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*Die Krone der Sterne*  
(The Crown of the Stars)

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Someone had once said that she carried the stars in her eyes. Iniza had felt the magnetic attraction of the universe ever since she first looked up into the night. To her, the sky was not a boundary but a gateway. She had hardly been able to wait for the day when the gate would open to her at last.

But then nothing turned out as she'd imagined it. Paladins in blood-red armour had led her up the ramp of the spacecraft. And long before her home world faded in the plasma stream of the power jets, Iniza had known that she was not a guest on board, but a prisoner.

She was treated like valuable cargo, they read her wishes from her lips – yes, Baroness, of course, Baroness – but less than an hour after take-off she was wishing herself back in the palace of Koryantum. From its towers, even as a child, she had marvelled at the universe in all its glory.

Here in the ship she saw no stars, only grey steel walls, so on the second day of the voyage she asked to be taken to a window, one of the curved panoramic viewing panes on the upper deck of the ship.

The witch Setembra sent two paladins, armed with blasters and swords, to escort her from her cabin to this place, where the stars shone a hundred times more brightly than on the clearest nights at home on Koryantum.

Speechless with awe, Iniza gazed out into space, almost forgetting why she had really asked to visit the upper deck, and that this was all a part of the plan.

Out there, the fiery swarms of the galaxy blazed, the starry torrent of the outer arm of the spiral, clear as quartz and red as rubies, emerald green and aquamarine. She recognized the Kerkes Nebula undulating on the far side of the Ashen Worlds, and it reminded her of stories of battlefields on distant moons and wrecks burning out in their forgotten orbits. She saw the constellation of the Iron Fist, with the fallen kingdoms of the Taragantum Drift, where the fleets of the Order had extinguished all

resistance to them from space. And then, when the vessel corrected its course, her field of vision was filled by the mining worlds of the Borderlands, the outermost region of the Empire, a belt of violence and lawlessness where only trade reigned supreme – trade with its drilling rights and its slaves, determining the fate of whole colonies.

Yet it was the beauty of the universe that took Iniza's breath away, not its terrors, in spite of all that human beings had done and suffered in the light of so many suns. She knew the history of the Empire, and its foundations in the early period of the Hegemony, and she knew all about the tyranny of the Master of Machines, and how the witches of the Kamastraka Order had overthrown him. But when she looked through this curved window, out into a firmament of millions of stars, she saw nothing but the immeasurable splendour of the cosmos.

“Did you ever dream of doing something totally crazy?” she asked the paladin on her right.

The soldier did not move, and if the expression on his face under the red mask of his helmet changed, no one but he himself knew it. His eyes were hidden behind faceted lenses that made his angle of vision many degrees wider. Iniza couldn't even be sure that her guard was male, for the red breastplate gave no clue to its wearer's sex.

“I mean,” she went on, “something that no one would ever think possible. Something utterly outrageous, like sailing on Kentra's solar winds, for instance, or dancing barefoot on the shore of the lava seas of Xusia.” She turned back to the window, looking at the reflection of the paladins in the curved pane. “Well, not exactly barefoot.”

The second soldier, the one on her left, turned his head barely perceptibly towards her.

“You know what I'm talking about, don't you?” she asked him. “Simply wanting to be different from everyone else.” She knew that she was addressing a man who had given up all claim to individuality when he chose the life of a paladin. He was one of millions who wore the red armour of fortified plastic, and who all looked identical behind the masks of their helmets. “Wanting to be more than the others,” she went on, undeterred. “Because you're doing something that doesn't occur to anyone else. And if it has, then they don't let the rest know.”

He turned his head another finger's breadth towards her. With the faceted lenses, he had probably had a complete view of her for some time.

Before the paladins came to fetch her, she had brushed her long, dark hair, and had chosen a black dress that fitted her closely, but not so closely that it showed she was wearing trousers under it. She hoped the two of them didn't know anything about the fashions in the Baronies, for if they did they would probably have realized that the boots just showing under the hem of her dress were a shocking sartorial faux pas.

"There are billions of solar systems out there, billions of possibilities. And so many dreams." She lowered her voice slightly, as if she were speaking only to the soldier on her left. "Do you never dream under those helmets of yours?"

The other guard said, "When you've finished here, Baroness, we will escort you back to your cabin."

She sighed. "I guess you were a spoilsport even as a child, right?"

"Baroness," he replied calmly, "our orders are to take care of you. Trying to provoke us won't change that."

It was not easy for her to tear herself away from the panorama of the galaxy as she took two steps back in pretended indignation. The fortified plastic of the men's breastplates scraped against each other as the soldiers swung around to her. They both saw the stunner that she had brought out from under her dress, but too late. It was a tiny but extremely effective weapon. Glanis had given it to her after take-off, just before she had been separated from him and the rest of her bodyguard. She had been afraid for him ever since.

Her new favourite paladin, the one on the left, was quicker than his comrade, but Iniza's energy beam was faster. She fired the stunner twice. That ought to be enough to put them out of contention for a few minutes – or so she thought. But then the left-hand paladin groaned as he lay on the floor, and groped with difficulty for his blaster. He had dropped the heavy weapon as he collapsed, and he would have to switch it to anaesthetic mode before aiming it at a valuable prisoner. He might just as well have asked her to wait until he had changed its setting.

Glanis had warned her that the armour would block much of the beam of the stunner. Iniza took a step toward the paladin and kicked his helmet with all her might. And then again, to make sure. When he stopped moving, she bent down and pushed the muzzle of her stunner under the rim of his helmet. She fired upwards and at his ear from close range, which probably cost him his eardrum. Then she did the same to

his motionless companion, just to be on the safe side. She'd taken an instant dislike to that man anyway.

She stopped for a very brief moment and took a deep breath. Glanis and she had discussed this hundreds of times, and together they had explored the gangways of an ancient wreck in the Swamp of Ruins, memorizing the location of every corridor and every ventilation shaft of a spacecraft. They knew a vessel of this kind inside out.

She hoped that their timetable still held good. And she hoped nothing had happened to Glanis and his six men. He was more than just the captain of her bodyguard, and she wondered whether the witch Setembra knew that. At home on Koryantum, no one had guessed anything, so there was a fair chance that the Order's informers didn't know either.

As Iniza straightened up, out in space she saw a gigantic outline making its way between her and the starry sea of the borderlands. She felt a faintness that had nothing to do with the weapon in her hand.

"Oh, fuck the crown's prick!" Iniza whispered through her teeth. A silly swear-word, too old-fashioned for a young woman, but she clung to it as she might have clung to an old soft toy that had been loved to bits. At home in the palace, there was a replica of the crown of the Divine Empress – every barony had been given one as a gift, generations ago – and in the past Iniza had often marvelled at it. The crown really did have what could have been taken for a tail looking like a penis, for it had been forged from the steel backbone of the Master of Machines. On the throne-world of Tiamande, it was coiled around the Divine Empress's throat and shoulders.

On the other side of the panoramic window, a deeply fissured shape cast its shadow over the blazing nebulas and constellations. At first sight, the Cathedral of the Witches' Order navigating outer space looked like a mountain thirty kilometres high and sixty broad. The spacecraft itself was slowly moving closer to it, setting course for one of the Cathedral's hangars, and so a mud-coloured planet gradually came into view through the window, hardly a stone's throw away by cosmic criteria. The cathedral hung above it like a spider brooding over its clutch of eggs in their sacs.

The Order's gigantic flagship was approximately pyramid-shaped: broad at the base, tapering as it rose upward. The majestic face of a girl – the face of the Divine Empress – was enthroned high above the labyrinthine cluster of buildings. From chin to forehead, it measured three kilometres. Its sightless eyes stared into space; its expression was grave and inscrutable. No one in the Baronies remembered when these

faces had been fitted to the cathedrals, but it must have been many centuries ago. If the Divine Empress looked as beautiful today, then she must surely be ageless and immortal, exactly as the Order claimed.

The rising flanks of the Cathedral were covered with a forest of steel sculptures, many of them several kilometres high. Muscular bodies in heroic poses, most of them either naked or in armour, standing, seated, lying, figures from the myriad myths of the Empire. There were no empty spaces on the upper part of the Cathedral; the colossal steel statues were enthroned everywhere, and the main structure had disappeared from sight beneath them.

The ships that acted as the bases of the Cathedral were very ancient. A thousand years ago, the Kamastraka Order of Witches had defeated the Master of Machines, and since then the Witches had been ornamenting the fortresses that they captured in space with these works of art, bearing magnificent witness to their own megalomania. As the Cathedrals operated only outside any planetary atmosphere, the force of gravity could not affect the sculptures. Companies of hundreds of steel sculptors, structural engineers and forced labourers were constantly at work on their maintenance. Even when the Cathedrals switched into hyperspace mode, to cover the unimaginable distances of the Order's Empire, the labyrinths of their iron canyons teemed with troops of renovators, improving or correcting the sculptures, or erecting new works on top of the old ones. Small figures thus stood on the shoulders of larger statues, and smaller figures again on the shoulders of the small ones.

Neither at the time of the Hegemony nor under the rule of the Machines had dimensions ever been so boundless. No one outside the Order knew how many Cathedrals existed – estimates varied between twenty and two hundred – but as only they could cross hyperspace under their own power, they seemed to be everywhere at once. At least half a dozen were stationed in the Borderlands alone, making sure the mighty Mining Guilds never forgot that they owed their trade solely to the Witches who tolerated their presence.

But the Cathedral now hovering over the prospecting world of Nurdenmark did not belong to the military power of the Order in this region. It came from Tiamande itself, the throne-world of the Divine Empress. The monstrous ship had crossed the entire Empire, and was now poised among the outer worlds.

Beyond them, on the brink of the intergalactic void, hung an accumulation of remote suns with their handful of inhabited worlds – the Outer Baronies. Koryantum

was one of the lonely planets that circled around those stars, far beyond the Empire of the Order, and ever since mankind could remember, it had been ruled by Iniza's family, the House of Talantis.

The independence of the Baronies, however, was only an illusion. The Cathedrals might keep a respectful distance from them, but that made no difference to the threat that they and the Order represented. Every fifth standard year, young women from the Baronies were chosen as brides of the Divine Empress and taken to Tiamande. No one knew what happened to them there, for no one in their home worlds ever saw them again. Sometimes there were three or four of them, more rarely only one, and that was the case this year. Only Iniza had passed the examination imposed by the Witches, and now the spacecraft was delivering her to the Cathedral in which she was to travel on to the distant court of the Divine Empress.

If Iniza boarded that fortress of the Order, her fate was sealed. That was why she and Glanis had planned her escape as thoroughly and in as much detail as they could at a distance. They had both been painfully aware that putting their plan into action would depend on luck rather than cunning.

At last Iniza forced herself out of the rigidity that had overcome her at the sight of the Cathedral. With a single movement, she tore her dress open down the seam that she had prepared in advance and threw it aside. Under it, she wore skin-tight trousers of black, elasticated cellular fabric, with a dark sweater over them. She now pulled the roll neck of the sweater up to her chin; the archives said that nights were cold on Nurdenmark. If she, Glanis and the bodyguard made it down to the planets in one of the spacecraft's dinghies, it would be a bitter irony of fate if they then froze to death there.

She picked up one of the swords carried by the paladins and left the two men lying in front of the panoramic window. There was no time to drag them into a hiding place. Someone might have heard the stunner firing shots, and then a whole troop could be on its way here.

It took her only a moment to get her bearings on the upper deck. She was just turning down a corridor on the left when she heard the hard ring of the booted feet of more paladins.

A few steps further on, there was a grating over a ventilator in the right-hand wall. Beyond it, a narrow shaft led up to the highest engineering level, a kind of loft inside the spacecraft, with large parts of its old steering mechanism still intact. Like

almost all the ships in the Empire, this one was over a thousand years old, a rusty relic of the Hegemony. The Witches forbade the building of new vessels on pain of draconian punishments, even extending to conflagrations that destroyed a whole world. One of their highest principles was the suppression of technical progress. As a result, spacecraft like this one were as antiquated as the laws of the Order that they served.

Iniza inserted the point of the sword under the edge of the grating, and the brittle rivets soon gave way. She swiftly pulled herself into the opening, leaving the sword behind, and swore with relief at the sight of the clusters of cable harness leading upward all around her. In the wreck that they had explored in the Swamp of Ruins, the vertical shaft had been entirely empty, with the very last piece of copper looted, but here she could climb up the cables without too much trouble. She just had to be careful not to touch any broken cables or exposed wires.

Soon she reached the upper level, and forced herself between two pipes. The engineering deck had a lower roof than the other levels, with loops of cable hanging from it. Iniza saw shimmering creatures of some kind. They resembled woodlice, and must be feeding exclusively on each other and the insulation of the wiring. And they wouldn't mind tasting her too, she feared, as she saw several of the scurrying little crustaceans putting out their feelers to her.

Glanis had been going to meet her here, but she couldn't see any sign of him among the pipes and the wiring.

A loud scraping sound alarmed her. When she looked back down the shaft, she found her fears confirmed. A paladin was nimbly making his way up the shaft hand over hand; he must have followed her through the open grating. Iniza aimed her stunner, and saw the soldier fall, his limbs paralysed. Clattering, he fell past the walls of the shaft, tearing cables that sprayed sparks out of their fixings, and disappeared beyond the smoky plastic. The paladins had orders to spare her – she was now the property of the Divine Empress – but there would be limits to even Iniza's immunity.

She hastily slipped back again and scurried into the darkness. Glanis had meant to wait for her here, while his men seized one of the dinghies.

They were members of her personal bodyguard; her father, Baron Seffren, had chosen them for her. Except for Glanis, they were all recruits, for no one had any doubt that the Witches would get rid of them on the way to Tiamande. A bride of the Divine Empress needed no guard of her own at the end of her journey, but failing to

give his only daughter bodyguards would have shown the Baron in a poor light. He had therefore chosen the men by only two criteria: they were young, and they were among the weakest of their contemporaries, so they could all be dispensed with.

Glanis, the exception, was the only volunteer, and an experienced captain. Some time ago he had incurred the Baron's displeasure, and that made him the ideal leader of a troop going to certain death.

"Glanis?"

Only the woodlice answered her, with a slight rustling of their armoured carapaces. Iniza instinctively touched the solitary ring that she wore on her right hand. Its surface was roughly carved, as if the craftsman had been unable to finish his work. Glanis had given it to her shortly before they left. He himself wore an almost identical ring.

Iniza and her guards had been separated earlier than they expected. That was an insult, but who was going to demand retribution? She and Glanis had considered the possibility before their departure. "I'll do all I can to free you," he had said, "but if they kill me you'll have to manage on your own." They had both known that in that case Iniza's chances were approximately zero, because there was a company of a hundred paladins on board the spacecraft.

Something moved in the darkness ahead of her.

"Glanis?"

It was a human figure, a silhouette among the strands of cables and the pipelines. She braced herself, expecting to see Setembra's face with its single eye emerge from the darkness. The Mother of the Order was responsible for delivering Iniza to Tiamande unharmed.

"Baroness," whispered a male voice. A tiny light shone straight into her face.

She aimed the stunner, but the man knocked the weapon out of her hand, roughly seized her forearm, and pulled her toward him. She struck out at him with her other fist, and caught hold of something that felt like a number of small braids on his chin. Whoever he was, he had a plaited beard as long as her hand.

"Baroness," he said again, more sharply this time. And then, almost angrily, "Iniza Talantis! Keep still!"

"Who the hell are you?"

He lowered the flashlight and grabbed her other arm. She kicked out at him, bent her torso and tried with all her might to wriggle free, but it was useless. He was strong, and obviously used to overpowering women. She hated him at once.

“I don’t want to have to hurt you.”

Fear mingled with her rage, making her even angrier. “Where’s Glanis?”

“Not here, and he won’t be coming either.”

When she fought back again, light fell on his large, scarred hands, and she saw the blood on them.