

# SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES

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Illustrated by Bill Bowman

# HUNT the SPACE-WITCH!

by IVAR JORGENSON

*...Unless you find her, your blood-brother is lost  
forever! But finding her is far worse than death!*



# Hunt the Space - Witch !

by Ivar Jorgenson

## CHAPTER I

**I**T WAS Barsac's second day on Glaurus, and the first moment of free time he had had since the ship had landed. Before that there had been the landing routines, the spaceport men to bribe, the inspectors to cajole, the jet alleys to scrub. But on the second day withered old Captain Jaspell called the men of the *Dywain* together and told them they might have five days' leave before departure.

Barsac smiled. He was a lean man, tall and well-muscled, with the chiselled scars of the Luaspar blood-rites fanning out radially from the edges of his thin lips. He was an Earther, thirty-nine years old; twenty of those thirty-nine years had been spent as a spaceman, the last eight as Second Fuelsman aboard Captain Jaspell's *Dywain*. He rose in the crowded cabin where the crew had assembled to hear Jaspell's words and said, "Captain, is that job on Repair Deck still open?"

Jaspell nodded. He was a desiccated Earther of a hun-

dred and three years, still keen of mind and iron of discipline. "You know it is, Barsac."

"And you're planning to fill the post while we stop over on Glaurus?"

"I am."

"I ask you to wait a day before publishing notice of the vacancy, then. I know a man on Glaurus who would fill your need. His name is Zigmunn. He's a Luaspar. He's my blood-brother, Captain."

"Bring him to me today or tomorrow," Jaspell said. "I can't wait any longer than that to find a replacement. Is he qualified?"

"I swear it."

"We shall see, Barsac. Bring him here."

**A**N HOUR LATER Barsac dismounted from the spaceport-to-city tube and found himself in the heart of the city of Millyaurr, oldest and greatest on Glaurus. It was a city of twenty-one million people and its population hailed from at least a hundred fifty worlds. Barsac found himself jostled

by scrawny blue dwarfs and fat gray-skinned Domrani patriarchs as he made his way down the ancient street. From the shops that lined the road came the smells of wine and raw meat, of newly baked bread and of festering cabbages.

Zigmunn had said in his letter that he lived now in the Street of Tears in the central residential zone of Millyaurr. Barsac paused to ask directions of a wizened old vender of stimulatubes, and cordially declined the offer of a tube at a large discount. He made his way forward.

It was ten years since he had last seen Zigmunn, though it did not seem that long. The Luasparru was an agile, quick-witted man who had formed a fine complement for Barsac's stolid massive strength, and they had hit it off immediately when they shipped off Vuorrleg together more than a decade back. The ship they were on was making a stop at Luaspar, Zigmunn's home-world; Barsac had gone to the home of Zigmunn's cognate kin and there they had gone through the agonizing Luaspar rites of blood-fealty, bound to each other in friendship forever by the scars that lined their lips.

Then they had left Luaspar

and gone on. And they had stopped for a while on Glaurus a year later, and became separated in a bar-room brawl, and Barsac had returned to the ship alone, without his blood-brother. The ship had blasted off without him. At his next port, Barsac found a letter waiting for him from Zigmunn; the Luasparru, stranded, had been unable to get a berth on any other ship out of Glaurus, and was biding his time, waiting for an offer.

Shortly after Barsac transferred into Jaspell's ship, the *Dywain*, and wrote to Zigmunn to tell him where he was; the Luasparru replied he was still stranded, but had high hopes of returning to space soon.

Eight years went by, and Zigmunn's letters became less frequent as no sign of a berth materialized, and finally Barsac learned that the *Dywain* was due to visit Glaurus as part of a journey out to the Rim. Then came word that the *Dywain* would be taking on an additional crewman on Glaurus, and Barsac rejoiced at the thought of being reunited with the Luasparru after so long.

The glowing placard against the side of a weathered old building read: *Street of Tears*. Zigmunn lived at number

eighty-one in the Street of Tears. Barsac looked for a house-number.

He found one: thirty-six. He crossed the street, which was narrow and reeked of the garbage of millennia, and headed up the cracked and blistered pavement. It was long ages since the slidewalk had functioned in the Street of Tears; probably the underground mechanisms had rusted into decay centuries ago, and the inhabitants had simply stripped away the metal of the slidewalk and sold it for scrap, leaving the naked concrete exposed beneath. The buildings loomed high, blotting out the golden light of Glaurus' sun.

Sixty-nine, seventy-one, seventy-three. Barsac crossed another street. He swore. Had Zigmunn been living in this filth for eight years?

Seventy - seven. Seventy - nine.

Eighty-one.

**T**HE STREET was crowded; aliens of all descriptions, swaggering native-born Glaurans, even a few curious folk who wore silver reflecting-masks that obscured all of their faces but their eyes and who walked in solitary grandeur, alone and given a wide

berth by others on the street. Barsac turned his attention toward the house.

It was old and weary-looking, a drab place of crumbling yellow brick. He went in. A directory in the dingy lobby yielded the information that Zigmunn lived on the third floor, room 32-A. There was no sign of a liftshaft; Barsac took the creaking stairs.

He knocked once at the door of 32-A before he noticed that a shutter had been drawn across it and a gleaming lock affixed. Dust stippled the lock and the shutter; both had been in place more than a little while.

Barsac turned. He pounded on the door of 33-A, and after a moment it opened, hesitantly.

"I'm looking for Zigmunn the Luasparru," he said.

He faced a tiny gnome of a woman who gaped toothlessly at him in confusion. She wore a mildew-flecked wrap that had probably been the height of fashion seventy or eighty years before, on some other world.

"Who?"

"Zigmunn of Luaspar. The man who lived or lives in the room next to yours." He pointed. "A very thin man about my height, with bronze skin and scars around his lips. Scars

like these." He bent close, showing her.

"Oh. Him. He went away. Two, three, maybe four weeks ago. Hasn't been back since. Would you stop in for tea with me? A young man like you must be very thirsty."

"No, thanks. Three or four weeks ago? Did he say where he was going?"

She giggled shrilly. "Not to me. But he wasn't fooling anybody. Him with all that drinking and his women and the noise and knives, there was only one place *he* would decide he wanted to go, don't you know?"

"I don't know. Where?"

Again the giggle, oddly girl-ish. "Oh, you know. I can't say. It really isn't right."

"Where?" Barsac demanded again, loudly this time. His voice seemed to stir up eddies of dust in the darkened hallway.

"Really, I—"

The door of 34-A popped open suddenly and a fierce-looking Dlarochrene stuck his wattled head out and snapped, "What's all the noise out here? Get back in your room, old fossil. Who are you? What do you want?"

"I'm looking for Zigmunn of Luaspar," Barsac said stonily as the old woman slammed shut her door and threw the

bolt. "He's a friend of mine. I'd like to find him."

"The Luasparru hasn't been here for weeks."

"That's what the old lady told me. I want to know where he's gone."

"You mean you can't guess?"

"I'm a spacer. I haven't been on Glaurus in nine or ten years. I don't know anything much about this planet."

"I suggest you find out, then. And if you're a friend of *his*, I don't want to talk to you. Go downstairs to the bar. You'll find some of his friends there. They'll tell you where he is."

The door shut abruptly.

**B**ARSAC STARED at the peeling wood a moment, then turned away, wondering what all this meant, what Zigmunn had done, where he was now. Questions were piling up rapidly. Barsac did not care for complications.

The bar was on street level, a dark low-ceilinged hovel that stank of stale beer. Barsac peered in; five or six habitués sat slumped at crude little wooden tables, and an Earthman bartender waited boredly behind his bar. With elaborate casualness Barsac sauntered in.

He spun a Galactic unit on the dull surface of the bar and asked for a drink. Lazily the bartender poured it, spilling half. Barsac smiled and drained the glass.

"Give me another," he said. "And make it full measure or I'll split your throat."

He put another coin next to the first one. Without responding the bartender poured him another, this time filling the glass to the brim. Again Barsac drained it in a gulp. Then he leaned forward, stared bluntly into the cold flat eyes of the barkeep, and said in a low voice, "I'm looking for a man named Zigmunn, a Luasparru. Know where he might be?"

Unsmilingly the barkeep pointed across the dark room to a figure slumped at a far table.

"Ask her.

"Thanks," Barsac said. "I will."

He crossed the bar-room to the girl's table, pulled out the chair opposite hers, and sat down. She looked up as he did so, but the glance she gave him was without any interest or curiosity; she simply looked at him because he was there, not because she cared about him.

"Buy me a drink," she said tonelessly.

"Later. I want to talk to you first."

"I don't talk to people. Buy me a drink. My room's on the fourth floor if you're looking for sport. If you just want to humiliate me, don't bother. It can't be done. Better men than you have tried."

He looked at her strangely. She was young—eighteen, maybe, twenty at most, and she was either an Earther herself or else mainly of Earther descent. Her corn-yellow hair fell carelessly over her shoulders; she wore a faded cling-on sweater that wrapped itself skin-tight against her slender body and in Zwihih style was cut to leave the nipples of her breasts bare. Her throat and face were dark in color, but whether it was from suntan or dirt Barsac could not tell. Her eyes were not the eyes of a girl of eighteen; they looked older than those of the woman he had seen upstairs.

"I guess I'd better buy you a drink," Barsac said. He held up two fingers to the watching barkeep.

This time he sipped his drink; she gulped hers, but showed no animation afterward. Gently he said, "My name is Barsac. Ever hear it before?"

"No. Should I have?"

"I thought a friend of



mine might have mentioned it to you sometime. A friend named Zigmunn."

"What do you know of Zigmunn?" Her voice was flat and empty; it seemed to come from just back of her teeth, not out of her chest.

"I'm his blood-kin. You see the scars around my lips? Zigmunn has them too."

"Had them. Zigmunn has no face at all by now."

Barsac's hands gripped the ragged wood of the table tightly. "What do you mean by that?"

For the first time the girl smiled. "Do you want me to tell you? Really?"

"I want to know where Zigmunn is."

"He isn't on Glaurus right now, that's for sure. I'm thirsty again."

"You'll get your other drink when you tell me where he is. If he isn't on Glaurus, where is he?"

"Azonda," she said.

Barsac blinked. Azonda was the eleventh planet of the system to which Glaurus belonged; Barsac cast back in his memory and recalled that the planet was without an atmosphere and so far from its sun that it was virtually without light as well—a cold, dead world. The thought came to him then that the girl must

be either drunk or insane.

"Azonda?"

She nodded. "He left three weeks ago. He and I had a little party the night before he left. And then he left. For Azonda."

Frowning, Barsac asked, "What in the name of space would he do on Azonda?"

She looked oddly at him. "You mean that, don't you? You're perfectly sincere? No. You want to tease me. Well, I won't be teased." Her eyes, which for a moment had come alive, lapsed back to their former brooding deadness, and she let her shoulders sag.

He grasped her arm. "I'm a stranger on Glaurus. I *don't* know about Azonda. And I want to find Zigmunn. There's a berth open on my ship for him, if he wants it. We're leaving in five days for the Rim stars. Tell me: what's he doing on Azonda? Or is this a joke?"

Quietly she said, "You came three weeks too late, if you have a ship's berth for him. Forget about Zigmunn. Go back to your ship and stop looking for him."

He squeezed her arm mercilessly. "Will you tell me where he is?"

She paled under his grip, and he released her. "One more drink," she pleaded.

Barsac shrugged and ordered the drink for her; none for himself. She tossed it down and said slowly, "Azonda is the headquarters for the Cult of the Witch. Three weeks ago Zigmunn joined the Cult. I was invited to join but I turned it down—because I haven't fallen quite that low yet. Yet. Anyway, he joined. He's on Azonda right now, undergoing initiation. And worshipping the Witch. I don't want to talk about these things down here. If you want more information, come upstairs to my room."

## CHAPTER II

**I**T WAS a small room, well-kept and clean despite the great age of the building. There was little furniture: a cheap chair, a writing-desk, a vidset, and a bed wide enough for two. Barsac followed her through the door numbly, thinking of Zigmunn and wondering what iniquity the Luas-parru had fallen into now.

She switched on the light; it was dim and uncertain. She locked the door. Gesturing for him to take the chair, she sprawled down on the bed. She hiked her flowing skirt up to her thighs, crossed her legs, and stared expectantly at him.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"My name is Kassa Jidrill, and I'm a party girl with a free permit. It's the best sort of work a girl can get these days, if you have a liking for the work. I don't, but I get along . . . sometimes. My mother was an Earther. Now you know all that's worth knowing about me."

He studied her. Her legs were slim and well turned, and some of the deep despair of a few moments before had left her. But he had not come to Millyaurr to play with party girls.

He said, "I'm looking for Zigmunn. You say he's on Azonda. Would you swear to it?"

"I'd swear by my chastity," she said acidly. "I told you he was there—prancing and dancing around the Witch, no doubt. Believe me or not, as you choose."

His jaws tightened. "How can I get to Azonda, then?"

"You can't. At least no certified spaceline will take you there. You might try hiring a jackrogue spacer to ferry you there. Or you could join the Cult and get a free passage, but that's a little drastic. Save your money and your time. There's no way out of the Cult once you're in."

Rising, Barsac came toward her and sat on the edge of the

bed. "Zigmunn and I are blood-kin. We've been separated ten years. I don't care what filth he's been forced to wallow in; I'm going to bring him out."

"Noble aims. But foolish."

"Perhaps so." He laid one hand on her bare thigh; it felt cool to the touch. "I need help, though. I have only five days on Glaurus and the world is strange to me. I need someone to explain things to me."

"And I'm nominated, eh?"

"You knew Zigmunn. You could help."

She yawned. "If I wanted to. But the Cult's a dangerous proposition. Go downstairs and buy a bottle; then come back. Forget Zigmunn. He's as good as dead."

"No!"

"No?" She shrugged lightly. "Have it your way, then. You're a strong and a stubborn man, Barsac. As much of an opposite to Zigmunn as anyone could imagine."

"How can I get to Azonda?"

"Forget Zigmunn," she crooned. She twisted sharply and toppled toward him, grasping his shoulders tightly in her arms, pulling him toward her. Her pale blonde hair tumbled in his eyes; it smelled of a sweet oil.

"No," he said suddenly, and rose.

For an instant anger and hatred glared in Kassa's eyes; then she softened. "Another failure, I see. In these times it's hard for a party girl to earn her keep; the men prefer to chase around in quest of dissolute blood-brothers. Very well, then. I'll take you to Lord Carnothute."

"Who?"

"The Governor of Millyaurr Province."

"How could he help me?" Barsac asked.

Her voice dropped to a barely audible whisper. "He is also a ranking official of the Cult, though few know it. Most Cult members wear the silver mask that hides their face, to symbolize the facelessness of the Witch. Lord Carnothute has special privilege, because of his rank. He was the agent who offered Cult-hood to Zigmunn and to me, one night that he spent here. Perhaps he could tell you where your blood-brother is. Maybe Zigmunn hasn't been sent to Azonda yet; they don't always leave right away. And in that case there's still a chance for him."

**T**HE GOVERNOR'S PALACE was an airy pencil of a building far to the north of the Street of Tears; it took Bar-

sac and Kassa more than an hour by aircab to get there, and cost him twelve Galactic units.

She had shed her party-girl costume and was wearing something more demure, a black silk dress and veil; quite unconcernedly she had stripped to the buff and changed with Barsac in the room, and he had eyed her body with interest but not with desire. He had long ago learned to channel his energies, and now the finding of Zigmunn occupied center stage in his mind; all else was inconsequential to him.

The air was cleaner in the district of Millyaurr they now entered. They approached the Palace gate. Barsac noticed figures in the silvery mask of the Cult moving through the streets, always alone.

They entered. Kassa spoke briefly to a guard. They were conducted through an antechamber, down a broad and well-lit corridor, and into a liftshaft.

"He gave me a password I could use any time I wanted to come to him," Kassa explained. "Ordinarily it's not easy to get to see him."

The liftshaft opened; they stepped out. Immediately Kassa threw herself to the ground in a forehead-to-floor

genuflection; Barsac remained erect, staring at the man who faced them.

He was tall, nearly seven feet in height, and correspondingly broad. He wore a ruffle of chocolate-colored lace, a skin-tight tunic, a bright sash of emerald-studded platinum. His hair was artificially silvered and glinted metallicly; his eyes, too, were silvered. He smiled, but there was little warmth in the smile.

Kassa rose and spoke the word she had said to the guard before. Lord Carnothute frowned a moment, then smiled again and said in a rumbling voice, "You are the girl Kassa. Who is your friend?"

"My name is Barsac. I'm a spacer in off the *Dywain*, that put down here yesterday."

The governor led them to a smaller, intricately-furnished room within, and Barsac suddenly found himself holding a crystal flask of liquor. He touched it to his lips; it was sweet, but promised to be explosively potent.

Kassa said, "He came to me this morning about the Luasparru Zigmunn."

Immediately shadows crossed Carnothute's massive calm face. "You refused the offer, Kassa. Zigmunn is no longer concern of his or yours."

"He was—*is*—blood-kin of mine," Barsac said thickly. "I want to find him. There's a job waiting for him on my ship, the *Dywain*."

"And how could I help you find him, my good man?"

Barsac glowered unblinkingly at the ponderous nobleman. "Kassa has told me about what has happened to Zigmunn—and of your connection with the organization to which he now belongs."

Kassa gasped. Carnothute scowled briefly, but merely said, "Go on."

"I don't know anything about this Cult," Barsac said. "I don't have any moral objections to it, and I don't give a damn who belongs to it or what sort of foul rites may be involved. I'm only interested in Zigmunn. The blood tie is a strong one. I didn't do this to my face without thinking about it a couple of times first. I want to know where he is, and if he's still on Glaurus I want to be allowed to see him and tell him there's a berth available for him on the *Dywain* if he claims it this week."

Carnothute steepled his thick fingers. He showed no sign of displeasure, none of anger, but Barsac had had experience with men of his size before; they held their anger in check for fear of crushing

the smaller creatures who lived in the world, but when their rage exploded it was a fearful thing. Slowly the governor said, "Your blood-brother is not on Glaurus."

Kassa shot a quick meaningful glance at Barsac. *I told you so*, she seemed to be telling him, but he chose to ignore it.

"Where is he, then?"

"He left for Azonda fifteen days ago with the most recent group of initiates to our—ah—organization."

"And how can I get to Azonda, then?"

"There is no way."

Barsac let those words soak in for a moment, while he finished off the drink Carnothute had given him. The governor seemed oppressively big, smug on account of his size. Barsac found himself longing to slip a knife between the ribs of that great frame.

At length he said, "How long will it be before he returns to Glaurus?"

"Perhaps never. Or, again, perhaps tomorrow. The novitiate lasts a year on Azonda; after that he is free to go where he wishes, so long as he maintains his loyalty. There is a mask that is normally worn, too. Cult members rarely bother to conceal the fact of their membership, unless

there are reasons that make such concealment necessary."

"Such as being governor of a big province of Glaurus?" Barsac said sharply.

Carnothute let the thrust slide away. "Exactly. Now, unless there's anything further either of you wishes to take up with me—"

"I want to reach Zigmunn. Send me to Azonda, Carnothute. If I could speak to him—"

"It is forbidden to interfere with the rite of initiation, Barsac. And even if you were to join the Cult yourself you would have to wait some months before you were judged ready to move on to Azonda. You are obstinate to the point of monomania, Barsac. But I tell you you'll only bring about your death if you insist on following this present course. You are dismissed."

**I**N THE STREET, outside the Palace, they stood together a moment in the gathering shadows of late afternoon. Fleecy clouds now filled the darkening sky, and the faint tracings of the triple moons appeared behind them; the sun, sinking, was swollen against the horizon, and the gold of its rays had turned to crab-red.

"You fool," Kassa said quietly. "Blundering in there and accusing him of this and that, and mentioning the Cult and his connection with it like that!"

"What was I supposed to do? Crawl on my face and beg him to give me back Zigmunn?"

"Don't you know that crawling helps? Carnothute has ruled this province thirty years. He's accustomed to crawlers. But we need a more subtle approach."

"What do you suggest, then?"

She drew a paper from her pouch and scribbled a name and an address on it. "This man will take you to the place where you can try to buy passage to Azonda. How much money do you have?"

"Eleven hundred Galactic units."

She sucked her breath in sharply. "Don't offer more than five hundred for passage. And see that you save a hundred for me; I'm not doing all this for charity, Barsac."

He smiled and touched her chin. He understood frankness and appreciated it. Perhaps, he thought, he might give her a chance to earn her hundred in another way, after he found Zigmunn.

The address was in the

Street of Kings. Barsac pocketed the slip.

"What will you do while I'm there?"

"I'm going to go back to see Carnothute again. Possibly the governor's in need of a woman; I'll offer myself. I could ask him to have your blood-kin disqualified from his novitiate and returned to Glaurus; he can do that, you know, if he feels a candidate's unfit. Maybe it will work. Many promises can be exacted in bed by one who knows how."

"And where will I meet you later?"

"In my room. Here's the key; you'll probably get back there before I do. Wait for me. And don't let them cheat you, Barsac. Be careful."

She turned and dodged back toward the Palace entrance. Barsac watched her go; then he grinned and turned away. The Street of Kings next, he thought.

**I**T TURNED OUT to be considerably less impressive than its regal name promised; perhaps in centuries past it had been a showplace of Millyaurr, but now it was hardly preferable to the Street of Tears. Night was gathering close by the time Barsac reached the street.

He sought out his man:

Dollin Sporeffien of number five-sixty, Street of Kings. Sporeffien turned out to be a chubby little man in his late sixties, totally bald but for a fuzz of white about his ears. He looked harmless enough, except for his eyes. They were not harmless eyes.

He looked bleakly at Barsac, eyeing him up and down, and said finally, "So you're Kassa's latest lover, eh? She always sends them to me for some favor or other. She's a nimble girl, isn't she? She could be one of the best, if she put her mind to it. But she won't. She refuses to live up to her potential, as you've probably found out some nights, young one."

Barsac did not try to deny anything. He said, "I want a man who'll take me to Azonda tonight."

Instantly the joviality left Sporeffien's face. "Some favors are harder to do than others."

"I'll pay for it. Well."

"How well?"

"Find me the man," Barsac said. "I'll talk price with him, not you."

Sporeffien smiled dubiously. "It might cost you some hundreds of credits. Are you still interested?"

"Yes."

"Come with me, then."

Sporeffien led him out of the house and into the street; by now the stars were visible above the murk and haze of the city. They entered another house in which a man sat clutching a jug of wine and staring blearily at the small child that lay sleeping on a bed of filth in one corner of the room.

Sporeffien said, "Barsac, meet Emmeri. Emmeri, Barsac. Emmeri's a private conveyance man. He owns a small ship—somewhat outdated, but it still operates. Barsac would like you to pilot him to Azonda tonight, Emmeri."

The man named Emmeri turned and looked coldly at Barsac. He put down the jug.

"To Azonda?"

"You heard him. What's the price?"

Emmeri's blood-shot eyes drooped shut an instant; when he opened them, they gleamed craftily. "How much can you pay?"

"Five hundred Galactic units," Barsac said clearly. "I won't haggle. I'm starting right off at my top price, and that's as high as I'll go."

"Five hundred," Emmeri repeated, half to himself. "A very interesting sum. When do I get it?"

"When we've made the round trip to Azonda."

"No," Emmeri said. "Payment in advance or no trip. I don't know what you want to do on Azonda, but I want the money before we blast off."

Barsac thought about it half an instant, and said at length, "Done. Get yourself ready. I want to blast off this evening. I just have to get in touch with Kassa and then I'll be ready."

Shrugging, Emmeri got to his feet and weaved unsteadily across the room to the washstand. He didn't look much like a trained pilot, Barsac thought. His fingers shook and his eyes were bleary and he showed no signs of having the quick reflexes the job demanded.

But that didn't matter. All that mattered was getting a ship. He could compute his own orbit out to Azonda if he needed to.

Emmeri turned. "You have the money with you?"

Barsac nodded. He added, "You get it when I see your spaceship, not before. I don't hand five hundred units over to any foul-smelling sot who claims to be a pilot."

"You think I'd cheat you?" Emmeri said.

"I don't think anything. I just don't like to waste money."

"In that case you came to



the wrong place," Emmeri said smirkingly.

To his dismay Barsac realized he had lost sight of Sporeffien; the older man had ducked behind him, into the shadows. Too late he saw that he had been maneuvered into a trap; he started to turn, but Sporeffien was even quicker, and brought the jug of wine down against his head with a resounding impact.

Barsac reeled and took two wobbly steps forward. He saw the still unbroken jug lift again, and tried to shield his head; Sporeffien crashed it down against the back of his neck, rattling his teeth.

Barsac pitched forward. He heard harsh laughter, and the old man's dry voice saying, "Anyone but a greenhorn should have known nobody would ferry him to Azonda for a million units cash down in initiation-time. Let's go through his pockets, Emmeri."

### CHAPTER III

HE WOKE to the sound of falling rain, clattering against the eaves of the houses and the stones of the street, and wondered for a moment how there could be rain aboard the *Dywain*. Then he remembered he was not aboard the *Dywain*. A moment later he

made the unpleasant discovery that he was lying face down in the gutter, one hand dangling in a fast-flowing rivulet of rain-water, and that he was soaking wet, encrusted with mud, and suffering from a splitting headache. The gray light of dawn illuminated the scene. He looked around. It was an unfamiliar street.

Slowly he got to his feet, feeling chilled and dazed, and brushed some of the street-mud from his clothes ineffectually. He shook his head, trying to clear it, trying to make the ringing in his ears cease.

His left thigh felt strange. A moment after he knew why: the familiar bulk of his wallet no longer pressed against it. He remembered now the scene of the night before, and reddened. Those two thieves had cleaned him out. Played him for a fool, slugged him, taken his wallet and his eleven hundred units and his papers.

They had left him with a key, though. He stared at it dully until he realized it was the key to the apartment of Kassa Jidril.

Kassa. She had sent him to Sporeffien. She must have known how laughable was the idea of hiring a ferry to take him to Azonda. And so she must have deliberately sent him to Sporeffien knowing

he would be worked over.

Angry as he was, he found it hard to blame her, or Sporeffien and his accomplice. This was a tough, hard world; a greenhorn with a thousand Galactic units or so in his wallet was fair game.

Only—Kassa had said she was going to return to Lord Carnothute and make a second attempt to get Zigmunn released from his Cult vows. Had she meant it? Or had that just been part of the deception?

Barsac did not know. But he decided to return to the girl's apartment, as long as he still had the key. He wanted to ask her a few questions.

The early-morning rain still poured down. He shivered, soaked through. The streets were deserted. He started to walk. A street-sign said, *Boulevard of the Sun*. He had no idea where that might be in relation to the Street of Tears.

He rounded a corner and entered a narrow winding street lined with hunchbacked old houses that leaned so close together above the street that little rain penetrated. Half-way down the street he spied the radiant globe of a winehouse, still open. And a man was leaving it. Barsac hoped he was sober enough to give him directions.

He hailed him. The man paused, turned, stared uncertainly at Barsac. He was a short man, thin, with a sallow pockmarked face framing a massive hooked nose. He wore iridescent tights of red and green and a dull violet cloak. His eyes were small and glinted brightly. He looked none the worse for his night's carouse.

"Pardon me," Barsac said. "Could you direct me to the Street of Tears?"

"I could. Directly ahead until you reach the Square of the Fathers—you'll know it by the big ugly clump of statuary in the middle—and then make a sharp right past the Mercury Winehouse. Street of Tears is four blocks along that way. Got it?"

"Thanks," Barsac said. He started to move on.

"Just a second," the other called after him. The Earther turned. "Are you all right?"

"Could be better," Barsac said shortly.

"You're all wet. And muddy. You've been beaten and robbed, haven't you?"

Barsac nodded.

"And you're a stranger, too. Need some money?"

"I can manage."

The small man took three steps and placed himself at Barsac's side, looking up at



him. "I know what it's like to be a stranger on Glaurus. I've been through it myself. I can help you. I can find you a job."

Barsac shook his head. "Appreciation. But I'm a spacer; my ship lifts at the end of this week. I'm not looking for a job."

"Many's the spacer who's been left behind. If you get into trouble, come to me. Here's my card."

Barsac took it. It said, *Erpad Ystilog, Exhibitor of Curiosities, 1123 Street of Liars*. Barsac smiled and pocketed it.

"I'll wish you a good morning," Ystilog said. "Do you remember the way to the street you seek?"

"Straight ahead to the Square of the Fathers, sharp right at the Mercury Winehouse and four blocks farther."

Ystilog nodded approvingly. "You remember well, spacer. If you're ever in need of a job, come to me."

"I'll think about it," Barsac said.

**T**HE RAIN had virtually stopped by the time he reached the Street of Tears; only a trickle of drops came down now, and the sky had turned

pearl gray and was on its way toward brightening. A filmy rainbow arched across the rooftops of the city, gauzy, tenuous, already melting away as the heat of morning descended.

But number eighty-one still seemed wrapped in sleep. Barsac mounted the stairs two at a time, pausing on the fourth-floor landing to draw out the key Kassa Jidrill had given him the night before.

But he did not need the key.

The door had been broken in. It was as if a battering-ram had crashed against it an inch or two from the place where the hinges joined the door-frame, and the wood had crumpled inward like a folding screen. The hall and the room both were dark. Frowning, Barsac nudged open the fragments of the door, pushing past the shattered door into the room.

He switched on the light. A moment later he found himself fighting the temptation to switch it off again.

Kassa lay neatly arranged on the bed, and the coverlet was soaked with blood. Barsac had seen horrible deaths before; this one took the prize.

She had been sliced open. A double-barred cross had been slashed into her body, the downstroke beginning be-

tween the breasts and continuing to the pelvis, the two crossbars incised about eight inches apart in her stomach. Her throat had been cut. And her face—

There was hardly a face left.

The clothes she had worn last night were stacked on the chair. A key lay on the floor near the bed. He picked it up; it was a duplicate of the one she had given him.

She had come home, then; she had locked the door. And someone had broken in.

Barsac found his hands quivering. He turned away, shaking his head slowly, and closed what was left of the door behind him.

There was a public communicator booth in the hall. Barsac entered the booth without bothering to flip the shutter release, and depressed the *call* stud.

He said, "Give me the police. I want to report a murder, operator."

A moment later a sleepy voice said, "Millyaurr Homicide Detail. Lieutenant Hassliq speaking. What is it?"

"A murder, Lieutenant. In the Street of Tears, number eighty-one. The dead person is a party girl named Kassa Jidriil. I just found her."

There was no increase of

animation in Lieutenant Hassliq's voice as he said, "And who are you, please?"

"I'm a spacer in town on leave from the ship *Dywain*. My name is Barsac. I—met the dead girl yesterday afternoon for the first time. I just came back to her room now and found her this way."

"Describe the condition of the body, please."

Barsac did, in detail. When he was finished Hassliq said, "I feared as much. All right, Barsac—we'll send a morgue truck right over to pick up the body. You don't need to stick around if you don't want to."

"Won't you want to question me for the investigation?"

"What investigation?"

Barsac blinked. "A girl's been murdered. Don't you usually investigate murder cases in Millyaurr?"

"Not when they're Cult jobs," Hassliq said. "What's the use? That party girl was killed ritualistically, if your description is accurate. Someone in the Cult took a dislike to her. But what can we do? It's next to impossible to regulate Cult activities; I'd only be begging to have my own face scraped off and a double-barred cross cut into *my* belly. No, thanks. We'll send a pick-up man out for the body.

Thanks for phoning in the information, Mr. Barsac."

He heard a click, stared at the receiver a moment, and hung up. They weren't even interested in finding Kassa's murderer, he thought. They didn't care. They were *afraid* to care.

**H**E WENT BACK to the room and sat by the dead girl until the morgue truck arrived. His quest for Zigmunn was taking on new colors; a robbery, now a murder had been woven into the pattern.

A ritualistic murder. A Cult murder. On Glaurus the Cult was law, it seemed. His heart felt curiously leaden; he avoided looking at the body on the bed. For Kassa all despair was ended now, suddenly, earlier than she had expected.

Half an hour passed; forty-five minutes. The rain began again, then stopped. Finally the truck arrived. Barsac heard the commotion on the stairs as the other boarders in the house, their curiosities aroused by the presence of the truck, followed the morgue men upstairs.

"In here," Barsac called.

Two bored-looking men with a stretcher slung between them entered. At the

sight of Kassa they winced.

"We get half a dozen of these a week," one said. "The Cult keeps a sharp knife."

They loaded her on the stretcher as if she were so much slaughtered meat. Barsac stepped forward and said, "What's going to happen to her body now?"

"She gets taken down to the morgue and entered. We wait a week for the body to be claimed. Then we send her to the crematorium."

"You don't expect anyone to claim the body?"

The stretcher-bearer smiled scornfully. "She was a party girl, wasn't she?"

"Besides," said the other one, "even if she was a nun of the Grand Temple. Nobody claims Cult victims' bodies. It isn't a healthy thing to do."

Barsac scowled. "I'd like to see her get a decent burial. She was, well, a friend of mine."

"Burial on Glaurus costs five hundred units, brother. Plus bribes. Was she that much of a friend? Don't throw your money away; she won't ever know the difference."

They smiled at him ghoulishly and lifted the stretcher. Barsac let them take her away. He was remembering that he had no money at all, and in four days he was due to re-

turn to his ship and leave Glaurus probably forever.

On sudden inspiration he yanked open the drawers of the dead girl's dresser. Cheap trinkets, souvenirs, cosmetics—ah—ten crumpled five-unit bills. The price for a night, he thought.

Coldly he pocketed the bills. Turning, he saw a thin-faced old man staring at him.

"Here, you! No robbery, here! That money belongs to me!"

"Who the devil are you?" Barsac asked.

"The landlord here. It's the rule; if a boarder dies intestate, I inherit. Hand over that money, right here and now."

"I need it," Barsac said. "You don't. The girl doesn't. Get out of my way."

He slammed the landlord against the greasy wall with a contemptuous slap of his flattened hand and made his way down the stairs and out into the Street of Tears, thinking of a dead party girl who would have been alive at this moment had he never come to Millyaurr.

**I**T WAS NEARLY NOON when he arrived at the field where the *Dywain* stood, and he was dizzy with hunger. He showed

his identity bracelet to the field guards and trotted out to the great ship.

Captain Jaspell was supervising the repainting of the stabilizer fins, up on D deck. Barsac waited until the captain had finished his harangue of the painters, then said, "Sir?"

"Oh—Barsac. Where's that ace repairman of yours?"

"I haven't been able to find him, sir. Not yet, anyway. But there's still time, isn't there?"

"Not much," the old captain said. "I'll have to send out the hiring notice tomorrow if I'm to get a man. I can't wait for your fellow any longer than that. You've been robbed, eh, Barsac?"

Smiling bitterly, Barsac nodded. "Foolishness, Captain. I'm cleaned out."

"How much do you need?"

"Three hundred units advance against next voyage, Captain. Is that too much?"

"Probably. Take a hundred fifty. Then if you get robbed again it won't be so bad. And be careful, Barsac; I don't want to have to find a fuelsman as well as a repairman on Glaurus."

Barsac pocketed his money and returned to the city. Hope of finding Zigmunn in time for him to get the job aboard the *Dywain* was dim indeed.

But Barsac was no longer mainly interested in getting him the job; he simply wanted to see Zigmunn, if possible to release him from the meshes of the Cult. And there were questions to be answered about his robbery and about the death of Kassa.

He hopped aboard a crowded airbus with defective air-conditioning and rode it as far as Lord Carnothute's palace. There he got off, entered the palace, and demanded to see the governor.

He was conscious that he did not make an imposing figure, in his mud-stained, blood-streaked clothes, with his gaunt bruised face and beard-stubbed cheeks. But he was determined to see Carnothute.

The governor appeared, a looming elephantine figure in ultramarine cape and sheath-like leggings of cerise trimmed with black. Barsac looked up at him and snapped, "Let me talk to you in private!"

Carnothute seemed amused. "A private audience is a rare privilege, my friend. My guards will have to be present throughout our conversation. Why do you come back?"

"To ask you questions. Did that party-girl Kassa return here yesterday after I left?"

Carnothute shrugged. "Perhaps."

"She did. Where did you and she go?"

"My fleshly life is hardly your concern, worthy spacer. Are there any less personal questions you would ask?"

"This one," Barsac said. "Some time between last night and this morning Kassa returned to her room and locked herself in. Then someone of unusual strength battered the door down and killed her. The police said it was a ritualistic murder. She was gutted and mutilated when I found her this morning. Here's your question: did you kill her?"

**C**HUCKLING, Carnothute said, "Party girls have short lives in Millyaurr. Why should you care whether a teenage slut lives or dies, you who land on Glaurus once a decade?"

"I care because the Cult killed her, and you're the only Cult member I know. You killed her. You killed her because she was trying to help me reach my blood-brother on Azonda, and because perhaps last night she extracted a promise from you that you chose not to keep when you reconsidered it in the harsher light of morning. Am I close, Carnothute? It's always easier to have a party girl murdered than to face the charge that



you broke your sacred word."

The governor's smooth-cheeked face darkened abruptly. In a cold, deep voice he said, "Let me give you advice, Barsac: forget the girl Kassa, and forget the Luasparru Zigmunn. The one is dead, the other beyond your reach. Give up your search and return to your ship."

"And if I choose not to?"

"Then you will die sooner than your parents expected. Leave me, Barsac." He turned to the three silent guards who waited near the door. "Take this man outside the palace and instruct him that he is not to return."

They converged on Barsac. Gripping his arms tightly, they swept him out of Lord Carnothute's presence, down the interlocking corridors, and outside the palace grounds. There, the tallest of the three spun him around and slapped his face.

Barsac growled and started for him. Another tripped him, and as he fell sprawling he realized he was in for another beating.

They worked him over for ten minutes with light-hearted gaiety, while he aimed futile blows at each of them in turn. They were Darjunnans, long-limbed and lithe, and while he managed to

bruise their silky violet skins from time to time they inflicted far worse damage on him. Five times he struggled to his feet only to be battered down again; they concentrated their attention on his empty stomach, drumming blows off it with sickening frequency.

Once he swung wildly and broke a nose; a moment later a kick behind the knee-joints dropped him on his face, gasping, and they devoted some time to his kidneys. They pummelled him efficiently, as if they were well-trained as a team; when Barsac hung to consciousness by only a thread one said, "Enough," and they left him.

He walked about ten paces and stumbled. He groped for a bench, found it, clung to its cool stone, and through puffed eyes watched drops of his own blood dripping from his face and puddling against the white flagstone walk. Dimly he realized they had not robbed him, and it surprised him.

He sat there five minutes, ten, unable to get up. His face throbbled. Every part of him ached. But they had shrewdly stopped while he yet was conscious, devilishly, so he would feel every moment of the pain.

He sensed the fact that someone stood in front of

him, looking down. He tried to open his eyes.

"Kassa?" he asked.

"No. I'm not Kassa. I suppose you found the Street of Tears, spacer. And then the Street of Blood."

"Who are you?"

"We met earlier this day. I offered to help you then. But I think you need it more now."

Through pain-hazed eyes Barsac made out the lean wiry figure of Erpad Ystilog, the Exhibitor of Curiosities.

#### CHAPTER IV

**B**ARSAC LAY BACK on the hard, uncomfortable couch and tried to relax. He failed; every nerve seemed wound tightly, almost to the breaking point. He was in number 1123, Street of Liars. Yestilog had brought him home.

"Awake?" Ystilog asked.

Barsac looked up at the sal-low pock-marked face, the great curved beak of a nose. "More awake than asleep, I guess. What time is it?"

"Well after noon. Feeling better? Drink this."

Forcing himself into a sitting position, Barsac accepted the cup. It contained a warm brownish liquid; he drank without questioning. The taste was faintly sweet.

"Good. I guess I owe you thanks."

Ystilog shrugged deprecatingly. "Never mind that. Rest, now; you'll need to rebuild your strength."

The curio-exhibitor left him. Barsac wanted to protest that he could not stay here any longer, that he had to make a further attempt to find Zigmunn, that time was running short and he would soon have to return to the *Dywain*. But the pain got the better of him; he slumped back and dropped off into sleep.

He woke again, some time later, feeling stiff and sore but stronger than he had been. Ystilog stood above him.

"I feel better now," Barsac said. "And I must go. I have little time."

"Why the rush?"

"My ship leaves Glaurus at the end of this week. And before then I have things to do."

"You've had ill luck so far, I'd say. My offer still goes—a job is open for you."

"I'm a spacer."

"Leave space. It's a loathsome life. Stay here in my employ. I need a strong-bodied assistant, one who can protect a frail man like myself. I encounter much danger while traveling with my museum. And I can pay you—not well, alas, but enough."

Barsac shook his head. "Sorry, Ystilog. You've been good to me, but it's out of the question. The *Dywain* is a good ship. I don't want to leave it."

Disappointment gleamed briefly on Ystilog's face. "I could use you, Barsac."

"I tell you no. But give me some information, before I leave."

"If I can."

"My purpose is to find my blood-brother, a Luasparru, Zigmunn by name. At the cost of two beatings and a robbing I've found out that he's been initiated into the Cult of the Witch, and is now on Azonda."

The smile left Ystilog's face. "So?"

"I want to find him and break him loose from the Cult. But I know nothing about this Cult. Tell me—what is it? From what did it spring? What are its aims?"

Quietly Ystilog said, "I can tell you little—the little that every non-initiated Glauran knows. The Cult is a thousand years old—more, perhaps. Its headquarters are on Azonda. A dead planet, as you may know. Heart of the Cult is the so-called Witch of Azonda."

"Tell me about her."

"There is nothing to tell. Only Cult members may see

her. She is supposedly lovely, immortal—and faceless. Cult members spend a year on Azonda worshipping her. Perhaps one Glauran in a thousand is a member. They practice certain dark rites, and the law ignores them. People think that most of our high officials are Cult members. If your blood-brother's gone to Azonda, forget him. He's lost to you forever."

Barsac scowled. "I refuse to believe that. I still have three days to find him."

"You'll find nothing but more pain," Ystilog said. "But if you're determined, I suppose I can't hold you back. You'll find your clothes in that closet. And don't try to pay me for what I've done; it was simple common courtesy."

Barsac dressed in silence. When he had donned the last of his garments, Ystilog reappeared, smiling. He carried a mug of wine.

"Have a drink as a parting toast," Ystilog said. He handed the mug to Barsac. "To your quest. And success."

Barsac drank. Tightening his cloak around him, he headed for the door—but before he passed the threshold his legs wobbled and refused to hold him. He sagged crazily; Ystilog caught him and eased him to the couch.

Bitterly he realized he had once again played the fool. A roaring tide of unconsciousness swept down over him, and he knew he had accepted a drink that was drugged.

**C**HURCH BELLS woke him. He stiffened at the first echoing peal, stirred, sat up in bed. His eyes were pasted together; he had to work to get them open. He felt rusty at the joints, stiff, flabby.

Church bells. The end of the week. The *Dywain* was leaving!

He jerked off the covers, climbed from the bed, slipped, stumbled, fell headlong. His legs and feet were numb from inactivity. He hoisted himself erect, alarm giving him strength.

"Ystilog! Damn you, where are you?"

"Here I am," said a quiet voice.

Barsac whirled unsteadily. Ystilog stood behind him, smiling pleasantly. He wore a black watered silk lounging robe and a blue morning wig. In his hand was a wedge-shaped blade, eight inches long, glittering.

"You drugged me," Barsac accused. "How long did I sleep? What day is it? What time is it?"

"Your ship left Glaurus half an hour ago," Ystilog said smoothly. "I was at the spaceport. I watched it depart; it was quite lovely to see it climb high and wink into overdrive, vanishing in the blue."

Rage surged through Barsac. He took two hesitant steps forward.

"Why did you do this?"

"I needed an assistant. A good man is hard to find. And you have muscles, Barsac, if no brains. The pay is eleven units a week plus food and board."

"*Eleven units!*" Barsac clenched his fists and advanced. The smaller man waited, unafraid.

"Put that knife away, Ystilog, and—"

Ystilog sheathed the knife. "Yes? You'll what?" He waved his empty hands in the air.

"I'll—I'll—what have you done to me?" Barsac growled.

"Conditioned you against doing me harm," Ystilog said. "I would be as big a fool as you to do otherwise. If you were in my place and I in yours, I would not hesitate to kill you as brutally as possible . . . if I were able. So you are not able. See?"

Barsac looked at his impotent hands. He longed to wring Ystilog's fragile neck, but it would have been easier

to strangle himself to death. An unbreakable geas lay upon him, keeping him from action.

He sank down numbly on the couch where he had slept so long. A quiver of suppressed anger and frustration rippled through him. "Is my ship really gone?"

"Yes," Ystilog said.

Barsac moistened his lips. This had been Zigmunn's fate, and now a decade later it was his. Like brother, like brother. Naturally Captain Jaspell would not have held up departure for the sake of an overdue fuelsman; starship schedules were as inflexible as the solar precessions.

"All right," Barsac said quietly. "I've been beaten and robbed and drugged, and now I've lost my ship as well. This trip to Glaurus has been grand. Just grand. Suppose you tell me what I'm supposed to do."

**T**HEY LEFT four days later by sea for Zunnigennar, the great continent of Glaurus' eastern hemisphere, where the people had a mildly greenish tinge to their skins and where the spoken tongue made mad-denyingly slight use of verbs. Barsac, in his new position as Ystilog's bodyguard, wore new clothes of synthetic silk, and

carried a fifty-watt shocker at his waist. The shocker had an illegal amplifier installed which boosted the output to lethal intensity, but this was not readily apparent even on close inspection, and the weapon could pass for a standard two-ampere model. Barsac longed to use it on his employer and fry his synapses, but his conditioning made that impossible.

The ship on which they departed was a small one which Ystilog had engaged for his personal use. It contained the whole of Ystilog's traveling museum-cum-circus.

Ystilog had acquired a variegated array of treasures. There were dreamstones from Sollighat, ghostly yellow in color and narcotic in their beauty; emerald-cut gems from the barren wastes of Duu, glistening in their metallic settings; talking trees of Thanamon, with their croaking vocabularies of seven or eight words of greeting and fifteen or twenty scabrous obscenities.

There were living creatures in cages, too: dwarf squids of Qi, hunching up in their tanks and fixing malevolent red gimlet-eyes on the onlookers; rain-toads from Mivaghik, violet-hued legless salamanders from the blazing sunside of

UpjiLaz, smiling protopods of Viron. Creatures from Earth, too, scorpions and sleek serpents and star-faced moles, platypusses and echidnas, sad-faced proboscis monkeys. The menagerie was at all times a chattering madhouse, and it was part of Barsac's job to feed each creature its special food every morning.

Ystilog had warned him to be careful; his predecessor in the job had lost an arm tossing flesh into the protopod-cage. The smiling creatures moved with blinding agility.

They opened at a showhouse in Zibilnor, largest city of the continent, and for seventeen days did spectacular business. Ystilog charged a unit a head for admission, half price for children and slaves, and during the time in Zibilnor grossed no less than twenty-eight thousand units, by Barsac's count. They jostled close, anxious to see the deadly creatures of twenty worlds that Ystilog had assembled, staring with covetous eyes at his gems and at his curios.

Twenty - eight thousand units. And through it all Barsac received eleven units a week, room and board. Eleven units a week was barely wine-money. He longed to slit Ystilog's throat, but could not approach the circus owner

with a weapon. On the last day but one of their stay in Zibilnor, Barsac sought out a professional killer. His intention was to offer the man full rights to Ystilog's circus if he would kill the entrepreneur, but when the time came to make the offer Barsac's mental block intervened, and he was unable to speak. He stumbled away, tongue-tied.

The circus moved on—slowly, across the face of Zunnigennar, Ystilog pausing here and there for a three-day engagement, a five-day stand. Local bearers helped them move the crates from one town to the next; Ystilog hired men to precede them, announcing that the show was coming.

In a locked chest by his bed Ystilog kept the receipts of the tour. He cabled his money back to Millyaurr once a week; the rest of the time the money lay there for Barsac's taking, but the compulsion against killing Ystilog extended too to robbing him and to running away. He was bound to the swarthy pockmarked little man by invisible threads stronger than the strongest metal.

**B**ARSAC sank into the depths of despair. He drank, he rob-

bed, once he killed. That was in the town of Dmynn, on the foul, polluted river Kyllnn. A riverboat man was in the same bar as the spacer, and, with two too many drinks in his belly, was boasting of the river life.

"We are free and we travel the water—the finest life there is!"

"Not half so fine as the life of a spacer," said Barsac darkly. He sat four stools to the left, nursing the flask of wine that would be his last drink of the night. "A riverman is just a crawler next to a spacer."

Instantly the riverboater was down off his stool and facing Barsac. "What would *you* know of this?"

"I'm a spacer!"

A low chuckle eddied up about him from all sides.

"You—a spacer?" the riverboat man said contemptuously. "I know you, you who call yourself a spacer. You're the circus man's lackey. Each morning you sweep the dung from the cages of his beasts!"

Barsac did not reply. He came forward fists first, and the riverman went rocketing back against a table. Barsac waited for him to get up, so he could hit him again. He felt restraining hands gripping his arms, and shook them off. Lifting the squirming

riverman, he propped him up and slapped him.

A knife appeared. Barsac kicked it away and hit the riverman in the throat. He doubled up, choking and gasping, and managed to grate out the words, "*Lackey . . . dung-sweeper!*"

Barsac stepped backward. The riverman charged; Barsac drew his shocker, flipped up the amplifier switch, and triggered a discharge all in the same instant. A smell of burning flesh reached his nostrils a moment later.

That night they left Dmynn, traveling overland toward the forested province of Eas. As their caravan of trucks rolled out of the river town, Ystilog said coldly, "It was necessary to place a fifty-unit bribe with the local police to save you, this afternoon. For the next ten weeks your pay is cut to six units a week. And keep out of such brawls in the future."

Barsac scowled. There was nothing he could say. Ystilog was his lord and master, and there was no way of lifting the foot planted squarely on his throat.

He lay awake nights thinking of ways to kill the little circus man, and burst into frantic fits of perspiration when the inevitable realization

came that he was incapable of action.

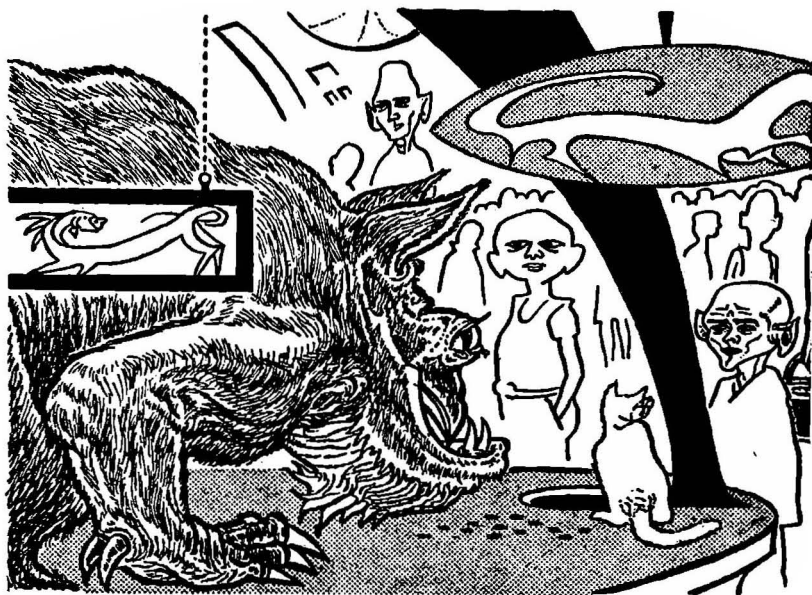
Ystilog had him. Ystilog owned him, and he served Ystilog well.

Across the face of Zunnigennar went the traveling circus, and Ystilog grew richer. He treated Barsac well, buying him clothes, feeding him handsomely. But Barsac did a slave's work, for he was a slave. The weeks went by, lengthening into months.

Barsac wondered about the *Dywain*, bound now for the Rim stars without him, and about Zigmunn in whose name

he had parted with his profession and his freedom. He thought of the girl Kassa, so long dead now. And, on those occasions when a silver-masked Glauran crossed his path, he thought of the Cult of the Witch, and of the dead world of Azonda where his blood-brother had gone.

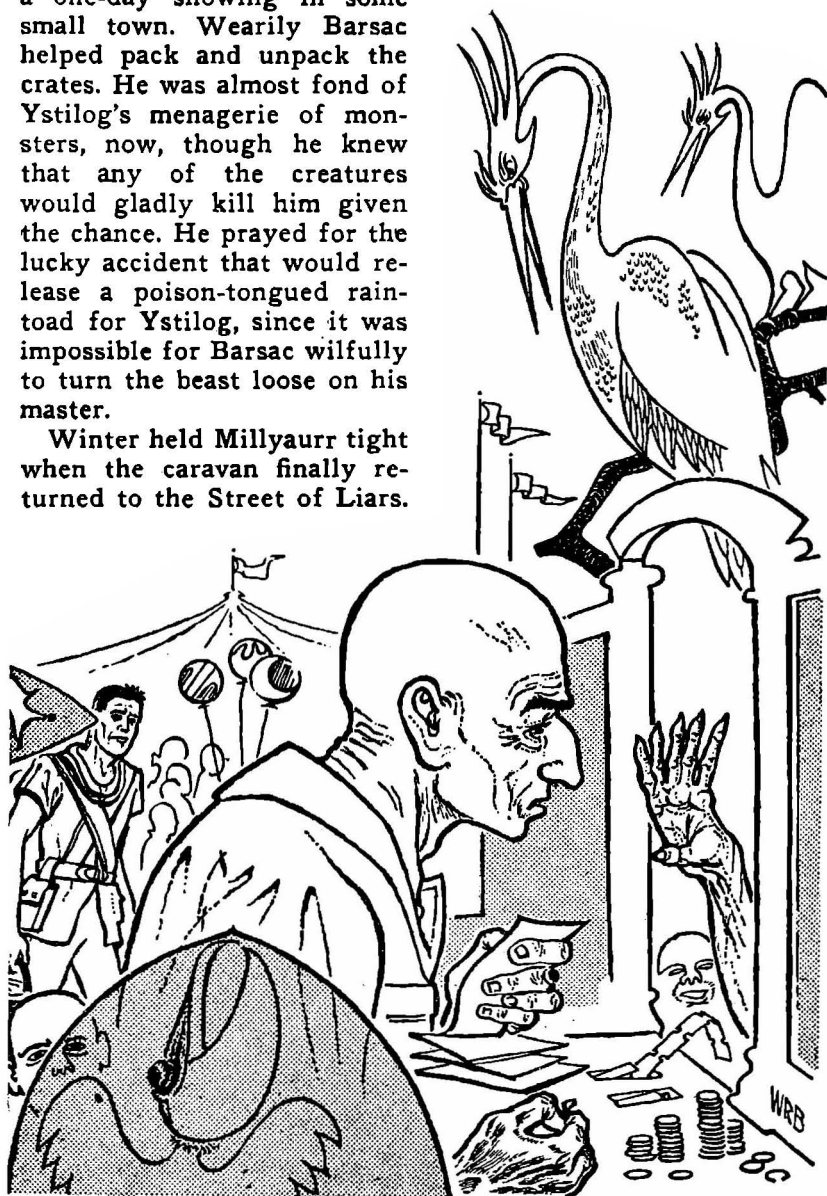
Winter came, and with it snow; Ystilog decided time had come to return to Millyaurr and live off the summer's profits. To Millyaurr they returned, stopping occasionally along the way to recoup food expenses by giving





a one-day showing in some small town. Wearily Barsac helped pack and unpack the crates. He was almost fond of Ystilog's menagerie of monsters, now, though he knew that any of the creatures would gladly kill him given the chance. He prayed for the lucky accident that would release a poison-tongued rain-toad for Ystilog, since it was impossible for Barsac wilfully to turn the beast loose on his master.

Winter held Millyaurr tight when the caravan finally returned to the Street of Liars.



Seven months had gone by since the week of Barsac's leave. He had grown gaunt and his eyes now lay deep in shadow, but his old stubbornness remained alive in him, imprisoned only by the web of hypnotic command.

But lines of despair now traced themselves on his face, as once they had on dead Kassa's face. He frequented dangerous sections of town, hoping for the release of death. He drank often in the bar where he first had met Kassa, sitting alone at the table in the rear.

He was there one night in late winter, spending a borrowed three-unit piece on liquor, when the front door opened and framed in it stood a silver-masked figure, a member of the Cult of the Witch.

Instinctively the other patrons of the bar huddled inward upon themselves, hoping not to be noticed, as the Cultist flicked gobbets of snow from his cape and entered the bar. Only Barsac looked up unafraid, and drew out the chair next to his in open invitation.

## CHAPTER V

**T**HE CULTIST paused just beyond the door, surveying the room with the ash-gray

eyes that lay just above the rim of his mask. Then, calmly, he strode down the aisle between the clustered tables and took the seat Barsac offered.

"Order two drinks," the Cultist said in a low voice.

Barsac signalled to the bar-keep for two more bowls of the mulled wine he had been drinking. Timorously the bartender advanced with them, laid them down, and retreated from the Cultist's presence without even bothering to ask for his money.

Barsac studied the other. The mask ran from ear to ear and from the bridge of the nose to the upper lip; all that was visible of the Cultist's face were the gray, piercing eyes, the broad furrowed forehead, and cold downslanting lips.

"Well," Barsac said, "drink hearty." He raised the bowl, expecting to clink it against the Cultist's, but the other merely grunted and took a deep drink.

When he was through he peered at Barsac and said, "You are Barsac the Earther, lackey to the circus proprietor Erpad Ystilog."

"I am. How did you know?"

"I know. Do you love your master?"

Barsac laughed harshly. "Do you think I do?"

"What I think is irrelevant at this time. You have been watched, Barsac. Ystilog was directed to you. We believe suffering is beneficial to the soul, as we understand the soul."

"In that case you've done a good job. I've suffered."

"We know that too. Why haven't you killed Ystilog?"

"Because—because—" Barsac strove to explain the compulsion Ystilog had laid on him, but the very compulsion kept him from framing the words. "I—I—can't say it."

"A tongue-block? Ystilog is good at such things. Would you like to kill Ystilog?"

"Of course."

"But you can't. Ystilog has laid a command across your mind. Yes?"

Stiffly, Barsac nodded.

The Cultist's thin lips curled upward. "Would you approve if someone else killed Ystilog for you?"

Beads of sweat broke out on Barsac's forehead. The conversation was skirting the borders of the compulsion-area in his mind; it was only with difficulty that he was forcing through his responses.

"Yes," he said heavily.

The Cultist touched the tips of his fingers together. "In one hour Ystilog will die, if we so decide it. You will be

free from your compulsion. Azonda waits."

"Azonda?"

"Where else could you go? What else is left, Barsac? Driven downward, cut off from the life you knew, an outcast on Glaurus—take the way of Azonda. We will free you from Ystilog. Come, then, with us."

Barsac struggled to get out a reply. Finally he said, "I... accede."

The Cultist rose. "Within an hour Ystilog dies. We will be waiting for you, Barsac."

And then he was alone.

**H**E SAT QUIETLY, nursing his warm drink, staring through the leaded window at the great heavy soft flakes of snow drifting downward. The Cult, he thought. Why not? What else is there? Better the Cult than endless years of Ystilog, and they will free me from—  
*No!*

Ystilog's compunction gripped him, sent him running out of the tavern into the chill winter bleakness. By acceding to the Cultist's request he was allowing the death of Ystilog, and that ran counter to his instilled conditioning. He had to prevent the murder. He had to save Ystilog. He had to get back in time.

He ran down the empty snow-choked streets. Within an hour, the Cultist had said. Burning conflict raged inside Barsac; he fought to hold his body back, to still his legs, to give the Cultists a chance to do their work, while at the same time the demon riding his mind spurred him forward to reach Ystilog and protect him.

At the corner he waited impatiently for an airbus. It came, finally, crusted over with snow, and he took it to the Street of Liars. From the terminal it was a five-block walk to Ystilog's flat; Barsac took it at a trot, stumbling in the snow every time his mind managed to reassert control over his rebellious body.

But as he drew near the flat, Ystilog's compulsion overmastered him, and uppermost in his mind was the thought that he must reach his master in time, save him from the knives of the Cultists—

Up the stairs. Down the hall. There was the door. Barsac gasped for breath; his lungs were icy, his nose and ears numb with cold.

"Ystilog! Hold on! I'm coming!"

A scream. Another, drawn-out, a ghastly bubbling wail that echoed down the corridor of the old flat and sent a dif-

ferent sort of chill through Barsac.

He slumped against the door like a cast-off doll. Ystilog's hold on him was broken. *I was too late after all*, he thought in relief. *They got him.*

The door opened. On nerveless feet Barsac entered. Four Cultists stood within.

Ystilog lay naked on his bed, in a pool of blood. The double-barred cross stood out in red clarity against the paleness of his skin. Two silver-masked figures stood above the body, holding a keen-bladed instrument with two handles over his face, slicing down—

Barsac looked away.

"It's over," said a familiar voice—the voice of the Cultist who had entered the tavern. "He died quickly. It was a pity."

"I wish I could have done it," Barsac murmured. "But the devil had me bound. Now I'm free, though. Free! Only—"

"Yes," the Cultist said. "Free. But you know the price of your freedom."

**A** THIRD TIME he saw Lord Carnothute, and for the first time there was no conflict between them. Barsac, weary, drained of fury and of passion, sat tiredly in an overstuffed

chair high in Carnothute's palace, listening to the huge man speak.

"You will leave for Azonda tomorrow," he said. "There are seventeen of you in this current group of initiates. The initiation period is one year. After that—well, after that you will know which roads are open for you and which are not."

"Will Zigmunn be there?"

Carnothute whirled and looked down at Barsac. "His year still has some months to run. He will be there. But if you have any idea—"

"You know I have none. I've lost all desire to reclaim him—or myself." Barsac listened to his own voice, heavy, toneless, and wondered frantically how he had changed so much in these seven months on Glaurus. It was as if his experiences had tarnished his soul, rusted it, corroded it, oxidized it finally to a heap of dust, and there was nothing left for him but to accept the uncertain mercies of the Cult.

"Will you have a drink?" Carnothute asked.

"I'm not thirsty."

"Good. Loss of physical desires is essential to one entering upon his novitiate. The desires return or not, as you choose, after you receive the mask."

Barsac shut his eyes a moment. "Did you kill the girl Kassa?"

"Yes. She had put me in a compromising position, and I either would have to kill her or do away with myself. I've grown fond of life, Barsac. You know the rest."

"I see." Oddly, he did not care. Nothing seemed to matter, any more.

"Come," Carnothute said. "Meet your fellow initiates. The ship leaves for Azonda tomorrow."

He allowed himself to be taken by the hand and led into an adjoining room. There, sixteen others sat on plurofoam couches ringing the wall, and three silver-masked Cultists stood as if on guard at the entrance.

Barsac studied the sixteen. He counted five women, eleven men, all of them humanoid by designation. They slouched wearily against the wall, not speaking to one another, some of them virtually withdrawn from the universe to some private many-colored inner world. One expression was common to their faces: the expression Barsac knew must be on his own as well. They were people who had lost all traces of hope.

One of the women still wore the revealing costume of a

party-girl, but it was frayed and tattered, and so was she. She seemed to be about forty. Her face was lined and unpretty, her eyes bleak, her mouth drooping. Next to her sat a boy of seventeen, his arms grotesquely puffed and purpled with the tell-tale stigmata of the sammthor-addict. As Barsac looked the boy quivered suddenly and emitted a cascade of tears.

Still further on was a man of thirty-five whose face was a mass of scars; one eye was gone, the other askew, and his nose sprawled crazily over his face. One lip and had been slashed; green jagged tattoo-marks marred his cheeks. He was one who would do well to take the mask, Barsac thought.

He took a seat on an unoccupied couch. He told himself: *These are people who have given up. I'm not quite like them. I'm still above water. These people have all let themselves drown.*

But with a faint petulant bitterness he admitted to himself that he was wrong, that he too belonged here among these walking dead. The Cult was a dead-end pickup. To it came human refuse, people who could not sink lower, and the Cult raised them up.

The Cult had had its eyes on him from the start. They

had spotted him as a likely prospect from the moment of his landing on Glaurus, and they had followed him through each succeeding adventure, as he slipped lower and lower, as more and more of the old Barsac crumbled and dropped away, until the time had come when he could go no lower, and they had stepped in to free him from Ystilog and welcome him to their midst.

He thought of Zigmunn, like him a spacer stranded in a hostile city, and how Zigmunn must have slowly descended to whatever pit served as the entrance requirements for the Cult.

But Zigmunn had been tougher, Barsac reflected. It had taken the Luasparru eight years of life on Glaurus before he entered the Cult; Barsac had achieved the same destination in less than eight months. Zigmunn had always been the shrewd one, though, and Barsac the stolid well-muscled one who depended on the manipulations of his blood-brother to see him through a time of trouble.

He was in trouble now. But there would be no help for him from Zigmunn, for Zigmunn had gone through the trap ahead of him and waited on Azonda now.

**T**HE SEVENTEEN were given rooms in Carnothute's palace. Cult members moved among them, speaking encouragingly to them, promising the rehabilitation the Cult held for them. Barsac barely listened. He dwelt almost entirely in an inner world where there were no betraying Sporeffiens, no lying Ystilogs, no Kassas of easy virtue, no Cult.

The night passed slowly; Barsac half-slept, half-woke, with little awareness of his surroundings. In the morning a Cultist brought him a meager breakfast, a dry bun and a sea-apple, and Barsac ate dispiritedly.

Carnothute called them all together once more to wish them well. Barsac stood, a half-corpse among sixteen other half-corpses, and half-listened. Part of his mind wondered where the *Dywain* was, now. More than half a year had gone by since its departure from Glaurus. Captain Jaspell had been bound for the Rim.

Probably they had already touched the worlds of purple-hued Venn and golden Paai-iad, and were moving onward toward Lorrिमok and the double sun Thoptor. Doubtless the vacancies in the crew had been filled by now, and the angular man named Barsac had long

since faded from the minds of the men of the *Dywain*.

Sleepily he stroked the scars about his lips, and realized he would be seeing Zigmunn soon. Nearly eleven years had slipped by since his last meeting with his blood-brother, but Barsac had not expected the reunion to come about on Azonda.

Cultists shepherded them through a door and down into a liftshaft. There were several moments of free fall while they sank into the recesses of Carnothute's vaults. Five glistening little cars waited for them there, and the candidates entered, three in the first, four in the second, three in the third, four in the fourth, three in the fifth. A faceless Cultist sat behind the steering-panel of each car.

At a signal the lead car shot off down the dark tunnel ahead of them. Barsac, who rode in the second car, peered into the darkness, but saw nothing.

The trip took perhaps a five-minute span, perhaps an hour; in the darkness Barsac was unable to account for the passage of the moments. They emerged into light, eventually, and he saw he was at the spacefield outside the city of Millyaurr.

They quitted the cars and

stood in an uncertain clump on the bare brown soil of the spacefield. Barsac saw the shining blue-white sweep of a giant starship's fins, and wildly thought it was the *Dywain*, till he saw the name stencilled on the vessel's landing buttresses: *Mmuvviol*. He felt no temptation to break away, run to the strange ship, inquire if there were a vacancy on board for a skilled fuelsman; he knew he belonged with the group of Cult-candidates, and made no attempt to move.

A lesser ship stood further along the landing-strip, small and slight, with a golden-green hull that bore no name. Cultists led Barsac and the other sixteen out across the field toward the nameless ship, and Barsac saw others at the field, oilers, repairmen, crewmen, passengers, draw back and stare as the procession of silver masks and shuffling zombies headed out over the field.

One by one they entered the ship. Cultists guided them to individual blast-hammocks and strapped them in; Barsac, for all his twenty years as a spaceman, made no move to draw the rig about him, but waited passively until his turn came to be strapped in.

A warning signal flashed through the ship. Barsac

closed his eyes and waited. The moment came that he thought would never come for him again: the faint anticipatory quiver as the drive compartment of a starship bursts into life, readying itself.

Lights flashed, bells rang—the old standard routine for a lifting spaceship. Something deep in Barsac's numbed mind longed to respond, to perform the actions that those signals demanded, but he remembered that on this ship he was passenger and not crewman, and he relaxed.

Later came the moment of blast-off as the drive translated matter to energy and pushed Glaurus away from the ship. Barsac felt a sickening moment of no-grav; then the vessel began to spin, and weight returned.

Through a port near his face he saw the cluttered globe of Glaurus spinning slowly against a black backdrop. The ship had spaced.

Its destination was Azonda.

## CHAPTER VI

THE NAMELESS SHIP hung on a tongue of fire over the dark world Azonda; then it dropped suddenly downward, and the landing buttresses sprang out at acute angles to support it.



Twenty-six spacesuit-clad figures, Barsac among them, emerged from the hatch of the ship—seventeen Cult candidates, nine watchful members. Even through the thick folds of his spacesuit, even despite the protective warmth of his suit's energons, Barsac shivered. Azonda was a dead world.

The golden sun that warmed Glaurus was only a perfunctory dab of light out here, eleven billion miles further spaceward. At this distance, the sun was hardly a sun—more like a particularly brilliant star.

Drifts of banked snow lay everywhere, glittering faintly in the eternal dusk—Azonda's atmosphere, congealed by cold. Gaunt bare cliffs glinted redly in the distance. All was silent, silent and dead. Life had never come to Azonda.

The Witch—?

Barsac wondered. He moved along in single file, lifting one spacebooted foot and putting it down, lifting the other. It seemed to him a wind whistled against his body, though he knew that was impossible on airless Azonda, an illusion, a phantasm. He kept walking.

The impassive guides led them along. A well-worn path was cut in the ice, and they followed this.

They came, finally, to a sort of natural amphitheater, a half-bowl scooped out of the rock by a giant's hand. Barsac was unable to see into the amphitheater; a gray cloud hung obscuringly over it.

"We have come to the Hall of the Witch," the leading Cultist said quietly via suit-phones. "Beyond the curtain of gray lies the place you have journeyed toward all your days of life."

Barsac narrowed his eyes and tried with no success to see through the curtain, hoping for some glimmer of that which lay within.

"When you pass through the curtain," came the even admonitory voice, "you will divest yourselves of your spacesuits. You will stand without clothing in the presence of the Witch."

*But that's impossible*, Barsac's space-trained mind protested instantly. *The cold, the vacuum, the pressure—we'd be dead in a minute.*

"No harm will come to you," said the Cultist.

Up ahead, Barsac saw now the front men of the file disappearing into the gray curtain, vanishing first one foot, then a shoulder, then the entire body, sectioned away as if they were sliding between the molecules of a solid wall.

Leadenly Barsac moved on, waiting for his turn to come.

In time the curtain loomed inches before his nose, and without hesitation he put his right foot through and followed after. His body tingled an instant; then he had passed through and was inside, in the Hall of the Witch.

"Remove your spacesuit and inner clothing," came the stern instruction.

*I can't!* Barsac thought. But then he looked to left and right and saw the others stripping, shedding their spacesuits and clothing like cast-off skins and evincing no ill effects. Barsac decided some manner of force-field must be in operation, a semi-permeable field that allowed humans to enter but which also maintained an atmosphere within itself. Experimentally he reached back and touched the inner skin of the curtain behind him with the tip of one finger, and got the answer: the curtain was unyielding as granite from the inside. It was penetrable only in one direction, and all within—humans and air molecules alike—were constrained to remain.

Reassured, Barsac put his hands to his spacesuit's sealing-hasps and pried them open; he felt a whisper of air rush past his throat as he re-

moved his helmet. The suit split open like the two halves of a sea-creature's shell; he let carapace and plastron drop unheeded and peeled away the few clothes he wore beneath.

Naked now amid sixteen other naked candidates and nine Cultists clad only in their face-concealing masks, Barsac moved forward into the violet haze that blurred what lay ahead. He walked for perhaps two minutes, and then the haze cleared away.

He stood facing the Witch of Azonda.

**S**HE SAT ENTHRONED, grasped in a translucent chair trimmed with onyx and edged in chalcedony. Before her there was a sort of dais, an altar of a kind, carved of some delicate semi-transparent pinkish stone. Visible beneath the outer barrier of the stone was a dark something, a mechanism perhaps; it was impossible to see it clearly.

Barsac stared at the Witch.

She was a woman who sat in naked magnificence, hands resting lightly on the knurled sides of her throne. Her skin was of a light gold color, warm-looking; her figure was lush, her breasts high, rounded. She had no face. From forehead to chin all was smooth

and gently curved, polished almost, a blank planchet on which a sculptor might have carved a face had he chosen to. Yet she did not look incomplete; she seemed perfect to Barsac, a living work of art.

Around her was ranged a semi-circle of acolytes: eleven men, Barsac saw, naked all, but with faces masked. Kneeling at the outer edge of the semi-circle were eight women, masked also. From the group rose a low wordless chant, a wailing ululation that rose shiveringly through tortured chromatic intervals and down again.

The sound swelled out about him. In his mind Barsac heard a soft voice say, *Come to me, for I am the Way; come to me, for in me there is no more pain, in me there is only peace and surcease from the suffering you have known.*

Fronds of light lapped at his mind. He felt impelled forward; he seemed to glide.

*An end to pain, an end to torment, an end to self.*

*In me there is peace always, and companionship, and in my company will you serve cheerfully and abide for all eternity.*

In response to an unvoiced command Barsac stretched out both his hands, and felt them being taken by others; a

dream-light suffused the area, and he was conscious of warmth and a kind of oozing softness.

Hands joined, the seventeen candidates advanced toward the Witch and knelt before the altar.

This was the end of the quest, Barsac thought; here was where all struggle ended, where all beingness cascaded back into the primordial womb of creation.

*In my light will you be healed—*

Fingers caressed his mind, urging him to give up his oneness, to become part of the brotherhood that called itself the Cult of the Witch. He felt the bonds of tension that gripped his mind relax under the gentle ministrations. It would be so easy to slip away from himself, to allow his mind and soul to merge with the others.

He relaxed. His self ebbed away.

*Look upon me,* came the command.

Barsac looked up at the faceless silent perfection of the Witch. Somehow his eyes slipped from her after a moment, and he scanned the eleven Cult acolytes ranged behind her, his eyes caught and fascinated by the brightness of the reflections from

their polished masks. It was as if in each of the masks a Witch shined.

Curious, Barsac thought, with the part of his mind that still remained to him. One of those acolytes has a scarred face.

A strange pattern of incisions radiating outward from the lips. Barsac frowned. The beauty of the Witch called to him to cease all thinking and surrender himself, but he shook the temptation away impatiently, and his hand rose to feel the deep grooves that disfigured his own face.

He and that acolyte were disfigured in the same fashion, he thought.

Odd. How could that be? How—

Awareness flooded back to him. He ripped his hands free of the crooning candidates who knelt next to him and stood up, remembering now.

His shout split the sanctified silence:

*"Zigmunn!"*

**T**HE LIGHT WAVERED. His sudden piercing bellow had broken the spell. Around him the candidates wandered in uncertain circles, torn from their trance but not masters of themselves any longer. Behind the throne, the stunned

acolytes froze in astonishment, while the Witch beamed blandly down, seeming to smile facelessly, and then darkened slowly into a figure of horror.

Barsac moved forward.

"Zigmunn! You, behind the mask—I know you by the scars! I've come here to get you, bring you back. Do you know these scars, Zigmunn?"

One of the stock-still acolytes spoke: "Barsac!"

"Yes. And the Witch failed to conquer me after all!" His stubbornness burned like a flame within him now; he forced himself forward toward the ring of acolytes. "Off with that mask, Zigmunn. Come back to Glaurus with me."

"Don't be a fool, Barsac. The Witch offers peace."

"The Witch offers lies!"

"You can never leave her," the Luasparru said. "Once you see her, you are part of her; the rest is superficial. Did you see her, Barsac?"

"I saw her. But I remain a free man."

"Impossible! You see only yourself mirrored in the Witch; she exists only if the Witch-forces exist in you, in the dark cesspool at the back of your mind."

"No," Barsac growled.

"Yes! If you are here, if you

have seen the Witch—then you are lost! Yield, Barsac! Give in. Worship her, for she is within you!”

“No!”

He pressed relentlessly forward. A whisper passed through his mind, but he knew it was meant not for him but for the acolytes: “*Stop him.*”

They laid hands on his wrists and clung to him. Angrily he shook them off; his body, so long held shackled, now swung free, and his fists clanged gaily off a silver mask. An acolyte sank, blood spouting.

Ten of the male acolytes were upon him now; only Zigmunn remained alone, cowering in panic behind the throne of the Witch. Barsac’s arms threshed; acolytes went spinning to the ground, right and left. His fists pummelled in and out, scattering them as he moved on. He was unstoppable.

Three acolytes now clung to him, then two, then one. He plucked the remaining man off, hurled him aside, and vaulted toward the Witch.

*Through the Witch.*

He passed through her as if she were so much dream-smoke, and, clearing the throne, caught Zigmunn by the throat. He stared bitterly at the blood-scars on the

Luasparru’s face, then whipped off the silver mask with a contemptuous swipe of his hand.

The drug-hazed eyes that peered at his were the Luasparru’s, but they were not those of the Zigmunn he had known. Sickened, Barsac released him and the pencil-thin Luasparru went reeling to one side.

“There is no way out of the Cult,” Zigmunn said quietly. “Why did you follow me here? Why have you caused this havoc?”

“I . . . came to get you,” Barsac said in a strangled voice. “But there’s nothing left to get. You belong soul and body to—to *this.*”

“Go back below,” Zigmunn urged crooningly. “Kneel and beg her forgiveness. She will welcome you back. Once you have seen her, you can never escape her. You’ve given up your self, Barsac.”

**H**E SHOOK his head bitterly. He saw now it had all been in vain; there was indeed no escape, and Zigmunn was lost forever. Heavily he turned away. The Witch was still on her throne, staring forward.

What was she? Thought-projection established by an unscrupulous priesthood? Alien

entity seeking companionship on this dead world? He would never know.

The acolytes were recovering from their state of shock, now. They were creeping toward him. From elsewhere in the dusk-cloaked hall, other silver-masked figures advanced on him.

With a sudden bellow of rage, Barsac snatched up the thin figure of Zigmunn and grasped the emaciated Luasparru tightly. Then, with a savage display of force, he dashed Zigmunn against the translucent altar of pink stone.

It shattered; the stone must have been only glass-thin. Zigmunn rolled to one side and lay still.

The curtain of force winked out.

Barsac froze for just a moment, staring down at the shattered altar, and a mighty scream went up from the acolytes who saw. In a vast rush the atmosphere fled outward, and the stinging airlessness of Azonda swept in over the Hall of the Witch.

Moving as though through a sea of acid Barsac ran toward his discarded spacesuit. It seemed to take hours for him to don it, hours more before air coursed through his helmet and he breathed again.

Actually, no more than fifteen seconds had gone by.

He turned. A hundred naked figures lay sprawled round the altar. Bubbles of blood trickled from their faces as they coughed out their lives into the vacuum that surrounded them. The Witch sat complacently through it all, paler now but unchanged otherwise and apparently unchangeable.

A harsh cry rumbled up from somewhere in Barsac's throat, and he turned away, retching, and started to run. Back, across the snow, away from the scene of death that had been the Hall of the Witch, toward the waiting golden-green ship that stood on its tail in the distant snow.

He reached the ship. He entered, converted to autopilot, hastily set up for blast-off. No time for elaborate checks and signals, now; there was but one passenger, and that passenger cared little whether he lived or died.

The ship lifted. Barsac clung desperately to the rails of the control-room wall and let the fist of gravity buffet him senseless. He dropped finally and lay flat against the coolness of the deckplates.

He awoke some time later. The ship's chart-tank told him he was well outside the Glaurus system now, cutting diag-

onally across the lens of the galaxy with the triple system of Ooon as the immediate destination. Barsac stared at his tortured unfamiliar face in the burnished mirror and realized he had escaped the Cult. They lay dead, back on dead Azonda, and he had a ship of his own; all the galaxy lay open for him. Life could begin again.

Or had he escaped the Cult? He wondered, as the nose of his ship drew ever nearer the tricolored glory of Ooon. For the tongue of the incomprehensible Witch had licked his mind, and perhaps Zigmunn

had not lied. The Witch would be always with him whether he willed it or not, whether he fled as far as the cinder-stars that lay behind the galactic lens. He stared at the white-haired fleshless face in the mirror, and it seemed to him that behind him waited another face, a featureless blank face, white and shining.

She would be with him always, and the memory of eight months of hell on Glaurus and Azonda. Stroking the lateral grooves that lined his jaws, Barsac studied the chart-tank, and waited for tricolored Ooon to draw near.

