



# Chaos and Order

The Gap into Madness

Stephen R. Donaldson

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### The Gap into Madness

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THE GAP INTO MADNESS

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ORDER

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TO

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HOWARD MORHAIM:

*a good friend,  
a great agent,  
and a hell of a Ping-Pong player.*

Battered, weary to the bone, and profoundly baffled, Min Donner joined *Punisher* shortly after Warden Dios returned to UMCPHQ from Holt Fasner's Home Office. She hadn't slept since the day before her visit to Sixten Vertigus, hadn't eaten since her ride back to UMCPHQ from Suka Bator. A headache like a threat of concussion throbbed in her forehead. Occasionally her hearing buzzed like neural feedback.

She felt that her whole life was being rewritten around her; reinterpreted to mean something she hadn't chosen and couldn't understand.

Why was she *here*?

In some sense, Warden had answered that question. The last time she'd spoken to him, he told her, to her utter astonishment, *I have reason to think Morn Hyland may survive*—Even though he'd convinced her long ago that Morn was being abandoned, that he'd sold her body and soul, he'd said, *If she does, I want someone to make sure she stays alive, someone I can trust. That means you.* For that reason—apparently—he was sending Min away from her duties at UMCPHQ.

Nevertheless his reply explained nothing. All she really knew was that she was here not because he'd lied to her earlier; lied to her systematically and incessantly for months.

What in God's name was going on?

His signal of farewell reached her as she rode her personal shuttle out toward the gap range where *Punisher* had already turned and started preparations for an outbound acceleration; but she didn't answer it. She had nothing more to say to him. Instead of returning some vacillating acknowledgment or salute, she replied to the questions of her crew by shaking her head. Let Warden Dios take her on faith, as she was required to take him. He'd left her no other way to express her galling confusion—or her blind, baffled hope.

With as much of her accustomed grim determination as she could muster, she put kazes and assassinations, treachery and intrigue behind her, and concentrated instead on the job ahead.

Her orders were superficially simple. She was instructed to take command of the first available UMCP warship—in this case, *Punisher*—and go immediately to the Com-Mine asteroid belt. Under cover of the belt, she was supposed to “watch for and respond to any developments” from the direction of Thanatos Minor. In other words, to observe and presumably deal with the outcome of Angus Thermopyle's covert attack on Billigate.

That was plain enough. But why was it necessary? After all, at Fasner's orders human space along the Amnion frontier—especially in the broad vicinity of Com-Mine Station and the belt—was being webbed with the most intensive communications network ever deployed. Any decipherable information from the direction of Thanatos Minor would reach UMCPHQ in a matter of hours, whether she was present in the belt or not.

What kind of “developments” did Warden expect? Angus Thermopyle—Joshua—would either succeed or not. If he succeeded, Nick Succorso and the danger he represented would be finished. Min's suspicions of Milos Taverner would come to nothing. And Morn might—conceivably—survive. On the other hand, if Angus failed, everyone and everything would be lost. Morn would be just one more casualty.



Either way, there would be nothing for Min to do, except possibly pick up survivors—warn off an Amnion pursuit. Com-Mine Station could have done that. *Punisher* herself, despite her battle-worn and depleted condition, could have done it. Min Donner was the UMC Enforcement Division director: she belonged elsewhere. Back at UMCPHQ, rooting out kazo and traitors. Or even down on Suka Bator, helping Captain Vertigus prepare and present her Bill of Severance. She had no reason to be *here*.

No reason, that is, apart from Warden's desire to get her out of the way—to dissociate her from the fatal game he played with or against Holt Fasner. And his unexpected assertion that Morn might *get away alive*.

*If she does, I want someone to make sure she stays alive—*

Was that the truth? Or had Warden said it simply to ensure that she obeyed him?

She didn't know; couldn't know. But in the end, his orders were enough. She obeyed because she had sworn that she would.

Nevertheless she couldn't shake the dark feeling that she was doomed; that between the Warden Dios and Holt Fasner were about to cost her everything she had ever believed in or trusted.

At last her shuttle thunked against the docking port in *Punisher's* side; grapples jerked her home. Min nodded to her crew and stepped into the shuttle's airlock as if she didn't care whether she ever returned.

The bosun commanding the honor guard which greeted her inside the ship's personnel bay looked as worn out and abused as she felt. Min winced inwardly at the sight: she hated seeing her people in such bad shape. However, she kept her chagrin and anger to herself while she returned the bosun's salute.

"Captain's apologies, Director Donner," he said. He sounded even worse than he looked—a young officer who had been under too much pressure for far too long. "He can't leave the bridge. We weren't expecting to head out—he hasn't had time to get ready—" The bosun caught himself, flushed like a boy. "You already know that. I'm sorry."

"Captain will see you whenever you want. I can take you to your quarters first."

Min had scanned *Punisher's* reports before leaving UMCPHQ. The cruiser had just come home from a bitter struggle with fifteen or twenty illegal ships which had turned Valdor Industrial's distant binary solar system into a virtual war zone.

Because of the kind of mining, processing, and heavy manufacturing carried on by the station, Valdor and the traffic it serviced were rich with prizes. And like most binary systems, this one was a maze of orbits—masses of rock revolving around each other in patterns so complex that they defied mapping by anything less than a megaCPU. The pirates were entrenched among the almost innumerable planets, planetoids, and moons cycling around the twinned stars called Greater and Lesser Massif-5.

Over a period of six months, the Scalpel-class cruiser had engaged in dozens of pitched battles, weeks of pursuit. And all to little avail. Two pirates had been destroyed, one captured. The rest had fought back with such concerted ferocity, or had fled with such intimate knowledge of the system's hiding places, that no mere cruiser could have hoped to deal with them all.

No wonder the bosun was exhausted. No wonder the faces of the honor guard ached with despair at the prospect of another mission. *Punisher* needed rest, *deserved* rest. The UMC

were spread too thin; would always be spread too thin, simply because the gap drive made available more space than any police force could control. Not for the first time, Min thought that as long as the threat of the Amnion endured—as long as forbidden space offered wealth in exchange for stolen resources—her people were doomed to fail.

As usual, she kept that idea to herself. Instead she told the bosun, “I’ll go to the bridge.” Then, before he could give any orders himself, she dismissed the honor guard. In general she disliked the formalities of her position; and in this particular case she actively hated wasting the energy of these weary men and women on ceremonial duties.

Momentarily flustered, the bosun began, “Director, Captain ordered—” But an instant later he swallowed his discomfiture. With a salute, he let the guard go. “This way, Director.”

Min knew the way. On any ship the UMCP had commissioned, she could have found the bridge blindfolded. She let the bosun guide her, however. She’d already undercut him enough by dismissing his honor guard.

By the time she left the first lift and headed forward through the ship’s core, she knew *Punisher* was in trouble. Because of the recent damage to her eardrums, she still couldn’t hear clearly enough to pick up the cruiser’s characteristic hums and whines. But she could feel centrifugal g through the soles of her boots; she could sense vibrations with the nerves of her skin. Subtle stresses reached her like undamped harmonics.

“You’ve got internal spin displacement,” she commented to the bosun. “Bearings are grinding somewhere.”

He gaped at her sidelong. “How—?” She was the ED director, however: he wasn’t supposed to question her. With an effort, he mastered himself. “Forward,” he answered. “We took a hit that knocked the whole core off true. But that’s not all. We’ve got micro-leaks in some of the hydraulic systems. Several doors stick until the pressure rectifies. Half a dozen bulkheads don’t quite seal. And we’ve been holed twice. We’ve kept integrity, but we lost the conduit to one of the sensor banks. Captain has men outside right now, trying to jury-rig leads before we go into tach. For the rest—

“Director, we haven’t had time to trace those leaks or patch those holes. We’ve been battle-stations for most of the past six months. And only a shipyard can fix internal spin.”

The young officer sounded so raw that Min frowned to herself. “No criticism intended, bosun,” she told him quietly. “It was just an observation.”

He swallowed hard. “Thank you, Director.” Until he blinked them clear, his eyes were perilously moist.

*Punisher* was desperate for rest.

Full of outraged protectiveness toward her people, Min thought harshly, Fuck you, Warden Dios, and the horse you rode in on. You had goddamn better know what you’re doing.

The ship was a swarm of activity. Men and women hurried in all directions, rushing to and from the hundreds of duties required by a new mission. The few who recognized Min Donn paused to salute; but most of them were concentrating too hard—focused by fatigue and urgency—to notice her. Scalpel-class cruisers carried a crew of sixty-plus, but *Punisher* didn’t have that many to work with. Her reports had cited four dead and eleven confined to the quarters or sickbay by injuries or battle-shock: fifteen crewmembers lost across the four watches. As soon as Min had received Warden’s orders, she’d dispatched a provisioning shuttle to meet the cruiser; but in the time available *Punisher* couldn’t be adequately

resupplied. No wonder the captain was too busy to leave the bridge. Damaged, shorthanded and ill equipped, his command was a poor candidate for any important assignment. *Punisher's* best hope was that this mission proved to be as trivial as Min feared.

With one palm she stroked the butt of her handgun to steady herself as she accompanied the bosun forward.

Aside from weight, armament, and crew, one of the differences between a cruiser like *Punisher* and a destroyer like *Starmaster* was that *Punisher's* bridge occupied a command module which could be detached from the main ship to function separately. If Captain Davies Hyland had had a vessel like this, he might well have survived *Starmaster's* destruction, survived to keep his daughter out of Angus Thermopyle's hands. That was another detail for which Min blamed herself uselessly, despite the fact that she herself had approved *Starmaster's* construction and had selected Davies Hyland as captain.

None of that showed on her face, however, as she went with the bosun—ahead of him now—through the aperture which linked the rest of the ship to the command module. She encountered *Punisher's* captain and bridge crew with her features set in characteristic lines, stern and unreadable.

Almost instantly all movement on the bridge stopped: techs working on the screens and control boards froze; the bridge crew—helm, targ, data and damage control, communications, engineering, scan—hesitated momentarily, their hands poised on their stations, their faces tense.

Their attention made her feel that she deserved her reputation as Warden Dickson's executioner.

But then the captain, Dolph Ubikwe, broke the pause by swinging his g-seat toward Min. In a granite rumble, he said stolidly, "Director Donner. Welcome aboard."

At once the bridge crew rose to salute. The techs moved out of Min's way as if they believed—or wanted to believe—that they were beneath her notice.

There was no welcome in Captain Ubikwe's voice, however. It seemed to pulse from his chest like the cut of a subsonic drill. Even if Min had been deaf, she might have been able to hear him through the bones of her skull. Ensigns under his command often said that his voice could strip paint at twenty paces.

He was a large man—almost too large to pass the UMCP physicals—with a heavy mass of muscle hidden under his fat. Too much strain and too few showers caused his black skin to gleam in the featureless light. Red rimmed his bloodshot eyes; they appeared to bulge in their sockets. Fists as heavy as cudgels rested on the arms of his seat.

"Thank you, Captain." Min didn't expect welcome. "At ease," she told the bridge crew without shifting her gaze from Dolph Ubikwe. As they resumed their g-seats, she asked him, "How soon can you go into tach?"

His fists tightened slightly. "Depends on whether that's a request or an order. You order and we're gone. All we need to know is where. But if it's a request"—he lifted his heavy shoulders—"we can probably be ready in three or four months."

In another place, at another time, Min might have smiled. She knew this man well. He had first come to her attention in the Academy ten years ago, when his air of insubordination and his poor grades had threatened to deny him a commission. She had overruled the Academy commander in person to make Dolph Ubikwe an ensign. Despite his resistance to disciplin

which had showed in his sloppy classroom work as well as his excess weight, she had sensed a fettered emotional power in him, a charisma similar to Warden's. It might make him an effective leader—if he ever learned how and when to unleash it. Since then, he had vindicated her judgment by rising swiftly to the command of his own vessel. Under other circumstances, she would have had no qualms about using him to carry out Warden Dico's orders.

"If it were a request," she replied to his tight stare, "I wouldn't be here."

His mouth twisted. "Then perhaps the Enforcement Division director would condescend to tell us where we're going. It does make a difference, you know—heading, velocity, all those troublesome little gap details."

Now she did smile—a smile as humorless and bleak as an arctic wind. Instead of reacting to his sarcasm, she said simply, "The Com-Mine belt. Close to forbidden space."

At once a new tension crackled across the bridge. The data officer breathed, "Oh, Jesus," and the man on targ muttered, "Shit!" as if he thought Min wouldn't be able to hear him.

A muscle at the corner of Captain Ubikwe's mouth twitched like a flinch. "Now why the hell," he asked Min, "would we want to do a thing like that?"

She didn't snap at him. She also didn't drop his gaze. She could have made *Punisher* obey her blind—she could require unquestioning compliance from any ship in the fleet—but she had no intention of doing so. For one thing, she owed this ship an explanation. And for another, she knew that Dolph Ubikwe would serve her better if she let him be himself.

"Because," she answered, "there's been a covert UMCP attack on Thanatos Minor's bootleg shipyard. As I'm sure you remember, that planetoid is in forbidden space relatively near the Com-Mine belt. For the better part of a decade, illegals have been using the belt to cover themselves on their way to Thanatos Minor. The Amnion tolerate encroachment from that direction, if not from anywhere else.

"While we're standing here, the shipyard is under attack, I'm not prepared to discuss the nature of the operation here, except to repeat that it's covert. For now, the important point is this. There's going to be fallout.

"I have no idea what kind of fallout. I can't know. There may be survivors." *Morn Hylar* may survive—"Our people, or illegals on the run. Or there may be a full-scale Amnion retaliation."

Borrowing Warden's conviction because she had so little to spare of her own, Min concluded, "Whatever it is, we're going out there to deal with it."

The bridge crew stared at her. They had all turned their stations toward her. From their seats—command and communications in front of her, engineering and data off to the side—scan and helm and targ apparently hanging upside down over her head—they studied her with fear or anger or despair or plain numb weariness, as if she had just instructed them to commit suicide.

For a moment Dolph lowered his eyes. When he raised them again, they seemed oddly naked, as if he had set aside some of his defenses. "Permission to speak frankly."

Just for an instant Min wondered whether she should refuse. Then she decided against it. By some standards, disagreements—not to mention hostility—between commanders was bad for discipline. On the other hand, *Punisher* was his ship: the tone which either inspired or dismayed his people was his to set, no matter what she did. She was willing to trust him.

instincts.

She nodded once. "Please."

He shifted his posture as if to launch his voice at her from a more stable platform. "The let me just ask you, Director Donner," he said in a tone of raw outrage, "if you are out of your incorrigible mind. Don't you *read* reports anymore? Haven't you got a clue what we've just been through? Or maybe you think dodging matter cannon fire and asteroids alone for six months is some kind of holiday. You sent us out to Valdor to do a job which would have been too much for five cruisers. We're lucky to get home limping instead of just plain dead.

"We're shorthanded here. *That* was in the reports, too. Some of my people are drifting around Massif-5 in *caskets*. We've got holes and hydraulic leaks and a scan bank with no wiring. But never mind that. After what we've been through, we can stand a few minor inconveniences. We've got worse problems."

His voice was harsh enough to hurt Min's ears, but she knew from experience that he still had plenty of volume in reserve. For the sake of her personal comfort, she hoped that he didn't use it.

"Have you *listened* to this ship yet, Director Donner? Or have you forgotten what internal spin displacement sounds like? Have you forgotten what that kind of displacement can do to a warship? In case you've been spending too much time behind your desk and not enough on the firing line, let me remind you. If the bearings go and internal spin freezes before we can shut it down, centrifugal inertia is transferred to the whole ship. The whole ship starts to spin—which is a nightmare for scan and helm, never mind targ. *Punisher* isn't made for that kind of maneuver. And if we start to spin like that in the belt—or in combat—then you can kiss your hard ass good-bye along with all the rest of us.

"This is all crazy, Director Donner. How many warships have we got now? Fifty? Fifty cruisers, destroyers, gunboats, and full battlewagons? Do you expect me to believe they're all unavailable for this job? That not one of them is in reach?

"If that's true, let Com-Mine Station do it, whatever it turns out to be. Hell on ice, Director, they've got enough in-system firepower to slag *three* ships like this. Let them police their own goddamn belt for a few more hours.

"We are in no shape for this."

For reasons which she had never tried to explain to herself, Min often liked her officers best when they were angry at her. Perhaps because she understood Captain Ubikwe's indignation and approved of it, or perhaps because she was so angry herself that his indifference formed a strange bond between them, she smiled back at his protest with something like affection.

"Are you done?"

"No." Her reaction disconcerted him, but he obviously didn't want to show it. "I'm going to say it all again, and this time I'm going to say it *loud*."

"That won't be necessary," she drawled. "You've made your point."

Captain Ubikwe studied her hard. After a moment he asked more quietly, "Then why do you get the impression you're not going to let us off the hook?"

"I'm not," she replied. "You *are* the only ship available. You're *here*. Sure, I could pull your replacement away from Valdor. I could signal a battlewagon from Betelgeuse Primary, or take a destroyer off frontier patrol. I could try Com-Mine and hope they do a good job.

“But none of them can get *me* out there.”

The bridge received this in surprise, dull shock, or dread. The man on scan let a th whistle through his teeth like an effort to ward away spooks. From above Min, the ta officer muttered again, “Shit.”

Dolph flashed a look upward. “Glessen,” he rasped at targ, as throaty as a combustio engine, “if you say that again in front of Director Donner, I’m going to take you out in th woodshed and cane you.” None of his people laughed: they knew better. “In case you weren paying attention, the director of the entire UMCP Enforcement Division, which we so proud serve, has just announced that she’s putting her life in our hands. She isn’t sending us out the belt to see what we’re made of—she’s going with us. Where I came from, we called th ‘putting your money where your mouth is’—abruptly he pounded a fist on his board—“an we *respected* it.”

Suddenly everyone on the bridge seemed busy with one task or another. No one glanced the Glessen as he murmured, “Aye, sir.”

Glowering excessively, Captain Ubikwe returned his gaze to Min. She suspected that he w swallowing a grin. His tone was grave, however, as he asked, “Are you telling me ED has stake in this covert attack? I thought only DA did work like that.”

Min didn’t want to mention Morn Hyland. She wasn’t ready to open that door into her ow heart. Instead she said what she thought Warden Dios would have wanted her to say.

“No. I’m telling you the UMCP has a stake in it. Humankind has a stake in it.”

The captain sighed. For a moment or two he peered at his hands while he considered th situation. Then he dropped his palms onto his thighs. “In that case—” With a heave, he ro from his g-seat and stepped aside. “As Enforcement Division director and the highest-rankin UMCP officer aboard, the bridge is yours. Take the command station. I’ll evict targ—I ca work from there until we’re ready to go into tach.”

Min made a quick gesture of refusal. “She’s your ship, Captain. We’re better off with you command. And I need rest.” In fact, she hadn’t slept for two days; hadn’t eaten in twelv hours. “If you’ll detail someone to show me my quarters, I’ll get out of your way.”

A touch of gratitude softened Dolph’s face as he sat down again, but he didn’t thank he Automatically he hit keys on his board, checked his readouts. “Bosun will take you.” Th young man still stood by the aperture. “If you’ve got more orders for us, better spell the out. We were busy before you came aboard, but we’re a hell of a lot busier now.”

Min didn’t hesitate. “I want to be on the other side of the gap in two hours,” she answer promptly, “and in the belt in three. That means you’ll have to cut it fine.”

She knew the risks. If internal spin froze in the gap, *Punisher* might resume tard half hundred or half a million kilometers off course, tossed askew by the interplay betwee inertia and hysteresis—almost certainly a fatal problem near an asteroid belt. And if sp froze while *Punisher* navigated the belt, some kind of collision would be inevitable. To prote herself the ship would be forced to do almost everything without g. And she hadn’t bee designed for that. Her people weren’t used to it.

But whatever Angus Thermopyle did or failed to do was out of Min’s control, beyond h knowledge. Somewhere in the vicinity of Thanatos Minor, the chronometer was running on deadline which she didn’t know how to meet. That fact gave her a greater sense of urgen than Warden’s actual orders did.

“As soon as we hit normal space,” she continued, “I want communications on maximum gain across all bandwidths. If it’s out there, I want us to hear it.”

“Assuming we don’t encounter any surprises, take us into the belt over on the far side—say, ten thousand k from the border—and find some rock we can hide behind, anything with enough magnetic resonance to confuse opposing scan. Wake me up when something happens or when we’re in position, whichever comes first. I’ll go into more detail then.”

Captain Ubikwe lifted his head and bared his teeth, dismissing her. “Consider it done.”

Softly but distinctly, so that everyone could hear her, she pronounced, “I do. Otherwise I would have taken command.”

To spare him the distraction of answering her, she turned away and let the bosun guide her through the aperture back into the main body of the ship.

On the way to her assigned quarters, she made a mental note to consider transferring Dolph’s target officer to her personal staff. She wanted people around her who were willing to raise objections.

If Warden had let Min raise enough objections, she might not be here now, dragging the damaged ship with a battered crew across the gap on a mission which would turn out to be either so useless or so critical that it should have been given to someone else.

Hashi Lebwohl was not a dishonest man. It was more accurate to say that he was a-honest. He liked facts; but truth had no moral imperatives for him, no positive—or negative—valuation. It had its uses, just as facts had theirs: it was a tool, more subtle than some, cruder than others.

It was a fact of his position as the UMCP director of Data Acquisition that he was expected to satisfy certain requirements. Warden Dios himself liked—indeed demanded—facts. For that reason among others, Hashi respected his director. Warden Dios made no effort to play fast and loose with reality, as the late and unlamented Godsen Frik had done endemically; or as even Min Donner did, in ways which she characteristically failed to recognize. Warden Dios lived in the world of the real. Under no circumstances would Hashi Lebwohl have hesitated to do his job by supplying Warden with facts. And he was seldom reluctant to share his understanding of the way in which facts linked with each other to form more complex, less tangible realities.

On the other hand, he felt no obligation whatsoever to tell Warden Dios—or anyone else—the truth.

He received his first hints of what had happened on Thanatos Minor long before anyone else; quite some time before any other information reached UMCPHQ. Yet he withheld the facts for nearly an hour. And he kept the truth entirely to himself.

The hints went to him, first, because they were coded exclusively for his use, and secondly because no one in UMCPHQ Communications knew that they had anything to do with Billigate or Joshua. They were nothing more or less than flares from DA operatives, and such messages were always routed straight to the DA director the moment they came in.

The earlier of these two signals was a cryptic transmission from Nick Succorso aboard *Captain's Fancy*. Initially Hashi didn't mention it because it contained no useful information. Later, however, he suppressed its contents because they disturbed him.

*If you can get her, you bastard, Nick had sent, you can have her. I don't care what happens to you. You need me, but you blew it. You deserve her.* Then, for no apparent reason, Nick had added, *Kazes are such fun, don't you think?*

A pox upon him, Hashi thought in bemusement. Curse his black soul. Her? Who? *You can have her.* Was he talking about Morn Hyland? Was he deranged enough to think that Joshua had been sent to Billigate to rescue her?

No. His reference to kazes contradicted that inference. Clearly he meant to warn or threaten Hashi concerning some woman who was involved with kazes. Yet that, too, made no sense. What could Nick possibly know about events here? How could he be aware that UMCPHQ and the GCES had suffered terrorist attacks?

Perhaps the “her” he referred to was *Captain's Fancy* herself? Perhaps he meant to suggest that if Hashi or the UMCP made any attempt to interfere with *Captain's Fancy* the frigate would become a kaze aimed at UMCPHQ?

*You deserve her.*

“Deserve” her?



*You need me, but you blew it.*

---

Apparently Nick Succorso had lost his mind.

At last Hashi put that flare aside. He found himself unable to divine Nick's intentions. And that troubled him. He disliked his sense of incomprehension.

The later signal was another matter.

No one outside his domain, and perhaps no more than three people within it, knew that Angus Thermopyle, Milos Taverner, and Nick Succorso were not the only men he'd helped send to Thanatos Minor; or that the fourth had been dispatched for precisely this reason, to observe events and report on them.

The transmission was from a purportedly legal merchanter called *Free Lunch*; "purportedly" because Hashi had equipped her with false id and records so that she could travel freely in human space while she nurtured her private reputation—also more putative than real—as an illegal. According to her captain, Darrin Scroyle, he and his ship had escaped the vicinity of Thanatos Minor just ahead of the shock wave of the planetoid's destruction.

So Joshua had succeeded. That was good, as far as it went. But Captain Scroyle's message conveyed other facts as well, the implications of which inspired Hashi's decision not to pass his information along to Warden Dios immediately. He needed time to consider the situation in the light shed by Captain Scroyle's revelations.

Under Hashi Lebwohl's absolute supervision, Data Acquisition employed agents and operatives of all kinds. Some were freelance rogues, like Nick Succorso. Others were spies in the more traditional sense, hunting secrets under deep cover among the tenuous spiderweb societies of humankind's illegals.

And others were pure mercenaries. Unlike the rogues, they were men and women of peculiar honor, who gave their loyalty and their blood to anyone who paid their price. They could be trusted to do a specific job for a specific price, to question nothing, to complain about nothing—and to say nothing about what they'd done when the job was finished.

The only disadvantage to such an arrangement, from Hashi's point of view, was that the next job any given mercenary accepted might well be for some other employer; perhaps for one of humankind's enemies. As much as he could, he avoided this embarrassment by keeping his mercenaries busy—and by outbidding other employers.

Darrin Scroyle was a mercenary. He and *Free Lunch* were among the best of the breed: daring, heavily armed, and fast; capable of both recklessness and caution, as occasion warranted; willing for violence on almost any scale, and yet able to act with subtlety and discretion.

When *Free Lunch* reached human space and passed her message through a listening post by means of a gap courier drone to UMCPHQ, Hashi gave Captain Scroyle's report his full credence.

The gist was this. *Free Lunch* had left Billigate as soon as Captain Scroyle had become convinced that events were near their crisis. That was as Hashi had ordered: he didn't want *Free Lunch* caught up in whatever explosion resulted from Joshua's mission. But during her departure from Billigate's control space, *Free Lunch* had scanned the planetoid and its embattled ships with every instrument she had, and had observed several significant developments.

A team in EVA suits had emerged from docked *Trumpet* in order to sabotage Billigate

communications. After that they had broken into the Amnion sector—and then escaped.

*Captain's Fancy* had destroyed *Tranquil Hegemony*, not by matter cannon or lasers, but by ramming—apparently to prevent the Amnion warship from killing the EVA team.

A shuttle had left the Amnion sector to be picked up by *Soar*.

And *Free Lunch* had seen *Calm Horizons* moving to intercept *Trumpet's* escape, supported by a small flotilla of illegals sent out by Billingate.

That was bad enough; full of surprises and unexplained possibilities. But there was worse.

Before their departure, Captain Scroyle and his people had spent as much time as they could around the installation, studying scan and communications, listening to rumors, looking for information. They had witnessed *Captain's Fancy's* arrival from the direction of Enablement Station, harried by warships. They had seen Captain Succorso's ship launch an ejection pod which had veered away from *Tranquil Hegemony* in order to be intercepted by *Soar*. And they had heard stories—

The story that the Amnion had revoked Captain Succorso's credit on Billingate.

The story that he, the Amnion, and the Bill were locked in a three-way conflict over the contents of the ejection pod.

The story that Captain Succorso had spent time together in a bar with Captain Thermopylos and his second from *Trumpet*.

The story that the Bill's guards had been attacked and the contents of the pod stolen.

The story that *Soar's* captain, a woman named Sorus Chatelaine, had a mutagen immunity drug for sale.

The story that Captain Succorso had bartered one of his own people, a woman, to the Amnion in order to obtain—so the rumor went—*Captain's Fancy's* freedom to leave Billingate.

Taken all at once, such information might have given Godsen Frik the vapors with vengeance—the worst case of collywobbles in his adult life. It had a different effect on Hashi Lebwahl, however. In a sense, he lived for such crises: oblique events with disturbing implications which called for all the cunning, misdirection, and initiative he could supply. The fact that he took nearly an hour to consider the situation before sharing what he knew—some of what he knew—didn't mean that he was frightened. It simply meant that he wanted to give his best attention to this particular conundrum.

*Soar* and *Captain's Fancy*. *Trumpet* and *Calm Horizons*. *Tranquil Hegemony* and an Amnion shuttle.

Joshua, Nick Succorso, the Bill, Milos Taverner, Sorus Chatelaine, the Amnion. Not to mention Morn Hyland, who must have played some crucial part in Nick's decision to visit Enablement, and who therefore simply could not be irrelevant to Nick's conflict with the Amnion—or with the Bill.

*If you can get her, you bastard, you can have her.*

Morn?

No: not possible.

There were too many players; too many pieces moving across the game board. In particular, Hashi wanted to know more about this Captain Chatelaine and her ship. Was she Nick's "her"? Could the rumors about her conceivably be true? If they were, where could she have obtained a mutagen immunity drug, except from Nick himself? Then why would he have given it to her?

But even while he accessed his personal board to call up whatever information Data Storage had on Sorus Chatelaine and *Soar*, Hashi considered deeper possibilities.

He was by no means an unintuitive man. And he knew himself well. He recognized from experience that the issues which first focused his attention when he studied a problem often proved to be of secondary importance. Those issues frequently served as mere distractions from his conscious mind so that other parts of him could work more efficiently. Therefore he didn't waste his time wondering why Nick's message continued to nag at him, suggesting doubts he could hardly name. Nor did he worry about how many of Nick's intentions were contained or concealed in the rumors Darrin Scroyle reported. Instead he concentrated deliberately on gleaning data; deflecting himself from the questions he most needed to answer.

Unfortunately that took time. Under the circumstances, he wasn't sure he could afford it.

Well, he required the time. Therefore he would afford it as best he could.

*You deserve her.*

While Data Storage spun retrieval routines over its mountains of information, he keyed his intercom and told DA Processing—which was what he called his center of operations—that he wanted to see Lane Harbinger. "At once," he added laconically. "Right now. Five minutes ago."

A tech replied, "Yes, sir," and went to work.

Lane was the granddaughter of the famous explorer/scientist Malcolm Harbinger, but that meant nothing to Hashi. Its only significance was that she'd come by her meticulousness honestly. He wanted to see her because she was the hardware tech he'd assigned to help E Chief of Security Mandich investigate Godsen's murder.

He could not have said what connection he imagined or hoped to find between Captain Scroyle's report and Godsen's murder. He was simply distracting himself; allowing himself intuition the time and privacy it needed in order to function. Preserving himself in that fertile state of mind in which the least likely connections might be discovered.

Lane Harbinger responded to his summons promptly enough. When his intercom chimed to announce her, he adjusted his glasses by sliding them even farther down his thin nose, ruffled his hair, and verified that his lab coat hung crookedly from his shoulders. Then he told the data tech who served as his receptionist to let Lane in.

She was a small, hyperactive woman who might have appeared frail if she'd ever slowed down. Like any number of other people who worked for Data Acquisitions, she was addicted to nic, hype, caffeine, and several other common stimulants; but as far as Hashi could tell, these drugs had a calming effect on her organic tension. He assumed that her meticulousness was yet another kind of drug; a way of compensating for internal pressures which would have made her useless otherwise.

Presumably she was also a woman who talked incessantly. She knew better than to do that with him, however.

"You wanted to see me," she said at once as if the words were the merest snippet of a diatribe which had already been going on inside her for some time.

Hashi gazed over his glasses at her and smiled kindly. "Yes, Lane. Thank you for coming. He didn't ask her to sit down: he knew that she needed movement in order to concentrate. Even her most precise labwork was done to the accompaniment of a whole host of extraneous tics and gestures, as well as through a cloud of smoke. So he let her light a nic and pace back

and forth in front of his desk while she waited for him to go on.

“I wanted to know,” he said, peering at her through the haze she generated, “how your investigation is going. Have you learned anything about the kaze who brought about our Godsen’s untimely demise?”

“Too soon to be sure,” she retorted like a rushing stream caught behind a check-dam of her own will.

“Don’t worry about being sure,” he countered amiably. “Just tell me where you are right now.”

“Fine. Right now.” She didn’t look at him as she paced. Her eyes roamed his walls as if they were the limits, not of this office, but of her knowledge. “It’s a good thing you sent me over there. ED Security is motivated as all hell, and careful as they know how, but they don’t understand what ‘careful’ really means. Let them stick to shooting people. They shouldn’t be involved in this kind of investigation. Five minutes without me, and they would have made the job impossible.

“It could have been impossible anyway. That wasn’t a big bomb, they never are, there’s only so much space you can spare inside a torso, even if you only expect your kaze to be able to function for a few hours, but it was high brisance, I mean *high*. No particular reason why it shouldn’t have reduced his id tag and credentials to particles so small even we couldn’t find them, never mind the embedded chips themselves.

“But Frik’s secretary knows more than she thinks she knows.” In full spate the tech’s tone became less hostile; or perhaps simply less brittle. “Ask her the right questions, and you find out that after she did her”—Lane sneered the words as if they were beneath contempt—“‘routine verification’ on this kaze, he didn’t put his id tag back around his neck. He didn’t clip his communications credentials back onto his breast pocket, which is so normal around here we don’t even notice it anymore, hell, I’m doing it myself”—she glanced down at the D card clipped to her labcoat—“you’re the only one who gets away without doing it. But he didn’t do that.

“He shoved them both into his thigh pocket, the right one, according to Frik’s secretary. Which is not the kind of thing you do if you’re trying to plant evidence when you blow yourself up, because the bomb is still going to reduce everything to smears and scrap. But it is the kind of thing you do if you’re new at this and you know you’re going to die and acting normal in secure areas isn’t second nature. So his id tag and credentials were just that much farther away from the center of the blast.

“I found part of one of the chips.”

Hashi blinked his interest and approval without interrupting.

“You know how we do this kind of search.” As soon as she finished her first nic, she lit a second. “Vacuum-seal the room and go over it with a resonating laser. Map the resonance and generate a computer simulation, which helps narrow the search. When we chart the expansion vectors, we can tell where the kaze’s residue is most likely to be. Those areas we study one micron at a time with fluorochromatography. When you’re operating on that scale, even a small part of a SOD-CMOS chip emits like a star.”

He did indeed know all this; but he let Lane talk. She was distracting him nicely.

“As I say, I got one. Two, actually, but one was driven into the floor so hard it crumbled when I tried to extract it. Even I can’t work with that kind of molecular powder. So there

just one.

“I don’t know much about it yet. We can assume its data is still intact, that’s exactly why this kind of chip is good for, but I haven’t found a way to extract it yet. SOD-CMOS chips are in a state when power is applied to the source and drain. They read back by reversing the current. But to do that you have to *have* a source and drain. This particular piece of chip doesn’t include those conveniences.”

Another nic.

“But I can tell you one thing about it. It’s ours.”

Fascinated as much by her manner as by her explanation, Hashi asked, “How do you know?”

“By its particular production quality. Legally, nobody but us is allowed to make them, that’s part of the datacore law. Of course, we don’t actually manufacture them ourselves, the law simply gives us the power to license their manufacture, but we’ve only granted one license, Anodyne Systems”—she didn’t need to mention that Anodyne Systems was a wholly owned subsidiary of the UMC—“and they supply us exclusively. In fact, everybody who makes SOD-CMOS chips for Anodyne Systems actually works for us. The whole company is really just a fiction, a way for the UMC to keep a hand in what we’re doing, and for us to get SOD-CMOS chips without having to find room for an entire production plant in our budget.

“There’s only one way to make a SOD-CMOS chip. On paper, they should all be identical no matter who produces them. But it doesn’t work that way in practice. Quality varies inversely with scale. The more you make, the more impurities creep in—human error, if not plain entropy. The less you make, the fewer the impurities. Unless you’re incompetent, in which case I wouldn’t expect the chip to work anyway.”

“So if a chip were manufactured illegally,” Hashi put in, “you would expect it to be purer than ours.”

Lane nodded without breaking stride. “*This* chip came from Anodyne Systems. It’s indistinguishable from the chips in our most recent consignment, which we picked up and brought here six days ago.”

“In other words,” he concluded for her, “we have a traitor on our hands.”

She corrected him. “A traitor or a black market. Or simple bribery. Here or in Anodyne Systems.”

“Quite right. Thank you.” He beamed his appreciation. Meticulousness was a rare and treasurable quality. “A traitor, a black market, or bribery. Here or over there.” After a moment, he added, “It fits, you know.”

She paused in her pacing long enough to look momentarily breakable. “Fits?”

“It’s consistent,” he explained casually, “with the fact that our kaze arrived on the shuttle from Suka Bator. He had already been cleared by GCES Security. That detail enabled him to succeed here. If he had come from any other port, the estimable Min Donner’s people would have scrutinized him more closely—and then he might not have been allowed to pass.”

Lane had resumed moving. “But I still don’t see—”

“It is quite simple,” Hashi replied without impatience. He enjoyed his own explanation. “Min Donner’s people were not negligent. They had reason to rely on GCES Security. Routine precautions around Suka Bator are as stringent as ours at the best of times. And at present, so soon after a similar attack on Captain Sixten Vertigus in his own office, those precautions

were at their tightest. Surely no threat would be allowed to pass. Our kaze would have presented little danger if he had not already been verified—in a sense, legitimized—by GCES Security.

“But how was that legitimacy achieved? Was GCES Security negligent? Under the circumstances, I think not. Therefore our kaze’s various credentials must have been impeccable.”

The smoking tech couldn’t keep silent. “All right, I get it. Whoever sent the kaze didn’t just have access to our SOD-CMOS chips. He also had access to GCES Security codes, not to mention ours. So he must be GCES personnel. Or UMCP.”

“Or UMC,” Hashi added. “They own Anodyne Systems.”

“Or UMC,” she agreed.

“But we can dismiss the GCES,” he continued. “Unlike the United Mining Companies and the United Mining Companies Police, our illustrious Council has no access to Anodyne Systems.”

“Conversely, of course, the Dragon in his den holds enough votes to obtain whatever he desires from the GCES.”

Lane considered this for a moment, then nodded through a gust of smoke. When Hashi didn’t go on, she asked, “So where does that leave us?”

“My dear Lane”—he spread his hands—“it leaves us precisely where we are. You have gleaned a certain fact. Each fact is a step, and enough steps make a road. We are one step farther along our road.”

“I am eager to see if you will be able to provide us with another fact, or perhaps two.”

She didn’t hesitate. “I’m on it,” she announced brusquely as she turned for the door.

“I am sure you are,” Hashi said to her departing back. “Thank you.”

For a useful distraction, he added while the door closed. And for some intriguing possibilities.

Sitting nearly motionless at his desk, he considered them.

If the list of suspects in Godsen’s premature effacement included only those men and women directly or indirectly involved in the manufacture and transshipment of SOD-CMOS chips, that was daunting enough. The prospect became actively appalling if the list were expanded to name every minion who might have been able to draw on Holt Fasner’s close ties with the GCES.

Hashi was neither daunted nor appalled, however. Such lists were self-winnowing, in his experience. Each new fact uncovered by Lane Harbinger, or by ED Security, would narrow the range of suspects. No, his thoughts ran in other channels.

What, he wondered, would be the Dragon’s reaction to the provocative information that Nick Succorso had brought some sort of cargo or prize back from Enablement Station? Hashi could hardly guess what it might have been—but he could estimate its value. It was so precious that the Bill and the Amnion were willing to fight over it; so precious that Captain Succorso was willing to sell one of his own people in order to buy it back. So precious that someone would risk stealing it from such formidable adversaries.

The Dragon, Hashi concluded, would want that cargo or prize for himself.

Hints and possibilities. He needed more than that.

*Kazes are such fun, don’t you think?*

*If you can get her, you bastard, you can have her. You deserve her.*

---

What was the malign and unreliable Captain Succorso talking about?

For a moment he scrutinized his covert mind, probing it for answers. But the intuitive side of his intelligence wasn't yet ready to speak. Perhaps it still lacked sufficient data.

He consulted his chronometer; he considered the hazards involved in contacting Warden Dios and saying, I have received some information concerning events on Thanatos Minor, but I decided to withhold it from you temporarily. Then he shrugged. Some processes could not be rushed.

Whistling tunelessly through his bad teeth, he keyed his intercom again and issued another summons.

This time he was less peremptory; more subtle. He meant to speak to Koina Hannish, but he had no wish to betray the nature of his connection with her. So he instructed Processing Seed Protocol's routine data stream with an update on one innocuous subject or another—a update which would catch her eye because it contained a preagreed combination of words. Then he set himself to wait.

Unfortunately waiting didn't constitute distraction.

*You deserve her?* he inquired. Was it possible that Nick meant Morn Hyland?

How could that be? Hadn't Warden Dios explicitly refused—over Min Donner's and Godsend Frik's strenuous objections—to allow any provision for her rescue to be written into Joshua's programming? Whatever Joshua did to Thanatos Minor—and, not incidentally, to Nick Succorso—his actions would not include any effort to procure Ensign Hyland's survival. Therefore she was dead. She wasn't aboard *Trumpet*, and only *Trumpet* could hope to escape the destruction of Billigate.

It followed impeccably that Morn Hyland was irrelevant.

Yet the DA director found that he couldn't let the matter rest there. It reminded him of other questions which he hadn't been able to answer.

*You need me, but you blew it.*

One was this: Why had Warden Dios decided to sacrifice Ensign Hyland? The UMC director had no history of such decisions. Indeed, he had often displayed a distressing resemblance to Min Donner in situations involving loyalty toward his subordinate personnel. Hashi had presented arguments which he considered convincing; but he was under no illusions about Warden's ability to ignore those reasons, if he chose. So why had the director made such an atypical decision?

Had he acceded to Hashi's reasons because he had already met similar arguments from Horace Fasner—or perhaps even been given direct orders?

Certainly a living Morn Hyland represented a palpable threat to the UMC CEO. To that extent, she might conceivably constitute a kaze of a peculiar kind. Within her she carried information which was undeniably explosive.

As Hashi had determined during his interrogation of Angus Thermopyle, she could testify that Com-Mine Security bore no fault for *Starmaster's* death. And she could testify that Angus was guiltless of the crime for which he'd been arrested and convicted. However, the still-recent passage of the Preempt Act had been founded squarely on those two accusations: that Com-Mine Security had performed or permitted sabotage against *Starmaster*; and that Security had conspired with Captain Thermopyle to steal Station supplies.

The Preempt Act was the capstone of Holt Fasner's ambitions for the UMCP. If the perceived reasons for the Act's passage were revealed as inaccurate, or if DA's hand in the fabrication of those reasons were exposed, the Act itself might be reconsidered. The web of power which Fasner had so carefully woven for his personal cops might begin to unravel.

Hashi didn't doubt that Holt Fasner wanted Morn Hyland dead.

So was Warden Dios simply following the Dragon's instructions? Or was he playing some deeper game?

This brought Hashi to another question which had troubled him for some time.

Why had Warden Dios insisted on "briefing" Joshua alone immediately prior to *Trumpet*'s departure? Joshua was nothing more than a welded cyborg: a piece of equipment in human form. Since when did the director of the United Mining Companies Police waste his time on "briefing" pieces of equipment?

*I don't care what happens to you.*

Hashi couldn't persuade himself to stop worrying about Nick Succorso's flare.

His chronometer continued to tick threateningly onward. The longer he waited, the harder pressed he would be to account for his delay. And that in turn conveyed other dangers. Under pressure he might find it necessary to admit his dealings with Captain Scroyle and *Free Lunch*. If those dealings became, in a manner of speaking, "public" between him and his director, he might find his freedom to offer Captain Scroyle new contracts restricted. In addition every passing minute increased the chance that *Free Lunch* might be forced to move beyond reach of the nearest listening post, which would prevent her from receiving any new offers—at least temporarily. Hashi would lose his opportunity to put Captain Scroyle back to work.

He permitted himself an intimate sigh of relief when his intercom chimed to inform him that Koina Hannish wished to see him.

He didn't admit her right away, however. Instead he took a moment to calm himself so that he could be sure none of his private urgency showed. Only when he was certain that he would give nothing away did he tell his receptionist to let the new UMCP Director of Protocol in.

As befitted a PR director, Koina Hannish lived on the opposite end of the emotive spectrum from Lane Harbinger. Where Lane emitted tension like a shout, Koina breathed an air of quiet confidence. Immaculately tailored and tended, she conveyed almost by reflex the impression that every word she spoke must be true, by virtue of the simple fact that it came from her mouth. Hashi supposed that most men would have called her beautiful. Under any circumstances he could imagine, she would make a better PR director than fulsome, fallacious Godsen Frik ever had. She would have risen to her present position long ago if Godsen had not held the job on Holt Fasner's authority.

"I don't like this, Director," she said frankly as soon as the office door was closed and sealed. "It doesn't feel right."

Hashi smiled benignly. "Director yourself, Koina Hannish. I will not waste your time by thanking you for this visit. You are desperately busy, I know. What is it that 'doesn't feel right' to you?"

She settled herself upright in a chair across the desk from him before she answered, "Seeing you like this. Talking to you. Working for you."

"My dear Koina—" As an affectation, Hashi pushed his glasses up on his nose. They were



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