

I

Peter J. Paxton marveled as he moved his old body through the brand-new offices of Interstellar Business Advisers. He had played no small part in the genesis of the organization, but in the old days he and Joe Finch had operated out of a small, rented office on the far side of the city. IBA now owned the building in which it was located and many others. The firm had come a long way.

He was on his way to the top office to see Josephine Finch. She had been a teen-ager the last time he had been on this side of Ragna; she'd be in her late twenties by now.

"May I help you, sir?" the receptionist asked politely from behind her pearly desk.

"Yes. Is Miss Finch busy at the moment?"

She answered his question with another. "Do you have an appointment?" Her day book was open and her pencil was poised to check off his name.

"No, I'm afraid not. You see—"

"I'm very sorry," she said, closing the book with an air of finality. "Miss Finch can see no one without an appointment."

Paxton rested a gnarled hand on the desk and leaned toward the girl. "Listen, dearie. You just tell her Old Pete is here. We'll worry about appointments later."

The receptionist hesitated a second or two, then shrugged and pressed a button. A simple click acknowledged her call.

"Someone named Old Pete demands to see you, Miss Finch," she said.

"Is this a joke?" a tiny speaker replied.

"I really couldn't say," the girl answered nervously.

"Send him in."

The receptionist rose to show him in, but Paxton waved her back to her seat and strode toward an ornate door of solid Maratak firewood that rippled with shifting waves of color; the name *Josephine Finch* was carved in the wood at eye-level and its color shifts were out of sync with the rest of the wood.

A young woman opened the door as he reached it. She wore an azure clingsuit that highlighted the blue of her eyes and the curves of her body. Short, raven hair framed a full-lipped, fine-featured face.

"Hello, Jo," said Paxton, eying her up and down. "You've grown a bit since I saw you last."

The girl examined him closely, then smiled with delight. "Old Pete! It's really you!"

"It's me all right," he said as he stepped into the office and glanced around. "You've really taken over, haven't you?"

"Why not? I own controlling interest and I happen to enjoy the work." She moved behind her desk and sat down. "But how about you? You've been retired and tucked away on an island in the Kel Sea for the past eight years. What brings you to IBA?"

Old Pete smiled as he settled himself into a chair. "Beating around the bush never was a Finch trait."

Jo shrugged. "As second largest stockholder you should know that IBA's being plagued with a host of imitators. You can't beat around the bush and stay on top."

"True, true. So I'll get to the point. Jo, what do you know about the Restructurist Movement?"

She paused before answering and regarded her visitor. Why would an aging man travel halfway around a planet just to ask her what she knew about the Restructurists? A simple call would have accomplished the same purpose with much less difficulty. Something was up.

"It's a political group that wants to change the Federation," she replied. "Elson deBloise is their current leader, I believe. They want to broaden the powers of the Federation to include planetary affairs."

Paxton nodded slowly. "To say, 'change the Federation' is to understate their purposes by a long shot—turn the Fed inside-out is more like it! The Federation was designed to keep the lid on

interplanetary affairs, but that's not enough for the Restructurists. They think the Fed should be some sort of equalizer between planets; they want to regulate trade and aid underdeveloped planets."

Jo was unconcerned. "They'll never get anywhere. The Federation Charter severely limits its activities."

"But there's an emergency clause in the Charter that allows for a temporary increase in powers should the Fed, or its planets, be threatened."

"I'm aware of that," Jo said. "But they've tried to invoke that clause many times and every time they've been voted down. And even if they did invoke it, so what? It's only temporary."

"That's where you're wrong, Jo," Paxton said gravely. "If you look at the history of old Earth, you'll find that very seldom is any increase in governmental power temporary. The emergency clause is the key to Restructurist control; once they invoke it they'll have their foot in the door and the Federation may never be the same again. I don't want to see that happen, Jo. Your grandfather and I were able to make IBA a growing concern because the Federation's policy toward a legally operating business has been strictly 'hands off.' We humans have got as far as we have as fast as we have because of that policy. I don't want to see that changed. I don't want the Federation turned into an empire, and I see the word 'Empire' looming in the future if the Restructurists get their way."

"But they won't."

"I wouldn't be too sure of that, my dear. Many of the Restructurists may be starry-eyed idealists but not a few of them are crafty plotters with power as their goal. I've made a study of the movement and Elson deBloise is by far its most dangerous member. He's after empire, I'm sure of it. He's a capable man—a mere planetary delegate ten years ago, he's now a sector representative. And something is cooking in his circle. I don't know exactly what it is, but a connection has been made between deBloise and a certain physicist named Denver Haas. If deBloise thinks Haas can further his aims, then both Haas and the Federation had better be on guard!"

"Well, why not go directly to the Federation?" Jo said.

"For the simple reason that deBloise's affairs need looking into and to obtain the information we want we need secrecy. The Fed is a wonderful organization, but it's too open and aboveboard in its maneuverings. A Fed investigation of deBloise would be pointless because he'd be ready when they came. But IBA has contacts as far flung as the Federation's. I think we can move on our own to find out the connection between Haas and deBloise and *then* go to the Fed."

Jo was silent a moment. "But it's always been a policy of IBA to stay out of politics. It's one of our bylaws, as a matter of fact."

"I know," Paxton replied, his face creasing into a smile. "I wrote it."

"Then why the sudden change of heart?"

"Well, I could say it's for the good of the company—and it is—but it goes deeper than that." He hesitated. "You never really knew your grandfather, did you?"

Jo's mouth twisted. "I hardly knew my own father. But when he was still around I remember you two talking a lot about Joe, Sr. He must have been quite a man."

"Oh, he was!" Paxton enthusiastically agreed. "We both started out from Earth when the Federation was young and growing by leaps and bounds. The Earth government was very big, very bureaucratic then. Starting a new business was no easy matter on Earth in those days, that's why Joe and I came to Ragna—that and, uh, other reasons. As I guess you know, your grandfather already had a successful book publishing company under his belt, though how he made it work I'll never know. The sale of Finch House gave us enough capital to leave Earth and come to Ragna to start IBA. Yes, your grandfather was quite a man. Why . . ."

Jo tuned the old man out momentarily and considered the situation. Joe Finch, Sr. and Old Pete had been the shrewdest pair of businessmen in the galaxy in their day; their counsel had pulled countless businesses out of the red and had started just as many others on their way. But Joe was long dead and Old Pete had carried that moniker for as long as Jo could remember. Was the current structure of the Federation really in danger, thereby endangering IBA, or was Old Pete suffering from a touch of senile paranoia?

"I'll tell you what we'll do," she said, interrupting Paxton's reminiscent monologue. "I'll have someone run a check on this Denver Haas character. If we can learn something about Haas, maybe we can get an idea of what deBloise has in mind and go from there." Catching a nod of approval from Old Pete, she went on. "We have a suite of rooms upstairs for visiting clients, it's empty now and you can use it for as long as you like. We'd be honored to have you as a guest."

Jo pressed a button as she finished speaking and the receptionist came through the multi-hued door. "Take Mr. Paxton to the guest suite," she told her. "He'll be with us for a while."

"Let me know as soon as you hear anything," Old Pete remarked, rising.

"You'll know as soon as I do," Jo assured him.

When she was alone, Jo sat behind her desk and stared at the two-dimensional painting of Joe Finch, Sr. that hung from the wall.

"I hope your old partner is wrong, Gran'pa," she muttered.

II

Old Pete appeared somewhat shaken when he entered Jo's office a few days later.

"I just saw a man," he said, "walking down the hall with what looked like a space rat on his shoulder."

Jo smiled. "That's just what it was. His name is Sam Orzechowski and it seems he's tamed the space rat. I'm trying to help him work up some commercial uses." She pointed to a chair. "Sit down. We've got some information on Haas and deBloise."

Old Pete leaned forward. "What have you found?"

"I don't know just yet," Jo replied. "I put one of the best investigators in the sector on the job. He just called to say that he's got some interesting information."

"Why didn't he tell you when he called?"

"Larry Easley rarely says anything of interest when there's a possibility that the wrong ears might hear it."

"Well, then, when does he arrive?" Pete asked.

Jo shook her head. "He doesn't. He never comes to this building. IBA uses his services quite often and frequent visits would give away the relationship. We're to meet him tonight at the Casino."

"Why there?"

"Because it's a perfect meeting place. I make it a practice to visit the Casino once a week and he stops in whenever he's on Ragna; that way no one thinks it's strange when we run into each other now and then—especially since we're both avid pokochess players."

"I hope you've included me in your plans tonight," Old Pete said. "I haven't had a really good game of pokochess in years."

"Of course you're included," Jo told him. "I want you along to question him on his information since you seem to have made a private study of deBloise and his activities."

"Just his public life. I know nothing of his private affairs."

"That's a start," Jo said.

Later that night, as they flittered toward the Casino, Jo turned to Old Pete. "There's something I've been wanting to ask you for a long time," she said.

"What's that?"

"It's about my father. You were the last person on Ragna to see him and were closest to him except for my mother. What kind of a man was he?"

Old Pete studied her for a moment. "You're a lot like your grandfather," he said finally. "Junior—your father—was different. He was never a very happy person; he was a born achiever, but his major problem was that he was born at the top, the heir apparent to IBA. He tried his best to make it with the company while your grandfather was alive, but after Joe died he became increasingly restless." Old Pete's mind drifted back to the day of Junior Finch's departure.

"But where are you going?" Paxton asked.

Joe Finch, Jr. shrugged. "I haven't really decided yet. It's only for a year, Pete, and I'm sure IBA won't miss me. You've been running the show ever since Dad's death anyway." He put his hand on Pete's shoulder. They were close—Junior had called him "Uncle Pete" as a kid—and Pete now and then tended to take on a fatherly attitude. "I'm a big boy now, Pete. I'm thirty-three, I have a wife who understands and a ten-year-old daughter who'll miss me but who'll somehow survive a year without me."

"I know what's eating you, Joe," Pete said gravely. "But can't you climb a mountain, or something?"

Junior laughed. "I've no desire to be a mountain goat. I just don't feel a part of IBA, that's all. It's not my company. I had nothing to do with its growth, or founding . . . it was just handed to me."

"But the company has a lot of growing to do," Pete said. "You could be part of that. Its future will ultimately depend on you, you know."

"IBA's present momentum will carry it another ten or twenty years with little help from anyone. I've got no qualms about taking out a year to go somewhere."

"And do what?"

"I dunno . . . something." He stuck out his hand. "Good-bye, Pete. I'll contact you when I get where I'm going."

Peter Paxton watched him walk off in the direction of one of the shuttle ramps, a man in the shadow of his father, the only son of Joe Finch trying to prove to himself that he was worthy of the title.

Junior didn't know why he picked Jebinose. Maybe he had heard about their minor racial problem once and had tucked it into the back of his mind for future reference. Maybe he was drawn to situations in flux. Jebinose was in minor flux.

Jebinose was one of those mistakes that blot the early history of man's interstellar colonization. In the old days of the splinter colonies, exploration teams were sent out to find Earth-class planets and now and then one of these teams became a little careless. A major criterion for colonizable classification was the absence of an "intelligent" native species. No one was quite sure just exactly what was meant by "intelligent" but tool-making was the favorite rule of thumb for dividing the intelligent from unintelligent. The Jebinose fiasco had nothing to do with interpretation of the rules. The fact of the matter is that Jebinose was given an "M" classification (Earth-type, suitable for settling) after the most cursory of examinations. The colonists were indeed surprised when they found out that they were sharing the planet with a tribe of primitive humanoids.

No one knows too much about the early colonial history of Jebinose. The splinter colony that landed there was conspicuous only by reason of its particular ineptitude at the task of colonization. But for the Vanek, not a single member would have survived a decade.

The Vanek are an alien enigma. They are quiet, humble, peaceful, fatalistic. They are few in number, intensely religious and welcomed all newcomers to their fold. They are humanoid with blue-gray skin and long spindly arms. Their civilization had reached a plateau in its development and they were quite willing to let it remain there. They swallowed up the colonists.

The cross-breeding phenomenon between human and Vanek has yet to be explained. There are many theories but not one has received general acceptance. No matter . . . it worked. The Jebinose colony, as in the case of many other splinter colonies, was completely forgotten until the new Federation tried to order the chaos of the omnidirectional human migration. By the time it was rediscovered, human and Vanek genes had been pooled into a homogeneous mixture.

Much heated debate ensued. Some argued that since the original colony had been completely absorbed, resettlement would, in effect, be interference with an alien culture. Others argued that the Vanek were now part human and thus had a right to Terran technology . . . and besides, Jebinose was favorably situated in regard to the emerging trade routes.

Jebinose was resettled.

The Vanek had settled in one of the agricultural regions and it was through this area that Junior wandered. Eventually he came upon the town of Danzer. It was a tiny place consisting of eight buildings, a general store-restaurant among them. Locals and Vaneks peopled the dirt street that ran down the middle of the town. On each side of the street ran a raised wooden boardwalk; Junior found a shady spot on one of these and sat down.

He had been walking for days and was bone weary. A cool breeze helped evaporate the sweat beading his face. A middle-aged man glanced at him from across the street and then came over for a closer look.

"You're new around here, I believe," he said to Junior, as he stuck out his hand. "I'm Marvin Heber and I like to know everyone around."

Joe shook the hand. "My name's Junior Finch and I'm *very* new around here."

"Just moved in, huh?"

"No, I'm just wandering around the region to see what I can see." The man was friendly but nosey so Junior decided to play it safe and be as oblique as possible. "Lot of virgin land left around here."

Marvin Heber nodded and eyed the newcomer. "If you want to settle, I'm sure we can find a place for you."

As Junior was trying to think of what to say next, an elderly, spindle-armed beggar in a dusty robe came up to him and asked for alms. His skin was bluish gray. Junior dropped a few small coins in the proffered alms bowl. "Wheels within wheels, *bendreth*," said the beggar.

"Was that a Vanek?" he asked as the beggar walked away. "I've heard they're common in this region, but that's the first one I've seen since I arrived."

"They keep pretty much to themselves and only come into town to buy supplies now and then. There's always a beggar or two about, however."

Junior said nothing but looked sincerely interested. He recognized Heber for a talker and was quite ready to prove a willing audience.

"They spend most of their time fooling around on their reservation, meditating and carving their little statues."

"What little statues are those?" Junior asked.

Heber took this opportunity to sit down and share Junior's shade. "You won't see any around here. Some company in the city buys them up as fast as the Vanek can turn them out and sells them as curios—'Handmade by alien half-breeds.' They're pretty popular over most of the settled galaxy. The Vanek have no financial worries, no, sir."

"Then why do they beg?"

Heber shrugged. "It's somehow mixed up in their religion which nobody really understands. You heard him say, 'Wheels within wheels' after you gave him some coins."

"Yeah," Junior said. "Then he said, *bendreth*: What does that mean?"

"Not much. *Bendreth* is the Vanek equivalent of 'sir' or 'madam.' They say that to just about everybody. 'Wheels within wheels' has something to do with their religion. According to tradition, a wise old Vanek philosopher with an unpronounceable name came up with the theory that the universe was a conglomeration of wheels, wheels within wheels within wheels within wheels. It got to the point where the only answer, or comment, he would make about anything was a simple 'Wheels within wheels.' It's a very fatalistic philosophy; they believe that everything works out in the end so they rarely take any decisive action. They figure the wheels will turn full circle without their help." He paused.

"Did you notice the crack in the begging bowl, by the way?"

Junior nodded. "Looked like it had been broken and then glued back together."

"That's part of the religion, too. You see, that old philosopher went to a banquet once—this was in the ancient days when the Vanek were rather barbaric—and the chief of the tribe sought to question him on his philosophy. Of course the only answer he could get was 'Wheels within wheels.' This annoyed the chief but he contained his anger until they all sat down at the eating table. During the meal it is said that the old philosopher uttered his favorite phrase over two hundred fifty times. The chief finally flew off the handle and broke a heavy earthen salad bowl over the old man's head, killing him. So now all the Vanek beggars carry an earthen salad bowl that they have broken and then repaired as a sign that the old man did not die in vain."

Junior shook his head in wonder. "They must be strange folk. Do the local Terrans get along with them?"

"I guess 'get along' is about the only way you could put it," Heber admitted. "There's no open

animosity between the two groups, but there's no friendship either. The Vanek float in and out of town and have no effect on the Terrans. I guess there are cases where the Vanek are discriminated against by the Terrans, but it's a passive thing. Most Terrans have little or no respect for the Vanek because the Vanek don't seem to care about respect and do nothing to engender it.

"It's not racial enmity as many outsiders might think." He cast a significant glance at Junior as he said this. "The fact that the Vanek are partially alien has little to do with it; that's a minor difference. There're other differences."

"Like what?" Junior asked.

"For one thing there's no first-person singular pronoun in the Vanek language. Some people thought this was a sign of group consciousness but that was disproved. It's just that they don't think of themselves as individuals. This makes it hard for Terrans to relate to them as individuals and thus it's hard to respect them as individuals."

"So it comes right back to a lack of respect again," Junior observed.

"Right! But try to convince the legislators in the capital about that! They're getting together a bill to combat the so-called discrimination against the Vanek, and it looks like it'll pass, too. But that won't make Terrans respect the Vanek and that's where the real problem lies." He kicked a stone out into the middle of the street. "Damn fools in the capital probably don't even know what a Vanek looks like! Just trying to make political names for themselves!"

"But if it helps the Vanek get more equality—" Junior began.

"Lip-service equality!" Heber declared angrily. "A forced equality that might well cause resentment on the part of the Terran locals. I don't want to see that. No, Mr. Finch. If equality's going to come to Danzer and other places like it, it's gotta come from the locals, not from the capital!"

Junior made no comment. The man had a good point, but one could never know whether it was sincerely meant or just an excuse to oppose some legislation that interfered with his racial prejudices. He noted that Heber made no alternative proposals.

Heber glanced at the sun. "Well, time for me to get back to my job," he said.

"What's that?"

"I'm the government in town, you might say . . . mayor, sheriff, judge, notary, and so on." He smiled. "Nice to have met you, Mr. Finch."

"Nice to have met *you*, Mr. Heber," said Junior. And he meant it

Heber was a pleasant man, but Junior wondered why he had taken so much time to explain the TerranVanek situation to him. Politics, maybe. If enough outsiders could be turned against the pending Integration Bill, maybe it wouldn't pass. Whatever his reasons, Heber had been very informative.

Junior walked across the dusty street to the general store. A land-rover passed close behind him as he crossed. Ground transportation was common here, possibly because flitters were too expensive to buy, run and service. It was hard work living off the land on Jebinose and the rewards were minimal. The farmlands were a depressed area as far as economics went. That would help explain a part of the poor TerranVanek relations; the Terrans were in control as far as numbers and technology were concerned and they owned all the businesses. But the Vanek held a superior economic position through the sale of their crude little statuettes. The Terrans broke their backs to keep their heads above water, while the Vanek did quite well by merely sitting around and whittling. The situation was tailor-made to generate resentment.

He approached the general store-restaurant building. The foodstuffs and supplies piled out front in their shiny, colorful plastic, or alloy, containers struck an odd contrast to the weather-beaten wood of the store. All the buildings in Danzer were handmade of local wood; prefab probably cost too much.

A hand-lettered sign proclaiming that Bill Jeffers was the proprietor hung over the doorway and Junior's nostrils were assailed by a barrage of smells as he passed under it. Everything from fertilizer to frying food vied for the attention of his olfactory nerve.

His retinas had not yet adjusted to the diminished light of the store interior and Junior bumped into someone just inside the door. Straining his eyes and blinking, he saw that it was a young Vanek.

"Sorry," he said. "Can't see too well in here just yet." He made his way to the main counter in the

back, not noticing the intense gaze he was receiving from the Vanek.

"Yes, sir!" said the burly bear of a man behind the counter. "What can I do for you?"

"I'd like something to eat. What's on the menu?"

The big man winked. "You must be new around here. You don't get *a* meal here, you get *the* meal: local beef, local potatoes and local greens."

"All right then," Junior said with a shrug. "Let me have *the* meal."

"Good. I'm Bill Jeffers, by the way," the man said and stuck out a paw.

Junior shook hands and introduced himself.

"Staying around here long, Mr. Finch?" Jeffers asked.

Junior shook his head. "No. Just wandering about the area." Again the questions about who you were and how long you were staying.

Jeffers nodded and then looked over Junior's shoulder. "What'll it be?"

"The meal, *bendreth*," said a sibilant voice behind him. Junior turned to face the Vanek he had accidentally jostled on his way in.

"Hello," he said with a nod.

"Good day, *bendreth*," replied the Vanek. He was young and slight with piercing black eyes.

"How are you today?" Junior asked in a lame effort to make conversation. The Vanek interested him and he wanted very much to get into a conversation with one. But finding a common ground for a discussion was no easy matter.

"We are mostly well," came the reply. Junior noted the plural pronoun and remembered what Heber had told him. It might help to open a conversation.

"I've heard that the Vanek always use the word 'we' in the place of 'I' and I've been wondering why that is so."

"It is the way we are," came the impassive reply. "Our teachers say we are all one on the Great Wheel. Maybe that is so, we do not know. All we know is that we have always spoken thus and no doubt we always shall. There is no Vanek word for a single man."

"That's too bad," Junior said without thinking.

"Why do you say that, *bendreth*?" The Vanek was showing some interest now.

Junior would have to come up with a tactful yet honest answer. "Well, I've always thought that a race progressed through the actions of individuals. The progress of the Vanek seems to have been terribly slow. I mean, you've gone nowhere in the past few centuries. Maybe that's the result for having the word 'I' absent from your functional vocabulary."

The Vanek eyed him closely and was about to speak when the meals arrived. Each paid for his meal and Junior expected the Vanek to follow him to one of the small tables situated in the corner. Instead the alien turned toward the door.

"Where are you going?" Junior asked.

"Outside. To eat."

"It's too hot out there. We'll sit at one of these tables."

The Vanek hesitated and glanced around. The store was empty and Jeffers had disappeared into the back. Wordlessly, he followed Junior to a table.

Both were hungry and once seated they began to eat. After swallowing two mouthfuls, Junior said, "Now, what were you about to say?"

The Vanek looked up and chewed thoughtfully. "You may be right. Once we might have said that we have progressed as far as we desire but that doesn't hold true any more. The Vanek seem to have proved quite willing to accept the benefits of a civilization technologically far superior to their own. So perhaps it has not been by desire that our culture has been stagnated. But it is our culture and—"

"Hey!" came a shout from behind the counter. "What's he doing in here?" It was Jeffers. He was pointing to the Vanek.

Without looking around, the Vanek picked up his plate and walked out the door. Junior watched in stunned silence.

"What was that all about?" he asked. "I was talking to him!"

"We don't allow any Vaneks to eat in here," Jeffers told him.

"Why not?"

"Because we don't, that's why!"

Junior could feel himself getting angry. He tried to put a lid on it. "Just who are the 'we' you're referring to?"

"Me!" said Jeffers as he came around from behind the counter and approached Junior's table. "It's my place and I've got a right to call the shots in my own place!"

"Nobody said you didn't only ... only you could treat him with a certain amount of human dignity." He winced at the triteness of his word.

"He's a half-breed!"

"Then how about half the amount of dignity you'd accord a human? How's that sound?"

Jeffers's eyes narrowed. "Are you one of those meddlers from the capital?"

"No," Junior said, dropping his fork into his mashed potatoes and lifting the plate. "I arrived on the planet about a week ago."

"Then you're not even from Jebinose!" Jeffers laughed. "You're a foreigner!"

"Aren't we all," Junior remarked as he walked out the door.

The Vanek was seated on the boardwalk finishing his meal. Junior sat down beside him but put his own plate aside. He was choked with what he knew to be self-righteous anger and couldn't eat. He tried to cool himself back to rationality.

"Is it always that way?" he asked finally.

The Vanek nodded. "Yes, but it is his store."

"I know it's his store," Junior said, "but we're going to change his attitude and I think I know just the way."

The Vanek gave him a questioning glance.

"You're going to take me to your tribe, or camp, or whatever it's called and we're going to put some pressure on Mr. Jeffers." Junior was speaking of economic pressure, of course. Economic pressure was a household word as far as the Finch family was concerned.

And so it began. Junior had found something unexpected in the young Vanek's attitude, had read it in the flick of a gaze, the twist of a mouth. For all their outward indifference, their detached air, the Vanek were keenly aware of the discrimination they faced daily in the Terran towns. Junior had seen through the facade and this gave him an incentive to do something about the situation.

He convinced the young Vanek to take him to the local Vanek leaders so he could present his plan. The scheme was simplicity itself. If Jeffers would not allow a Vanek to eat in his store, then no Vanek should spend a cent in that store. Since the Vanek made up a good fifty percent of the local buying public, they could cripple Jeffers' profits in no time.

The Vanek leaders quickly agreed to the plan and a very self-satisfied Junior Finch spent the night in a nearby field. The morning held some surprises, however, when he returned to town; for as he approached Jeffers's store, two Vanek emerged carrying sacks of foodstuffs.

Junior had overlooked one simple fact: Jeffers's store was the only place within a twenty-mile radius where you could buy food. He would have to think of another way to put pressure on Jeffers.

There were two options: the Vanek could either open their own store, or they could find a way to buy food from a store twenty miles away. The first was out; the Vanek were not cut out for shopkeeping. That left buying in another town as the only solution.

Junior started walking. It took him over six hours to reach Zarico, the nearest town. As he entered the town he had an intense sensation of *deja vu*; it was as if he had traveled in a tremendous circle and wound up right back in Danzer. The buildings were amazingly similar to those in Danzer; there was even a general store-restaurant.

The attitudes were similar, too. Vincent Peck, the owner, allowed no Vanek to eat in his store. But Junior changed his mind . . . it took two hours of hard talking, a half-gallon of local wine and endless repetitions of Junior's promise to increase sales by at least fifty percent if only he'd let the Vanek eat lunch in his store.

Peck finally agreed. He wasn't exactly crazy about the Vanek, but he was a businessman first and increased sales meant increased profits. This was the plan: Junior would use Peck's lorry to ferry the Vanek back and forth from Danzer for a two-week trial; if the plan turned out to be worth his while, Peck would continue to cooperate.

Apparently Peck found it very worthwhile for after the trial period he offered Junior a salary to keep on driving the lorry. Jeffers and many other Danzer citizens resented this intrusion into their affairs by an outsider, but Marvin Heber was overjoyed; he went so far as to inform the news media.

This was a mixed blessing: it resulted in the anonymous donation of a bus for transport of the Vanek from Danzer to Zarico and back, but it also heightened the local resentment toward Junior—the people of Danzer felt that the rest of the planet was laughing at them. And one night a couple of locals in their cups administered a mild beating to Junior. But there was no real harm done.

Finally, one of the legislators from the capital paid a visit to Junior and invited him to speak before the legislature on behalf of the Integration Bill. As Junior turned him down—explaining that the success of his venture in Danzer would prove the bill unnecessary—Bill Jeffers walked up and capitulated. He had tried to hold out but it was useless; he was beaten. His business could not survive without the Vanek and so they could eat lunch in his store from that day forward.

Junior and Jeffers left the legislator to his own devices while they went off to drink to harmony and higher profits in Danzer.

Next morning, Junior was found lying in the alley next to Jeffers's store. He was dead, a Vanek ceremonial dagger implanted in his heart.

No one for a moment believed that the Vanek were responsible for the act, even when they confessed to it. No Vanek had ever been known to lie, but this instance was considered an exception, especially since they buried Junior themselves with full rights and honors, a ceremony accorded only to the wisest and most beloved of their own race. They were not killers and certainly wouldn't kill a man they loved so. Marvin Heber came to the conclusion that the Vanek were lying out of fear and so he looked for a human agent. He found none.

And as is so often the case, the ghost of Junior Finch was tearfully used to obtain enough votes to pass the Integration Bill, the very bill he had tried to prove unnecessary.

"IBA sent out its own investigators, of course," Old Pete said as they pulled into the Casino, "but they could uncover nothing new. Either the murderer was a human, who did a perfect cover-up job, or your father actually was killed by the Vanek—a highly unlikely possibility.

"And, as you know," he concluded, "we left your father's body in its grave on Jebinose. It somehow belonged there."

Jo nodded. She had not asked for a full recounting of the events on Jebinose, but Old Pete had obviously made a careful investigation and the details had given her a fuller picture of her father's character than she had ever got from her mother. She was glad she had asked.

Alighting from the flitter they were greeted by an elaborately costumed doorman to whom Jo was obviously a familiar figure. He bowed them into the front entrance.

The Casino consisted of a number of large rooms, each devoted to particular games of chance. Jo headed directly for the pokochess parlor. This was her favorite game, a game of chance and skill in which each player was "dealt" a king, three pawns and five other randomly selected pieces. The two players could place wagers on the outcome at any point during the course of the game. Pokochess was not very popular with the Casino because the house could make money only when a guest played the house "pro." But the game was the current rage on Ragna and a pokochess parlor was found to be a good draw; patrons could use the Casino's parlor for a small fee per game.

Larry Easley was sitting at one of the tables with an associate. Easley could have been a very distinguished looking man if he had wanted to be, but the nature of his profession demanded a somewhat nondescript appearance. And so he made certain that his clothes, his posture, the cut of his hair, everything about him invited anonymity. He was a detective and very, very good at his work.

He looked up and saw Jo and Old Pete approaching. With a smile, he rose and greeted them. Introductions were made all around and the four of them seated themselves around the table. After a bit

of polite conversation, Easley's assistant, Deggs, excused himself to make a call.

"What's the news, Larry?" Jo asked. "We'll discuss that first and then I'll give you a rematch at pokochess . . . and I hope you do better this time."

Easley nodded. "O.K. First off, I found out a good deal about this Denver Haas you're interested in. He's a physical engineer who has recently developed something he calls a 'warp gate' and he's ready to go into production."

Noting the questioning stares, he explained. "It seems that Haas has eliminated the necessity for an individual warp unit on every interstellar ship. He's also found a way to make trips of almost any distance in one jump. All you have to do is set up two gates—one at each end—and go through one and come out the other."

"Teleportation!" Old Pete exclaimed.

"Not at all," Easley said. "The ship in question travels in warp just like ships do now, but the advantage lies in the fact that the ship merely follows a beam between the gates in a single hop. It's quicker and you can send ships through one after the other and the ships need be equipped only with tube drive. Do you realize what this will do for interstellar trade?"

Pete frowned. "I know what it *can* do . . . but I also see some problems."

"I see them, too," Jo said.

Easley was puzzled. "What do you mean?" he asked, looking to Jo.

"I'm talking about getting the product off the ground." Old Pete nodded in agreement with Jo. She continued. "The device is a definite fortune-maker, but it will take a while before it starts to pay off. You see, every single ship in every merchant fleet is equipped with its own warper, so a warp gate is of no value to those fleets, at least not yet. They won't start buying warp gates until they start replacing some of their ships."

Old Pete summed it up. "In other words, the warp gates will be phased in only as fast as the individual warpers can be phased out."

"And that may not be fast enough for Mr. Haas's little company," Jo added.

"And what does *that* mean?" Easley asked.

"Star Ways," was the extent of Jo's reply but Easley understood.

"But what's the connection between Haas and deBloise?" Pete asked.

"Money," Easley said. "DeBloise is financing Haas but for some reason he wants his name kept out of it; he's gone to an awful lot of trouble to cover any connection between Haas and himself. The same goes for the others who are in on the deal."

"Who are they?" Paxton asked. "The list reads like a who's who of the Restructurist movement. The cover job has been excellent, by the way. I couldn't prove to any court that deBloise is behind Haas. My informants have assured me that they'll deny every word they've said if they're brought into court."

"Well, at least *we* know he's behind it," Jo mused. She turned to Old Pete. "What do you think? I'd be tempted to forget the whole thing except for the cover-up; that makes me suspicious."

Paxton shook his head. "I really don't know what to do next. Maybe Mr. Easley could send one of his men to Jebinose to just sort of sniff around and—"

"Jebinose!" Jo exclaimed. "What's Jebinose got to do with this?"

"Didn't you know?" Old Pete said with surprise. "That's deBloise's home planet."

Jo was shocked. "I knew he represented that sector, but I never dreamed he was from Jebinose itself."

"Yes, he was born there. As a matter of fact, he was principal sponsor of the Integration Bill when your father was there. As another matter of fact, he pleaded for the bill's passage with the cry that Junior Finch must not have died in vain!"

Jo shook her head. "I never realized . . ." Her face suddenly hardened, "Larry, I want you to go to Jebinose personally and look into deBloise and see what you can find, if anything. And you might check out a town named Danzer while you're at it."

"I thought you didn't want to get IBA involved in any political matters," Old Pete remarked in a slightly bantering tone.

"This political matter just might become a personal matter," Jo replied.

Old Pete leaned back in his chair and tried unsuccessfully to prevent a very satisfied smile from creasing his face.

III

Jo decided to pay Denver Haas a personal visit. The man had ignored all the literature forwarded to him and had refused to see any IBA representatives. Jo hated interstellar travel, hated that wave of nausea that occurs each time the ship comes in and out of warp, but Haas was located on Dil and that was only two jumps away. That wasn't too bad and maybe a personal visit from IBA's number-one officer would have some effect on the man. She hoped it would be worth it. He had promised to see her when she arrived.

Haas lived and worked in a converted warehouse not too far from the spaceport. The most vital and innovative aspects of his warp gate were now covered by Federation patents and so security was no longer of great importance. Still, Jo had to be cleared twice before she was allowed to enter the building.

Haas was obviously not out to impress anybody. The inside of the building was as dingy as the outside and a lone, harried receptionist-secretary occupied the single desk in the cluttered foyer.

Jo presented the girl with her clearance sheet. "Josephine Finch to see Mr. Haas," she said.

The girl took the sheet without looking up, checked the appointment book and nodded. She pressed a button and said: "Miss Finch is here."

"Send her in," replied a gruff voice.

The girl pointed to a nondescript door with a simple "Haas" printed on it. Jo knocked and entered.

The office was an unbelievable clutter of filing cabinets, diagrams, blueprints and miscellaneous notes and drawings on scraps of paper. Denver Haas, a feverish little man, was bent over his desk, reading and making notes, looking like a gnome king ensconced among his treasures. He looked up as he heard the door, close.

"Ah, Miss Finch," he said, smiling tightly. "You've come. This is quite an honor even if it is a waste of time for both of us. He rose, gathered some papers off a chair and threw them on the floor. Pushing the chair around to the front of the desk, he said, "Please sit down."

Jo did so and waited for the little man to regain his seat. He was older than she had imagined with an unruly shock of graying hair and, of all things, a beard. With all the permanent depilation techniques available, facial hair was an unusual sight.

"Well, what is it you wanted to see me about?" he demanded.

"Your new product," Jo said simply. "I think it has good potential and I'm here to convince you that IBA can help you get the most out of it."

He smiled with what he thought was slyness. "And what makes you think I need any help from IBA at all?"

"The very nature of the warp gate," she stated. "It's major advantage is the simple fact that once you have a pair of them set up, shipping over any distance will become quicker, easier and dirt cheap. That's fine for the major companies along the major trade routes, but that won't sell too many gates for you. I don't know what it will cost to purchase one, but I'm sure they won't be cheap."

Haas nodded in agreement and Jo continued.

"And don't forget that all the freighters currently in use are equipped with individual warpers. It would be of little use for a company to send these ships through a gate when they can go by themselves. And what about the smaller companies that may have trouble meeting your price—"

Haas held up his hand. "I've thought of that and it's all taken care of. If we get an initial flood of orders—and I've no doubt we will—we'll be able to produce the subsequent gates at a lower price because we'll be able to increase production scale." He leaned back with a what-do-you-think-of-that? look on his face.

"I figured on that," Jo said. "But what about Star Ways?"

"What about it?"

"Competition. Star Ways is the biggest conglomerate in the galaxy and the individual warper is their meat-and-potatoes product. You don't think they're just going to sit still and let you make their primary product obsolete, do you? They're going to cut their prices down—way down—until you fold. And when you go out of business, they'll come along and buy up the rights to the warp gate. The royalties you'll receive from them will give you enough money to last you three lifetimes, of course, but your company will be gone. IBA can prevent that from happening, or at least give SW a battle the likes of which it's never seen."

"No," Haas said, shaking his head, "that will never happen. SW will never get the rights to the gate because I own them completely—completely. And I'll never sell: I'm not after money ... it's something more than that. The warp gate is my life, I've worked on nothing else for as long as I can remember. Only recently have I been able to devote my full time to it, but it has been with me always. I've worked as an engineer, an architect, even a technician when times weren't so good, but I've always come home to the game. It's part of me now . . . I would no sooner lease the gate to another company than I would lease my right arm to another man. The Haas company will only lease the rights from me and if the Haas company can't sell the gate, no one will."

Jo smiled inwardly. She wondered if deBloise was aware of Mr. Haas's plans for his invention; this monomaniac was just asking for financial ruin.

"I wonder what your backers would say if they knew this?" she asked.

"They know and they're with me one hundred percent!"

Jo was taken aback by this statement; it didn't make sense.

"And just who are your backers?"

"I can't tell you. It seems they wish to remain anonymous which is strange, but none of my concern. I've searched long and hard to find men with vision such as these. We are in complete accord and everything is legal so I really don't care if they want to remain anonymous." He rose. "And now I must get back to my work. But I do want to thank you for stopping in; I've had the utmost confidence in the gate but you've managed to boost it even higher."

"How's that?" Jo asked, puzzled.

"I was, at first, a little surprised that you knew about the gate but then I realized that IBA has far-reaching contacts. The fact that you were interested enough in the gate to come here and try to get 'in on the kill' is proof that its success is guaranteed. IBA rarely takes on losers."

Jo was tempted to say that IBA had a reputation for turning losers into winners but decided it wasn't worth the effort to explain. She merely shrugged. IBA could have done a lot for him but under no circumstances could she work with a man such as Haas. She merely shrugged and headed for the door.

"And there's one thing you forgot," Haas said with a gloat in his voice.

Jo gave him a questioning glance.

"Military contracts! You forgot about military contracts! The gate is perfect for supply and personnel transport on a military scale!"

She wanted to laugh in his face. The Federation forces would, of course, be glad to know that such a thing as the warp gate was available, but they'd need very few in peacetime and the prospect of a war was highly unlikely.

"Yes," he went on, beaming, "I don't think there will be any problem in getting those initial orders. We'll just have to sit back and watch them roll in."

Jo left the warehouse in a daze. How did people like Haas get into business? He was, no doubt, a brilliant designer and theorist—the existence of the gate proved that—but he had no idea of the economic forces he would be up against. IBA could have helped, could have mounted a campaign to convince the backwater planets to purchase their own gates to cheapen import costs. This might have got Haas over the hump; but without the man's cooperation such a plan was out of the question. As things stood now, SW would wipe the company off the map in no time and deBloise and his circle would lose a pile of money.

But according to Haas, deBloise was well aware of this idiocy. That didn't make sense. She had

done some research on deBloise and he had proven to be an extremely crafty man who planned well and covered all exits. Involvement in this fiasco-to-be was highly out of character and that bothered Jo, bothered her very much.

Returning to Ragna, Jo filled Old Pete in on the details and he was none too happy with the situation either.

"It doesn't fit, Jo," he said. "I've been watching deBloise carefully ever since he made political hay out of Junior's death and this isn't like him at all. I don't like it."

"Well, there are only two possible answers," Jo sighed. "He has either made a big mistake this time and completely underestimated the situation, or he knows something we don't know."

"Don't worry about making a choice, Jo; the answer is simple: he knows something we don't—he *must!*" The old man shook his head and smiled ruefully. "Imagine Denver Haas thinking that military contracts would pull him through! Ha! There's no one to fight! I mean, who are we going to go to war with, the Tarks?"

Jo had been reaching for the handle of one of her desk drawers but froze at the mention of the Tarks. Old Pete noted the arrested movement.

"Don't be silly, Jo," he said. "The Federation may not be on the best terms with the Tarks but there's no war in sight. There are economic and territorial disputes and it may eventually come to blows but not in the near future." He turned toward the door. "And deBloise and his faction are nowhere near powerful enough to start one. That's a blind alley, I'm afraid."

Jo smiled and nodded. "I guess you're right. I'll see you later." But when he was gone her demeanor changed. She leaped upon the intercom. "Find William Grange—tell him to drop whatever he's doing and get to my office immediately." She cut off without waiting for a reply.

The Tarks were the key. Old Pete had been right about the war aspect: there was no way deBloise could start a war. But the pieces had suddenly fallen together for Jo—at least she hoped they had—and what she saw was a most ingenious, devious plan. Denver Haas had given her all the pieces and Old Pete had brought in the catalyst: the Tarks.

She couldn't help but smile with admiration as she considered all the delicate aspects of the insidious plot. This deBloise character was a truly remarkable man. The Restructurists were lucky to have him on their side. But the Federation had Josephine Finch.

Grange came in then. "You wanted to see me, Miss Finch?"

"Yes, Bill. I need some quick information on SW."

Grange visibly relaxed at this statement and took a seat. He knew more about Star Ways than many of its board members. The company had been the first to develop a commercial interstellar warp unit and quickly changed its name from Heller Technical to the more picturesque Star Ways Corporation. Through innovative marketing and financial maneuvers and the tried and true business practice of hiring the best and making it worth their while to stay on, Star Ways had securely placed itself in the number one spot as far as gross income was concerned. The corporation had never needed the services of IBA.

"What specifically do you want to know? I could talk all day."

"I know you could," Jo replied with a smile. "But I want to know SW's two top subsidiaries—not necessarily the most active but the ones most important to the gross income."

"The first is easy: their tube-drive company. When they acquired that they really began to move because they could outfit ships for both interstellar and peristellar travel. They have a number of fair-sized competitors . . . Fairgood is giving them the best fight they've had in years." He beamed as he said this; Fairgood was an IBA account.

"The second most important subsidiary is a debatable choice. General Trades generates a lot of income on luxury items but there's that pharmaceutical company they acquired a while back—Teblinko Drugs—that's been a thorn in their side. They had to pour a lot of money into it but things seem to be paying off at last. Latest figures show that it's pulled up behind Opsal Pharmaceuticals which makes it the number two drug firm. So I'd say that Teblinko and General Trades are of equal importance at the moment, but once Teblinko consolidates its gains its well-being will be somewhat less crucial to overall profits."

Jo nodded and made a few notes.

"What's this all about?" he asked. Jo had decided to keep her counterplan to herself. She was debarking on a precarious course of action, the repercussions of which might well reverberate throughout the whole galactic economic structure; the fewer who knew about it the better.

"Just working out a theoretical problem," she replied. "You've been a big help. May I call on you again if I need you?"

"Sure," Grange replied, taking the hint and rising. He was too canny to be fooled by Jo's lame explanation—you weren't told to drop everything and get up to the head office because of a theoretical problem—but he was confident of being filled in on all the details if and when he came to be involved.

When he had gone, Jo ordered the complete files on Fairgood Drive and Opsal Pharmaceuticals; both were long-standing IBA accounts. She began poring over them as soon as they arrived.

With the Fairgood file was an envelope with new information: a natural deposit of Leason crystals had been found on the second planet of the Rako system—the Tarks, however, were also claiming the find since Rako occupies a place along the mutual expansion border. To further complicate matters, consent for export had to be obtained from the inhabitants—a group of senile savages.

Jo shook her head and put the file aside. That would take a very careful evaluation. Now to look at Opsal. Opsal and Teblinko were in a pitched battle for the galactic pharmaceutical trade. The two companies were about equal in product quality but Opsal had a slight advantage in distribution since it was slightly older. Teblinko, however, was closing the gap.

What was clearly needed was a new product and both companies were vying for the rights to a certain grain rust on the planet Lentem. Again, the only thing holding them up was the native intelligent race. For the Tarks wanted the same item and the natives were holding out, hoping to use their commodity as a bargaining point between the two interstellar races.

Jo frowned. The Tarks were popping up more and more lately. There would be a clash someday—a big one. The Tarcan Empire was ruthless and active and no doubt took the Federation's *laissez-faire* attitude as a sign of weakness, or poor organization. One day they would overstep their boundaries to test the Federation's mettle. That would be a fatal mistake for the Tarks.

She fed the Opsal data into the computer and asked for a few correlations and information on any existing variables which she might be able to manipulate. The machine gave her a number of items, among them was the fact that the Tarcan representative was due for another visit to Lentem in quest of the grain rust rights. Also, there emerged a short biography on a man named James Rondo, a terran and the only "alien" allowed permanent residence on Lentem.

She immediately sent an urgent message to the president of Opsal telling him to send a man to Lentem as soon as possible and to place one thousand shares of Opsal stock under the name of one James Rondo, resident of Lentem. She could give no reasons now but asked the president to trust her . . . IBA had done well for them in the past and was trying to do so now.

Now for Fairgood: that company had followed IBA's advice by sending out exploration teams to any star systems which showed spectroanalytic traces of Leason crystals. It was an expensive undertaking which had yielded only analogues until last year when a motherlode of true, natural Leason crystals had been found on Rako II. Leason crystals were the major lining of peristellar drive tubes and until now could only be obtained through an expensive, low-yield synthesis; a large natural deposit was priceless.

However, the Tarks were claiming the planet, too. A major incident was avoided—luckily—by the discovery of a dying, semi-savage race on the planet. By mutual agreement, Tark and Terran had agreed not to exploit any planet with intelligent natives without the permission of those natives. These natives wanted rejuvenation of their race in return for the crystals, and both the Fairgood company and the Tarcan Empire had research teams at the site trying to solve the problem. No one was meeting with any success. A public-relations expert was clearly indicated here—only the "public" in this case would be a group of aliens.

Jo thought she knew the firm which could supply the right man; if he was free at this time and the firm could be convinced to send him, Andy Tella was the man. She got a message off to Fairgood and virtually insisted that they send one Andrew Tella off to Rako II—and be sure to give him plenty of

incentive, she added.

These preparations completed, Josephine Finch could only sit and wait. If her plan was successful, deBloise would be countered. That was all that mattered. As far as she was concerned, this was merely an economic move with political implications. She was using her economic influence to preserve a political system she believed in.

She was totally unaware of what Larry Easley would find on Jebinose and had no idea that her detachment toward deBloise was about to be transformed into a very personal involvement.

IV

After two fruitless weeks on Jebinose, Easley went to Danzer to contact the local Vanek group. He still had his suspicions about Junior's death and wanted confirmation directly from the mouth of a Vanek. For Vaneks never lie.

It was easy enough to find one. The Vaneks had made a sort of shrine out of the place where Junior had died and there they mounted a constant vigil. In the fatal alley, in the center of a crude circle of stones, sat a lone Vanek beggar, humming and jiggling his broken salad bowl.

"Wheels within wheels," he said as Easley approached.

"Sure," said Easley, stopping outside the circle. "Uh, can I speak with you a minute?"

"Speak, *bendreth*."

Easley squatted and looked at the Vanek. Pupils dilated from a long watch in the shade of the alley looked out at him from beneath hooded eyelids. The blue-tinted skin of his face was wrinkled and dusty. This was one of the older Vaneks.

"I want to know about Junior Finch."

The Vanek smiled. "He was our friend."

"But he was killed."

The smile remained. "Wheels within wheels, *bendreth*."

"But who killed him?" Easley asked.

"We did."

"But why?"

"He was our friend."

Easley was getting annoyed. "But why did you kill a man who was your friend?"

"He was different."

"How was he different?"

The Vanek shrugged. "Wheels within wheels, *bendreth*."

"But why did you kill him?"

"He was our friend."

"Oh, hell!" Easley muttered, rising and dusting off his knees. He realized he was wasting his time and turned away without giving alms. *Damned if I'll give them a cent.*

How could you figure a bunch of alien half-breeds who kill the man who's trying to help them, and then make a shrine out of the place where they murdered him?

He growled to himself and headed for his flitter. He had an appointment with Elson deBloise himself later in the afternoon and he didn't want to be late. His favorite and most successful cover—that of an author researching a book—had paid off again. DeBloise was no different from any other public figure . . . he couldn't pass up the chance of having his name used as a source.

He spent most of the early afternoon going over his plan of attack. He expected to get little information from deBloise but at least he'd be able to size the man up in person. Larry Easley's job was people and he could get a lot out of a personal conversation, even if the subject was the weather. And Josephine Finch wanted to know about deBloise and what he knew about her father.

He arrived at the plush home planet offices of the Sector Representative a little early and sat eying the receptionist until it was time for his appointment.

Elson deBloise gave him a warm greeting. "Well, Mr. Easley, what do you think of our fine planet?" He was a big, puffy-looking man, but Easley immediately sensed a core of steel.

"Very nice," Easley lied as he took the indicated seat.

"I understand you're doing a book about Joe Finch, Jr."

Easley nodded. "I was hoping I could get a personal glimpse of the man from your viewpoint."

"I'm afraid I didn't know him at all, never met him."

"But that was quite an impassioned speech you made about him on behalf of the Integration Bill."

"I didn't have to know him to say what I did," deBloise replied with a faint smile. "I knew what he was trying to do. He was trying to bring equality to those less fortunate and he was trying to give the Vaneks a little dignity. He was going out on a limb for his fellow man. I understood him perfectly and I'm willing to bet that if he were alive today he'd be very active in the Restructurist Movement."

Easley doubted that very much but kept his opinion to himself. "What about that Integration Bill, Mr. deBloise? Would it have passed without Mr. Finch's death?"

"Definitely—not with such resounding unanimity, of course, but it would have passed. That bill, by the way, was pending before he even arrived on Jebinose. I was its main sponsor."

"And on the reputation you earned with that bill, you went on to successfully run for Planet Rep to the Federation, isn't that correct?"

DeBloise paused and scrutinized his interviewer. "Is this book about me, or about Finch?"

"It's about Finch, of course," Easley said, flashing the most disarming smile in his repertoire. "But I want to get into the long-range effects of his stay and consequent demise on Jebinose."

"Of course," deBloise said, somewhat mollified. He had the distinct feeling of being under a microscope. This writer, Easley, had a manner about him which deBloise did not like. He'd have to run a check on the man.

The intercom buzzed and deBloise accepted the call with some annoyance. "I said I wasn't to be disturbed during the next few minutes!"

"I'm sorry, sir," said the receptionist, "but Mr. Proska is here and wishes to see you."

The casual observer would have noticed nothing, but Larry Easley's attention became riveted on deBloise.

At the mention of the name "Proska," every muscle in deBloise's body had stiffened and there was the slightest blanching of the skin, the slightest tightening of the mouth. The man's body was transmitting fear, acute fear. His voice, however, was calm when he spoke.

"Tell him I'll be with him in a moment." He released the button and turned to Easley. "I'm sorry, but some urgent business has just come up and I'm afraid we'll have to cut this interview short. I'm leaving for Fed Central tonight but I should be back in a few weeks; please make another appointment with my secretary."

Easley said he'd be sure to do so. As he reentered the waiting room, he saw only one occupant besides the receptionist. A small, sallow, balding man sat with his hands on his knees. Easley was about to classify him as a timid nonentity until he caught a look at the man's eyes. There was not a hint of timidity or even mercy to be found there. This was no doubt the Mr. Proska who struck such fear into the heart of Elson deBloise, powerful, secure, influential Elson deBloise. Mr. Proska must have some sort of hold over deBloise, something that terrified the man. Larry Easley suddenly became very interested in finding out just what it was. He started with the records at the Planet Center.

When the human race broke its Earth-shackles and reached out for new stars and the virgin planets that circled them, its fertility apparently trebled and its numbers grew in a geometrical progression. With interplanetary travel commonplace and interstellar travel a routine, planet-hopping became the rule rather than the exception and it was virtually impossible for one individual to find another. The problem was easily solved with the introduction of planetary record centers. Vital, identifiable statistics of all natives were kept on record, usually in a place near the major spaceport. Data such as date of birth, parents, education, employment record, present location and so on were kept in a file open to the public. Some people grumbled about the records as an invasion of privacy, but most realized that with billions upon billions of humans strewn about the galaxy, they were necessary.

It was to these files that Easly hurried as soon as he was out of the deBloise office complex. It was a slim chance, but Proska just might have been born on Jebinose. If so, Easly would at least have a starting point. In the Planet Center, he found a free computer station and punched in Proska's name. There were only two people on record with that name. The first was deceased; the second had been born forty-four years before and still resided on the planet.

That was the one—at least the age was right. Easly checked down the list and noted that Cando Proska had attended the Jebinose psi school as a boy but had dropped out at the age of ten. That in itself was strange because people with psi talents are always in demand; even those with the most mediocre abilities are assured a good income for the rest of their lives. Proska must have talent or else he would never have been admitted to the school. Why did he drop out? He had held a routine office job until about fifteen years ago when he quit. No employment since then. Also strange.

That was the end of the record. Not much information, but Easly felt somewhat satisfied. Something had clicked in the back of his mind as he reviewed the information; he couldn't place it right now—his mind often made correlations without immediately informing him—but he knew from experience not to push it. Sooner or later it would come to the surface.

He decided to take a look at Proska's home and wrote down the address. It was a nice day so he rented an open flitter and punched in the address. To his surprise, the flitter took him to the outskirts of the city and into the center of an exclusive well-to-do neighborhood. It hovered over a large home of elaborate design and a red light flashed a warning that clearance was required from below before it could land. Easly took a closer look at the grounds and his trained eye picked up traces of a very effective and very expensive protective system.

"Not bad for a guy who's been out of work for fifteen years," he muttered.

He was about to start a slow circle for a better look when he noticed another flitter approaching. He took control of his own vehicle and moved off at an unhurried pace. The other flitter was closed with the windows opaqued. He watched it land in front of the Proska house and cursed himself for his carelessness in renting an open flitter. If deBloise had been in that flitter and had recognized him, Easly's cover was in jeopardy. His policy in a situation such as this was to assume the worst. That being the case, he would have to hurry and make another inquiry and then, possibly, get off-planet immediately.

Easly had obtained another address before leaving the Planet Center, that of Jacob Howell. He now punched that address and gave his flitter full throttle. Howell had been in charge of the Jebinose Psi School at the time Proska had dropped out. Maybe he could supply another piece to the puzzle.

Howell was retired now and lived off his pension in a small apartment in the city. He seemed to be a lonely old man and welcomed Easly openly. Any company, even that of strangers, was better than sitting alone.

Easly decided on a direct approach. "Do you remember a student named Proska, Mr. Howell? About thirty-four years ago, at the age of ten, he dropped out of the Psi School."

Howell wrinkled his brow. "Proska?"

"Cando Proska."

Howell nodded. "Yes, I believe I do remember him. The name isn't familiar but it's so rare that someone drops out of the school that I believe I know who you mean; Nasty business, that."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, little Proska got into an argument with another boy whose name escapes me—it was in the psychokinesis lab, I think—and the other boy died right there on the spot. Proska blamed himself and would not return to the school."

"What did the other boy die of?"

Howell shrugged. "We don't know. His parents were from the farm region and were devout members of the Heavenly Bliss sect—we have a lot of them on Jebinose, you know—and they refused to allow an autopsy. It's part of the Heavenly Bliss canon that the human body not be willfully mutilated. It was known that the boy had some sort of congenital heart defect and that was assumed to be the cause of death. It was probably the excitement of his argument with little Proska that brought it on, but Proska could not be blamed. You couldn't convince *him* of that, however. He considered himself

responsible and never wanted to come back."

Easily was interested. "Congenital heart defect? But that's ancient history! Nobody walks around with that sort of condition anymore!"

"They do when the parents refuse to consent to surgery," Howell said. "Mutilation, you know. If the same thing happened today there would be an autopsy, Heavenly Bliss sect or no. But we weren't as well organized then as we are now. I wish we had insisted on an autopsy. Then little Proska would have been spared such a burden of guilt. It was a shame to lose him. I seem to remember that he showed promise."

Easily's mind turned this new information over a few times and looked for correlations. None. He rose and thanked Howell for his help. The man virtually insisted that he stay for dinner, or at least for a drink. Easily begged off and left feeling guilty for not repaying the man for his information with a little companionship. But time was too short, and instinct was prodding him to leave Jebinose immediately.

He shrugged it off. He was interested now, too interested to give up just yet. He had a tantalizing feeling that all the pieces were there; all he had to do was arrange them in the proper light. He started laying them out for examination. It was important to Jo to stop, or delay, deBloise and this Mr. Proska might well supply the lever with which she could apply some pressure.

First of all, deBloise was terrified of Proska. Proska was a psi who might possibly have caused the death of a boy at school as a child. He had never returned because of guilt. Why so much guilt? Unless he *knew* he had killed the other boy!

Could Proska kill with his mind?

Proska had a hold over deBloise and a big, expensive, well-protected house . . . and he hadn't worked for the past fifteen years. Fifteen years . . . the Integration Bill was passed almost fifteen years ago . . .

The subconscious correlation his mind had made back at the Planet Center suddenly came to the surface: it was fifteen years ago that Junior Finch had been killed on this planet! And it was possible that Proska could kill with his mind . . . and Proska quit work fifteen years ago! And he had a hold over deBloise.

But that didn't fit. The Vaneks killed Junior; they admitted it openly. And Vaneks never lie. And it was generally conceded that Junior's death merely increased the margin by which deBloise's pet Integration Bill was passed. So deBloise had nothing to gain from Junior's death. Or had he?

Against his better judgment, Easily decided to pay another visit to the alley where Joe, Jr. had been killed. Perhaps the same Vanek would still be there. He would no doubt be as reticent as he had been earlier in the afternoon so Easily made a stop at his hotel room. This time he would be better prepared; all he needed now was the tiniest bit of cooperation from the beggar.

The sun was well below the horizon when he landed in Danzer and he made his way quickly through the darkened streets hoping that he would find the same beggar in the alley.

He did, Easily wanted an older beggar, one who might have known Junior personally.

"Wheels within wheels, *bendreth*," the beggar greeted him. "Have you come again to meditate on our friend, Junior Finch?"

Easily nodded. "I would also like to meditate on someone else. His name is Proska."

The beggar's eyes remained impassive. "We know Mr. Proska but we do not fear him. We are not completely human and so his power is ineffective against us."

"What power?" he asked with a start. He hadn't expected such a direct answer.

"There are many powers in the Great Wheel," the Vanek said. "Mr. Proska possesses quite an unusual one."

"Yes, but just what is his power?"

The beggar shrugged. "Wheels within wheels, *bendreth*."

Easily knew right then that he would get little more out of the Vanek without some help. The evening breeze had yet to rise so he had to act now. He withdrew a cigar from his pocket and took his time lighting it. By the time the tip was glowing a bright red, he and the beggar were enveloped in a cloud of aromatic smoke. This was the effect Easily had wanted. He had a tiny vial of gas in his hand. He opened the nozzle and let it stream toward the Vanek. The gas worked as a highly effective tongue-loosener on

humans but was not entirely odorless and colorless. Thus the improvised smoke screen. He could only hope the Vanek nervous system was still sufficiently humanoid for the gas to work.

It took only a few seconds for the vial to empty and Easly casually slipped it back into his pocket, allowing himself to breath again.

"What is Proska's power?" he repeated.

"Wheels within wheels, *bendreth*," came the standard reply.

Easly cursed and was about to get to his feet when he noticed the beggar begin to sway.

"I am dizzy, *bendreth*. I fear it is the smoke you make."

"I'm very sorry," Easly said with the slightest trace of a smile. A mild dizziness was the drug's only side effect. He ground the cigar out in the dirt.

"Maybe you didn't understand my question," he said carefully. "I want to know what *kind* of power Mr. Proska possesses."

"It is a power of the mind," the Vanek said, putting a finger to his forehead.

Now we're getting somewhere, Easly thought with mental relish.

It was fully an hour later when Easly returned to his flitter and took to the air. Even with the help of the gas it had been hard work to pull any concrete information out of the beggar. The Vanek think in such a circumspect manner that you almost have to start thinking like them in order to get the answers you want. But Easly had his answers now and he wasn't even going to stop at his hotel. First stop was the spaceport.

His expression was grim as he flew through the night. The mystery of Joe's death and Proska's diabolical talent had been cleared up. He shuddered at the thought of running into Proska now. The little man couldn't kill with his mind as Easly had originally suspected. No, what Proska could do was much worse.

At the spaceport, Easly dropped the flitter off at the rental area and headed directly for the shuttle desk. He couldn't afford to wait for a direct route to the sector in which Ragna was located. His immediate concern was to get off Jebinose; he could worry about getting to Ragna later.

On the way to the shuttle area he passed the subspace communication area and thought it might be a good idea to get a message off to Jo ... just in case something happened to him. He entered one of the large, glass-enclosed booths, closed the door behind him and seated himself at the console. The information computer informed him that it was midday in Calmer City on Ragna. That would mean there was a good chance of catching Jo in her office. Easly put his identifying card in the slot and gave the desired destination of his call. A staggering price flashed on the screen but he pressed the "Accept" button immediately. This would go on the expense account.

Jo was surprised when she learned that she had a subspace call from Larry Easly. He would make such a call only under emergency conditions so he must have something important to say. Yet in all the time she had known him, Easly had never said anything important unless it was face to face. She started to smile as his face appeared on the screen and then remembered that he could neither see nor hear her—subspace calls were strictly one-way affairs.

"Jo?" he said. "I hope that's you on the other end. The indicator says it is, but I can't be sure so please excuse the cryptic nature of what I'm about to say. First of all, as to your father's end, there's more here than meets the eye. The man you sent me here to investigate may well be involved, but there's a new factor: a psi talent who . . . who—"

As Easly's voice faltered, Jo noticed his face go slack. He swayed in front of the screen, seemingly engaged in a battle to keep his balance. Utterly helpless, Jo had to sit and watch in horror as his eyes rolled up into his head and he sank from view.

Picture transmission was not interrupted, however, and Jo anxiously watched the passers-by, hoping one of them would glance in and realize that something was wrong with Easly. One man did stop and look in the glass. He was small, sallow and balding. His hard little eyes seemed to rest on the spot where

Easily had fallen, but he registered no surprise, made no move to help.

He merely smiled and turned away.

V

Jo arrived on Jebinose the next day with Old Pete. She would have liked to have confronted deBloise but he was well on his way to Fed Central for a meeting. She made a call, then hired a fluttercab to take them to the offices of the company that leased the sub-space phones to the spaceport.

"Aren't you going to the hospital first?" Old Pete asked.

"Not yet. I just called them and he's still in a coma." Larry was in good hands. As soon as Jo had been sure that he would not be getting up off the floor of the call booth, she had placed a call of her own to the local hospital to have Larry placed in an intensive care unit immediately. Every possible thing that could be done for him was to be done and all bills would be paid by the sector account number she gave them.

They arrived at the offices of the booth leasers. A tall, hawkish man greeted them.

"May I help you?"

"Yes," Jo said. "I'd like to speak to someone about the call booths you lease."

The hawkish man's face brightened. "Ah! You wish to lease some?"

"No. I just want some information."

"Oh," the man said with sudden sullenness. He handed Jo a brochure. "All the information you need is in here."

Jo flipped the brochure back in his face. "Listen, you!" she said. "One of my employees, who happens to be in perfect health, went into a coma in one of your booths and whether or not you find yourself up to your ears in a lawsuit depends on the answers I get from you right now!"

The man was suddenly quite agreeable. "You must mean the unfortunate incident last night. I assure you, our booth had nothing to do with that. Every piece of equipment is of the finest quality and everything is insulated and shielded. Why, we even have a psi shield around each and every—"

"Psi shield?" Jo said with heightened interest. "Why a psi shield?"

"Well, as you know, a telepath can't read a nontelepath . . . unless the nontelepath is speaking; and then he can only read what's being verbalized, so it's not very useful. *Unless* you want to know what is being said in a soundproof booth."

"Such as one of your call booths," Jo added with a nod.

"Correct. So we fit each booth with a psi shield which sort of dampens all psi transmissions."

"In either direction?" Jo asked. The man paused and considered this. "Yes, come to think of it, it acts as a wall and so interference would be met in either direction."

"Thank you," Jo said. "That's all I want to know." She wheeled and stalked out to the street. A bewildered Peter J. Paxton followed.

"What was that all about?" he asked as they regained their seats in the fluttercab.

"Larry mentioned something about a psi talent before he collapsed. I'm just wondering if maybe Larry was supposed to die in that booth but the shield somehow dulled the effect."

"You mean a psi killer?" Old Pete scoffed. "That's a fairy tale!"

Jo was pensive. "Wouldn't all the psi killers in the galaxy like you to think so? I mean, there's no way you can prove that a man has been killed by a psionic thrust, and surely no one's going to admit that he has such an ability because there's only one way he could know about it: murder."

"I see your point, Jo, but it's pretty farfetched. It's clear that Larry stumbled onto something and deBloise tried to silence him. But I doubt that he's the victim of a psi killer. I wish he were conscious so we knew what deBloise is up to."

"I already know deBloise's plan," Jo said. "I'm surprised you haven't figured it out yet."

"What do you think it is?" he asked.

"I'll tell you this much: "I made an all-out effort to obtain the Rako II Leason crystals for Fairgood

and the *hassa* rust for Opsal and it paid off. Both contracts have been landed although the operatives took some steep risks to get them."

"I can see what a natural supply of Leason crystals will do for Fairgood and I congratulate you for helping them get it—they'll leave the competition behind in no time. But I'm not familiar with this *hassa* rust."

"*Hassa* is a grain that grows on Lentem; it's commonly afflicted by a peculiar rust that has turned out to be the pharmacological find of the century. Every known kind of bacterium becomes addicted to the *hassa* rust should enough of it be ingested by the host; and if you remove the rust from the host's diet, the bacteria die."

"Even the enterics?"

Jo nodded. "Every single one in the body. The patient is then reinfected with his everyday, nonpathogenic bacteria and sent on his way, cured."

"But why do you need a contract?" Old Pete asked. "I'm sure some hotshot botanist could grow his own *hassa*."

"It's been done already," Jo said. "But no one has had the slightest bit of luck in getting the rust to grow. It seems to be highly sensitive . . . and it grows wild on Lentem."

Old Pete shook his head in wonder. "I'm proud of you, Jo. In two moves you've put two IBA accounts into the top of their respective fields."

"And countered deBloise in the process," she added,

"I still don't see how," Old Pete mused. He watched his young female companion closely. He had thought it unfortunate when he had learned that Josephine Finch had taken administrative control of IBA.

Her stock holdings entitled her to it, but she had seemed such a girlish thing when he had retired. She was a woman now and more like her grandfather than Old Pete had imagined anyone could ever be; she had his take-command attitude, his coolness, his decisiveness, his ability to deal practically with abstract situations. Yet her femininity was ever apparent and, somehow, enhanced by these qualities. IBA had been in her hands for five years now and was flourishing. Old Pete wished he were about fifty years younger.

His reverie was interrupted by their arrival at the hospital. There they learned that Larry had nothing physically wrong with him. All tests had come up negative.

"About the only thing I can suggest," the doctor told Jo as they stood beside Larry's bed, "is that this may be a psychogenic coma. It almost seems as if the mind induced this state upon itself but for what reason I can't imagine."

"Protection?" Jo suggested.

"Possibly, but from what?"

"That remains to be seen," Jo muttered.

Later, when the doctor had gone and Old Pete was out attending to hotel accommodations, Jo sat alone in the darkened room and watched Larry Easley's peaceful face. She fervently hoped that Larry's prognosis was as favorable as the doctor had indicated. And she wasn't thinking of the secret now sealed within him.

Three years of close association had formed a close bond between the two of them, a bond that might well grow into something more if they would only momentarily slow the pace of their individual lives. Larry was stopped in his tracks now; maybe if Jo decelerated a little ...

There was a noise behind her and Jo turned to see five cloaked figures filing through the door. Wrinkled, blue-gray faces peered out from their hoods. Vanek. Jo's feelings toward the Vanek were ambivalent. She couldn't believe that they had killed her father, yet there was the fact of their confession to the crime. She waited for them to speak.

"We came to see the daughter of Junior Finch, our friend," said one.

"How do you know who I am?" Jo said, springing to her feet. She had carefully hidden her identity on this trip, even to the point of using an account listed under a phony name to pay for Larry's medical care.

"Vanek eyes are everywhere," came the enigmatic reply.

"What do you want here?" she asked.

"We wished to pay you homage," said the speaker. The five Vaneks bowed toward her.

"Wheels within wheels, *bendreth*," they chorused. Then, in complete silence, they filed out.

Jo hesitated a moment, then rushed to the door and peered out. The Vaneks were gone. She flagged a nurse who was rounding the corner to her left.

"Where did those five Vaneks go?" she asked.

The nurse smiled. "Did you say *five* Vaneks? Dear, I've worked in this hospital for nearly ten years and I've never seen *one* Vanek set foot inside this building. They have their own medicine, you know."

"I guess I was mistaken," Jo lied after the slightest pause and closed the door again. Jebinose was proving to be a very strange planet.

On Jo's order, a small psi-shielding device was placed in Easley's room and hidden under the bed. She didn't know exactly what had happened before but was quite sure there had been an attempt on Larry's life and she wanted to be prepared in the event the assassin returned to finish the job. A psi shield might be the reason Larry was alive now and she wanted to take no chances.

The doctor returned and told her that the latest test results indicated a progressive shallowing of the coma; Easley was expected to regain consciousness within the next six or eight hours.

Jo placed a call to Old Pete. She stood at the window and stared at the last rays of sunset as she waited for the connection. Old Pete's face appeared on the screen.

"I'm staying here tonight," she told him. "I'll call you as soon as there's something to call about."

Old Pete nodded from his hotel room. "O.K. I'll be there first thing in the morning."

Jo broke the connection and sat down beside the bed. She sat there with her thoughts and didn't bother to turn on the room lights as night crept in. Consequently, she was startled when the night nurse popped in and threw the switch.

"Just checking up on him," she said with a pleasant smile. She walked over to the vital signs indicator on the bed, glanced at the readings and nodded. "He's coming along fine," she said and departed.

The door opened again a few hours later. It was an orderly, a short, balding man in white.

"You'll have to step out a minute, Miss, while I prepare him for some final tests," he said in a rasping voice. "Sorry, but that's the rule."

Jo stood up. "Going to finish the job you bungled in the call booth?" she said through tight lips.

The orderly turned on her with blazing eyes. "Who are you?"

"I'm the person who was on the other end of that sub-space call when you tried to kill him," Jo told him. "I saw you on the screen."

Calmer now, Proska nodded. "So it seems I made *two* mistakes last night: not only did I forget about the psi shield on the booth but I carelessly got in range of the pick-up, too." He shook his head. "Not as careful as I used to be. But I'll tie up *all* the loose ends tonight. But before I do, tell me about this man. What was he after?"

Jo hesitated, not sure of what to do. There was a little red button on the visiphone for instant contact with the police. A single push would bring them immediately. She wanted to see this man in the hands of the police—although how they'd handle him was beyond her—but more than that, she wanted information. He obviously planned to kill her along with Larry so it might not be too difficult to get him to open up. Then she'd press that button.

"He's a detective I sent here to get some information on Elson deBloise," Jo said.

"What kind of information?" "Something that might be of political use," she replied.

Proska's eyes gleamed. "Blackmail, perhaps?"

"Perhaps."

"We thought it might be something like that. He had an interview with deBloise, then he was seen hovering over my house, then he went to Danzer and spent a long time talking to a Vanek. We didn't like that; and then the speed with which he headed for the spaceport convinced us that he knew something, something dangerous." He moved toward the bed. "But now it doesn't matter what he knows."

Jo reached for the red button on the visiphone but never made it. Her vision blurred as nausea and vertigo swept over her. She found herself sprawled flat on her back on the floor.

Proska's teeth were clenched. "That was a futile move! I sensed a psi shield the moment I entered the room but your detective's condition should be proof enough that a shield only dulls my powers." He stopped speaking suddenly and eyed Jo as she slumped on the floor, eyed her sprawled legs, the curves of her body accentuated by the clingsuit.

"You know," he said as he came around and sat on the edge of the bed, "it would be a shame to waste you." His gaze roved her body again. "You could be very entertaining."

Jo propped herself into a sitting position and laughed in his face.

"Don't be so smug, my dear!" he flared. "You're talking to Cando Proska and he can do unheard of things with his mind! I discovered as a child that I could kill with thought and it terrified me. But after years of being pushed about by people with power and money and being treated like any other worthless slob, I decided I'd had enough. I began experimenting with my powers and I learned, I learned. A fair number of people are dead or worse because of those experiments but I finally knew my capabilities."

He glared at her, ego blazing in his eyes. "So do not laugh at a threat from Cando Proska! I could take your mind and purge it of all cognitive ability. That no doubt would make you quite entertaining for a while—completely mindless, of course, but *quite* responsive! It's no idle boast . . . I've done it before." A thought suddenly struck him and he glanced at Easley.

"Come to think of it, that's probably what your detective discovered.

I 'purged'—that's my own little name for it—an off-worlder some years ago in Danzer. His name was Finch; you might have heard of him."

Jo's body froze with shock and rage. She managed to speak with only the greatest effort of will. "I'd heard he was murdered."

"Oh, he was. But not by me. You see, Finch's success at integrating the town of Danzer was threatening to kill a bill on which Elson deBloise had staked his political future. I merely went to deBloise and told him I could help him if he'd meet me in my apartment. He was desperate by then so he came and I offered to stop Finch cold without the slightest use of force, or violence . . . for certain considerations, of course. He had learned that Finch was on the verge of success so he agreed. I merely went to Danzer and relieved Finch of all his cognitive abilities. He was a drooling vegetable when I left him in that alley."

"But the knife," Jo said.

Proska nodded. "One of his Vanek friends came along and saw his condition. He conferred with other Vaneks and they decided to kill him. They practically worshiped Finch and felt he would prefer to be dead than allowed to live on as a mindless blob of flesh. It all worked out rather well, actually. The Integration Bill passed with an impressive majority and I've been bleeding deBloise dry ever since." He smiled at Jo's questioning glance. "That's right. I made a recording of our little 'business conference' in which he promised to pay me for stopping Finch. And if I should happen to die in a manner that is in anyway suspicious, a copy of that recording will go directly to the Federation Ethics Council and deBloise's political career will be finished.

"And anytime I want to put pressure on him, I threaten him with Finch's fate. It's a perfect setup: he's scared to death of me and yet he doesn't dare do a thing to get rid of me. He'll do just about anything I tell him to . . . it's amazing how some people fear being a vegetable more than they fear dying." He turned his gaze on Jo. "And now it's your turn."

"The shield!" she warned, hoping to deter him.

"That's no problem. I know it's hidden in this room and after you're unconscious I'll find it and disconnect it."

As Jo struggled to her feet, Proska fixed his eyes upon her and she felt the vertigo and nausea again. But this time she was ready for it and resisted.

"You're strong," Proska commented. "Finch was strong, too, but eventually he was defeated."

Jo's knees suddenly buckled and she fell to the floor but kept resisting. "It must run in the family," she said.

Proska must have been somewhat surprised, or puzzled, by this statement for the indescribable pressure on Jo's consciousness lessened momentarily. She took advantage of the lapse.

"He was my father!" she screamed.

Not being psionic, Jo could never know, understand or explain what happened then. Proska recoiled—mentally and physically—at this revelation and at the intensity with which it was uttered. And in doing so he left open a channel between himself and the girl. Something flashed across that gulf, all the concentrated hatred, rage and disgust that had collected while Jo had listened to this horrid little monster of a man cold-bloodedly recount the murder of her father, the fury, resentment and repressed self-pity that had waited fifteen years for an object found one and channeled along the waiting path.

Proska twisted in agony and clawed at his eyes. He opened his mouth to scream, but no sound came forth. Unconscious, he crumbled to the floor.

Relief and reaction flooded Jo and she felt her own consciousness dimming. But before everything went black, she thought she saw the door to the room open and a hooded blue-gray face poke itself inside.

She was brought back to consciousness by the night nurse. "Feeling better now?" the woman asked. "I think you'd better take to a bed, Miss; you look awfully tired. You might have been on the floor for hours more if I hadn't got the buzz."

Jo was fully alert now and looked around the room for Proska. "Buzz?" she asked.

The nurse beamed. "Yes. Mr. Easily snapped out of his coma a few moments ago, saw you on the floor and rang for me."

"Larry!" Jo cried, leaping to her feet. He lay there in the bed, smiling and looking perfectly healthy.

"Hi, Jo," he said. The nurse quietly slipped out.

"Where's Proska?" Jo said with no little agitation once they were alone.

Easily was surprised. "You know about Proska?"

"He came here tonight to finish you off, Larry. Wasn't he here when you came to?"

"No," Easily said, totally bewildered. "What are you talking about? And what were you doing passed out on the floor when I woke up? The nurse explained what she knew about what happened to me, but what happened to you?"

Jo placed a call to Old Pete and then proceeded to tell Larry all she knew. When she told him what Proska had said, he nodded.

"That's what I found out from that Vanek in Danzer," he said. He shook his head. "They consider him the most dangerous man in the universe but were just sitting around waiting for the Great Wheel to bring him his due. Frankly, it scares the hell out of me to know he's running around loose!"

Old Pete arrived then and Jo related the events of the night again. "Did you say his name was Proska?" Old Pete asked.

Jo and Larry nodded in unison.

"Well, then, you have nothing further to worry about. As I came in I found the hospital in an uproar over the body that had been found outside the city. He had been wearing an orderly's uniform but his name was Proska and no Proska had ever been employed by the hospital. I would have ignored the whole story except for the bizarre way the man had been killed."

"You mean he's been murdered?" Jo asked.

"Yes, almost ritualistically. It seems some person or persons nailed him to a tree, sawed off the top of his head, scooped out his brain and smashed it at his feet."

"The Vanek!" Jo said.

"Not a chance," Old Pete declared. "The Vaneks never take any decisive action on their own behalf, or on behalf of anyone else."

"Maybe they've learned something," Larry mused. "Maybe Junior Finch taught them that a little initiative is better than waiting for the Great Wheel. Maybe they didn't want the daughter of their honored Junior to go the same way as her father and decided to do something."

There was a pause, then: "For beginners, they sure don't kid around," said Old Pete with a visible shudder.

"This means deBloise is finished," Jo said with satisfaction. "Proska's recording should be on its way to the

Federation Ethics Council by now. That's where he said it would go if his death had anything suspicious about it."

"That stops deBloise," Old Pete concurred, "but what about the Haas plan? The other Restructurists can carry it through without him."

Jo smiled. "That remains to be seen." She turned to the visiphone and placed a call to the Jebinose brokerage house.

"I'd like to buy some stock in Op-sal Pharmaceuticals and Fairgood Drive," she said as a man's face appeared on the screen.

"You and everybody else," he said with a smirk. "I've been trying to get a bid in on those two issues all night. The Galactic Board has gone wild!"

"How about Teblinko, or Star Ways Drive?"

The man's eyes lit up. "As much as you want! Good prices, too!"

"I'll think about it," Jo said. "Thank you." She turned to Old Pete and Larry. "Well, that's the end of deBloise's plan."

"I still don't understand," Old Pete said.

Jo moved away from the phone and slumped into a chair. "DeBloise was planning on SW running Haas out of business. He knew it would happen; and when it did he expected to go before the Federation and plead that further development of the warp gate is vital to the security of the Fed and will be needed on that inevitable day when we clash with the Tarks. He'd claim that unregulated competition was depriving the Federation of the gate, and he'd demand invocation of the emergency clause so that the Fed could intervene against SW."

"That's it!" Old Pete cried with dancing eyes. "If the plan succeeded, the Restructurists would have had a foothold in one of their prime target areas: regulation of trade!"

Easily was still somewhat puzzled. "How can you be so sure this is the plan?"

"It's obvious when you tie everything together. DeBloise was carefully hiding his financial link with Haas—that indicated he feared a conflict of interest charge. He was also aware that backing Haas was financial suicide . . . Haas is a monomaniac and a lousy businessman to boot. With him in charge of production and marketing, the warp gate was doomed; Star Ways would drive him out of business before he could get off the ground. And since Haas will allow no one other than himself to produce the gate—to which he has full legal rights—the warp gate would thus be lost to humanity and 'unregulated trade' would be painted as the villain.

"The obvious military advantages of the gate would have made it a perfect lever to get at the emergency clause. The Restructurists would scream Security and it would be difficult to oppose them. So I decided to stop them before they got started . . . I struck at SW."

Jo leaned forward as she spoke. "You see, SW is a well-diversified corporation and could afford to lose money on their warper in a price war as long as they could count on their subsidiaries to make up the difference. So I aimed at SW's diversity: I took a gamble and tried to hurt its two biggest subsidiary companies and succeeded. An effective competitive price war is almost impossible for SW now and so there's no excuse to invoke the emergency clause!"

Old Pete was on his feet. "This calls for a celebration!"

"Not yet," Jo said, her facial muscles tightening and her eyes going crystalline. "Not until I go to Fed Central and personally see Elson deBloise thrown out on his ear!"

DeBloise was not to be thrown out. When the accusation was made in the General Council, he and his Restructurist allies were ready. Jo and Old Pete arrived in time to hear the end of his fiery speech.

". . . And so we take our leave of you. You haven't driven us out with your false, slanderous smears against my character! It is your stupidity, your blindness which causes us to leave you to fester in this pool of anarchy called the Federation! We've tried to warn you, tried to help you bring order to the galaxy but you seem to desire chaos. Then chaos you shall have! We leave to form a new coalition of worlds. And woe to everyone who stands in our way!" With a dramatic swirl of his cloak he left the dais and headed for the door. Other Restructurist members of the Council followed him out.

Jo and Old Pete were standing by the main door as the group marched through. Jo stared intently at

deBloise: their eyes met, then deBloise was past. She was just a bystander to deBloise. He did not know—and perhaps never would—that the young, attractive woman watching his grand exit was the cause of his downfall.

A vid reporter rushed frantically around the foyer of the Council hall trying to get reactions. He approached Old Pete and aimed his recording plate at him.

"Sir," he asked, breathlessly, "what do you think this means? Do you think there's a chance of war between the Fed and the new Coalition?"

"The secession is certainly a bold move," Old Pete replied, "but I doubt if it means war. Oh, there might be a few armed skirmishes over some of the resource planets, but I hardly think the Fed will go to war in the full sense of the word."

This calm, reasoned reply was not at all to the reporter's liking. He turned to Jo.

"What about you, Miss? Mr. deBloise claims the terrible charge against him is all part of a plot to destroy him? Do you think there's a possibility of such a thing?"

Jo smiled and shrugged. "Wheels within wheels, *bendreth*."

She took Old Pete's arm and they walked away, laughing.