

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!

Herds

Caravan

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Galactic Collapse

The Rehumanization of Jade Darcy

Book 2

Jade Darcy
and the
Zen Pirates

Stephen Goldin
and
Mary Mason

Parsina
PRESS


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This book is dedicated to the people
who most shaped Mary's life:

Betty Jo Mason, her mother
Billie Mansfield, her grandmother
Walt Mansfield, her grandfather
Joe Mason, her father

Chapter 1

A Minor Disturbance

It wasn't until the Phelphum threw the mantisoid arbiter Cyclad Arik into the Purrchrps that Jade Darcy thought there was any real problem.

Cyclad Arik, Jade's coworker, could usually handle anything up to and including a Commancor colonial army. But even the nearly two-meter tall praying mantis was an insignificant burden to a Phelphum's large, strong arms—and since arbiters at Rix's weren't supposed to injure even violent customers if they could help it, Cyclad quickly found herself flying into the celebrating Purrchrps three tables over from the original little fight between the two Phelphums.

Jade leaped into action even before she saw that the Purrchrps were going to catch Cyclad safely. She

had two full sectors to travel, but the outbreak of fighting had put her on alert, and the launching of Cyclad set her in motion.

Her own sector was quiet, giving her the freedom to intervene on her comrade's behalf. Bounding across the floor of the ingesterie, weaving her way around and between the occupied tables, she headed toward the battling behemoths. Each Phelphum was the size of a small Quonset hut, but Jade had no intention of fighting them hand-to-hand. As she neared the battle scene, she bent over and picked up a chairback they'd broken off earlier. With a speed and accuracy seldom seen in humans, she threw it with full force onto the nearest Phelphum's foot.

The creature let loose a scream that rattled the crockery, and began running toward the door with a slithery limp. The other turned toward Jade and raised its arms to club her; Jade, who had continued running after her throw, leaped and landed with both boots on one of the wide, rootlike feet of the Phelphum. She slid off the rounded appendage and somersaulted quickly away to avoid the massive arms that could have turned her to pinkish jelly on the floor. She rolled to her feet as smoothly as though on strings, braced for the next attack.

Facing her was a weeping customer—or at least the Phelphum equivalent, which was a bent and swaying one. Putting all her willpower into controlling her heart rate and temper, Jade asked for and received the creature's parole.

"You don't fight fair," the u-trans interpreted the Phelphum's whimper. "You attacked my...my...appendage! Such dastardly conduct should be con-

demned by all civilized beings.”

Jade turned to look at the devastation around her. For all its fancy decor and high prices, Rix Kaf-Amur’s ingesterie was, in actuality, little more than a glorified bar and grill. Open around the clock and catering to all known races, it was the preferred place for public meetings and meals. Usually at this hour it was half full or better with every kind of walking, flying, slithering and hopping alien to be found in the settled galaxy. Everyone, as the saying went, came to Rix’s. Right now, thanks to this fight, nearly a third of the patrons had fled, and the rest were clustered at the far side of the hall, squawking, whistling, and otherwise commenting on the brawl that had broken tables as far as twenty meters away. Three patrons, besides the combatants, were claiming injuries, and the physical damage to the place would have cost months of Jade’s salary. It would take an hour to get everything back to normal, if they were lucky... and *Jade* was supposed to feel ashamed. She opened her mouth to give the alien a piece of her mind, and diplomacy be damned, when the other Phelphum re entered the area.

The Phelphum whose feet Jade had leaped on turned to the other one it had been intent on killing just seconds earlier. “Darling, it hurt my foot. It really did!” was how Jade’s u-trans conveyed the creature’s howl.

“Dearest, how dare it! I’ll make it right, I’ll do something, I’ll—”

“May I be of assistance?” A Daimeitroo approached the Phelphum, holding out the little computer—the equivalent of a business card—that

would feed its information into the Phelphum's implanted computer. The Phelphum straightened up to its full height—a sign of self-confidence in its race—and held out one of its club like hands to receive the information.

Jade groaned at the sight of the two-meter-tall beaver with the six limbs. A race of lawyers, the Daimeitroo never fought—they just sued people. Lots of people. All the time. Muttering about venues, contingency fees, and liabilities, the beaver swept her new clients from the hall.

Jade looked up toward her boss. Rix Kaf-Amur, the big blue tree who owned and ran this establishment, was watching as he always did from the glass-walled booth high in the center of the southern wall. Jade spread her arms in an apologetic gesture and bowed deeply. When she looked up again, Rix was making the scissor motion with two of his tentacles, signaling all was fine. Then he returned the tentacles to his control board, directing the robots and automatic systems to help clean up the mess.

“Jade, it was most enlightening to view the expedient manner in which you disabled my opponents,” said Cyclad Arik as she came back from the Purrchrps’ table to stand next to Jade. “Such gracious and skilled professionalism is your hallmark.”

“Thanks. It was no more than you do for me.”

The two arbiters—or, as Jade privately thought of herself and her colleagues, bouncers—set about making the place presentable again. They reassured customers, helped them return to their tables, and felt the evening was finally under control when they heard the crackle of an energy gun being fired. They

both hit the floor simultaneously.

“What the fuck is that?” hollered Jade, rolling to look at Rix. The ingesterie’s owner pointed with one tentacle toward the first quadrant.

The ingesterie was divided into four sections around the central dumbwaiter system that brought food up from the basement kitchens. Sector One held the special environment tanks to accommodate those patrons who needed atmospheres, temperatures, gravities, and so forth that differed from the standard. In some ways, Sector One was easiest to patrol; beings who knew how fragile their life-preserving environment was seldom made much trouble. On the other hand, when trouble did break out there, it was much harder to diagnose and handle.

Such was the case now. A large number of tanks were scattered about the floor of Sector One, obscuring events from Jade’s view. Even Rix, from his high vantage point, had trouble seeing exactly what was going on. There was a new trainee handling the arbiter assignment for the sector, and the other three were supposed to be backing her up—but with the excitement caused by the Phelphums, Jade and Cyclad had neglected that region. Even so, Kokoti should have been in place to help the newcomer. Where was *he*?

Jade and Cyclad Arik had worked together long enough to develop an instinctive partnership. Without a word spoken, they split up, Cyclad going left and Jade right. They would circle around the tanks, coming to the disturbance from opposite directions. With any luck, the trainee would handle it and it would all be over by the time they got there. But

Jade had long ago given up believing in luck—at least in the good variety.

Crouching low to reduce her target area, she raced between the tables, where patrons who had just been reseated were beginning to panic again. In other circumstances, Jade would have plotted a straighter course through some empty dining areas, but with guns involved, she preferred to use the cover and take just a few seconds longer.

Out of the corner of her eye she saw Kokoti still rooted in Sector Three, and she suddenly remembered why he wasn't moving to help the trainee. The Overlady of Memdisen was dining in his sector, and right now his prime responsibility was to keep her safe. That was why he hadn't come to Jade's aid with the Phelphums, either. A fight somewhere else could merely be a diversion to leave the Overlady unprotected. Knowing Kokoti and his sensitivities, he probably felt guilty that he wasn't helping his comrades—but he was doing exactly what he had to do. Orders were orders.

After some darting from table to table, Jade finally arrived in a position to see the back area of Sector One. The fight was not coming from one of the tanks, but from a mixed group that had been seated behind them. Sector One was not exclusively for those with specialized environments. Sometimes Rix assigned people there when the rest of the house was full, and sometimes people requested seating there—usually the gawkers, hoping to catch a glimpse of something exotic in one of the tanks.

Whatever the reason, a group of three Bissahks, two Fallintu, and two Murzhaw had been seated

there today, and they had started to fight among themselves. Jade didn't know whether the three races were all at peace with one another or whether this fight had some personal basis to it, and there was no time to ask the ingesterie's computer for background information. She had to wade in and hope for the best.

The Bissahks were the most imposing, well over two meters tall, four-limbed, and green from a symbiotic moss that grew all over their skins. They tended to be slow and ungainly, and Jade had never seen one who could fight worth a damn. She dismissed them as being but a small part of the problem confronting her. The day she couldn't handle three Bissahks was the day she'd better get out of this business, fast.

The Fallintu were another matter entirely. They were just slightly taller than Jade, but theirs was a race of warriors, and most of them learned to fight before they learned to walk. Unlike the Commandors, however, they had no talent for colonial administration; that was perhaps the one thing that kept them from becoming the scourge of the galaxy. They captured and then lost worlds with such astonishing regularity that humans were calling them the new Germans. That did not stop individuals, however, from being dangerous.

The Murzhaw were tiny creatures smaller even than human dwarves. A Murzhaw's head comprised almost half his height, and he had a thick, stocky body to support the head. The average Murzhaw was not fast, not strong, not agile, and not a trained fighter.

But one of these Murzhaw was wielding a Lebbin 520. A Murzhaw with a pistol was as dangerous as anyone else.

Jade looked quickly for any signs of B'k'rol, the trainee who was supposed to be watching this section. After a moment she spotted her lying prone beneath a busted bench. At first Jade thought the rookie might be dead, but then she saw her move slightly. Alive or dead, though, she was obviously in no shape to help Jade and Cyclad.

Cyclad's route to the trouble spot was shorter, and she could take larger strides than Jade, so she made it to the fracas several seconds earlier. The sight of Cyclad bearing down must have intimidated the Murzhaw, which Jade could well understand, for the creature aimed the Lebbin and fired, but slowly enough that Cyclad had a chance to leap aside and take cover behind a table. The maneuver allowed Jade to get a few meters closer to the Murzhaw without being spotted. Every step was an advantage.

Jade's attention was focused, had to be focused, on the barrel of the Lebbin. She couldn't let it be pointed either at her or at any of the special environment tanks—although Rix was even now raising the airtight isolation walls around the squares containing the tanks. Still, her peripheral vision caught a motion coming from her right, and the special computer in her spine analyzed the threat and took action even before her conscious mind could interpret it.

The Bissahk who'd been about to step in front of her and deliver a clumsy roundhouse punch found himself yanked off his feet as Jade grabbed the arm

he'd started to swing. She took advantage of her opponent's momentum and tossed him out of her way. The alien went crashing into an empty table to the left, and lay dazed on the floor, no longer much of a threat.

This brief action caught the Murzhaw's eye and he turned in the direction of his Bissahk tablemate—but did not instinctively fire, a good sign. Jade saw that he was holding the Lebbin awkwardly; the pistol had not been made with a Murzhaw's tiny hands in mind. Things might not be quite so hopeless after all.

Jade spun on her right foot to use up the added momentum she'd gotten from the Bissahk, only to come face to face with one of the Fallintu in a crouched battle stance, snarling and ready for a fight. Jade feinted to her left, and the alien was just intoxicated enough to be fooled. As the Fallinton lunged toward where it thought Jade would be, Jade's right arm lashed out and grabbed its leg, yanking it off balance. The Fallinton's arms flailed wildly and it fell to the ground. Jade leaped over it—then had to dive for cover once again as the Murzhaw whirled to point the Lebbin at her again.

But the pistol wasn't pointed at her for long. On the Murzhaw's other side, Cyclad Arik had gotten back to her feet and was advancing once more, only to confront the remaining two Bissahks and the other Fallinton. Individually, she could have disposed of either threat quickly—but both simultaneously took a bit of her concentration.

The instant the Murzhaw with the gun turned in Cyclad's direction, Jade vaulted over the table she'd

hidden behind. There was now nothing but open ground between herself and her objective—but as she started her run across no man’s land, her peripheral vision again caught the blur of the other Murzhaw moving to intercept her. At the same time, the Murzhaw with the gun realized that Cyclad was otherwise occupied for a second and whirled back in Jade’s direction.

Instinctively, Jade grabbed the other Murzhaw and held it in front of her. The creature struggled, but even a small human like Jade was stronger than it was—and as soon as it saw the Lebbin pointed straight at it, the Murzhaw held very still indeed.

“You can kill me if you want,” Jade said, “but you’ll have to kill your friend, too.”

Jade stared at the Murzhaw, her heart banging full speed in her chest. People who weren’t trained killers normally had a psychological barrier against random killing of their own race. Of course, there was always the chance that the Murzhaw she held was the sworn blood enemy of the one with the gun, who would be only too happy to kill them both. Jade had the spring-loaded knives, as usual, up her sleeves; if the Murzhaw did shoot, and his aim wasn’t perfect, he would be dead an instant later.

But, as she’d hoped, the Murzhaw didn’t shoot. His gun hand was shaking as he said, “I don’t want to kill you. I don’t want to kill anyone. But they were ganging up on me, and I had to defend myself.”

“‘They’?”

“The Fallintu and the Bissahks. They said I wouldn’t pay off my bet, and wouldn’t give me time to transfer assets.”

Gamblers! Jade thought with disgust. *I never saw one yet worth his weight in Debanigan scrip.* But her voice was carefully controlled as she said, “No one’s ganging up on you now. The fight’s over. If you shoot now, it’s murder, not self-defense.”

“But what can I do?”

“Well, if you keep on the way you’re going, one or the other of us will end up dead. I don’t find that appealing. If you drop the gun, we’ll both live. I don’t promise more than that, but it’s a hell of a lot better than the alternative.”

The Murzhaw paused to consider that for one long, heart-stopping moment, then said suddenly, “You’re right.” He dropped the Lebbin, and it was caught just before it reached the ground by Cyclad Arik, who’d been cautiously approaching the Murzhaw from behind while Jade was talking to him. Jade pushed away the Murzhaw she’d been holding, and just as quickly as that, the crisis was over.

Jade and Cyclad rounded up the miscreants and got their ID codes so they could be charged for the damages they’d caused. Then Cyclad went to tend to the trainee, B’k’rol, while Jade escorted the offending parties out of the ingesterie.

Now that the heat of the moment had cooled, the combatants were a little embarrassed about the fuss they’d caused. “In truth, Jade Darcy,” said one contrite Bissahk as they walked to the door, “you were partly to blame for starting the fight.”

“Me?” Jade exclaimed. “I’ve never seen or spoken to any of you in my life, and I was clear across the room—”

“When the Phelphum fight broke out, we made a bet. Knowing Phelphums, the Murzhaw thought you could not quell the disturbance in under five minutes. The rest of us, who have seen you fight at Galentor’s and work here, knew you would settle the matter in less time.”

Jade stopped dead, dumbfounded. “Of all the shitheaded, fartbrained things I ever heard of, that is by far the lamest. Look, don’t you have anything better to do with your money than gamble it on me?”

“You never objected to people gambling on you when you fought at Galentor’s.”

“But that’s different, that’s... that’s an *event*, not a riot.”

“Isn’t a riot also an event?”

“Just get the fuck out of my sight,” Jade said, shooing them the rest of the way out the door.

She stood watching the door close behind them, her fists clenched in rage. “I hate all gamblers,” she muttered.

Bab-ankh, the fluffy ball of blue feathers on stilt-like legs who served as the ingesterie’s greeter, came up behind her. “But when you held that Murzhaw up in front of you, weren’t you gambling that the other one wouldn’t shoot?”

“That wasn’t gambling, that was a calculated risk,” Jade said. Then, turning to Bab-ankh, she continued, “And speaking of that, why the hell didn’t you warn us they were armed? You’re supposed to let us know—”

“They had no gun when they came in. I scanned them thoroughly.”

“Then where the fuck did the Lebbin come from?”

I know it's not on the menu."

"The gun was mine, Jade Darcy."

Jade whirled to face B'k'rol, who was leaning shakily against Cyclad Arik. The trainee was taller than Jade, but so were all the other arbiters except Hiss!arr. B'k'rol was a Lotht; her massive barrel chest sported two pairs of strong arms and rested on surprisingly slender hips and legs.

"What were you doing on the floor with a gun?" Jade demanded.

"I thought I might need it."

Jade's temper hit the explosion point. "If you don't fucking trust yourself, at least you should trust us. I won't work with anyone who has no faith in herself or me." She turned and stomped off the floor.

Jade practically flew down the steps to the security briefing room. She waited impatiently for the door to slide, wishing she could slam it open dramatically, and the instant the gap was wide enough she stormed inside to confront Disson Peng-Amur, head of the ingesterie's security and podbrother to its owner.

The big blue tree trunk spotted Jade with its multiple eyes and waved some of its tentacles in acknowledgment. "Rix has told me about the difficulty upstairs—"

"Did he also tell you B'k'rol supplied the almost murder weapon?"

"That is news to me—"

"I'm glad to hear it, because if you'd known about the gun and hadn't told us, I'd be out that door before you could photosynthesize."

"You are a valued employee, Jade Darcy," Disson

said, waving his tentacles in some agitation. “We don’t wish to lose you.”

“Well, I’m not working a shift with that punk again. She brought a gun out on the floor, which is stupid. She didn’t tell her colleagues, which is criminally stupid. And she let a customer take it away from her, which is... is...” She waved her arms in exasperation, giving an unintended parody of Disson’s tentacles. “There are no words for how stupid that is. Even the sergeant couldn’t have described how stupid that is.”

And Jade left the room before Disson could reply.

Still furious, Jade entered the locker room and headed toward the med cabinet to bandage herself as quickly as possible. That was when she spied Rortig, her relief. A quick glance at the back of her hand showed that not only was her shift over, it had been for half an hour.

Shit, I’ve even been doing this on my own time, she thought. She opened the channel to Disson. “I’m heading straight home. I’ll fix the log later.”

“Of course, Miss Darcy. Don’t concern yourself with the log. You can handle that from home. Enjoy your time away from here.”

Jade stomped back up the steps. Though normally she left by the back door, tonight she was in a black, perverse mood and decided to leave through the front.

“How couldn’t I enjoy it?” she muttered as she walked. “I only wish I had more than one day off before I had to face this madhouse.”

“Is there anything I can help with?” asked Babankh, still apologetic even though the appearance of

the gun had not been his fault.

“Never mind, just talking to myself,” said Jade as she hailed a cab, a rare indulgence for her.

“Why do that? Don’t you know what you are going to say?”

Jade tried to make her mind work well enough to answer the question, but pain and fatigue had taken their toll. She just climbed in the cab, programmed it for home, and tried not to think of the job.

CHAPTER 2

A Mercenary's Vacation

The cab dropped Jade off at the entrance to her residential compound. She took off her blouse and her equipment belt as she walked down the well lit sylvan path toward the door; the heavy, humid, 32C air made any clothing feel like too much, and the unitard she wore in lieu of more feminine underwear provided all the covering her minuscule modesty demanded.

The path wound around the rim of two other buildings before it branched off to hers. Jade had chosen this complex because of its vehicle restrictions and treelike-plant privacy screens. Once in her bungalow she couldn't see her neighbors, and vice versa. With only emergency traffic allowed into the complex—and not even those could get closer than fifteen meters to her place—it was as secure as any

urban dwelling could be.

When her feet crossed the tiny green bar of light that marked the start of her personal privacy screen, Jade lifted her hand to the small box on the gatepost so her ID could be registered and the alarms deactivated. The light flashed twice, and Jade walked through. As she got to her door she saw that Pain-In-The-Ass had already been fed.

Pain-In-The-Ass was a frizzlic, a native animal of Cablans that resembled a piebald hedgehog. This one had adopted Jade three years earlier, and earned its name on a regular basis. As Jade approached, Pita stopped pushing his dish around the front porch in a futile search for more food in its clean bottom and skittered over to Jade, making clicking noises on the flagstones with its tiny claws.

“Well, I see you’re in good shape. Megan must be over, right? Anyone might try to break into my place, but only Megan would bother to feed you.” Jade picked up the little beast who was nuzzling her ankles and carried it in. Megan Cafferty was waiting inside as Jade expected.

Megan Cafferty—an extremely wealthy woman, the former head of, and now field representative for, Cafferty Technologies—was the only other Terran on Cablans, and godmother to Pita. She was also the source of many of Jade’s more lucrative assignments. They had met when Megan first came to Cablans and hired Jade for a tough piece of negotiating. It had been successful enough that Megan had stayed on Cablans and continued to hire Jade whenever possible. She was the closest thing Jade had to a friend, and one of only two beings allowed in Jade’s

house when she wasn't present.

Jade hit the palmlock and started to announce herself as the door slid open, but gave it up as a lost cause. They were at it again.

Megan was an amateur operatic soprano, and Val—Jade's computer—had any vocal range desired. Jade had walked in on Megan singing "Bess, You Is My Woman Now" with the computer. She stood unobserved in the doorway, enjoying the blast of cool air and the look on Megan's face.

Megan's face was rapturous as she stood, her luminous white hair forming a halo about her, tendrils curled in the humid air, her eyes closed as she inhaled deeply waiting for her cue. She threw her head up and came in solid and clear with the line "Porgy, I'se your woman now," taking the killer high first notes with the strength of a young castrato. Pita wiggled out of Jade's arms, dropped to the floor, and strode over to curl up on Megan's toes. Megan's smile broadened as she glanced at the animal, then her eyes flew the rest of the way open as she finally spotted Jade. She looked Jade over in critical appraisal.

"That will be all, Val," said Megan, and the computer cut off in midnote. "Jade, you're late and injured. What happened this time?" Megan led the way to the bathroom and the first-aid supplies.

"Just the usual. What did I tell you about corrupting my computer like that? Next thing I know, I'll get La Boheme as a wake-up call. Val, start the water."

Jade pulled off her clothes and stepped into the shower while Megan laid out the dressings and ointments. As per standing instructions the shower was

already running and at Jade's preferred temperature when she got in.

"Ouch, damn it!" Jade yelled as the spray hit the abrasions and bruises she'd gotten that evening.

"What was it, Palovoi or Commancors?" asked Megan after a couple of minutes, her trained voice carrying easily over the noise of the running water.

"Phel-fucking-phums. Just a little marital squabble that did a good thousand eus in damage. And as if that wasn't bad enough, some assholes decided to bet on the fight, then welsh on the bets 'cause I broke the fight up, and started a regular riot with an energy weapon the new bouncer—the arbiter, no less, brought in. A Lebbin 520. Fucking idiot." Jade gurgled as she spoke into the running water while she quickly, efficiently finished her shower.

She stepped out of the enclosure and walked over to where Megan was waiting for her. She didn't wait for the warm air cycle to dry her off, reaching instead for the large fluffy towels Val presented her by opening a cupboard and sliding out the shelf they rested on.

Jade's feather-cut hair was a skullcap dripping pearls on her face before she attacked it with the smaller towel that had topped the stack. Bent over as she was, the towel covered most of her body from Megan's view until she threw the damp thing into the lower cupboard and straightened up to take the next one from the stack.

Megan took a moment to eye Jade wistfully, wishing *she'd* ever looked so perfect. The soft, clear light made Jade's body glow golden tan as she efficiently dried off. Jade Darcy was of slightly less than

average height for a human woman, but that was the only thing ordinary about her. Her body was muscular from many hours of intense workouts. Each motion revealed muscle definition that was sleek and balanced. A powerful gymnast or swimmer would look much the same, but few took the time to develop the entire body the way Jade had. Still, there was a womanly grace about her. No steroids or punishing weightlifting had distorted this form to the so-called body-builders' parody of humanness, but neither did she have the skinny smoothness of a model who had starved her way to a sleek figure. The resulting appearance was sexy, powerful, feminine—and totally inconsequential to Jade. Her body was as strong, fast, and powerful as she could make it; that, not beauty or sexiness, was her goal.

Megan had often seen Jade undressed in the last year. One of the skills Megan had acquired in her “checkered past” was that of masseuse—not the slapdash skills of a disguised prostitute, but the intricate training of a medical physical therapist. Once Jade had known her long enough to have some trust in her, Megan was often called on to pound, pummel, and coax the strains and pain of Jade’s work out of her. While Megan had originally asked for tonight’s meeting to discuss a contract negotiation trip coming up, one look at Jade’s battered body put that second on the list.

Jade sat down on the chair next to Megan and started to reach for the bandages.

“Stop that! That’s my job, and I’ll thank you to leave it to me,” Megan said with a motherly tone.

“I can get some of them myself,” Jade said in an

obviously token protest as she dropped her hand and leaned forward so Megan could reach the eight centimeter square scrape on her lumbar region.

“I’d like to see you bandage this one. I know you could, you’re enough of a contortionist, but it’ll be easier for me. What hit you here, anyway?” Megan gently sprayed the antiseptic liquid and rolled on the adhesive around the oozing skin. “It looks like you fell off of a bicycle on some asphalt.” She placed the large bandage over the zone, pressed its edges carefully onto the adhesive ring she’d drawn, and waited for it to set before she trimmed off the excess gauze pad.

“I bumped against a table,” was all Jade would say. Megan had learned, over the years, that this terseness was a symptom of anger, one of the few emotions Jade could ever let herself feel safely. She had learned, also, not to pry too deeply, or she’d risk having her head cut off—verbally, at least,

“Massage-table mode, Val,” Megan said, and the table that was in the front room of Jade’s bungalow began converting itself into the proper shape and height for her to work. Jade rose and lay down on her back, flinching slightly as the raw spot hit the shallow padding. Megan started on the various bruises, spraying them with light local anesthetic and putting padded dressings over the worst of them.

Suddenly the frizzlic entered the picture. “Oof!” Jade exclaimed as the creature landed on her tummy. “Damn it, Pain-In-The-Ass, when will you learn that my belly is not yours to jump on whenever you wish? I ought to throw you into the cyclor and be

done with you.”

Pita ignored the fierce words and scrambled up Jade’s body to its favorite place between her small round breasts, then proceeded to settle down with the little grumbly noise frizzlics made as they purred. Jade ruffled its fur and began to pet it even before she finished threatening it.

Megan smiled at the picture of Jade Darcy—one of the most feared and respected mercenaries in this sector of the galaxy, the most efficient killer she’d ever known, one of the few carcs available for private employment—taking abuse from a five kilo furball. She finished with the last of the dressings and started to massage Jade’s slightly swollen feet. Jade stopped talking and responded with her usual moans of delight. As it had learned to expect, the frizzlic got the beneficial side effects of the process—a sensual rubdown as Jade’s hands unconsciously mimicked Megan’s.

Megan worked carefully around the delicate scars that delineated much of Jade’s body, the only outward traces of the complex surgery Jade had undergone to make her a computer-augmented-reflex commando—a carc. The surgery and special training the Terran Forces had given her made her faster and more deadly than any other class of human. They also left her ticklish in places where the scars disturbed some nerves in the skin. Jade had a way of getting back at people who tickled her, and Megan didn’t want green-and-purple hair again, or whatever fiendish thing Jade might think up in retaliation next time.

Megan did Jade’s arms and legs, then dislodged

Pita so Jade could turn over and Megan could work on her back. Instead, Jade stood up.

“Is something wrong?” Megan asked as she wiped the massage oil off her hands with Jade’s discarded bath towel. “I’d be happy to get your back for you.”

“No. At least, nothing you’ve done.” Jade paced around the large open room that formed most of her apartment. The living room/kitchen was also the bedroom. The dining table-cum-massage table also converted into the single bed Jade used for sleeping. The bath, toilet, and shower were to the back of the apartment concealed from the front door by the sink, counter and mirror. The computer displays and ship-type cupboards filled every wall. It left a lot of room to pace in. Following on her heels, avoiding her feet from years of practice, was the frizzlic, snuffling and hoping for a little more attention. Jade ignored it totally.

“Do you realize how long it’s been since I had a real job? Not just as your adviser, or bodyguard that you only need half the time anyway—I mean a war, or skirmish, or rescuing a kidnap victim like that R’nagan.” Jade turned suddenly as she reached her door and bellowed at Megan, “Eight months! Eight months of sitting around while you talk business, or fighting drunks at Rix’s—or, worse, not fighting them. Now they come looking for me. Galentor was bad enough, always wanting me to fight at his place. Now kids come, Palovoi and T’gheelwiuds and even Restaals pick fights in Rix’s just to see what I’ll do. Do you know how hard it is on the nerves to keep pulling punches, to make sure the customer is always treated with respect no matter how big an ass-

hole he is? I'm tired of giving kid glove treatment to giant bugs and walking trees and overgrown porcupines."

As Jade resumed her pacing, Megan sat back patiently, waiting for her to reach her own solution. She hadn't raised a half dozen children without learning some of the tricks of the trade.

"If I could fucking go off to some nice clean war, where you know who you are and who the enemy is, and what you're supposed to do about them... what am I saying? I must be crazy to want to get shot at—but I can't take any more of this routine, either."

Jade flung herself into the chair next to Megan and shot halfway out of it again as her bruises flared through the light anesthetic. She lowered herself down more gently as Megan tried to smother her smile.

"That's right. Laugh at a poor wounded invalid. Hell, I must look pretty damn funny at that."

Megan looked at the still naked woman across from her, gleaming from the massage oil, her hair in soft tendrils curling about her face, her almond eyes—a heritage from her Japanese ancestors—flashing darkly, her delicate features flushed with emotion, and thought that "funny" was the last word she'd use. "You need a vacation."

"That's the fucking problem, I've had a vacation. I need work," Jade said, leaning forward to place her elbows on her knees and her head on her hands. The pose made her look fourteen until you looked at the fine lines just starting to appear around her eyes. Those eyes were older than death.

Megan picked up the frizzlic, who'd given up on

Jade paying any attention to it and skittered over to second-best. “This isn’t a vacation. It may not be your main work, as well I know, but a vacation it’s not. A vacation is a break from *all* work, doing only what you’d like and nothing else. Now, what would that be?”

Killing Barker was the first thought in Jade’s mind, but that was something even Megan didn’t and could never know about. “I can’t think of anything particular.”

Megan saw the carnivorous, predatory expression that flashed across Jade’s face, and knew that was a lie. In the last three years she’d learned not to probe too much, or it drove away the one person in a dozen light years she could call friend. But associating with Jade was often like striking a match in a darkened munitions dump.

Am I crazy? she wondered. *Do I have a death wish? This woman’s threatened to kill me before, and she still might if I learn whatever it is about her past that she doesn’t want me to know. I could drop her. There are plenty of good people who are easier to work with. But—*

But there was more to Jade Darcy than just the carc, the killing machine—something that made Megan keep coming back, despite the danger. She gave a mental sigh. Jade wasn’t the only one who was getting tired of walking a diplomatic tightrope. Megan just had more practice at it, and a patience born of experience.

“Why not just take off and go somewhere new?” she said aloud. “See something different, far away from Rix’s, and wars, and business meetings. There

must be someplace you'd like to visit." She watched and listened carefully, hoping to gain some further clue into the mystery that was Jade.

"Can you see me as a tourist with a camera around my neck? Not fucking likely. Besides, there's nowhere I could go. There's hardly anyplace nearby I haven't seen for one war or business trip or another—and most of them would rather not be reminded of my visit, and vice versa. Mercenaries don't get to take vacations, anyway. Anywhere we go, they look at us. 'Who's she here to kill this time? Who hired her? When is the fight going to happen?' I'd make trouble just by being there. Who would want me to stop by for a visit?"

"The Furgatos," came Val's voice unexpectedly. "There is still the open invitation to the Imperial First Snow Festival on Restaapa."

"Sure, the Exec has been working on that one for years, but I don't want to stay in some monastery and... pray... all...day. What the hell's the matter with you?"

Megan's face had turned as pale as the white spot on Pain-In-The-Ass's forehead, and her mouth had dropped open. Jade had never seen her so stunned. She reached over and lifted Megan's jaw with her right hand, then sat up straight as Megan sputtered a moment before making sense.

Megan started, stopped, took a deep breath, then turned to Val's console. "Show me the invitation, Val." To her surprise the screen didn't light up; instead, an octagon of handmade paper was held out to her by a small waldo. Taking it gently in hand, she reverently ran her fingers over the blue-black seal

and the beautifully drawn calligraphy. “What does this translate as, Val?”

“Jade Darcy household is allowed permission to attend the Imperial Festival of First Snow, to be held at the Monastery of the Dirda Hills, beginning the cycle of—’ a local date about two weeks from now. ‘Arrival before this date is required as per Imperial Law.’ It is chopped by that individual Jade calls the Exec, and the abbot of the Furgato sect, and sealed by Great-Tree-In-The-Dense-Forest, Imperial Chamberlain, the officer in charge of the festival.”

Megan sat stock still, her mouth working silently. Jade stood it as long as she could, then asked, “Is it that fucking important?”

Megan looked at her as though she were demented, then explained. “There are, out of the ten thousand worlds in the system, maybe five virgin, unaltered rich markets. The plum of them all is Restaapa. Except for the dirda melons the Furgato export and a few insignificant novelties they import for the rest of the population, the Restaals have allowed no trade, no alliances, no real contact with the outside world. Last Restaal year they had four outsiders at this festival, only one of which was human—and he couldn’t bring even a secretary or his wife. Less than twenty aliens have ever been allowed outside of the transfer town, and it took years of negotiation for them to arrange it—and they were just scholars.

“The Greest let us put some surveillance satellites in orbit around Restaapa, so we know it’s a planet rich in heavy metals, that very little industrialization has occurred, and that it has not even begun to tap the oil, or gold, or osmium, or any of it.

Then there is the rich plantlife that produces alkaloids that... well, look at the dirdas and the Palovoi alone. CafTech and every other corporation has been trying for years to get a toe in the door—and you get a bloody invitation to the most important, the single most important, social and political event on Restaapa for the next six of our years, and you ask if it's that important?" Megan's voice hadn't reached a screech exactly, but the frizzlic decided to take off through the little swinging door to brave the predators outside instead.

In a voice so meek most people wouldn't have recognized it as Jade's, the stunned mercenary asked, "Do you want to go?"

"When I think of all the time and energy I've devoted these last months to wangle a way to get to a lesser festival, much less the Imperial, I... What did you say?" Megan stopped ranting long enough to look at Jade, and saw the kind of smile she usually wore after performing one of her worst practical jokes.

"You said I need a vacation. I think I need work. I know I need the money. You want to go to this thing because it's important to CafTech. The invitation says 'household.'" Jade's grin grew wider as she saw the impatience swell in Megan. She thought about drawing it out further, but knew Megan could go into apoplexy if she did. "If you'll pay me my usual fees for the duration and pick up the expenses—we'll go to the stupid damn thing."

"Val—record, witness, and bond that last statement. Girl, you're on, we'll leave tomorrow. Damn—what kind of wardrobe do we need? Val, look up traditional costume, Restaapa, Snow Festival. Then—"

“Hold it, Cafferty. I have to check with Disson first and be sure my shift is covered. And I didn’t say anything about tomorrow. Val—”

“Disson Peng-Amur sends his best wishes,” Val said, “and says he needed some shifts for the new trainees to work into anyway; enjoy the time off. He reminds you you have eighteen shifts of vacation time at present, including the three he gave you for your difficulties tonight. He also posted a hazard bonus of seventy-five eus to your account, in addition to your vacation funds.

“Ms. Cafferty, the designs you requested are displayed on the eastern wall. As recycling systems are not listed as one of the exports to Restaapa, I recommend preparing them out of cloth that can withstand primitive laundering with alkali soaps and water.”

Jade held up her hand to stop the computer’s information. She glanced at the triumphant expression on Megan Cafferty’s face, at the various designs of clothing projected on the wall, and at the invitation Megan still held as gently as a frail goblet. “I need two days to recover from tonight, and get Pain-In-The-Ass set up, and it will take at least that to get the clothes made anyway. We’ll leave five days from now.”

Megan leaped up and pulled Jade into her arms. She gave the younger woman a hug and a hearty kiss, and swung her around.

Jade froze. She never let anyone grab her, and as for kissing... the less thought about that, the better. It came as a sudden revelation to her that she was naked—not even knives strapped to her arms. As soon as she could, she broke away and headed for the

whirlpool tub.

“Get out of here,” she called as she lowered herself into the water, trying to keep her roiling emotions under control. “Go harass your own computer for the information.”

Megan gathered up her things and called out, “Who’s employing who around here? I’m the one who signs the checks, remember.”

“Yeah, but I’m the one with the goddamn invitation.”

“See you later, boss,” said Megan as she walked out of the door, the frizzlic skittering back inside between her feet.

The little pet scrambled up onto the chair, and from there to the armrest beside the hydrotherapy tub. Absentmindedly Jade began to pet it, ignoring its sneezes of disdain as water dripped in its nose.

What kind of idiocy have I let myself in for? Weeks with those thieving Furgatos in a strange place. At least, from what Megan said, there won’t be any other humans, maybe no other aliens at all. She turned in the tub so the jets hit some new places, and sighed with the luxuriant feeling. It should be safe enough. The pay will come in handy, and it’ll be away from Rix’s and the goddamn Phelphums.

Jade had Val call up the data on Restaapa and the festival and tried to concentrate on it, stealing occasional glances at her only bathroom ornament—a glorious, charming carp carved out of golden jade given to her by the Furgato Exec years before. Between the fatigue and the languor induced by the tub, it was difficult to concentrate on the information Val provided—but it was still more comfortable than

thinking about the strange warmth she'd felt when Megan had hugged and kissed her. It had been the first time any human had done so in nearly twelve years, and Jade had convinced herself she didn't care if it ever happened again. But she kept remembering how good it had felt and, she knew, would feel the next time. If she could allow a next time. If she could deny a next time.

The frizzlic skittered toward the main room, overwhelmed by the spray as Jade turned up the water jets to pummel her body—and, she hoped, distract her from her dilemma.