

## **THE REHUMANIZATION OF JADE DARCY**

*(books by Stephen Goldin and Mary Mason)*

Jade Darcy and the Affair of Honor

Jade Darcy and the Zen Pirates

***also by Mary Mason***

Throwing Lead: A Writer's Guide to Firearms

(with J. Daniel Sawyer)

***also by Stephen Goldin***

Polly!

Quiet Post

Herds

Caravan

Scavenger Hunt

The Eternity Brigade

A World Called Solitude

Assault on the Gods

And Not Make Dreams Your Master

Crossroads of the Galaxy

Mindflight

Mindsearch

Trek to Madworld (*Star Trek*)

The Business of Being a Writer

## **THE PARSINA SAGA**

Shrine of the Desert Mage

The Storyteller and the Jann

Crystals of Air and Water

Treachery of the Demon King

## **AGENTS OF ISIS**

Tsar Wars

Treacherous Moon

Robot Mountain

Sanctuary Planet

Stellar Revolution

Purgatory Plot

Traitors' World

Counterfeit Stars

Outworld Invaders

Galactic Collapse

The Rehumanization of Jade Darcy

Book 1

**Jade Darcy**  
and the  
**Affair of Honor**

**Stephen Goldin**  
and  
**Mary Mason**

**Darsina**  
**PRESS**  


*Jade Darcy and the Affair of Honor*. Copyright © 1988 by Stephen Goldin and Mary Mason.

All Rights Reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission, except in the case of brief quotations embedded in critical articles and reviews.

Cover art copyright © 2012 Mary Mason & J. Daniel Sawyer.

First Parsina Press edition, March 2012.

ISBN: 1463685394.

EAN-13: 978-1463685393.

This book is dedicated to our son  
KENNETH SMITH  
In the hope that he may live to travel  
between the stars...  
with or without the Greest



# **Chapter 1**

## **Nightmare**

He came at her, naked and erect. His body was small but solidly built, and his face was strangely hidden in shadow that obscured nothing else about him. The smell of his sweat mingled unpleasantly with the tang of her own fear. He moved with the dazzling quickness only another carc could achieve, yet his approach was strangely slowed, as though viewed from a projector run at half speed. Horrified though she was, she could not take her eyes from his body—and particularly from his large, thick penis with the blue veins in bas relief on the side.

Her first impulse was to run, her second to fight, but she could do neither. She couldn't move. She knew intellectually she was just as fast and almost as strong as he was, but her body would not obey her. Her hands were held at her side by some invisible force, her feet were pinned in place. She stood helpless, struggling against her unseen bonds and gasping from the desperation of her efforts as he drew nearer.

Though his face was still in shadow, she could see his eyes quite clearly—darkly gleaming with both desire and triumph. His eyes took in the contours of her body, and she realized for the first time that she was naked, too, totally helpless before his lecherous advance.

At first all was darkness around her, the silent darkness of the grave. She screamed at him to stop, to leave her alone, but no sounds came from her throat—and despite the shadow over his face she could tell he was beaming a salacious grin. His thumbs were rubbing the tips of his fingers as his large, callused hands prepared to reach out and touch her helpless body.

Then the scene shifted and she was in the ingerterie, with its dim lighting and crowds of strange beings from dozens of worlds. The noise level rocked from stillness to the deafening drone of alien speech, hundreds of simultaneous conversations, but still her screams could not be heard. Most of the beings around her were strangers, but even so she saw many familiar faces.

There was Rix in his accustomed box behind the glass wall, his multiple arms controlling the environ-

ment for his varied patrons. There was little Babankh and slimy Lorpet, and so many others who were just a flicker of recognition in the back of her mind. Colonel Stavros, who'd never been within a hundred parsecs of this place, sat placidly at a nearby table, fingering his mustache and looking pointedly away.

She tried to call out, but her voice couldn't be heard above the din; she tried to reach out, but her arm would not move from its place. She could only stand there, naked and helpless, as the man with the shadowed face came toward her with lust in his eyes.

Then the man laughed, and all noise ceased. The ingesterie's patrons stopped what they were doing and riveted their attention on her. But not even the other arbiters made a move to fight off her attacker. Most of the patrons sat or stood where they were, and some even came around behind the man, ready to help him. She looked down at her own body and saw that strange arms and tentacles were now holding her in place. There was no safety, not even here. They had all betrayed her. They had all turned against her. Her anger rose against them, almost—but not quite—covering the fear she felt at the man's approach.

Her breathing was ragged and her heart was banging so heavily she thought it would surely burst through her chest. Her stomach was grinding away at itself until she wanted to throw up, and yet she couldn't. Somehow that would be a victory for him, another bit of herself he controlled. She couldn't allow that.

The patrons were cheering silently as the man



came toward her, his penis long and stiff, looking oddly deformed and menacing. Though she whimpered and twisted, she could not escape the inevitable moment.

Then the ingesterie vanished and she was in the woods again. She lay naked on her back with her feet spread widely apart as he continued toward her. The ants bit at her back and buttocks, and she writhed on the damp ground but couldn't escape. The man's face was no longer in shadow as he knelt between her legs and reached up to grab her jaw with his strong right hand. It was a face she knew well, a face she'd cared for—once. Now it was twisted into a leering mask of sadistic lust, the lips swollen and red with passion, saliva drooling from the right corner.

His right hand gripped her throat tightly while that elbow leaned heavily on her left shoulder, pinning her to the ground. His left hand grabbed her right breast and squeezed it so hard she cried out even through his choking grip. Everywhere his hands touched her skin she felt a burn like strong alkali eating away her flesh. As his left hand roughly stroked the right side of her body it left a trail of slime as though an army of slugs had crawled over her. Her mind whispered it was only sweat, but her flesh screamed otherwise.

Now he leaned his face down toward hers, and the sour smell of his breath combined with the smell of his sweat and the stink of putrid sex. His lips forced themselves on hers, and the slimy touch made her stomach flip over. She wanted to vomit in his face, but her body was so paralyzed even that reflex

was denied her. And still his hands were touching her, pawing her, burning her. His right elbow shifted and dug into her left breast even as he squeezed the right one again with his left hand.

Then his right hand pushed her head all the way back, so far she thought her neck might snap. She couldn't see what was happening, now, but at least he'd stopped kissing her. Of all the perversions, that mockery of love seemed the most disgusting.

His penis jabbed at her, but the angle was wrong and it missed her vagina, poking hard instead against the upper edge and pressing her flesh against the pubic bone. Tears of pain came to her eyes and she tried to cry out, but he held her throat so tightly she couldn't make a sound. Twice more he jabbed and missed, bringing so much pain that her body involuntarily arched to aid his entrance even as she hated herself for doing so.

His penis tore its way through her unlubricated labia, pulling her pubic hairs with it and seeming to yank some out from their roots. Her vagina was on fire as he plowed through the dry tissue that suddenly moistened with her own blood. The man looked down at the blood and smiled in triumph, and pumped some more as he pressed himself against her and kissed her and...and...and....

"Let me go, let me go!" Jade Darcy screamed as she opened her eyes and stared in horror at the gently lit ceiling panels overhead. Her screams reinforced her already heightened fear, producing an accelerating spiral that ended only when she ran out of breath. She struggled to sit up, but her arms and legs were restrained tightly at her sides and she

couldn't break them free.

"Please read the numbers on the screen," said a gentle voice from the side of the room.

"Fuck you, Val! Let me go!" she shrieked.

"Swearing isn't good enough; you can do that in your sleep. Please read the numbers on the screen."

Jade turned her head desperately to the right and tried to make her eyes focus. The computer screen had a series of random numbers displayed on it. "Four, thirteen, twenty-eight, five," she said hoarsely, gasping like an asthmatic for air to fill her empty lungs.

"Good morning, Jade," the computer said as it released the restraints on her ankles and wrists.

"Motherfucking son-of-a-bitch computer," Jade muttered as she pulled her limbs in quickly, before the computer could bind them again. Her body was quaking from the aftermath of the experience, and her stomach was a pit of fire and nausea. As soon as she could control her arm movements well enough, she reached for the plate beside her bed and grabbed some saltine crackers. She stuffed them into her mouth, nearly choking as she hurried to get them down to ease the burning in her gut.

Her body still felt slimy and dirty from the mauling by her phantom attacker. She remembered how bad the feeling was seven years ago when the nightmares first started, when she would stumble half blind from the bed, knocking over anything she hadn't already broken in her sleep, to reach the shower and stand under the running water for hours trying to rinse off the disgusting feel of his skin on hers. At least things had minimally improved since

then.

“Shower, Val,” she said when she finished her mouthful of crackers.

“Already running.”

Her body was starting to feel more like her own again. As soon as she could trust her legs to support her she swung them over the side of the bed and stood up, then staggered into her tiny bathroom. She peed and stood under the shower for fifteen minutes, letting the hot water wash away her sweat and purify her skin. She didn't bother to lather just yet; she still had her morning exercises to do and some residual anger to relieve.

She walked naked into the second room of her two-room house, the special exercise room. For half an hour she performed the 108 movements of t'ai chi to center herself, to bring her back into herself, to reclaim her body from the possession of her dream attacker. She'd been taught to start from the center, the gut, then to place herself and her movement in harmony with this center. But it was this center that had been violated; it was the extremities that had been safely away, apart. These were all she owned after the nightmare. Starting from her fingertips, the exercises brought feeling in through her limbs and into her torso and feet, pushing out all unwanted intrusions and making her body and spirit whole again. Once she was back in control, she was ready for her real workout.

She did some quick stretches, then, walking to the set-in arsenal closet, she looked over her choices and finally selected a pair of long-bladed knives. She held one in each hand for a few moments, letting her

fingers grow accustomed to their feel and weight. When she was ready, she closed the closet and said, "Fifteen minutes, Val, mode A."

The lights dimmed to twilight level and the walls disappeared, replaced by an infinite plane of darkness. Jade Darcy forced herself to relax, running through the mild self-hypnotic tricks she'd learned years ago in Special Training. She put her conscious mind in the passenger seat, leaving the actual work to her subconscious, her training, and her computer-augmented reflexes. She'd watch and evaluate as a detached observer, not needing to participate unless an override was necessary.

From off to her left, barely visible in the corner of her eye, a faceless figure rushed toward her, and her body responded even before her mind registered the fact. Spinning on her left foot, she swung her left arm in a backhand slash that would have cut the attacker across his groin if he were a real person instead of a holographic image. The instant she delivered the disabling blow the image vanished, replaced by two more assailants coming from behind her.

Jade whirled and moved again, causing one of the attackers to charge past her. The second man came closer, only to receive her right-hand dagger up under where his ribs would have been. He promptly disappeared, leaving her to face the onslaught of his partner, coming around for a second pass. She didn't even need her knives for him; the back of her left hand hit him hard in the windpipe even as her right foot lashed out to kick him in the crotch. This attacker vanished and two more appeared, coming at her from opposite directions.

By ones and twos, holographic images of attackers charged at her, all faceless, all unarmed. All of them were dispatched with effortless blows her well-trained body delivered before her brain even had a chance, in most cases, to register the threat. Her body did not seem anchored to the floor. She moved in space from her center, not her feet. There were no separate motions, but fluid cascades along four, five, or even six axes. This was routine exercise for a carc, as mindless as sit-ups were for ordinary people; Jade's mind could revel in the sensation of her body behaving as it was supposed to, and the satisfaction of disemboweling and castrating the men who came charging toward her.

When she'd disabled the last adversary and no more came against her, the walls reappeared and the lighting came up gradually to normal level. "Fifteen minutes, as you requested," the computer told her.

Jade Darcy stood naked and sweating in the middle of the floor. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath before speaking. "Score, Val?"

"Ten dead, twenty-three incapacitated, three who might possibly have gotten up and caused further trouble."

"Replay those three."

Jade stepped off to one side as holographic images of her and her opponents materialized. She watched the movements carefully and saw she'd been a bit sloppy in a couple of her kicks. Viewed analytically, she realized she'd tried too hard to aim for the groin in cases where a lower kick to the kneecap would have been more effective. She knew it was still the aftermath of her nightmare—she *wanted* to

kick men in the balls after that—but it disturbed her nonetheless. The spinal computer that augmented her reflexes was supposed to be dispassionate and separate from her mind and her emotions. If even *it* was affected by her nightmare, how deeply into her psyche had the rape been burned?

“Looks like I need some minor reprogramming,” she muttered. “Too bad there’s no one within five transfer stations who can do it.”

She sighed as she put the knives back in their place in her arsenal closet. Almost anyone, even a carc, would be satisfied with that score, considering she’d remained uninjured, but Jade Darcy was a perfectionist. Fighting was her life’s trade, the only thing that mattered to her anymore. “Pretty good” was not enough in the real world. There were only the perfect and the dead, and she was resolved to remain in the first category.

“Shower again, Val,” she said as she padded to the bathroom. This time she lathered up and washed herself thoroughly, and douched as well to remove the last psychological traces of impurity left over from the nightmare. Finally feeling cleansed, she stood under the dryer and let the moisture be evaporated from the surface of her body.

“Let’s have some breakfast, Val, while I’m deciding what to wear today. Just the usual.”

The computer’s programming could have synthesized eggs and toast, or cereal, or steak, or sashimi, or any of thousands of other combinations humans considered edible—but Jade Darcy’s diet was rigid. She always had a breakfast of her own concoction, a milkshakelike agglomeration of protein, vitamins,

and all the nutritional necessities for human well-being. It was a meal devoid of taste or substance, but eating was a purely mechanical function, and Jade Darcy could see no reason to pamper herself by indulging in the decadence of pleasant sensation. A meal couldn't be good for her if it *tasted* good.

The bed reshaped itself into a table and bench in the center of her front room, and a slot opened in the wall to reveal a large tumbler filled with Jade's breakfast. Jade took the tumbler and sat down on the bench, staring at the computer screen in the wall. "I'm feeling purplish today, Val. Show me what you've got."

She sipped slowly at her breakfast as the screen flashed a number of designs and patterns, most of them totally inappropriate for her. She'd never told the computer to eliminate the frillier, more feminine designs from its catalog; she liked to look at them even though she knew she could never wear them. Finally the computer reached the more acceptable range and she saw a design she liked. "I'll have that one today, Val," she said.

Putting the tumbler with her half-finished breakfast down on the table, she crossed the room to the closet. The computer had used raw materials, both fresh and recycled from other clothes, to create the outfit Jade requested. The scents of fresh dye and the polymer catalysts were still dissipating as Jade reached for them.

She decided to give the smells a moment to fade while she did her toilet. She brushed her teeth and flossed thoroughly, then gargled her mouthwash as well. Her hair merely required two minutes' brush-



ing with the special dryer attachment; the short cut Val gave her each month was designed for minimal care.

Her clothing was equally efficient. Breast bands built into the leotard were made of an elastic fabric designed to minimize both bruising in a fight and breakdown of tissues even during the most rigorous movement. The material of her tights allowed enough air circulation to prevent skin and other problems while still providing decent insulation from extreme temperatures. That these features also made the most of her sleek young figure was something Jade had told Val was an unimportant by-product. Over these basics she donned the clothes of a special breakaway design that couldn't be used to restrain her in a fight. After five minutes, Jade stepped out into the room once more. "Mirror, Val," she said.

The entire wall beside her became reflective, allowing her a full-length glimpse of herself. She looked her image over approvingly. Her hip-length long-sleeved silky shirt was lilac with subtle swirls of darker purples and had a deep wine collar that circled her neck softly, leaving plenty of room to breathe and turn her head quickly. The slacks were a deep purple verging into black, tucked into thigh-high boots of lavender leather.

The ensemble fit closely to her short, slender body without ever restricting her total freedom of movement. In her job, movement was everything. She didn't bother with makeup. There weren't any other humans around here to impress, and aliens didn't care whether her features were artificially en-

hanced. She had her clothes impregnated with a neutral scent that soothed most pheromone-sensitive races, and that was sufficient as perfume.

Her jet-black hair was shoulder-length, curling inward just at her neck and framing the Oriental face she'd inherited from her Japanese mother. She had brown eyes, a straight, thin nose—the only feature she'd really gotten from her father—and a sensuous mouth. She'd once taken pride in her beauty, but she no longer thought in those terms. Hers was an efficient face, and that was good enough for her.

Deciding that she looked acceptable for the day, Jade sat back down at the table to finish her breakfast. “Any mail or messages, Val?” she asked as she took another sip from the tumbler.

There was one letter, all the way from Earth, and it bore the letterhead of Verdugo and Lance Detective Agency. Jade immediately sat up straight and read it carefully, but it was simply their monthly report on the activities of Mastersergeant Jeffrey B. Barker. The subject had spent his month entirely at the training base in Java with a corps of carc trainees. There had been no unusual activities. Along with the report was their monthly bill for 250 eus.

Jade snorted. “Motherfuckers are bleeding me dry, and all they send me is garbage. What's my credit balance, Val?”

“Fifteen thousand, three hundred seventeen energy units.”

And rent was coming up next week, too, which meant another two hundred eus shot. This two-room detached house, with its gravity generator and dis-

tance from its neighbors, was the minimum she felt she could get away with—she needed the exercise room and the higher gravity to keep herself in shape—but she still felt guilty about the extravagance. She was tempted to write Verdugo and Lance and tell them to fuck off, but she knew she didn't dare. She had to keep tabs on Barker. She couldn't let him get away. In his position, he could disappear at any moment, and she might never be able to find him again. She couldn't let that happen.

“Pay their fucking bill, Val,” she sighed, knowing that and the rent would bring her well below fifteen thousand. She couldn't hire the kind of talent she'd need with that little money. No matter how hard she worked and how tightly she saved, the money mounted up so slowly. She'd never get what she needed working for Rix. What she needed was a few more jobs, a couple of big ones. But she couldn't go around creating them; they had to come to her, and she had to wait for them. It was very frustrating.

“There's also a message from the K'luune, Lorpet,” Val said.

“Maybe the slimy bastard has a job for me. His last few tips paid off. Play it, Val, while I try to hold down my breakfast.”

Lorpet's features appeared on the screen, looking like a mass of bubbling white jelly with a row of dark spots for eyes and sharp mandibles that clicked together to produce his speech. The computer translated his clicks for her.

“Greetings, worthy Jade Darcy. The humble Lorpet abases himself before your noble presence and begs your forgiveness for his intrusion into your pri-

vacy. Information has reached the attention of this unworthy one regarding the presence on Cablans of another member of your estimable race, just arrived today. Knowing this would be of interest to you, poor pitiful Lorpet hastens to contact you at your convenience to share his minuscule knowledge, and humbly awaits your decision to make an appointment. Once more, he entreats your forgiveness for presenting himself uninvited upon your notice.” Lorpet’s eyes blinked in a ritual pattern of farewell and the message faded from her screen.

Jade Darcy sat frozen in place, staring at the blank screen. Another Terran on Cablans! An animal panic, kin to her nightmare fear, paralyzed her as no physical opponent could have. She’d come all this way, to the farthest transfer station she could find, specifically to avoid other humans. For five years she’d remained alone of her kind—and now suddenly another one had shown up. What could this mean?

Shards of her nightmare flashed through her mind, and her hand twitched so badly she put her tumbler down to avoid spilling her breakfast. Closing her eyes, she performed the t’ai chi breathing discipline to restore her body and spirit to calmness. *There’s no evidence this person came for you*, she told herself sternly. *It could be a coincidence. You’re not the center of everyone else’s universe. Other people can come here for unrelated reasons.* This litany helped her stop the fight-or-flight reaction, but did little toward releasing the knot her stomach was tied in.

She looked at the small computer screen implanted in the back of her left hand and asked, “Time?”

The screen showed she had little more than an hour before she was due to start her shift at the ingesterie—not enough time to meet and deal with Lorpet. She'd have to set something up for after work. This was top priority.

“Send a message to Lorpet, Val, as follows: The unworthy Jade Darcy gratefully acknowledges the enlightening message of the most honorable and exalted Lorpet, and while she is too lowly to aspire to his level of wisdom, she begs his condescension to enlighten her further. She excuses the fact that her dreary...no, her dismal existence requires her presence at the ingesterie of Rix Kaf-Amur until 1700 hours, but she would be most honored to grovel before him at a place of his convenience at any time thereafter. End of message.” False humility was a power game to the K'luune. If she could outgrovel “poor, pitiful Lorpet”—one of the shrewdest data brokers on Cablans—perhaps she could knock his price down to something reasonable.

She went to her dresser and pulled out the accessories she'd need for the day. First was the u-trans, a small cylinder attached to a custom-molded earpiece. The curved cylinder fit around the back of her ear, making it nearly invisible. Without the u-trans she couldn't hope to make sense of the babel that surrounded her on Cablans. She rolled up her sleeves and strapped on her other accessories—two spring-loaded knife holders, one on the inside of each forearm. She tested them to make sure they were working, then rolled her sleeves down over them and tested them again. The proper muscle contractions in her arm would send the blade into her hand, ready

for action; but in the meantime the knives were out of the way and unobtrusive.

That was all the weaponry she carried. If trouble arose that she couldn't handle with her training, her computer-augmented reflexes, and two knives, it would be such a big problem that she'd have to call for assistance anyway. There was no sense overarming herself.

She looked at herself in the mirror one more time, straightened her hair, and made sure the knives didn't show. Jade Darcy was ready for work.

"Maintenance configuration, Val," she said as she strode to the door, which opened obediently for her.

Standing in the doorway was a frizzlic, a small four-legged animal less than half a meter long and standing as tall as the middle of her calf. Its brown fur, streaked and spotted with patches of gray, was short and bristly. It had a small face with a long pointed snout, a white triangular marking on its forehead, and small black eyes that seemed to be all pupil. Jade had never seen a hedgehog face to face, but she could easily imagine that the frizzlic was an alien cousin to the hedgehog.

"You again," she chided the frizzlic. "How many times have I told you not to come around here?"

The frizzlic merely made chirping sounds and rubbed its long snout against the door frame.

"You're supposed to be feral," Jade continued. "It says so right in my computer. I know some people make pets out of you, but you're supposed to take care of yourself in the wild. Why don't you do that instead of coming around here looking for handouts? It's not good to be domesticated. You get too depen-

dent on other people, and then when they betray you, you die.”

She looked at the screen on the back of her left hand and realized she had just enough time to get to work for the shift briefing. Her tumbler still had some of her breakfast left in the bottom—but her stomach was too queasy after Lorpet’s message to digest anything more. It would be a shame to let the stuff go to waste.

“Get me a bowl, Val,” she said. She placed the frizzlic on the ground away from the doorsill, then walked back inside and over to the wall slot, where Val had revealed a small bowl. The frizzlic followed her inside, adjusting to the higher gravity Jade kept inside her house, and trying to rub its eagerly wiggling snout against her boots. Pouring the remainder of her breakfast into the bowl, Jade strode back to the door and placed the bowl down outside, under the bushes that lined the walkway.

With a short, high-pitched squeal, the frizzlic stuck its head into the bowl, getting some of the liquid up its snout. It snorted and shook its head, then began lapping at the liquid with its little green tongue.

Jade watched it with a scornful expression. “Just don’t expect to make a habit of this, frizzlic. This is not going to be a regular relationship. The last thing in the universe I need is a fucking pet.”

She walked back into the apartment and tossed the empty tumbler into the recycle slot. Shaking her head at the silly sounds the frizzlic was making, she strode off to work. Had she realized she was humming, and a lullaby at that, she would have been

very annoyed with herself.



## **Chapter 2**

### **Rix's Place**

Jade made it to the ingererie with a few minutes to spare. She slipped in through the back door and descended the broad stairs to the employees' area. Nodding hello to the kitchen help, she walked through the aisles between tables loaded with enormous cooking vats and the fresh fruits and vegetables that were one of the luxuries which brought customers to Rix's place.

On her left was a table full of those obscenely knobby, fluorescent chartreuse slime-eggs, oozing inside their gelatinous skins. Jade always felt slightly nauseated just looking at them. As she passed the

next table, a Lemmant was unloading a shipment of pink dirda melons, and Jade frowned. Dirda melons meant two things. First, they were only transported by the Furgato sect of the Restaals, and the Furgatos always came to Rix's when they were on Cablans. Watching over them would be like dealing with a circusful of clowns.

Second, the only beings who really liked the dirda melons were the Palovoi, on whom they acted as both an intoxicant and an aphrodisiac. Since the melons had to be eaten quickly, Rix would be notifying his regular Palovoi customers of their availability right now, and they'd show up within a couple of hours—during Jade's shift.

She didn't relish the thought of facing drunken, lecherous Palovoi and thieving Furgatos when she was already on edge from Lorpet's call. Maybe she'd be lucky and the Furgatos and Palovoi would be in someone else's quadrant so she wouldn't have to worry about them. The way her luck was running this morning, though, she doubted it.

Passing through the kitchen, she came to the door of the security staff room, where the shift briefing would be held. She placed the back of her left hand against the security scanner so the door would recognize her computer's pattern, and waited for the familiar click as the door unlocked for her. When it came, the door slid open and she walked into the briefing room.

Even though she was on time, she was still the last to arrive. Her colleagues watched her as she strode across the room and settled on one of the soft, wide benches that were the universal seating ar-

rangement on Cablans, built to accommodate most kinds of alien anatomy. Jade smiled, nodded, and looked right back at them.

As usual there would be four arbiters on this shift, including herself. On the bench beside Jade's chosen spot was Hiss!arr, the only arbiter on the entire staff who was smaller than she was. The Purrchrp was covered in short golden fur with black markings on his face, and his long prehensile tail was wrapped around his waist, as usual when it was not in use. He seemed rather heavysset for his height, but Jade had seen him move and knew he was scarcely slower than she was, with perhaps a bit more strength. He had a squashed-in face and wore only a wide belt for modesty.

The two coworkers on the bench behind Jade were considerably bigger than she and Hiss!arr. Kokoti looked like an enormous fat beetle sitting up, using two of his limbs for walking and the other four for manipulation. His shell was an iridescent blue-green, wrapped in a gauzy material that was spun around him fresh each day by a tiny symbiote. His head was in constant motion, sweeping back and forth; it was a trait that always disquieted Jade, even though she knew Kokoti needed it to see depth and achieve peripheral vision.

Beside Kokoti was Cyclad Arik, another insectoid. With long, oddly jointed limbs sporting razor-sharp serrations, she resembled a giant praying mantis except that she had a hawklike beak strong enough to rend meat from bone. Physically she was the most imposing of the four, yet Jade knew she was actually the calmest and most easygoing of the

lot. Still, if Jade had to pick one other person to have at her back in a fight, she'd have chosen Cyclad Arik without hesitation.

Jade and her coworkers shared the job title of "arbiters," but Jade knew a more colloquial word for it: "bouncers." She and her colleagues were the security force for the *ingesterie*, one of the most wide-open public establishments on Cablans. Their task was to keep social frictions to a minimum and preserve the *ingesterie*'s reputation as a gathering place among the many varied species that came to Cablans. The arbiters themselves referred to their clique, only half in jest, as the *Ingesterie Diplomatic Corps*.

Disson Peng-Amur, pod brother of the owner, Rix, noted Jade's arrival. He resembled nothing so much as a big blue tree with three main roots, and a ring of tentacles that always seemed to be busy on a dozen things at once. When Jade was seated, he spoke in a loud, slow croaking voice that Jade's *u-trans* interpreted for her. "Since we're all here, even if it's a few minutes before the official shift start, I'll begin the briefing. Reservations for this shift are light so far. Hiss!arr, you'll of course have first quadrant." First quadrant contained most of the specialized environments, and Hiss!arr, with his short, lush fur, preferred that section because it was kept considerably cooler than the rest of the building. "Kokoti will have second quadrant today, Jade Darcy third, and Cyclad Arik fourth. So far, first and fourth look to be the busiest, but that's bound to change."

Disson next proceeded to discuss the reservations that had been made. Some of them were regular cus-

tomers, about whom little needed to be said; the arbiters were already well familiar with their customs and practices. Others, either individuals they saw less frequently or members of races they were less familiar with, required more discussion.

A thorough briefing always started with physical details: what members of that race looked like, whether they required a special environment, what they ate and drank, and whether they'd requested any special items like privacy walls or screens. Then there'd be a discussion of how they could be expected to behave: what they considered a threat, insult, or a compliment, how large a zone of privacy the average member had, what other races they were antagonistic or subservient to, and how they were normally affected by the intoxicants and drugs they usually ingested in public. Finally the most practical aspects would be discussed, how to deal with them in a fight: whether they were normally armed and with what weapons, whether they had any natural defenses such as stings, venoms, or shells, what their fighting posture was, what their vulnerable points were, and—most important—what their surrender signals were. It was a huge amount of information delivered in a shorthand code peculiar to these highly skilled professionals.

Jade Darcy listened attentively to the briefings on the patrons who'd be seated in her colleagues' areas, since it was always possible she'd be called on to back them up in a tight spot. She noticed that an old troublemaker had been scheduled for seating in the second quadrant. Jade had discovered an effective way of dealing with her last time she was in, but had

neglected to mention it in her report that day; she made a mental note to tell Kokoti about it before they went on shift.

When Disson came to describe the patrons who'd be placed in the third quadrant this shift, her worst fears proved justified: both the Furgatos *and* the Palovoi would be seated in her area. Jade braced herself. Neither group was especially dangerous under most circumstances, but they'd both be rambunctious in their own ways. She was good at handling both, but she'd have to be prepared for an active shift.

Then Disson added, "There will also be a triad of Commancors dining in Red 69 and 70, scheduled at 1400 hours. Do you need a briefing on them?"

Jade frowned again and took a deep breath. "I'm quite familiar with Commancors, thank you."

None of the other arbiters needed a briefing, either. The Commancors were one of the most aggressive races in the known galaxy. They'd fought with almost everyone at one time or another, and as a result had made themselves and their culture well known, if not well loved. Commancors were always trouble; if they weren't causing it themselves, they were attracting it.

The rest of the briefing was routine, but Jade was still fuming inwardly at the notion of Commancors in her quadrant as well as Furgatos and Palovoi. She didn't need trouble today, not on top of the nightmare and the nervousness Lorpet's news was causing. She realized she'd have to keep a close watch on herself as well as on the patrons, because she'd like nothing better than an excuse to wade into the Com-

mancor party with fists, feet, and knives. Still, the Commancors were patrons of the ingesterie, and as such deserved her respect and protection.

Disson closed the briefing with his usual admonition, “Be careful up there,” and the arbiters had a few minutes to relax before they were due to relieve their colleagues currently working the floor. Jade assumed a lotus position on the bench and performed some breathing exercises while the others talked among themselves.

Finally Cyclad Arik came over and knelt beside her. Although Jade knew intellectually that Cyclad Arik was a very mild and pleasant mantis, a slight trace of entomophobia combined with her enhanced reflexes to make her stiffen in expectation of a fight.

“My senses detected some agitation when you were apprised of the scheduled presence of the Commancors,” Cyclad Arik said as the u-trans rendered her high squeals into English.

“I don’t like Commancors,” Jade said simply.

“Nobody likes Commancors,” said Cyclad Arik. It was one of the bluntest and most unkind remarks Jade had ever heard this kind, polite creature make. The giant mantis continued, “But that information by itself would not have created the intensity of your reaction. You don’t like me either, but we function together without dissonance.”

Jade looked startled. “What makes you think I don’t like you?”

“I’ve seen your body flinch and shudder when I approach. I try not to make such approaches frequently, but this afternoon I was concerned there might be trouble on the floor if this matter isn’t dis-

cussed now.”

“It’s...it’s just an instinctive reaction,” Jade apologized. “There’s a very predatory insect on my home world, and you look like a giant version of it. Even though I know you’re a sensitive, intelligent creature, my instincts keep telling me to protect myself.” The very reflexes that made her such a good fighter also exaggerated her instinctive reactions to Cyclad Arik, and Jade had to be constantly on override whenever her coworker came within range. “I...admire you and respect you greatly,” she finished weakly.

Cyclad Arik tilted her head at a strange angle and clicked her beak a couple of times, a body expression Jade had never been fully able to interpret. “This still does not explain your reaction to the Commancors,” Cyclad Arik continued.

“It’s a personal matter,” Jade said, and even she could tell her voice was a little too loud.

“It ceases to be personal when we’re all upstairs working,” the other said. “Our lives may rest in one another’s hands. Surprises can be fatal. We must know as much as possible to prepare for all contingencies.”

Jade sighed. Cyclad Arik was right, of course, but trusting still came hard, even after all this time.

“My planet was overrun by the Commancors,” she said softly. “My father, brothers, and uncle all died fighting them. I swore then I’d get even—but right after I finished my army training, before I had the chance, the Greest ordered the Commancors to cede the planet to us and we weren’t at war with them anymore. I still feel some anger and frustration, but



I can handle those feelings once I know to expect them. I'll treat the Commancors like any other patrons."

"It's advantageous to know your sentiments on the matter," said Cyclad Arik, standing up again and turning to leave.

"Thank you for your concern," Jade said, so quietly it was barely more than a whisper. Cyclad Arik did not respond, and it was possible she didn't even hear Jade's comment.

Needing to shake off the emotional load that had just built up within her, Jade went over to where Kokoti was completing a discussion with Disson. As soon as was polite—etiquette being very important to the Kettcens—she said, "I heard you'll be having Marphle in your quadrant today. Would this be a convenient time to discuss something I found out about her?"

"Of course, my dear, any time for you," Kokoti replied. "I regret I have no refreshments to offer you right now. I do hope you'll forgive me."

Jade tried not to look directly into Kokoti's face as it moved from side to side; it tended to make her seasick. "Of course; I had no such expectations. At any rate, you were off duty the last time Marphle was here, and I had to handle a bit of unpleasantness involving her. During the scuffle"—and Jade felt that was a mild word for the brawl that erupted suddenly and caused three squares' worth of damage—"I noticed she always pulled her toes out of the way, even when it meant getting hit somewhere else. I ducked under all four arms and got close enough to stomp on her toes—and I told her I'd do it unless she

behaved herself. She skittered away and cried, so I moved right after her and repeated the threat. She put down the tables she'd been about to throw and we settled the matter peacefully. I really don't think I could have done much damage through those heavy boots she wears, but she seems to have a deep-rooted instinct to protect her feet at all costs."

"Absolutely inspired, my dear," Kokoti said. Jade had always wondered whether the u-trans programmer had, on some strange whim, deliberately made Kettcens sound like stuffy British colonels, or whether that was really the way their grammar worked. "Phelphums are bottom feeders. They evolved in tidal areas and spend all their childhood there, living off what their toes can find and their hands can club. They're naturally very careful about them. The toes also play a major role in their reproduction. Why, to injure them would impair her in pairing."

Kokoti began the high-pitched chirruping and head-bobbing that was laughter to his species. This attempt at an English pun, plus the up-and-down movement in addition to his normal side-to-side, was too much for Jade. She loudly pointed out she had to get ready for shift change, checked her gear, and walked away. Kokoti wouldn't be so bad, she thought, if only his species didn't think of multilingual puns as an art form—and if he weren't so wretched an artist.

A few minutes later it was time to begin work. Jade and the other arbiters left the quiet of the briefing room. They headed through the kitchen and up the wide stairs to the bedlam of the ingesterie itself.

Rix Kaf-Amur's *ingesterie* was the largest and best-known institution of its kind on Cablans. In a multiracial society that conducted most of its business over computer linkups, the *ingesterie* was one place where social intercourse was possible on a personal, very public basis. Even those races whose customs forbade eating and drinking in public often came to meet business contacts from other races. It was considered the socially proper thing to be seen at the *ingesterie* occasionally, and members of all races and social levels mingled there on equal terms.

Physically the *ingesterie* was laid out like the floor plan of some enormous department store—a vast expanse of floor broken into discrete areas whose boundaries could be rearranged to suit the necessities of the moment. For administrative purposes the floor was divided into four quadrants, and in the center, where they joined, were the serving stations where food was brought up from the kitchen for the servers to distribute among the clients.

Within each quadrant, the ground was marked off into basic square units roughly five meters on a side. If a patron required more room, one or more adjacent squares could be added to provide a dining area in the size and configuration desired. The first square was considered a basic part of the meal; each additional square cost the patron extra.

Within the squares, the furnishings were altered to fit the patron's anatomy and dining needs. That much was standard. Other services were available for a price. If the patron did not wish to be on display to the other diners, opaquing fields could be set up. If the patron wished, the closed-off section's environ-

ment could be almost totally controlled: atmospheric composition and pressure, temperature, sounds, smells, lights, colors, video illusions, and other requests could be specifically ordered, each for its own price.

Jade and her coworkers came out on the floor and relieved the previous shift of arbiters, who gave them a quick rundown on what had been happening. It had been a quiet shift, with no problems. Jade devoutly hoped her shift would be the same. Sometimes the ingesterie was the only neutral ground on which feuding races could meet in peace. It was the arbiters' job to keep it peaceful.

Jade Darcy stepped out onto the floor to begin her rounds. Looking up, she could see the glass wall of the control booth, where Rix Kaf-Amur spent virtually all his time. A tall blue tree like his pod brother, he kept the tentacles around his trunk in constant motion working the elaborate series of controls that made each dining area unique. A computer might have handled everything faster, but Rix contended his personal attention made everything the subtlest bit better.

The floor of the ingesterie was a cacophony of roars, bellows, clicks, whistles, squeaks, squeals, chirps, croaks, sighs, and miscellaneous other modes of communication, even though sound baffles had been used wherever possible. The smells of so many individuals from so many different races hung in the atmosphere and mixed with the savory and unsavory aromas of the foods they ate, despite the air purifiers' attempts to neutralize the odors. Since the ingesterie was open around the clock and was never

empty of patrons, the constant clashing of noises and smells lowered a metaphorical haze over the whole establishment. Even after all the time Jade had worked here, it hit her fresh at the start of each shift.

She walked the paths between the occupied dining areas with a casual gait, never hurried yet never dawdling. Her movements were graceful and precise. She always knew where her next step would be and what would be around her. As often as she could arrange it her back was to a wall or an empty dining area. Her eyes continually scanned the room, and she noticed details without appearing to stare at anyone. Occasionally she would nod or exchange pleasantries with a regular patron who greeted her, but most of the time she was a shadow presence unnoticed by the ingesterie's patrons.

Her biggest hassle during the first half of her shift was with the first wave of Furgatos, but they came and went with only the usual minor incidents of casual theft. They were friendly enough, but they didn't believe in honest trading—or in much of anything else, for that matter. All was illusion, according to their sect, particularly in matters of ownership. They stole what they wanted and freely expected others to steal from them in return. The results were seldom harmful in these controlled surroundings and occasionally amusing, since most people knew what to expect—but it did mean extra work for Jade, who had to keep picking the Furgatos' pockets to retrieve items they'd stolen from other ingesterie patrons.

This much was routine. The pocketpicking re-

quired a bit of dexterity, but Jade had enough practice that she scarcely had to think about it. Her mind had altogether too much time to dwell on the unpleasant implications of Lorpet's message. There was another human on Cablans. There was *another* human on Cablans.

The Palovoi, enticed by the dirda melons the Furgatos had brought, would arrive at 1400 hours, about the same time as the Commancors. While the Palovoi wouldn't be staying more than two hours, they'd be both intoxicated and insulting. They wouldn't hurt anything except the feelings of some inexperienced diner who took them seriously, but Jade would still have to be prepared for trouble. It would be best to be fed and refreshed before they arrived.

Through her hand computer she coordinated with the other arbiters so they'd know she was on her lunch break and would cover her quadrant in case of trouble. Then she went downstairs and stepped into a small service cubicle that was there for the benefit of the staff. Pressing the computer in the back of her left hand against the scanning plate, she identified herself so the cubicle would know who she was. After a brief moment of reflection, Jade asked the cubicle for steak, rice, green beans, and coffee. While she was waiting for the meal to be synthesized, she used her hand computer to call home. "Any messages, Val?" she asked.

"Just one—Lorpet replying to your message. Do you want the entire statement?"

Jade didn't feel like wading through more of the K'luune's disclaimers and false humility, even

though it would give her an idea of her bargaining position. “Just a summary, Val. I’ll take the full text later.”

“He asks you to meet him at Galentor’s gambling palace anytime after 1800 hours to discuss your business.”

Jade nodded absently. Galentor’s was a safe, neutral choice. “Call back and tell Lorpet that the unworthy Jade Darcy, who is so far beneath him that she dares not answer his invitation personally, acknowledges receipt of his far too generous request and humbly accedes to his wishes.”

After lunch Jade went back upstairs to the main level. As she walked along the southern edge of the room from the eastern portion of fourth quadrant to her own quadrant three, she signaled her coworkers via her computer that she was back on the floor and working. There was no immediate sign of Hiss!arr, but Cyclad Arik and Kokoti both made the horizontal crisscross motion with their manipulators that meant everything was going well. As she passed Rix’s glass booth high up in the south wall, he gave her a similar sign. This reassured her; nothing escaped Rix’s notice.

As she got halfway around her own quadrant she saw Hiss!arr emerging from one of the environment tanks in first quadrant. When he stepped out and shut the locking door behind him, he saw Jade and also gave her the “all clear” signal.

A brief silence followed by exaggerated noise caused Jade to look over the meter-high central serving station and see that the second wave of Furgatos had entered the ingesterie. Bab-ankh, the inges-

terie's greeter, was escorting them to their squares. Bab-ankh was a small ball of blue fluff with tiny hands and face on impossibly long stiltlike legs. He moved quickly, not letting the Furgatos dawdle near other squares, as he led them to a region near the back of third quadrant and under Rix's station, where they could be more closely watched. This also kept them away from the central serving stations and the servers' main paths; plates going past Furgatos didn't always arrive full at their destination.

Jade immediately changed her route to swing by the Furgatos' squares and was greeted by the top-ranking member of the group. Whoever had programmed the u-trans had decided that Furgato rankings were roughly equivalent to Earth's naval ranks; the leader of this group bore a title akin to executive officer. He'd been to the ingesterie many times before and had become an admirer of Jade's. He exchanged a few pleasantries with her now as she went around the party, greeting former patrons and being introduced to a couple of first-timers.

The patting, hugging, and elaborate handshaking appeared affectionate to any but practiced "dips." Actually, pockets were being picked, counterpicked, and repicked as Jade went around the table, but this activity ended when a young Furgato touched Jade's implant wrong and the computer in the back of her hand sent up an alarm. The startled youngster dropped the bauble he'd been taking from Jade, who'd just taken it from another Furgato, who had, in turn, taken it from one of the patrons he'd passed on the way to this square. With a quick motion Jade caught the object before it hit the floor as the other



Furgatos laughed at their comrade's mistake.

"Don't be ashamed, recruit," the Exec said through his chuckles. "She's bested me more than once. Jade Darcy, you've earned a kung'an."

"I'm honored indeed," Jade answered. These riddles were a form of education to the Furgatos, and the more sophisticated ones were shared with an acquaintance as humans might share a snifter of fine cognac. Jade was, in fact, quite relieved; a night when a kung'an was put out led to deep discussion and little trouble.

"This is a kung'an that was actually presented by a member of your own race." Jade tensed at those words until the Exec continued, "I believe it's some three thousand of your years old. It was in a book of kung'an the Greest gave us; our replies to them were his fee to let us transfer through here with our shipment of melons."

Even through the carefully neutral tones of the utrans the Exec's voice sounded exultant as he spoke the kung'an. "Listen: Two dragons fight over the lost pearl; which is victorious?"

"I'll give you my answer before you leave," Jade temporized. She noticed the Palovoi just being seated between the Furgatos and the serving station, and added, "But now I must see to those who'll be dining on your melons."

"Of course," the Exec said with excessive blinking. "Until then."

Jade bowed and started making her way to the Palovoi table, taking a small inventory along the way of the items she'd liberated from the Furgatos. Most of these she distributed back to their original

owners with the apologies of the management, and the owners—knowing the Furgatos’ reputation—accepted the situation. Jade ended up with one item left over—a small knife of the sort a Purrchrp usually carried behind his neck. She tapped a short message to Hiss!arr on her hand computer, but he replied quickly that his was still intact; this one must have come from some Purrchrp outside the ingererie. Jade decided she’d better keep an extra close eye on the Furgato Exec; it took both skill and nerve to steal a Purrchrp’s stash knife.

The Palovoi’s table and their saddle-shaped chairs had been placed in squares close to the serving station, because delays in second and later servings of dirda melons had been known to cause problems. The Palovoi themselves looked like deformed, bowlegged centaurs suffering from rickets. Their quadrupedal bodies were about half the length of a gymnast’s horse, with meter-long bowed legs whose feet pointed to the outside. From the rear came a two-meter long, bifurcated prehensile tail which, in such crowded places, was carried over a shoulder or wrapped around the “waist.” The trunks rose from the front of their bodies perhaps half a meter before their two long arms branched out.

The Palovoi’s two mouths and sensory organs seemed to be scattered at random on the smooth dome above the branching arms, but the creatures had full 360-degree vision and excellent directional hearing. They could see higher into the infrared than humans could but little past green in the other direction, which made their clothing color combinations seem strange to human eyes.

Their skin hung on them in deep folds, like that of a pampered bloodhound who'd recently lost weight. This disguised their sexual characteristics, except for the obvious beauty traits: Palovoi women were admired for the strength and size of their arms, men for their legs.

These Palovoi were old established customers of Rix's, a married party in the traditional grouping of two females and four males. Jade approached and politely inquired, "What ill wind blew you disgusting oafs in here? Is it just my bad luck, or do you want to ruin everyone's appetite?"

Migul, the dominant male, made an untranslatable sound with his left mouth, then said, "If we'd known you'd be here, tailless one, we'd have chosen another place to dine today. Anything's better than seeing you again." Migul's arms were on his back knees, a sign of battle-readiness—and respect.

Jade was about to reply when she noticed the Commancors enter the room. With that troublesome potential on hand she had little time to dally with boisterous but basically harmless Palovoi.

"I've got more important things to do than deal with scum like you," she told Migul. "I'll leave you in the hands of our inept server, who's still far better than you deserve."

"If you leave Rix's altogether we'll really have something to celebrate," Migul said in parting.

Bab-ankh escorted the Commancor triad to their dining area at his normal fluttery pace, which the Commancors, with their short, stubby legs, found hard to match. The Commancors were humanoid and, like most members of their race, were about

Jade's height and built in stocky proportion. They had blue-green skin, bulbous heads, and bulging eyes set wide apart. Their tiny hands, with eight clawed fingers each, were very dexterous and deadly. They were among the most ruthless and aggressive fighters in the galaxy—but from the green cloaks they were wearing and the way they were looking at one another, this was a mating triad. They'd come here simply to eat.

As the group walked through the paths to Red 69 and 70, many heads and eyes turned to watch them. Commancors were not widely liked, and they drew attention wherever they went. Those who didn't stare or glare at them made a studious effort to look in other directions and ignore them completely. But Jade could feel the atmosphere in the room change abruptly, no matter what Rix's gauges said.

There was one patron who reacted more intently than the rest. He was a Lemmant, a tall, reedy biped whose body was clothed in swirls of crimson with a gaudy plumed hat. His smooth skin was pale blue, almost white, which Jade had been told was a sign of youth in his race. He'd come into the ingesterie alone some time before the Commancors, and had seemed content to eat his solitary meal in silence. Jade had dismissed him as not being any potential threat—but the arrival of the Commancors spurred her to a quick reevaluation.

When the Commancors entered and walked to their area a few squares away from his own, the Lemmant stopped eating to stare at them for several minutes before turning back to his food. Jade wasn't familiar with Lemmants and couldn't read his facial

expressions, but the tensing of muscles throughout his body was unmistakable. He was preparing for some action.

“What are relations currently between Lemmant and Commancor?” Jade asked her hand computer.

The answer came back quickly. “The races are at peace with each other.”

Then it must be a personal motivation, Jade reasoned, to provoke such a reaction. She asked for information about Lemmant social interactions and was told that the race, which so far inhabited only their native planet, was organized into strong family and clan units. Their behavior was highly formalized, and they had a strong sense of personal and group honor.

Jade worried as she continued to make her rounds between the Furgatos, the Palovoi, and the Commancors, paying special attention to the young Lemmant. Pride and honor, she knew from experience, caused more trouble and provoked more fights than greed and lust.

She asked for anatomical information, and learned that the Lemmants came from a low-gravity world and found even Cablans’s point eight gees a little burdensome. That was comforting, since in a fight it would be harder for him to move than for her. The most vulnerable points seemed to be the leg joints, the soft midsection, and the neck. Jade filed the information in her mind as possibly useful.

Over the next half hour, nothing significant happened. The Furgatos stayed at their table quietly, discussing their kung’an. The Palovoi ate their dirda melons and became loud, but otherwise remained

manageable. The Lemmant kept staring at the Com-mancors' area and ordering drinks, but made no overt moves to leave his own square. The Comman-cors, oblivious to his attention, casually pulled apart the raw carcasses of their food and ate it off the bones as was their custom.

Jade patched her hand computer into the inges-terie's files. "The young Lemmant at Red 23 has been ingesting many fluids in the last half hour. What is the nature of those fluids?"

"Blue Hazard is considered a moderate intoxicant for his species."

"What's the Lemmant intoxication level?"

"Unknown; such data have not been entered into my registers."

Jade brooded for a few moments as she made her circuitous route around the floor of third quadrant. "Isn't there a Lemmant working in the kitchen?" she finally asked the computer. "I thought I saw one as I came in."

"Yes. She is Cord du Dassenji."

"Put her on the line for me, please." Jade's concern increased as the patron finished his current tankard, slammed it down on the tabletop, and called his server to bring him another.

A polite voice came through the speaker. "You wanted me, Arbiter Darcy?"

"Yes. I need some information. A young male Lemmant is here, and so far he's consumed three and a half liters of something called Blue Hazard. I need to know the effect of that much consumption in about half an hour."

"He would be zhockened—that is, very intoxicat-

ed,” Cord du Dassenji said with surprise. “That’s an awful lot of drink that fast.”

“What effects could it have on him?”

“It all depends on his mood and what happens around him. He could just fall asleep, or see things, or get into a fight.”

“Thank you, Cord du Dassenji,” Jade said, starting to sign off.

“Arbiter Darcy,” her informant said timidly.

“Yes?”

“That intoxicated, he could even do something...dishonorable.”

“Thank you for warning me. I’ll try to prevent that.”

She broke the connection with Cord du Dassenji and frowned. There’d be no way of knowing which way this particular patron would jump—though sleepiness did not appear likely. “Was the Lemmant armed when he came in?” she asked the ingesterie computer.

“Only a ceremonial dagger at his waist.”

“What about the Commancors at Red 69 and 70? Are they armed?”

“They brought no weapons with them.”

That, Jade knew, scarcely mattered. An unarmed Commancor was still likely to be more dangerous than a knife-wielding Lemmant. She took a brief moment to flash a message to her colleagues, describing the potential situation. They had to be ready to cover trouble in their own quadrants if anything erupted in Jade’s—and to back her up in case the problem evolved beyond her capacity to handle it.

The noise level at the Palovoi table rose abruptly,

and Jade started over there. The opening round of melons had been consumed and its effects were starting to show. The second round had been ordered, but, because the melons lost their effect very quickly after being exposed to air, they couldn't be prepared in advance. The time between consumption of the first round and delivery of the second was when trouble was most likely to occur. Despite their verbal aggressiveness—or perhaps because of it—the Palovoi seldom fought physically. When intoxicated, however, they were capable of major devastation—and the high price of the melons reflected this danger.

The Palovoi's tails were stroking their mates' bodies and braiding with one another in continually changing patterns. These melons must be from a potent harvest indeed; this behavior usually didn't start until the second round was half over.

The second round of melons arrived about the same time Jade did. Jade and the server were completely ignored as the sextet tore into the aphrodisiacs with their own knives. Jade started to breathe a little easier; the Palovoi would be pacified for a while now.

A gentle ciliated touch at the back of her neck caused Jade to whirl at full speed. Adrenalin pumped through her body and her right hand reached up in quick defense, even as her peripheral vision told her the touch was from the Furgato Exec. She caught his hand in a tight grip even as she controlled the rest of her reaction with an effort that taxed her to the limits.

“Arbiter Darcy,” the Exec began, unaware how



close he'd come to being killed. He gripped her hand as she let go of his. "My crew and I were wondering whether you'd care to discuss our kung'an at some length."

As Jade started to protest that she was too busy, the Exec continued smoothly, "Later, after shift, somewhere private?"

Jade then patiently explained that she didn't date customers. She had started to reclaim her hand from the complex caress of his two dozen cilia when a roar went up from the Palovoi table loud enough to cut through and silence the din in half the ingerterie. One of the melons had been very overripe. Jade pulled herself free with a hurried excuse and turned to the scene of the disturbance.

Migul was yelling at the server who'd brought the unsatisfactory melon. "You weak-armed excuse for a female! Get us some proper fruit now or the world will witness your fall from the trapeze!"

Much to Jade's relief, what passed for laughter was rippling through the group. They were noisier than usual, but just enjoying themselves. Talk at the other tables around them was just resuming normal levels when Migul spotted Jade.

"You're still here, I see, Arbiter Darcy," he said. "I'll bet you're as polite as that other human."

Jade's usual quick comeback was choked off as she realized what Migul had said. "What other human? Where...?" she began.

Across the room the Lemmant jumped up from his seat, so abruptly his hat was knocked from his head, and uttered some unintelligible battle cry. He pulled his knife—a mean-looking curved-bladed dag-

ger—from its scabbard and started charging across the empty squares between himself and the Commancor triad.

Questions about the new human on Cablans would have to wait. Jade instantly calculated the fastest possible route between the Palovoi table and the Commancors. She did not precisely run, but moved at a deceptively fast lope that covered the ground without the appearance of panic. If a square between herself and the Commancors was unoccupied, she cut through it; if there were patrons there, she took the path around. Even though she had a greater distance to travel, she arrived at the Commancors' area almost simultaneously with the Lemmant.

The Commancors had been involved with their own conversation and hadn't seen the Lemmant coming until he was almost upon them. They stood up quickly from their meal and spread themselves out within their area, presenting their foe with three separate targets. If he charged at any one of them, the other two would be quickly upon him.

Seeing this defense, the Lemmant hesitated. His drunken mind, while urging him to action, was inadequate to the task of planning tactical maneuvers. He stood unsteadily on his feet, anchored in place but waving his knife in a threatening manner.

Jade inserted herself into this formation, slipping directly between the Lemmant and the Commancors. This placed her back to the Commancors, which was not an enviable position—but all her attention had to be focused on the drunken Lemmant right now. She'd have to trust the Commancors were so startled

that they wouldn't be as treacherous as their reputations warranted.

Although she had the spring-loaded blades up her sleeves, Jade stood openhanded facing her potential opponent. Her legs were slightly apart with just the barest bend to the knees; her arms were out at her sides in an almost universal nonthreatening posture. The Lemmant was already on a hair trigger; she didn't want to do anything to set him off.

Jade's voice was quiet and even as she spoke to the Lemmant. "Is there anything I can help you with?"

"They are murderers!" the Lemmant shrieked in a very high voice. "I am going to kill them!"

"No you're not," Jade said, just as quietly as before but with firm conviction. "This is an ingesterie, not a slaughterhouse or a battlefield. People come here to eat, drink, and talk, not to kill."

"Let mudworm come," said one of the Commandors behind Jade. "We'll show him what is true fighting."

Jade ignored the comment and concentrated exclusively on the Lemmant. "If you have a problem, if you have a grievance," she continued, "you can talk it over with me. I'll listen to you. Just put your blade away."

"They are murderers, all of them," the Lemmant repeated, and slashed vigorously through the air with his knife to emphasize his point.

Jade put a firm override on her computer-augmented reflexes not to react to the gesture. Around her she could feel the ingesterie growing quiet as the other patrons turned to watch the drama. She hadn't

asked for the other arbiters' help, yet; with luck, she wouldn't need it, but she knew they were there. She hoped they were keeping watch on the Commancors behind her.

The Commancors continued their jeering, as though trying to urge the Lemmant on. Jade tried to make the Lemmant focus entirely on her voice, ignoring the others.

"You obviously have a complaint," she said. "I'll be happy to listen to it. But you have to put the knife away first. We can't talk while you're holding that. Put the knife away and we'll talk."

Jade was two steps away from him, out of arm's reach. With her speed and his drunkenness, she was confident she could close the gap and wrest the dagger from him if she needed to—but overt action was always the last recourse in her job. Decorum must be maintained.

The Lemmant's gaze wandered from Jade to the Commancors behind her, who were taunting him. With an incoherent scream he lurched a step to his left, toward the nearest Commancor. The other Commancors started to converge, and once again Jade physically interposed herself between the Lemmant and his enemies. She could feel the Commancors at her back, but she forced herself to stay calm.

She ended up a step closer to the Lemmant. His blade was within her reach—just as she was within range of its sharp edge. "You're a civilized being," she intoned. "You don't want to make a scene here."

"*They* are not civilized," the Lemmant said.

An idea occurred to Jade. "Does your family approve of brawling in public places?" she asked him.

“Think of the dishonor it would bring to your name and your clan if you were killed as a common drunkard. You don’t want that to happen, do you?”

A strange expression came over the Lemmant’s face, and for the first time he lowered his arm slightly. His muscles were still tensed, but he was wavering. “But they...”

“The Commancors’ behavior has no bearing on your personal honor,” Jade said. “If you have a grievance, you must deal with it in an honorable manner. This doesn’t become you. It’s not honorable.”

Jade watched with sharp eyes as his muscles began to loosen. Slowly and deliberately, making no sudden moves to alarm him, she reached up toward his knife hand. “You don’t want to disgrace yourself in front of all these people. You can stop now. Nothing irreparable has happened. We’ll talk, you’ll tell me what your problem is, then we’ll find an honorable way to deal with it. Trust me and no one will get hurt.”

Her hand finally reached his and started to close about his fist. He trembled as her skin touched his, and then suddenly all the tension went out of him. The dagger dropped from his hand and Jade caught the hilt in midair before it could reach the ground. The Lemmant slowly pulled in upon himself and sank to the floor, making loud gasping sounds. He was oblivious to the world around him, lost in his personal grief. He was no longer a threat to anyone.

Jade tucked the dagger into her belt and finally turned to face the Commancors. “The management apologizes for this unfortunate incident,” she said politely. “We’re relieved to see that no physical harm

has been done. You will, of course, not be charged for your meals.”

“We knew he’d collapse,” said one of the Commancors. “Lemmants always do.”

The tallest and most authoritative of the Commancors, obviously the primal of this triad, asked, “What will become of cowardly Lemmant?”

Jade looked down at the Lemmant, still huddled dejectedly in a small pile. “He’s obviously intoxicated,” she said. “He’ll be escorted from the premises back to his lodgings. When he sobers up and realizes his mistake, I’m sure he won’t bother you again.”

“Not sufficient,” the primal harrumphed. “This creature has threatened us, and may again. Our future safety demands strong action. In Dominion, he would be killed—but on Cablans, I expect at least Greest’s judgment.”

The Commancors had every right to make that demand, Jade knew, but she really didn’t want to go that far. Her rationale was that it would result in adverse publicity for the ingesterie—but deep down inside, her hatred for the Commancors made her unwilling to give them any satisfaction from this unfortunate encounter. Rix Kaf-Amur gave his arbiters broad discretionary powers to handle awkward situations—and what good were powers if they weren’t exercised now and then?

“I really don’t think such a drastic step is necessary,” she told the Commancor.

“You’re not person he threatened,” the other responded. “My mates and I are now safe, but nothing stops him from ambushing us in dark spot outside ingesterie. Cowardly Lemmants act thus. I demand

justice.”

“Is safety your only concern,” Jade asked, “or are you out to avenge your honor as well?”

Her question had the desired effect. “Let weakling Lemmants pule about honor,” the primal said. “We wish only to travel through Cablans in safety.”

“Not that solitary Lemmant is threat to Commancors in face-to-face combat,” he added hastily. “But such cowardly creature might use impersonal weapon to kill us from safe distance.”

“I understand,” Jade said. “And if I can ensure your safety on Cablans, will you then drop your demand for the Greest’s justice?”

She and the primal stared at each other across the dining area for several interminable seconds. Finally the Commancor said, “How do you propose that?”

Jade turned back to the Lemmant and knelt beside him. Taking his chin in her hand, she forced him to look up into her face. “Listen to me well,” she told him in stern tones. “You have violated both law and custom here, and the Commancors have a right to retribution. They’ve nobly agreed to drop charges against you if you guarantee their safety here on Cablans. You must give me your most solemn vow not to cause harm, either directly or indirectly, to any Commancors on Cablans.”

To a certain extent she’d been exaggerating when she claimed he’d broken the law—because there was no law on Cablans except the Greest’s wishes. Since no one could know from day to day, or even moment to moment, what the Greest would think of something, most people tended to be conservative in their

actions—but for all Jade knew, the Greest might decide to give this Lemmant a medal for his behavior here tonight.

Jade stared into the Lemmant's face, offering a silent prayer that he wasn't too drunk to realize she was trying to help him. At first the Lemmant looked back at her uncomprehendingly, but as she repeated her offer he began to nod. Pulling himself together, the Lemmant stood up slowly and turned to face the Commancors.

"I was wrong to attack you here," he said. "I will not cause harm, either directly or indirectly, to any Commancors on this world except in a matter of defending myself. This I do swear upon my honor, and upon the honor of my maternal uncle, and upon the honor of my clan." He looked unflinchingly into the eyes of the primal Commancor.

Jade rose to stand beside him. "If you know anything about Lemmants," she told the primal, "you'll know how serious his word is. Your safety is assured; he'd sooner die than hurt you or any of your race on Cablans. Will you now agree to let him go without facing the Greest?"

The primal Commancor did not want to give in, but in the face of Jade's gentle insistence he could not find a reasonable alternative. "Very well, cowardly creature may go," he said sneeringly. "He's getting better than he deserves—but it's hard to sink low enough to give Lemmant what he truly deserves. Remove him from my sight before is ruined remainder of my appetite."

After bowing to the Commancor, Jade hastened to comply. Taking the Lemmant by the arm, she led



him gently but firmly past his table to retrieve his hat, then to the front entryway. The alien's steps were slow and wobbly, but he was in enough control that she didn't have to support him. Around her she could feel the tension in the air slowly ebbing as the other patrons realized the problem had been solved. Jade caught the attention of the other arbiters and nodded to let them know she had the situation well under control. It was then she noticed the too-casual return of the Furgatos to their table. They were stashing their weapons, not stolen baubles. Obviously they'd been prepared to come to her aid. This was atypical behavior, but Jade had no time to puzzle it out just now.

When she reached the entryway she discharged her prisoner into Bab-ankh's care. "See that he reaches his lodgings safely," she said. "Charge the Commancors' meal to his account and put his name on list four."

"Not five?" Bab-ankh asked, surprised. List four was for those people who could be readmitted to the ingesterie but kept under close scrutiny; list five was for those permanently barred until further notice.

"He's no fighter," Jade said, shaking her head. "He's under some strain, but if we keep an eye on him we can probably control it. It'd be a shame to lose his business completely."

She took the Lemmant's ceremonial dagger from the waistband of her slacks and handed it to the greeter, taking a close look at it for the first time. It was a beautiful blade, longer than her forearm, with a sharp edge and a hilt made of some material like gray ivory, engraved and set with jewels.

“Keep this here and let him know he can have it when he sobers up tomorrow. I’m sure he’ll want it back; it’s too good a blade to lose.”

Her duty done here, she returned to her rounds in the ingesterie. Though her movements were as graceful as ever, she was emotionally a wreck. *I didn’t need this*, she thought. *Not today. Let’s just hope it’s not an omen of bad news yet to come.*

Jade made the horizontal “all clear” sweep with her hands to signal her colleagues. Hiss!arr and Kokoti were already back at their rounds. Cyclad Arik, though, tilted her head back until her eyes weren’t visible to Jade and spread her arms wide apart—the equivalent of a human’s bow to a job well done. Jade was just as glad the mantisoid couldn’t see her blush at the accolade.

Bringing herself back to reality, she started toward the Palovoi table to ask them about the “other human” Migul had mentioned—but it was too late. The Palovoi had risen from their rind-littered table and were staggering carefully toward the door. They were far too incoherent to make any sense out of—so intoxicated and aroused, in fact, that they were screaming about the utter lack of trapeze sets and trampolines a civilized establishment should have.

“Without privacy and proper equipment,” one female yelled as she was helped out the door, “how could any civilized race enjoy the fruit properly?”

While this provided an interesting glimpse into the basically unknown sex life of the Palovoi, it frustrated Jade no end that she’d now have to wait for her meeting with Lorpet to get any real information about this development. She was also upset that the

alien Palovoi should know about this other human before she did.

The Commancors seemed settled back to the rest of their meal, and Jade was just starting to relax when she saw the Exec headed her way, intent on an answer to his kung'an. Pretending not to see him, Jade walked briskly in another direction, meanwhile placing a discreet call home to Val.

As she'd hoped, her home computer's encyclopedic file had a number of replies to this classic riddle. Jade was too mentally exhausted to come up with an original one, so she memorized an old answer and hoped it would satisfy the Exec. Meanwhile she prayed that the last two hours of her shift—which had been average except for the Lemmant and the Commancors—would go smoothly. She had to be calm later when she met Lorpet and learned what he had to tell her about this other human who'd come to Cablans.