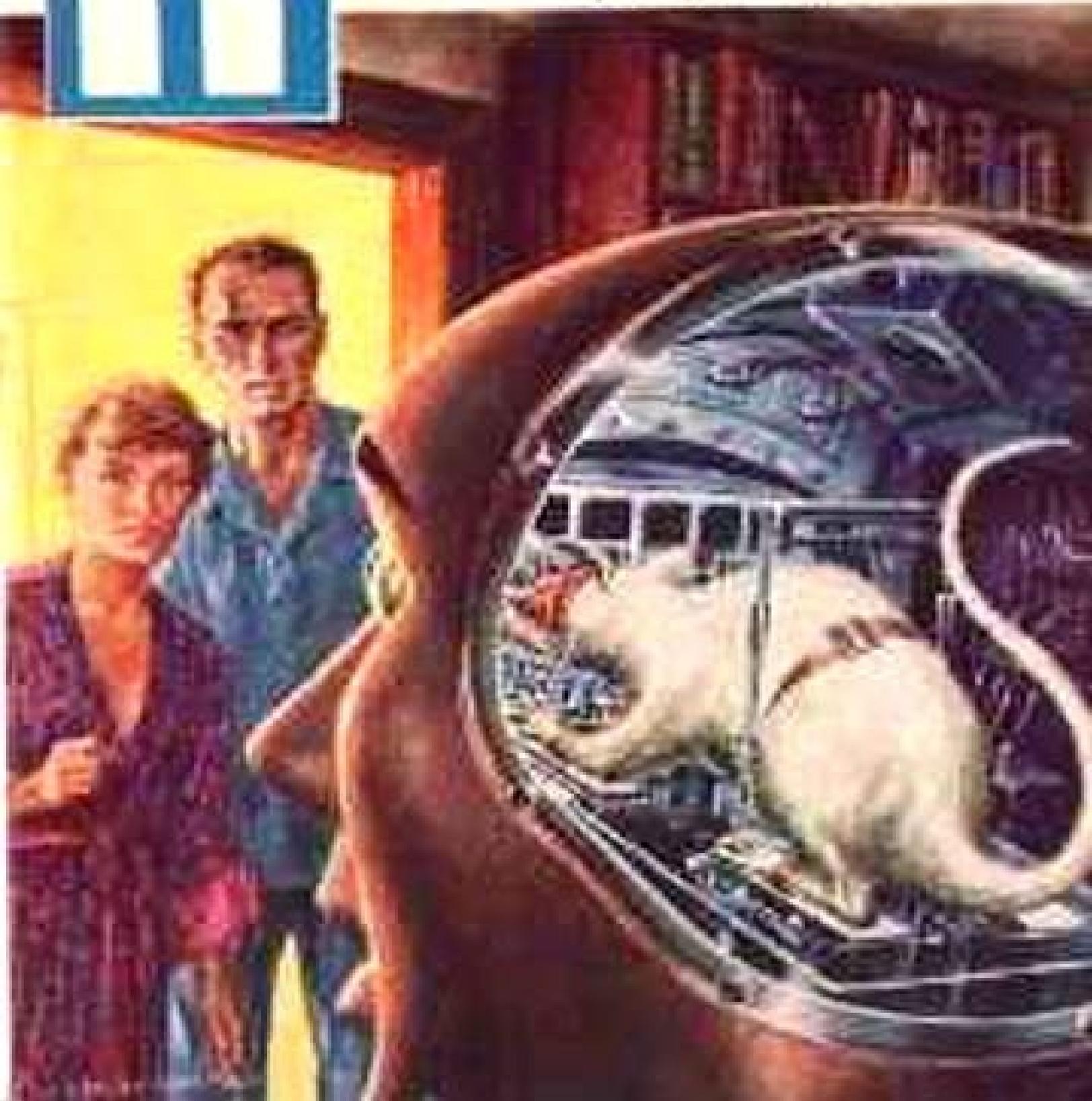


# SCIENCE FICTION

DECEMBER • 18 CENTS

## Rat in the Skull

by Rog Phillips



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*Title:* The Night of Hoggy Darn

*Author:* McKenna, Richard [Richard Milton] (1913-1964)

*Date of first publication:* December 1958

*Edition used as base for this ebook:* If, December 1958 [Buffalo, New York: Quinn Publishing Co.] [first edition]

*Date first posted:* 30 November 2017

*Date last updated:* June 4, 2018

Faded Page ebook#20180611

This ebook was produced by Al Haines

**Publisher's Note:** As part of the conversion of the book to its new digital format, we have made certain minor adjustments in its layout.

# THE NIGHT OF HOGGY DARN

BY

R. M. MCKENNA

*The talented author of "The Fishdollar Affair" returns with another compelling story of a frontier world—grim New Cornwall of the Black Learning.*

Red-haired Flinter Cole sipped his black coffee and looked around the chrome and white tile galley of Space Freighter *Gorbals*, in which he was riding down the last joint of a dogleg journey to the hermit planet of New Cornwall.

"Nothing's been published about the planet for the last five hundred years," he said in a nervous, jerky voice. "You people on *Gorbals* at least see the place, and I understand you're the only ship that does."

"That's right, twice every standard year," said the cook. He was a placid, squinting man, pink in his crisp whites. "But like I said, no girls, no drinks, nothing down there but hard looks and a punch in the nose for being curious. We mostly stay aboard, up in orbit. Them New Cornish are the biggest, meanest men I ever did see, Doc."

"I'm not a real doctor yet," Cole said, glancing down at the scholar grays he was wearing. "If I don't do a good job on New Cornwall I may never be. This is my Ph. D. trial field assignment. I should be *stuffing* myself with data on the ecosystem so I can ask the right questions when I get there. But there's nothing!"

"What's a pee aitch dee?"

"That's being a doctor. I'm an ecologist—that means I deal with everything alive, and the way it all works in with climate and geography. I can use any kind of data. I have only six months until *Gorbals* comes again to make my survey and report. If I fumble away my doctorate, and I'm twenty-three already...." Cole knitted shaggy red eyebrows in worry.

"Well hell, Doc, I can tell you things like, it's got four moons and only one whopper of a continent and it's low grav, and the forest there you won't believe even when you see it—"

"I need to know about *stompers*. Bidgrass Company wants Belconti U. to save them from extinction, but they didn't say what the threat is. They sent travel directions, a visa and passage scrip for just one man. And I only had two days for packing and library research, before I had to jump to Tristan in order to catch this ship. I've been running in the dark ever since. You'd think the Bidgrass people didn't really care."

"Price of stomper egg what it is, I doubt that," the cook said, scratching his fat jaw. "But for a fact, they're shipping less these days. Must be some kind of trouble. I never saw a stomper, but they say they're big birds that live in the forest."

"You see? The few old journal articles I did find, said they were flightless bird-homologs that lived on the plains and preyed on the great herds of something called darv cattle."

"Nothing but forest and sea for thousands of miles around Bidgrass Station, Doc. Stompers are pure hell on big

long legs, they say."

"There again! *I* read they were harmless to man."

"Tell you what, you talk to Daley. He's cargo officer and has to go down with each tender trip. He'll maybe know something can help you."

The cook turned away to inspect his ovens. Cole put down his cup and clamped a freckled hand over his chin, thinking. He thought about stomper eggs, New Cornwall's sole export and apparently, for five hundred years, its one link with the other planets of Carina sector. Their reputedly indescribable flavor had endeared them to gourmets on a hundred planets. They were symbols of conspicuous consumption for the ostentatious wealthy. No wonder most of the literature under the New Cornwall reference had turned out to be cookbooks.

Orphaned and impecunious, a self-made scholar, Cole had never tasted stomper egg.

The cook slammed an oven door on the fresh bread smell.

"Just thought, Doc. I keep a can or two of stomper egg, squeeze it from cargo for when I got a passenger to feed. How'd you like a mess for chow tonight?"

"Why not?" Cole said, grinning suddenly. "Anything may be data for an ecologist, especially if it's good to eat."

The stomper egg came to the officers' mess table as a heaped platter of bite-sized golden spheres, deep-fried in bittra oil. Their delicate, porous texture hardly required chewing. Their flavor was like—cinnamon? Peppery sandalwood? Yes, yes, and yet unique....

Cole realized in confusion that he had eaten half the platterful and the other six men had not had any. He groped for a lost feeling—was it that he and the others formed a connected biomass and that he could eat for all of them? Ridiculous!

"I'm a pig," he laughed weakly. "Here, Mr. Daley, have some."

Daley, a gingery, spry little man, said "By me" and slid the platter along. It rounded the table and returned to Cole untouched.

"Fall to, Doc," Daley said, grinning.

Cole was already reaching ... lying in his stateroom and he *was* the bunk cradling a taut, messianic body flaming with imageless dreams. He dreamed himself asleep and slept himself into shamed wakefulness needing coffee.

It was ship-night. Cole walked through dimmed lights to the galley and carried his cup of hot black coffee to main control, where he found Daley on watch, lounging against the gray enamel computer.

"I feel like a fool," Cole said.

"You're a martyr to science, Doc. Which reminds me, Cookie told me you got questions about Bidgrass Station."

"Well yes, about stompers. What's wiping them out, what's their habitat and life pattern, oh anything."

"I learned quick not to ask about stompers. I gather they're twenty feet high or so and they're penned up behind a stockade. I never saw one."

"Well dammit! I read they couldn't be domesticated."

"They're not. Bidgrass Station is in a clearing the New Cornish cut from sea to sea across a narrow neck of land.

On the west is this stockade and beyond it is Lundy Peninsula, a good half-million square miles of the damndest forest ever grew on any planet. That's where the stompers are."

"How thickly settled is this Lundy Peninsula?"

"Not a soul there, Doc. The settlement is around Car Truro on the east coast, twelve thousand miles east of Bidgrass. I never been there, but you can see from the air it isn't much."

"How big a city is Bidgrass? Does it have a university?"

Daley smiled again and shook his head. "They got fields and pastures, but it's more like a military camp than a town. I see barracks for the workers and egg hunters, hangars and shops, a big egg-processing plant and warehouses around the landing field. I never get away from the field, but I'd guess four, five thousand people at Bidgrass."

Cole sighed and put down his cup on the log desk.

"What is it they import, one half so precious as the stuff they sell?"

Daley chuckled and rocked on his toes. "Drugs, chemicals, machinery parts, hundreds of tons of Warburton energy capsules. Pistols, blasters, cases of flame charge, tanks of fire mist—you'd think they had a war on."

"That's no help. I'll make up for lost time when I get there. I'll beat their ears off with questions."

Daley's gnomish face grew serious. "Watch what you ask and who you ask, Doc. They're suspicious as hell and they hate strangers."

"They need my help. Besides, I'll deal only with scientists."

"Bidgrass isn't much like a campus. I don't know, Doc, something's wrong on that planet and I'm always glad to lift out."

"Why didn't you and the others eat any of that stomper egg?" Cole asked abruptly.

"Because the people at Bidgrass turn sick and want to slug you if you mention eating it. That's reason enough for me."

Well, that was data too, Cole thought, heading back to his stateroom.

Two days later Daley piloted the cargo tender down in a three-lap braking spiral around New Cornwall. Cole sat beside him in the cramped control room, eyes fixed on the view panel. Once he had the bright and barren moon Cairdween at upper left, above a vastly curving sweep of sun-glinting ocean, and he caught his breath in wonder.

"I know the feeling, Doc," Daley said softly. "Like being a giant and jumping from world to world."

Clouds obscured much of the sprawling, multi-lobed single continent. The sharpening of outline and hint of regularity Cole remembered noting on Tristan and his own planet of Belconti, the mark of man, was absent here. Yet New Cornwall, as a human settlement, was two hundred years older than Belconti.

The forests stretched across the south and west, broken by uplands and rain shadows, as the old books said. He saw between cloud patches the glint of lakes and the crumpled leaf drainage pattern of the great northeastern plain but, oddly, the plain was darker in color than the pinkish-yellow forest. He mentioned it to Daley.

"It's flowers and vines and moss makes it that color," the little man said, busy with controls. "Whole world in that forest top—snakes, birds, jumping things big as horses. Doc, them trees are *big*."

"Of course! I read about the epiphytal biota. And low gravity always conduces to gigantism."

"There's Lundy," Daley grunted, pointing.

It looked like a grinning ovoid monster-head straining into the western ocean at the end of a threadlike neck. Across the neck Bidgrass Station slashed between parallel lines of forest edge like a collar. Cole watched it again on the landing approach, noting the half-mile of clearing between the great wall and the forest edge, the buildings and fields rectilinear in ordered clumps east of the wall, and then the light aberration of the tender's lift field blotted it out.

"Likely I won't see you till next trip," Daley said, taking leave. "Good luck, Doc."

Cole shuffled down the personnel ramp, grateful for the weight of his two bags in the absurdly light gravity. Trucks and cargo lifts were coming across the white field from the silvery warehouses along its edge. Men also, shaggy-haired big men in loose blue garments, walking oddly without the stride and drive of leg muscles. Their faces were uniformly grim and blank to Cole, standing there uncertainly. Then a ground car pulled up and a tall old man in the same rough clothing got out and walked directly toward him. He had white hair, bushy white eyebrows over deep-set gray eyes, and a commanding beak of a nose.

"Who might you be?" he demanded.

"I'm Flinter Cole, from Belconti University. Someone here is expecting me."

The old man squinted in thought and bit his lower lip. Finally he said, "The biologist, hey? Didn't expect you until next *Gorbels*. Didn't think you could make the connections for this one."

"It left me no time at all to study up in. But when species extinction is the issue, time is important. And I'm an ecologist."

"Well," the old man said. "Well. I'm Garth Bidgrass."

He shook Cole's hand, a powerful grip quickly released.

"Hawkins there in the car will take you to the manor house and get you settled. I'll phone ahead. I'll be tied up checking cargo for a day or two, I expect. You just rest up awhile."

He spoke to the driver in what sounded like Old English, then moved rapidly across the field toward the warehouses in the same strange walk as the other men. As far as Cole could see, he did not bend his knees at all.

Hawkins, also old but frail and stooped, took Cole's bags to the car. When the ecologist tried to follow him he almost fell headlong, then managed a stiff-legged shuffle. Momentarily he longed for the Earth-normal gravity of Belconti and the ship.

They drove past unfenced fields green with vegetable and cereal crops, and fenced pastures holding beef and dairy cattle of the old Earth breeds. It was a typical human ecosystem. Then they passed a group of field workers, and surprise jolted the ecologist. They were huge—eight or nine feet tall, both men and women, all with long hair and some of them naked. They did not look up.

Cole looked at Hawkins. The old man glared at him from red-rimmed eyes and chattered something in archaic English. He speeded up, losing the giants behind a hedge, and the manor house with the palisade behind it loomed ahead.

The great fence dwarfed the house. Single baulks of grassy brown timber ten feet on a side soared two hundred feet into the air, intricately braced and stayed. High above, a flyer drifted as if on sentry duty. Half a mile beyond, dwarfing the fence in its turn, arose the thousand-foot black escarpment of the forest edge.

The manor house huddled in a walled garden with armed guards at the gate. It was two-storied and sprawling, with a flat-roofed watch tower at the southeast corner, and made of the same glassy brown timber. Hawkins stopped the car by the pillared veranda where a lumpy, gray, nondescript woman waited. Cole got out, awkwardly careful in the light gravity.

The woman would not meet his glance. "I'm Flada Vignoli, Mr. Bidgrass's niece and housekeeper," she said in a dead voice. "I'll show you your rooms." She turned away before Cole could respond.

"Let me carry the bags, I need to," he said to Hawkins, laughing uncertainly. The old man hoisted his skinny shoulders and spat.

The rooms were on the second floor, comfortable but archaic in style. The gray woman told him that Hawkins would bring his meals, that Garth Bidgrass would see him in a few days to make plans, and that Mr. Bidgrass thought he should not go about unescorted until he knew more about local conditions.

Cole nodded. "I'll want to confer with your leading biologists, Mrs. Vignoli, as soon as I can. For today, can you get me a copy of your most recent biotic survey?"

"Ain't any biologists, ain't any surveys," she said, standing in the half-closed door.

"Well, any recent book about stompers or your general zoology. It's important that I start at once."

The face under the scraggly gray hair went blanker still. "You'll have to talk to Mr. Bidgrass." She closed the door.

Cole unpacked, bathed, dressed again and explored his three rooms. Like a museum, he thought. He looked out his west windows at the palisade and forest edge. Then he decided to go downstairs, and found his door was locked.

The shock was more fear than indignation, he realized, wondering at himself. He paced his sitting room, thinking about his scholarly status and the wealth and power of Belconti, until he had the indignation flaming. Then a knock came at the door and it opened to reveal old Hawkins with a wheeled food tray.

"What do you mean, locking me in?" Cole asked hotly.

He pushed past the food tray into the hall. Hawkins danced and made shooing motions with his hands, chattering shrilly in the vernacular. Cole walked to the railing around the stairwell and looked down. At the foot of the stair a giant figure, man or woman he could not say, sat and busied itself with something in its lap.

Cole went back into his room. The food was boiled beef, potatoes and beets, plain but plentiful, plus bread and coffee. He ate heartily and looked out his windows again to see night coming on. Finally he tried the door and it was not locked. He shrugged, pushed the food tray into the hall and closed the door again. Then he shot the inside bolt.

In bed, he finally dropped off into a restless, disturbed sleep.

Emboldened by morning and a hearty tray breakfast, Cole explored. He was in a two-floor wing, and the doors into the main house were locked. Through them he heard voices and domestic clatter. Unlocked across the second-floor hall was another suite of rooms like his own. Downstairs was still another suite and along the south side a library. The door into the garden was locked.

My kingdom, Cole thought wryly. Prisoner of state!

He explored the library. Tristanian books, historical romances for the most part, none less than three hundred years old. No periodicals, nothing of New Cornwall publication. He drifted from window to window looking out at the formal garden of flower beds, hedges and white sand paths. Then he saw the girl.

She knelt in a sleeveless gray dress trimming a hedge. Her tanned and rounded arms had dimpled elbows, he noted. She turned suddenly and he saw, framed by reddish-brown curls, her oval face with small nose and firm chin. The face was unsuitably grave and the eyes wide.

She was not staring at his window, Cole decided after a qualm, but listening. Then she rose, picked up her

basket of trimmings and glided around the corner of the house. Before he could pursue her plump vision to another window, a man appeared.

He looked taller than Cole and was built massively as a stone. Straight black hair fell to his shoulders, cut square across his forehead and bound by a white fillet. Under the black bar of eyebrow the heavy face held itself in grim, unsmiling lines. He moved with that odd, unstriding New Cornish walk that suggested tremendous power held in leash.

Cole crossed the hall and watched the blue-clad form enter a door in the wing opposite. The girl was nowhere. Again Cole felt a twinge of fear, and boiled up anger to mask it.

Inside looking out, he thought. Peeping like an ecologist in a bird blind!

When Hawkins brought lunch Cole raged at him and demanded to see Garth Bidgrass. The old man chattered incomprehensibly and danced like a fighting cock. Thwarted, the geologist ate moodily and went down to the library. The garden was empty and he decided on impulse to open a window. A way of retreat, but from what and to where, he wondered as he worked at the fastenings. Just as he got it free, a woman stooped through the library door. She was at least seven feet tall.

Cole stood erect and held his breath. Not looking at him, the woman dropped to her knees and began dusting the natural wood half-panelling that encircled the room between bookcases. She had long blonde hair and a mild, vacant face; she wore a shapeless blue dress.

"Hello," Cole said.

She paid no attention.

"Hello!" he said more sharply. "Do you speak Galactic English?"

She looked at him out of empty blue eyes and went back to her work. He went past her gingerly and up to his room. There he wrote a note to Garth Bidgrass, paced and fanned his indignation, tore up the note and wrote a stronger one. When Hawkins brought his dinner, Cole beat down his chattering objections and stuffed the note into the old man's coat pocket.

"See that Bidgrass gets it at once! Do you hear, at once!" he shouted.

After nightfall, nervous and wakeful, Cole looked out on the garden by the pale light of two moons. He saw the girl, wearing the same dress, come out of the opposite wing, and decided on impulse to intercept her.

As he climbed through the library window he said to himself, "Anything may be data to an ecologist, especially if it's pretty to look at."

He met her full face at the house corner and her hands flew up, fending. She turned and he said, "Please don't run away from me. I want to talk to you."

She turned back with eyes wide and troubled, in what nature had meant to be a merry, careless face.

"Do you know who I am?" he asked.

She nodded. "Uncle Garth says I'm not to talk to you." It was a little girl's voice, tremulous.

"Why? What am I, some kind of monster?"

"N-no. You're an outworlder, from a great, wealthy planet."

"Belconti is a very ordinary planet. What's your name?"

"I'm Pia—Pia Vignoli." The voice took on more assurance, but the plump body stayed poised for flight.

"Well I'm Flinter Cole, and I have a job to do on this planet. It's *terribly* important that I get started. Will you help me?"

"How can I, Mr. Cole? I'm nobody. I don't know anything." She moved away, and he followed, awkwardly.

"Girls know all sorts of things that would interest an ecologist," he protested. "Tell me all you know about stompers."

"Oh *no!* I mustn't talk about stompers."

"Well talk about nothing then, like girls do," he said impatiently. "What's the name of that moon?" He pointed overhead.

Tension left her and she smiled a little. "Morwenna," she said. "That one just selling into Lundy Forest is Annis. You can tell Annis by her bluish shadows that are never the same."

"Good girl! How about the other two, the ones that aren't up?"

"One's Cairdween and the other, the red one—oh, I daren't talk about moons either."

"Not even *moons*? Really, Miss Vignoli—"

"Let's not talk at all. I'll show you how to walk, you do look so funny all spraddled and scraping your feet. I was born off-planet and I had to learn it myself."

She showed him the light down-flex of the foot that threw the body more forward than up, and he learned to wait out the strange micropause before his weight settled on the other foot. With a little practice he got it, walking up and down the moonlit path beside her in an effortless toe dance. Then he learned to turn corners and to jump.

"Pia," he said once. "Pia. I like the sound, but it doesn't suit this rough planet."

"I was born on Tristan," she murmured. "Please don't ask—"

"I won't. But no reason why I can't talk. May I call you Pia?"

He described Belconti and the university, and his doctorate, at stake in this field assignment. Suddenly she stopped short and pointed to where a red moon lifted above the dark cliff of the eastern forest.

"It's late," she said. "There comes Hoggy Darn. Good night, Mr. Cole."

She danced away faster than he could follow. He crawled back through his window in the reddish moonlight.

Next afternoon Cole faced Garth Bidgrass in the library. The old man sat with folded arms, craggy face impassive. Cole, standing, leaned his weight on his hands and thrust his sharp face across the table. His freckles stood out against his angry pallor, and sunlight from the end window blazed in his red hair.

"Let me sum up," he said, thin-lipped. "For obscure reasons I must be essentially a prisoner. All right. You have no education here, no biologists of any kind. All right. Now here is what they expect of me on Belconti: to rough out the planetary ecosystem, set up a functional profile series for the stomper and its interacting species, make energy flow charts and outline the problem. If my report is incorrect or incomplete, Belconti won't send the right task group of specialists. Then you spend your money for nothing and I lose my doctorate. I must have skilled helpers, a clerical staff, *masses* of data!"

"You've said all that before," Bidgrass said calmly. "I told you, I can provide none of that."

"Then it's hopeless! Why did you ever send for an ecologist?"

"I sent for help. Belconti sent the ecologist."

"Help me to *help* you, then. You must try to understand, Mr. Bidgrass, science can't operate in a vacuum. I can't work up a total planetary biology. I must *start* with that data."

"Do what you can for us," Bidgrass said. "They won't blame you on Belconti when they know and we won't blame you here if it doesn't help."

Cole sat down, shaking his head. "But Belconti won't count it as a field job, not in ecology. You *will* not understand my position. Let me put it this way: suppose someone gave you a hatchet and told you, only one man, to cut down Lundy Forest?"

"I could start," the old man said. His eyes blazed and he smiled grimly. "I'd leave my mark on one tree."

Colt felt suddenly foolish and humbled.

"All right," he said. "I'll do what I can. What do you think is wiping out the stompers?"

"I know what. A parasite bird that lays its eggs on stomper eggs. Its young hatch first and eat the big egg. The people call them piskies."

"I'll need to work out its life cycle, look for weak points and natural enemies. Who knows a lot about these piskies?"

"I know as much as anybody, and I've never seen a grown one. We believe they stay in the deep forest. But there are always three to each stomper egg and they're vicious. Go for a man's eyes or jugular. Egg hunters kill dozens every day."

"I'll want dozens, alive if possible, and a lab. Can you do that much?"

"Yes. You can use Dr. Rudall's lab at the hospital." Bidgrass stood up and looked at his watch. "The egg harvest should start coming in soon down at the plant and there may be a dead pisky. Come along and see."

As Hawkins guided the car past a group of the giant field workers, Cole felt Bidgrass' eyes on him. He turned, and the old man said slowly, "Stick to piskies, Mr. Cole. We'll all be happier."

"Anything may be data to an ecologist, especially if he overlooks it," Cole murmured stubbornly.

Hawkins cackled something about "Hoggy Darn itha hoose" and speeded up.

In the cavernous, machinery-lined plant Cole met the manager. He was the same powerful, long-haired man Cole had seen in the garden. "Morgan." Bidgrass introduced him with the one name, adding, "He doesn't use Galactic English."

Morgan bent his head slightly, unsmiling, ignoring Cole's offered hand. His wide-set eyes were so lustrously black that they seemed to have no pupils, and under the hostile stare Cole flushed angrily. They walked through the plant, Morgan talking to Bidgrass in the vernacular. His voice was deep and resonant, organ-like.

Bidgrass explained to Cole how stomper egg was vac-frozen under biostat and sealed in plastic for export. He pointed out a piece of shell, half an inch thick and highly translucent. From its radius of curvature Cole realized that stomper eggs were much larger than he had pictured them. Then someone shouted and Bidgrass said a flyer was coming in. They went out on the loading dock.

The flyer alongside carried six men forward of the cargo space and had four heavy blasters mounted almost like

a warcraft. As the dock crew unloaded two eggs into dollies, other flyers were skittering in, further along the dock. Bidgrass pointed out to Cole on one huge four by three-foot egg the bases of broken parasite eggs cemented to its shell. Through a hole made by piskies, the ecologist noted that the substance of the large egg was a stiff gel. Morgan flashed a strong pocket lamp on the shell and growled something.

"There may be a pisky hiding inside," Bidgrass said. "You are lucky, Mr. Cole."

Morgan stepped inside and returned almost at once wearing goggles and heavy gloves, and carrying a small power saw. He used the light again, traced an eight-inch square with his finger, and sawed it out. The others, all but Cole, stood back. Morgan pulled away the piece and something black flew up, incredibly swift, with a shrill, keening sound.

Cole looked after it and Morgan struck him heavily in the face, knocking him to hands and knees. Feet stamped and scraped around him and Cole saw his own blood dripping on the dock. He stood up dazed and angry.

"Morgan saved your eye," Bidgrass told him, "but the pisky took a nasty gouge at your cheekbone. I'll have Hawkins drive you to the hospital—you wanted to meet Dr. Rudall anyway."

Cole examined the crushed pisky on the way to the hospital. Big as his fist, with a tripartite beak, it was no true bird. The wings were flaps of black skin that still wrinkled and folded flexibly with residual life. It had nine toes on each foot and seemed covered with fine scales.

Dr. Rudall treated Cole's cheek in a surprisingly large and well appointed dressing room. He was a gray, defeated-looking man and told Cole in an apologetic voice that he had taken medical training on Planet Tristan many years ago ... out of touch now. His small lab looked hopelessly archaic, but he promised to biostat the dead pisky until Cole could get back to it.

Hawkins was not with the ground car. Cole drove back to the plant without him. He wanted another look at the mode of adhesion of pisky egg on stomper egg. He drove to the further end of the plant and mounted the dock from outside, to freeze in surprise. Twenty feet away, the dock crew was unloading a giant.

He was naked, strapped limply to a plank, and his face was bloody. Half his reddish hair and beard was singed away. Then a hand hit Cole's shoulder and spun him around. It was Morgan.

"Clear out of here, you!" the big man said in fluent, if plain, Galactic English. "Don't you ever come here without Garth Bidgrass brings you!" He seemed hardly to move his lips, but the voice rumbled like thunder.

"Well," thought Cole, driving back after Hawkins, "datums are data, if they bite off your head."

"For your own safety, Mr. Cole, you must not again leave the company of either Hawkins or Dr. Rudall when you are away from the house," Bidgrass told Cole the next morning. "The people have strange beliefs that would seem sheer nonsense to you. but their impulsive acts, if you provoke them, will be unpleasantly real."

"If I knew their beliefs I might know how to behave."

"It is your very presence that is provoking. If you were made of salt you would have to stay out of the rain. Here you are an outworlder and you must stay within certain limits. It's like that."

"All right," Cole said glumly.

He worked all day at the hospital dissecting the pisky, but found no parasites. He noted interesting points of anatomy. The three-part beak of silicified horn was razor sharp and designed to exert a double shearing stress. The eye was triune and of fixed focus; the three eyeballs lay in a narrow isosceles triangle pattern, base down, behind a common triangular conjunctiva with incurved sides and narrow base. The wings were elastic and stiffened with a fan of nine multi-jointed bones that probably gave them grasping and manipulating power in the living organism. None

of it suggested the limit factor he sought.

Dr. Rudall helped him make cultures in a sterile broth derived from the pisky's own tissues. In the evening a worker from the plant brought eleven dead piskies and Cole put them in biostat. He rode home with Hawkins to his solitary dinner feeling he had made a start.

Day followed day. Cole remained isolated in his wing, coming and going through his back door into the garden. He became used to the mute giant domestics who swept and cleaned. Now and then he exchanged a few words with the sad Mrs. Vignoli, Pia's mother, he learned, or with old Bidgrass, in chance meetings. He watched Pia through his windows sometimes and knew she fled when he came out. There was something incongruous in the timid wariness with which her plump figure and should-be-merry face confronted the world.

Once he caught her and held her wrist. "Why do you run away from me, Pia?"

She pulled away gently. "I'll get you in trouble, Mr. Cole. They don't trust me either. My father was a Tristanian."

"Who are *they*?"

"Just they. Morgan, all of them."

"If we're both outworld, we should stick together. I'm the loneliest man on this planet, Pia."

"I know the feeling," she said, looking down.

He patted her curls. "Let's be friends then, and you help me. Where do these giant people come from?"

Her head jerked up angrily. "That has nothing to do with your work! I'm inworld too, Mr. Cole. My mother is of the old stock."

Cole let her go in silence.

He began working evenings in the lab, losing himself in work. Few of the blue-clad men and women he encountered would look at him, but he sensed their hostile glances on the back of his neck. He felt islanded in a sea of dull hatred. Only Dr. Rudall was vaguely friendly.

Cole found no parasites in hundreds of dissected piskies, but his cultures were frequently contaminated by a fungus that formed dark red, globular fruiting bodies. When he turned to cytology he found that what he had supposed to be an incredibly complex autonomic nervous system was instead a fungal mycelium, so fine as to be visible only in phase contrast. He experimented with staining techniques and verified it in a dozen specimens, then danced the surprised Dr. Rudall around the lab.

"I've done it! One man against a planet!" he chortled. "We'll culture it, then work up mutant strains of increasing virulence—oh for a Belconti geno-mycologist now!"

"It's not pathogenic, I'm afraid," Dr. Rudall said. "I ... ah ... read once, that idea was tried centuries ago ... all the native fauna have fungal symbiotes ... protect them against all known pathogenic microbiota ... should have mentioned it, I suppose...."

"Yes, you should have told me! My God, there go half the weapons of applied ecology over the moon ... my time wasted ... why didn't you tell me?" The ecologist's sharp face flushed red as his hair with frustrated anger.

"You didn't ask ... hardly know what ecology means ... didn't realize it was important..." the old doctor stammered.

"*Everything* is important to an ecologist, especially what people won't tell him!" Cole stormed.

He tried to stamp out of the lab, and progressed in a ludicrous bouncing that enraged him even more. He

shouted for Hawkins and went home early.

In his rooms he brooded on his wrongs for an hour, then went downstairs and thundered on the locked door into the main house, shouting Garth Bidgrass' name. The sounds beyond hushed. Then Garth Bidgrass opened the door, looking stern and angry.

"Come into the library, Mr. Cole," he said. "Try to control yourself."

In the library Cole poured out his story while Bidgrass, standing with right elbow resting atop a bookcase, listened gravely.

"You must understand," Cole finished, "to save the stompers we must cut down the piskies. Crudely put, the most common method is to find a disease or a parasite that affects them, and breed more potent strains of it. But that won't work on piskies, and I could have and should have known that to begin with."

"Then you must give up?"

"*No!* Something must prey on them or their eggs in their native habitat, a macrobiotic limit factor I can use. I must learn the adult pisky's diet; if its range is narrow enough that can be made a limit factor."

The old man frowned. "How would you learn all this?"

"Field study. I want at least twenty intelligent men and a permanent camp somewhere in Lundy Forest."

Bidgrass folded his arms and shook his head. "Can't spare the men. And it's too dangerous—stompers would attack you day and night. I've had over two hundred egg hunters killed this year, and they're trained men in teams."

"Let me go out with a team then, use my own two eyes."

"Men wouldn't have you. I told you, they're superstitious about out-worlders."

"Then it's failure! Your money and my doctorate go down the drain."

"You're young, you'll get your doctorate another place," the old man said. "You've tried hard, and I'll tell Belconti that." His voice was placating, but Cole thought he saw a wary glint in the hard gray eyes.

Cole shrugged. "I suppose I'll settle in and wait for *Gorbals*. But I've had pleasanter vacations."

He turned his back and scanned the shelves ostentatiously for a book. Bidgrass left the room quietly.

It was a boring evening. Pia was not in the garden. Cole looked at the barrier and the incredible cliff of Lundy Forest. He would like to get into that forest, just once. Hundred and fifty days before *Gorbals* ... why had they ever sent for him? They seemed to be conspiring to cheat him of his doctorate. They had, too.... Finally he slept.

He woke to a distant siren wail and doors slamming and feet scraping in the main house. Dressing in haste, he noted a red glow in the sky to southward and heard a booming noise. In the hall outside his room he met Pia, face white and eyes enormous.

"Stomper attack!" she cried. "Come quickly, you must hide in the basement with us!"

He followed her into the main house and downstairs to where Mrs. Vignoli was herding a crowd of the giant domestics down a doored staircase. The giant women were tossing their heads nervously. Several were naked and one was tearing off her dress. Cole drew back.

"I'm an ecologist, I want to see," he said. "Stompers are data."

He pushed her gently toward the women and walked out on the front veranda. From southward came an incredibly rich and powerful chord of organ music, booming and swelling, impossibly sustained. Old Hawkins danced in the driveway in grotesque pointed leaps, shrieking "Hoosa maida! Hoosa maida!" Overhead the moons Cairdween, Morwenna and Annis of the blue shadows were arranged in a perfect isosceles triangle, narrow base parallel to the horizon. It stirred something in Cole, but the swelling music unhinged his thought. With a twinge of panic he turned, to find Pia at his elbow.

"They're after me, after us," she cried against the music.

"I must see. You go find shelter, Pia."

"With you I feel less alone now," she said. "One can't really hide, anyway. Come to the watch tower and you'll see."

He followed her through the house and up two flights to the roof of the tower on the southeast corner. As they stepped into the night air, the great organ sound enwrapped them, and Cole saw the southern sky ablaze, with flyers swooping and black moles hurtling through the glare. Interwoven pencils of ion-flame flickered in the verging darkness and the ripping sound of heavy blasters came faintly through the music.

A hundred-yard section of the barrier was down in flames, and the great, bobbing, leggy shapes of stompers came bounding through it while others glided down from the top. Flyers swarmed like angry bees around the top of the break, firing mounted blasters and tearing away great masses of wood. The powerful chord of music swelled unendurably in volume and exultant richness until Cole cried out and shook the girl.

"It plucks at my backbone and I can't think! Pia, Pia, what *is* that music?"

"It's the stompers singing," she shouted back.

He shook his head. Bidgrass Station seethed, lights everywhere, roads crowded with trucks. Around the base of the breakthrough a defense perimeter flared with the blue-violet of blasters and the angry red of flame guns. As Cole watched it was overrun and darkened in place after place, only to reform further out as reserves came into action. Expanding jerkily, pushed this way and that, the flaming periphery looked like a fire-membrane stressed past endurance by some savage contained thing. With a surge of emotion Cole realized it was men down there, with their guns and their puny muscles and their fragile lives against two-legged, boat-shaped monsters twenty feet high.

"Sheer power of biomass," he thought. "Even their shot-down bodies are missiles, to crush and break." A sudden eddy in the flaming defense line brought it to within half a mile of the house. Cole could see men die against the glare, in the great music.

The girl pressed close to him and whimpered, "Oh, start the fire mist! Morwenna pity them!" Cole put his arm tightly around her.

A truck convoy pulled up by the manor house and soldiers were everywhere, moving quickly and surely. A group hauled a squat, vertical cylinder on wheels crashing through the ornamental shrubbery. Violet glowing metal vaning wound about it in a double helix.

"It's a Corbin powercaster," Pia shouted into Cole's ear. "It broadcasts power to the portable blasters so the men don't heed to carry pack charges or lose time changing them."

Cole looked at the soldiers. The same big men he saw every day, the same closed and hostile faces, but now a wild and savage joy shone in them. This was their human meaning to themselves, their justification. The red boundary roared down on them, they would be dying in a few minutes, but they were braced and fiercely ready.

The music swelled impossibly loud and Cole knew that he too was going to die with them, despised outworlder that he was. He hugged the girl fiercely and tried to kiss her.

"Let me in your world, Pia!" he cried.

She pulled away. "Look! The fire mist! Oh thank you, good Morwenna!"

He saw it, a rose pink paled by nearer flame, washing lazily against the black cliff edge of Lundy Forest. It grew, boiling up over the barrier in places, spilling through the gap, and the great, agonizing chord of music muted and dwindled. The flame-perimeter began shrinking and still the fire mist grew, staining the night sky north and south beyond eye-reach. The song became a mournful wailing and the soldiers in the garden moved forward for the mopping up.

"Pia, I've got to go down there. I've got to see a stomper close up."

She was trembling and crying with reaction. "I think they'll be too busy to mind," she said. "But don't go too far in ... Flinter."

He ran down the stairs and through the unguarded gate toward the fought-over area. Wounded men were being helped or carried past him, but no one noticed him. He found a stomper, blaster-torn but not yet dead, and stopped to watch the four-foot tripart beak snap feebly and the dark wings writhe and clutch. The paired vertical eyelid folds rolled apart laterally to reveal three eyes under a single triangular conjunctiva, lambent in the flame-shot darkness. Soldiers passed unheeding while Cole stood and wondered. Then a hand jerked violently at his arm. It was Morgan.

Morgan wordlessly marched him off to a knot of men nearer the mopping up line and pushed him before Garth Bidgrass. Sweat dripped from flaring eyebrows down the grim old face, and over a blistered right cheek. A heavy blaster hung from the old man's body harness.

"Well, Mr. Cole, is this data?" he asked dourly. "Have you come out to save stompers?"

"I wish I could have saved men, Mr. Bidgrass. I wanted to help," Cole said.

"Another like this and you may have to," Bidgrass said, less sharply. "It was close work, lad."

"I can help Dr. Rudall. You must have many wounded."

"Good, good," the old man said approvingly. "The men will take that kindly and so will I."

"One favor," Cole said. "Will you have your men save half a dozen living stompers for me? I have another idea."

"Well, I don't know," Bidgrass said. "The men won't like it ... but a few days, maybe ... yes, I'll save you some."

"Thank you, sir." Cole turned away, catching a thick scowl from Morgan. Overhead the three moons were strung in a ragged line across the sky, and Hoggy Darn was rising.

Cole worked around the clock at the hospital, sterilizing instruments and helping Dr. Rudall with dressings. He was surprised to see other doctors, many nurses and numerous biofield projectors as modern as any on Belconti. Some of the wounded were women. All of them, wounded and unwounded, seemed in a shared mood of exaltation. He caught glimpses of Pia, working too. She seemed less poised for flight, tired but happy, and she smiled at him.

After three days Cole saw his stompers in a stone-floored pen at the slaughter house. Earth breed cattle lowed in adjacent pens. Four stompers still lived, their bodies blaster torn and their legs crudely hamstringed so they could not stand. They lay with heads together and the sun glinted on the blue-black, iridescent scales covering the domed heads and long necks.

Three shock-headed butchers stood by, assigned to help him. Their distaste for Cole and the job was so evident that he hurried through the gross dissection of the two dead stompers at one end of the same pen. After an hour he

thought to ask, as best he could, whether the living stompers were being given food and water. When one man understood, black hatred crossed his face and he spat on Cole's shoe. The ecologist flushed, then shrugged and got on with the job.

It brought him jarring surprises culminating in a tentative conclusion late on the second day. Then the situation began to fall apart. Working alone for the moment, Cole opened the stomach of the second stomper and found in it half-digested parts of a human body. Skull and humerus size told him it was one of the giants.

First pulling a flap of mesentery over the stomach incision, Cole went into the office and phoned Dr. Rudall to come at once. Coming out, he heard angry shouts and saw two of his helpers running to join the third, who stood pointing into the carcass. Then all three seized axes, ran across the pen and began hacking at the necks of the living stompers.

The great creatures boomed and writhed, clacking their beaks and half rising on their wings, unable to defend themselves. The butchers howled curses, and the stompers broke into a mournful wailing harmonized with flesh-creeping subsonics. Cole shouted and pleaded, finally wrested an axe from one and mounted guard over the last living stomper. He stood embattled, facing a growing crowd of butchers from the plant, when Dr. Rudall arrived.

"Dr. Rudall, explain to these maniacs why I must keep this stomper alive!" he cried angrily.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Cole, they will kill it in spite of you."

"But Garth Bidgrass ordered—"

"In spite of him. There are factors you don't understand, Mr. Cole. You are yourself in great danger." The old doctor's hands trembled.

Cole thought rapidly. "All right, will they wait a day? I want tissue explants for a reason I'll explain later. If you'll help me work up the nutrient tonight—"

"Our pisky nutrient will work. We can take your samples within the hour. Let me call the hospital."

He spoke rapidly to the glowering butchers in the vernacular, then hurried into the building. An hour later the stomper was dead, and Hawkins drove Cole and the doctor back to their lab with the explants.

"I've almost got it," Cole said happily. "Several weeks and two more bits of information and I'll tell you. In spite of all odds, one man against a planet—this will found my professional reputation back on Belconti."

Once again Cole faced Garth Bidgrass across the round table in the library. This time he felt vastly different.

"The piskies are really baby stompers," he said, watching the craggy old face for its reaction. It did not change.

"I suspected it when I saw how the smaller eggs fused with the large egg, with continuous laminae," Cole went on. "There was the morphological resemblance, too. But when I dissected two mature stompers I found immature eggs. Even before entry into the oviduct what you call pisky eggs are filamented to the main body of cytoplasm."

Disappointingly, Bidgrass did not marvel. He squinted and cocked his head. Finally he said, "Do you mean the piskies lay their eggs internally in the stompers?"

"Impossible! I made a karyotype analysis of pisky and stomper tissue and they are *identical*, I tell you. My working hypothesis for now is that pisky eggs are fertilized polar bodies. It's not unknown. But that the main body should be sterile and serve as an external food source—that's new, I'm sure. That will get my name in the journals all through Carina sector."

He could not help smiling happily. Bidgrass bit his lower lip and stared keenly, not speaking. Cole became nettled.

"I hope you see the logic," he said. "What threatens your stompers is harvest pressure from your own egg hunters. Stop it for a few decades, or set aside breeding areas, and you can have a whole planetful again."

The old man scowled and stood up. "We'll not stop," he said gruffly. "There are still plenty of stompers. Remember last month." He walked to the end window and back, then sat down again still looking grim.

"Don't be too sure," Cole objected. "I haven't finished my report. I made a Harvey analysis on the tissues of one stomper. It involves culturing clones, measuring growth rates and zones of migration and working out a complex set of ratios—I won't go into details. But when I fitted my figures into Harvey's formula it indicated *unmistakably* that the stompers have a critical biomass."

"What does that mean?"

"Think of a species as one great animal that never dies, of which each individual is only a part. Can you do that?"

"Yes!" the old man exploded, sitting bolt upright.

"Well, the weight of a cross-section of the greater animal at any moment in time is its biomass. Many species have a point or value of critical biomass such that, if it falls below that point, the greater animal dies. The species loses its will to live, decays, drifts into extinction in spite of all efforts to save it. The stomper is such a species, no doubt whatever. Do you see how the slaughter a month ago may *already* have extinguished them as a species?"

Bidgrass nodded, smiling grimly. His eyes held a curious light.

"Tell me, Mr. Cole, your Harvey formula—do *human beings* have a critical biomass?"

"Yes, biologically," Cole said, surprised. "But in our case a varying part of the greater animal is carried in our culture, our symbol system, and is not directly dependent on biomass. A mathematical anthropologist could tell you more than I can."

Bidgrass placed his hands palm down on the table and leaned back in sudden resolution.

"Mr. Cole, you force me to tell you something I had been minded to hold back. I already know a good part of what you have just told me. I wish to exterminate the stompers and I will do so. But I meant for you to go back to Belconti thinking it was the piskies."

Cole propped his chin on folded hands and raised his eyebrows. "I half suspected that. But I fooled you, didn't I?"

"Yes, and I admire you for it. Now let me tell you more. Stomper egg brings a very high price and I have kept it higher by storing large reserves. When it is known the stomper is extinct, the rarity value of my reserve will be enormous. It will mean an end of this harsh life for me and for my grandniece after me."

Cole's lip curled, and red mounted in the old man's face as he talked, but he went on doggedly.

"I want the pisky theory and the news of stomper extinction to be released through Belconti University. The news will spread faster and be more readily believed and I will avoid a certain moral stigma—"

"And now I've crossed you up!"

"You can still do it. I can ease your conscience with a settlement of—say—five thousand solars a year for life."

Cole leaped up and leaned across the table.

"No!" he snapped. "Old man, you don't know how ecologists feel about the greed-murder of species. What I *will* do is work through Belconti on your government at Car Truro, warn it that you are about to destroy an important planetary resource."

Bidgrass stood up too, scowling darkly red.

"Not so fast, young fellow. I have copies of your early notes in which you call the piskies the critical limit factor in stomper extinction. Almost three hundred people were killed in that stomper attack, and you could easily have been one of them. If you had, I would naturally have reported it via the next *Gorbals* to Belconti and sent along your notes to date—do you follow me?"

"Yes. A threat."

"A counter-threat. Think it over for a few days, Mr. Cole."

Cole sat glumly in his room waiting for his dinner and wondering if it would be poisoned. When old Hawkins tapped, he pulled open the door, only to find Pia instead with a service for two. She was rosy and smiling in a low-cut, off-shoulder brown dress he had not seen before.

"May I eat dinner with you tonight, Flinter?" she asked.

"Please do," he said, startled. "Am I people now, or something?"

"Uncle Garth says now that you know—" She broke off, blushing still more.

"I don't like what I know," he said somberly, "but it's not you, Pia. Here, let me."

He pulled the cart into the room and helped her set the things on his table. Pia was lovely, he decided, wanting to caress the smooth roundness of her shoulders and dimpled arms. When she sat across the small table from him he could not help responding to the swell of her round breasts barely below the neckline. But her manner seemed forced and she looked more frightened than ever.

"You look like a little rabbit that knows it's strayed too far from the woods, Pia. What *are* you always afraid of?"

Her smile faded. "Not because I'm too far from the woods," she said. "What's a rabbit? But let's not talk about fear."

They talked of food and weather through a more than usually elaborate dinner. There was a bottle of Tristanian *kresch* to follow it. Cole splashed the blue wine into the two crystal goblets, gave her one and held up his own.

"Here's to the richest little girl on Tristan someday," he said, half mockingly.

Tears sprang to her eyes. "I don't want to be rich. I just want a home away from New Cornwall, just anywhere. I was born on Tristan. Oh Flinter, what you must think—" She began crying in earnest.

He patted her shoulder. "Forgive me for a fool, Pia. Tell me about Tristan. I had only one day there, waiting for *Gorbals'* tender."

She spoke of her childhood on Tristan, and the tension eased in both. Finally she proposed a picnic for the next day, the two of them to take a sports flyer into the forest top. He agreed with pleasure and squeezed her hand in saying good night.

She squeezed back a little. But she still looked frightened.

Next day Pia wore a brief yellow playsuit, and Cole could not keep his eyes off her. When he was loading the picnic hamper into the small flyer before the main hangar, she suddenly pressed close to him. He followed her wide-

eyed gaze over his right shoulder and saw Morgan bulking darkly ten feet away.

"Hello there, Mr. Morgan," Cole said into the impassive face under the black bar of eyebrow.

Morgan rumbled in vernacular and walked on. His lips did not move.

"You're afraid of Morgan," Cole said when he had the flyer aloft and heading east.

"He's a bard. He has a power," she said. "Today, let's forget him."

Cole looked back at the bulk of Lundy Peninsula, swelling lost into blue-green distance from the narrow isthmus. The straight slash of Bidgrass Station from sea to sea looked puny beside the mighty forest towering on either side. Then Pia had his arm and wanted him to land.

He grounded on a pinkish-green mass of lichen several acres in area. Pia assured him it would support the flyer, reminding him of the planet's low gravity.

The resilient surface gave off a fragrance as they walked about on it. In a sea all around their island, branches of the great forest trees thrust up, leafy and flowering and bedecked with a profusion of epiphytal plants in many shapes and colors. Bright-hued true birds darted from shadow into sunlight and back again, twittering and crying.

"It's beautiful," he said. And so was Pia, he thought, watching her on tiptoe reaching to a great white flower. The attractive firmness of her skin, the roundness and dimpling, *ripeness*, that was the word he wanted. And her eyes.

"Pia, you're not frightened any more!"

It was true. The long-lashed brown eyes were merry as nature meant them to be.

"It's peaceful and safe," she said. "When I come to the forest top I never want to go back to Bidgrass Station."

"Too bad we must, and let's pretend we don't," he said, pointing to a cluster of red-gold fruits. "Are those good to eat?"

"Too good. That's the trouble with New Cornwall."

"What do you mean?"

"Race you back to the flyer," she cried, and danced away, bare limbs twinkling in the sunlight. He floundered after.

The lunch was good and she had brought along the rest of the bottle of *kresch*. They sipped it seated beside the flyer while she tried to teach him New Cornish folk songs. Her small, clear singing blended with that of the birds around them.

"I catch parts of it," he said. "As an undergraduate a few years ago I studied the pre-space poets. I can read Old English, but it is strange to my ear."

"I could teach you."

"I love one wry-witted ancient named Robert Graves. How does it go: *If strange things happen where she is—* no, I can't recall it now."

"I could write the songs out for you."

"The beauty is in you and your voice. Just sing."

She sang, something about a king with light streaming from his hair, coming naked out of the forest to bring love into his kingdom. Small white clouds drifted in the blue sky, and blue Annis slept just above the rustling

branches that guarded the secret of their island. He listened and watched her.

She was softly rounded as the clouds, and her clustered brown curls made an island of the vivid face expressing the song she sang so bird-like and naturally. She was vital, compact, self closed, perfect—like one of the great flowers nodding in the breeze along the island shore—and his heart yearned across to her.

"Pia," he said, breaking into the song, "do you really want to get away from New Cornwall?"

She nodded, eyes suddenly wide, lips still parted.

"Come with me to Belconti then. Right now. We'll cross to Car Truro and wait there for *Gorbals*."

The light dimmed in her face. "Why Car Truro?"

"Pia, it's hard to tell you. I'm afraid of your great-uncle ... I want to contact the planetary government."

"It's no good at Car Truro, Flinter. Can't you just come back to Bidgrass Station and ... and ... do what Uncle Garth wants?"

He could barely hear the last. The fear was back in her eyes.

"Do you know what he wants?"

"Yes." The brown curls drooped.

Cole stood up. "So *that's* the reason—well, I'll not do it, do you hear? Garth Bidgrass is an evil, greedy old man and maybe it runs in the blood."

She jumped up, eyes more angry now than fearful. "He is not! He's trying to save you! He's good and noble and ... and *great!* If you only knew the truth—Morwenna forgive me!" She clapped her hand to her mouth.

"*Tell* me the truth then, since I'm still being made a Belconti fool of. What *is* the truth?"

"I've said too much. Now I'll have to tell Uncle Garth—" She began crying.

"Tell him what? That I know he's a liar? That you failed as a—" He could not quite say the word.

"It's true I was supposed to make you love me and I tried and I can't because ... because..." she ended in incoherent sobbing.

Cole stroked her hair and comforted her. "I've been hasty again," he apologized. "I'm still running in the dark, and that makes for stumbles. Let's go back, and I'll talk to your great-uncle again."

In the morning Garth Bidgrass, looking tired and stern, invited Cole to breakfast with the family. Cole had never been in the large, wood-panelled room overlooking the south garden through broad windows. Pia was subdued, Mrs. Vignoli strangely cheerful. The meal, served by a giant maid, was the customary plain porridge and fried meat.

The women left when the maid cleared the table. Bidgrass poured more coffee, then leaned back and looked across at Cole.

"Mr. Cole, I did you a wrong in having you sent here. I kept you in the dark for your own protection. Can you believe that?"

"I can believe that you believe it."

"You came too soon. You were too curious, too smart. I have had to compound that wrong with others to Pia and my own good name."

Cole smiled. "I know I'm curious. But why can't I know—"

"You can, lad. You've nosed through to it and I'll tell you if you insist. But it will endanger you even more and I wish you would forego it."

Cole shook his head. "I'm an ecologist. If I have the big picture, maybe I can help."

"I thought you'd say that. Well, history first, and settle yourself because it is a big picture and not a pretty one. This planet was settled directly from Earth in the year 145 After Space, almost eight hundred years ago. It seemed ideal—native protein was actually superior to Earth protein in human metabolism. Easy climate, geophysically stable, no diseases—but planetology was not much of a science in those days.

"The colony won political independence in 202 A.S. It had a thriving trade in luxury foods, mostly stomper egg concentrates—freight was dear then. Settlements radiated out from Car Truro across the plains. Food was to be had for the taking in the mild climate and it was a kind of paradise. *Paradise!*"

The old man's voice rang hard on the last word and Cole stiffened. Bidgrass went on.

"Early in the third century our social scientists began to worry about the unnatural way the culture graded from the complexity of Car Truro to a simple pattern of mud huts and food gathering along the frontiers. Children of successive generations were taller than their parents and much less willing or able to use symbols. By the time a minority decided the trend should be reversed, the majority of the people could not be roused to see a danger."

"Earth life is normally resistant to low-grav gigantism," Cole said. "I wonder—"

"It was all the native foods they ate, but mainly stomper egg. There are more powerful and quicker-acting substances in the forest fungi, but then the population was all in the eastern grasslands, where the stompers ranged."

"I read they were a plains animal."

"Yes, and harmless too, except for their eggs. Well, the minority set up a dictatorship and began cultivating Earth plants and animals. They passed laws limiting the mechanical simplicity of households and regulating diets. They took children from subnormal parents and educated and fed them in camps. But the normals were too few and the trend continued.

"Shortly after mid-century the population reached the edge of the southern forest, and there many were completely wild. They drifted along the forest edge naked, without tools or fire or language or even family groupings. Their average stature was nearly eight feet. The normals knew they were losing. Can you imagine how they *felt*, lad?"

Cole relaxed a little. "Ah ... yes, I can ... I imagine the fight was inside them, too."

Bidgrass nodded. "Yes, they were all tainted. But they fought. They asked Earth for help and learned that Earth regarded them as tyrants oppressing a simple, natural folk. The economy broke down and more had to be imported. The only way to pay was in stomper egg exports. In spite of that, in about the year 300, they decided to restrict the stompers to the western part of the grasslands, thousands of miles beyond the human range.

"The egg hunters began killing piskies and grown stompers. They killed off the great, stupid herds of darv cattle on which the stompers fed. The stompers that survived became wary and hostile, good at hiding and fierce to attack. But killing off the eastern darv herds broke them and in a generation they vanished from the eastern plains. Things seemed to improve and they thought the tide was turned. Then, in the year 374, came what our bards now call the Black Learning."

"Bards?" Cole said. He drained his coffee cup.

"Morgan could sing you this history to shiver the flesh on your bones," the old man said, pouring more coffee. "What I am telling you is nowhere written down, but it is engraved in thousands of hearts. Well, to go on.

"We knew some of the stompers had gone into the southern forest—you see, they have to incubate their eggs in direct sunlight and we kept finding them along the forest edge. But we had assumed they were eating the snakes and slugs and fungi native to the forest floor. Now we learned that a large population of wild humans had grown up unknown to us in the deep forest—and the stompers were eating them.

"You have seen our forests from a distance, lad. Do you realize how impossible it is to patrol them? We hadn't the men, money or machines for it. We appealed, and learned we would get no help from any planet in Carina sector except for pay. But the egg market fell off, and our income with it. Ships did come, however, small ones in stealth, to ground along the forest edge and capture the young women of the wild people."

Cole struck the table. "How rotten...!" His voice failed.

Bidgrass nodded. "We call that the Lesser Shame. The young women were without personality or language, yet tractable and responsive to affection. They were flawless in health and physique, and eight feet tall. They could be sold for fantastic prices on loosely organized frontier planets and yes, even to Earth, as we learned. Something dark in a man responds to that combination. You feel it as I speak—no, don't protest, I know. We had long had that trouble among our own people."

"Did my own people of Belconti—" Again Cole's voice failed. He brushed back his red hair angrily.

"Belconti was new then, still a colony. Well, that was the *help* we got. We hadn't the power to fight stompers, let alone slave raiders. But the Galactic Patrol was just getting organized and the sector admiral agreed to keep a ship in orbit blockading us. We broke off all contact except with Tristan, and the Patrol let only one freight line come through to handle our off-planet trade. It was then we began to hate the other planets. We call it the Turning Away.

"Now we are forgotten, almost a myth. The Patrol ship has been gone since two hundred years ago. But we remember."

"I wish I'd known this," Cole said. "Mr. Bidgrass, things are greatly changed in Carina sector—"

Bidgrass held up his hand. "I know, lad. That's why you're here, and I'll come to it. But let me go on. Early in the fifth century we decided to exterminate the stompers altogether and in two decades killed off all the darv cattle. But the stompers went into the forests in the south and west and from there came out to raid the plains. Not to kill, but to carry off normal and semi-wild people into the forest for breeding stock. A stomper's wing is more flexible than a hand. One of them can carry half a dozen men and women and run a thousand miles in a day. Some fungi in the forest can dull a man in an hour and take his mind in a week. Few who were carried in ever came out again.

"This went on, lad, for *centuries*. From our fortified towns and hunting camps we ranged along the forest edge like wolves. The stompers must lay their eggs in direct sunlight. That forced them out where we could get at them, into clearings and uplands and along the forest edge. We killed all we could.

"We found rhythms in their life pattern keyed to our four moons. When the three lady moons form a tall triangle, the stompers group in the open to mill and dance and sing. About every three months this happens over several days and in old times it was the peak raid season. It was also our chance to kill. The people call the configuration the House of the Maidens."

Cole nodded vigorously. "I remember that. Strange how lunar periodicity is bionative in every planet having a moon."

"It saved us here, praise Morwenna, but once almost destroyed us. There is a longer, sixty-two year cycle called the Nights of Hoggie Darn. Then the red moon passes through the House of the Maidens and the stompers go completely berserk. The first one after the war was joined fully, in 434, caught us unprepared and cost us more than three-fourths of our normal population in the week that we remember as the Great Taking. We were thrown back into Car Truro for decades and the stompers came back on the plains. They snatched people from the streets of Car

Truro itself. That we call the Dark Time."

The old man's craggy face shadowed with sorrow and he sighed, leaning back. Cole opened his mouth but Bidgrass leaned forward again, new, fierce energy in his voice.

"We rallied and came back. We fought from the air and killed them in large numbers when we caught them in the open on Maiden nights. We drove them back off the plains and harried them along the forest edges and in the upland clearings where they came to lay eggs. We gathered all the eggs we could find. They defended their eggs and caused us steady losses. But we fought.

"We built our strategy on the Maidens and in time we drove the enemy out of the southern forest and into the west. Then we crowded him into Lundy Peninsula, made it a sanctuary for a hundred years to draw him in. When I was your age we fought out the last Nights of Hoggy Darn a few miles east of here. Ten years later we finished Bidgrass Station and the barrier and the continent was free of stompers."

Cole shifted his chair to get the sun off his neck. "I hardly know what to say," he began, but Bidgrass raised his hand.

"I've more to tell you, that you must know. By the late seventh century things were normal around Car Truro as regards regression. We began a pilot program of reclamation. The egg hunters captured wild people along the forest edge, still do. But some are beyond saving, and those they kill. We have to pen them like animals at first, but they can be trained to work in the fields, and for a long time now we have had few machines except what we need for war. Their children, on an Earth diet, come back toward normal in size and intelligence. The fourth and fifth generations are normal enough to join in the war. But war has always come first and we have never been able to spare many normals for reclamation work.

"Even so, ex-wilds make up more than half our normal population now. That's about forty thousand; there are nearly a hundred thousand on the reclamation ladder, mostly around Car Truro. The ex-wilds have a queer, poetic strain, and mainly through them we've developed a sort of religion along the way. It helps the subnormals who are so powerfully drawn to run back to the forests. It's a strange mixture of poetry and prophecy, but it's breath of life to the ex-wilds. I guess I pretty well believe it myself and even you believe some of it."

Cole looked his question, hitching his chair nearer the table.

"Yes, your notion of the greater animal, critical biomass, that you spoke of. We speak of Grandfather Stomper and we are trying to kill him. He is trying to enslave Grandfather Man. The whole purpose and meaning of human life, to an ex-wild, is to kill Grandfather Stomper and then to reclaim Grandfather Man from the forest. You would have to hear Morgan sing it to appreciate how deeply they feel that, lad."

"I feel it, a little. I understand Morgan now, I think. He's an ex-wild, isn't he?"

"Yes, and our master bard. In some ways he has more power than I."

Cole got up. "Mind if I pull a curtain? That sun is hot."

"No, go ahead. Our coffee is cold," the old man said, rising too. "I'll ask for a fresh pot."

Seated again in the shaded room, Bidgrass resumed, "There's not much more. After the barrier was up it seemed as if Grandfather Stomper knew his time was running out. Don't laugh now. Individual stompers don't have intelligence, symbol-using, that is, as far as we know. But they changed from plains to forest. They learned to practise a gruesome kind of animal husbandry—oh, I could tell you things. Something had to figure it out."

"I'm not laughing," Cole said. "You're talking sound ecology. Go on."

"Well, they began laying eggs right along the barrier and didn't try to defend them. We picked up hundreds, even thousands, every day. The people said Grandfather Stomper was trying to make peace, to pay rent on Lundy Forest. And maybe he was.

"But we spat in his face. We gathered his tribute and still took all the eggs we could find in the inland clearings. We killed every stomper we saw. Then, for the first time I think, Grandfather Stomper knew it was war to the death. He began to fight as never before. Where once a stomper would carry a captured egg hunter a hundred miles into the forest and turn him loose, now it killed out of hand. They began making mass attacks on the station and they didn't come to capture, they came to kill. So it has gone for forty years now."

The old man's voice changed, less fierce, more solemn. He sat up straight.

"Lundy Forest is near eight hundred thousand square miles. No one knows how many millions of wild humans are in it or how many scores of thousands of stompers. But this I knew long before you came to tell me about critical biomass: Grandfather Stomper is very near to death. He ruled this planet for a million years and he fought me for near a thousand, but his time is come.

"Don't laugh, lad, at what I am about to say now. Mass belief, blind faith over centuries of people like our ex-wilds and semi-wilds, can do strange things. To them and even to myself I *represent* Grandfather Man, and from them a power comes into me that is more than myself. I know in a *direct* way that in the Nights of Hoggy Darn to come I will at long last kill Grandfather Stomper and the war will be won. That time is only eight weeks away."

"Then I'll still be here. Grand—Mr. Bidgrass, I want to fight with you."

"You may and welcome, lad. Must, even, to redeem yourself. Because, for what you know now, your life is forfeit if the ex-wilds suspect."

"Why so? Are you not proud—" Cole half stood and Bidgrass waved him down.

"Consider, lad. For centuries across the inhabited planets people of wealth and influence have been eating stomper egg, serving it at state banquets. But now you know it is human flesh at one remove. How will they feel toward us when they learn that?"

"How should they feel? Man has to be consumed at some trophic level. His substance is as much in the biogeochemical cycles as that of a pig or a chicken. I suppose we *do* feel he should cap the end of a food chain and not short-cycle through himself, but I'm damned if I'm horrified—"

"Any non-ecologist would be. You know that."

The giant maid came in with a pot of coffee and clean cups. Bidgrass poured and both men sipped in silence. Then Bidgrass said slowly, "Do you know what the people here call outworlders? Cannibals! For centuries we have had the feeling that we have been selling our own flesh to the outworlds in exchange for the weapons to free Grandfather Man."

He stood up, towering over Cole, and his voice deepened.

"It has left bone-deep marks: of guilt, for making the outworlders unknowing cannibals; of hatred, because we feel the outworlds left us no choice. And shame, lad, deep, deep shame, more than a man can bear, to have been degraded to food animals here in our forests and across the opulent tables of the other planets. Morgan is only second-generation normal—his father was killed beside me, last Hoggy Darn. If Morgan knew you had learned our secret he would kill you out of hand. I could not stop him. Do you understand now why we didn't want you until next *Gorbals*? Do you see into the hell you have been skating over?"

Cole nodded and rubbed his chin. "Yes, I do. But I don't despise Morgan, I think I love him. On Belconti, Grandfather Man is mainly concerned to titillate his own appetites, but here, well ... how do I feel it? ... I think what you have just told me makes me more proud to be a man than I have ever been before. I will carry through the deception of Belconti University with all my heart. Can't Morgan understand that?"

"Yes, and kill you anyway. Because you *know*. You will not lightly be forgiven that."

Cole shook his head helplessly. "Well *dammit* then—"

"Now, now, there's a way out," Bidgrass said, sitting down again. "The prophecies all foretell a change of heart after Grandfather Stomper dies. They speak of joy, love, good feeling. Morgan did agree to your coming here—he wants to hide the past as much as I do and he could see the value of my plan. In the time of good feeling I hope he will accept you."

"I hope so too," Cole said. "Morgan is a strange man. Why is Pia so afraid of him?"

"I'll tell you that, lad—maybe it will help you to appreciate your own danger. Some few of us are educated on Tristan. Twenty-three years ago my younger brother took my niece Flada there. She ran away and married a Tristanian named Ralph Vignoli. My brother persuaded them to come back and live at our installation there, and Ralph swore to keep secret the little he knew.

"The ex-wilds of New Cornwall kept wanting Ralph to come here so they could be sure of the secret. He kept refusing and finally they sent an emissary to kill him. My brother was killed protecting him. I stepped in then with a compromise, persuaded Ralph to come here for the sake of his wife and daughter. Pia was seven at the time.

"Ralph was a good man and fought well in battles, but two years later Morgan and some others came to the house in my absence and took him away. They took him to a clearing in Lundy Forest, where the stompers come to lay eggs, stripped off his clothing and left him. That was so the stompers would not take him for an egg hunter and kill him outright, but would carry him into the forest like they do with strayed wild stock. Morgan said the command came to him in a dream.

"I think Pia feels she is partly responsible for Ralph's death. I think she sometimes fears Morgan will dream about her, her Tristanian blood...."

"Poor Pia," Cole said softly. "These *years* of grief and fear...."

"They'll be ended come Hoggy Darn again, Morwenna grant. Don't you grieve her with your death too, lad. Stay close to the house, in the house."

Bidgrass rose and gulped the last of his coffee standing.

"I must go, I'm late," he said, more cheerfully than Cole had ever heard his voice. "I have a conference with General Arscoate, our military leader, whom you'll meet soon."

He went out. Cole went out too, thoughts wrestling with feelings, looking for Pia.

In the days that followed Cole took his meals with the family except when there were guests not in Bidgrass' confidence. The doors into the main house remained unlocked and he saw much of Pia, but she seemed unexpectedly elusive and remote. Cole, busy with his report to Belconti University, had little time to wonder about it.

He faked statistics wholesale and cited dozens of nonexistent New Cornish authorities. To his real data indicating critical biomass he added imaginary values for the parameters of climate, range, longevity, fertility period and Ruhan indices to get an estimated figure. Then he faked field census reports going back fifty years, and drew a curve dipping below critical ten years before his arrival. He made the latest field census show new biomass forty-two percent below critical and juggled figures to make the curve extrapolate to zero in twelve more years.

It pained him in his heart to leave out the curious inverse reproduction data. But it was a masterpiece of deception that should put the seal on his doctorate, and because it reported the extinction of a planetary dominant, he knew it would make the journals and the general news all through the sector.

The night he finished it, working late in the library, Pia brought him milk and cookies and sat with him as he explained what he had done.

"It's right," he defended himself to her against his scholar's conscience. "Humans on New Cornwall are a threatened species too. The secret must be hidden forever."

"Yes," she agreed soberly. "I think if all the sector knew, the ex-wilds would literally die of shame and rage. Being wild is not so bad, but—that other!" She shuddered under her gray dress.

"Pia, sometimes I feel you're still avoiding me. Surely now it's all right and genuine between us."

She smiled sadly. "I'll bring you trouble, with Morgan. Father came to New Cornwall because of me."

"But I didn't. I've been thinking I may *stay*, partly because of you. You've been afraid so long it's habitual."

"Strangely, Flinter, I don't feel it as fear any more. It's like bowing with sadness, my strength to run is gone. My old dreams—Morgan coming for me—I have them every night now."

"Morgan! Always Morgan!"

She shook her head and smiled faintly. "He has a dark, poetic power. He is what he is, just like the stompers. I feel ... not hate, not even fear ... a kind of *dread*."

He stroked the back of her hand and she pulled it away.

"An old song runs through my head," she went on. "A prophecy that Grandfather Stomper cannot be killed while outworld blood pumps through any heart on the planet. I feel like my own enemy, like ... like your enemy. You should not have come until next *Gorbals*. Flinter, *stay away from me!*"

He talked soothingly, to little avail. When they parted he said heartily, "Forget those silly prophecies, Pia. I'll look out for you."

Privately, he wondered how.

Cole sat beside Pia and across the food-laden table from General Arscote, a large pink-faced man in middle life.

"It's an old and proven strategy, Mr. Cole," the general explained. "When Hoggy Darn starts we will harass the enemy from the air in all but one of the fourteen sizable open spaces in Lundy Forest. That one is Emrys Upland, the largest. They will concentrate in Emrys, more each night, until the climactic night of peak frenzy. Then we come down with all the men and women we can muster and we kill. We may go on killing stragglers for years after, but Grandfather Stomper will die on that night."

"Why not kill from the air?"

"More firepower on the ground. I can only lift ninety-four flyers all told. But I will shuttle twenty thousand fighting men into Emrys in an hour or two on the big night."

"So quickly? How can you?" Cole laid down his fork.

"They will be waiting in the forest top all around the periphery, in places where we are already building weapons dumps. In the first days of harrying, we will stage in the fighters."

"Morgan will visit each group in the forest top and sing our history," Bidgrass said from the head of the table. "On the evening of the climactic night, as Hoggy Darn rises, they will take a sacramental meal of stomper egg. At no other time is it eaten on this planet."

Mrs. Vignoli looked down. "Garth!" Arscote said.

"The lad must know, must take it with us," Bidgrass said. "Lad, the real reason for not killing from the air is that

the people *need* to kill personally, with their feet on the ground. So our poetry has always described that last, great fight. I must *personally* kill Grandfather Stomper."

Cole toyed with his knife. "But he is only a metaphor, a totem image—"

"The people believe in an actual individual who is the stomper counterpart of Garth here," the general broke in. "You know, Mr. Cole, the stompers we kill ordinarily are all females. The males are smaller, with a white crest, and they keep to the deep forest except on Hoggy Darn nights. Maybe the frenzy then has something to do with mating—no one knows. But Garth will kill the largest male he can find. The people, and I expect Garth and I as well, are going to believe that he has killed Grandfather Stomper in person."

The general sipped water and looked sternly over his glass at Cole. Cole glanced at Pia, who seemed lost in a dream of her own, not there to them.

"I see. A symbol," he agreed.

"Not the less real," Arscoate said tartly. "Symbols both mean and are, Garth here is a symbol too and that is why, old as he is, he must be in the thick of it. He is like the ancient battle flags of romantic pre-space history. People before now have actually *seen* Grandfather Stomper. I am *not* a superstitious backwordler, Mr. Cole, but—"

Cole raised a placatory hand. "I know you are not, general. Forgive me if I seemed to suggest it."

"Let's have wine," Bidgrass said, pushing back his chair. "We'll take it in the parlor and Pia can sing for us."

When General Arscoate said good-night he told Cole not to worry, that he would have reliable guards at the manor gate during Garth Bidgrass' absence in Car Truro.

"I meant to tell you and Pia in the morning, lad," Bidgrass said. "Arscoate and I must go to Car Truro. There's heartburning there over who gets to fight and who must stay behind. It will be only two days."

Cole felt uneasy all day. He spent most of it writing the covering letter for his report and phrasing his resignation from the university field staff. He wrote personal letters to his uncle and a few friends. After dinner he finally signed the official letters and took the completed report to Bidgrass' desk. Then he went to bed and slept soundly.

Pia wakened him with frantic shaking.

"Dress quickly, Flinter. The guard at the gate was just changed and it's not time."

She darted out to the hall window while he struggled with clothing, then back again.

"*Quickly*, darling! Morgan's crossing the garden, with men. Follow me."

She led him through the kitchen and out a pantry window, then stooping along the base of a hedge to where a flowering tree overshadowed the garden wall.

"I planned this, out of sight of guard posts, when I was a little girl," she whispered. "I always knew—over, Flinter, quickly!"

Outside was rough ground, a road, a wide field of cabbages and then the barrier. Veiled Annis rode high and bluish in the clear sky. They crossed the field in soaring leaps, and shouts pursued them. The girl ran north a hundred yards behind the shadowy buttresses and squeezed through a narrow crack between two huge timber baulks. Cole barely made it, skinning his shoulders.

"I found this too when I was a little girl," Pia whispered. "I had to enlarge it when my hips grew, but only just

enough. Morwenna grant they're all too big!"

"Morgan is, for sure," Cole said, rubbing his shoulder. "Pia, I *hate* to run."

"We must still run. My old plan was to reach here unseen, but now they know and they'll come over the wall in flyers. We'll have to hide in the thick brush near the forest edge until Uncle Garth returns."

She pulled a basket out of the shadows.

"Food," she said. "I brought it last night."

He carried the basket and they raced across the half-mile belt to concealment among high shrubbery and enormous mounds of fungi. Flyers with floodlights came low along the wall and others quartered the clearing. Cole and Pia stole nearer to the forest edge, into its shadow. They did not sleep.

Once he asked. "How about stompers?"

"They're a chance," she whispered. "Morgan's *sure*."

With daylight they saw four flyers patrolling instead of the usual one. At their backs colossal blackish-gray, deeply rugose tree trunks eighty feet in diameter rose up and up without a branch for many hundreds of feet. Then branches jutted out enormously and the colorful cascade of forest-top epiphytes came down the side and hung over their heads a thousand feet above.

Pia opened the food basket and they ate, seated on a bank. She wore her brown dress, her finest, he had learned, and she had new red shoes. She was quiet, as if tranced.

Cole remembered the picnic on the forest top, the secret island of beauty and innocence, and his heart stirred. He saw that the food basket was the same one. He did not tell her his thoughts.

They talked of trivial things or were silent for long periods. He held her hand. Once she roused herself to say, "Tomorrow, about this time, Uncle Garth will come looking for us." Shortly after, she gasped and caught his arm, pointing.

He peered, finally made a gestalt of broken outlines through the shrubbery. It was a stomper, swinging its head nervously.

"It smells us," she whispered. "Oh Flinter, forgive me darling. Take off your clothes, *quickly!*"

She undressed rapidly and hid her clothes. Cole undressed too, fear prickling his skin, remembering what Bidgrass had told him. The stomper moved nearer in a crackle of brush and stopped again.

Man and girl knelt trembling under a fan of red-orange fungus. The girl broke off a piece and motioned the man to do the same.

"When it comes, pretend to eat," she breathed, almost inaudibly. "Don't look up and don't say a word. Morwenna be with us now."

The stomper's shadow fell across them. The man's skin prickled and sweat sprang out. He looked at the girl and she was pale but not tense, munching on her piece of fungus. She clicked her teeth faintly and he knew it was a signal. He ate.

The stomper lifted the man by his right shoulder. It was like two fingers in a mitten holding him three times his own height off the ground. He saw the beak and the eye and his sight dimmed in anguish.

Then the right wing reached down and nipped the left shoulder of the rosy girl-body placidly crouching there. It swung her up to face the man momentarily under the great beak and the tricorn eye, and their own eyes met.

Very faintly she smiled and her eyes tried desperately to say, "I'm sorry" and "Goodbye, Flinter." His eyes cried in agony "No! No! I will not have it so!"

Then the two-fingered mitten became a nine-fingered mitten lapping him in darkness that bounced and swayed and he knew that the stomper was running into Lundy Forest. The wing was smooth and warm but not soft, and it smelled of cinnamon and sandalwood. The odor overpowered him and the man lapsed into stupor.

The man woke into a fantastic dream. Luminous surfaces stretched up to be lost in gloom, with columns of darkness between. The spongy ground on which he lay shone with faint blue light. Luminous, slanting walls criss-crossed in front of him. Close at hand, behind and to the right, enormous bracket fungi ascended into darkness in ten-foot steps that supported a profusion of higher order fungi in many bizarre shapes.

He stood up and he was alone.

He climbed over a slanting root-buttress and saw her lying there. He called her name and she rose lightly and came to him. Radiant face, dimpled arms, round breasts, cradling hips: *his woman*. They embraced without shame and she cried thanks to Morwenna.

He said, "People have come out of the forest. What are the rules?"

"We must eat only the seeds of the pure white fungus—that's the least dangerous. We must walk and walk to keep our bodies so tired and hungry that they use it all. We must keep to a straight line."

"We'll live," he said. "Outside among our people, with our minds whole. We'll alternate left and right each time we round a tree, to hold our straight line. We'll come out somewhere."

"I will follow. May Morwenna go with us."

The fantastic journey wound over great gnarled roots and buttresses fusing and intermingling until it seemed that the root-complex was one unthinkable vast organism with many trunks soaring half-seen into endless darkness. Time had no feeling there. Space was a bubble of ghostly light a man could leap across.

Could leap and did, over and over, the woman following. The man climbed a curiously regular, whitish root higher than his head and it writhed. Then, swaying bark along its length, came a great serpent head with luminous ovoid eyes. While the man crouched in horror, waving the woman back, the monstrous jaws gaped and the teeth were blunt choppers and grinders, weirdly human looking. They bit hugely into a bracket fungus and worried at it. Man and woman hurried on.

Strength waned. The woman fell behind. The man turned back to her and the light was failing. The blue mold was black, the luminous panels more ghostly.

"It's night. Shall we sleep?" he asked.

"It's just come day," the woman said, pointing upward.

He looked up. Far above, where had been gloom, hung a pinkish-green, opalescent haze of light. Parallel lines of tree trunks converged through it to be lost in nebulosity.

"Daylight overpowers the luminous fungi," she said.

"We sleep, then walk again. Shall we find food?"

"No. We must always go to sleep hungry so we will wake again."

They looked, until tired out, for a place of shelter.

They slept, locked together in the cranny of a massive buttress. The man dreamed of his tame home-world.

He woke again into nightmare. In a twenty-foot fan-grove of the white fungus they combed handfuls of black spores out of gill slots. The birdshot-sized spores had a pleasant, nutty flavor.

With the strength more walking. *Use it, use it, burn the poison.* Day faded above, and luminous night below came back to light the way. A rocky ledge and another, and then a shallow ravine with a black stream cascading. They drank and the man said, "We'll follow it, find an upland clearing."

They heard rapid motion and crouched unbreathing while a stomper minced by up ahead. It had a white crest.

On and on, fatigue the whip for greater fatigue and salvation at the end of endurance. They passed wild humans. A statuesque woman with dull eyes and yellow hair to her ankles, placidly feeding. Babies big as four-year-old normals, by themselves, grazing on finger-shaped fungi. An enormous human, fourteen feet tall, fat-enfolded, too ponderous to stand even in low gravity, crawling through fungus beds. The man could not tell its sex.

On and on, sleep and eat and travel and sleep, darkness above or darkness below, outside of time. The stream lost, found again, sourcing out finally under a great rock. And there, lodged in a black sandbank, the man found a human thigh bone half his own height. He scoured off the water mold with sand. He was armed.

The man walked ahead clutching his thigh bone, and the woman followed. They slept clasped together naked all three, man woman and thigh bone.

Stompers passed them and they crouched in sham feeding. The man prayed without words, *both or neither*. And hatred grew in him.

Snakes and giant slugs and the beautiful, gigantic, mindless wild humans, again and again, a familiar part of nightmare. The fat and truly enormous humans; and the man learned they had been male once. He remembered from far away where time was linear the voice of Grandfather Man: *Some are beyond saving, and those they kill.*

And a stomper passed, white crested, and far ahead a human voice cried out in wordless pain and protest. The man was minded to deviate from his line for fear of what they might see, but he did not. When they came on the boy, larger than the man but beardless and without formed muscles, the man looked at the tears dropping from the dull eyes and the blood dropping from the mutilation and killed him with the thigh bone. *Some are beyond saving.* And the hatred in him flamed to whiteness.

On and on, day above and day below in recurrent clash of lights. A white crested stomper paused and looked at them, crouched apart and trembling. The man felt the deepest, most anguished fear of all and beneath it, hatred surged until his teeth ached.

On and on. The man's stubble softened into beard, his hair touched his ears. On and on.

The land sloped upward and became rocky. The trees became smaller and wider spaced so that whole trunks were visible and the light of upper day descended. A patch of blue sky, then more as they ran shouting with gladness, and a bare mountain crest reared in the distance.

They embraced in wild joy and the woman cried, "Thank you, oh *loveliest* Morwenna!"

"Pia, we're human again," Cole said. "We're back in the world. And I love you."

Fearful of stompers, they moved rapidly away from the forest over steadily rising ground. The growth became more sparse, the ground more rocky, and near evening they crossed a wide moorland covered with coarse grass and scattered blocks of stone. Ahead a long, low fault scarp bounded it and there they found a cave tunneled into the

rock, too narrow for a stomper. At last they felt safe. Morwenna rode silvery above the distant forest.

Water trickled from the cave which widened into a squared-off chamber in which the water spilled over the rim of a basin that looked cut with hands. Underfoot were small stone cylinders of various lengths and as his eyes adjusted Cole saw that they were drill cores.

"Prospectors made this," he told Pia, "in the old, innocent days when they still hoped to find heavy metals." Then he saw the graven initials, T.C.B., and the date, 157 A.S.

They ate red berries growing in their dooryard, gathered grass for a bed and slept in a great weariness.

Next day and the next they ate red berries and fleshy, purple ground fruits and slept, gaining strength. Secure in their cave mouth they watched stompers cross the moorland. When night fell they gazed at the bunched moons, but the three Maidens did not quite form a house and Hoggy Darn was still pursuing them.

"A few days," Pia said.

"If this isn't Emrys Upland, Arscoate will kill us with fire mist."

She nodded.

More stompers crossed the moorland, some white crested. They moved there randomly at night and from the forest came a far-off sound of stompers singing. The Maidens formed a house and Hoggy Darn grazed the side of it before they fled. To south and west faint rose glowed in the night sky.

"Fire mist," Pia said. "The nights of harrying have begun. Oh Flinter, if this is really Emrys Upland it will be perfect."

"What will?"

"You—us—oh, I can't say yet."

"Secrets, Pia? Still secrets? Between *us*?"

"You'll know soon, Flinter. I mustn't spoil it."

The love in her eyes was tinged with a strangeness. She sought his arms and hid her face in his shoulder.

Stompers on the moorland all day so they dared not leave the cave. Flyers streaking high overhead, scouting.

"Pia, I believe this is Emrys Upland. I'll help after all with the great killing."

"You will help, Flinter."

"Afterward I'll take you to Belconti."

"We will never see Belconti, Flinter."

The strangeness in her eyes troubled him. He could not kiss it away.

Stompers crowding the moorland all night with their dancing, their vast singing coming to the cave from all round the compass. Rose banks distant in the night sky and Hoggy Darn crossing the House of the Maidens. Red Hoggy Darn, still lagging, still not catching it perfectly upright. The strangeness of Pia. The waiting, clutching a polished thigh bone.

At last the night when the mighty war song of the stompers went up unbearably, as the man had heard it that

once before, and fire mist boiled along the distant mountains. Flyers shuttled across the sky, dropped, rose again. Blasters ripped the night with ion-pencils. Hoggy Darn gleamed redly on the threshold of the House of the Maidens that stood almost upright and perfect with silvery Morwenna at the vertex. Flyers blasted clearings in the throng of stompers, and grounded. Men boiled out of them, setting up Corbin powercasters here, there, another place, fighting as soon as their feet hit ground.

The man stood up and brandished the thigh bone.

"I must go down and fight. Wait here."

"I must go too," the girl said calmly.

"Yes, you must," he agreed. "Come along."

Stompers rushed by them and bounded over their heads and did not harm them. Blaster-torn stompers fell heavily beside them, threshing and snapping, and they were not touched. Men lowered weapons to point at the man and girl, shouting to one another out of mazed faces silently in the whelming music of the stomper chorus. Man and girl walked on.

Unharmd through the forest of singing, leaping shapes, hand in hand through a screen of fighting men that parted to admit them, they walked into the light of a glowing Corbin where a tall, gaunt old man stood watching their approach. The feeling of exalted unreality began to lift from Cole.

"Grandfather, give us blasters," he shouted. "We want to fight."

"The power is on you, lad, and you only half know it," the old man shouted back. "Stand here by the Corbin. Your fight is not yet." Tears stood in the fierce old eyes.

Across the moorland the fighting raged. Islands of men and women grouped round their Corbins held back the booming, chaotic sea of stompers that surged against them from all sides. Dikes of dead and dying grew up, men and stompers mingled. The flyers shuttled down and up again and more islands of men took shape. Hoggy Darn crossed the threshold and the savage war song of the stompers shook the night sky.

In a lull Morgan came in to the Corbin to change the wave track on his blaster. His face was a mask of iron joy and his eyes blazed.

"Morgan, if we are both alive after, I will kill you!" Cole shouted.

"No," Morgan rumbled. "You have been into the forest and come out again. It took you three weeks. It took me three hundred years. Clasp hands, my brother in hatred."

"Yes, brother in hatred." The exalted unreality began coming back strongly. "I want a blaster!" he howled at Morgan.

"No, brother in hatred, your fight is not yet." Morgan rejoined the battle, the ring of men standing braced in blaster harness fifty yards away, ripping down with interweaving ion-pencils the great forms leaping inward. Man and girl held hands and watched.

To the left trouble came to a nearby island. Stompers converged from all sides, abandoning the other attacks, impossibly many. They overran the defenders, attacking not them but the powercaster behind them, and piled up until the Corbin's blue-violet glare was hidden. A great blossoming of flame tore the pile of stompers apart, but the Corbin was dark.

"They blew out the power banks," Pia said. "They've never known to do that before. Now the men still living have only pack charges."

It was a new tactic, a death-hour flash of insight for Grandfather Stomper. Across the moor, island after island went dark and the war song grew in savage exultation, but the man thought it dwindled in total volume. Then it was

their own turn.

Cole and Pia crouched away from the Corbin in the lee of a stone block and two still-twitching stompers. Beside them Morgan and Bidgrass fired steadily at the shapes hurtling above. When the Corbin blew, a wave of stinking heat rolled over them. All around, survivors struggled to their feet, using flame pistols to head-shoot wounded stompers, digging out and connecting emergency pack charges to their blasters. They were pitifully few and their new, dark island was thirty feet across.

The moor seemed dark with only the red of flame pistols and the violet flickering of power pack blasters. It seemed to heave randomly like a sluggish sea with the seen struggles of dying stompers and the felt struggles of lesser human bodies. Thinned now, stompers attacked singly or in small groups. Blasters flickered and ripped and went darkly silent as power packs discharged. The red of short-range flame pistols replaced them. But across the fault scarp ridge the tumult swelled to new heights and Corbin after Corbin there flamed out of existence in a bloom of rose-purple against the skyline.

In a lull Bidgrass shouted to Morgan, "That's costing them more than they have to give, over there. Listen. Can you hear it?"

"Yes, Father in Hatred," Morgan said. "They will break soon."

"Yes, when Arskoate lays the fire mist. They will come through here. I have one charge left."

"I have two, Father in Hatred. Change packs with me."

Cole found his voice and his senses once more.

"I must find a weapon! Grandfather, give me your flame pistol!"

"Soon, lad. Soon now. Let the power take you," the old man soothed.

Stompers streamed over the moor again and the fighting flared up. The war song beat against the man's ears so that he drew the girl nearer and shook the thigh bone. Blaster fire flickered out altogether and the red blooming of flame pistols weakened. But more and more stompers streamed past without attacking. Then the man saw fire mist plume lazily in the east, point after point coalescing all along the forest edge.

"Now!" shouted a great voice beside him. "Now, lad!"

It was old Bidgrass, striding out like a giant, blaster leveled in its carrying harness.

The shout released Cole and he saw it far off, coming down the scrap rubble to the moor. Huger than any, white crest thirty feet above the ground, Grandfather Stomper. The war song roared insanely over the moor. Hoggly Darn gleamed heart-midst of the three lady moons.

The grim old man aimed and fired. The great bird-shape staggered and came on, left wing trailing. The old man waited until it was nearly on top of him and fired again. The stomper jerked its head and the bolt shattered the great tri-part beak but did not kill it. With the right mitten-wing it reached down and swung its adversary twenty feet up, held him and haggled at him with its stumps of beak.

The old man's free right arm flailed wildly. Cole beat the stomper's leg with the thigh bone and howled in hatred. Then he saw the flame pistol lying where it had fallen from the holster. He picked it up, but the power was on him again and he did not use it. He hurled the thigh bone at the stomper's head, diverting it for a second, and tossed the pistol to old Bidgrass. He knew they could not fail.

The old man caught the pistol. When the great head swung back he held the muzzle against the tricorn eye and fired. Red plasma-jet burned into the brain behind it. The stomper bounded once in the air, dropped its slayer, ran three steps and collapsed.

The stomper song changed suddenly. It became a mournful lament, a dying into grieving subsonics. Cole knew

that note. He had heard it from the stompers in the stone-floored pen when the butchers were hacking off their heads. He knew that Grandfather Stomper was dead forever, after seven hundred years of war.

Flyers crossed above, blasters were still at work across the ridge, but the war was ended. The power, whatever that sense of exalted unreality might be, left Cole; and he felt naked and ridiculous and wondered what he was doing there. Then he saw the girl bending above Garth Bidgrass and regained control of himself.

The strong old man was smiling wearily.

"We've won the war, lad," he said. "The next task is yours."

"I'll help you," Cole said.

"You'll lead. Oh, I'll live, but not for long. Centuries ago, lad, there was a prophecy, and until tonight people like myself and Arscoate thought it was only poetry, however literally Morgan and the other ex-wilds took it."

"What was it?"

"It foretells that on the night Grandfather Stomper shall die the new Grandfather Man will come naked out of the forest with his beautiful wife and armed with a thigh bone, and that he will lead us in the even greater task of reclamation that comes after. Your ritual title of address is 'Father in Love,' lad, and I'm just a broken old man now. Take up the burden."

Cole's throat swelled, choking speech for a moment.

"I can start," he said.

END

[End of *The Night of Hoggy Darn*, by Richard McKenna]