

## Chapter 2

As Lord Oulezandur Luckran opened the heavy white door to the Emperor's private quarters he almost bumped into a teenage girl hurrying from the room, her hastily gathered clothing bundled in a ball and clutched to her breast. Because he was small in stature, they were momentarily face to face, and Luckran could see shame and humiliation in those brown eyes. Relief was also evident. They both knew there were many such girls who never emerged from the Imperial bedchamber alive.

Luckran, the Emperor's First Advisor, stepped aside to let the girl scamper away. He then entered the large living room, soundlessly closing the door behind him. To his left, double doors to His Majesty's bedroom were slightly ajar and Luckran could hear movement within. He waited patiently.

The huge living room was bright with the early morning sun that shone through the large floor-to-ceiling windows, their heavy white curtains held open by hooks of solid gold. Gold-threaded white wallpaper reached to within two feet of the ceiling, the intervening space filled with a deep plaster moulding of elaborate design. From the moulding's circular counterpart at the ceiling's centre, a large crystal chandelier hung. When the palace was first occupied, a century and a half earlier, each evening a servant spent half an hour lighting the many candles. Since then, the fixture had been modified, first for gas, then for electricity.

Luckran, a slightly bent figure dressed in pale green robes, wandered about the room, his soft shoes sinking into the deep blue carpet. He could recall the original carpet being laid in this room, as he had supervised the construction of the magnificent palace when the Emperor had finally but reluctantly agreed to relocate to more hospitable climes. It was fashioned after the gigantic structure further north that had once been the seat of

Neiron, the Emperor whose throne Destlar had taken centuries earlier.

The history books describe Destlar's spectacular defeat of Arnelius the Wizard, and how he subsequently conquered the Kingdom of Rustletov with a show of titanic power, the climax being the murder of the King, Neiron's cousin. Rustletov's nobility, never content under Neiron's rule, had been quite happy to accept this forceful new leader and his plans to invade the Empire itself. Under normal circumstances, Rustletov's army would have been no match for Neiron's, but Destlar rode in the vanguard, decimating the Imperial forces with immense claps of thunder that shattered eardrums, and raging fires that neither sand nor water could extinguish. Neiron sent his best magicians into the field, but they too found themselves enveloped in flames and had to use all their might to put out the fires and escape. Witnessing this, Neiron decided Destlar would not be stopped; the old Emperor ran, making space for the new.

Through a simple and logical policy of reward for the faithful and obliteration of any who might resist, Destlar had, over the centuries, expanded the Empire to the point where the entire planet was his domain. All religions were banned, except for the one founded by a long-forgotten prophet who had preached tolerance and forgiveness and who had lived in the western region of the original Empire two hundred years before Destlar was born. Destlar declared himself head of the Church and Velkren of the Gods, one of the angelic beings, intermediaries between humanity and the divine. A move seen as arrogant and derisory at the time, it proved wise as, with the passing of the years, most of the faithful accepted without deliberation Destlar's celestial nature. His immortality was very convincing.

During his unparalleled reign, there had been a few moments when a people won autonomy. But it was always short-lived and not since the Mazeranian massacre had any real resistance flourished.

"Luckran," the Emperor called in his high nasal voice as he emerged from the bedroom in his habitual black robes. "That damn wizard!"

"Wizard, Your Majesty?"

"Don't pretend to be confused. Put on last night's news."

With Destlar standing before the large television screen attached to the wall, Luckran pressed a few buttons on the remote control. He knew exactly what the Emperor wished to show him. In a moment, an image of a snow-covered town square appeared on the screen. At the centre of the image was a man in brown robes, standing on the back of a truck and gesticulating wildly. Luckran purposely kept the sound low.

"He's threatening some grand demonstration of his power and purpose," Destlar continued. "Any idea what he's up to?"

"No, Your Majesty. I believe he's all talk."

"Yet he gathers a following."

The television images showed a group of people standing before the truck, looking up at the magician. But they didn't seem to be taking the man seriously. It looked like they were enjoying the spectacle. "Not many. He's considered a bit eccentric, mad even. He spends long periods away from his wife and son, in the cold and barren mountains. Meditating, it seems."

Destlar grunted. "I hope you're right. There's something about him I don't like. I thought by now he'd have disappeared."

Luckran knew that the Emperor, despite his extraordinary abilities, feared magicians more than anyone or anything, save death itself. For that reason, the First Advisor went out of his way to keep all magicians happy, content and harmless, providing each with a large stipend, basically for doing nothing.

Destlar crossed the room and settled himself into the large sofa between two windows, adjusting his robes and arranging the many cushions about him. "I'm surprised you haven't taken care of him."

Luckran switched off the television. "I really don't think there's any need, Your Majesty. It's better not to react at all,

so that soon he'll be forgotten. I'm not even withholding his stipend. And I notice he's not refusing it."

"All right. I'll leave it to you. Now, I believe you have news."

"Yes, Your Majesty. MatScan is now fully operational. Yesterday afternoon, a human being was disintegrated, transmitted to a receiver, where he was successfully rebuilt. The subject is alive and well."

"Very good. How far away is this planet you've found?"

"Thirty light-years. But distance doesn't come into the equation with MatScan. The only tedious part is setting up the receiver; it will take a little over thirty years for our spaceship to reach the planet. Once it's there, MatScan can transmit enough materiel and troops to take control of the new world."

"Thirty years. Still some time to wait."

"But we are fortunate to have found a suitable planet so close to Earda. On a cosmic scale, thirty light-years is not far at all."

Destlar reacted to the news of MatScan as if it was a new type of train. The almost identical planet in orbit about a relatively nearby star was no more exciting or amazing than the discovery of new lands beyond the endless ocean several centuries earlier. But the First Advisor was not surprised by such muted response. He knew the Emperor's interests lay elsewhere.

"Perhaps not far enough," Destlar said. "What if they decide to attack us?"

"I assure Your Majesty, there is no chance of that. They are primitive. They haven't yet harnessed electricity. And they have no magic." Luckran liked to remind Destlar there were no magicians on the new world. "Thirty years from now," Luckran pronounced, "Your Majesty's domain will span two solar systems."

Destlar rose from the couch. He regarded Luckran with piercing black eyes, looking down either side of his long and pointy nose. Perhaps he was searching for a hint of sarcasm in his First Advisor's bearing. But he must have been happy

enough with what he found, or didn't find, for he gave a quick nod and turned in the direction of the dining room. It was the attitude of a man who believed things were as they should be.

Luckran coughed quietly.

Destlar turned. "You have more to say, Luckran?"

"I am assuming Your Majesty would care to visit the new domain."

"Perhaps."

"With the worsening climate, I believe it would be wise to have such a journey planned out in advance. Shall I proceed?"

Destlar grunted his approval, then turned for the dining room again.

Luckran bowed to the retreating back. He was a satisfied man, leaving the Emperor's quarters. The most important part of the meeting had come right at the end, when he broached the subject of Destlar leaving Earda, the slowly freezing home world. He could see the Emperor wasn't too pleased with the idea, and Luckran felt it would take no small amount of persuasion to get him to leave, but at least now the seed had been planted.

For the Emperor, spaceflight was not an option. The notion of 30 years in deep space with most of that time spent in hibernation would terrify Destlar. Luckran didn't expect Destlar to find MatScan very appealing either, but he believed the time would come when the Emperor would be relieved that an escape route existed, despite the risks inherent in such a novel form of transport.

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Luckran entered the small conference room. Sitting either side of the table were two men, one dressed in a dark suit, the other in military uniform. The civilian was dark-skinned, the soldier white, like opposing chess pieces. Together they rose from their

seats. "Thank you for coming," the First Advisor said. "Please, sit down."

Luckran sat at the head of the table and introduced each man to the other. "Dr Rendal Rubyan, scientist, engineer, commissioned to develop certain technologies, the details of which are classified. General Aldon Meckreen, Commander of the Imperial Engineering Corps. Amongst other sensitive projects, this unique division has been entrusted with the construction of the Emperor's villas, the existence of which are kept secret from all save the Emperor, myself and those within the general's staff who need to know."

Luckran handed the general a brown folder. In red letters it was marked as classified. "General, I am assigning you two projects, though together they form one system. You will begin construction of a new villa in the Swutland mountains. On the surface, it will appear ordinary, but in the extensive basements Dr Rubyan's apparatus will be installed. You will begin searching for a suitable site immediately.

"At the same time, you will begin construction of a spaceship in orbit. This ship will also contain equipment provided by Dr Rubyan." He pointed to the file. "Details are within."

The general frowned. "My Lord, are you expecting us to carry out the construction of a spaceship in secret?"

"No. That would be impossible. The official story will be that a new space station is being constructed."

Meckreen nodded. "Very good, My Lord. I look forward to the challenges."

"As outlined in the documentation, Dr Rubyan will be available for consultation and two members of his team will join your division for the duration of the spaceship construction, and afterwards on the villa."

Meckreen's eyes opened wide. "With respect, First Advisor, and no offence meant to Dr Rubyan, but I cannot accept outsiders."

"I understand your concerns, and indeed appreciate them. But I personally vouch for these men. They and Dr Rubyan can be trusted implicitly. Now, I'm sure you want to get started. Good day, General."

For the briefest moment, Meckreen's face betrayed his concern. Then he snapped out of his seat, put on his cap and saluted. "My Lord!" With the file tucked under his left arm, he left the room.

Luckran looked at the other man. "How about lunch, Rendal?"

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After lunch, Lord Luckran and Rendal Rubyan sat in two large leather armchairs beside a fire of spitting logs in the lounge of the Governors' Rooms, home to the most enviable of clubs. A seat on the Imperial Assembly guaranteed admission, but from time to time, others were granted membership. Dr Rubyan was one of those few, thanks to his association with Lord Luckran, his long-time friend.

The lounge was on the ground floor of a three-storey building, four centuries old, hunkered between two giant office blocks in the centre of high-rise Wesmork. The teak panelled walls and deep red carpet added to the room's sleepy character. It was quiet and cosy.

The two old men sipped brandy from hundred-year-old crystal goblets. They had been presented to Luckran years earlier by a viceroy who'd imagined the gift would garner favour. The disappointed man was long since dead. Luckran liked to drink from them, as they reminded him of the egocentric stupidity of man.

"Meckreen's men won't figure out what all that machinery's for?" Luckran asked.

"No. They're closed boxes, with instructions on how to wire them together. It's common practice in engineering to connect

inputs and outputs according to documentation, without necessarily having any idea of what's going on inside the devices themselves. They'll be curious, but they won't consider it strange. I expect they'll be more confused about the apparent lack of propulsion for the ship, but we'll tell them it's to be fitted later."

"You've done well, Rendal."

No one other than Luckran knew that Rubyan and his team were in fact magicians. In total secrecy, they had combined magic and engineering to develop a most fantastic technology, MatScan. It was imperative that Destlar remain unaware of the fact that magic was involved. He did not trust magicians, which Rubyan found mildly insulting. Perhaps it stemmed from earlier times when the world was less stable and the Emperor was forced to fight those magicians who enviously eyed the throne.

Still, Rubyan wondered that the Emperor didn't guess the truth. With classical physics, as he referred to it, MatScan would be impossible. Only by effectively combining the electromagnetic field with the more elusive, esoteric magical field could such technology become a reality.

An essential element of the remarkable mode of transport was Deep Sleep. When a live subject was undergoing the process of disintegration/reintegration, it was first necessary to place the organism in suspended animation. Rubyan and his team had spent years developing the technology and the magic that together slowed the heart rate down to about ten beats per hour. And of course Deep Sleep had a secondary function. It would allow a ship's crew to spend most of a long and uneventful journey asleep.

While testing the system on monkeys, Rubyan was disappointed to find the simians could not survive more than three months in hibernation. Human subjects—criminals sentenced to death—lasted longer, but few beyond 20 months and only a single individual beyond two years. A perplexed

Rubyan tried to discover the reason for this limit, but time constraints forced him to move on. Though he considered it inelegant, the solution was simple: the crew would awaken at regular intervals during the voyage. After a brief spell relaxing, they would return to sleep. The hibernation periods were set at 12 months.

Rubyan took a sip of brandy, his long dark fingers encircling the glass. A tall, thin figure, he looked much younger than his 76 years, with a full head of curly black hair and a face free of wrinkles, except when he smiled, which he did now. "You know what I always say: nothing's impossible to a magician."

"If only," Luckran sighed. "Now, I've another job for you."

"Ah, no. Come on, Oulezandur, you promised me that was the last one. I'm to help General Meckreen, but other than that, I get on with my research."

"You can't complain, Rendal. You keep talking about how much you've learned, thanks to the projects I assign to you."

Rubyan reluctantly acknowledged this fact. Luckran prevented other magicians from working with scientists and engineers. He was afraid of what they might come up with. Something that, in the wrong hands, might pose a threat to the Emperor. "You're right," Rubyan admitted. "I've done really well out of our relationship. But I want to study magic. I want to find out what it really is, rather than simply use it."

"And you will. But I need you one more time. If I'm to persuade the Emperor to leave Earda, the MatScan terminal in the Swutland mountains must be completely secured."

Rubyan frowned. "You're very determined to have him leave."

Luckran thumped the armrest. "Well of course I am. I want to get off this planet before I'm sandwiched between two walls of ice."

"Ah, yes. The immortal think long term. And of course you need His Majesty to go too, as he's the one keeping you alive."

"Yes, thanks Rendal. Rub it in."

"How old are you, exactly?"

"Never mind my age."

"You must be a couple of centuries by now. I remember learning about you in school," the magician said with a widening smile. "The man upon whom the Emperor bestowed the unique gift of immortality, reward for unstinting service to the welfare of mankind."

"Few have gained so little for doing so much," Luckran said. Despite the gravity of his voice, or perhaps because of it, Rubyan laughed.

A waitress approached. "Can I get you gentlemen another drink?" She was dressed in a tight short black skirt with matching waistcoat and a white blouse. Luckran noticed Rubyan's eyes travel up the girl's legs and along her hips to linger on the ample bosom that was putting considerable strain on the waistcoat buttons.

"Yes," answered Luckran for them both. "Two more." The magician's eyes continued to follow her as she went around the corner towards the bar.

Once she was gone, Luckran put the conversation back on topic. "I need a completely secure terminal, with the Deep Sleep unit at the centre. Impervious to any kind of assault, conventional or mystic. Could you erect such a barrier?"

Rubyan looked into the fire for a moment, thinking. "Yes, it could be done, but such a spell would take years to fashion, one layer on top of another, so to speak."

"Time we have. It will be thirty years before the MatScan terminal is in place at the other end."

"All right. I'll put one of my magicians to work on it."

"No," Luckran interrupted. "I want you. I'll trust no one else."

"I don't think you were listening, Oulezandur. This spell will be decades in the making. And it will be hard work. Most

days now, I take a nap after lunch. No, you'll want one from my team to take on this task."

"No, Rendal. They're good, but nowhere close to you. It has to be you."

"Sorry. I'm not able for it. Besides, I'd be dead before it was finished."

"Nonsense. You're as healthy as an ox. Anyway, you'll enjoy the challenge. Nothing pleases you more than trying something new."

The waitress arrived with the drinks. "Thank you, my dear," Rubyan said as he took one of the glasses from the proffered tray. She smiled and walked off.

"Do you want her?" Luckran asked.

Rubyan laughed sheepishly, embarrassed that he'd been caught staring at the girl.

"I'll have her placed in an apartment," Luckran stated, "and she will be yours. A gift from the Emperor, for all your hard work. Your wife need never know."

Rubyan's pulse quickened as he imagined the fun he could have with such a beautiful woman. Then he shook the images away. "You're joking. She'd want nothing to do with an old man like me."

"She'll hardly believe her luck. It will mean permanent absence from the Imperial harem."

Rubyan sat up. "You mean she's one of the Emperor's wives?"

"Of course not. He has no wives. What would he want with a wife? He's not looking for an heir."

"So what are you telling me?"

"The servants here, they all live at the palace, in the harem."

"And he allows it?"

"He wouldn't care in the least, if he knew. And I like it this way. No outsiders. Between here and the palace they go, and nowhere else. Except your girl. I'll have the keys to the new apartment dropped by your office tomorrow."

“You’re serious?” Rubyan threw his hands up. “Oulezandur, even after forty years, you still surprise me.”

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Destlar settled back into the cushions and watched the news. The main item concerned a pleasure cruiser that had been hit by a freak wave in the middle of the Consluminous Sea. The reporter was happy to announce that all of the passengers had been saved, though there hadn’t been enough time to get the entire crew off the ship before it went under. Next up was an unexpected development in the Assembly, where the decision to cut state funding to schools and universities by eight percent was vetoed by the First Advisor. Destlar was a little surprised. He considered having a word with Luckran about it in the morning.

The news continued, each report more prosaic and tiresome than the previous one. But it left Destlar happy because there was no mention of the ranting magician. Perhaps Luckran was right when he said the man was no threat. He was about to switch off the television when a beautiful young woman with long dark hair appeared on the screen. She was laughing, her arms about a handsome and equally happy-looking young man. The reporter informed the viewers that the newlywed couple had just won a large sum of money in the state lottery. It was one of those light-hearted reports that were often tacked on to the end of a newscast. Destlar usually switched off in disgust, but this time he was captivated. The groom lifted his bride and swung her about. She squealed and laughed as he hugged her close and kissed her on the lips.

Destlar pressed pause. The woman was looking directly into the camera, her white teeth and deep brown eyes sparkling. The man was looking at his wife adoringly, bewitched.

Destlar smiled back. He reached for the bell rope.

Moments later, the Emperor's valet entered the room softly. "Your Majesty?"

Destlar pointed at the television. "Bring them to me."

The valet looked at the screen, then turned to the Emperor and bowed. "Yes, Your Majesty."

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The crowd gathered at the end of the pier. A heavy grey sky promised snow. The magician stood with his back to the sea, arms raised. His wife aimed a camera. More footage for tomorrow's news. "Today it begins!" he shouted. "Today we take the first step in our walk to freedom." The townspeople nudged each other and smiled, wondering what kind of entertainment was in store.

No one paid particular attention to the rumble of the jet. Every three days, the Imperial fighter screamed in from the East, across the town and out over the ocean. It had been doing so for years. Whether it was part of some training exercise, or just a reminder of who was boss, was anybody's guess.

The magician stopped talking. His audience thought he was simply waiting for the plane and its loud engines to pass. But then he clasped his hands together and tracked the jet across the sky, like a child aiming an imaginary gun. A few people laughed at the image.

Suddenly, a blinding bolt of white light shot from the magician's hands. Everyone except the camerawoman flinched. They half turned away, shielding their eyes from the barrage of photons, while she did her best to track the crackling stream as it raced towards the jet.

The pilot saw it coming and tried to manoeuvre the plane out of the way, but the light bent towards him. It struck the tail, tearing it from the fuselage. The plane spun like a sycamore seed and smashed into the sea. It was all over in seconds.

The magician staggered. He gripped the railing, then slowly turned and sat with his back to the timber. He dropped his head and closed his eyes, elated but too exhausted to show it. His wife continued to film.

The townspeople were stunned. They'd never witnessed such a devastating feat of magic. They stood in silence, fearfully wondering what form the Emperor's retribution would take.

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"You said not to worry about him!" Destlar shouted. "Then, like that," he continued with a snap of his fingers, "he destroys one of my jets. What's next? An attack on the palace?" Standing in the middle of his living room, the Emperor towered over Luckran, clenching his fists in rage. "I want this fucker dead! Now!"

"Troops have already landed in the town, but he's gone into hiding."

"Bomb them. Wipe them out. They're the ones hiding him. They deserve it."

"But he may not be there any more. I expect he got out quickly. However, I'm sure someone there knows of his whereabouts. We'll find him."

"You'd better! And I want that wife and child brought to me."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"Leave me!"

Luckran bowed, then left the room and quickly made for the elevator, one that only he and the Emperor's valet had access to. He tapped a card against the sensor beside the golden doors and they immediately slid apart. He stepped inside the mahogany-panelled car and pressed the button for the basement. It was only a few hours since the attack that had taken him completely by surprise, and yet he was afraid too much time had passed. He knew the magician would be exhausted after such an awesome

effort, and Luckran wanted to catch him before he had a chance to regain his strength. He didn't fancy sending his troops against a man who could tear fighter jets out of the sky.

The spectacular images were all over the news, and the people were frightened. Those in the temperate latitudes, living in relative comfort, were scared of the barbarians in the North who, if it wasn't for the might of the Emperor, the Velkren, would come pouring south like a plague of locusts. Those same people in the North were terrified of the Imperial response. It would be better for all concerned if this was dealt with quickly and decisively.

The doors opened. Luckran stepped out, turned to his left and walked along the bright corridor to the communications centre. Inside the small, dimly lit room, one soldier sat at a console, headset in place. Behind him stood a general, looking at a large screen on the wall. The general turned as Luckran entered. "We have him, My Lord."

Luckran looked at the screen. The unstable images, obviously from a camera perched on a soldier's helmet, showed a small house, nestled amongst a group of fir trees. The light was fading, the soldiers' shadows stretching far across the snow in front of them.

Three soldiers ran up to the house. One of them kicked the door in. Seconds later, there came the unmistakable crack of automatic machine-gun fire. Two quick bursts. "That's it," said the general. "Easy."

The camera entered the cabin and panned about. In the middle of the floor sprawled a brown-robed figure. The chest was covered in blood. The camera focused on the face, the wide lifeless eyes staring at the ceiling. Then it turned as a soldier approached, escorting a terrified woman and boy. "Target eliminated, General," the soldier spoke to the camera. "And we have the wife and child. What shall we do with them?"

The general turned to Luckran. "Your orders, My Lord?"

Luckran considered. It would be merciful to execute the woman and child now. He could tell the Emperor they'd been shot when the soldiers stormed the hideout. He could have the video footage edited so that there was no mention of the wife and child. There would be little chance of the deception being discovered. However, it wasn't worth the risk. The Emperor's trust was far too valuable. "Bring them here, unharmed."

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"I would advise against it, Your Majesty," Luckran said. The day after the attack on the jet, he stood again in the Emperor's living room with Destlar towering above him, fists clenched.

"I don't care!" Destlar's anger still had not abated, despite the torment he had unleashed upon the dead magician's family.

Earlier in the day he'd forced the woman and child to repeatedly watch the news report featuring images from the cabin. Finally, when the footage once more reached the stage where the dead magician's eyes stared out of the screen, Destlar had frozen the picture and went about raping and mutilating the mother. The seven-year-old boy had whimpered in the presence of a trinity of dreadful faces: his father's in death, his mother's in anguish and his tormentor's alive with hatred and... something else. His young mind did not recognise sadism.

After torturing the woman for three hours, Destlar finally grew tired of her. An attractive woman, he'd noted with glee when she'd been brought before him, she lay crumpled on the floor with her tongue sticking out one side of her mouth and her face and neck bruised purple. Destlar turned away in disgust.

He fixed his attention on the boy sitting in the corner with his hands over his eyes. Did he think he was hidden? Had his mind regressed to early childhood? "I see you," Destlar called in a playful voice. The boy retreated further into the corner. The Velkren approached and stood over him. The terrified child kept

his hands over his eyes. His body shook as he cried. "You poor thing," Destlar soothed, then bent down to rub the blond hair. "To have such a father. A criminal. A madman. What kind of life would you have had anyway?" He then closed his eyes and felt the tingle in his guts build in intensity until it was almost painful. "You will go quickly, with ease." The fire moved up through his chest and out along his outstretched right arm.

But at that moment, he reconsidered. He removed his hand from the boy's head. The fire dwindled and died. Destlar turned to the mother and reached out to her with his mind. She wasn't dead, not yet. Smiling, he looked down at the boy. "Actually, I think I'll send you two to the dungeon. Why end the fun now?"

Half an hour later, with the woman and child safely in the hands of a trusted pair of talented and discreet doctors, the Emperor sat on his couch and dreamed up activities for the two, which would begin as soon as the mother was revived and revitalised. This entertained him for a while, soothing his anger. But he grew impatient. He didn't want to wait days, or maybe weeks. By the time Luckran arrived, he was pacing the room.

"I want every town and city in Rustletov that received that madman destroyed," the Emperor commanded as soon as his First Advisor walked into the room. He wasn't in the least bit sentimental about the country that once had been his home.

But the diminutive figure in the green robes was presently not inclined to follow orders. "The people of Rustletov are Your Majesty's loyal subjects," Luckran said. "To kill indiscriminately would be seen as unfair and might encourage others to join the radicals. And the Church would find it difficult to explain such actions from the Velkren."

"You dare defy me?" Destlar shouted.

Anyone else would have quailed in fear. But Luckran was well used to the Emperor's outbursts. Safe in his indispensability, he stood firm. "I exist only to serve Your Majesty. But my position as First Advisor compels me to always and ever provide the

very best advice. That is what Your Majesty charged me with, all those years ago.”

Destlar gritted his teeth. For a moment he looked like he might argue further, but then he waved Luckran away. “Leave!” he commanded.

“Yes, Your Majesty.” Luckran bowed and quietly left the room. He’d saved Rustletov, but he was experienced enough to know that the Emperor’s fury, like a bolt of lightning, would ground somewhere.

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The woman stumbled down the stairs, her baby in one arm, her son held about the waist with the other. She ran to her friend’s apartment and hammered on the door.

Many people, especially those in underprivileged areas, abided by the one-child law, because it was difficult to care for more than one, and because every so often younger siblings died horribly. Everyone knew it was Destlar’s work, but what triggered the cull, and why particular areas were chosen, were mysteries. And there really was nothing a parent could do, other than ride it out and hope that the icy presence passed harmlessly by. Two decades earlier, it was rumoured, a community on the far side of the world had responded by bringing all the children together, in an effort to fool the Emperor. An enraged Destlar had responded by killing them all.

While most of the authorities, both secular and religious, remained uncomfortably silent, some defended the Velkren’s actions. They said it was harsh but essential punishment for those who flout the law. Strict population control was necessary for survival. They pointed to the fact that the Velkren never targeted older siblings, conveniently ignoring his many mistakes.

The woman uselessly grappled with the door handle, then pounded on the wood once more. Inside the apartment, her

friend ran to the door. "No!" the husband shouted, dragging her back. "There's nothing we can do."

"Please! She's my friend," the wife cried.

"If she was your friend, she'd leave us alone. We have to look after our own." The two adults looked across the room at their frightened teenage daughter, standing by the kitchen table with her hands to her mouth, face pale, eyes wide.

"It's the will of the Gods," the man said.

"Then the Gods are cruel," responded the woman, "to put us in the care of such a monster."

"Shut up!" the man hissed.

In the corridor, the woman went to her knees, pulled the boy towards her and pushed the baby against his chest. Confused, the boy pushed back.

"Mammy," he cried.

"Stop it! Move your hands!" She squeezed her children together, making them one.

"What's the matter?" an unfamiliar voice spoke. She looked up at a man in the sky-blue robes of the Order of Lurg, the God of Light. "Is the child sick?"

"Take the boy," she pleaded, pushing her son towards him. "Please. Take him away."

The priest frowned. "Why? I don't understand. What's the matter?" he reiterated.

"Take him!" she yelled. The baby started to choke. "No!" she screamed. "Please, no!" In horror she looked down at the little face, the eyes screwed up, the tiny mouth opened, pointy tongue protruding as the little one struggled for breath. She could actually see the neck tightening. "Please," she whimpered. "Don't. Please."

A terrible croak emanated from the delicate creature before the little head lolled to one side. She cradled her daughter's head in the crook of her neck and stroked her hair, rocking back and forth and crying till her throat cracked. The boy took a step back, whimpering. The priest didn't move.

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Less than an hour after beginning, Destlar got bored. It never quite lived up to his expectations, probably because the victims were remote and their reactions blunted by distance. And yet he kept repeating the act, as if somehow it would be more rewarding this time.

He lifted himself from the couch and crossed to the corner of the room to pull the heavy velvet rope. In years gone by, the rope was one end of a complex system of cables that ran through walls and floors and terminated in a brass bell in the kitchen far below. But that system had been superseded; now the rope activated an electronic transmitter that communicated with the Imperial Valet's personal phone.

The valet, never too far from His Majesty's quarters, arrived within minutes. "Your Majesty?"

"Bring two girls."

"Yes, Your Majesty. Any particular types?"

"No. I'll leave it up to you."

"Very good, Your Majesty." The valet bowed, retreated, then headed straight for the harem. Considering the Emperor's current demeanour, he suspected the girls, whatever pair he chose, would not make it through the night.