

. . . From the Dark Ages of Space emerged the Second Empire . . . ruled by a child, a usurper and a fool The Great Throne of Imperial Earth commanded a thousand vassal worlds—bleak, starved worlds that sullenly whispered of galactic revolt . . .

At last, like eagles at a distant eyrie, the Star-kings gathered . . . not to whisper, but to strike!

## THE REBEL OF VALKYR

by Alfred Coppel

Out of the dark ages of the Interregnum emerged the Second Empire. Once again in the space of a millennium, the banner of Imperial Earth waved above the decimated lands of the inhabited worlds. Four generations of conquerors, heirs to the greatness of the Thousand Emperors, had recreated the Galactic Empire, by force of arms. But technology, the Great Destroyer, was feared and forbidden. OnHy witches, warlocks and sorcerers remembered the old knowledge, and the mobs, tortured by the racial memories of the awful destruction of the Civil Wars, stoned these seekers and burned them in the squares of towns built amid the rubble of the old wars. The ancient, mighty spaceships—indestructible, eternal—carried men and horses, fire and sword across the Galaxy at the bidding of the warlords. The Second Empire—four generations out of isolated savagery—feudal, grim; a culture held together by bonds forged of blood and iron and the loyalty of the warrior star-kings ...

Quintus Bland,

## ESSAYS ON GALACTIC HISTORY

### I

Kieron, Warlord of Valkyr, paced the polished floor angrily. The flickering lights of the vast mirrored chamber gHinted from the jewels in his ceremonial harness and shimmered down the length of his silver cape. For a moment, the star-king paused before the tall double doors of beaten bronze, his strong hands toying with the hilt of his sword. The towering Janizaries of the Palace Guard stood immobile on either side of the arching doorway, their great axes resting on the flagstones. It was as though the dark thoughts that coursed through Kieron's mind were—to them—unthinkable. The huge warriors from the heavy planets of the Pleiades were stolid, loyal, unimaginative. And even a star-king did not dream of assaulting the closed portals of the Emperor's chambers.

Kieron's fingers opened and closed spasmodically over the gem-crusted pommel of his weapon; his dark eyes glittered with unspent fury. Muttering an oath, he turned away from the silent door and resumed his pacing. His companion, a brawny man in the plain battle harness of Valkyr, watched him quietly from under bushy yellow brows. He stood with his great arms folded over the plaits of grizzled yellow hair that hung to his waist, his deeply-lined face framed by the loosened lacings of a winged helmet. A huge sword hugged his naked thigh; a massive blade with worn and sweat-stained hilt.

The lord of Valkyr paused in his angry pacing to glare at his aide. "By the Great Destroyer, Nevitta! How long are we to stand this?"

"Patience, Kieron, patience." The old warrior spoke with the assurance of life-long familiarity. "They try us sorely, but we have waited three weeks. A little longer can do no harm."

"Three weeks!" Kieron scowled at Nevitta. "Will they drive us into rebellion? Is that their intention? I swear I would not have taken this from Gilmer himself!"

"The great Emperor would never have dealt with us so. The fighting men of Valkyr were ever closest to his heart, Kieron. This is a way of doing that smacks of a woman's hand." He spat on the polished floor. "May the Seven Hells claim her!"

Kieron grunted shortly and turned again toward the silent door. Ivane! Ivane the Fair . . . Ivane the schemer. What devil's brew was she mixing now? Intrigue had always been her weapon—and now that Gilmer was gone and she stood by the Great Throne . . .

Kieron cursed her roundly under -his breath. Nevitta spoke the truth. There was Ivane's hand in this, as surely as the stars made Galaxies!

Three weeks wasted. Long weeks. Twenty-one full days since their ships had touched the Imperial City. Days of fighting through the swarms of dilettantes and favor-seekers that thronged the Imperial Palace. There had been times when Kieron had wanted to cut a path through the fawning dandies with his sword!

Gilmer of Kaidor lay dead a full year and still the new Court was a madhouse of simpering sycophants. Petitions were being granted by the score as the favorites collected their long-delayed largess from the boy-Emperor Toran. And Kieron knew well enough that whatever favors were granted came through the ambitious hands of the Consort Ivane. She might not be allowed to wear the crown of an Empress without the blood of the Thousand Emperors in her veins, but by now no one at Court denied that she was the fountain-head of Imperial favor. Yet that wasn't really enough for her, Kieron knew. Ivane dreamed of better things. And because of all this hidden by-pHay, the old favorites of the warrior Gilmer were snubbed and refused audience. A new inner circle was building, and Kieron of Valkyr was not—it was plain to see—to be included. He was prevented even from presenting his just complaints to the Emperor Toran.

Other matters, he was told again and again, occupied His Imperial Majesty's attention. Other matters! Kieron could feel the anger hot and throbbing in his veins. What other matters could there be of more importance to a sovereign than the loyalty of his finest fighting men? Or if Toran was a fool as the courtiers privately claimed, then surely [vane had more intelligence than to keep a Warlord of the Outer Marches cooling his heels in antechambers for three weeks! The Lady Ivane, herself so proud, should know how near to rebellion were the warrior peoples of the Periphery.

Under such deliberate provocations it was difficult to loyally ignore the

invitation of Freka of Kalgan to meet with the other star-kings in grievance council. Rebellion was not alluring to one like Kieron who had spent his boyhood fighting beside Gilmer, but there was a limit to human endurance, and he was fast reaching it.

"Nevitta," Kieron spoke abruptly. "Were you able to, find out anything concerning the Lady Alys?"

The grizzled warrior shook his head. "Nothing but the common talk. It is said that she has secluded herself, still mourning for Gilmer. You know, Kieron, how the little princess loved her father."

The lord of Valkyr frowned thoughtfully. Yes, it was true enough that Alys had loved Gilmer. He could remember her at the great Emperor's side after the battle of Kaidor. Even the conquered interregal lords of that world had claimed that Gilmer would have surrendered the planet if they had been able to capture his daughter. The bond between father and daughter had been a close one. Possibly Alys had secluded herself to carry on with her mourning—but Kieron doubted it. That would not have been Gilmer's way, nor his daughter's.

"Things would be different here," said Nevitta with feeling, "if the little princess ruled instead of Toran."

Very different, thought Kieron. The foolish Toran bid fair to lose what four generations of loyal fighters had built up out of the rubble of the dark ages. Alys, the warrior princess, would add to the glory of the Imperium, not detract from it. But perhaps he was prejudiced in her favor, reflected Kieron. It was hard not to be.

He recalled her laughing eyes and her courage. A slim child, direct in manner and bearing. Embarrassing him before his roaring Valkyrs with her forthright protestations of love. The armies had worshipped her. A lovely child----with pride of race written into her patrician face. But compassionate, too. Gravely comforting the dying and the wounded with a touch or a word.

Eight yeas had passed since bloody Kaidor. The child of twelve would be a woman now. And, thought Kieron anxiously, a threat to the ascendant power of the Consort Ivane . . .

The tall bronze doors swung open suddenly, and Kieron turned. But I was not the Emperor who stood there framed in the archway, nor even the Consort. It was the gem-bedecked figure of Landor, the First Lord of Space.

Kieron snored derisively. First Lord! The shades of the mighty fighter: who had carried that title through a thousand of Imperial Earth's battles must have been sickened by young Toran's . . . or Ivane's . . . choice of the mincing courtier who now stood before him.

The more cynical courtiers said that Landor had won his honors in Vane's bed, and Kieron could well believe it. Out in the vast emptinesses of the Edge men lived by different standards. Out there a woman was a woman—a thing to be loved or beaten, cherished or enjoyed and cast off—but not a touchstone to wealth and power. Kieron had loathed Landor on sight, and there was no reason enough to believe that the First Lord reciprocated most

completely. It was not wise for anyone, even a Warlord, to openly scorn the Consort's favorites—but restraint was not one of the lord of Valkyr's virtues, though even Nevitta warned him to take care, Assassination was a fine art in the Imperial City, and one amply subsidized by the First Lord of Space.

"Well, Landor?" Kieron demanded, disdaining to use Landor's title.

Landor's smoothly handsome features showed no expression. The pale eyes veiled like a serpent's.

"I regret," the First Lord of Space said easily, "that His Imperial Majesty had retired for the night, Valkyr. Under the circumstances . . ." He spread his slender hands in a gesture of helplessness.

The lie was obvious. Through the open doorway of the royal chambers came the murmuring sound of laughter and the reedy melody of a minstrel's pipes in the age-old ballad of Lady Greensleeves. Kieron could hear Toran's uncertain voice singing:

Greensleeves was all my joy,

Greensleeves was all my joy,

And who but Lady Greensleeves?

Kieron could imagine the boy—lolling foolishly before the glittering Ivane, trying to win with verses what any man could have for a pledge of loyalty to the Consort. The Valkyr glared at Landor. "I'm not to be received, is that it? By the Seven Hells, why don't you say what you mean?"

Landor's smile was scornful. "You out-worlders! You should learn how to behave, really. Perhaps later ..." "Later be damned!" snapped Kieron. "My people are starving now! Your grubbing tax-gatherers are wringing us dry! How long do you think they'll stand for it? How long do you imagine I will stand for it?"

"Threats, Valkyr?" asked the First Lord, his eyes suddenly venomous. "Threats against your Emperor? Men have been whipped to death for much less."

"Not men of Valkyr," retorted Kieron.

"The men of Valkyr no longer hold the favored position they once did, Kieron. I counsel you to remember that." "True enough," Kieron replied scornfully. "Under Gilmer, fighting men were the power of the Empire. Now Toran rules with the hands of women . . . and dancing masters."

The First Lord's face darkened at the insult. He laid a hand on the hilt of his ornate sword, but the Valkyr's eyes remained insolent. The huge Nevitta stirred, measuring the Pleiadene Janizaries at the door, ready for trouble.

But Landor had no stomach for sword-play—particularly with as young and supple a fighter as the Warlord of Valkyr. His own ready tongue was a better weapon than steel. With an effort, he forced himself to smile. It was a cold smile, pregnant with subtle danger.

"Harsh words, Valkyr. And unwise. I shall not forget them. I doubt that you will be able to see His Majesty, since I do not believe the tribulations of a planet of savages would concern him. You waste your time here. If you have other business, you had better be about it."

It was Kieron's turn to feel the hot goad of anger. "Are those Toran's words or Ivane's dancing master?"

"The Consort Ivane, of course, agrees. If your people cannot pay their taxes, let them sell a few of their brats into service," Landor said smoothly.

The die was cast, then, thought Kieron furiously. All hope for an adjustment from Toran was gone and only one course lay open to him now.

"Nevitta! See that our men and horses are loaded tonight and the ships made ready for space!"

Nevitta saluted and turned to go. He paused, looked insolently at the First Lord, and deliberately spat on the floor. Then he was gone, his spurs ringing metallically as he disappeared through the high curving archway.

"Savage," muttered Landor.

"Savage enough to be loyal and worthy of any trust," said Kieron; "but you would know nothing of that."

Landor ignored the thrust. "Where do you go now, Valkyr?"

"Off-world."

"Of course," Landor smiled thinly, his eyebrows arching over pale, shrewd eyes. "Off-world."

Kieron felt a stab of suspicion. How much did Landor know? Had his spies pierced Freka the Unknown's counter-espionage cordon and brought word of the star-kings gathering on Kalgan?

"It cannot concern you where I go now, Landor," said Kieron grimly. "You've won here. But . . ." Kieron stepped a pace nearer the resplendent favorite. "Warn your tax-gatherers to go armed when they land on Valkyr. Well armed, Landor."

Kieron turned on his heel and strode out of the antechamber, his booted heels staccato on the flagstones, silver cape flaunting like a proud banner.

II

Past the tall arch of the Emperor's antechamber lay the Hall of the Thousand Emperors. Kieron strode through it, the flickering flames of the wall-scones casting long shadows out behind him—shadows that danced and whirled on the tapestried walls and touched the composed faces of the great men of Earth.

These were brooding men; men who stared down at him out of their thousand pasts. Men who had stood with a planet for a throne and watched their Empire passing in ordered glory from horizon to horizon across the

night sky of Earth—men worshipped as gods on out-world planets, who watched and guided the tide of Empire until it crashed thundering on the shores of ten thousand worlds beyond Vega and Altair. Men who sat cloaked in sable robes with diamond stars encrusted and saw their civilization built out from the Great Throne, tier on shining tier until at last it reached the Edge and strained across the awful gulf for the terrible seetee suns of mighty Andromeda itself ...

The last few of the men like gods had watched the First Empire crumble. They had seen the wave of annihilation sweeping in from the Outer Marches of the Periphery; had seen their gem-bright civilization shattered with destructive forces so hideous that the spectre of the Great Destroyer hung like a mantle of death over the Galaxy, a thing to be shunned and feared forever. And thus had come the Interregnum.

Kieron had no eyes for these brooding giants; his world was not the world they had known. It was in the next chamber that the out-world warrior paused. It was a vast and empty place. Here there were but five figures and space for a thousand more. This was the Empire that Kieron knew. This Empire he had fought for and helped secure; a savage, darkling thing spawned in the dark ages of the Interregnum, a Galaxy-spanning fief of star-kings and serfs—of warlocks and spaceships—of light and shadow. This Empire had been born in the agony of a

Galaxy and tempered in the bitter internecine wars of reconquest.

Before the image of Gilmer of Kaidor, Kieron stopped. He stood in silence, looking into the face of his dead liege. The hour was late and the Hall deserted. Kieron knelt, suddenly filled with sadness. He was on his way to rebellion against the Empire that he had helped this stern-faced man to expand and hold—rebellion against the power of Imperial Earth, personified by the weak-faced boy standing draped in the sable mantle of sovereignty in the next niche. Kieron looked from father to son. By its composure and its nearness to the magnetic features of the great Gilmer, the face of young Toran seemed to draw character and strength. It was an illusion, Kieron knew.

The young Valkyr felt driven hard. His people hungered. Military service was no longer enough for the Imperial Government as it had been for decades. Money was demanded, and there was no money on Valkyr. So the people hungered—and Kieron was their lord. He could not stand by and see the agony on the faces of his warrior maids as their children weakened, nor could he see his proud warriors selling themselves into slavery for a handful of coins. The Emperor would not listen. Kieron had recourse only to the one thing he knew . . . the sword.

He bowed his head and asked the shade of Gilmer for forgiveness.

A slight movement caught his battle-sharpened eye as someone stirred behind a fluted column. Kieron's sword whispered as it slid from the scabbard, the gemmed hilt casting shards of light into the dimness of the colonnade.

Treading softly, Kieron eased his tall frame into the shadows, weapon alert.

The thought of assassination flashed across his mind and he smiled grimly. Could it be that Landor had his hirelings after him already?

Kieron saw the shadowy shape slip from the colonnade out onto the great curving terrace that bordered the entire west wing of the Palace. Eyes narrowed under his black brows, the lord of Valkyr followed.

The stars gleamed in the moonless night, and far below, Kieron could see the flickering torchlights of the Imperial City fanning out to the horizon like the spokes of some fantastic, glittering wheel. The dark figure ahead had vanished.

Kieron sheathed his sword and drew his poniard. It was far too dark for swordplay, and he did not wish to risk letting the assassin escape. Melting into the shadows of the colonnade again, he made his way parallel to the terrace, alert for any sign of movement. Presently, the figure appeared again beside the balustrade, and the Valkyr moved swiftly and quietly up behind. With a cat-like movement, he slipped his free arm about the slight shape, pulling it tight against himself. The poniard flashed in his upraised hand, the slender blade reflecting the starlight.

The weapon did not descend ...

Against his forearm, Kieron felt a yielding softness, and the hair that brushed his cheek was warm and perfumed.

He stood transfixed. The girl twisted in his grasp and broke free with a gasping cry. Instantly, a blade gleamed in her hand and she had launched herself at the Valkyr furiously. Her voice was tight with rage.

"Murdering butcher! You dare...!"

Kieron caught her upraised arm and wrenched the dagger from her grasp. She clawed at him, kicking, biting, but never once calling aloud for aid. At last Kieron was able to pin her to a column with his weight, and he held her there, arms pinioned to her sides.

"You hellcat!" he muttered against her hair. "Who are you?"

"You know well enough, you murdering lackey! Why don't you kill me and go collect your pay, damn you!" gritted the girl furiously. "Must you manhandle me too?"

Kieron gasped. "I kill you!" He caught the girl's hair and pulled her head back so that her features would catch the faint glow of light from the city below. "Who are you, hell-cat?"

The light outlined his own features and the Arms of Valkyr on the clasp of his cloak at his throat. The girl's eyes widened. Slowly the tenseness went out of her and she relaxed against him.

"Kieron! Kieron of Valkyr!"

Kieron was still alert for some trick. Landor could have hired a female assassin just as well as a man.

"You know me?" he asked cautiously.

"Know you!" She laughed suddenly, and it was a silvery sound in the night.  
"I loved you ... beast!"

"By the Seven Hells, you speak in riddles! Who are you?" the Valkyr demanded irritably.

"And I thought you had come to kill me," mused the girl in self-reproach.  
"My own Kieron!"

"I'm not your Kieron or anyone else's, Lady," said Kieron rather stiffly, "and you'd better explain why you were watching me in the Hall of Emperors before I'll let you go."

"My father warned me that you would forget me. I did not think you would be so cruel," she taunted.

"I knew your father?"

"Well enough, I think."

"I've had a hundred wenches—and known some of their fathers, too. You can't expect me to . . ."

"Not this wench, Valkyr!" the girl exploded furiously. The tone carried such command that Kieron involuntarily stepped back, but still keeping the girl's hands pinned to her sides.

"If you had spoken so on Kaidor, I'd have had the skin stripped from your back, outworld savage!" she cried.

Kaidor! Kieron felt the blood drain away from his face. This, then, was . . . Alys.

"Ha! So you remember now! Kaidor you can recall, but you have forgotten me! Kieron, you always were a beast!"

Kieron felt a smile spreading across his face. It was good to smile again. And it was good to know that Alys

was . . . safe.

"Highness ..."

"Don't 'Highness' me!"

"Alys, then. Forgive me. I could not have known you. After all it has been eight years . . ."

"And there have been a hundred wenches . . ." mimicked the girl angrily.

Kieron grinned. "There really haven't been that many. I boasted."

"Any would be too many!"

"You haven't changed, Alys, except that you ..."



"Have grown so? Spare me that!" She glared at him, eyes flaming in the shadows. Then suddenly she was laughing again, a silvery laugh that hung like a bright thread in the soft tapestry of night sounds. "Oh, Kieron, It ts good to see you again!"

"I thought to hear from you, Alys, when we reached Earth—but there was nothing. No word of any kind. I was told you were in seclusion still mourning Gilmer."

Alys bowed her head. "I will never stop mourning him." title looked up, her eyes suddenly bright with unshed tears. "Nor will you. I saw you kneeling inside. I thought then Mat it might be you. No one kneels to Gilmer now but the old comrades." She walked to the balustrade and stood leoking out over the lights of the Imperial City. Kieron watched the play of emotions over her face, caught suddenly by her beauty.

"I tried to reach you, Kieron—tried hard. But my servants have been taken from me since I was caught spying on Ivane. And I'm kept under cover now, permitted out onHy after dark—and then only on the Palace grounds. Ivane has convinced Toran that I'm dangerous. The peopHe like me because I was father's favorite. My poor stupid little brother! How that woman rules him. .. I"

Kieron was aghast. "You spied on Ivane? In heaven's name, why?"

"That woman is a born plotter, Kieron. She isn't satisfied with a Consort's coronet. She's brewing something. I Emissaries have come to her from certain of the star-kings and others . . ."

"Others?"

Alys' voice was hushed. "A warlock, Kieron! He has been seeing Ivane privately for more than a year. An awful man!"

Superstition stirred like a quickening devil inside the Valkyr. The shuddering horror of the dark and bloody tales he had heard all his life about the warlocks who clung to the knowledge of the Great Destroyer rose like a wave of blackness within him.

Alys felt the same dark tide rising in her. She moved closer to Kieron, her slim body trembling slightly against his. "The people would tear Ivane to pieces if they knew," she whispered.

"You saw this warlock?" asked Kieron sick with dread. Alys nodded soundlessly.

Kieron fought down his fears and wondered uneasiHy what Ivane's connection could be with such a pariah. The warlocks and witches were despised and feared above all other creatures in the Galaxy.

"His name?" Kieron asked.

"Geller. Geller of the Marshes. It is said that he is a conjurer of devils . . . and that he can create homunculi! Out of the very filth of the marches! Oh, Kieron!" Alys shuddered.

An awful plan was forming in Kieron's mind. He was thinking that Ivane must be stripped of the spells and powers of this devil-man. With such powers at her command there might be nothing impossible of attainment. Even the crown of the Imperium itself ...

"Where," Kieron asked slowly, "can this warlock be found?"

"On the street of the Black Flame, in the city of Neg on Kalgan."

"Kalgan!" Kieron's heart contracted. Was there a connection? Kalgan! What had Ivane to do with that lonely planet beyond the dark veil of the Coalsack? Was it coincidence? Out of all the thousands of worlds in space .. . Kalgan.

"Is there something wrong, Kieron? You know this man?"

Kieron shook his head. It had suddenly become more than imperative that he go to Kalgan. The mystery of the Imperial Consort's connection with a warlock of Kalgan must be unraveled. And the star-kings were gathering .. .

The Valkyr was suddenly taken with a new and different fear. If Alys had spied on Ivane, then she must be in danger here. Ivane would never tolerate interference with her plans from Gilmer's daughter.

"Alys, are you a prisoner here?"

"More, I'm afraid," the girl said sadly. "I'm a reminder to Toran of the days of our father. One that he would like to eliminate, I think."

Kieron studied her in the starlight. His eyes sought the thick golden hair that brushed her shoulders, the glittering metallic skirt that hung low on her hips, outlining the slim thighs. He watched the graceful line of her unadorned throat, the bare shoulders and breasts, the small waist, the flat, firm stomach—all revealed by the studied nakedness of the fashions of the Inner Marches. This was no child. The thought of her in danger shook him badly.

"Toran would not dare harm you, Alys," said Kieron uncertainly. There had been a time when he could have said such a thing with perfect assurance, but since the death of Gilmer, the Imperial City was like an over-civilized jungle—full of beasts of prey.

"No, Toran wouldn't . . . alone," said Alys; "but there are Ivane and Landor." She laughed, suddenly gay; her eyes, seeking Kieron's, were shining. "But not now! You are here, Kieron!"

The Valkyr felt his heart contract. "Alys," he said softly, "I leave Earth tonight. For Kalgan."

"For Kalgan, Kieron?" Alys' eyes widened. "To seek that warlock?"

"For another reason, Alys." Kieron paused uneasily. It was hard to speak to Gilmer of Kaidor's daughter about rebellion. Yet he could not lie to her. He temporized.

"I have business with the lord of Kalgan," he said.

Alys' face was shadowed and her voice when she spoke was sad. "Do the star-kings gather, Kieron? Have they had all they can stand of Toran's foolish rule?"

Kieron nodded wordlessly.

The girl flared up with a sudden imperious anger. "That fool! He is letting the favorites drive the Empire to ruin!" She looked up at Kieron pleadingly. "Promise me one thing, Kieron."

"If I can."

"That you will not commit yourself to any rebellion until we have spoken again."

"Alys, I . . ."

"Oh, Kieron! Promise me! If there is no other way, then fight the Imperial House. But give me one chance to save what my father and his father died for ... !"

"And mine," added Kieron somberly.

"You know that if there is no other way, I won't try to dissuade you. But while you are on Kalgan, I'll speak to Toran. Please, Kieron, promise me that Valkyr will not rebel until we have tried everything." Her eyes shone with passion. "Then if it comes to war, I'll ride by your side!"

"Done, Alys," said Kieron slowly. "But take care when you speak to Toran. Remember there is danger here for you." He wondered briefly what Freka the Unknown would think of his sudden reluctance to commit the hundred spaceships and five thousand warriors of Valkyr to the coming rebellion. A thought struck him and quickly he discarded it. For just an instant he had wondered if Geller of the Marshes and the mysterious Freka the Unknown might be the same . . . Stranger things had happened. But Alys had described Geller as old, and Freka was known to be a six-and-one-half foot warrior, the perfect "type" of the star-king caste.

"One thing more, Alys," Kieron said; "I will leave one of my vessels here for your use. Nevitta and a company will remain, too. Keep them by you. They will guard you with their lives." He slipped his arm about her, holding her to him.

"Nevitta?" Alys said with a slow smile. "Nevitta of the yellow braids and the great sword? I remember him."

"The braids are greying, but the sword is as long as ever. He can guard you for me, and keep you safe."

The girl's smile deepened at the words 'for me' but Kieron did not notice. He was deep in planning. "Be very careful, Alys. And watch out for Landor."

"Yes, Kieron," the girl breathed meekly. She looked up at the tall outworld warrior's face, lips parted.

But Kieron was looking up at the stars of the Empire, and there was

uneasiness in his heart. He tightened his arm about Alys, holding her closer to him as though to protect her from the hot gaze of those fiery stars.

### III

The spaceship was ancient, yet the mysterious force of the Great Destroyer chained within the sealed coils between the hulls drove it with unthinkable speed across the star-shot darkness. The interior was close and smoky, for the

only light came from oil lamps turned low to slow the fouling of the air. Once, there had been light without fire in the thousand-foot hulls, but the tiny orbs set into the ceilings had failed for they were not of a kind with the force in the sealed, eternal coils..

On the lower decks, the horses of the small party of Valkyr warriors aboard stomped the steel deck-plates, impatient in their close confinement; while in the tiny bubble of glass at the very prow of the ancient vessel, two shamen of the hereditary caste of Navigators drove the pulsing starship toward the spot beyond the veil of the Coalsack where their astrolabes and armillary spheres told them that the misty globe of Kalgan lay.

Many men—risking indictment as warlocks or sorcerers —had tried to probe the secrets of the Great Destroyer and compute the speed of these mighty spacecraft of antiquity. Some had even claimed a speed of 100,000 miles per hour for them. But since the starships made the voyage from Earth to the agricultural worlds of Proxima Centauri in slightly less than twenty-eight hours, such calculations would place the nearest star-system an astounding two million eight hundred thousand miles from Earth—a figure that was as absurd to all Navigators as it was inconceivable to laymen.

The great spaceship bearing the Warlord of Valkyr's blazon solidified into reality near Kalgan as its great velocity diminished. It circled the planet to kill speed and nosed down into the damp air of the grey world. The high cloud cover passed, it slanted down into slightly clearer air. Kalgan did not rotate: in its slow orbit around the red giant parent star, the planet turned first one face, and then another to the slight heat of its sun. Great oceans covered the poles, and the central land mass was like a craggy girdle of rock and soil around the bulging equator. Only in the twilight zone was life endurable, and the city of Neg, stronghold of Freka the Unknown, was the only urban grouping on the planet.

Neg lay sullen in the eternal twilight when at last Kieron's spaceship landed outside the gates and the debarkation of his retinue had begun; the spaceport, however, was ablaze with flares and torches, and the lord of Kalgan had sent a corps of drummers—signal honors—to greet the visiting star-king. The hot, misty night air throbbled with the beat of the huge kettle-drums, and weapons and jewelled harness flashed in the yellow light of the flames.

At last the debarkation was complete, and Kieron and his warriors were led by a torch-bearing procession of soldiery into the fortified city of Neg—along ancient cobbled streets—through small crowded squares—and

Finally to the Citadel of Neg itself. The residence of Freka the Unknown, Lord of Kalgan.

The people they passed were a silent, sullen lot. Dull, brutish faces. The faces of slaves and serfs held in bondage by fear and force. These people, Kieron reflected, would go mad in a carnival of destruction if the heavy hand of their lord should falter.

He turned his attention from the people of Neg to the massive Citadel. It was a powerful keep with high walls and turreted outworks. It spoke of Kalgan's bloody history in every squat, functional line. A history of endless rebellion and uprising, of coups and upheavals. Warrior after warrior had set himself up as ruler of this sullen world only to fall before the assaults of his own vassals. It had ever been the policy of the Imperial Government never to interfere with these purely local affairs. It was felt that out of the crucibles of domestic strife would arise the best fighting men, and they, in turn, could serve the Imperium. As long as Kalgan produced its levy of fighting men and spaceships, no one on Earth cared about the local government. So Kalgan wallowed in blood.

Out of the last nightmare had come Freka. He had risen rapidly to power on Kalgan—and stayed in power. Hated by his people, he nevertheless ruled harshly, for that was his way. Kieron had been told that 'this warrior who had sprung out of nowhere was different from other men. The Imperial courtiers claimed that he cared nothing for wine or women, and that he loved only battle. It would take such a man, thought Kieron studying the Citadel, to take and hold a world like Kalgan. It would take such a man to want it!

If Freka of Kalgan loved bloodshed, he would be happy when this coming council of star-kings ended, the Valkyr reflected moodily. He knew himself how near to rebellion

he was, and the other lords of the Outer Marches, the Lords of Auriga, Doom, Quintain, Helia—all were ready to strike the Imperial crown from Toran's foolish head.

Kieron was escorted with his warriors to a luxurious suite within the Citadel. Freka, he was informed, regretted his inability to greet him personally, but intended to meet all the gathered star-kings in the Great Hall within twelve hours. Meanwhile, there would be entertainment for the

visiting warriors, and the hospitality of Kalgan. Which hospitality, claimed the hawk-faced steward pridefully, was without peer in the known Universe!

An imp of perversity stirred in Kieron. He found that he did not completely trust Freka of Kalgan. There was a premeditated cold-bloodedness about this whole business of the star-kings' grievance council that alerted him to danger. There should have been less smoothness and efficiency in the way the visitors were handled, Kieron thought illogically, remembering the troubles he, himself, had gone to whenever outworld rulers had visited Valkyr.

He was suddenly glad that he had warned Nevitta to use extreme caution should it be necessary to bring Alys to Kalgan. It was possible he was

being over-suspicious, but he could not forget that Alys herself had seen a warlock from Kalgan in familiar conversation with the woman really to blame for the danger that smouldered among the worlds of the Empire.

The drums told the Valkyr that the other star-kings were arriving. Torches flared in the courtyards of the Citadel, and the hissing roar of spaceships landing told of the eagles gathering.

Through the long, featureless twilight, the sounds continued. Freka made no appearances, but the promised entertainment was forthcoming and lavish. Food and wine in profusion were brought to the apartments of the Valkyrs. Musicians and minstrels came too, to sing and play the love songs and warchants of ancient Valkyr while the warriors roared approval.

Kieron sat on the high seat reserved for him and watched the dancing yellow light of the flambeaux light up the stone rooms and play across the ruddy faces of his warriors as they drank and gamed and quarreled.

Dancing girls were sent them, and the Valkyrs howled with savage pleasure as the naked bodies, glistening with scented oils, gyrated in the barbaric rhythms of the sword dances, steel whirring in bright arcs above the tawny heads. The long, gloomy twilight passed unregretted in the warm, flame-splashed closeness of the Citadel. Kieron watched thoughtfully as more women and fiery vintages were brought into the merrymaking. The finest wines and the best women were passed hand to hand over the heads of laughing warriors to Kieron's place, and he drank deeply of both. The wines were heady, the full lips of the sybaritic houris bittersweet, but Kieron smiled inwardly—if Freka the Unknown sought to bring him into the gathering of the star-kings drunk and satiated and amenable to suggestion, the lord of Kalgan knew little of the capacity of the men of the Edge.

The hours passed and revelry filled the Citadel of Neg. Life on the outer worlds was harsh, and the gathering warriors took full measure of the pleasures placed at their disposal by the lord of Kalgan. The misty, eternal dusk rang with the drinking songs and battle-cries, the quarreling and lovemaking of warriors from a dozen outworld planets. Each star-king, Kieron knew, was being entertained separately, plied with wine and woman-flesh until the hour for the meeting came.

The sands had run their course in the glass five times before the trumpets blared through the Citadel, calling the lords to the meeting. Kieron left his men to enjoy themselves, and with an attendant in the harness of Kalgan made his way toward the Great Hall.

Through dark passageways that reeked of ancient violence, by walls hung with tapestries and antique weapons, they went; over flagstones worn smooth by generations. This keep had been old when the reconquering heirs to the Thousand Emperors rode their chargers into the Great Hall and dictated their peace terms to the interregal lords of Kalgan.

The hall was a vast, vaulted stone room filled with the smoky heat of torches and many bodies. It teemed with be-jewelled warriors, star-kings, warlords, aides and attendants. For just a moment the lord of Valkyr regretted having come into the impressive gathering alone. Yet it was

unimportant. These men were—for the most part—his peers and friends; the warrior kings of the Edge.

Odo of Helia was there, filling the room with his great laughter; and Theron, the Lord of Auriga; Kleph of Quintain; and others. Many others. Kieron saw the white mane of his father's friend Eric, the Warlord of Doom, the great Red Sun beyond the Horsehead Nebula. Here was an aggregation of might to give even a Galactic Emperor pause. The warlike worlds of the Edge, gathered on Kalgan to decide the issue of war against the uneasy crown of Imperial Earth.

Questions coursed through Kieron's mind as he stood among the star-kings. Alys—pleading with Toran—what success could she have against the insidious power of the Consort? Was Alys in danger? And there was Geller, the mysterious warlock of the Marshes. Kieron felt he must seek out the man. There were questions that only Geller could answer. Yet at the thought of a warlock—a familiar of the Great Destroyer—Kieron's blood ran cold.

The Valkyr looked about him. That there was power enough here to crush the forces of Earth, there was no doubt. But what then? When Toran was stripped of his power, who would wear the crown? The Empire was a necessity—without it the dark ages of the Interregnum would fall again. For four generations the mantle of shadows had hovered over the youngling Second Empire. Not even the most savage wanted a return of the lost years of isolation. The Empire must live. But the Empire would need a titular head. If not Toran, the foolish weak boy, then who? Kieron's suspicions stirred. ...

A rumble of tympani announced the entrance of the host. The murmuring voices grew still. Freka the Unknown had entered the Great Hall.

Kieron stared. The man was—magnificent! The tall figure was muscled like a statue from the Dawn Age; sinews rippling under the golden hide like oiled machinery, grace and power in every movement. A mane of hair the color of fire framed a face of classic purity—ascetic, almost inhuman in its perfection. The pale eyes that swept the assemblage were like drops of molten silver. Hot, but with a cold heat that seared with an icy touch. Kieron shivered. This man was already half a god....

Yet there was something in Freka that stirred resentment in the Valkyr. Some indefinable lack that wassensed rather than seen. Kieron knew he looked upon a magnificent star-king, but there was no warmth in the man.

Kieron fought down the unreasonable dislike. It was not his way to judge men so emotionally. Perhaps, nought the Valkyr, I imagine the coldness. But it was there. Yet when Freka spoke, the feeling vanished, and Kieron felt himself transported by the timbre and resonant power of the voice.

"Star-kings of the Empire!" Freka cried, and the sound of his words rolled out over the gathering like a wave, gaining power even as he continued: "For more than a hundred years you and your fathers have fought for the glory and gain of the Great Throne! Under Giber of Kaidor you carried the gonfalon of Imperial Earth to the Edge and planted it there under the light

of Andromeda itself! Your blood was shed and your treasure spent for the new Emperors! And what is your reward? The heavy hand of a fool! Your people writhe under the burden of excessive taxation--your women starve and your children are sold into slavery! You are in bondage to a foolish boy who squats like a toad on the Great Throne ..."

Kieron listened breathlessly as Freka of Kalgan wove a web of half-truths around the assembled warriors. The compelling power of the man was astounding.

"The worlds writhe in the grip of an idiot! Helia, Doom, Auriga, Valkyr, Quintain . . ." He called the roll of the warrior worlds. "Yes, and Kalgan, too! There is not enough wealth in the Universe to satiate Toran and the Great Throne! And the Court laughs at our complaints! At us! The star-kings who are the fists of the Empire! How long will we endure it? How long will we maintain Toran on a throne that he is too weak to hold?"

Toran, thought Kieron grimly, always Toran. Never a word of Ivane or Landor or the favorites who twisted Toran around their fingers.

Freka's voice dropped low and he leaned out over the first row of upturned faces. "I call upon you—as you love your people and your freedom—to join with Kalgan and rid the Empire of this weakling and his money-grubbing and neglect!"

In the crowd, someone stirred. All but this one seemed hypnotized. It was old Eric of Doom who stepped forward.

"You speak treason! You brought us here to discuss grievances, and you preach rebellion and treason, I say!" he shouted angrily.

Freka turned cold eyes on the old warrior.

"If this is treason," he said ominously, "it is the Emperor's treason—not ours."

Eric of Doom seemed to wilt under the icy gaze of those inhuman eyes. Kieron watched him step back into the circle of his followers, fear in his aging face. There was a power in Freka to quell almost any insurrection here, thought the Valkyr uneasily. He, himself, was bound by the promise he had made to Alys, but it was only that that kept him from casting his lot with the compelling lord of Kalgan. Such a feeling was unreason itself, he knew, and he fought against it, drawing on his reserves of information to strengthen his resolve to obstruct Freka if he could. Yet it was easy to understand how this strange man had sprung out of obscurity and made himself master of Kalgan. Freka was a creature made for leadership. Kieron stood away from the crowd and forced himself to speak. All his earlier suspicions were growing like a suffocating cloud within him. Someone was being fooled and used, and it was not the lord of Kalgan!

"You, Freka!" he cried, and the lords turned to listen.

"You shout of getting rid of Toran—but what do you offer in his place?"

Freka's eyes were like steel now, glinting dully in the light of the



wall-torches.

"Not myself. Is that what you feared?" The fine mouth curled scornfully. "I ask no man to lay down his life so that I may take for myself the Great Throne and the sable mantle of Emperor! I renounce here and now any claim to the Imperial Crown! When the time is right, I will make my wishes known."

The crowd of star-kings murmured approvingly. Freka had won them.

"A vote!" someone cried. "Those who are with Freka and against Toran! A vote!"

Swords leaped from scabbards and glittered in the torchlight while the chamber rang to a savage cheer. Here was war and loot to satisfy the savage heart! The sack of Imperial Earth herself! Even old Eric of Doom's sword was reluctantly raised. Kieron alone remained silent, sword sheathed.

Freka looked down at him coldly.

"Well, Valkyr? Do you ride with us?"

"I need more time to consider," said Kieron carefully. Freka's laughter was like a lash. "Time! Time to worry about risking his skin! Valkyr needs time!"

Kieron felt his quick anger surging. The blood pounded in his temples, throbbing, pulsing, goading him to fight. His hand closed on the hilt of his sword and it slipped half out of the sheath. But Kieron caught himself. There was something sinister in this deliberate attempt to ruin him—to brand him a coward before his peers. A man faced two choices here, apparently; follow Freka into rebellion, or be branded craven. Kieron glared into the cold eyes of the Kalgan lord. The temptation to challenge him was strong—as strong as Kieron's whole background and training in the harsh warrior-code of the Edge. But he could not. Not yet. There were too many irons in the fire to be watched. There was Alys and her plea to Toran. There was the plight of his people. He could not risk the danger to himself of driving a blade through Freka's throat, no matter how his blood boiled with rage.

He turned on his heel and strode from the Great Hall, the laughter of Freka and the star-kings ringing mockingly in his ears.

IV

Kieron awoke in darkness. Of the fire on the hearth, only embers remained and the stone rooms were silent but for the sound of sleeping men. The single Valkyr sentry was at his elbow, whispering him into wakefulness. Kieron threw back the fur coverlets and swung his feet over the edge of the low couch.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Nevitta, sir."

"Nevitta! Here?" Kieron sprang to his feet, fully awake now. "Is there a

woman with him?"

"A slave-girl, sir. They wait in the outer chamber." Kieron reached for his harness and weapons, threading his way through his sleeping men. In the dimly lit antechamber, Nevitta stood near the muffled figure of Alys. Kieron went immediately to the girl, and she threw back her hood, baring her golden head to the torchlight. Her eyes were bright with the pleasure of seeing Kieron again, but there was anger in them, too. The lord of Valkyr knew at once that she had not succeeded with Toran.

"What happened, Nevitta?"

"An attempt was made on the little princess' life, sir." "What?" Kieron felt the blood drain from his face.

"As I say, Kieron." The old Valkyr's face was grim.

"We had to fight our way out of the Palace."

"I never had a chance to speak to Toran," the girl said sombrely. "It was all that could be done to reach the spaceship. Even the Janizaries tried to stop us. Two of your men died for me, Kieron."

"Who did this thing?" asked Kieron ominously.

"The men who attacked the princess' quarters," said Nevitta deliberately, "wore the harness of Kalgan."

That hit Kieron like a physical blow . . . hard. "Kalgan! And you brought her here? You fool, Nevitta!"

The old Valkyr nodded agreement. "Yes, Kieron. Fool is the proper word ..."

"No!" Alys spoke up imperiously. "It was my command that brought us here. I insisted."

"By the Seven Hells! Why?" demanded Kieron. "Why here? You could have been safe on Valkyr! I know it was my order to bring you here, but after what happened . . ."

"The princess would not hear of seeking safety, Kieron," said Nevitta. "When Kalgan proved its treachery by trying to assassinate her, she could think only of your danger here . . . unwarned. She would risk her life to bring you this news, Kieron."

Kieron turned to face the girl. She looked up at him, eyes bright, lips parted.

"What could make a princess risk her life . . ." Kieron began numbly.

"Kieron . . ." The girl breathed his name softly. "I was so afraid for you."

The Valkyr reached slowly for the clasp of her cloak and unfastened it. The heavy mantle dropped unnoticed to the flagstones. Alys stood, swaying slightly, parted lips inviting. Kieron watched the throbbing pulse in her white throat and felt his own pounding. He took a step toward her, his arms

closing about her yielding suppleness. His mouth sought her lips.

Unnoticed, Nevitta slipped from the antechamber and silently closed the door after him ...

Kieron stood before the arched window, staring out into the eternal, misty dusk of Kalgan, his heart heavy. Behind him, Alys lay on the low couch. Her bright hair lay in tumbled profusion about her face as she watched her lover at the window. Kieron turned to look at her, feeling the impact of her warm beauty. He began to pace the floor, wracking his brains for a lead to his next move in the subtle war of treachery and intrigue that had taken shape around him.

He had ordered his men ready for attack, but for the moment there was little need for that kind of vigilance. What was needed was more information. Carefully, he marshalled what few facts he had at his disposal.

The connection between Freka and the plotters in the Imperial City which he had suspected was proved at last by the attempt on Alys' life by men of Kalgan. The star-kings were being used to fight a battle not their own. But whose? Freka's . . . or Ivane's? No matter which, they were being tricked into striking the Imperial Crown from Toran's head, and the gain to them and their people would be—more oppression.

The treatment he himself had received in the Imperial Court made sense now. Landor sought to drive him into the arms of Freka's revolt. Only Alys had spared him.

Now, the star-kings must be warned. But by the code of the Edge, Kieron must prove to them that he was not the craven coward that Freka's laughter had branded him. And he needed proof. Proof of the monstrous structure of treachery and intrigue that had sprung up out of a worn-cupidity and an unknown star-king's cold inhumanity.

Kieron stared moodily down into the damp courtyard beneath the open window. In the early dawn it was deserted. Then, quite suddenly, there was activity in the walled-in square. An officer of the Citadel guard escorted heavily cloaked figure into the yard, and with every evidence of great respect, withdrew. The solitary figure paced the wet cobbles nervously.

Who, wondered Kieron, would be treated with such obvious obsequiousness and yet left in a back courtyard to await the summons of Freka of Kalgan? A sudden thought struck him. It could be only someone who should not be seen by the star-kings and their attendants that tilled the Citadel of Neg to overflowing.

Kieron studied the cloaked nobleman with renewed interest. It seemed to him that he had seen that mincing walk before ...

Landor!

Kieron flung open the door to the outer chamber. His startled men gathered about him. Alys was on her feet behind him. He signalled for Nevitta and four men to enter.

"Nevitta! Tear down that wall tapestry and cut it into shreds . . . Alys, tie the strips together and make a rope of it! Make certain the knots are secure enough to bear a man's weight ... That's Landor down there!"

Kicking off his spurred boots, Kieron eased himself over the ledge of the window. The courtyard was thirty feet below, but the ancient walls of the Citadel were rough and full of the ornate projections of Interregnal architecture. Kieron let himself down, feeling the mist wet on his face. Twice he almost lost his footing and pitched to the courtyard floor. Alys stared down at him from the window, whitefaced.

He was ten feet from the bottom when Landor looked up. Recognition was instant. There was a moment of stunned silence, and Kieron dropped the remaining distance to land cat-like on his feet, blade in hand.

"Kieron!" Landor's face was grey.

The Valkyr advanced purposefully. "Yes, Landor! Kieron! I wasn't supposed to see you here, was I? And you don't dare raise an outcry or the others will see you, too! That would raise quite a smell in the Consort's pretty brew, wouldn't it?"

Landor shrank back, away from the gleaming blade in Kieron's hand.

"Draw, Landor," said Kieron softly. "Draw now, or I'll kill you where you stand."

In a panic, the First Lord of Space drew his sword. He knew himself to be no match for the Valkyr star-king, and at the first touch of blades, he turned and fled for the gate. He banged hard against the heavy panels. The gate was locked. Kieron followed him deliberately.

"Cry for help, Landor," Kieron suggested with a short, hard laugh. "The place is full of fighting-men."

Landor was wide-eyed. "Why do you want to kill me, Kieron," he cried hoarsely; "what have I done to you . . . ?"

"You've taxed my people and insulted me, and if that were not enough there would still be your treachery with Freka—tricking me and the others into rebellion so that Ivane can seize the crown! That's more than enough reason to kill you. Besides . . ." Kieron smiled grimly, "I just don't like you, Lander. I'd enjoy spilling some of your milky blood."

"Kieron! I swear, Kieron ..."

"Save it, dancing master!" Kieron touched Landor's loosely held weapon with his own. "Guard yourself!"

Landor uttered an animal cry of desperation and lunged clumsily at the Valkyr. Kieron's sword made a glittering encirclement and the First Lord's weapon clattered on the cobblestones twenty feet away.

Kieron's eyes were cold as he advanced on the now thoroughly terrorized courtier. "Kneel down, Landor. A lackey should always die on his knees."

The First Lord threw himself to the cobbles, his arms around the outworlder's knees. He was grey with fright and babbling for mercy, his eyes tightly shut. Kieron reversed his sword and brought the heavy hilt down sharply on Landor's head. The courtier sighed and pitched forward. Kieron sheathed his weapon and picked the unconscious man up like a sack of meal. Time was short. The guards would be returning to escort Landor to Freka.

Kieron picked up the courtier's fallen sword. There must be no sign of struggle in the courtyard. The Valkyr carried Landor over to where Alys and Nevitta had lowered their improvised rope. He trussed Lander up like a butchered boar and called to them. "Haul him up!"

Landor disappeared into the window and the rope came down again. Kieron climbed hand over hand after the vanished courtier. Within seconds he stood among his warriors again, and the courtyard was empty.

"Landor!" Kieron splashed wine in the unconscious man's face. "Lander, wake up!"

The courtier stirred and opened his eyes. Immediately they filled with fear. A hostile circle of faces looked down at him. Kieron, his dark eyes flaming. Alys . . . the great red face of Nevitta, framed by the winged helmet . . . other savage looking Valkyrs. It was to Landor a scene from the legendary Seventh Hell of the Great Destroyer.

"If you want to live, talk," said Kieron. "What are you doing here on Kalgan? It must be a message of importance you carry. Ivane would have sent someone else if it weren't."

"I ... I carry no message, Kieron."

Kieron nodded to Nevitta who drew his dagger and placed it against Landor's throat.

"We have no time for lies, Landor," said Kieron.

To emphasize the point, Nevitta pressed the blade tighter against the pulse in the First Lord's neck. Landor screamed.

"Don't ... !"

"Talk—or I'll cut the gizzard out of you!" Nevitta growled.

"All right! All right! But take the knife away ... 1" "Ivane sent you here."

Landor nodded soundlessly.

"Why?"

"I . . . I . . . was to tell Freka that . . . that his men failed to ... to . . ."

"To kill me!" finished Alys angrily. "What else?"

"I . . . was also to tell him that the rest of the plan was . . . was . . . carried out ... successfully."

"Damn you, don't talk in riddles!" Kieron said. "What 'plan'?"

"The Emperor is dead," Landor blurted, eyes wild with terror. "But not by my hand! I swear it! Not by my hand!" Alys choked back a cry of pain.

"Toran! Poor...Toran..."

Kieron took the terrified courtier by the throat and shook him.

"You filthy swine! Who did it? Who killed the Emperor?"

"Ivane!" gasped Landor. "The people do not know he is dead and she awaits the star-king's invasion to proclaim herself Empress! . . . In the god's name, Kieron, don't kill me! I speak the truth!"

"Freka helped plan this?" demanded Kieron.

"He is Ivane's man," stammered Landor, "but I know nothing of him! Nothing, Kieron! The warlock Geller brought him to Ivane five years ago . . . that is all I know!"

Geller of the Marshes . . . again. Kieron felt the awful dread seeping through his anger. Somehow the connection between Geller and Freka must be discovered. Somehow . . .

Kieron turned away from the terrified Landor. The picture was shaping now. Freka and Ivane. The star-king's rebellion. Toran ... murdered.

"Keep this hound under guard!" ordered Kieron. Landor was led away, shaken and weak.

"Nevitta!"

"Sir?"

"You and the princess will go back to the ship as you came. She must be taken to safety at once. As soon as that pig is missed, we'll have visitors . . ."

"No, Kieran! I won't go!" cried Alys.

"You must. If you are captured on Kalgan now it will mean a carte blanche for Ivane."

"But then you must come!"

"I can't. If I tried to leave here now, Freka would detain me by force. I know his plans." He turned again to Nevitta. "She goes with you, Nevitta. By force if necessary."

"Return to Valkyr and gather the tribes. We can do nothing without men at our backs. One of the ships will remain here with me and the men. We will try to get clear after we are certain that—" He looked over at the slim girl, his eyes sombre—"that Her Majesty is safe."

The Valkyr warriors in the room straightened, a subtle change in their expression as they watched Alys. A gulf had suddenly opened between this

girl and their chieftain. They felt it too. One by one they dropped to their knees before her. Alys made a protesting gesture, her eyes bright with tears. She saw the chasm opening, and fought it futilely. But when Kieron, too, went to his knees, she knew it was so. In one fleeting moment, they had changed from lover and beloved to sovereign and vassal.

She forced back the tears and raised her head proudly; as Galactic Empress, Heiress to the Thousand Emperors, she accepted the homage of her fighting men.

"My lord of Valkyr," she said in a low, unsteady voice. "My love and affection for you—and these warriors will never be forgotten. If we live . . ."

Kieron rose to his full height, naked sword extended in his hands.

"Your Imperial Majesty," he spoke the words formally and slowly, regretting what was gone. "The men of Valkyr are yours. To the death."

Kieron watched Nevitta and Alys vanish down the long, gloomy hall outside the Valkyr chambers—to all appearances a warrior chieftain and his slave-girl ordered away by their master. Even then, thought Kieron bleakly, there was danger. He saw them pass one sentry, two . . . three . . . They turned the corner and were gone, Kieron's hopes and fears riding with them.

Already, there were sounds of confusion in the Citadel of Neg. Men were searching for the vanished Landor. Searching quietly, reflected Kieron with grim satisfaction, for the visiting star-kings must not know that Freka the Unknown held familiar audience with the Imperial First Lord of Space. Spur of the moment hunting parties and entertainments were keeping the visitors occupied while the Kalgan soldiery searched.

Kieron weighed his chances of escape and found them small indeed. They dared not stir from their quarters in the Citadel until the roar of Nevitta's spaceship told that the Empress was safely away. And meanwhile, the search for Landor drew nearer.

An hour passed, the sand in the glass running with agonizing slowness. Once Kieron thought he heard the beat of hooves on the drawbridge of the Citadel, but he could not be certain.

Two hours. Kieron paced the floor of the Valkyr chambers, his twelve remaining warriors armed, alert, watching him. Nervously he fingered the hilt of his sword.

Another hour in the grey, eternal twilight. Still no sound of a spaceship rising. Kieron's anxiety grew to gargantuan proportions. The search for Landor came closer steadily.

Kieron could hear the soldiers tramping the stone corridors and causeways of the Citadel.

Suddenly there was a knock at the barred door to the Valkyrs' quarters.

"Open! In the name of the lord of Kalgan!"

A Valkyr near the door replied languidly. "Our master sleeps. Go away."

The knocking continued. "It is regretted that we must disturb him, but a slave of the household has escaped. We must search for him."

"Would you disturb the Warlord of Valkyr's repose for a slave, barbarians?" demanded the warrior at the door in a hurt tone of voice. "Go away."

The officer in the hallway was beginning to lose patience.

"Open, I say! Or we'll break in!"

"Do," offered the Valkyr pleasantly. "I have a sword that has been too long dry."

How Landor must be sweating in that back room, Kieron thought wryly, thinking that the Valkyrs would rather kill him than let his message reach Freka. But Landor's death would serve no useful purpose now. Time! Time was needed. Time enough to let Nevitta get Alys out of danger!

Kieron stepped to the door, hoping that some warriors of the Outer Marches might possibly be within earshot and catch the implication of his words. "Kieron of Valkyr speaks!" he cried. "We have Landor of Earth here! Landor, the First Lord—is that the slave you seek?"

But the only response was the sudden crash of a ram against the panels of the wooden door. Kieron prepared to fight. Still, no sound of a spaceship rising ...

The door collapsed, and a flood of Kalgan warriors poured into the room, weapons flashing.

Savagely, the Valkyrs closed with them, and the air rang with the metallic clash of steel. No mercy was asked and none was given. Kieron cut a circle of death with his long, out-world weapon, the fighting blood of a hundred generations of warriors singing in his ears. The savage chant of the Edge rose above the confused sounds of battle. A man screamed in agony as his arm was severed by a blow from a Valkyr blade, and he waved the stump desperately, splattering the milling men with dark blood. A Valkyr warrior went down, locked in a death-embrace with a Kalgan warrior, driving his dagger into his enemy again and again even as he died. Kieron crossed swords with a guardsman, forcing him backward until the Kalgan slipped on the flagstones made slippery with blood and went down with a sword-cut from throat to groin.

The Valkyrs were cutting down their opponents, but numbers were beginning to tell. Two Valkyrs went down before fresh onslaughts. Another, and another, and still another. Kieron felt the burning touch of a dagger wound. He looked down and saw that a thrust from someone in the melee had slashed him to the bone. His side was slick with blood and the white ribs showed along the ten inch gash.

Now, Kieron stood back to back with his two remaining companions. The other Valkyrs were down, lying still on the bloody floor. Kieron caught a glimpse of Freka's tall figure behind his guardsman and he lunged for him, suddenly blind with fury. Two Kalgan guards engaged him, and he lost sight



of Freka. A Valkyr went down with a thrust in the belly. Kieron took another wound in the arm. He could not tell how badly hurt he was, but faintness from the loss of blood was telling on him. It was getting hard to see clearly. Darkness seemed to be flickering like a black flame just beyond his range of vision. He saw Freka again and tried to reach him. Again he failed, blocked by a Kalgan soldier. A thrown sword whistled past him and imbedded itself in the last. Valkyr's chest. The man sank to the floor in silence, and Kieron fought alone.

He saw the blade of an officer descending, but he could not ward it off. And as it fell, a great hissing roar sounded beyond the open window. Kieron almost smiled. Alys was safe ...

He lifted his sword to parry the descending stroke, Weakened, the best he could do was deflect it slightly. The blade caught him a glancing blow on the side of the head and he staggered to his knees. He tried to raise his weapon again . . . tried to fight on . . . but he could not. Slowly, reluctantly, he sank to the floor as darkness welled up out of the bloody flagstones to engulf him ...

V

Kieron stirred, the pulsing ache in his side piercing the reddish veil of unconsciousness. Under him, he could feel wet stones that stank of death and filth. He moved painfully, and the throbbing agony grew worse, making him teeter precariously between consciousness and the dark.

He was stiff and cold. Hurt badly, too, he thought vaguely. His wounds had not been tended. Very carefully, he opened his eyes. They told him what he had already known. He was in a dark cell, filthy and damp. A sick chill shook him. Teeth chattering, huddled on the stone floor, Kieron sank again into unconsciousness.

When he awoke again, he was burning with fever and a cold bowl of solidified, greasy gruel lay beside him. His tongue felt thick and swollen, but the sharp agony of his wounded side had subsided to a dull hurt. With a great effort, he dragged himself into a corner of the dungeon and propped himself up facing the iron-bound door.

His searching hands found that he had been stripped of his harness and weapons. He was naked, smeared with filth and dried blood. As he moved he felt a renewed flow of warmth flooding down from his torn flank. The wound had reopened. Sweat was streaking the caked blood on his cheek. His mind wandered in a feverish delirium—a nightmare dream in which the tall, coldly arrogant figure of

Freka seemed to fill all space and all time. Kieran's over-bright eyes glittered with animal hate.. ..

Somehow, he felt that the hated Kalgan was nearby. He tried to keep his eyes open, but the lids seemed weighted. His head sagged and the fever took him again into the ebony darkness of some fantastic intergalactic night where wierd shapes danced and whirled in hideous joyousness . . .

The rattling of the door-lock woke him. It might have been minutes later or

days. Kieron had no way of knowing. He felt light-headed and giddy. He watched the door open with fever-bright eyes. A jailer carrying a flambeau entered and the light blinded Kieron. He shielded his face with his hand. There was a voice speaking to him. A voice he knew . . . and hated. With a shuddering effort, he took a grip on his staggering mind, his hate sustaining him now. Moving his hands away from his face, he looked up—into the icy eyes of Freka the Unknown.

"So you're awake at last," the Kalgan said.

Kieron made no reply. He could feel the fury burning deep inside him.

Freka held a jewelled dagger in his hands, toying with it idly. Kieron watched the shards of light leaping from the faceted gems in the liquid torchlight. The slender blade shimmered, blue and silvery in the Kalgan's hands.

"I have been told that the Lady Alys was with you—here on Kalgan. Is this true?"

Alys . . . Kieron thought vaguely of her for a moment, but somehow the picture brought sadness. He put her out of his mind and squinted up at Freka's gemmed dagger, unable to take his eyes from the glittering weapon.

"Can you speak?" demanded Freka. "Was Toran's sister with you?"

Kieron watched the weapon, a feral brilliance growing like a flame in his dark eyes.

Freka shrugged. "Very well, Kieron. It makes no difference. Does it interest you to know that the armies are gathering? Earth will be ours within four weeks." His voice was cold, unemotional. "You realize, of course, that you cannot be allowed to live."

Kieron said nothing. Very carefully he gathered his strength. The dagger...the dagger...!

"I will not risk war with Valkyr by killing you now. But you will be tried by a council of star-kings on Earth when we have done what we must do ..."

Kieron stared hard at the slender weapon, his hate pounding in his fevered mind. He drew a deep, shuddering breath. Freka spun the blade idly, setting the jewels afire.

"We should have taken you the moment Landor was missed," mused the Kalgan. "But . . . it really doesn't matter now ..."

Kieron's taut muscles uncoiled in a snakelike, lashing movement. He hit Freka below the knees with all his fevered strength and the Kalgan went down without a sound, the slim dagger clattering on the slimy floor of the cell. The guard leaped forward. Kieron's searching hand closed about the hilt of the dagger. With a sound of pure animal rage in his throat he drove it into Freka's unprotected chest. Twice again his hand rose and fell, and then the guard caught him full in the face with a booted foot and the light of the torch faded again into inky blackness ...

In the darkness, time lost its meaning. Kieron woke a dozen times, feeling the dull throbbing ache of his wounds and then fading again into unconsciousness. He ate—or was fed—enough to keep him alive, but he had no memory of it. He floated in a red-tinged sea of black, unreal, frightening. He screamed or sobbed as the phantasms of his sick dreams dictated, but through it all ran a single thread of elation. Freka, the hated one, was dead. No horror of nightmare or delirium could strip him of that one grip on life. Freka was dead. He remembered vaguely the feel of the dagger plunging again and again into his tormentor's breast. Sometimes he even forgot why he had hated Freka, but he clung to the knowledge that he had killed him the way a drowning man clings to the last suffocating breath.

Sounds filtered into Kieron's dungeon. Sounds that were familiar. The hissing roar of spaceships. Then later the awful susurrations of mob sounds. Kieron lay sprawled on the stones of his cell-floor, not hearing, lost in the fantasmagoric stupor of delirium. His wounds still untended, only the magnificent body of a warrior helped him cling to the thread of life.

Other sounds came. The crash of rams and the clatter of falling masonry. The shrieks of men and women dying. The ringing cacophony of weapons and the curses of fight-lug men. Hours passed and the din grew louder, closer, in the heart of the Citadel of Neg itself. The torches on the outer cellblocks guttered out and were left untended. The rounds of fighting rose to a wild pitch, interlaced with the inhuman, animal sounds of a mob gone mad.

At last Kieron stirred, some of the familiar sounds of battle striking buried chords in his fevered mind. He listened to the advancing clash of weapons until it rang just beyond his dungeon door.

He dragged himself into his corner again and crouched there, the feral light in his eyes brilliant now. His hands itched for killing. He flexed the fingers painfully and waited.

The silence was sudden and as complete as the hush of the tomb.

Kieron waited.

The door flung wide, and men bearing torches rushed into the cell. Kieron lunged savagely for the first one, hands seeking a throat.

"Kieron!" Nevitta threw himself backward violently. Kieron clung to him, his face a fevered mask of hate. "Kieron! It is I . . . Nevitta!"

Kieron's hands fell away from the old warrior and he stood swaying, squinting against the light of the torches. "Nevitta Nevitta?"

A wild laugh came from the prisoner's cracked lips. He looked about him, into the strained faces of his own fighting men.

He took one step and pitched forward into the arms of Nevitta, who carried him like a child up into the light, tears streaking his grizzled cheeks . . .

For three weeks Alys and Nevitta nursed Kieron, sucking the poison of his

untended wounds with their mouths and bathing him to break the fiery grip of the fever. At last they won. Kieron opened his eyes—and they were sane and clear.

"How long?" Kieron asked faintly.

"We were gone from Kalgan twenty days . . . you have lain here twenty-one," Alys said thankfully.

"Why did you come back here?" Kieron demanded bitterly. "You have lost an Empire!"

"We came for you, Kieron," Nevitta said. "For our king."

"But . . . Alys ..." Kieron protested.

"I would not have the Great Throne, Kieron," said Alys, "if it meant leaving you to rot in a cell!"

Kieron turned his face to the wall. Because of him, the star-kings fought Ivane's battle. And by now they would have won. The only thing that had been done was the killing of the treacherous Freka. He held Kalgan now, for the Valkyrs had returned seeking their Warlord after Freka's plan had stripped the planet of fighting men—and the mobs had done the Valkyr's work for them. But two worlds were not an Empire of stars. Alys had been cheated. Because of him.

No! thought Kieron, by the Seven Hells, no! They could not be defeated so easily. There were five thousand warriors with him now. If need be, he would fight the Imperium's massed forces to win Alys' rightful place on the throne of Gilmer of Kaidor!

"Let me up," Kieron demanded. "If we hit them on Earth before they have a chance to consolidate, there's still a chance!" -

"There is no hurry, Kieron," said Nevitta holding him in the bed with a great hand. "Freka and the star-kings have already ..."

"Freka!" Kieron sat bolt upright.

"Why, yes . . ." murmured Nevitta in perplexity. "Freka."

"That's impossible!"

"We have had information from the Imperial City, Kieron. Freka is there," said Alys.

Kieron sank back on the pillows. Had he dreamed killing the Kalgan? No! It wasn't possible! He had driven the blade into his chest three times ... driven it deep.

With an effort he rose from the bed. "Order my charger, Nevitta!"

"But sir!"

"Quickly, Nevitta! There is no time!"

Nevitta saluted reluctantly and withdrew.

"Help me with my harness, Alys," ordered Kieron forgetful of majesty.

"Kieron, you can't ride!"

"I have to ride, Alys. Listen to me. I drove a dagger into Freka three times . . . and he has not died! One man can tell us why, and we must know. That man is

Geller of the Marshes!"

Neg was a shambles. The advent of the Valkyrs had been a signal for the brutish population to go mad. Mobs had thronged the streets, smashing, killing and looting. The few Kalgan warriors left behind to guard the city had had to aid the Valkyrs in restoring order. It seemed to Kieron, as he rode along the now sullenly silent streets, that Kalgan and Neg had been deliberately abandoned as having served a purpose. If Freka still lived, as they said, then he was something unique among men, and not meant for so unimportant a world as Kalgan.

Shops and houses had been gutted by fire. Goods of all kinds were strewn about the streets, and here and there a body—twisted and dismembered—awaited the harassed burial detachments that roamed the shattered megalopolis.

Kieron and Alys rode slowly toward the marshy slums of the lower city, Nevitta following them at a short distance. The three war horses, creatures bred to war and destruction, paced along easily, flaring nostrils taking in the familiar smells of a ruined city.

Along the street of the Black Flames there was nothing left standing whole. Every hovel, every tenement had been gutted and looted by the mobs. Presently, Kieron drew rein before a shuttered shanty between two structures of

fire-blackened stone.

Nevitta rode up with a protest. "Why do you seek this beloved of demons, Kieron?" he asked fearfully. "No good can come of this!"

Kieron stared at the shanty. It stared back at him with veiled ghoulish eyes. The writhing mists shrouded the grey, street in the eternal twilight of Kalgan. Kieron felt his hands trembling on the reins. This was the lair of the warlock.

The stench of the marshes was thick and now the mists turned to soft rain. Kieron dismounted.

"Wait for me here," he ordered Nevitta and Alys.

With pounding heart, he drew his sword and started for the door that gaped like the black mouth of a plague victim. Alys touched his elbow, disregarding his instructions. Her eyes were bright with fear, but she followed him closely. Secretly glad of her companionship, Kieron breathed a prayer to his Valkyr gods and stepped inside. .

The place was a wreck. Old books lay everywhere, ripped and tattered. In a corner, someone had tried to make a bonfire of a pile of manuscripts and broken furniture and had half succeeded.

"The mob has been here," Alys said succinctly.

Kieron led the way through the rubble toward the door of a back room. Carefully, he pushed it ajar with the point of his blade. It creaked menacingly, revealing another chamber—one filled with strange machines and twisted tubes of glass. Great black boxes stood along one wall, coils of bright wire running into the jumbled mass of shattered machines that dominated the center of the room. The air of the cold, silent room had a strange and unpleasant tang. The smell, thought the Valkyr, of the Great Destroyer!

The tip of his sword touched one of the bright copper coils springing from the row of black boxes along the wall,

and a tiny blue spark leaped up the blade. Kieron yanked his weapon away, his heart racing wildly. A thin curl of smoke hung in the air, and the steel of the blade was pitted. Kieron fought down the urge to run in terror.

"I'm afraid, Kieron!" whispered Alys, clinging to him. Kieron took her hand and moved cautiously around the pile of broken machinery. He found Geller then, and tried to stop Alys from seeing.

"The Great Destroyer he served failed him," Kieron said slowly..,The warlock was dead. The mob, terrified—and hating what they could not understand—had killed him cruelly. In his staring eyes mocked Kieron, the blackened tongue lolled stupidly out of the dry lips. Geller's mystery, thought Kieron, was still safe with him....

On the way out, Kieron stopped and picked up the remnants of a book of sigils. It was incredibly old, for the characters on the cover were those of the legendary First Empire. With some difficulty he made out the title.

"'Perpetually Regenerating Warps and their Application in Interstellar Engines' ...."

The words meant nothing to him. He dropped the magic hook and picked up two others. This time his eyes widened.

"What is it, Kieron?" Alys asked fearfully.

"Long ago," Kieron said thoughtfully, "on Valkyr, it was said that the ancients of the First Empire were familiar with the secrets of the Great Destroyer ..."

"That's true. That is why the Interregnum came, and the dark ages," said Alys.

"I wonder," mused Kieron looking at the books. "What was this Geller known best for?"

Alys shuddered. "For his homunculi."

"The ancients, it is said, knew many things. Even how to make . . . artificial servants. Robots, they were called." He handed her the book. "Can you read this ancient script?"

Alys read aloud, her voice unsteady.

"First Principles of Robotics."

"And this one?"

"Incubation and Gestation of Android? . . . !"

Kieron of Valkyr stood in the silent, wrecked laboratory of the dead warlock Geller, his medieval mind trying to break free of the bondage of a millennium of superstition and ignorance. He understood now ... many things.

VI

Like great silver fish leaping up into the bowl of night, the ships of the Valkyr fleet rose from Kalgan. Within the pulsing hulls five thousand warriors rode, ready for battle. Against the mighty forces of the assembled star-kings,

the army of Valkyr counted for almost nothing; but the savage fighting men of the Edge carried with them their talisman—Alys Imperatrix, uncrowned sovereign of the Galaxy, Heiress to the Thousand Emperors—the daughter of their beloved warrior-prince, Gilmer, conqueror of Kaidor.

In the lead vessel, Nevitta dogged the harried Navigators, urging greater speed. Below decks, the war chargers snorted and stomped the steel decks, sensing the tension of the coming clash in the close, smoky air of the spaceships.

Kieron stood beside the forward port with Alys, looking out into the strangely distorted night of space. As speed increased, the stars vanished and the night that pressed against the flanks of the hurtling ship grew grey and unsteady. Still velocity climbed, and then beyond the great curving glass screen there was nothing. Not blackness, or emptiness. A soul-chilling nothingness that twisted the mind and refused to be accepted by human eyes. Hyper-space.

Kieron drew the draperies closed and the observation lounge of the huge ancient liner grew dim and warm.

"What's ahead, Kieron?" the girl asked with a sigh. "More fighting and killing?"

The Valkyr shook his head. "Your Imperium, Your Majesty," he said formally, "a crown of stars that a thousand generations have gathered for you. That lies ahead."

"Oh, Kieron! Can't you forget the Empire for the space of an hour?" Alys demanded angrily.

The Warlord of Valkyr looked at his Empress in perplexity. There were times

when women were hard to fathom.

"Forget it, I say!" the girl cried, her eyes suddenly flaming.

"If Your Majesty wishes, I'll not speak of it again," said Kieron stiffly.

Alys took a step toward him. "There was a time when you looked at me as a woman. When you thought of me as a woman! Am I so different now?"

Kieron studied her slim body and sensuously patrician face. "There was a time when I thought of you as a child, too. Those times pass. You are now my Empress. your vassal. Command me. I'll fight for you. Die for you, if need be. Anything. But by the Seven Hells, Alys, don't torture me with favors I can't claim!"

"So I must command then?" She stamped her foot angrily. "Very well, I command you, Valkyr!"

"Lady, I'll never be a Consort!"

The girl's face flushed. "Did I ask it? I know I can't make a lapdog out of you, Kieron."

"Stop it, Alys," Kieron muttered heavily.

"Kieron," she said softly, "I've loved you since I was a child. I love you now. Does that mean nothing to you?" "Everything, Alys." Lust rose as he felt the tensions in her.

"Then for the space of this voyage, Kieron, forget the Empire. Forget everything except that I love you. Take what I offer you. There is no Empress here ..."

The silver fleet speared down into the atmosphere of the mother planet. Earth lay beneath them like a globe of azure. The spaceships fanned out into a wedge as they split the thin cold air high above the sprawling megalopolis of the Imperial City.

The capital lay ringed about with the somnolent shapes of the star-kings' great armada. Somewhere down there, Kieron knew, Freka waited. Freka the Unknown. The unkillable? Kieron wondered. For weapons he had his sword and a little knowledge. He prayed it would be enough. It had to be. Five thousand warriors could not defeat the assembled might of the star-kings.

Shunning the spaceport, Kieron led his fleet to a landing on the grassy esplanade that surrounded the city. As the hurried debarkation of men and horses began, Kieron could see a cavalry force massing before the gates to oppose them.. He cursed and urged his men to greater speed. Horses reared and neighed; weapons glinted in the late afternoon sunlight.

Within the hour the debarkation was complete, and Kieron sat armed and mounted before the serried ranks of his warriors. The afternoon was filled with the flash of steel and the blazing glory of gonfalons as he ordered his ranks for battle . . . a battle that he hoped with all his heart to avoid.



Across the plain, the Valkyr could make out the pennon of Doorn in the first rank of the advancing defenders. Kieron ordered Nevitta to stay by the Empress in the rear ranks and to escort her forward with all ceremony if he called for her.

Alys rode a white charger and had clad herself in the panoply of a Valkyr warrior maid. Her hips were girded in a harness of linked steel plates, her long legs free to ride astride. Over her chest and breasts was laced a hauberk of chain mail that shimmered in the slanting sunlight. On her head a Valkyr's winged helmet—and from under it her golden hair fell in cascades of light to her shoulders. A silver cloak stood out behind her as she galloped past the ranks of Valkyrs, and they cheered her as she went. Kieron, watching her, thought she resembled the ancient war-goddess of his own world—imperious, regal.

With a cry, Kieron ordered his riders forward and the glittering ranks swept forward across the esplanade like a turbulent wave, spear-heads agleam, gonfalons fluttering. He rode far ahead, seeking a meeting with old Eric of Doom, his father's friend.

He signalled, and the two surging masses of warriors slowed as the two star-kings rode to a meeting between the armies. Kieron raised an open right hand in the sign of truce, and old Eric did likewise. Their caparisoned chargers tossed their heads angrily at being restrained and eyed each other with white-rimmed eyes.

Kieron drew rein, facing the old star-king.

"I greet you," he said formally.

"Do you come in friendship, or in war?" asked Eric.

"That will depend on the Empress," Kieron replied.

The lord of Doom smiled, and there was scorn on his face. He was remembering Kalgan and Kieron's reluctance. "You will be pleased to know, then, that the Imperial Ivane bids you enter her city in peace—so that you may do her homage and throw yourself on her mercy for your crimes against Kalgan."

Kieron gave a short, steely laugh. So Ivane had already learned of the Valkyr sack of Kalgan. "I do not know any 'Imperial Ivane,' Eric," he said coldly. "When I spoke of the Empress, I meant the true Empress, Alys, the daughter of your lord and mine, Gilmer of Kaidor." He signalled Alys and Nevitta forward.

The gonfalons of the Valkyr line dipped in salute as Alys trotted through the ranks. She drew rein, facing the amazed Eric.

"Noble lady!" he gasped. "We were told you were dead!"

"And so I might have been, had Ivane had her way!"

The old star-king stammered in confusion. There was more here than he could understand. Only a week before, he and the other star-kings had done homage to Ivane and hailed her as their savior from the oppressions

of the Emperor Toran, and the nearest living kin to the late Gilmer. And now...!

Eric frowned. "If we have been made fools, Freka must answer for this!"

"And now," asked Kieron grimly, "do we enter the city in peace or do we cut our way in?"

Eric signalled his men to swing in beside the ranked Valkyrs and the whole mass of armed men moved through the fading afternoon toward the gates of the Imperial City.

It was dusk by the time the cavalcade reached the walls of the Imperial Palace. Kieron called a halt and ordered his men to rest on their arms. Taking only Nevitta and Alys with him, he joined Eric of Doorn in challenging the

Janizaries of the Palace Guard.

They were passed by the stolid Pleiadenes without comment, for the lord of Doom was known as a vassal of the Imperial Ivane. Faces set, the small party strode up the wide curving stairway that led into the Hall of the Great Throne. The courtiers had been warned by the shouts of the people in the streets that something was happening, and they had already begun to gather in the Throne Room.

He had come a long way, thought Kieron, from the day when he had stood before the Throne begging an audience with Toran. Now, everything hung on his one chance to prove his case—and Alys'—to the assembled nobles.

Kieron noted with some concern that the Palace Guards were gathering too. They covered each exit to the chamber, cutting off retreat.

By now, the Hall of the Great Throne was jammed with courtiers and star-kings, all tensely silent—waiting. Nor did they wait long.

With a blast of trumpets and a rolling of tympani, Ivane entered the Throne Room. Some of the courtiers knelt, but others stood in confusion, looking from Alys to Ivane and back again.

Kieron studied Ivane coldly. She was, he had to admit, a regal figure. A tall woman with hair the color of jet. A face that seemed chiseled out of marble. Dark, predatory eyes and a figure like a Dawn Age goddess. She stood before the Great Throne of the Empire, mantled in the sable robe of the Imperium—a robe as black as space and spangled with diamonds to resemble the stars of the Imperial Galaxy. On her head rested the irridium tiara of Imperatrix.

Ivane swept the Hall with a haughty stare that stung like a lash. When her eyes found Alys standing beside Kieron, they brightened, became feral.

"Guards!" she commanded. "Seize that woman! She is the killer of the Emperor Toran!"

A murmuring filled the chamber. The Janizaries pressed forward. Kieron drew his sword and leaped to the dais beside Ivane. She did not shrink

back from him.

"Touch her, and Ivane dies!" shouted Kieron, his point at Ivane's naked breast. The murmuring subsided and the Janizaries pulled up short.

"Now, you are all going to listen to me!" shouted Kieron from the dais. "This woman under my blade is a murderess and plotter, and I can prove it!"

Ivane's face was strained and white. Not from fear of his sword, Kieron knew.

"In the Palace dungeons you will likely find Landor . . ." Kieron continued. "He will be there because he knew of Ivane's plottings and talked too much when he had a dagger at his throat. He will confirm what I say!"

"This woman plotted to usurp the Imperium as long as five years ago! It may have been longer . . ." He turned to Ivane. "How long does it take to incubate an android, Ivane? A year? Two? And then to train him, school him so that every move he makes is intended to further your aims? How long does all that take?" I

vane uttered a scream of terror now. "Freka! Call Freka!"

Kieron dropped his sword point and stepped away from Ivane, as though she were contaminated. There was little danger from her now—but there was still another.

Freka appeared at the edge of the dais, his tall form towering above the courtiers. "You called for me, Imperial Ivane?"

Ivane stared at Kieron with hate-filled eyes. "You have failed me! Kill him now!"

Kieron whirled and caught Freka's blade on his own. The mich tiers drew back, giving them room to fight. No one made a move to interfere. It was known that Valkyrs held the city of Neg, and according to the warrior code two warlords must be allowed to fight to the death if they wished.

Kieron made no attack. Instead he retreated before the expressionless Freka.

"Did you know, Freka," asked Kieron softly, "that Geller of the Marshes is dead? He was your father in a way, wasn't he?"

Freka made no reply, and for a moment the only sound in the hushed Chamber was the ring of blades.

Suddenly Kieron lunged. His sword pierced Freka from throat to back. The Valkyr stepped back and pulled his blade clear. The crowd gasped, for Freka the Unknown did not fall .

"Are you really unkillable?" breathed Kieron. "I wonder!"

Again he lunged under the mechanical guard of the KaHgan. Again his blade sank deep. Freka backed away for a moment, still alert and unwounded.

Kieron shouted derisively at the star-kings: "Great warriors! Do you see? You have followed the leadership of an android! A homunculus spawned by the warlock Geller!"

A gasping roar went up in the chamber. A sound of superstitious horror and growing anger.

Kieron parried a thrust and brought his blade down on Freka's sword arm. Hard. A sword clattered to the flagstones—still gripped by a slowly relaxing hand. There was no blood. The android still moved in, eyes expressionless, his one hand reaching for his enemy. Kieron struck again. A clean cut opened from shoulder to belly, slicing the artificial tendons and leaving the android helpless but still erect. Kieron raised and lowered his blade in glittering arcs. Freka ... or the thing that had been Freka ... collapsed in a grotesque heap. Still it moved. Kieron passed his point again and again through the quivering mass until at long last it was still. Somewhere a woman fainted.

A thick silence fell over the assemblage. All eyes turned to Ivane. She stood staring at the remnants of the thing that had been . . . almost . . . a man. Her hand fluttered at her throat.

Alys' voice cut through the heavy stillness. "Arrest that woman for the murder of my brother Toran!"

But the crowd of courtiers was thinking of other things. Jaded and cynical, they had seen with their own eyes that Ivane was a familiar of the dreaded Great Destroyer. Someone cried: "Witch! Burn her!"

The mass of courtiers and warriors swept forward, screaming for the kill. Kieron leaped for the dais, his sword still bared.

"I'll kill the first one who sets foot on the Great Throne!" he cried.

But Ivane had heard the crowd sounds. The black mantle slipped from her shoulders, and she stood stripped to the waist, like a marble goddess—her eyes recapturing some of their icy hauteur. Then, before she could be stopped, she had taken a jewelled dagger and driven it deep into her breast.

Kieron caught her as she fell, feeling the warm blood staining his hands. He eased her down on the foot of the Great Throne and laid his ear to her breast.

There was no pulse. Ivane was dead.

Before the assembled Court, the Warlord of Valkyr knelt before his Empress. The star-kings had gone, and the Valkyrs were the last outworld warriors remaining in the Imperial City. Now, they too, would take their leave.

The Empress sat on the Great Throne, mantled in sable. Somehow, the huge throne and the vast vaulted chamber seemed to make her look small and frail.

"Your Imperial Majesty," said Kieron, "have we your leave to go?"

Alys eyes were bright with tears. She leaned forward so that none but Kieron might hear. "Stay a while yet, at least let us say our goodbyes alone and not... She looked about the crowded Throne Room, "not here."

Kieron shook his head mutely. Aloud, he said again, "Have I Your Majesty's permission to return to Valkyr?"

"Kieron...!" whispered Alys. "Please ..."

Ile looked up at her once, pain in his eyes, but he did not speak.

Afys knew then that the gulf had opened between them again; that this time, it was for the rest of their lives. The tears came and s treaked her cheeks as she lifted her head and spoke for all the Court to hear.

"Permission is granted, My Lord of Valkyr. You ... you may return to Valkyr." And then she whispered, "And my love goes with you, Kieron!"

Kieron raised her jewelled hands to his lips and kissed them. . . . Then he arose and turned on his heel to stride swiftly from the Great Hall.