

“We await your pleasure, Your Ladyship,” squeaked the director.

He was the best, reflected Isabella behind her screen. Only the best would do. There wasn't much time.

Once again she glanced at the mirror. One last check, just in case.

Yes, it was all perfect. Not a royal gown, not armor, not a dress uniform resplendent with braid, but the mottled field-gray-and-brown poncho of a common Volunteer.

An AT rocket slung behind her back. A submachinegun at her belt. Grenades. Magazines. Only the red collar tabs with golden crown and wreath to distinguish her from some common burgher's daughter. And the Diadem of Miranda, nestled in her now shockingly short hair.

“Leonidas, my sweet,” she thought wistfully, “in just a few short weeks you taught me more than all my tutors combined.”

She reached for the mahogany box on the table. The lid rose.

Her breath caught in her throat at the sight of it. The war scepter. The Mace of Miranda.

She couldn't breathe, as if an iron hoop had closed around her chest, squeezing the life out of her. Her heart fluttered in terror, as if it were about to burst, or jump out her throat, but couldn't decide which it would be.

Her hands grasped the edge of the table. Her knees shook.

She had never touched it. Not even at her own coronation. Not even on the night it had fallen from Father's nerveless hand, to rattle into the spreading pool of blood. Not even then.

She'd washed the blood off her skin, and gotten dressed, and summoned servants to take away this monstrous thing, and the remnants of another.

"I am stronger than you," muttered Isabella as her knees threatened to buckle.

"I do not fear you. You cannot hurt me. *You cannot hurt me ever again.*"

The mace was just metal, she thought as she gasped silently for air. Just dead metal and shiny polished stones, she said to herself as she centered her *chi* just below her solar plexus, just like Aunt Matilda had taught her, and pushed it downward.

It was a *thing*. Just a thing, with no will, no soul, no brain, lying in a box, waiting for a hand to wield it. That was all.

The power of the universe flowed into her body through her bellybutton and outward to her heart and lungs and limbs. It banished the terror and the pain and the weakness, squeezing it out into the air, where it belonged. Away from her, until there was nothing left but the pure Will that ruled the flesh, whether the flesh liked it or not.

*She was Isabella, By the Grace of Heaven Baroness of Miranda, First of Her Name, Anointed Heiress of the Founders From Whose Line the Scepter Would Not Pass! She would fear no mere metal and stone!*

Isabella grasped the mace and glided, regally, around the screen, toward the little man with the twitching nose and the beady eyes of an overanxious hamster.

“Proceed, Herr Vandergriff. Let us make haste.”

“At once, Your Ladyship,” replied the nervous little creature as he scampered out of the tent, leading the way.

“We have set the static cameras up here and here, by the pines, Your Ladyship, and the hovercams are there, and over there. I sincerely hope all is to Your Ladyship’s satisfaction.”

Yes, thought Isabella, yes indeed it was. The calm, deep forest. The lasers of a flak battery for a background. The dome of the command center.

*There could only be one take.*

A bright blue star bloomed suddenly in the cloudless, sun-filled sky. Another. And another, and another. They flashed and died, visible only for a moment before the sun’s radiance drowned them out again.

Rennekampff. He was a clever one, that man. He wasn’t selling his life cheaply. Not cheaply at all.

White contrails drew themselves across the azure deep, so quickly that the eye could not follow. Thunder pealed in volleys.

The ground to space missile sites at Diederhoff and Gotterburg. Father's sole sound investment.

"Ready your broadcast, Herr Vandergriff!" snapped Isabella at the gaping director. "Our time grows short."

This was her last chance to reach them all. From the sweltering jungles of the equator to the frozen glaciers of the poles; from tiny handhelds to enormous skyscrapers turned into projection screens; from echoing hangars to crowded public shelters; from tiny alpine villages to the great cities; from the simplest hovels to the finest mansions, her presence would fill Miranda one last time.

"At once, Your Ladyship," bowed Vandergriff, waving to his staff.

"And in three... two... one... Action!"

"*Adlige und Bürgerliche*, our Baroness addresses us from a secure, undisclosed location!" boomed the famous news anchor.

Isabella felt suddenly inflated, as if a pillar of smoke and fire had descended from the heavens and filled her to the brim. The director, the pines, the cameras all grew small, and far away. There was only her and *it*. The thing that came and made her something else, something more than mere flesh and blood; something that did not live here, in the world of men, but only sojourned here from time to time.

“People of Miranda!” thundered the voice that was not really herself at all, “We face today new enemies, but ones who come with an old purpose. They come with their ships and their soldiers to take this world from us. They think that because they are many, and we are few, that because they have great fleets and mighty armies, and we face them with only the simple weapons in our hands, that they will subdue us. They expect us to flee. They expect us to surrender. They expect to take our world without further trouble, and make us their slaves.

“Many a fool has thought thus before them! Many a fool has found different!”

The Mace suddenly felt light as a feather in Isabella’s hand as she brandished it aloft.

“*We are Miranda!* We do not quail before foreign conquerors! We do not flee, nor do we abandon the struggle in fear! Let them come, as others have come before them! We will fight them at the bridgeheads. We will fight them in the fields, and in the hills, in the forests and in the swamps. We will fight them in the villages. We will fight them in the streets of our great cities. We will meet them wherever they go, from the ocean’s depths to the tops of the highest mountains.

“As long as even one among us draws breath, we will fight! We will *never* surrender! And though we have to fight for a thousand years, still the sacred soil of our Fatherland will burn beneath their feet! As long as a Mirandan hand grasps this scepter, as long as a single foreign soldier pollutes our sacred soil, there will be no surrender, and no peace!”

She held the Mace before her now, two handed, fists clenched above the pommel and beneath the head, as if ready to smash an approaching foe. Isabella felt *sharp* all of a sudden, sharper and colder and more merciless than any mere *thing* made by the feeble hand of Man could possibly be.

“My people, We, your Baroness, do not flee off-world. We do not sit in safety and harangue you from the comfort of some faraway palace. We stand within your ranks.

“As long as We draw breath, We shall struggle against these new enemies. We shall fight from among the ranks of Our People, as Our forefathers did in days of old. And We shall not tolerate any who betrays Our sacred Fatherland.

“If there be one in Our ranks who seeks to sow fear or doubt, who advocates surrender or compromise, be he high or low, noble or commoner, young or old, *he is proscribed!* Show him no mercy, even if he be your brother or your father or your son, your liege lord or your bosom friend, for he is no longer of Our People. And if there be one within Our ranks who shows skill and valor above his station, then let him rise where he must, for in this hour the sword of knighthood is drawn to be grasped by any with the courage to wield it. Though he be born the lowest of the low, yet in this hour of our Fatherland’s need, let valor win him lands and titles!

“Go forth now and do your duty to the Fatherland. Defend what is yours, and give the enemy no quarter, for you will receive none. Your Baroness fights alongside you, until the bitter end, unto victory or death!”

“Cut!” yelled the director.

The Chief Guardsman was waving at her from the aircar. It was time to go. Past time.

A gust of wind rattled the pine needles. A wrathful mushroom of smoke and fire was rising to the north, where Diederhoff used to be.

Another volley of contrails pierced the rising cloud. Father’s builders had wrought well. But ultimately in vain.

Soon, whether from lack of missiles or from enemy action, Diederhoff and Gotterburg and all the other fortresses would fall silent, one by one. But that was just the beginning. She was not Father, to fear the common *Volk* more than any external enemy.

The Junker had their Treasures, and they had their well-armed retainers. But the *Volkswehrarsenaal* had been... eclectic.

No more. Two hundred and sixty million submachineguns. One hundred and twenty million rifles. Three hundred and eighty million ponchos. Six hundred million rockets. Eight billion mines. Twelve billion tons of explosives. Ammunition and EFP cones without count. And that was merely what she had issued.

Eight years she had prepared for this day. For eight years, the Junker had grumbled about the unseemly austerity of her court, about her reforms, about her taxes, about her curbs on their ancient powers and privileges. For eight years, the adoration of the Volk had grown day by day. And now came the payoff. Any Junker who betrayed her, the burghers would hang by his guts.

She had expected that it would be the Empire or the Archduchy, or maybe the League. In the end, it was none of the above.

A new enemy. A mighty empire heretofore unknown and invisible, distant and alien. But no matter.

Let them come. The soil of Miranda would receive them by the millions. Her Ladyship the Baroness had prepared a comfortable little piece of this world, two meters long and half a meter deep, for each and every single one of them. Or perhaps a little smaller.

A bright blue flash lit up the summer sky.

The director's hovercameras fell dead to the ground. And azure deepness blossomed, with downward-pointing contrails.