship, but the baron ignored the alien creature, hot eyes fixed on the Commander's arrogant back as the wart-faces fell in behind the demon-jester and his entourage. Plan a demonstration, is it? Sir George thought venomously. Jesu, but I know what I'd like to use as a target! The sight of your precious hide sprouting arrows like peacock feathers ought to impress the "local lordlings" no end! He snorted bitterly at the thought, then drew a deep breath and turned to the dragon-man as the hatch closed behind the Commander. The towering alien looked down at him, then gestured for Sir George to accompany him from the ship. Sir George obeyed the gesture, not without a fresh flicker of anger. Yet there was no point in resenting the dragon-man, and he tried to put his emotions aside as the dragon-man steered him out of the unfamiliar portion of the ship. To Sir George's surprise, however, the alien did not stop when they reached the huge cargo deck which stood open to the local environment. Instead, the dragon-man actually followed him from the ship, as if it meant to accompany him all the way to the pavilion which had been set up for Sir George and Lady Matilda. The baron paused, surprised by the departure from normal practice, but the dragon-man only gestured him onward. He hesitated a moment longer, then shrugged ever so slightly and resumed his progress. The two of them passed the screen of shrubbery separating the English camp from the ship, and Sir George smiled as he caught sight of Matilda, waiting for him. He raised his hand and opened his mouth to call her name . . . . . and found himself lying on the ground with no memory at all of how he had gotten there. He blinked, head swimming, and peered up as a small hand stroked his brow anxiously. Matilda's worried face peered down at him, and beyond her he saw Father Timothy, Dickon Yardley, Sir Richard, Rolf Grayhame, and a dozen others. And, to his immense surprise, he saw the dragon-man, as well, still standing behind the circle of far shorter humans and gazing down at him over their heads. "My love?" Matilda's voice was taut with anxiety, and he blinked again, forcing his eyes to focus on her face. "What happened?" she demanded. "I—" He blinked a third time and shook the head he now realized lay in her lap. It seemed to be still attached to his shoulders, and his mouth quirked in a small, wry smile. "I have no idea," he admitted. "I'd hoped that perhaps you might be able to tell me that!" Her worried expression eased somewhat at his teasing tone, but it was her turn to shake her head. "Would that I could," she told him, her voice far more serious than his had been. "You simply stepped around the bushes there and raised your hand, then collapsed. And—" despite herself, her voice quivered just a bit "—lay like one dead for the better part of a quarter-hour." She looked anxiously up at Yardley, who shrugged. "It's as Her Ladyship says, My Lord," the surgeon told him. Yardley lacked the training and miraculous devices of the Medic, but he'd always been an excellent field surgeon, and he'd been given far longer to learn his craft than any other human battle surgeon. Now he shook his head. "Oh, she exaggerates a little—you were scarcely `like one dead.' I fear we've seen all too many of those, have we not?" He smiled grimly, and one or two of the others chuckled as they recalled men who most certainly had lain "like one dead" until their masters' marvels restored them to life and health. "Your breathing was deeper than usual, yet not dangerously so, and your pulse steady. But for the fact that we couldn't wake you, you might simply have been soundly asleep. Have you no memory of

having tripped or fallen?" "None," Sir George admitted. He pushed himself experimentally into a sitting position and patted Matilda's knee reassuringly when he felt no sudden dizziness. He sat a moment, then rose smoothly to his feet and raised one hand, palm uppermost. "I feel fine," he told them, and it was true. "Perhaps you do, but you've given me more than enough fright for one day, Sir George Wincaster!" Matilda said in a much tarter tone. He grinned apologetically down at her and extended his hand, raising her lightly, and tucked her arm through his as he turned to face his senior officers once more. "I feel fine," he repeated. "No doubt I did stumble over something—my thoughts were elsewhere, and any man may be clumsy enough to fall over his own two feet from time to time. But no harm was done, so be about your business while I—" he smiled at them and patted his wife's hand where it rested on his elbow "—attempt to make some amends to my lady wife for having afrighted her so boorishly!" A rumble of laughter greeted his sally and the crowd began to disperse. He watched them go, then turned his gaze back to the dragon-man. But the dragon-man was no longer there. Matilda watched him closely for the rest of that long day, and she fussed over him as they prepared for bed that night, but Sir George had told her nothing but the simple truth. He did, indeed, feel fine—better, in some ways, than in a very long time—and he soothed her fears by drawing her down beside him. Her eyes widened with delight at the sudden passion of his embrace, and he proceeded to give her the most conclusive possible proof that there was nothing at all wrong with her husband. But that night, as Matilda drifted into sleep in the circle of his arms and he prepared to follow her, he dreamed. Or thought he did, at least . . . "Welcome, Sir George," the voice said, and the baron turned to find the speaker, only to blink in astonishment. The voice sounded remarkably like Father Timothy's, although it carried an edge of polish and sophistication the blunt-spoken priest had never displayed. But it wasn't Father Timothy. For that matter, it wasn't even human, and he gaped in shock as he found himself facing one of the eternally silent dragon-men. "I fear we have taken some liberties with your mind, Sir George," the dragon-man said—or seemed to, although his mouth never moved. "We apologize for that. It was both a violation of your privacy and our own customs and codes, yet in this instance we had no choice, for it is imperative that we speak with you."

"Speak with me?" Sir George blurted. "How is it that I've never heard so much as a single sound from any of you, and now . . . now this—" He waved his arms, and only then did he realize how odd their surroundings were. They stood in the center of a featureless gray plain, surrounded by . . . nothing. The grayness underfoot simply stretched away in every direction, to the uttermost limit of visibility, and he swallowed hard. "Where are we?" he demanded, and was pleased to hear no quaver in his voice. "Inside your own mind, in a sense," the dragon-man replied. "That isn't precisely correct, but it will serve as a crude approximation. It is our hope to be able to explain it more fully at a future time. But unless you and we act soon—and decisively—it is unlikely either your people or ours will have sufficient future for such explanations." "What do you mean? And if you wished to speak with me, why did you never do so before this?" Sir George asked warily. "To answer your second question first," the dragon-man answered calmly, "it was not possible to speak directly to you prior to this time. Indeed, we aren't `speaking' even now—not as your species understands the term." Sir George frowned in perplexity, and the dragon-man cocked his head. His features were as alien as the Commander's, yet Sir George had the sudden, unmistakable feeling of an amused smile. It came, he realized slowly, not from the dragon-man's face, but rather from somewhere inside the other. It was nothing he saw; rather it was something he felt. Which was absurd, of course . . . except that he felt absolutely no doubt of what he was sensing. "This is a dream," he said flatly, and the dragon-man responded with a very human shrug.

"In a sense," he acknowledged. "You are most certainly asleep, at any rate. But if this is a dream, it's one we share . . . and the only way in which we could communicate with you. It is also—" the sense of a smile was even

stronger, but this time it carried a hungry edge, as well "—a method of communication which the Commander and his kind cannot possibly tap or intercept." "Ah?" Despite himself, Sir George's mental ears pricked at that. No doubt it was only a dream, and this talkative dragon-man was no more than his own imagination, but if only— "Indeed," the dragon-man reassured him, and folded his arms across a massive chest. "Our kind do not use spoken speech among ourselves as most other races do," he explained. "In fact, we are not capable of it, for we lack the vocal cords—or equivalent—which you and other species use to produce sound." "Then how do you speak to one another?" Sir George asked intently. "And, for that matter, what do you call your kind among yourselves?" "We are what others call `telepaths,' " the dragon-man replied. "It means simply that we cast our thoughts directly into one another's minds, without need of words. And no doubt because we do so, we do not use individual names as other species do. Or, rather, we don't require them, for each of us has a unique gestalt—a taste, or flavor, if you will—which all others of our kind recognize. As for what we call ourselves as a species, the closest equivalent in your language would probably be `People.' Since meeting you humans, however, and especially since establishing a contact point in your mind, we aboard this ship have been rather taken by your own descriptions of us." The dragon-man's amusement was apparent. "The notion of playing the part of one of your `dragons' against the Commander is extremely attractive to us, Sir George." Sir George smiled. "In that case, we will no doubt continue to call you dragons," he said, and the dragon-man projected the sense of another fierce grin as he nodded. "We would find that most acceptable," he said. "Yet the need for you to give us a name because we've never developed one is another example of the differences between your kind and us which result from the fact of our telepathy. Despite several of your millennia as the Federation's slaves, we have still to evolve many of the reference points most other species take for granted. Indeed, it was extremely difficult for our ancestors to grasp even the concept of spoken communication when the Federation discovered our world. They took many years to do so, and only the fact that we had independently developed a nuclear-age technology of our own prevented the Federation from classifying us as dumb beasts." " `Nuclear-age'?" Sir George repeated, and the dragon-man shrugged again, this time impatiently. "Don't worry about that now. It simply means that we were considerably more advanced technically than your own world . . . although the Federation was even more relatively advanced compared to us than we would have been compared to your world. "Unfortunately," the alien went on, and his "voice" turned cold and bleak, "we were too advanced for our own good—just enough to be considered a potential threat, yet not sufficiently so to defend ourselves—and the Federation declared our world a `protectorate.' They moved in their military units `for our own good,' to `protect' us from ourselves . . . and to insure that we never became any more advanced than we were at the moment they discovered us." "Because they feared competition," Sir George said shrewdly. "Perhaps," the dragon-man replied. "No, certainly. But there was another reason, as well. You see, the Federation is entirely controlled by species like the Commander's. They are far more advanced than our own race—or yours—and they regard that as proof of their inherent superiority." "So I've noticed," Sir George said bitterly. "We realize that, yet we doubt that you have fully realized what that means," the dragon-man said, "for you lack certain information." "What information?" Sir George's voice sharpened and his eyes narrowed. "Explaining that will take some time," the dragon-man replied, and Sir George nodded brusquely for him to continue. "Life-bearing worlds are very numerous," the dragon-man began. "They're far less common, statistically speaking, than nonlife-bearing or prebiotic worlds, but there are so very many stars, and so very many of them have planets, that the absolute number of life-bearing worlds is quite high." The creature paused, and Sir George blinked as he realized he actually understood what the other was talking about. Ideas and concepts he had never imagined, even after all his years in his masters' service, seemed to flood into his mind as the

dragon-man spoke. He didn't fully understand them—not yet—but he grasped enough to follow what he was being told, and he was vaguely aware that he should have been frightened by the discovery. Yet he wasn't. That curiosity of his was at work once more, he realized, and something else, as well. Something the dragon-man had done, perhaps. And perhaps not. He shook himself, grinning lopsidedly at the stretched feeling of his brain, and nodded for the dragon-man to continue. "While life-bearing worlds are numerous," the alien said after a moment, "intelligent life is very rare. Counting our own species, and yours, the Federation has encountered less than two hundred intelligent races. While this sounds like a great many, you must recall that the Federation has possessed phase drive and faster-than-light travel—the ability to voyage between stars and their planets—for more than one hundred thousand of your years. Which means that they have discovered a new intelligent species no more than once every five hundred years." Sir George swallowed hard. The Englishmen's experiences in their masters' service had half-prepared him for such concepts, but nothing could have fully prepared him. Still, much of what the dragon-man was saying wasn't terribly different from concepts he and Matilda and Father Timothy had been groping towards for years. In fact, the priest had proved more ready than Sir George to accept that Mother Church's teachings and Holy Scripture's accounts of things such as the Creation stood in need of correction and revision. Not that even Father Timothy had been prepared to go quite so far as this! "Of all the species the Federation has encountered, only thirty-two had developed the phase drive themselves, or attained an equivalent technological level, when they were encountered. Those races, more advanced than any others, are full members of the Federation. They sit on its Council, formulate its laws, and enjoy its benefits. The rest of us . . . do not. "In the eyes of the Federation, less advanced races have no rights. They exist only for the benefit of the Federation itself, although the Council occasionally mouths a few platitudes about the `advanced races' burden' and the Federation's responsibility to `look after' us inferior races. What it means in practical terms, however, is that we are their property, to be disposed of as they will. As you and your people have become." The dragon-man paused once more, and Sir George nodded hard. He could taste the other's emotions—his hatred and resentment, burning as hot as Sir George's own—and a distant sort of amazement filled him. Not that he could understand the other, but that under their utterly different exteriors they could be so much alike. "Some of the subject species, however, are more useful to the `advanced races' than others," the dragon-man resumed after a long, smoldering moment. "Yours, for example, has proven very useful as a means to evade the letter of their prime directive, while ours—" the dragon-man seemed to draw a deep breath "—has proven equally valuable as bodyguards and personal servants." "Why?" Sir George asked. The question could have come out harsh, demanding to know why the dragon-men should be so compliant and submissive, but it didn't. There was too much anger—and hatred—in the dragon-man's "voice" for that. "Our species is not like yours. We are not only telepaths—among ourselves, at least—but also empaths. While we are not normally able to make other species hear our thoughts, nor able to hear their thoughts, we are able to sense their emotions, their feelings. This makes it very difficult for anyone who might pose a threat to one we have been assigned to guard to slip past us. "But those aren't the only differences between us. Your kind has but two sexes, male and female. Our species has four: three which are involved in procreation, and a fourth which might be thought of as our `worker' caste."

"In the same way as bees?" Sir George asked, and the dragon-man paused, gazing intently at him. For a moment, his brain felt even more stretched than before, and then the alien nodded. "Very much like your `bees,' " the dragon-man told him. "All of our kind aboard this ship are from that worker caste, which also provides our warriors. We are neither male nor female, as you use the terms, but we are the most numerous sex among our kind. And, like your world's `bees,' we exist to serve our `queen.' " The dragon-man paused and cocked his head once more. "It's actually considerably more complex than

that. There are nuances and— Well, no matter. The analogy will serve for the moment." It seemed to refocus its attention upon Sir George. "The point is that, unlike your kind, our kind are not entirely what you would think of as individuals. We are more than simple parts of a greater whole, and each of us has his—or her, depending upon how one chooses to regard us—hopes and desires, yet we see into one another's minds and emotions with such clarity and depth that it's almost impossible for us to develop a true sense of `self' as you nontelepathic species do. "More than that, our `queens' dominate our lives. According to our own histories—or those the Federation hasn't completely suppressed, at any rate—that domination was far less complete before the Federation encountered us. The development of our own advanced technology and the society which went with it had apparently inspired our reproductive sexes to extend a greater degree of freedom—of equality, one might say—to the worker caste. But the Federation quickly put a stop to that, for it is the queen's very domination which makes us so valuable. "You see, Sir George, unlike your species, our young receive their initial educations from direct mind-to-mind contact with their parents . . . and queens. And during that process, the queen is able to direct us—to `program' us—in order to direct and constrain our behavior. We believe this was once a survival trait of the species, but it is now the thing which makes us so valuable to the Federation, for guilds like the Commander's `recruit' us from our home world. For all intents and purposes, they buy us from our queens, and our queens have no choice but to sell us, for the Federation controls our world completely and we continue to exist only at the Federation's sufferance." "This `programing' of which you speak," Sir George said very carefully. "Of what does it consist?" "Of mental commands we cannot disobey," the dragon-man said softly. "The guilds specify what commands they wish set upon us, and our queens impress those orders so deeply into our minds that we cannot even contemplate disobeying them. And so, you see, the Federation regards us—rightly—as even more suitable for slaves than your own kind." "And yet . . ." Sir George let his voice trail off, and again he received that impression of a fierce and hungry grin. "And yet we have now communicated with you," the dragon-man agreed. "You see, our queens are most displeased at the manner in which they are forced to sell their children into slavery. And they are aware that the guilds buy us primarily to be used as the Commander uses us—as security forces for exploration and trade vessels. Even with phase drive, a few ships are lost in every decade or so, of course, but we suspect that not all of them have been lost to, ah, natural causes." "Ah?" Sir George looked at the dragon-man with sudden, deep intensity, and the alien's mental chuckle rumbled deep in his brain. "Our queen programmed us exactly as the Commander demanded when he bought us for this expedition," the dragon-man told him. "We must obey any order he may give, and we may not attack or injure our masters. But that is all we must do. We feel quite certain that the Guild also wanted us programmed to protect our masters at all times, but that wasn't the way the Commander phrased their demands. Nor did he demand that we be programmed so as to be unable to watch others harm them without intervening. We believe—hope!—that over the centuries some of our kind have found ways to turn similar chinks in their programming against their masters. Just as we now hope to turn this against our masters." "Ah," Sir George said again, and this time his voice was dark and hungry. "Indeed. And that brings us to your species, Sir George. You see, your kind are unique in at least two ways. Most importantly, in terms of our present needs, your minds operate on a . . . frequency quite close to our own. We realized that from the beginning, though our masters did not ask us about it, and so we weren't required to tell them. It is far from a perfect match, of course, and to communicate with you as we are doing required the linked efforts of several of our kind. Nor could we do it while you were awake without immediately alerting our masters. Simply establishing the initial contact point rendered you unconscious for twelve of your minutes, and we had not previously dared risk causing such a thing to happen." "But now you have," Sir George said flatly. "For two reasons,"

the dragon-man agreed. "One was that we were able to do so when neither the Commander, the Hathori, any other guildsmen, nor any of the ship's remotes were in position to observe it. Such a situation had never before arisen."

Sir George nodded slowly, and the dragon-man continued. "The second reason is that, for the first time, it may be possible for us to win our freedom from the Guild . . . if you will act with us." The alien raised a clawed hand as if he sensed the sudden, fierce surge of Sir George's emotions—as no doubt he had—and shook his head quickly. "Do not leap too quickly, Sir George Wincaster! If we act, and fail, the Commander will not leave one of us alive. Not simply you and your soldiers, but your wives and children, will perish, as will all of our own kind aboard this ship." Sir George nodded again, feeling a cold shiver run down his spine, for the dragon-man was certainly correct. The thought of freedom, or even of the chance to at least strike back even once before he was killed, burned in his blood like poison, but behind that thought lay Matilda, and Edward, and the younger children . . . "Before you decide, Sir George, there is one other thing you should know," the dragon-man said softly, breaking gently into his thoughts, and the baron looked up. There was a new flavor to the dragon-man's feelings, almost a compassionate one.

"And that thing is?" the human asked after a moment. "We said that two things made your people unique," the dragon-man told him. "One is our ability to make you hear our thoughts. The second is the terrible threat you represent to the Federation." "Threat? Us?" Sir George barked a laugh. "You say your kind were far more advanced than ours, yet you were no threat to them!" "No. But we are not like you. To the best of my knowledge, no other race has been like you in at least one regard." "And that is?" "The rate at which you learn new things," the dragon-man said simply. "The Commander's Guild regards you as primitives, and so you are . . . at the moment. But we have seen inside your minds, as the Commander cannot. You are ignorant and untaught, but you are far from stupid or simple, and you have reached your present state of development far, far sooner than any of the Federation's `advanced' races could have." "You must be wrong," Sir George argued. "The Commander has spoken to me of the Romans his competitors first bought from our world. My own knowledge of history is far from complete, yet even I know that we've lost the knowledge of things the men of those times once took for granted, and—"

"You've suffered a temporary setback as a culture," the dragon-man disagreed, "and even that was only a local event, restricted to a single one of your continents. Do not forget—we were aboard this ship when the Commander carried out his initial survey of your world, and it is well for your species that he did not recognize what we did. Compared to any other race in the explored galaxy, you `humans' have been—and are—advancing at a phenomenal rate. We believe that, from the point your kind had reached when you were taken by the Guild—" "How long?" It was Sir George's turn to interrupt, and even he was stunned by the sheer ferocity of his own question. "How long has it been?" he demanded harshly. "Some six hundred and sixty of your years, approximately," the dragon-man told him, and Sir George stared at him in shock. He'd known, intellectually, that he'd slept away long, endless years in the service of his masters, but this—! "Are . . . are you certain?" he asked finally. "There is some margin for error. We are not trained in the mathematics to allow properly for the relativistic effects of the phase drive—" not even the dragon-man could make the dimly sensed concepts that went with that terminology comprehensible to Sir George "—and the guildsmen do not share such information with us. But they do speak among themselves in front of us, and they frequently forget—in their arrogance—that while we cannot speak as they do, we can hear. Indeed, that our kind has been forced to learn to understand spoken languages so that we can be ordered about by our `betters.' " "I . . . see," Sir George said, then shook himself. "But you were saying . . . ?" "I was saying that even after so brief a period as that, we would estimate that your kind has certainly advanced at least to steam power and electrical generation by now. It is even possible you have developed the earliest forms of radio communication and atmospheric flight. But even if you

have come only so far as inefficient steam engines and, perhaps, effective artillery and small arms, you will have advanced at more than double the rate of any of the so-called `advanced' members of the Federation. If you are left alone for only a very little longer—perhaps another four or five of your centuries—you will have discovered the phase drive for yourselves." "We will have?" Sir George blinked in astonishment at the thought. "That is our belief. And it is also what makes your species so dangerous to the Federation. Compared to any human institution, the Federation is immensely old and stable—which is another way of saying `static'—and possessed of an ironbound bureaucracy and customary usages. By its own rules and precedents, it must admit your world as a co-equal member if you have developed phase drive independently. Yet your kind will be a terribly disruptive influence on the other races' dearly beloved stability. By your very nature, you will soon outstrip all of them technologically, making them inferior to you . . . and so, by their own measure, justifying your people in using them as they have used us. Even worse—though we think they will be slower to recognize this—your race, assuming that you and your fellows are representative—will not take well to the pyramid of power the Federation has built. Within a very short period of time, whether by direct intervention or simply by example, you will have led dozens of other species to rebel against the `advanced races,' and so destroyed forever the foundation upon which their power and wealth—and comfortable arrogance—depends." "You expect a great deal from a single world of `primitives,' my friend." "Yes, we do. But should the Federation, or another guild, learn that you, too, are from Earth and return there too soon, it will never happen. They will recognize the threat this time, for they will have a better basis for comparison . . . and will probably be considerably more intelligent and observant than the Commander. They can hardly be less, at any rate!" The mental snort of contempt was unmistakable, and Sir George grinned wryly. "But if they do recognize it, they will take steps to deflect the threat. They may settle for establishing a `protectorate' over you, as they did with us, but you represent a much more serious threat than we did, for we did not share your flexibility. We believe it is far more likely that they will simply order your race destroyed, once and for all." Sir George grunted as if he had just been punched in the belly. For a long, seemingly endless moment, his mind simply refused to grapple with the idea. But however long it seemed, it was only a moment, for Sir George never knowingly lied to himself. Besides, the concept differed only in scale from what he'd already deduced the Commander would do if his violation of the Council's decrees became public knowledge. "What . . . what can we do about it?" he asked.

"About your home world, nothing," the dragon-man replied in a tone of gentle but firm compassion. "We can only hope the Federation is as lethargic as usual and gives your people time to develop their own defenses. Yet there is something you may do to protect your species, as opposed to your world."

"What?" Sir George shook himself. "What do you mean? You just said—" "We said we could not protect your home world. But if your kind and ours, working together, could seize this ship, it is more than ample to transport all of us to a habitable world so far from the normal trade routes that it would not be found for centuries, or even longer. We here aboard this ship are unable to reproduce our kind but, as you, we have received the longevity treatments. You have not only received those treatments but are capable of reproducing, and the medical capabilities of the ship would provide the support needed to avoid the consequences of genetic drift or associated problems. Moreover, the ship itself is designed to last for centuries of hard service. It would provide a nice initial home for both of our races, as well as a very advanced starting point for our own technology. With human inventiveness to back it up, no more than a century or two would be required to establish a second home world for your kind. One that would certainly provide the threat we have projected that your original home world may someday pose." "And why should you care about that?" Sir George demanded. "For two reasons," the dragon-man replied imperturbably. "First, there would be our own freedom. We would, of course,

quickly find ourselves a tiny minority on a world full of humans, but at least we would be freed from our slavery. And, we believe, we would have earned for ourselves a position of equality and respect among you. "But the second reason is even more compelling. If we are correct about the impact your species will have upon the Federation, then you offer the best—perhaps the only—chance our home world will ever have to win its freedom." "Ummm . . ." Sir George gazed at the other, his thoughts racing, and then he nodded—slowly, at first, but with rapidly increasing vigor. If the dragon-man was telling the truth (and Sir George felt certain that he was), all he had just said made perfect sense. But— "Even assuming that all you say is true, what can we possibly do?" "We have already told you that we believe we have a chance—a slim one, but a chance—to gain our freedom. If we succeed in that, then all else follows." "And how can we hope to succeed?" "Assume that you English had free access to the ship's interior and to your weapons," the dragon-man replied somewhat obliquely. "Could you take it from its crew?" "Hm?" Sir George rubbed his beard, then nodded. "Aye, we could do that," he said flatly. "Assuming we could move freely about the ship, at least. Even its largest corridors and compartments aren't so large as to prevent swords—or bows—from reaching anyone in them quickly. Of course, our losses might be heavy, especially if the crew would have access to weapons like your fire-throwers."

"They would," the dragon-man said grimly. "Worse, they might very well have access to us, as well." "What do you mean?" "We told you that we have been conditioned to obey orders. As it happens, the Commander personally purchased us for this mission, and his demand was that we obey him. He may have intended that to apply to his entire crew, but that was not the way he phrased himself. Even if he realized that at the time, however, we believe he has long since forgotten, since we have always been careful to obey any order any guildsman gave us. By the same token, we were never conditioned not to attack the Hathori, who are no more guildsmen or proper crewmen than you or we. The Hathori, unfortunately, truly are almost as stupid and brutish as the Commander believes. Whatever happens, they will fight for the Guild like loyal hounds . . . but as you have seen on the field of battle, they are no match for you Englishmen with hand-to-hand weapons. And they are certainly no match for our own energy weapons." The sense of a smile in every way worthy of a true dragon was stronger than ever, and Sir George laughed out loud. But then the dragon-man sobered. "Yet all of this hinges upon what happens to the Commander at the very outset. If he should have the opportunity—and recognize the need—to order us to crush you, we would obey. We would have no choice, and afterward, our deeper programming would prevent us from attacking any surviving guildsmen." "I see." Sir George regarded the dragon-man thoughtfully. "On the other hand, Sir Dragon, I doubt that you would have spent so long explaining so much if you had not already considered how best to deal with those possibilities." "We have. The key is the Commander. He wears the device which controls the force fields which keep your people sealed outside the core hull of the ship on a chain about his neck." Sir George nodded, recalling the gleaming pendant the Commander always bore with him. "That is the master control, designed to override any opposing commands and open any hatch or force field for whoever possesses it. The programming can be altered from the control deck, assuming one has the proper access codes, but the process would take hours. By the time it could be completed, the battle would be over one way or the other." "So we must find some way to capture or kill the Commander as the first step," Sir George mused. The dragon-man nodded, and the baron shrugged. "Well, that seems to add little extra difficulty to an already impossible task." "True," the dragon-man agreed gravely, yet a flicker of humor danced in his voice, and Sir George grinned crookedly. "So how do we capture or kill him?" " `We' do not," the dragon-man replied. "You do." "Somehow I had already guessed that," Sir George said dryly. "But you still haven't explained how." "It has to do with his weapons-suit," the dragon-man said, and ran his own clawed hand over the red-and-blue garment he wore. "He has great faith in its protective

capabilities, and under most circumstances, that faith would probably be justified. Alas!" Another, hungry mental grin. "Certain threats are so primitive, so unlikely to ever face any civilized being from an advanced race, that, well—" Again that very human shrug, and this time Sir George began to grin in equal anticipation. In the event, it proved far simpler to become allies than for their alliance to carry out the dragon-men's plan. The basic strategy was almost breathtaking in its simplicity and audacity, but Sir George lacked the secret means of communication the dragon-men shared among themselves. His newfound allies confirmed his own suspicion that the Commander and his fellows were able to eavesdrop on virtually any human conversation. Fortunately, after so long the crewmen responsible for monitoring those conversations—who shared the Commander's arrogant contempt for all "primitive" races to the full—had become overconfident, bored, and lax. They paid only cursory attention to their duties, and it had been many years since they'd reexamined the patterns in which they'd placed their mechanical spies. Worse, they had even more contempt, in many ways, for the dragon-men than for the humans. Absolutely confident in their subservience, and with no suspicion that it was even physically possible for dragon to communicate with human, the guildsmen made no effort to conceal the placement of their spies from their bodyguards. All of which meant that if Sir George was very careful, it was possible to speak to his subordinates in places where the Guild could not overhear him. But those conversations must be very brief, lest the watchers note that he had abruptly begun spending a suspicious amount of time in the "dead zones" not covered by their spies. And it was difficult, Sir George soon discovered, to plan a desperate rebellion, even with men who'd known and served with one for decades, when that planning could be carried out only in bits and pieces. Especially when the entire plan had to be completed and in place in no more than twelve days. Matilda came first, of course. He'd feared that she would believe his dream had been just that—only a dream—and he could hardly have blamed her. After all, he had more than half-believed it one when he awoke. But she only gazed deeply and intently into his eyes as they stood in a small hollow beside the river, temporarily safe from eavesdroppers. Then she nodded. "I understand, my love," she said simply. "Who shall we tell first?" Matilda's belief made things much simpler. All of Sir George's officers had long since come to recognize her as his closest advisor and confidante, as well as his wife. They weren't precisely accustomed to receiving orders directly from her, for she had always been careful to remain in the background, but they neither felt surprised nor questioned her when she did inform them that she spoke for her husband. With her assistance, Sir George found it relatively simple to inform those most necessary to working out and executing the plan. Father Timothy was crucial, not least because the Commander had accepted his role as a spiritual counselor. The demon-jester might scoff at "primitive superstition," but clearly he had thought better of attempting to interfere with it. Sir George suspected that the Commander actively encouraged the faith among his human slaves in the belief that it kept them more pliable, but that was perfectly acceptable to the baron, for Father Timothy's pastoral duties gave him an excellent excuse to be out and about among them. His ability to speak to any human without arousing suspicion, coupled with the imprimatur of his moral and religious authority in the eyes of those to whom he spoke, made him of enormous value as a plotter. Rolf Grayhame was the next most important member of the cabal. The burly archer went paper-white when Sir George first broached the subject, for, despite his hatred for the Commander, Grayhame—more than any other among the English, perhaps—had had the lesson of the guildsmen's inviolability driven into his head. Indeed, Sir George had done a great deal of the driving himself, for it had seemed far more likely that the archers might decide they could reach the Commander than that one of the knights or men-at-arms who must somehow come within arm's reach might decide the same thing. But despite his initial shock, Grayhame recovered quickly, and his smile was ferret-fierce—and hungry—when Sir George explained his part in the plan. "Said it was the only

reward I really wanted, now didn't I, My Lord?" the archer demanded, his voice little more than a harsh, whispered mutter despite Sir George's assurance that no spies were placed to hear or see them at the moment. "Can't say the notion of relying so much on the dragon-men will make me sleep sound of nights, but for the rest—pah!" He spat on the ground. "I'll take my chances, My Lord. Oh, aye, indeed will I take my chances!" Sir Richard Maynton completed the uppermost tier of the conspiracy, and, in some ways, his was the hardest task of all. Grayhame needed to enlist only a dozen or so of his men; Maynton's task was to prepare all of their men, archers and men-at-arms alike, for the brutal hand-to-hand combat certain to rage within the hull of the ship. And he had to do it in a way which would not warn the Commander. Which meant he also had to do it without actually warning any more than a tiny handful of his own subordinates. In many ways, that was the aspect of the plan which most disturbed Sir George. He felt more than a little guilty for involving not simply his men but their families and children in a mutiny which could end only in victory or death without even warning them, yet he had no choice. Once he and the dragons had established communications, the aliens "spoke" with him every night while he seemed to sleep dreamlessly beside his wife, and each of those conversations served only to reinforce the baron's own earlier conclusions about the Commander. Whatever happened to Earth, and however much the Commander might praise Sir George and his men, the time was virtually certain to arise when the English would become a potential embarrassment for the Commander's Guild . . . and when that happened, they would all die. And so Sir George and his officers made their plans and prayed for success.

"Good afternoon, Commander," Sir George said courteously as the demon-jester's air car floated to a stop at the meticulously laid out lists and the vehicle's domed top retracted. "Good afternoon," the Commander piped back. He pushed up out of his comfortable, form-fitting seat to stand upright in the air car, and Sir George held his breath. The Commander had approved the plan the baron had presented for their demonstration, but there was always the possibility that he might change his mind at the last moment. Now the demon-jester glanced around for another long moment, studying the tall rows of seats the English had erected for the local not-men's chieftains. The "seats" were actually little more than long, bare poles, but they served the three-legged aliens well enough, and the chieftains sat with barbarian impassivity. It was, of course, impossible to read their mood from their expressions, but their total motionlessness suggested a great deal to Sir George. The Commander gazed at them without comment, but Sir George could almost taste the demon-jester's satisfaction. He had eagerly embraced the baron's suggestion that they might also organize a joust and melee to follow the archery competition and demonstrate the advantages which the Englishmen's armor bestowed upon them in close combat, as well. The fact that organizing the melee meant that Maynton and Sir George, the leaders of the competing sides, would each have a small but fully armed and armored force under his immediate command, clearly had not occurred to the demon-jester. Of course, the implications hadn't occurred to most of the Englishmen, either . . . but a handpicked few among them knew precisely what their commanders intended. "You have done well," the Commander said now, and Sir George smiled broadly as the alien stepped out of the air car at last. "Thank you, Commander. It's always easier to overawe a foe into surrender than to defeat him in the field." "So I also believe," the Commander agreed, and started up the wooden stairs to the special box the English had built for him. It was rare, though not completely unheard of, for him to leave his air car in the field. But this time there was a difference. Before, Sir George had never known that his invisible barriers—the force fields, as the dragon-men described them—protected him from all physical contact only aboard the ship or within the confines of the air car. Now, thanks to the dragon-men, he did know, and his smile grew still broader as the Commander ascended to his place. His personal escort of six dragon-men followed with no more sign of expression or excitement than they had ever shown, and Sir George's smile faded as he gazed upon them. They

remained as alien, as unearthly—in every sense of the word—as ever to his eye, but he no longer knew them by eye alone. Truth to tell, the subtler internal differences between them and humans were almost more alien than their outer appearances, yet those differences now struck him as intriguing, almost exciting, rather than grotesque or repellent. The joint sense of existence which always led them to use "we" or "us" rather than "I" or "me" in communication, the calm with which they accepted their own inability to reproduce or their inevitable separation from the ongoing growth and change of their own race, the manner in which they accepted contact—and other-induced change or constraint—at the very deepest level of their beings . . . all of those things were truly and utterly alien to Sir George. But they were not threatening. They were not . . . evil. Whatever the dragons' outer shape and form, Sir George had decided, however different their perceptions and methods of communication, and despite the fact they could never father or bear children, they were as much "men" in every important sense of the word as any Englishman he had ever met. Indeed, far more so than most, for the six dragons "guarding" the Commander went knowingly and willingly to their own deaths as they followed the Commander up the steps to his box. Neither Matilda nor Father Timothy had cared at all for that portion of the plan. Grayhame had been unhappy with it, but had grasped its necessity, while Maynton had objected only mildly, as if because he knew it was expected. Sir George suspected that was largely because the other knight had a limited imagination. Despite all else that had happened, only Sir George had ever actually "spoken" with the dragons. The others were willing to take his word for what had happened because for over fifty years he had never lied to them, never abused their trust in him, but they had not themselves "heard" the dragons speak. And because Maynton had never heard them, they remained less than human to him. He continued to regard them, in many ways, as Sir George continued to regard the Hathori: as roughly human-shaped animals which, however clever or well-trained, remained animals. But they were not animals, and Sir George knew he would never be able to see them as such again, for it had been they who insisted that their fellows with the Commander must die. Their logic was as simple as it was brutal. If the Commander could be enticed out of his air car and taken alive, he could be compelled to order the remainder of his crew to surrender. Like so much else of the vaunted Federation, the Guild's hierarchical command structure was iron bound. If their superior officer ordered them to surrender, the other guildsmen would obey . . . and the Commander, for all his readiness to expend his English slaves or slaughter the inhabitants of "primitive" planets possessed nothing remotely resembling the human—or dragon—quality of courage. With a blade pressed to his throat, he would yield. But to get close enough to apply that blade had required, first, a way to get him out from behind his air car's force fields and, second, that someone get within arm's reach. The fashion in which Sir George had structured the "demonstration" for the local chieftains had accomplished the former, but no one could accomplish the latter until the Commander's guards—Hathori and dragon alike—were neutralized. The Hathori would defend him no matter what; the dragons would have no choice but to do the same if they were commanded to, and no one could doubt that such a command would be given if they did not spring forward on their own immediately. Neither Sir George nor his senior officers were particularly concerned about the Hathori. Not in the open field, at least. They had seen the bulge-eyed wart-faces in action, and were confident of their ability to destroy them with longbow fire or swarm them under quickly here. Once aboard ship, in the narrow confines of its corridors and chambers, it would be another matter, unless they could win their way into its interior before the Hathori could be armed and armored by the guildsmen. The dragons and their "energy weapons" were another matter entirely, and they had been relentless in their conversations with Sir George. It was entirely possible that the Commander's personal guards would be able to cut a way at least as far as the air car with their personal weapons, especially if the Hathori kept the

English busy, and once he was behind his force fields and once again invulnerable, the Commander would be ruthless in destroying any and all possible threats. Which meant, the dragons insisted, that no chances could be taken. Capturing the Commander alive was the one move they could be certain would succeed; at the very best, any other gambit would almost certainly cost the English far heavier casualties by requiring them to fight their way into the ship. For those reasons, the Commander's personal guards must die, and they had hammered away at that point until Sir George was forced to promise to accept their plan. Which didn't mean he liked it. Now he watched the Commander reach his position on the canopied platform. The demon-jester crossed to the thronelike chair constructed especially for him, and Sir George could almost taste the thick-bodied little creature's satisfaction as he gazed down at all about him. The elevation of his position, establishing his authority over the chieftains he had summoned here, had been a major part of the baron's argument for the arrangement of the stands, and Sir George smiled a much harder, hungrier smile as he watched the Commander bask in his superiority to the despised primitives clustered about his feet in all their abject inferiority. The Commander gazed down at Sir George for another moment, then nodded regally for the demonstration to begin, and Sir George, in turn, nodded to Rolf Grayhame. The archery captain barked an order, and two dozen archers, helmets and metalwork brightly polished for the occasion, garments washed and bright with color, marched briskly to the firing line. Sir George had longed to call for a larger number of them, but he'd concluded that he dared not. Twenty-four was more than sufficient to provide the demonstration the Commander desired. To ask for more bows to be issued might have aroused suspicion, or at least caution, and the Commander might have decided to remain safely in his air car after all. The archers stopped in formation and quickly and smoothly bent and strung their bows, and the Commander, like the gathered chieftains, turned to gaze at the targets just over a hundred yards down range. Most of those targets were shaped like humans, but some among them were also shaped like natives of this world, and all were "protected" only by the large wicker shields the natives used in battle. The sort of shields longbow arrows would pierce as effortlessly as awls. Grayhame barked another order, and twenty-four archers nocked arrows and raised their bows. "Draw!" Grayhame shouted, and twenty-four bowstaves bent as one. "Loose!" the captain bellowed . . . and twenty-four archers turned on their heels, and twenty-four bowstrings snapped as one. Two dozen arrows flew through the bright sunlight of an alien world, glittering like long, lethal hornets and crashed into their targets with devastating force. Eighteen of those arrows carried deadly, needle-pointed pile heads. At such short range they could pierce even plate, and they smashed into the Hathori on the Commander's raised dais like hammers. Five bounced harmlessly aside, defeated by the angle and the Hathori's armor; thirteen did not, and all but two of the bulge-eyed aliens went down. Not all of those felled were dead, but all were out of action at least for the moment. And so were the two who were unwounded, for the remaining six arrows had done their own lethal work. Every one of them had slammed home in the Commander's body, and the brilliant red garment which would have shrugged aside fire from the dragons' terrifying "energy weapons" was no help at all against clothyard shafts at a range of under ten yards. They drove clean through the creature's body, spraying bright orange blood, and then deep into the back of the Commander's thronelike chair. The demon-jester never even screamed—couldn't even tumble from the chair to which the arrows had nailed it—and the two surviving Hathori gaped at their master's feathered corpse in shock. That shock seemed to hold them forever, although it could not actually have been more than the briefest span of seconds, but then they turned as one, raising their axes as they charged the nearest humans. They never reached their targets. The archers were already nocking fresh arrows while the handful of knights and men-at-arms who had known what was to happen charged forward, but many of the men—and women—who hadn't had the least idea what was planned were in the way. As

surprised as the Hathori themselves and completely unarmed, all they could do was flee, and their bodies blocked the archers' shot at the surviving Hathori. But it didn't matter. The Hathori had moved no more than two strides when half a dozen lightning bolts literally tore them apart. The air was full of human shouts and screams of consternation and shock as the enormity of what had just happened smashed home, and the alien chieftains had vaulted from their places and disappeared with commendable quickness of mind. Sir George had watched them vanish, and now he made a mental note to keep an eye out for their return, in case they should sense an opportunity to strike at all the hated off-worlders while those invaders fought among themselves. But almost all of his attention was focused elsewhere, and he charged up the stairs towards the Commander's body. Maynton and three other picked knights accompanied him, helping to drive through the confusion, and his own sword was in his hand by the time he bounded onto the platform. It wasn't needed—the dragons had already dispatched the wounded Hathori with ruthless efficiency—and he leaned forward to jerk the bright, faceted pendant from around the neck of the corpse. He held the precious device in his hand, his heart flaming with exultation as he gazed down at it, and then something touched his armored shoulder. He spun quickly, only to relax as he found himself gazing up into the eyes of one of the dragons. The towering alien regarded him for several long seconds and then waved at the carnage about them, pointed to the dead Commander, and cocked his head in unmistakable question. The baron followed the gesturing hand with his eyes, then looked back up at his huge, alien ally, and grinned fiercely. "Your folk may have been willing enough to die, Sir Dragon—aye, and brave enough to do it, as well! But it is not the English way to murder our own, and with this—" he raised the pendant "—we'll not need that piece of meat to take his precious ship, now will we? And with us to hunt the guildsmen, and your folk to hunt Hathori, well—" His grin bared his teeth as he and the mute dragon stood eye to eye, and then, slowly, the dragon showed its own deadly looking fangs in a hungry grin of its own and it gave a very human nod. "Then let's be about it, my friend!" Sir George invited, reaching up to clap the huge alien on the back, and the two of them started down the platform stairs together. End

# About this Title