

The Demons of Darkside

It was early, so the ancient televisor was only observed by a scant audience. Sila, the town buried on the edge of Venus' eastern swamp belt, didn't wake till dark.

Barry Garth, almost alone in the scrap metal barroom, put his head in his arms and listened with a weary hatred. He'd heard so many telecasts during the past months. Thousands, it seemed, and all on the same subject.

"A third appeal for clemency was today denied Alice Webster by the Interplanetary Court," rasped the blurred image of the telecast announcer. "This means that the twenty-three-year-old heiress, convicted of murdering her uncle, Gavin Webster, the Mercurian Metals tycoon, will die as scheduled three weeks from today. Her fiancé-accomplice, Barry Garth, has not yet been apprehended by the police, from whom he escaped soon after the trial."

"Dirty rat!" hiccupped a space sailor at the bar. "Leaving a dame to take the rap by herself!"

"Flash! Ladies and gentlemen!" The telecaster's voice fairly crackled. "Word has just come from Mercury. The private yacht of Wilsey Stevens, third vice-president of Mercurian Metals and chief witness for the prosecution at the murder trial of Alice Webster, crashed on Darkside two hours ago. Our Mercurian informer states that the yacht, the Hermes, struck a magnetic storm before she broke her drag, and was sucked down into the shadow.

"Wilsey Stevens himself was piloting the craft. Since experience has proven salvage work impossible, and since no one has ever survived either a crash or an expedition on the dark face of Mercury, it must be concluded that Stevens and his entire crew of six men are lost. Names of those aboard--"

Barry Garth didn't hear them. He was staring blankly at the telescreen, his big raw-boned frame taut. So Wilsey Stevens was dead, after all. All his lying, all his signing away of two lives, had availed him nothing. Darkside had caught him, and he was dead.

That meant Alice was dead, too. There was no hope now of saving her. He might as well go back and die with her.

Wilsey Stevens dead! But was he? Who knew what happened on Darkside? No one had ever come back to tell. Perhaps, if the crash hadn't killed him, he might live—at least for awhile. Was there a chance, one meager but all-important chance?

Barry Garth strode out of the barroom then, and there was something strangely ruthless in his dark, handsome face and the set of his wide shoulders.

The slow Venusian dusk cloaked the single shoddy street. The fever-mists crawled up out of the swamp, and some faraway scaly beast sent up a hissing scream. Blue mud reeked and squelched under Garth's boots. Ahead, a space of desolation with the rocket-blown pits filled with water, was the port of Sila, the town's only excuse for existing.

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Garth paused near a cluster of rusty shanties, searching with narrowed blue eyes. Finding what he sought, a cracked and slimy board bearing the legend "Scotia Salvage Co.," he started forward and stopped again, wondering if he were not a little mad.

The odds were greatly against him that he could find Stevens alive, or live to come back himself if he did. Darkside was one of the impenetrable mysteries of the System. No one knew what existed under the blanket of everlasting shadow and freakish magnetic currents—except that men who went there never came back!

Garth shrugged. Perhaps he was going mad. To be a crack racing flier with a future and the grandest girl in nine planets, to be, out of a clear sky, accused and convicted of murder, to face an unjust death with that girl was enough to make anyone crazy.

Wilsey Stevens either killed or knew who killed Gavin Webster. His testimony at the trial, convicting Alice and Garth, had proven that. He had woven an unbreakable chain of evidence around them. But they knew they were innocent. Garth's one hope had been to force Stevens to confess. His one meager clue as to discovering Stevens' possible motive for the murder had brought him to Sila, only to end like this.

A new thought occurred to Garth. Even if Stevens were dead, the Hermes might yield some clue that would be sufficient to stop Alice's execution and give them another chance.

He knew what he was going to do to the man in the Scotia Salvage Company office. He didn't care. Not all the population of this rotten sinkhole put together added up to Alice Webster. He would cheerfully have shot them all down, if it meant one single chance for her.

As for himself, he was no diamond-studded hero. He wanted to live. He had a right to live!

Barry Garth put his right hand in his pocket and pushed open the door of the Scotia Salvage Company.

A pungent reek of white Venusian whisky struck his nostrils. The cramped, untidy office was growing dark, but he could see the man who rose from behind the rickety table. He looked into a dark face sunk between tremendous shoulders, with savage gray eyes half-veiled by hair, black, shaggy as that of a bear. Heavy stubble shadowed a square, grim jaw. The man's worn spacemen's kit, wrinkled against a powerful body, was stained and dirty. The tunic was torn open over a black-haired chest.

"There's no job here," growled the man. "And I'm closed for the night." His voice was deep and harsh, with a slight burr.

Garth shook his head.

"I don't want a job," he said.

"Then what do ye want?"

"Your ship," said Garth.

The gun blurred out of his pocket, snapped softly. A needle laden with a quick-acting anesthetic caught the man at the base of his hairy throat. Before his startled curse could voice itself, the big Earthman fell.

Barry Garth eased his fall. There was something about that bitter, deep-lined face that seemed familiar, even important, but he couldn't bring the half-memory clear. He knew he'd never seen the man. He shrugged and sat down to wait.

The black, starless night shut down, and it began to rain. Staggering under the big man's weight, Garth ventured out into the deserted landing field. There was no one here but himself and the Scot.

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He found the hangar, opened it with the Scot's keys. There was a squat, ancient salvage tug inside, one of those disreputable pirates of the space lanes, who preyed on misfortune and made ill luck worse. Garth knew these tramp salvage men. They'd give aid, preferably to private ships, and then strip the owner to his underclothes to pay for the service. He had, in his younger days, lost his first ship to just such vultures.

The name Bruce was painted on the scarred hull. Garth dumped the Scot through the open port and set about checking the ship. Because of the darkness he was forced to risk a small light.

Some instinct made him look up suddenly. A face was framed in the opening of the door he had thought was closed. It was a thin, unhealthy Martian face, with lank hair and a mouth purpled from chewing finchi. Then it was gone.

Garth jumped for the door and caught a dim glimpse of a tall, awkward form running. But there was no chance for a shot.

He turned back to the Bruce. He might, of course, have been watched all the time. By whom? Police spies, perhaps. A sharp-eyed space rat who had recognized him and wanted the reward. Or just a curious loafer.

There had been something purposeful about that peering face. Garth's bony jaw locked grimly. Strapping the Scot in his bunk, he slid back the hangar top and sent the Bruce hurtling up on roaring jets, outbound for Mercury

He was far beyond the cloud blanket, out in space, when he saw the little streak of flame on his visi-plate. Another ship, up from Sila, was following him.

Crouched in the pilot's bay, which was little more than a sweltering air-space between banks of machinery and control panels, Barry Garth threw every last atom of speed into the Bruce and cursed its slowness. If that was a police ship following—

But it wasn't. The ship reached its maximum velocity, approximately that of the Bruce, and hung there. It was close enough so that Garth could make out its shape in the brilliant glare of the Sun. It was a squat, shabby salvage tug like the Bruce. Barry Garth frowned.

There was something funny about that. There was nothing ahead but Mercury, and there was no salvage job on Mercury except the Hermes. Besides, it took a damned strong motive to get any man near Darkside.

Uneasy curiosity sent his hand for the television switch. But he drew it back. He didn't dare contact that ship. If the Martian back in Sila had anything to do with it, they knew he had stolen the Scot's ship. If not, he didn't dare tip them off. They could radio the Venusian police to pick him up before he hit the shadow.

Garth forced himself to calm, and set about checking his course. Then he jerked bolt upright, sweat bursting in a sudden flood from every pore.

The Scot had screamed—screamed in black, abysmal terror!

Barry Garth stood in the dim glow of the panel light, facing into the darkness toward the stern. The bunkroom was back there, beyond the air-tight door. Garth cradled the needle gun, waiting.

The bulkhead door clanged open wildly against the wall. A towering shape burst through it, staggered, and plunged for the light switch. The cold white glare of full power blazed blindingly.

The Scot stood flattened against the curving hull-wall, every muscle rigid. His face was a ghostly gray and his eyes were mad.

Garth forced his voice to be quiet.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

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Breath sobbed into the big man's lungs.

"The demons," he whispered. The burr was deep and thick in his voice. "They come i' the dark. I can hear them."

"You've had a nightmare," Garth said. "Take a drink and go back to bed."

A measure of sanity returned to the Scot's wild gray eyes. His heavy muscles knotted in his effort to still them.

"The light," he said. "It drives them awa'. They cannot stand the light."

Garth relaxed, remembering that the Scot had been drinking.

"All right, I'll leave the lights on," he agreed. "Go and sleep it off."

The Scot's harsh laugh startled him.

"I'll nae sleep them off while I live, lad." He ran huge scarred hands through his shaggy hair, and looked up again, completely under control. "Now then. What are ye doing, and why?"

"We're going on a salvage job," said Garth evenly. "To Mercury. There's a man there I want to see."

"To Mercury?" Fear leaped bright in the big man's eyes, but he held it down. "Go on."

Garth told his story.

"Stevens is my last and only hope," he finished. "He must have had a motive, a reason for what he did to us. I've tried every other way to find it, and failed. Now I'm trying this. I'll die if I fail, but I'd have to die anyway. I had to have a ship, a salvage ship, and I knew I couldn't get anyone to go where I'm going voluntarily. I'll get you out of it if I can get out myself. But I'd rather kill every rat in Sila than let this chance go."

"Aye, ye're right," the Scot said. "And why not? Life's nae a merry gambol. Where on Mercury is it ye're going?"

"Darkside."

The Scot's grim mouth opened, but no sound came forth. His eyes widened like

ice-gray flames. Garth saw a tremor shoot through him, as though he'd taken a death-blow over the heart. Then he laughed.

The roar of that wild, harsh laughter shook Garth strangely, and sent his blood running boiling hot and then cold. He braced himself and raised his gun.

"Darkside!" the big man whispered. "He's taking me to Darkside. Me, Sandy MacDougal!" He swung to face forward, toward the silver blaze of Mercury. "This is yer doin'! Ye thought ye had me once, ye black demons of hell, but I cheated ye! Ye got Sarasoff, but nae me. Ye've hounded and followed me, and noo ye want me back. But I'll nae come! D'ye hear me? I'll nae come!"

He flung himself forward with startling speed for such a big man. But Garth was ready. His finger closed convulsively on the trigger. MacDougal's hands had only time to close around his throat before they went lax.

Barry Garth dragged the Scot back to his bunk and strapped him in, this time where he couldn't get at the buckles. Then he stood staring down into that lined, bitter face, and he felt himself tremble.

"Sandy MacDougal," he whispered. "I remember now. He was a crack pilot on the Mercury run for Interplanetary Mails nearly fifteen years ago. And he was reported to be lost on Darkside!"

So someone had come back from the shadow. Someone had cheated whatever deadly forces lived in that sunless cone of eternal night. Garth smiled grimly. What one man had done, another could do.

Then he looked at MacDougal again, and his smile died
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Twenty-four hours went by, and then another five. Barry Garth, keeping himself awake on caffeine tablets from the supply locker, crouched in the narrow bay, stripped to the waist. The metal shields were over the ports, but the blaze of the huge, malignant Sun sent in heat that the hard-worked refrigerator units couldn't down. The thermometer crawled up and up, and the control levers were almost too hot to touch.

Three times in that period of hours, Garth had thrust another needle into Sandy MacDougal, keeping him in drugged quiet. Far more often than that he had cursed the necessity of bringing another man, cursed the luck that had given him MacDougal, of all men.

"Perhaps," he muttered, "it's my punishment for risking another man's life." Then he thought of Alice Webster waiting in her cell—waiting for a death she didn't deserve. Garth glared red-eyed at the shuttered ports.

"I'll get him back if I can," he said aloud. "But I had to do it! I had to!"

It was the heat, he decided, that made his nerves go tight. The heat and that damned ship behind him that hung on and wouldn't go away. He swore viciously at the image in his visi-plate. It blurred before his eyes, and he felt the cabin spinning. Another caffeine tablet helped keep him awake. How much farther was it? He'd wait another hour. MacDougal would come to by then.

Still the heat climbed. Several times Garth found himself on the verge of collapse. His rangy body was tough, but the ordeal of the past months had taken something out of him, and he hadn't eaten regularly since his escape. He kept his aching, burning eyes on the chronometer, and when it reached a certain mark, he gripped the emergency fuel-dump lever.

The plastic burned his palm, but he pulled it back, watching the gauge drop. He had calculated nicely, and he prayed that his calculations were right. If they weren't, it was just too bad.

When he staggered back to the bunkroom, the Scot was awake. Garth bent over him.

"Listen," he said. "There's just enough fuel in the tanks to get us to Mercury. You can't go back to Venus, no matter what. Now get in there and stand your watch."

MacDougal looked at him.

"Ye love that lassie, don't ye?" he asked surprisingly.

Garth nodded. "I'll sleep now. And there's nothing you can do about it, MacDougal, so don't try."

The Scot rose stiffly, stood looking down.

"Ye've the kind of guts I like, lad. Sorry I can't help ye."

Garth's bony face went ugly.

"It takes two pilots to get a ship through the disturbance field. That's one reason why I had to bring you. And you're going to pull your weight!"

MacDougal shrugged.

"Without fuel, I'll have to, for awhile."

Garth hefted the pistol significantly.

"I'll see that you do," he said meaningly. He smiled as MacDougal turned and went down the corridor. And then he groaned as a thought struck him. He had forgotten that ship following them!

He plunged forward, and felt the vibration of the rockets die out of the hull, then start again as the forward jets cut in, decelerating. Raging, Garth burst into the control room and raised the needle gun.

Then the televisor buzzed. MacDougal, almost smiling as he looked into the visi-plate that had given him his chance, flipped the switch.

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Garth saw the duplicate of the Bruce's cramped sweatbox of a cabin blur onto the old screen. A man filled the foreground—a burly man with iron-gray hair and a fighting jaw and level dark eyes. His half-naked body gleamed with sweat, but even so, there was a compact neatness about him.

"What the hell's going on there?" the man said.

MacDougal laughed.

"Brent, for the first time in my life I'm glad to see yer ugly face!" Relief amounting almost to hysteria rang in his voice. "My young friend here dumped my fuel, so ye can gi' me a tow back to Venus."

Amazement and suspicion vied in Brent's dark, hard face.

"Akai!" he called. And another face materialized beside his. It was the unhealthy Martian face that Garth had seen back in Sila. "Is that the man you saw?"

The Martian licked his purple lips and nodded. Brent scowled.

"What are you trying to put over on me?" he demanded. "You were headed straight for Darkside, and you know it!"

"Aye, but we've changed our plans," MacDougal said.

"Then you've given up?" A fierce smile creased Brent's cheeks. "It's just as well. I'd have wrecked you before I'd have let you have what Wilsey Stevens owes me. Though how you got onto it is beyond me."

Garth bent forward, suddenly taut.

"What do you know about Stevens?" he shouted.

Brent's black eyes glared at him.

"You know damn well!" he said. "I'm going for what you were, before you lost your nerve. It's funny, too. I'd have thought a man with guts enough to tackle Black Sandy there and steal his precious Bruce would have had the guts to do anything."

Garth was abruptly conscious of MacDougal's face. It was lined with a growing terror now.

"The tow, Brent?" he said. "Ye'll do it?"

"No! I'm going after the Hermes! Radio Venus for help. They'll take the Bruce away from you, but that won't matter much. We independents are nearly dead, anyhow—and a good thing." Garth caught the surprising bitterness in his voice. "We're nothing but a bunch of filthy pirates, anyway."

"Brent!" Garth shouted. "What's in the Hermes? What do you know about Wilsey Stevens?"

Brent frowned.

"I don't know what you're driving at, and I haven't time to find out. So long!"

The screen went dead. MacDougal shot a shaking hand to the dial, and in the same instant, Garth lunged. The heavy needle gun in his hand rose and smashed down. Tubes and fragile metal shattered. Garth stood back, breathing hard, and cut the forward jets. The flame of Brent's ship passed their dot on the visi-plate.

"Get going," Garth said. "It's Mercury, or slow death for us."

MacDougal looked at him like an animal beaten numb with hopeless fear. Garth shivered, but he stifled the stab of remorse he felt.

"There aren't any demons," he snarled. "You're crazy with drugs and whisky."

"Why d'ye think I drink?" MacDougal whispered. "So I can stay as sane as I am." He turned to the controls, set the stern tubes blasting again.

Garth went back and locked himself into the bunk-room. But it was a long time before he slept

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Time passed in a blur of rising heat, of dials and gauges that danced before aching eyes, of metal that burned at the slightest touch, of clattering machinery and warm, stale water that did not quench thirst.

At first, after his escape, the fear of failure had risen in Garth in racking waves. The knowledge of Alice Webster, waiting in her cell for him to free her, drove him on incessantly.

The answer to his problem lay on Mercury. He had only to overcome certain obstacles to find it. And success or failure—when it was over, it was over. Alice would die in a few days. There'd be no time to try again.

Garth was rather glad. He knew he couldn't stand another try, another struggle. All that was left to him now was the memory of Alice Webster's face when he kissed her in the court-room, before they were drawn apart.

MacDougal stood his watches in a dangerous, tight-lipped quiet, drinking steadily from a supply in the locker but never getting drunk. The little flame of Brent's ship stayed always ahead of them, but unable to break away.

The Bruce and Brent's ship entered the disturbance area almost together, and Garth prepared himself. Now was the time that MacDougal would probably make his last bid for freedom. There was no radio communication to Mercury, due to the nearness of the Sun and the crazy electro-magnetic currents generated by the wild flight of the planet's metallic body across the force-field of the Sun.

But MacDougal would try to semaphore the relay ship that hung above the Twilight Belt, or he could try to regain control of his ship and set her down on one of the mining company fields.

His face looking more like a death's head than ever, Garth came into the control room. It was empty. He'd taken one foolish step forward before he realized that the bulkhead door wasn't flat against the wall in its hooks.

He caught the blurred movement out of the tail of his eye as he dived forward and heard the crash of the spanner flung by McDougal on the metal floor. It was close enough to jar his teeth. Then he was bunched together and springing up, and the heavy pistol that never left him was flying for MacDougal's head.

The Bruce lurched as the Scot swayed back, stunned and bleeding. The machinery bellowed and clanged as timers and compensators went off balance. Garth caught up the needle gun.

"Get over to those controls," he said almost gently. "Or I'll put enough of these needles in you so you'll never wake up."

Blood was running from MacDougal's temple, matting his shaggy black hair.

"I'll get you out of it, MacDougal," whispered Garth. "I swear I will!"

MacDougal took the controls, uncertainly at first as the wild currents gripped the Bruce, then with strength flowing back into his hands. Garth, watching the struggling machinery, operated manual controls where the electric systems were too deranged, looked curiously at MacDougal.

What had happened, down there on Darkside, to change him so horribly?

The flame of Brent's ship curved across the visi-plate, still ahead. And then, abruptly, there was darkness edging across the field toward the little flame and the little dot that were their two ships—a darkness utter and impenetrable.

The dot was so tiny against the immensity of glare and shadow that Garth didn't see it until it was almost on them. MacDougal saw it, too, and took his hands away from the controls, staring at the oncoming edge of darkness.

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At that velocity, it wouldn't be fatal. But it would be enough to crack their outer hull, force them to head for the Twilight Belt and repairs. Brent was in earnest, then. He knew something about Wilsey Stevens, something he didn't want to tell, something big enough to take him to Darkside.

Garth blasted his port steering jets, knocking MacDougal aside to get at the levers. There was a dull, vicious thud somewhere astern. The Bruce yawed and shuddered, and there was a tiny hiss of air finding emptiness.

Violet flames were born abruptly here and there along the metal. Electricity penetrated the broken skin in greater strength. The rockets broke in ragged discord as the timers went out. And it began to grow hotter. The refrigerators had quit, short-circuited.

"Vac suits!" yelled Garth, and sent the Bruce hurtling toward the shadow. There was no time to get to the Twilight Belt now, even if he'd wanted to. At these temperatures, a man would roast alive in a matter of minutes.

MacDougal got the suits. He seemed completely beaten, beyond even terror.

"What will ye do?" the Scot asked.

"You're the salvage man," Garth said.

Brent's ship had already touched the shadow, plunged into it. Garth could follow the crimson streak of her rockets.

"Ye'll have to land and study the damage," MacDougal said finally.

"Then we'll land." Garth pulled the final zipper on his vac suit, switched on the refrigerating unit and gasped with relief.

And then the shadow suddenly touched them!

The temperature shot downward, freezing where it had seared. Electric fire danced and flared through the ship. Garth felt the Bruce leap under his hands as wild, mad currents surged against her.

MacDougal laughed suddenly.

"Ye've killed us for nothing, lad," he said evilly. "My Brucie's done, and even if she weren't, Brent's ahead. The law of salvage says the wrecked ship belongs to the first one there!" His harsh, wild laughter rang against the helmet phones, and then was silent. And through the silence Garth heard someone whispering, very softly, but he couldn't quite hear the words. MacDougal's eyes met Garth's.

"The demons, lad," he whispered. "The demons of Darkside!"

They struck with a skidding crash that jarred them brutally, but the Bruce was tough and it didn't kill them. Garth, crushed under MacDougal's weight, felt it lift suddenly, heard a broken cry and the shriek of a bent metal port being hurled open. And then he was alone.

Garth had never been so alone, even in prison, or out in space with his racing ship. The cold glare of his torch, thrown out the open port, showed him only an endless maze of crystal spires, glimmering eerily in the light. There was a naked loneliness about those tumbled crystal peaks, held forever in the unchanging vacuum and the unimaginable dark.

Garth felt the desolation seeping into him, flowing like water through his bones. The darkness pressed down, a solid thing beyond the narrow shaft of his torch. It was smothering, overpowering. The black of utter blindness, untouched by sunlight since the Universe began.

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He swore loudly, defiantly. The Hermes was somewhere down here. MacDougal was out there, and Brent, and Akal, the Martian. And Wilsey Stevens!

Barry Garth left the ship. The crystals walled around him, flung back his light in broken glints of green and gold, blue and crimson.

"MacDougal!" he shouted over and over, bellowing into his helmet phone.

He heard wild, faint laughter. And then the Universe was drowned out in a rush of voices.

Whispers, loud and clear, were at his elbow, and stretching to the very borders of infinity. Whispers not borne by his helmet phone. Whispers that came through the airless dark and into his brain.

There was something indescribably horrible about them. They reached deep inside him and dredged up buried ugliness—hate, fear, lust and a brutal desire for vengeance he hadn't known he possessed. Did he really hear words, or was it just that his mind formed them from habit, out of the things that stalked inside his skull?

"MacDougal!" he cried, and ran—ran engulfed in a mocking sea of whispers that kept pace with him, filling him like an empty vessel with shapes of naked horror.

Climbing a jagged ridge, he saw the shattered hulk of a wreck. He knew it, even in the dim reflection of his powerful light, by the peculiar design of the rocket tubes. It was the Hermes!

"Stevens!" he shouted, and instantly the whispers surged stronger and louder in rhythms of hatred and murderous rage. Then terror blotted them out.

Perhaps MacDougal was right about the demons. Only the bull strength of the Scot could have brought him through this alive. What had happened to the Sarasoff he'd mentioned, down here in these crystal valleys?

Desperately he got a grip on himself, shouting to drown out the whispers. Then he heard another voice, crying:

"What is it? In God's name—"

Garth stumbled forward, and quite suddenly, the whispers stopped.

Sounds rocketed through his headphones. MacDougal, crying his lament. Brent, swearing viciously. And a thin, high scream from Akal.

A pit yawned suddenly beneath him, filled with shards of light broken from the blue-white torch beam. There were men down there, five of them! Lost from some ancient wreck. They were rigid and unchanging in the spatial cold. Garth looked at their dead faces and swayed with a long, icy shudder.

He couldn't find MacDougal, and his voice grew fainter as the Scot wandered farther away in the crystal maze. The Hermes loomed quite close now. Garth moved through showers of flame, over faceted ridges and between rearing cliffs, ever toward that silent ship.

He realized that he was waiting with a terrible fascination for the whispers to come again.

"Akal!" Brent's voice shouted suddenly. "Where are you?"

There was no answer. Garth's torch picked out a stocky figure in a vac suit standing beside the broken hulk of Stevens' yacht. There were other shapes there, strewn on shattered crystals, but they didn't move. Brent had a gun in his hand, one of the deadly proton guns forbidden to civilians.

Quickly Garth came up to him, and stopped.

"This ship is mine," Brent said to him. "Keep off."

"I don't want the ship," Garth said. "I want Stevens."

Brent gestured.

"There he is, damn him. MacDougal's demons got him." He laughed, but it had a cracked, uncertain quality.

Garth knelt hurriedly. He could see Stevens' strong face clearly. But it wasn't impassive now. It was twisted into a mask of deadly terror. Stevens was dead.

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Garth rose slowly, his sunken blue eyes fixed on the Hermes. His last hope of saving Alice lay there, barred by the stubborn figure of Brent.

"Listen," he said harshly. "I don't want that ship, or anything in it, except information. I'm going in, Brent."

Brent's gun hand lifted.

"You'd better not," he warned. And suddenly his voice broke out, loud and hard and bitter. "Do you think I'm going to let any man near this ship? Do you think I want to die here? Stevens owes me this. He made me what I am. But I wasn't cut out for a smuggler, nor a damned tramp salvage pirate! Stevens wouldn't let me go. But he's got his—and I want mine!"

Questions broke from Garth, savage, urgent, but were lost in whispers. Again the world was filled with them, goading, driving, lashing him with brutal sensations. They swirled chaotically through him, bringing a jumble of alien voices, Brent's, MacDougal's, Akal's, all shrieking fear and death and hatred.

No wonder MacDougal was crazy. Garth would be, too, if he lived. He'd even be too crazy to marry Alice. What were the whispers? They weren't demons. Then what were they?

And then things happened. A dark shape plummeted from a crystal peak, hurled itself at Brent. Garth glimpsed a white face gashed with purple. He heard Akal's thought rhythms, heavy with greed and hate, but most of all, greed.

Brent hadn't seen him in time. Akal had him down in a flash. He was kneeling on his gun hand, battering his tough glassite helmet against the crystals on the ground. Garth leaped forward, gripping the heavy torch. Brent knew something. He couldn't die yet. The torch crashed down on Akal's helmet and knocked loose the life-giving oxygen valve. The Martian squealed, gasped, and fell away.

The whispers had sent Akal mad with the magnification of his greed for whatever was in the Hermes. Garth grabbed up the gun and plunged on into the wreck.

The cabins were a shambles. Fire from a short-circuit in the control relays had consumed every inflammable substance, every paper. There was nothing!

Garth stood lax in the shattered cabin. There was nothing to do now but wait for death. His last hope was gone. He had taken MacDougal to his death for nothing. Alice Webster was doomed.

But Brent knew something. He had to shake off this weariness and make him tell what was so important in the Hermes. The demon whisperings surged and swelled now. Garth dropped the gun and began to laugh. He'd solved the secret of Darkside, anyway. He couldn't stop laughing. Brent knew something, but he wouldn't tell. And it didn't matter now. They were all going to die, here in the dark and the whispers.

Louder and louder came those voices. Brent was in the cabin, yelling defiantly. It was something about Yttrium, and Wilsey Stevens.

Yttrium was rare and valuable, he babbled. Found in the mines of Mercurian Metals, it was stolen and smuggled through Sila to secret agents who bought it for armaments. It was smuggled by Brent and Wilsey Stevens. Stevens flew the stuff from the Twilight Belt on his own yacht. He killed Gavin Webster because he found out, and hung the murder on Alice Webster and Barry Garth.

Brent didn't know about the murder, but Garth could fill in the gaps. He gripped Brent by the arm.

"Let's get away!" he shouted. "Hook onto your cargo of Yttrium and let's go."
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Brent laughed crazily.

"Ship's smashed," he muttered. "I'm going to stay here with it."

The whispers, surging and swelling, came again. Over and over, a hideous monody. Suddenly Brent rushed at him. But he couldn't avoid the attack. The whispers drugged him. He fell under Brent's rush and lay laughing. Laughing, because he couldn't help it, because he had the evidence to save Alice Webster, and he couldn't use it.

Alice. The whispers said her name. He saw her, heard her, touched her. The picture of her steadied him. He stopped laughing and began to fight.

Struggling, they rolled through the broken port and onto the crystal ground. And though Garth's torch was lost, there was light, faint webs of rainbow light tossed from facet to facet.

MacDougal rushed up to them then. A giant with mad gray eyes, he stood above the two, a heavy shard of crystal in his hands, muttering with the whispers.

"The demons sent Sarasoff to kill me," he mumbled. "I killed him first. Kill! Kill before they do!"

The shard struck down. Desperately Garth flung Brent aside, took the blow glancingly on his shoulder, and struggled up. Even with Alice strong in his mind, he wanted to kill. He remembered a short-handled pick in his belt. While MacDougal was regaining his balance, poising the shard for another blow, Garth took the pick and brought it down solidly on the Scot's helmet. It stunned him, but didn't knock him out. Then an amazing change came over MacDougal.

"Their censor-band has relaxed," he said dazedly. "Conscious and subconscious are merged in my brain now. We can communicate with them for a short while. Listen!"

Garth started violently. Brent was shocked back a little to sanity. The whispers were faint. The crystals flickered eerily about the Scot, who was lying on the ground.

"We realize that we've made a mistake," a strange voice said. "But it's lonely here. You unfamiliar organisms were new, interesting. We thought we might be friends. But we bitterly regret it. We understand now."

Garth stared wildly. Had he gone mad already? The crystals flamed, weaving dim veils of gold and scarlet, and purple and green.

"Your minds are strange to us," the voice went on. "They give off wavelengths of which we know nothing. We do not know about hate, fear and love. We can but guess at them, and sensory impulses are unknown to us. In some manner we do not understand, we have caused unfavorable reactions in the organisms that have come into our sphere of life. Their mind-waves are confused, and then lost.

"We don't understand, now, why the censor-band, which seems to keep the vibrations of a part of your minds separate from the other part, has slackened in McDougal's brain. But for the first time we can communicate with you."

Why was there light in the crystals? Why had the cold torchbeam broken to a full spectrum?

"Yes, we're alive," the voice went on. "You call us crystals. We're carbon, as you are, but static. We came into being with this planet and we'll go out of being with it. We neither die nor change. But we can't build up vibration of the proper frequency to enter your conscious minds. That's what you term them, isn't it?"

"In some ways we have, instead, amplified the vibrations of your subconscious minds, which seem to be a storehouse for impulses not permitted in your conscious minds. We didn't realize for a long time that your fleshly brains had two centers of thought."

* * *

These, then, were the demons!

"But how do you do it?" Garth managed to ask.

"We build up thought impulses by simple oscillation of our facets," the voice explained. "During this exchange of vibrations, energy is liberated in the form of light. When all of us oscillate to the same frequency, we have quite a powerful output. Solar radiations destroy our thoughts by introducing counter-vibrations. That's why we're powerful only in the screening shadow of this planet.

"We meant no harm. We wanted contact, not destruction. It's very lonely here in the eternal dark, the eternal silence, the eternal thought. We might have helped you. Instead, we have—~~is~~ killed the thought—killed you. We're glad that this contact has been possible, for we wanted to explain and to tell you that we'll never try it again. As soon as we sense the presence of one of your organisms, we shall cease oscillating until it's gone. You need never—~~is~~ fear the sensation?—fear us.

"We're sorry. We meant no harm. But we're lonely. Pure thought is wonderful. There's no limit to it. But we're so near the limit, though we hadn't believed it existed. And we're lonely. Lonely. Lonely."

The fires died out of the crystals like fireflies drowned in the mist. Darkness, black and unbroken and cold, followed. And there was silence, utter and complete. The whispering had stopped for all time.

MacDougal stirred and opened his eyes. They were wide and dazed, but the madness was gone from them.

"I heard," he whispered. "Somehow, I heard. Thank God!"

Garth turned away. He had no right to watch another man's soul being released from hell.

Far away he could make out the dim glow of the Twilight Belt. They could make it now, without madness dogging them. He could semaphore the relay ship and get a stay of Alice's execution. Brent's testimony would change things. Alice would be free, and he, too!

Brent could come back to claim his Yttrium. MacDougal was free of his demons. And Darkside was no longer a death-trap, except for the magnetic currents, which man's engineering genius could soon overcome.

The dark, lonely plain spread around him. He could feel it, though he was blind with the darkness. For just an instant, he could feel the black eternities of flight through frigid space, the silence, the desolation, the terror of a Universe coming to its end.

"I'm sorry," he whispered to the voice-crystal. "So very sorry" Then, quite loudly, he yelled to the others: "Come on. Our air won't last forever. Let's go!"