

ALLAN COLE & CHRIS BUNCH

EMPIRE'S END

ST&N #8

THE STEN SERIES

Sten

The Wolf Worlds

The Court of a Thousand Suns

Fleet of the Damned

Revenge of the Damned

Return of the Emperor

Vortex

End of Empire

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DEDICATION

*To everyone who was there when
'Death came quietly to The Row'*

FOREWORD TO THE NOVEL SERIES

Hailed as a “landmark science fiction series” the *Sten Series* has thrilled millions of readers across the world.

Set three thousand years in the future, the eight Sten novels tell the tale of a tough, street-wise orphan who escapes his fate as factory planet “delinq” to become the strong right-hand of the most powerful man in the Universe—a man hailed by his billions of subjects as “The Eternal Emperor.”

THE HERO

Sten is the ultimate survivor. He’s lightning quick, mean streets cunning and blessed with the twin gifts of hungry intelligence and hard-won common sense. Born on a factory planet where life has less value than the lowliest machine, Sten rebels against The Company that enslaved, then killed his parents. He finds a new family of sorts—and the means for revenge—in the ranks of the Emperor’s Imperial Forces.

A series of crucial missions brings him to the attention of the Eternal Emperor himself. Sten’s talents and unshakable loyalty are tested in crisis after crisis, brutal warfare, and assassination.

Besides his “black ops” skills, Sten is armed with a weapon of last resort—he carries a small knife made of an undetectable substance in a flesh and muscle “sheath” in his arm. With a blade edge only one molecule thick, the knife can cut through any substance like butter.

Sten rises swiftly until he becomes a confidante and advisor to the Emperor. Through all this Sten never forgets his lowly origins. Self-deprecating humor, friendship and luck in love shield him from Fame’s blinding light. If anything his empathy and sense of responsibility for the common folk of the Empire grow with each new honor and badge of rank.

Finally he is asked to make the supreme sacrifice—risking even those he loves—to stand up for the citizens of the Empire. Then, when he succeeds, he turns his back on the greatest honor of all.

STEN’S WORLD

Picture the greatest Empire history has known. Its boundaries are the Universe itself, containing more stars, planets and sentient life than could be calculated by the swiftest 21st Century computer. This is a space kingdom where humans live side-by-side with countless alien forms. In fact the word alien itself is offensive and all species are merely called “beings.” The planetary systems range from the sophistication of Prime World where the elite gather—to the rough and ready mining and frontier worlds at the Empire’s edges.

Ruling over all this is:

THE ETERNAL EMPEROR

As his title implies, the Eternal Emperor is a human who has mastered death through the use of secret cloning techniques and mind transfer. When he’s in his cups, he sometimes boasts that although he’s been the target of hundreds of assassination, only three were successful.

The Emperor is the ultimate capitalist and when Sten steps onto the stage he has reigned for three thousand years. The source of the Eternal Emperor’s power is a mysterious fuel—called Anti-Matter Two (AM2). It drives the star ships that link the Empire and provides the energy for all industry, agriculture and commerce. He alone controls its supply and price. And he alone knows where AM2 is to be found.

The Emperor is no tyrant. He prefers wit to force, negotiation to confrontation. But if all else fails, ~~he has enormous military resources to back up his will.~~ His past is a rigorously guarded secret and his future is permanently entwined with the Empire he created.

Despite his vast power the Emperor greatly misses the familiar things of his 21st Century youth. On a bad day he would trade it all in for a good bottle of single malt scotch or the sweet sound of an old hand-crafted violin. He spends his spare time in his antique-cluttered royal suites, restoring or reconstructing nostalgic objects from his salad days.

The Emperor, who has the looks of a handsome, 35-year-old, is also a consummate cook and spends hours in his Prime World kitchens recreating the recipes of ancient Earth, while hatching elaborate plans to confound his many enemies.

The Eternal Emperor sees a bit of his long ago self in Sten. After all, as he occasionally implies, his roots are as common as Sten's. If their relationship was not by necessity that of ruler and subject they might even have become friends.

Sten admires the Emperor. Perhaps, in a way, he even considers him a father figure. And he has sworn absolute loyalty to the Empire. In the end, however, he will realize that his loyalty is to the idea, not the man.

OTHER CHARACTERS

Sten's world is filled with bizarre and wonderful characters. Among the more important are:

ALEX KILGOUR: Sten's sidekick and confidant. An incredibly strong heavy-worlder of Scottish descent, Kilgour's passion is shaggy-dog stories. All of which are so awful that his mission mates can hardly wait for the bad guys to kick in the door and interrupt him.

IAN MAHONEY: Sten's mentor. A top military man, Mahoney excels at both cloak-and-dagger and more conventional warfare, and prefers to lead from the front. Once completely loyal to the Emperor, he was assassinated by his old boss. But, the canny old Irishmen left secrets behind that may solve the mystery that is the Eternal Emperor.

RYKOR—A walrus-like alien who is the Emperor's chief psychiatrist. A fan for Sten's from the beginning, ultimately her loyalties will be to him.

And there are many more, including the various beautiful and multi-talented women Sten squirts during his adventures. Ranging from a tough Prime World detective, to the princess of a barbaric race of space pirates.

SR. ECU: The Manabi are a very special race of aliens, who appreciate beauty and civilization above all things, and whose specialty is the high art of diplomacy. They are prized for their negotiating skills and adamant neutrality. A philosophy that will be tested to the breaking point—and beyond.

OTHO: The fierce and canny chieftain of the Bhor warriors. He loves Sten as a brother and delights in killing his enemies, drinking their souls to hell with huge goblets of Stregg.

CIND: A beautiful Bhor warrior princess and crack sniper who has set sights of a very different nature on Sten.

POYNDEX: He betrayed his masters before. Now he has a new master—the Eternal Emperor. His assignment: Hunt down and kill Sten.

MARR and SENN: Imperial caterers par excellence, these two furry beings are past masters at the art of the party.

STREGG—THE DRINK: This heart-stopping booze appears first in Book Two: The Wolf World where a race of Viking-like beings is introduced. Hailing from an ice-planet, their ancestral enemies

was the Streggan, a fierce beast that hunted the Bohr almost into annihilation. Finally, they turned the tide and wiped out the beast entirely. They named their favorite drink Stregg, in honor of their ancient enemy. The names were inspired by a boozy session the authors' had at Harry's Bar in Century City, California. There they discovered the wonders of Stregga, the Italian liqueur. It means witch in Italian. Here's the secret to making your own Stregg: mix one part Stregga with one part white Tequila. Drink straight, or pour over ice. Some like to add a little simple syrup. We didn't.

BOOK ONE

INDIAN OPENING

CHAPTER ONE

THE RUINS OF the Imperial assault fleet fled through the “dark” between star clusters. There was one tacship carrier, two heavy cruisers, one light, their destroyer flotilla screens, and, in the center of the formation, auxiliaries and the troop transports carrying the battle-shattered remnants of the First Imperial Guards Division.

Flanking and closing the formation was the huge battleship *Victory*.

On its bridge, Sten stared at a strategic battlescreen, not seeing either the glow “ahead” that represented the Empire...nor the symbols to the “rear” that were the anarchy-ripped Altaic Cluster.

Two E-days earlier:

Sten: Ambassador Plenipotentiary. Personal Emissary of the Eternal Emperor. Admiral. Medals and decorations beyond count, from the Galactic Cross down, including Grand Companion of the Emperor’s Household. Hero.

Now.

Sten: Traitor. Renegade. And, he thought, don’t forget Murderer.

Among the symbols representing what was “behind” the *Victory* was one marking where the Imperial Battleship *Caligula*, its Admiral Mason, and over three thousand loyal Imperial sailors had been. They’d been slaughtered by Sten for following a direct order to planetbust the Altaic’s capital world, an order issued in person by the Eternal Emperor.

“Boss, Ah hae a wee tip.”

Sten’s eyes—and mind—refocused. Alex Kilgour. Sten’s best friend, a rather roundish looking heavy-worlder who probably knew even more about death and destruction than Sten.

“GA.” Part of Sten’s mind, the part always removed from the hue and cry, found it funny both of them still used slang from their now-long-gone days in Mantis Section, the Emperor’s super-secret covert-operations unit. Go ahead.

“Giein’ thae y’ hae no ‘sperience a’ bein’t an outlaw, y’r entire life bein’t spent singin’ hymns an’ such, p’raps y’ dinnae ken Robbie Roy types hae noo time’t’ be pausin’t an’ smellin’t th’ flowers. Thae dinnae wan’ a halter an’ a neck-stretch.”

“Thank you, Mister Kilgour. I’ll get my thumb out.”

“Dinnae fash, lad. Any wee service, y’ hae but’t’ snivel.”

Sten turned away from the screen. Around him, waiting, was the *Victory*’s bridge-watch. The top elements of his long-serving personal staff, who were in fact more Sten’s own private intelligence agency than striped-suiters.

Twenty-three Gurkhas—Nepalese mercenaries famous for serving only in the Emperor’s private bodyguard—but these had volunteered for special duties: guarding the life of their ex-CO, Sten.

Otho. Six other Bhor. Squat, shaggy monsters with long beards, yellow fangs, and ground-brushing knuckles. They seemed happiest either tearing an enemy in half the long way or else doing the same to his bank balance in a shrewd multiworld trade. They were also fond of eddaic-type poetry. There were another hundred of them elsewhere on the *Victory*. And, most important, left to last, their commander Cind: Human. Expert sniper. Descended from a now-obliterated warrior cult. A highly respected combat leader.

Beautiful. Sten’s friend and lover.

Enough bean counting, he thought. Kilgour had been right: a wolf could never chance lying in sunny clearing listening to the bees buzz—not unless he’d suddenly decided on a new career as fireside rug.

“Weapons?”

“Sir?” The young woman was waiting. The lieutenant’s name, Sten recollected, was Renzi.

“Bring your people back to general quarters. Commander Freston”—this was his longtime personal officer—“I want—oh, clot. Cancel.”

Sten remembered. “Both of you,” he said, raising his voice. “And anyone else interested—listen up. Things have changed. I just declared war on the Emperor. Which makes me a traitor. Nobody is required to obey my orders. No one who remains loyal to his oath will be harmed. We’ll—”

His words were interrupted by the ululation of the GQ siren as the weapons officer obeyed Sten’s first command.

That was one answer.

Freston made another: “Pardon, sir? There was some static there and I lost you. Your orders?”

Sten held up a palm for Freston to stand by.

“Weapons, I want all Kali and Goblin stations at full launch-readiness. Some of our Imperial friends might decide to bag a renegade. Plus there were four destroyers escorting the *Caligula*. If any ship begins an attack, put a Goblin in the vicinity and blow it off as a warning.”

“And if they keep coming?”

Sten hesitated. “If they do—contact me. No Kali launches will be made without my orders, and any launch will be controlled by either myself or Mister Kilgour.” The Kalis were operator-guided shipkillers.

“That’s not—”

“That is an order. Follow it.”

“Yessir.”

“Commander Freston. Patch me a secure link to General Sarsfield on whichever transport he’s riding.”

Sarsfield was the Guards’ CO, and the next-ranking officer to Sten. Freston touched keys.

“One other thing,” Sten said. “You’ve been through C&S school?”

“Yessir.”

“You have any really terrible sins in your past? That’d keep you from being the very model of a shipcaptain? Ram the admiral’s barge? Shine the ship’s cannons with carbolic acid? Bootleg the beer? Badmouth the beef? Boast about buggery?”

“Nossir.”

“Fine. They tell me pirates get promoted a lot before they get hanged. The *Victory’s* your ship, Mister.”

“Yessir.”

“Don’t thank me. That just means you’ll probably be next after Kilgour for the high jump. Mister Kilgour?”

“Sir?”

“All offwatch personnel to the main hangar.”

“Yessir.”

And then Sten noticed Alex’s hand move away from the small of his back. He might have been fingering an old war wound around the caudal vertebra. Kilgour was not—his hand had been touching the butt of a miniwillygun, hidden in his waistband. Alex took no chances: loyalty to the Emperor was the abstract would be acceptable. But if anyone attempted to fulfill that promise to “defend the Empire and its welfare unto death,” they would be prime candidates for martyrdom. And most likely Kilgour would loudly admire their fidelity at the wake.

A screen cleared. Sarsfield.

“General, you’re aware of what’s happened?”

“I am.”

“Very well. In view of events, you are now the ranking officer of the fleet. Until you receive differing orders from the Empire, I would suggest you continue the present course toward the nearest Imperial worlds. I will advise you that, regrettably, any attempt to interfere with the *Victory* or its movements will be opposed with maximum force. However, none of your ships are in danger if they obey these instructions.” The old soldier grimaced. He took a deep breath, and started to say something. Then he changed his mind.

“Your message is understood.”

“Sten. Clear.” The screen blanked. Sten wondered what Sarsfield had been about to say—that none of the Imperialships had one-quarter the firepower of the *Victory* nor were they skippered by deathseekers? Or—and Sten cursed at himself for still having a bit of romance in him—Good luck? It didn’t matter.

“Jemedar Lalbahadur?”

“Sah!”

“Turn out your people. I want them as flanking security.”

“Sah!”

“Captain Cind, I’d also like your people dancing attendance.”

“They’re already drawing weapons,” Cind said.

“Commander—pardon, Captain Freston, have the captain’s personal boat ready for launch. We’ll steal you another one somewhere.” Interesting, Sten thought, how quickly one could lose that stifling straitjacket discipline the navy held so dear.

“Yessir.”

“Mister Kilgour? Shall we go draw the line with our saber and see if anybody’s in an Alamo kind of mood?”

Alex hesitated.

“Sir, i’ y’ wish. But thae’s another wee matter...a matter o’ security...Ah think Ah’d best—”

“Oh Christ!”

Suddenly Sten remembered security. He had no idea what Alex was hesitating about—but Sten had recollected two trump cards of his own. If they still held value. He unsealed the front of his combi-suit and lifted out the thin pouch that was hung on a tie around his neck. He removed two squares of plas.

“You people stand by,” he ordered.

Sten hurried across the bridge to the central computer station. He told the two operators to clear off the cubicle, pulled a security screen around the station, and slid a keyboard out.

Touched keys.

The station was one of the three on the *Victory* that could access ALL/UN—the central Imperialcomputer net that reached every Imperial command on every world and ship of the Empire. *Should*, Sten thought, rather than *could*. Most likely the *Victory* had been cut out of any access to anything, just as the Eternal Emperor had cut Sten’s usual direct line into his quarters.

Weeks passed. Months. Decades. Sten knew his body could have been carbon-dated before the screen suddenly cleared and ALL/UN blinked at him, then vanished. Then: ACCORDANZA. Sten input the *Victory*’s code. Another long wait. The next thing he would see would be the simulation of a stiffly extended human middle finger and

STATION REJECTED.

Instead: ATELIER.

Sten input the program on the first plas chip. Again, a wait, then, BORRUMBADA. Damn, I thought.

They accepted it. Once again: ATELIER. The second chip was fed in. And again Imperial All Units accepted the program. Now we pray a lot, and hope both those little bastards work their magic.

The chips were a gift from Ian Mahoney, Sten's former commander in Mantis, Fleet Admiral, and for aeons, the closest thing the Eternal Emperor had for a friend. But Mahoney was dead now—accused of treason by the Emperor and executed.

It's a great pity, Ian, Sten thought, you couldn't come up with one of these for yourself—and deploy it before the Eternal Clot killed you. He caught himself. No time for that, either.

Sten pulled the security curtain aside and found Alex waiting. "Ah'm thankin't you f'r warmin't t' chair frae me, boss. Noo, i' y'll get gone?"

"Yessir, Mister Kilgour, sir. Out of the way, sir, right away, sir. Can I have someone send in tea, sir?"

"Clottin' liquid fit only't' flow through th' veins ae sasse-nachs. Ah'll hae a dram in a wee." And Kilgour pulled the curtain closed.

Sten started for one of the slideways connecting the bridge to the battleship's central transit tube and thence to the hangar near the stern. Without orders, the Gurkhas, willyguns at the port, were trotting behind him.

Cind and her Bhor were waiting at a junction. She motioned them, and the Gurkhas, to move on ahead.

For a moment, she and Sten were alone at the bend of a corridor.

"Thanks," she said, and kissed him.

"For what?"

"For not asking."

"Asking what?"

"You are a clot," she said.

"You mean—"

"I mean."

"But I never thought that you wouldn't, I mean—"

"You're right. I stay volunteered. Plus I never took any oath to any Emperor. Besides, I know how to pick a winner."

Sten looked closely at her. She did not appear to be either making a joke or trying to build her morale.

"My ancestors were Jannissars," she went on. "They served tyrants who hid behind the lie that they were the voice of a god they'd made up.

"I swore if I could become a soldier, I wouldn't be like them. Matter of fact, the kind of soldiering I dreamed about was helping get rid of all those bastards like the Prophets. Or like Iskra. Or the Emperor."

"Well," Sten said, "you told me that before. And now I guess you'll get your chance. Or at least a good shot at going down in noble flames."

"Naah," Cind disagreed. "We're gonna kick his ass. Now come on. You've got a sermon to preach."

Sten stood on the winglet of a tacship, looking down at the nearly two thousand beings—those sailors of the *Victory* not absolutely required at weapons stations or to keep the ship alive, plus the

remainder of his embassy staff—spread out around him.

He didn't think he was doing a very good job of preaching tyrannicide. He tried not to look up at the hangar's overhead catwalks where Bhor and Gurkha marksmen waited, in case someone planned any nonverbal objections.

"All right," he finished. "That's the situation. I shoved the Emperor's face in it. There's no way I can let me vanish and pretend nothing happened. Which I'm not going to do anyway.

"I won't say what comes next. Because I don't think any of you should volunteer to remain with me. If there's anybody down there who's good at running progs or who stayed awake in battle analysis, it's easy to come up with a prediction.

"I've got the *Victory*, and maybe some beings somewhere who believe the same as I do. Which is why I think that it's time to fight back. This, I plan to do.

"I've been serving the Emperor for most of my life. But things have gone nuts. Like the Altaics, for instance. All right, those poor beings were blood-crazed. And have been so for generations.

"But we're the ones who made it fall apart. We're the ones responsible for turning turmoil into bloody chaos."

Sten caught himself. "No," he said, his voice dropping so that those in the back had to listen hard. "I shouldn't say 'we.' You, me, all of us, did our best.

"But our best wasn't good enough. Because there was one being who was running his own program. The Emperor. We followed his orders—and look what it produced. And I was not going to let it be covered up with a planetbuster.

"That's all I think I should say. We'll have the captain's own boat ready in a bit. It'll cross-connect to the rest of the fleet. You've got about one ship-hour to collect your gear and board.

"Do it, people. You'll live a lot longer if you stay with the Emperor, no matter what he is and no matter what he does. I have no other choices left. You do.

"One hour. Get yourselves out of the line of fire. Now. Anybody else, anybody who's had enough of serving a madman who's hellbent on turning the Empire into chaos, like the chaos we just left—move over against the hangar baffle.

"That's it. Thanks for helping. Thanks for your service. And good luck to all of you, no matter what you choose. Dismissed."

Sten turned away. He pretended to be busy talking to Cind, but his ears were full of the low rumble of voices, and then the clatter of bootheels on the decking.

Cind's eyes weren't on him, but beyond, watching for a potential attacker. Then the voices and movement stopped.

Sten made himself turn around. He blinked in astonishment. Before he could ask, Cind told him.

"The first people to move were your staffers. I'd say, maybe nine out of ten will stick. You've really corrupted them."

"Hell," was the best Sten could manage.

"No drakh," Cind agreed. "Plus you have what I'd estimate is two-thirds of the swabs. I thought nobody in the navy *ever* volunteered. But I think you got a whole bunch of prospective rebels."

Before Sten could do anything—like fall on his knees and thank a couple of the Bhor gods that the *Victory* had been blessed/cursed with over a thousand brain-damaged crewmen—a com blared: "Sten to the bridge! Sten to the bridge!" There was a slight note of emotion in the talker's voice—which meant that almost certain and immediate catastrophe loomed.

"These six screens are patch-ins from the *Bennington*'s internal com. They came right after the first contact." Sten glanced at them—they showed weapons stations and missile-control consoles, a

deserted. "I am not assuming they're realtime casts," Freston continued. Sten looked up at the main screen. On it was the *Bennington*, the tacship carrier that was the heaviest ship in Sarsfield's fleet. Flanking it were two specks that a readout ID'd as destroyers. Headed directly toward the *Victory* on full drive. Either Sarsfield had ordered a suicide run, since there was zero possibility the carrier could play hitsies with a battlegroup, or else things were getting weird out there.

"I have," Freston said, "six Kali stations manned, tracking and holding at four seconds short of launch."

"Replay the first transmission from the *Bennington*." Freston brought the cast up on a secondary screen. It showed the *Bennington*'s bridge, which looked as if it'd been the focal point for a bar brawl. The officer onscreen had a bandaged arm, and her uniform was torn. "*Victory*, this is *Bennington*. Please respond, this freq, tightbeam. This is Commander Jeffries. I have assumed command of the *Bennington*. The officers and sailors of this ship have rejected Imperial authority, and are now under my orders. We wish to join you. Please respond."

The screen swirled, and the message repeated.

"We also," Freston said, "have a cast from one of the DD's—the *Aoife*. The other one's the *Aisling*. They're both Emer-class."

He indicated a projection from *Jane*'s on another screen, which Sten ignored.

"Their cast is shorter, and key-transmitted *en clair*. As follows: '*Aoife* and *Aisling* to join. Accept Stencommand. Both ships homeworld Honjo Systems.' Does that explain anything, sirr." It did—barely. The Honjo were known as supertraders throughout the Empire. And they were cordially hated. They were ethnocentric to a ridiculous extreme, dedicated to the maximum profit but absolutely loyal to whatever master they'd agreed to serve—as long as that loyalty was returned. They were also lethal, nearly to the point of race suicide, as the privy council had found out during the Interregnum when they tried to steal the Honjo's AM2.

Sten had heard rumors that since the Emperor's return the Honjo felt, with some degree of justification, they hadn't been rewarded properly (which meant monetarily) for their loyalty to the Empire.

"Divert the Kali watch from those two ships. Contact them as soon as I finish, tell them messages received and stand by for instructions," Sten ordered. "We'll find out how far they're backing us in a bit. Get me through to this Jeffries on the *Bennington*." The connection was made quickly. And the conversation was short. The *Bennington* had, indeed, mutinied. The captain was dead; five officers and twenty men were in the sick bays. About thirty percent of the crew, now held under arms, had remained loyal to the Empire.

"Request orders, sir," Jeffries finished.

"First," Sten said, thinking fast, "welcome to my nightmare, and I think you're all insane. Second, get all loyalists ready for transshipment. If you've got a supply lighter, use that. Otherwise, disarm enough tacships if that's the only alternative. Third, keep your weapons stations unmanned. Sorry, but we're not in a position to trust anyone."

"Fourth, stand by to receive visitors. Fifth, get your navcoms set up to slave to this ship's command. We're going to travel some, and you'll convoy on us. That's all."

"Yessir. Will comply. Standing by for your personnel to board. And...thank you."

Sten blanked the screen. He didn't have time to wonder why another set of idiots were volunteering for the death chamber. He looked around for Alex and found him, sitting back from the main console, looking smug. Kilgour surreptitiously crooked a finger. Sten, wanting to growl, went over.

"Y'r pardon, boss, but afore we move on, Ah hae a report...We're still rich, lad."

Sten repressed the suicidal urge to kick Alex. What the hell did that have to do with—

~~“Since we’re in a hurry, Ah’ll keep th’ input short. While y’ were doin’t y’r usual job ae inspirin th’ idjots, Ah hit our bank accounts.~~

“Another thing a wee outlaw needs is liquid’ty. So all our assets Ah could lay th’ fast touch on, dumped into an old laundry bank frae th’ Mantis days.”

Sten started to say something, but then realized Kilgour wasn’t being greedy—revolutions, like politics, are fueled by credits and fail for lack of same nearly as often as they do for not providing proper alternative. Sten would need all the credits in the known universe if he was even to survive the war, let alone win.

And Kilgour had not exaggerated about their riches. Years earlier, when they were prisoners of war of the Tahn, their ex-Mantis companion Ida the Rom had pirated their accrued pay and pyramided it into vast riches. They were wealthy enough for Sten to have purchased his own planet, and for Kilgour to build half-a-dozen castles and surrounding estates on his home world of Edinburgh.

“Then, thinkin’t thae’ll prob’ly be someone followin’ that trail, Ah then rescrubbed th’ gelt’t’ Ida wi’ a wee message’t’ stan’ by an’ expect th’ pleasure ae our company, fat cow thae she is. Ah think we’ll be needin’t th’ gypsies afore thae skreekin’t an’ scrawkin’t is o’er.

“Plus Ah drop’t a wee line’t’ our king ae th’ smugglers ae well, although Ah dinnae ken i’ Wild’r dropbox is still good.

“Thae’s all, boss. Noo, y’ hae some work f’r me? Ah’m assumin’t we’re noo bein’t sensible an’ findin’ a badger’s den an’ pullin’ it in a’ter us.”

Alex was on his feet and at attention. Sten nodded appreciation.

“You’ve got that right. Besides, the Emperor would just send badger dogs after us. So we won’t bother. Grab about half of the Bhor and get over to the *Bermington*. Make sure they’re real since we’re talkin’ about things.”

“If not?”

“Do whatever seems right. But if it’s a trap, make them bleed, not us. I’ll keep two Kali stations launch-ready until you say otherwise, and I’ll keep one flight of tacships out on CAP.”

“Ah’m gone.” And Kilgour was.

Sten wanted to take a deep breath and come up with a plan—but there was no time to do anything other than react. He went back to Commander—now Captain—Freston.

“Okay, Captain. You heard what we’re doing. We’ll have all three ships slaved to the *Victory*. We want an irrational evasion pattern on the nav computer.”

“Yessir.”

“I want one flight of tacships out around the *Bermington*. And I want another flight...gimme a hotrod—whatsername, La Ciotat—in charge...one light-second back of the formation, also slaved to the *Victory* as rear guard. Every time we hyperjump, we’ll leave one of the *Bennington*’s Kalis behind, manned by one of Renzi’s officers. I don’t like being followed.”

“Yessir.”

“Now, get me double-ganged to those Honjo hardheads.”

“Aye, sir. Do we have a final destination?”

Sten didn’t answer.

Not because he didn’t have an answer, but because one secret of being a live conspirator was never telling anyone anything until just before it happened. In fact, he had two, now that true miracles had happened and he had not just a ship, but the beginnings of a fleet.

The first one he hadn’t exactly decided on. But it would be close to center stage, since all good

rebellions require some kind of Bastille-bashing to get started.

The second?

Mahoney had shouted “Go home,” as he was dragged off to his death.

And Sten had finally figured out exactly where Mahoney meant. Even if he still had not the slightest idea why or what.

Or so he hoped.

CHAPTER TWO

RANETT DUG HER elbow into a sleepy-eyed clerk's ribs, trod hard on a naval officer's toes, and with practiced carelessness, dumped hot caff on a bureaucrat's swollen paunch.

As she punched through the crowd, she strewed apologies in her wake: "Pardon...So sorry...How clumsy of me..."

If anyone had been awake enough to notice, they would have seen that Ranett moved with the oil-slick ease of a combat veteran. She slipped through the crowd at full tilt. Leaping across openings. Forcing gaps where none existed before. All the while she kept her eyes focused on her eventual goal—the enormous doors leading into the Arundel Castle pressroom.

At the door she was brought up short by a black uniformed mountain. The golden insignia on the guard's sleeve was an ornate / with a 5 twisted around it like a snake. Wonderful, her mind snarled. Internal Clottin' Security.

She flashed her sweetest smile. Guaranteed to melt the hearts of most reasonably heterosexual males. "Excuse me, please..." Ranett started to duck under his arm and slip into the pressroom. Inside she heard a briefer's dry voice. The clots have already started, she thought. I'll skin somebody's hide for this.

Again, the IS man barred her way. "Press only," he snarled.

Ranett kept the sweet smile pasted on. "Then, that means me." She whipped out her credentials and held them steady for the big stupe's beady eyes. He looked closely at the credentials, then at her face. Taking his damned good time.

"Looks like you, all right," he said. Then he gave her a malicious grin. Double wonderful, Ranett thought. A media hater.

"You still can't go in."

"Why the clot not?" the IS man jolted. The sweetness on Ranett's face was gone now. Her tongue dripped icicles. But after the moment's hesitation, the guard failed to take warning.

"Orders, that's why," he growled. "The briefing's already in progress...No one may enter or leave until it's over."

A heartbeat later his self-satisfied smile was replaced with a look of pure terror as Ranett unleashed her pent-up fury.

"Get out of my way, you pumped-up little scrote," she snarled. "You let me in there this instant, or I'll fry your pubes for breakfast."

She let him have it for a full one and a half horrible minutes. Scorching him and the wall on either side with blasphemies and foul threats equal to anything the IS man had ever heard—up to and including introducing him to the Emperor's chief torturer.

As each second of the ninety dripped away like a full year, the name on the press ID started registering in his tiny brain. The woman flaying him alive was a legendary newsbeing. Ranett had covered the Tahn wars from the front. Survived the nightmare years when the privy council ruled. Produced prizewinning livie documentaries that even he had watched in awe. Mighty government and corporate chieftains had been known to flee like small boys caught in dirty little acts when she showed up with her recording crew.

When she paused for breath—or new inspiration—the IS man did his best to ooze out of her way. He was busy deserting his post—he'd rather face his hyena-voiced sergeant than this woman—when he heard the big doors hiss open, then closed. He looked behind him. Managed a breath...long and shuddering. Ranett was inside. He was safe until the press conference was over. And clot his orders.

Fleet Admiral Anders—Chief of His Majesty’s Naval Operations—did a little mental swearing of his own when he saw Ranett duck into the crowded room and cozen some young fool out of an aisle seat.

Up until now, the thing had gone perfectly. When he had first gotten news of the drakh that had hit the fan in the Altaics, he had put his press crisis officers into motion before he had even gotten orders from the Emperor. The admiral’s critics—all silent now—believed him far too young for his position. Also too consciously handsome and smooth. A man who had climbed quickly to the top through political talent, rather than military. In fact, his combat medals had all been won by staged fly-ins over recently cleared enemy territory. He had fired many shots in anger, but all skillfully executed memoirs and press releases.

His first act as Chief of Naval Operations had been to create the emergency press-pool system that the beings before him were operating under. The rules were simple: (1) Only newsbeings credentialed by his office could attend a Crisis Briefing. (2) Only questions pertaining to the “facts” presented in the briefing would be entertained. (3) Only authorized spokesbeings were permitted to be questioned. (4) Any violations of the first three rules might be deemed a breach of Imperial security and all parties prosecuted for treason.

Still, there were certain realities to handling the media. Some of the beings before him were stars more popular than any livie heartthrob. And they commanded salaries of such size that they were powerful corporations in their own right.

Fortunately, most of them were tame. One part of Anders’s genius was he recognized that even a gadfly must join the institution it torments to become a rich and famous gadfly.

Ranett didn’t fit this mold. She was merely famous. She had no desire for wealth. Cared nothing for her fame...except as a powerful tool to be used to get her way.

Which was why when Admiral Anders drew up the list of reporters to be called, he was forced to include her name. But it went on the bottom. Careful instructions were given for the call to go out to be late for Ranett to attend.

But here she was. In clotting person. Despite the hour—Anders had purposely set the crisis briefing for two E-hours before dawn—Ranett looked frighteningly awake. Unlike her punchdrunk colleagues who yawned and nodded all around her, halfheartedly bending an ear as Anders’s press briefing officer continued the jargon-laden drone.

“...So much for the history and physical makeup of the Altaic Cluster. You will find planetary maps, thumbnails, relative-grav data, and time-conversion charts in the materials we’ve already handed out,” the officer said.

“Also included is a fact sheet on the four principal races: the Jochians and Torks. Both human. And the Suzdal and Bogazi. Both ET. It will be helpful to recall that the Jochians are the majority race. And each of the races harbored historical hatred of the other.” There was a dry rustle of documents. The officer moved on. “Next...the political backdrop. The details are well known to you all. However, to sum up. Anarchy threatened when the Emperor’s trusted ally, The Khaqan, died. He was a member of the Jochian majority. It was unfortunate the heavy workload and detail-driven nature of his duties prevented The Khaqan from grooming a successor.

“The Emperor appointed Doctor Iskra—a prominent Jochian scholar and devoted citizen of the Empire—as the new leader...”

Ranett was getting the range now. She could see by the glazed look on her colleagues’ faces that nothing important had been said...yet. But they were over an hour into the briefing. The dry lecturer in front of her was only one of several who had come before. Obviously, all of them had outlined equal

unimportant facts. It was certainly not news that things had gone into the slokhouse in the Altaics. leakproof news blackout had been slammed down for some time now. Ranett herself had just returned from an attempt to visit the sector. Her ship had been ordered back to Prime by someone very powerful, just short of its destination.

She quick-checked through the sheaf of press materials she had snagged on the way to her seat. Found the Crisis Briefing Agenda. Sure enough, the first items listed on the agenda came under the heading of Background. That was followed by Crisis In Focus: Fleet Admiral Anders, Chief of His Majesty's Naval Operations. This was followed by a Q&A. Nowhere on the agenda—or in the other material in the folder—was there a hint of exactly what this crisis briefing was all about. Except for the fact it had something to do with the Altaics. And it was probably military, since the briefing was being conducted by the Chief of Naval Operations.

If Ranett was the type who whistled, she would have done so right then. There was some deep drakh about to come down. In her experience weaving through the maze of Imperial politics, good news was announced immediately. Bad news was shunted to the end.

She caught Admiral Anders dart a glance at her. He was clearly stewing over her presence. Gooooo. She gave him her nastiest grin. Anders pretended to ignore her. Turned his solemn attention back to his briefing officer.

“...the greatest difficulty,” the man was saying, “proved to be the numerous heavily armed forces under the command of the several highly volatile races. To begin with, a diplomatic effort was launched to meet with the commanders of the hostile forces arrayed against Dr. Iskra. And, as quickly as possible, Imperial forces were sent in to assist Dr. Iskra in keeping the peace. Those forces were commanded by one of the Emperor's most capable and loyal officers—Admiral Mason...”

Ranett's alarm bells started ringing. Why the lavish praise for Mason? She had also caught the past tense phrase: “...forces *were* commanded.” Then the alarms grew louder still. The briefing officer had unaccountably left out the name of the man who had headed the diplomatic mission: Plenipotentiary Sten. She knew Sten was one of the most prominent beings on the Eternal Emperor's staff. The poor sod, Ranett thought. To her mind, Sten was either being set up as a scapegoat or was bound for execution. She wondered if maybe it had already happened.

“...Despite the many difficulties,” the briefing officer continued, “we are happy to tell you today that the situation in the Altaics has stabilized. Order has been restored. Some time in the near future we expect to be able to permit free travel and communication with the cluster.”

Rüiight! Ranett thought. She knew when she was wading in drakh thigh-deep. “Near future” most likely meant...never in her lifetime.

“That concludes the background portion of the agenda,” the briefing officer said. He made with a insincere smile. “Thank you for your attention, gentlebeings. Admiral Anders will now bring us up to date on the latest developments. Please give him a warm welcome.”

There was a scattering of applause as Anders came forward. This frosted Ranett. She noted most of the applause came from the star anchors. Human or ET, they all looked alike to Ranett—gorgeously rich, and self-satisfied.

“This is a solemn moment for me, gentlebeings,” Anders intoned. “It is with heavy heart that I announce to you that one of our own has betrayed all that I...and the hundreds of thousands of other members of the Imperial forces...stand for.”

Ranett leaned forward. Here it comes, she thought.

“Only hours ago, Admiral Mason stumbled upon a plot to overthrow His Majesty, the Eternal Emperor.”

A loud rumble erupted from the press corps. Anders held up a hand for silence. And got it.

~~“The coup attempt—using the disturbances in the Altaic Cluster as a screen—was uncovered on~~
moments after it was launched. Admiral Mason engaged the perpetrators. And shattered them.

“...Losing his own life in the process. As well as all hands aboard his ship.”

The rumble turned into a thunderclap. Newsbeings were on their feet shouting for attention. Ranett stayed in her seat. Intent on Anders. She noted that his left cheek was twitching. And his eyes were overly bright. Her conclusion: the Admiral was a lying sack.

Again Anders signaled for silence. Again he got it. “The coup was masterminded,” he said, “by being we all believed to be loyal...a man who proved to be secretly nursing an insane desire to murder our Emperor, and once again bring disaster to the Empire.

“Plenipotentiary Sten! A man who once had the Emperor’s love and trust.

“You will be pleased to know that although this intergalactic outlaw survived, his forces have been destroyed or scattered. As we speak, they are being hunted down one by one.”

Now, Anders skillfully allowed himself to be overwhelmed by questions.

“Any word on this villain’s whereabouts, Admiral?” one of the overpaid anchors shouted.

“None that I am allowed to verify,” Anders said. “But rest assured, Sten—and his underling, Alex Kilgour—can run. But they can’t hide.”

“Were any of the rebel forces in the Altaics involved?” came another question.

“Again, I am hampered by concerns of Imperial security. I can say, however, that Sten was heavily involved with the rebels in the course of his duties.”

“Is there any danger of the conspiracy spreading?”

“I can’t say no to that. But, I can say I believe we have it localized. Internal Security will be following up all leads.”

It’s witch-hunt time, Ranett thought.

“What were Admiral Mason’s total casualties?”

“I’m sorry...Again, security concerns prevent me from answering. Except to say all hands aboard his flagship died in the cowardly attack.”

“How many of Sten’s forces have been killed or captured?”

Anders shrugged. “I repeat my last...Imperial security, and all. I promise all of you these questions and all others, will be answered...in the fullness of time.”

Ranett dipped into her bag of tricks and pulled out her favorite—the Donaldson. Her practiced bellow blasted over the other questioners. “ADMIRAL ANDERS! ADMIRAL ANDERS!”

She could not be denied. Anders sighed. Motioned for her to GA.

“What evidence do you have against these alleged conspirators?” she asked.

Anders frowned. “Evidence? I told you...There was a coup attempt.” He tried laughing at her. “I know it’s early, Ranett, but we do wish you’d pay attention when we speak.”

“I heard you, Admiral,” Ranett snarled. “But, I assume...If this Sten is captured—”

“When, Ranett. When!”

“Your qualification, Admiral. Not mine. Regardless. If, or when, Sten—and this Alex Kilgour—are captured...what proof of a conspiracy exists? For the trial, I mean. For example, did you monitor any conversations? Discover correspondence between the alleged perpetrators? Witness them meeting with known enemies of the Empire? That sort of thing.”

Anders sputtered. “Dammit. They attacked and destroyed Admiral Mason’s ship! What other proof do you need?”

Ranett wasn’t buying. “An honest prosecutor might ask for more than your word, Admiral,” she said.

said.

~~“Surely you can see that. Show us pictures of the attack, for example. Transcripts of bridge-to-bridge communications. Whatever proof you have.”~~

“I’ll have to plead security concerns again,” Anders said. “You’ll have those things...eventually.”

“In the fullness of time,” Ranett said.

“I couldn’t have put it better myself,” Anders said.

Ranett knew, *at that moment*, no one had any intention of capturing Sten. Not alive, at any rate. The admiral buried a smile and started to turn away.

“One other question, Admiral...if you please.”

Anders buried a groan. “Go ahead, Ranett. *One* more.”

“Does this incident with the plenipotentiary indicate a severe weakness in the diplomatic corps?”

Anders was honestly stumped. “I don’t understand. This is an isolated incident. One man acting alone with a small group of deranged individuals. Nothing more.”

“Then what about Ian Mahoney?”

Anders purpled. “One has nothing to do with the other,” he snarled.

“Oh? Wasn’t Ian Mahoney assigned to the Altaics as well? In fact, wasn’t he Plenipotentiary Sten’s superior at one time? And wasn’t he just executed? Also accused—with great fanfare, I might add—a traitor? And, like Sten, hadn’t he too spent a lifetime in service to the Emperor?”

“Come on, Admiral. Either one and one equals two or we have a coincidence that at the very least indicates dissatisfaction with Imperial policy. Loyal and able beings who have spent their entire careers fighting the Emperor’s battles aren’t suddenly transformed into traitors. Unless there’s something seriously wrong.”

“Writing an editorial, Ranett?” Anders growled.

“No, Admiral. Just asking questions. That’s my job. Answering them is yours.”

“I won’t dignify your remarks by responding,” Anders said. He turned to the rest of the newsbeing. “And...I warn you all...The area your colleague has just encroached upon is forbidden under the crisis-briefing rules. She—and the rest of you—*will* confine yourself to asking and communicating only those details authorized under those rules. Do I make myself clear?” The press room was oddly silent. No one looked at Ranett. Angry enough to peel and parboil Anders, Ranett opened her mouth to bellow one more stinging question. Then she saw the deadly look in Anders’s eyes. Saw an Internal Security officer move forward, getting ready for a word *from* the admiral. Her jaw shut with a snap.

She smiled, shrugged, and buried her head in her notes.

Ranett was a survivor. She would get her questions answered—one way or the other.

As the press briefing broke up and everyone hurried out of the room, Ranett thought about Sten one more time.

Poor sap. He didn’t stand a chance.

CHAPTER THREE

“I AM AFFLICTED with fools,” the Eternal Emperor roared. “Overpaid, overstuffed, smirking, self-satisfied fools.”

A variety of beings quaked in their footgear as the Emperor detailed his displeasure. There was Avri, the young woman with the very old eyes, who was his political chief of staff. Walsh, the handsome but exceedingly stupid boss of Dusable, who was the Emperor’s toady in Parliament. Anders, the admiral who had run afoul of Ranett at the press conference. Bleick, the Emperor’s chamberlain. And scores of other beings—uniformed and otherwise—were scurrying about the yawning Imperial chamber or hanging their heads in shame as the Emperor railed on. The Emperor towered over Anders. Blue eyes shifting to the color of cold steel. “What kind of a press conference was that, Admiral? You’re supposed to be an expert on that sort of drakh. God knows, you can’t pour piss out of a boot when it comes to *real* military business.”

“Yessir,” the Admiral said. He was drawn up, heels locked, like a raw recruit.

“And *you*, Avri...You were supposed to gameplan this thing with pube brain, here. I gave you the spin on a gilt-edged platter, for crying out loud.”

“Yessir,” Avri said. Licking lush lips with a nervous tongue.

“People, I do not have time to explain basic politics to you,” the Eternal Emperor gritted. “Traitor—the privy council—put this Empire in its worst shape in two thousand years. And I barely pulled it out *that* time.

“Now I’m saddled with debt, harried by mewling allies, and every time I turn over another rock, a new kind of traitorous slime crawls out.

“In my view—which, dammit, is the only view that counts—Sten is the worst of the lot. I nursed that snake at my bosom for his whole clotting life. Gave him honors. Riches. And how does he repay me? Conspires with my enemies. Plots my murder. And when discovered, he slaughters innocent sailors, and one of the best admirals in my service, in a cowardly sneak attack.”

The Emperor’s voice lowered. He shook his head. Weary. “Now, *that’s* a spin, dammit. Guaranteed to turn a drakhhouse into a palace. Not so very hard, is it?”

“I’m very sorry, sir,” Anders said. “I don’t know how that reporter—Ranett—got in.”

“Oh, just shut the clot up, Admiral,” the Emperor said. “If you can’t make a plan that can stand the test of somebody with a little smarts, then get out of the clotting business.”

“Yessir.”

“Avri, it’s damage-control time. I want *all* newscasts blanketed by our spin doctors. Hit the C-Edprograms extra hard. ‘Face The Empire.’ ‘Witness To History.’ ‘Countdown.’ That sort of thing. I especially want you to get into the pants of that Pyt’r Jynnings clown over at K-B-N-S-O. Half the Empire watches that piece of drakh he calls ‘Nightscan.’ I don’t know why. Guess he makes everybody feel smart because he’s so damned dumb.”

“Right away, Your Majesty,” Avri said.

“You! Walsh!”

The dimwit that was the ruler of Dusable blinked into semisentient awareness. “How...uh...may I be of...uh...service, Your...uh...Highness?” he managed.

“I want those lazy sods in Parliament stoked up. Some kind of condemnation vote. Calling Sten and that Scots sidekick of his every filthy name in the book. And if that vote isn’t unanimous, I’ll nail your guts to a post, Walsh. And lash you around it.”

“Yessir,” Walsh gobbled.

“One other thing. Get ahold of Kenna. I have a little personal business I want him to transact.”

“Right away, Your Highness,” Walsh said. Kenna was possibly the sharpest old pol on Dusable. A world whose politics were so crooked infants gurgled the word “mordida” before they learned to say “momma.”

“Anders. I want all firstline forces on this. I don’t care what fleets you have to strip. Sten *must* be found.”

“Yessir.”

“Bleick!” His chamberlain snapped to. “I want—•”

He stopped in midorder as the door hissed open and Poyndex, his chief of Internal Security, entered. His face was grim. Bloodless. A man bearing bad tidings. But the Emperor was too angry to take immediately notice.

“Where the clot have you been, Poyndex? I told you I wanted that info on Sten and Kilgour immediately, dammit. Not tomorrow. Not the day after. But now, dammit. Now!”

Poyndex glanced quickly around the room. Then back at the Emperor. “I think we need to talk in private, sir.”

“I don’t have time for games, Poyndex. Spit it out.”

Poyndex hesitated. The Emperor’s eyes got a sudden spooky glint in them. Clinical paranoia was Poyndex’s diagnosis. “If you insist, Your Majesty,” Poyndex said. “But I would be remiss if I didn’t warn you one more time. This should be discussed in private. I strongly urge you to reconsider.” The Eternal Emperor turned to his people. “Get out.” They got. With feeling. In moments the room was empty. The Emperor looked back at Poyndex. “Okay. Now report.”

Poyndex stiffened. “I regret to say there is nothing *to* report, sir. All files on Sten and Alex Kilgour have been wiped clean.”

“Say clotting what?”

“It’s as if they never existed, sir.” Poyndex’s heart was hammering as he delivered the news.

“That’s not possible,” the Emperor said.

“But I’m afraid it’s true, Your Majesty,” Poyndex said. “Even the Mantis computers have been penetrated. There is no record of Sten—or Alex Kilgour—in *any* record system in the Empire. I don’t know how it was done. I’ve got every tech in IS working around the clock. The only thing we know for sure is it had to have been done by a very high placed insider.” The Emperor stared at Poyndex for a long, uncomfortable time. He turned and palmed a switch. His personal computer terminal winked into life.

“Fortunately,” the Emperor said, “I keep my own files for just this reason.” He laughed. Without humor. “When all is lost,” he said, “you have to depend on yourself.”

His fingers flashed across keys, beginning the search.

“I *used* to have a staff I could depend upon,” the Emperor said. “Mahoney, for one. Sometimes I regret I had to have him killed. Ian was a strong right arm, that’s for sure.” The Emperor, who normally appeared to be a man in his mid-thirties, suddenly seemed very old to the IS chief. His handsome features drawn. His voice high-pitched...and weak. The Emperor looked up at Poyndex. “The same with Sten. I tell you, Poyndex, the trouble with traitors is they tend to be your best people. Another humorless laugh. “Maybe that’s what old Julius was trying to tell Brutus.”

“Pardon me, Your Majesty? I have no knowledge of these beings. Should I have IS put this Julius and Brutus on your Personal Enemies list?”

The Emperor grunted. “Never mind.” He muttered to himself. Just loud enough for Poyndex to hear.

“That’s the other thing...No one to talk—”

He suddenly broke off. "What the clot?"

"Something wrong, sir?"

The Emperor hammered keys. "No. I probably should have—Holy drakh!"

The Emperor bleared up at Poyndex. "My files..." he gasped, "they're..."

Poyndex glanced at the screen. Saw the display. "STEN, NI. KILGOUR, ALEX. NO FILES ON RECORD. PRESS ONCE FOR ANOTHER REQUEST." The IS chief staggered back, as flabbergasted as his boss. The Eternal Emperor's personal files on Sten and Kilgour had been wiped absolute clean. The Emperor's heavy fist smashed on his desk. "I want Sten, dammit! Get him, Poyndex. If you don't, I will. And I will personally put his head on a stake next to yours."

Poyndex fled. And as he went out the door, he swore he could hear a growling, as if a great hound were snarling after him.

CHAPTER FOUR

“GOOD EVENING, GENTLEBEINGS. I’m Pyt’r Jynnings. Welcome to this week’s edition of ‘Nightscan.’ The news program that examines the crucial issues of our time.

“Tonight we focus our full hour on an event that has stunned the Empire. At the heart of the broadcast is a disarmingly simple question...

“Sten: Traitor, or Misunderstood Genius?”

“To my right, Professor Knovack. A renowned Imperial historian and expert on parliamentary power brokering. To my left, Sr. Wiker. Former speechwriter for the Eternal Emperor. Current ambassador to the Tahn worlds.

“Professor. We’ll start with you. What is your response to the question?”

“Oh, he’s a traitor. No question about it.”

“What about you, Sr. Wiker?”

“I couldn’t have put it better myself, Pyt’r. Sten is definitely a traitor.”

“Ah! Agreement! And...uh...so soon. Goodness me. Well, let’s explore the other side of the coin then. Professor?”

“I went first before.”

“Ha ha. Too true. Well, Sr. Wiker, what’s fair is fair. Now, tell us...do you think Sten is a misunderstood genius?”

“That’s an interesting question, Pyt’r. And I’ve come prepared to discuss it all night...if I have to.

“Good. Good.”

“But, before we do, I think we have to talk about the nature of this man.”

“Oh? Did you know Sten? Personally?”

“Good God, no! Uh...I mean...I know *of* him. And I most certainly know *his* type.”

“Please share these insights with our viewers.”

“To begin with, he has enjoyed the favor of our Emperor his entire life. True, he performed some service. Valuable service, some might say.”

“But, would *you* say that?”

“I think that’s...uh...open to interpretation. More importantly, he has been the recipient of a host of honors. So these services—however one might characterize them—have certainly been repaid. Besides these honors, he has also been blessed with great wealth. Thanks to his friendship with the Eternal Emperor.”

“How do you react to those statements, Professor Knovack?”

“I think this...this...traitor approached our Emperor in a rare moment of weakness. After that awful business with the privy council. And our beloved Emperor mistook his ambition for love and loyalty. And now it seems...the Emperor was...was...nurturing a snake at his bosom.”

“Very well put, Professor. Your reputation as a phrasemaker has once again been assured...Any comments thus far, Sr. Wiker?”

“I think we’re forgetting those poor Imperial service beings who were the victims of Sten’s traitorous and cowardly action. Especially Admiral Mason. Think of his family! Think of how much agony they must be in at this moment.”

“A most excellent point. I think we should all pause for just a moment. A moment of silence, if you please. Out of respect for Admiral Mason’s family and the crew of the *Caligula*...”

As the vid recorders whirred for the billions of K-B-N-S-O viewers, the three men solemnly bowed their heads.

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