

# HAGGARD HONEYMOON

by

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*On other planets, even of an Earth-type nature, the general environment will be totally alien to that to which Mankind has been accustomed. However, it may well be that the dangers to human beings will be unseen—as the following story by two American authors points out.*

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*Haggard's Meteorite: The origin of its name is lost in obscurity, but its importance to the human race will never be forgotten. First recorded on Canopus 37 on August 27, 2024 Ertime, this meteorite for a period of thirty years supplied Earth's need for uranium virtually alone. The Hundred-Year Quest for the control of hydrogen fusion, the most baffling scientific mystery of all time, ended in success just before the Haggard mine yielded its last worthwhile ore. It is interesting to speculate whether the opportune discovery of this great mine made interstellar travel possible, or if man's venture into space might have collapsed at the beginning for lack of the only fuel known at the time capable of powering the great starships.*

*An interesting note on the mining operation the Space Service conducted on Canopus 37 will be found in the section dealing with new maladies and diseases encountered on other worlds.*

## HISTORY OF GALACTIC EXPLORATION

### One

He came trudging along the jungle trail in the last of the fading light, a big man, young, his shoulders drooping in fatigue. Valle, the needlebrush poised, stood watching until he reached the little garden and sank wearily

into a bamboo chair. She made a final light stroke, outlining a bright leaf, and stepped back to admire the effect.

“Is this the way you greet a tired husband home after a hard day’s work?” asked Carter Mason gruffly.

His bride of six weeks studied the unfinished painting a moment more, then turned towards him, flung her arms out in dramatic appeal, and recited:

*“If I should meet thee  
After long years,  
How should I greet thee?  
With silence and tears.”*

He lunged forward out of the chair, caught one of the extended hands and pulled her, laughing, on to his lap as he settled down again. “It’s only been since this morning, Mrs. Mason. Now kiss me and tell me what’s for dinner, in that order.”

“But it *seemed* like years,” she said instead, struggling to sit upright. He released her quickly, always mindful not to impose his strength on hers. She found a more comfortable position on his lap and kissed him leisurely and with great thoroughness.

“How did it go today?” she asked gently when their lips parted.

“Not too bad. I picked up a chunk that weighed in at forty kilograms, and Sorenhirst found two that weighed fifty together.”

“Pure uranium as usual?”

“The pure stuff. We just don’t find anything else down there.”

Valle wriggled off his lap and to her feet, a small, slim young woman with very dark hair and eyes and an olive complexion. “Dinner’s on the table, and there’s a movie at the Centre at eight. Feel up to it?”

“Of course,” he agreed automatically, though he would have been perfectly content to stay home with her and go to bed early. Ten hours hard work in this planet’s low-oxygen atmosphere was enough activity for one day.

The little three-room cottage sat in a small clearing out in the heart of the forest, and it was refreshingly cool inside. He flicked a switch as they stepped indoors and the orange glare of the insect-repelling lights came on in the garden. Electricity was the only luxury these cottages afforded, and since they were of slat and bamboo construction the bugs would have eaten a sleeper alive if not kept away. Canopus 37, or McKeeper as it was more popularly known, was a tropical world, with a climate similar to that of Earth's equatorial zone across three-quarters of its surface, and the temperature did not change more than ten degrees the year round.

Their assigned *Rilli* servant, whom they called Jake, stood waiting at the head of the small rough table, wearing his usual blank expression. The natives of McKeeper were humanoids less than a meter high, with very broad shoulders and sturdy bodies covered with a thin coat of brown or black fur. Their earless heads were round as balls and apparently made of solid bone, to judge by their percipience. When the McKeeper project first started an effort had been made to train them for work in the mine, but it had been abandoned after a few months. The *Rilli* seemed constantly lost in a dream world of their own, and the intelligence, which was one of their manifest characteristics when they chose to display it, was seldom used.

Their dinner consisted of the fruits and nuts which grew locally in great profusion, supplemented by one meat dish from the kitchen in the Centre. Carter ate with the intentness of a man who must consume vast quantities of fuel for conversion into energy. Valle dawdled with her food, but ate a fair meal.

He took a shower after eating, room-temperature water drained from an overhead wooden barrel, and when he was dressed again Jake had finished his work and gone and Valle had slipped into a dress and was waiting. He dropped a sonic insect repellent in his pocket and they headed for the Centre.

McKeeper received little starlight but had three very bright moons, of which at least two were always in the night sky. The *Rilli* kept the paths from the cottages to the Centre free of new growth and McKeeper's numerous carnivores were too small to be dangerous to humans. It was a peaceful half-kilometre to the Centre and they strolled leisurely along, arms about each other, two honeymooners lost in each other and the charm of the night.

Carter Mason stared downward at the bright young face turned up to the moonlight, felt the movement of the pliant waist under his arm, and wondered how long this could last, and where the catch was hidden.

The big blond man with the crewcut searched his memory as they walked, and just before they emerged into the open area where the Centre stood recalled a favourite remnant. In a hushed voice he quoted:

*“She walks in beauty, like the night  
Of cloudless climes and starry skies;  
And all that’s best of dark and bright  
Meet in her aspect and her eyes.”*

Valle laughed, delighted. “I thought I was the nineteenth century poet fiend. You quote Byron like a professor.”

“The only thing I ever memorized,” he said, grinning, and then they were in the open and saying hello to other couples converging on the brightly lit Centre.

There were twenty-one couples present, one-half the human population of the planet, and every person there was between twenty-five and thirty years of age, each couple had been married the day before they left Earth, and no person had been there longer than five and a half Ermonths. In two weeks the bi-monthly ship from Earth would fall into orbit over the base and the fire-belching chemical-powered shuttles would bring down fourteen more couples, and take away fourteen families and some five thousand kilograms of pure uranium, of which roughly one thousand would be used on the return trip. The McKeever Operation paid a little over two to one on uranium production, and the factor which kept the average so low was the weight of twenty-eight human bodies, and the support systems to keep them alive, which had to ride both ways each trip. No person stayed on McKeever more than six Ermonths.

They found seats on the rough wooden benches the *Rilli* had made for the main recreation room and settled down to enjoy the film. Two old-timers, Adam and Joy Parkinson, who would be leaving on the next ship, were sitting on their right. Carter noticed before the lights dimmed that Adam was leaning forward, tensed, and Joy was watching him with a troubled expression on her sharp young face.

The film was a dramatic love story, one some deskbound bureaucrat on Earth felt proper for a group of young honeymooners isolated on a foreign planet. The plotline had two newlyweds kidnapped by a psychopath who hated women, and built steadily towards a very dramatic finish. At the climax, when the psychopath was approaching the terrified girl with a

flashing knife, while the young husband lay bound and helpless, Carter felt Adam stirring by his side, and suddenly the nervous man bounded to his feet and screamed, the sound a harsh and jarring reality which shattered the illusion created by the screen. The lights came on instantly, and Adam stood looking wildly around at the small audience, his face still white with terror. Then he put his hands to his face and sank shuddering back into his seat. Joy stood leaning over him comfortingly, her thin face concerned.

Colonel Simpson, the ranking officer and a three-month man, came swiftly from the projection room, where his pretty wife had been serving as operator, and motioned Carter out of his seat. The little group stood milling uncertainly for a moment as Simpson sat down and talked with Adam and Joy, then slowly began to drift out of the door, all interest in the movie forgotten. Colonel Simpson's voice stopped them.

"Your attention, please, everyone. Adam Parkinson is reporting to the hospital immediately, and Joy is appointed as his nurse. He will be relieved of active duty until the ship arrives. The rest of you please report for work as usual in the morning."

There was an excited buzz of speculation as the group broke up into small knots, but Carter ignored it and led Valle swiftly away. He had heard enough of Simpson's conversation with the Parkinsons to get the general drift. And he thought he saw the catch to a Haggard Honeymoon.

Valle asked no questions until they were on their private path, but then they tumbled out in a confused heap. Carter hushed her gently with a big palm and slowed his rapid pace. McKeever's air had an oxygen content of only sixteen per cent, and even after one learned deep-breathing techniques it did not pay to over-exert yourself.

"Simpson was asking Adam how he'd been sleeping lately, and if he had nightmares," the big man said slowly. "The answer was that he hardly slept at all, and if he did his dreams were so bad they almost drove him crazy. Joy confirmed that Adam hadn't rested well for a month, and that he'd been having nightmares from which he'd wake up in the middle of the night, screaming. This is the first time it happened while he was awake, and I heard Simpson say something about that being the final sign."

"Final sign? Sign of what?"

"The reason no one stays here longer than six months, obviously. Apparently men on McKeever are peculiarly susceptible to mental derangement, and after six months they start cracking up. At least that's the

gist of what he told Joy and Adam. He also said it seldom affected women, and that Adam would be all right once he got away from here.”

“Mental derangement? I thought this tour was limited to six months because of the thin air, the hard work, and so on. Where does mental illness come in?”

“We were all led to believe that, but no one ever actually said it aloud. And no one explained why they only accepted engaged couples for this assignment, or why they go to such pains to give you ideal honeymoon conditions. And especially, no one explained why students straight out of college started with a captain’s commission in the Space Service.”

“Do you suppose this all ties in together? If so, why hasn’t someone explained it, and why are you sent out here unprepared?”

“I don’t know, but tomorrow I’m going to try to find out.”

When he reported to the Centre next morning Simpson was waiting for him. “Carter, you’re going to take Major Parkinson’s place in administration, starting tomorrow. Come by here on your way home for a briefing.”

He climbed on the little runabout that was the base’s only powered land vehicle in numbed surprise. The base organization structure was very simple. There was a colonel for a CO., three majors, and the rest captains. Every man on the base except the CO. worked, one of the majors in charge of each shift at the mine and the third in administration, which consisted primarily of overseeing the maintenance work performed by the *Rilli* and the kitchen-work done by the wives.

The other young captains on the day shift pounded him heartily on the back and congratulated him as they rolled to the mine. Major Parkinson had what was considered the best job on the base. He did no physical work, and was in constant contact with all the pretty young wives. Carter took their good-natured kidding with a grin, but was glad when they reached the Changehouse and he could hop out and get into his suit.

The Changehouse was a big building, of locally mixed concrete, sitting on the edge of the small round lake that was Haggard’s mine. The walls were radiation-proof through sheer massiveness. One large room was open to the lake, and from here a wide ramp led downward at a sharp angle into the red water. The three crawlers, small submersible radiation-proof tanks with front-mounted shovels and an open cargo compartment at the

rear, stood at the water's edge where the night shift had left them.

In the outer room Carter and the rest of the day crew stripped to the buff and donned soft, protective underwear, then the heavy, awkward suit. It was made of eight layers of alternating silk and lead foil, with a small air-tank strapped to the back and a polarized vision-glass three inches thick.

Carter and his partner, Buckley, stepped through the door marked DANGER: RADIATION and walked over to their crawler. They made the usual exterior inspection and then climbed inside. Buckley took the operator's chair and activated the control board. He checked his indicators carefully, then turned on the pump and eased the power control forward. The crawlers were powered by a small reactor cooled by Nak, a sodium-potassium solution which circulated through an outer jacket over the reactor and passed through a heat-exchanger on the opposite end of its cycle. The heat-exchanger generated steam, which was in turn used to drive a turbine. The turbine turned a D.C. generator which supplied usable power. It was the simplest system anyone had been able to devise where uranium was the only fuel available, but woefully inefficient compared to the giant atom-smashers which powered the starships.

When the turbine reached operating speed Buckley fed current to the high-torque motors turning the tracks and the crawler eased forward. They trundled to the ramp leading into the reddish water and felt the familiar lurch as it eased over the edge and started downward. Buckley turned on the outside lights as the water rose in a red veil around them.

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## Two

The crater Haggard's Meteorite had created when it struck McKeever some thousand Eryears back was a half-kilometre wide and sixty metres deep, circular in outline and filled with the only red water known on the planet. The bottom was covered with the accumulated silt of years, level in some areas, but heaped in odd shapes and forms in others. The crawlers were slowly and methodically removing the entire lake bottom to the Changehouse, where it was sifted for uranium and returned to a far portion of the lake in the form of mud. So far the yield had been incredibly high, so much so that this one mine was supplying the entire Space Service fleet.

Buckley followed the tracks of the night shift across the silt to their work area, a reddish mound near the centre where the yield had been good, and manoeuvred the crawler into position. Carter, acting as co-pilot

for the moment, watched the dials on the control board. Buckley moved them forward at full speed and when the grinding tracks had the shovel buried deep in the muck he lifted sharply upward. The crawler started to lurch forward as the shovel came free, but Buckley eased up on the power and threw it into reverse. As the machine moved backward the shovel continued to rise, describing a full half-circle and dumping its contents in the cargo compartment at the rear. Then forward again for another scoop, rocking and jouncing on the uneven lake-bottom.

When the compartment would hold no more Buckley retained the last scoop in the shovel and headed for the ramp. They broke water in a moment and continued up the ramp to the dumping chute. A ton of red water, mud, silt, filth—and maybe an ingot of uranium—went tumbling into the gaping maw. Inside the Changehouse other men, working with hands shielded from deadly radiation only by the thickness of their gloves, sorted the solid particles out of the mess and washed them clean. These were taken to a small spectroscope and carefully checked, while the effluvia of mud and slime was washed into the long, open sluice that sloped gently downward out of the massive building and ended in a far corner of the lake.

The large pump which made it possible for the Changehouse to operate, the atomic-powered generator which supplied the small settlement with electrical power, and the three crawlers and the little runabout were the only heavy items of Earth manufacture on McKeever. The Centre, their cottages, and their food were all supplied by the planet itself. Every kilogram saved on weight was a kilogram reserved for uranium. The Service even preferred small men, when they could get ones who met their unusual and exacting standards. Big men like Carter Mason were rare on McKeever.

At noon they took a short break to eat, and then changed places and continued the long grind. And finally the day ended, the night shift reported in, and they were free to go. McKeever had a twenty-two Erhour rotation and the men worked two ten-hour shifts. During the two hours slack time each morning, repairs were made to the equipment, the sluice was cleaned and the safety equipment carefully and competently checked. Each man caught two hours slack time each week. They had arbitrarily assigned a seven-day week to the planet, since the seasons changed the weather very little, and worked six of those seven days.

Carter was dog-tired, as usual, when he hopped off the runabout and reported to Colonel Simpson in the small room he called his office. Billie, Simpson's pretty wife, who acted as the commander's secretary, motioned him to a seat.



“Any luck today?”

“Not much. A few bits and pieces.”

“That’s too bad. Rest a moment and I’ll get Bert. I think he’s in the kitchen.”

She was gone less than two minutes and returned with her husband, animatedly discussing as they walked some aspect of managing the kitchen force of eight wives. As a wife Billie had no official status, but unofficially she managed the women’s work force under the supervision of the major in administration.

There were lines of strain on Simpson’s face when he sat down and hitched forward in his chair, to rest his elbows on the desk and his face in his hands. There was silence for a moment, and then Simpson asked, “Tell me, Mason, have you ever wondered why we have a somewhat un-military set-up here?”

“I expect we all have, sir. But the hours are so long and you’re kept so busy; and being new-marrieds...” he let the statement go unfinished. The absorption of each new couple in the joys of sex, and the manifold aspects of marriage under such strange but satisfying conditions, easily accounted for time-consumption.

“Let me give you some background that was left out of your orientation courses, Mason. First, the Space Service tried for two years to mine Haggard’s Meteorite, with little success. The attempt was almost abandoned, and would have been except for one of those freaks of chance that happen now and then, even in the Space Service. A young lieutenant, fresh out of the Academy and just married, was assigned to McKeever. Service wasn’t voluntary then. He tried to get out of it and it was impossible. Rumours had been getting around of what it was like here and the young wife knew her chances of getting back a sane husband were only one-in-three. She pulled off the virtually impossible stunt of stowing away on a military ship and went with her husband. Once here, of course, there was little they could do. Every gramme of return weight was needed for uranium. So she stayed, and the base commander built the first of the honeymoon cottages.”

Simpson studied his fingers a moment, then continued, “There was no set period of duty then. A man stayed until he showed signs of cracking up, and was shipped home on the next ship. The average man lasted two

months, some as long as four. It took two out of every three grammes mined just to haul the crews back and forth! The young lieutenant made the usual two months with no problems, then four, and then eight. During his tenth month he showed signs of cracking and both he and his wife were returned, with a full pardon for her violation of military rules. On the next shipment two couples were sent, to see if it was a freak chance or a breakthrough. One couple had been married eight years and were still childless, the second another pair of honeymooners. The older married man lasted four months, the younger eight. That was enough for the high brass. From then on all McKeever recruits were young, new-married, and highly compatible couples. And for the first time the system started showing a real profit.”

“A first-class case of empirical reasoning, eh? And it worked. But tell me, why was no effort made to find the conditions that caused the derangement and eliminate them?”

Simpson smiled briefly. “Efforts were made and the trouble was located. But doing something about it turned out to be a different matter. It seems that the atmosphere around the lake is loaded with very high-frequency energy waves of unknown origin, so faint it takes our best instruments to detect them at all. It’s like nothing we’ve ever experienced, and frankly, the best scientists we could get up here were completely lost. In the end it was decided we’d work our way around them, not through them, after this honeymoon method was discovered. No one quite knows why, but the effect is pronouncedly less apparent on young people who have an overpowering interest in life besides themselves. Also, women are apparently immune or the effect is so mild no one has stayed long enough to be hurt. That first lieutenant’s wife stayed ten months with no ill effects, and no woman since has been affected in her six months stay.”

“Has anyone failed to recover after being returned to Earth?”

Simpson turned away and stared at the blank wall of his office. “A few. Some of them are still in asylums on Earth.”

For the first time bitterness crept into Mason’s voice. “And we weren’t told this. We were told about the captain’s commission, the hard work and long hours, the ideal honeymoon conditions, and the unusual fact our wives could accompany us for duty tours on a foreign planet. Nothing more!”

“There is a very good reason for this, which is why you will tell no one else, including your wife. You last longer if you stay ignorant. Brooding brings it on. Only yourself and the two other majors know the full story. Not

even Billie is in on it. And it's quite possible Parkinson could have made his six months without trouble if he hadn't known."

"I'm afraid it's a little late for that. Valle and I were discussing Parkinson's behaviour on the way home from the movie. We came quite close to guessing the answer."

"Then don't discuss it any further, and ask Valle not to let the word get around to the other wives. This is quite important."

"I'll do my best, sir," said Mason, rising. It was apparent from Simpson's manner that the interview was at an end.

Carter Mason went home to the loving arms of his wife, and next morning reported to his new duties as administrative officer. He swiftly discovered, with the help of Billie Simpson, that Parkinson had been holding down a complex job entailing endless record-keeping and some rather exacting personal relationship problems. One of his primary responsibilities had been the keeping of the peace between eighty-four young people of many and varied backgrounds who were unexpectedly thrown into close proximity under very unusual conditions. The expected cause of trouble, infidelity, was relatively rare, although light flirtations were a common and recurring event. Still, there were many causes of conflict inherent in the situation itself, and Parkinson's prime job seemed to have been to keep them at a minimum. It did not take Carter long to decide he had been picked for promotion as much for his degree in psychology as his native abilities.

When the shuttle took Parkinson away two weeks later he had to be carried aboard. He was not violent, but he seemed to have lost the faculty of self-control. Joy, her thin face white with grief, was by his side. Simpson watched them go without changing expression, and when the little ship cleared ground he turned to Carter and said, "According to the best information I have he's only in the beginning stages. He should recover almost fully before he reaches Earth. The only ones in whom it didn't clear up were those already in the violent stage."

Carter shuddered slightly, and returned to his duties. The ship had brought a batch of paper for his attention.

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It was a month later when he awoke from a deep sleep to a sound of low sobbing, and discovered his wife was shivering violently in the narrow bed,

and crying in her sleep.

He sat up in bed and pulled her into his arms, comforting her tenderly and bringing her gradually from sleep to wakefulness. After a time the shivering eased and she grew quieter. He continued to pet and hold her until she finally pushed away and sat up in the bed, her nude body a dim but lovely presence in the deep shadows. "I'm... all right, darling. It's faded away now. But what a terrible nightmare; I was flying, and had wings, but I didn't beat them, I just flew, and---"

"Easy now, don't try to recall the dream, it will only disturb you again," he soothed her. "Lie down and try to get back to sleep. It's late."

"I don't know if I ever want to sleep again," she said simply. "That horrible... *thing!*... that attacked me while I was flying. It had huge claws, and locked them in my back and started tearing at my neck with its great beak... I was falling..." She sobbed again, and then the tears came, full of a deep but unexplainable grief, and she cuddled into his arms and let them flow. From there she passed into a light doze, one unmarked by any sign of dreaming, and he eased her back to the bed and pulled the light sheet over themselves again. He held her close to his own body while she passed into deep slumber, and gradually dozed off again himself.

She was her usual buoyant self in the morning as she prepared his breakfast, and he could almost have thought the incident forgotten if there had not been unusual dark shadows around her large eyes.

Carter pondered Valle's odd description of the dream during the short walk to work. That "feeling of falling" was an old and easily explained dream symbol, but the odd description of flying without using wings and the other attacking birds—those were out of no textbook he had ever read. It aroused an immediate and pressing question. Was this a natural dream, brought on by some factor as simple as indigestion, or a manifestation of the derangement that plagued the inhabitants of McKeever?

His question was answered the next night, when Valle dreamed again, and this time it was something so unworldly, so completely out of keeping with her background that it almost had to be caused by an outside source. It was no worse than the night before, but two in a row was too much for him to tackle alone. He took the matter up with Simpson as soon as he got to work.

The commanding officer held his head in his hands and stared at his home-made desk top, his face a study in misery. When he raised his gaze

his face was sober and cold. “What would you say if I told you I had almost exactly the same dream you described the same night?”

“I’d say that since you’re almost a five-month man it might reasonably be expected. I’d also say I don’t see what that has to do with the problem. According to these records I’ve inherited it’s normal, almost expected, for a man to start getting the bad dreams in his fifth month. It’s never happened to a woman before.”

“True, and it is a complicating factor. But if you’ll check you’ll probably find that half the five-month men here had the same dreams as myself and Valle on the same nights. Don’t you find this significant?”

“Not particularly. We already know it’s caused by microwave energy forms of some description. It’s not too odd that it should have a roughly similar effect on human beings, enough to at least give you similar dreams.”

“No two human beings are that similar, Carter. Assuming that the force acts identically on any two humans, why should it inspire almost identical dreams? Valle and I, for instance, have completely different backgrounds, come from different world states, are of different nationality. The odds against a given stimulus causing us to dream the same dream are astronomical, yet we not only did but so did every other affected man on this planet. No, there has to be a logical explanation, and so far we haven’t found it.”

“I’ve got a more pressing problem. Valle and I need to go back on the next ship, not wait the extra two months for our regular turn. According to all records breakdown comes within a few weeks of the commencement of the dreaming.”

Simpson sighed. “I know. And it means not only a loss of shipping weight next time but a disruption of our organization here. We’ll be shy a couple for two months. But I’m afraid it can’t be helped. Go ahead and cut orders for yourselves. I’ll sign them.”

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### **Three**

It was two nights later when he came up out of a heavy sleep to find Valle shaking him. “Carter, wake up! You sleep like a dead man! Carter, listen, I think I’ve discovered something tonight. The dream was beautiful for a change, something about lovely colours floating across the sky, with hordes

of little *Rilli* chasing after them. But tonight, for the first time, I could tell that something was pushing those dreams at me, making me go through them whether I wanted to or not. And Carter... whatever it was was a living intelligence!"

Jarred fully awake, he sat up and turned on the room's single lamp. Valle, who was not very modest, made no pretence of covering herself, but leaned forward earnestly and said, "I could feel direction and control behind those dreams. It was like being an actor in a play, but instead of knowing your lines and reciting them you really *lived* the part, and felt and touched and tasted everything the actor did. But it was all so weird and three-quarters of it wasn't understandable in human terms. I kept trying to make sense out of it, and when I did I seemed to get lost..."

Her voice trailed away, then resumed, "And my head started hurting, and I woke up. I don't think it would have been so bad if I hadn't insisted on trying to understand the dream."

There was no intelligent life whatever on McKeever, with the possible exception of the *Rilli*, and they were in a doubtful category. Or could it be that there was an intelligent lifeform not yet discovered? Possibly creatures so small they had so far escaped observation, and used this weird method of making their presence felt?

There was no way they could resolve the puzzle that night, and they gave it up and went to sleep. Next morning Carter told Simpson of Valle's feelings, and found that it was not a new discovery. "Several other people have reported the same impressions. But we've never been able to prove it one way or the other. And usually," he hesitated, then continued, "when an affected man gets to that stage—he's pretty far gone."

"But Valle had her first dream only three nights back! You said it usually takes several weeks from the first signs."

"Yes, and I was talking about men. She's the first woman ever to be affected. I don't know where the difference lies, but I can tell you I don't like it."

They left it on that unsatisfactory note, and Carter took a fast hike to the Changehouse to pick up the weekly report. Major Chen Yi, in charge of the day shift this week, had it ready, and Carter paused for a moment's conversation before heading back. "How's the pickings this week?"

Chen Yi, a small, dapper man with a drive far larger than his size, who

had majored in celestial navigation in college, picked his teeth with a splinter and spat in the dirt. They were standing just outside the closed entrance to the main flushing room, as close as Carter could go unless he wanted to put on a protective suit. "About as usual. We'll have all the ship can carry next month."

Carter thought of telling him they would be shipping two hundred kilograms less than usual this trip, but restrained himself. There was no point in letting word of Valle's troubles leak out any sooner than it must.

Carter turned and stared out over the placid surface of the red lake, pondering, as he had a thousand times before, the many enigmas hidden in that sultry water. A lake whose bottom was covered with odd, huge formations, where pure uranium was lying about in profusion, whose water contained an element that defied analysis but which was the best radioactive shield known, so good an inch of it over a piece of uranium enabled you to wet your finger over it and not get burned. A lake that contained water found nowhere else on the planet, a lake that, by itself, was supplying all the uranium needed for Earth's far-ranging interstellar fleet.

"That must have been quite a blow when this junior-sized planetoid came whistling down through the atmosphere and smashed into this planet," said Carter softly. "A wonder it didn't drive McKeever out of its orbit."

Chen Yi turned and stared at him, his slanted eyes twinkling. "It wasn't too bad an impact. It hit at a relatively slow speed, just a few hundred kilometres an hour, and it didn't have the mass you seem to think. It was hollow."

It was Carter's turn to stare. "Hollow? You're kidding me. And how could you know?"

"The distribution of the fragments and the shape of the lake. And a little elementary maths will prove the speed point. It came straight down and dug in without bouncing, creating a roughly round lake. The material was semi-metallic, as you know. The soil here is only a few metres thick, and the soft limestone under it extends well below the depth of the lake. For practical purposes you can forget the soil. Just figure on a round metallic object hitting the limestone and digging down. You'll get so many metres of penetration per so many metres per second of speed. Be glad to show you the math sometime."

"No, thanks, it would probably be over my head anyway. But tell me,

where did you come up with idea of a hollow meteorite?”

The smaller man smiled briefly. “Already had the idea. Just wanted some proof of it, theoretical if nothing better. Hasn’t it occurred to you, Carter, that it is impossible to explain this,” he swept a hand at the red lake, “in terms of natural phenomena?”

Carter had to smile; He wasn’t the only one for whom honeymoon conditions were not a sufficient antidote to thought. “You tell me.”

“All right, I’ll spell it out. The object which hit here was a ship, not a meteorite. It was almost a half-kilometre in diameter and spherical in shape. It was composed of a semi-metallic alloy with which we are completely unfamiliar, and used a damping agent for its nuclear drive which was soluble in water, and turned it red. And it wasn’t from this galaxy.” Chen Yi turned and stared into the north-west sky, where the bright sun hid the stars from view. “Our nearest neighbours the Magellanic Clouds,” he pointed with a small finger. “Large or small, take your pick. Earth’s supply of uranium came from one of them.”

Carter walked back to the Administration building in a thoughtful, almost dazed, silence.

Just before he entered the door he paused and stared a moment at the only building, other than those of the base, on the planet McKeeper. Just the tip of the tower could be seen in the distance, and in a way it was as great a marvel as Haggard’s Meteorite. The *Rilli* had felled some of the largest trees in the vicinity, giants towering over sixty metres high, and, by engineering methods forgotten or ignored in the present day, hauled them to the crest of the only hill in the vicinity. There they erected a high tower to their unknown god. The area round the tower was strictly taboo to all Earthmen and most of the *Rilli*, only the tribal leaders, priests, and guards having access to the grounds. The top of the tower was the holy-of-holies to the little people. Other than that abortive attempt to use them as miners the *Rilli* had not received much attention from the busy Earthmen, and they deserved more study.

Carter finished the day’s work in thoughtful silence and wound his weary way homeward, arm in arm with Valle, whose turn it had been in the kitchens. It seemed odd that so much could be known about McKeeper, and yet so little understood. This malady that struck Earth people so mercilessly, so senselessly, which was so well defined and so meagrely comprehended—where did it originate? Was it a natural phenomenon produced in some strange way by the planet’s magnetic field? Could there



be any meaning to the puzzling fact that the afflicted persons seemed to feel, in the latter stages, that the dreams they experienced were directed at them by an intelligent entity? Or was this only a sign of incipient breakdown, the standard paranoid delusion of persecution? And most important of all... Valle. There was almost a month to endure before the next shuttle, and if the case histories he had examined were any indication she was going off the deep end at a rate approximately four times the previous record. Two more days would find her mind trembling dangerously close to the brink of accepting the unreal, another week might render her insane beyond recovery. She could not possibly stay a full month unless her dangerous progress downhill was somehow arrested.

And there was no possible way in which she could be removed from McKeever.

Valle had another dream that night, worse than the last, and woke up screaming. She stayed awake the rest of the night and he made some coffee and stayed up with her.

Something had to be done, and after talking it over with Colonel Simpson he tried the only antidote that seemed a possibility. He gave Valle a strong sedative the next night, and sat with her until she drifted off to a drugged sleep. He could tell from her deep, slow breathing that she was at least two levels below normal unconsciousness, and decided to get some rest himself, but first he set the alarm for an hour earlier than usual, though he badly needed the rest. He did not intend for Valle's drugged slumber to fade into normal sleep on the road to wakefulness.

He experienced the first dream himself that night, but it was so faint it bothered him very little. Well before dawn he was up and checking on Valle, who was beginning to twitch slightly but still seemed unusually deep in sleep. He made coffee and carried it to her bedside, then brought her rapidly up out of sleep into full wakefulness, immediately forcing her to take an oral stimulant followed by coffee. She smiled gratefully through the mental fog as she sipped the coffee and tried to throw off the effects of the sedative. When she could talk intelligibly she said, "It worked, darling. No dreams."

"One. I had it," he answered briefly, then smiled at her instant apprehension. "No problem. Very minor affair which shouldn't bother me too much before we leave. It's you I'm worried about."

"This is going to be an awful way to sleep, but we'll manage," she said, and summoned a wan smile. He could not force himself to smile back.

He saw her at noon, when she came into Administration on an errand, and she looked perfectly happy. But he was still ten steps from their door that night when he heard her terrified scream.

He made those ten steps in two jumps and burst inside to find her facing a puzzled and apprehensive Jake, still screaming, her small mouth an ugly rictus of terror.

He reached her and swept her into his arms, where she collapsed, sobbing in relief. Jake, his round face alternating between fright, stupidity, and puzzlement, stood in indecision for a moment, then observed that the tall ones were paying no attention to him and hastily left. He had known many men behave oddly after being on McKeever for a time, but this slim and dark-eyed tall one was the first woman he had seen go to pieces this way. But then, the ways of the tall ones were usually incomprehensible to him anyway. All he could be certain of was that they furnished the best knives, axes, cooking pots, and arrowheads his people had ever seen, and gave them away for ridiculously low numbers of hours of labour.

Behind him in the little honeymoon cottage Mason comforted the sobbing Valle as best he could, and got the story from her. "It—it was horrible, Carter! I was—was fixing our dinner, not thinking about the dreams at all, and was feeling so happy because you'd soon be home, and—suddenly the kitchen around me just seemed to fade away, as though it were made of smoke, and I was out between the stars, riding on a great bird, and a voice was reciting what seemed to be poetry, but in a tongue I couldn't understand, and lights appeared ahead of me, and a great wind started to blow, the lights got closer and it grew cold, so cold I knew I'd soon die, and *the lights! The lights!*"

She collapsed into sobbing again, but soon recovered and continued: "When the lights drew near I could see they were gigantic light-emitting eyes, eyes on creatures like none I've seen in my worst dreams, and riding on these creatures were man-like things I could tell were *Rilli*, but not like Jake and these others, huge things taller than you are but wide like the *Rilli*, and their eyes flashed and they had great swords they whirled over their heads, and they shouted as they charged me. And I could tell that there were hundreds of others just like me out there between the stars, riding those huge birds, and we had come to fight these giant men. And—and one of them came at me, swinging that great sword.

"His eyes were flashing like stars themselves, his mouth was open and he was roaring some war-song, that great sword came flying for my

throat and I tried to dodge, to turn, and then—it seems odd to tell it, but I'd been trying all along to wake up, to get away from that scene because in another part of my mind I knew it was all illusion, it *had* to be illusion, and I wanted so desperately to wake up, I was trying all the time to force my eyes to see something besides the blackness and the stars, and when I saw that sword coming at me I closed my eyes and screamed. I actually felt the sword cut into my neck and knew I was dead in another thousandth of a second if I didn't pull away and I tried and opened my eyes again and there was Jake in front of me, staring at me pop-eyed.

“For an instant I couldn't shake off the feeling he was the big one on the monster who was chasing me. I screamed and that brought me fully back, so that I knew where I was and that it was Jake in front of me, but then I couldn't stop screaming and screaming. When I screamed I knew I was *alive*, you see, and I heard my own voice and knew I was home again. Oh God! God! God! It was so horrible!”

And then she stiffened in his arms, stiffened and stood upright and tried to pull away, and her mouth formed a small round pout of pain and terror, and her eyes were closed.

Carter picked her up bodily and carried her hastily to the bed. Working with desperate speed he pried open her rigid jaws and forced two tablets into her mouth, then poured water after them and held her when she coughed and spluttered, held her rigid until the involuntary reflexes forced her to swallow. The drug took effect within minutes and he watched the rigidity fade from her slim body, the breathing ease and become less ragged, until finally she seemed to pass into a normal deep slumber.

When he felt sure she was all right again he sat on the foot of the narrow bed and permitted himself to slowly relax, letting his muscles sag into the posture of weariness and defeat. After a long time he stirred himself and moved slowly to the kitchen, where his food, now cold, was waiting on the table. Suddenly hungry, he sat down and ate hastily, scarcely noticing what passed between his lips. When the hunger pangs were satisfied he left the dirty plates on the table and started pacing the small room, his mind going in dizzy circles, returning constantly to the one central point which there was no denying. He had to find the cause of the illusions and remove them, *now*, while his darling slept. Or there would be no sane awakening.

\* \* \* \*

## Four

Something was nagging at the back of his mind, some fragments of the personal nightmare in which he was living. He felt the answer to the weird dreams hung tantalizingly near, that he had all the necessary facts in his possession, if only he could fit and tamp them into place.

He was still pacing, hours later, when Valle stirred and gave a whimper. He went into the bedroom to find her tossing restlessly, making small moaning noises in her throat, and after thinking it over he forced another sleeping tablet down her throat.

When she had relaxed again he stepped out into the night, oblivious of the swarm of hungry insects which instantly pounced on him, and walked to and fro in the small area they called their garden. In the north-west the first grey light of dawn was in the air, paling the sky of its golden moonglow, and he knew it would soon be time for the first shift to report to Administration.

He looked to the south-east, through a small clear area in the heavy woods, and saw a light twinkling far in the distance, a light that appeared to be just off the ground. And suddenly he knew.

It was intuitive, instinctual, more a primal knowledge than reasoned logic, but it came with such deep and certain conviction it left no room for doubts or argument. He *knew*, and acted on the knowledge.

He made a last hasty check on Valle and found her sleeping peacefully, the dark face composed. Then he was out the door and trotting purposefully towards the Changehouse, threading his way through the various paths with sure skill. He reached it just as Canopus came peeping over the horizon, yellow and immense in the distance, and headed for the crawlers parked at the edge of the lake.

He knew he needed a suit, since the interior of the crawlers was often as not hot from shielding leaks, but there was no time. He scrambled inside without touching the bare metal of the hull and seated himself at the control board. He started the pump and felt the movement of the Nak beginning to circulate, and waited in strangled impatience for pressure to build up. Just as the system reached operating temperature he glanced through the port and saw his former partner, Buckley, running frantically towards the crawler, waving his arms. He must have been working slack time, and knew quite well no one had any business in a crawler at that time of the morning.

He ignored Buckley and eased the crawler forward, turning it away from the water and towards the path to Administration. Even at full speed the slow machine could move no faster than ten miles an hour, and he watched his former partner running alongside him for a moment, gesturing frantically, and then ignored him. Buckley swiftly dropped behind.

Buckley would report to Simpson, of course, but it scarcely mattered. There would not be time for anyone to interfere with what he planned to do.

He drove the lumbering vehicle past Administration at a good distance, not even looking that way, and on up the slight rise to the crest of the first gentle hill, then down the slope and through the trees which grew thickly at the bottom. It was ticklish work picking his way for the next few miles, but the crawler had an old-fashioned tank's capacity to go anywhere. In another half-hour he saw the tower ahead and started working his way towards it.

The *Rilli* were abroad even at this time of the morning. He saw several of them staring with pop-eyed amazement at the crawler which had no business near their tower, and when it became obvious he intended to roll straight to it, several of them seized rocks and hurled them at the glass port. He ignored them and a moment later saw some grim-faced guards appear at the base of the tower, armed with bows and arrows. The arrows clattered harmlessly off the window; when they saw there was no chance of stopping him one of the guards, with a cry of despair Carter saw but could not hear, hurled himself under the heavy tracks.

Carter felt the slight bump as the crawler rolled relentlessly on.

The remaining *Rilli* scattered with yells of terror as he wheeled to a stop almost against the towering logs. He hesitated for a moment, then pulled the emergency tool-pack from under the operator's chair and set swiftly to work. It was the labour of but a moment to remove the floorplates, exposing a portion of the cooling system. With hands that trembled slightly he opened the main intake valve where fresh Nak could be added to the system, and jumped back as the hot liquid came boiling out. He hastily undid the hatch locks, reached over to the control board and raised the reactor to full heat, then flipped the hatch back and climbed outside.

The *Rilli* were clustered in a group in front of the machine, including the two *Rilli* with bows. They seemed uncertain just what to do about him, but when he headed for the edge of the clearing at a dead run they made up their minds and started after him.

One arrow went whistling by him and another just over his head before he heard the *Rilli* shout between themselves and the arrows stopped coming. They had decided to take him alive.

He glanced back over his shoulder and saw a small jet of steam rising from the open hatch of the crawler. It curled upward into the still morning air, a grim indication of the terrific heat building up underneath. And he was still dreadfully close.

The *Rilli* were better athletes than he, but his longer legs gave him an advantage they could not overcome. He settled down to a ground-eating lope, not really knowing how long he had, nor how far it was best to be. He was over a mile away, and the nearest pursuer several hundred yards behind, when the explosion came.

The reactor was not an efficient bomb, but the blast did cut through the vast trunks, cut them and lifted the tower several metres into the air before it settled back into a disintegrating heap of wood and rubble.

He felt the change instantly. It was as though he had lived with the sense of presence so long it had become an accepted part of him, no more noticed than the hair on his head or the skin on his hands. It was noticeable by its absence that there had *been* a sense of presence, and now it was gone.

Never, he hoped, to return.

The *Rilli* chasing him had paused in indecision, looking back on the shattered remnants of their tower. He set off again at a slower trot, and after a moment they decided he was no longer worth chasing and turned back to the smoking ruins. Carter knew they were probably walking towards a fatal dose of radiation, but was too tired to care.

\* \* \* \*

Valle was up and waiting for him, her olive face white with fear. Simpson was there also, and about half the rest of the men on McKeever.

They moved forward purposefully when he came in sight, and he offered no resistance when they took his arms roughly and led him in to face Simpson. The young colonel stared at him sharply, then more intently as he failed to detect the signs of mental breakdown he had evidently

expected.

“No, I haven’t nipped my wig,” said Carter wearily, as the men holding his arms let him sag into a welcoming chair. “Hell, man, can’t you *feel* it?”

“Yes, I can tell that something has... changed. Carter. I can’t quite say what it is, but I do know I feel better.” Simpson sat facing Carter and stared intently into the big man’s face. “But maybe you’d better start at the beginning. Even if you knew what you were doing you owe us all an explanation. And I can’t imagine a reason for not confiding in me sufficiently good enough to save you from a court-martial.”

“I thought about it, but there wasn’t time. At least, not time enough to convince you. As for starting at the beginning, I’m not sure I can. I’ll hazard a guess, and you can see what you think.

“Has it occurred to anyone to wonder where the *Rilli* came from? Who they really are? We’ve been taking it for granted they evolved on this planet, part of the local fauna. I don’t think so any more. I think the *Rilli* are descendants of a spaceship crew, a very large crew which arrived on this planet a thousand years ago. I think their intergalactic ship crashed on this planet, after completing a trip that dwarfs anything of which we’ve even dreamed. They had some method of cushioning the impact, enough so that a sizable portion of the crew lived through it. Then for reasons at which we can only guess the survivors let their cultural heritage lapse.

“I don’t know if they were from a planet where the living was hard and they were corrupted by the soft life here, where food could be had for the taking, or if it was something more subtle, such as a difference in the atmosphere which lowered mental ability. In any case, they went downhill fast, so much so that now even their language has degenerated. Two things they retained, though, were the legends of their people, the tales of race greatness which form the folklore of any outcast group, and the ability to tell those tales, in startling realism, by mental projection.”

He paused, and there was a sudden excited outburst from the intent group of listeners. The majority of the men who had already experienced dreams were telling their wives or neighbours how often they had noticed the *Rilli* in them, and how neatly Carter’s theory tied together.

“Apparently what had been a pastime, or part-time entertainment feature at home, became a drug, an obsession, on this lonely planet,” Carter went on. “As their level of civilization dropped they came to depend

more and more on the stories as an escape from reality, until finally the priests were broadcasting day and night. We've seen the result. The *Rilli* walk around in a constant daze, their minds divided between observation of the real world and the ancient sagas they are hearing and seeing inside their heads. It's no wonder they appear stupid."

"It all makes good sense," said Major Chen Yi, who was standing in the listening crowd. "But please tell us how you arrived at your conclusions."

"The clue that put me on the right track was a statement Valle made. She said once that the dream she experienced the night before wouldn't have been so bad if she hadn't tried to understand it. She *couldn't* understand it, the story not being in Earthly terms or Earthly forms. If you just watched it as a meaningless series of experiences and stayed withdrawn you could probably endure it for quite a while. But when you're asleep your mind instinctively *does* try to understand, and the concepts are too alien to be grasped. The result is that the mind begins to lose the ability to distinguish between illusion and reality—and that is insanity."

"The tower, of course, was the home of the priests who remembered and broadcast the great stories," said Simpson thoughtfully. "Those signals we found but couldn't identify were of such short wave-lengths they would be transmitted on a line-of-sight basis only. And the fact they were so weak our best equipment could barely detect them only proves the brain is a better receiver than any machine. But this doesn't fully explain why you chose the drastic method of blowing up the tower, killing the broadcasting priests and ruining one valuable crawler, instead of simply telling me about your suspicions and letting us check them out together."

"Valle couldn't have lasted the night," said Carter simply. "And it hadn't occurred to me those people would be broadcasting on line-of-sight."

"Well, it's too late to worry now," said Simpson with a sigh. "I suppose your contribution to the programme will far outweigh the demerits you're in line for. You'll have to go through a formal court-martial when we get back to Earth, of course, but that shouldn't be for several years now."

He rose to his feet with a grin, the commanding officer again. "We've got a pretty big job ahead of us for the next few days. The *Rilli* will have to be rounded up and moved to a new home far away from here, in case they start broadcasting again, and we've got to come up with some method of making two crawlers do the work of three. Go to bed, Carter, and report for



duty tomorrow. Come on, everybody, let's clear out of here and let these people get some rest. They've had a rough night."

After the last unmasked guest had gone, Valle came and huddled in his arms and cried a little, but more from relief than tension. He held her quietly until she relaxed, too tired to get up and stagger off to bed.

"We've all learned a lot since yesterday," said Carter thoughtfully, "but we haven't thought about the greatest wonder of all yet. We have, right here on McKeever, citizens of another galaxy. Our planetary biologists back home are going to flip." He eased Valle to the floor, then staggered to the door instead of the bed, and stood staring into the morning sky. He could see nothing but the brightness of the McKeever day, but his imagination reached far beyond the few scattered stars separating Canopus from the lonely immensity of intergalactic space, reached beyond the void of a hundred and fifty-six thousand light-years of emptiness.

Valle was by his side. "One day we'll make that trip ourselves and tell their people of their success. But for now, dear, let me remind you we have the small job of finding what caused the *Rilli* decline, and doing something about it."

"Yes, they have to be picked up," said Carter soberly, turning back inside. He put a heavy arm around her waist. "But that's tomorrow's job."