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## The Star Pit

Two glass panes with dirt between and little tunnels from cell to cell: when I was a kid I had an ant colony.

But once some of our four-to-six-year-olds built an ecologarium, with six-foot plastic panels and grooved aluminum bars to hold corners and top down. They put it out on the sand.

There was a mud puddle against one wall so you could see what was going on underwater. Sometimes segment worms crawling through the reddish earth hit the side so their tunnels were visible for a few inches. In hot weather the inside of the plastic got coated with mist and droplets. The small round leaves on the litmus vines changed from blue to pink, blue to pink as clouds coursed the sky and the pH of the photosensitive soil shifted slightly.

The kids would run out before dawn and belly down naked in the cool sand with their chins on the backs of their hands and stare in the half-dark till the red mill wheel of Sigma lifted over the bloody sea. The sand was maroon then, and the flowers of the crystal plants looked like rubies in the dim light of the giant sun. Up the beach the jungle would begin to whisper while somewhere an aniwort would start warbling. The kids would giggle and poke each other and crowd closer.

Then Sigma-prime, the second member of the binary, would flare like thermite on the water, and crimson

clouds would bleach from coral, through peach, to foam. The kids, half on top of each other now, lay like a pile of copper ingots with sun streaks in their hair – even on little Antoni, my oldest, whose hair was black and curly like bubbling oil (like his mother’s), the down on the small of his two-year-old back was a white haze across the copper if you looked that close to see.

More children came to squat and lean on their knees, or kneel with their noses an inch from the walls, to watch, like young magicians, as things were born, grew, matured, and other things were born. Enchanted at their own construction, they stared at the miracle in their live museum.

A small, red seed lay camouflaged in the silt by the lake/puddle. One evening as white Sigma-prime left the sky violet, it broke open into a brown larva as long and of the same color as the first joint of Antoni’s thumb. It flipped and swirled in the mud a couple of days, then crawled to the first branch of the nearest crystal plant to hang, exhausted, head down, from the tip. The brown flesh hardened, thickened, grew shiny, black. Then one morning the children saw the onyx chrysalis crack, and by second dawn there was an emerald-eyed flying lizard buzzing at the plastic panels.

‘Oh, look, Da!’ they called to me. ‘It’s trying to get out!’

The speed-hazed creature butted at the corner for a few days, then settled at last to crawling around the broad leaves of the miniature shade palms.

When the season grew cool and there was the annual debate over whether the kids should put tunics on – they never stayed in them more than twenty minutes

anyway – the jewels of the crystal plant misted, their facets coarsened, and they fell like gravel.

There were little four-cupped sloths, too, big as a six-year-old's fist. Most of the time they pressed their velvety bodies against the walls and stared longingly across the sand with their retractable eye-clusters. Then two of them swelled for about three weeks. We thought at first it was some bloating infection. But one evening we saw a couple of litters of white velvet balls half hidden by the low leaves of the shade palms. The parents were occupied now and didn't pine to get out.

There was a rock half in and half out of the puddle, I remember, covered with what I'd always called mustard-moss when I saw it in the wild. Once it put out a brush of white hairs. Then, one afternoon, the children ran to collect all the adults they could drag over. 'Look! Oh, Da! Da, Ma, look!' The hairs had detached themselves and were walking around the water's edge, turning end over end along the soft soil.

I had to leave for work in a few minutes and haul some spare drive parts out to Tau Ceti. But when I got back five days later, the hairs had taken root, thickened and were already putting out the small round leaves of litmus vines. Among the new shoots, lying on her back, claws curled over her wrinkled belly, eyes cataracted like the foggy jewels of the crystal plant – she'd dropped her wings like cellophane days ago – was the flying lizard. Her pearl throat still pulsed, but as I watched, it stopped. Before she died, however, she had managed to deposit, nearly camouflaged in the silt by the puddle, a scattering of red seeds.

I remember getting home from another job where I'd been doing the maintenance on the shuttle-boats for a crew putting up a ring station to circle a planet itself circling Aldebaran. I was gone a long time on that one. When I left the landing complex and wandered out toward the tall weeds at the edge of the beach, I still didn't see anybody.

Which was just as well because the night before I'd put on a real winner with the crew to celebrate the completion of the station. That morning I'd taken a couple more drinks at the landing bar to undo last night's damage. Never works.

The swish of frond on frond was like clashed rasps. Sun on the sand reached out fingers of pure glare and tried to gouge my eyes. I was glad the home-compound was deserted because the kids would have asked questions I didn't want to answer; the adults wouldn't ask anything, which was even harder.

Then, down by the ecologarium, a child screeched. And screeched again. Then Antoni came hurtling toward me, half running, half on all fours, and flung himself on my leg. 'Oh, Da! Da! Why, oh why, Da?'

I'd kicked my boots off and shrugged my shirt back at the compound porch, but I still had my overalls on. Antoni had two fists full of my pants leg and wouldn't let go. 'Hey, kid-boy, what's the matter?'

When I finally got him on my shoulder, he butted his blubber wet face against my collarbone. 'Oh, Da! Da! It's all craaaa-zy!' His voice rose to lose itself in sobs.

'What's crazy, kid-boy? Tell Da.'

Antoni held my ear and cried while I walked down to the plastic enclosure.

They'd put a small door in one transparent wall with number combination lock that was supposed to keep this sort of thing from happening. I guess Antoni learned the combination from watching the older kids; or maybe he just figured it out.

One of the young sloths had climbed over and wandered across the sand about three feet.

'See, Da! It crazy, it bit me. Bit me, Da!' Sobs became sniffles as he showed me a puffy, bluish place on his wrist centered on which was a tiny crescent of pinpricks. Then he pointed jerkily to the creature.

It was shivering, and bloody froth spluttered from its lip flaps. All the while it was digging futilely at the sand with its clumsy cups, eyes retracted. Now it fell over, kicked, tried to right itself, breath going like a flutter valve. 'It can't take the heat,' I explained, reaching down to pick it up.

It snapped at me, and I jerked back. 'Sunstroke, kid-boy. Yeah, it is crazy.'

Suddenly it opened its mouth wide, let out all its air, and didn't take in any more.

'It's all right now,' I said.

Two more of the baby sloths were at the door, front cups over the sill, staring with bright, black eyes. I pushed them back with a piece of seashell and closed the door.

Antoni kept looking at the white fur ball on the sand. 'Not crazy now?'

'It's dead,' I told him.



‘Dead because it went outside, Da?’

I nodded.

‘And crazy?’ He made a fist and ground something already soft and wet around his upper lip.

I decided to change the subject, which was already too close to something I didn’t like to think about. ‘Who’s been taking care of you, anyway?’ I asked. ‘You’re a mess, kid-boy. Let’s go and fix up that arm. They shouldn’t leave a fellow your age all by himself.’ We started back to the compound. Those bites infect easily, and this one was swelling.

‘Why it go crazy? Why it die when it go outside, Da?’

‘Can’t take the light,’ I said as we reached the jungle. ‘They’re animals that live in shadow most of the time. The plastic cuts out the ultraviolet rays, just like the leaves that shade them when they run loose in the jungle. Sigma-prime’s high on ultraviolet. That’s why you’re so good-looking, kid-boy. I think your ma told me their nervous systems are on the surface, all that fuzz. Under the ultraviolet, the enzymes break down so quickly that – does this mean anything to you at all?’

‘Uh-uh.’ Antoni shook his head. Then he came out with, ‘Wouldn’t it be nice, Da–’ he admired his bite while we walked ‘–if some of them could go outside, just a few?’

That stopped me. There were sunspots on his blue-black hair. Fronds reflected faint green on his brown cheek. He was grinning, little, and wonderful. Something that had been anger in me a lot of times momentarily melted to raging tenderness, whirling about him like the dust in the light striking down at my shoulders, raging to protect my son. ‘I don’t know about that, kid-boy.’

‘Why not?’

‘It might be pretty bad for the ones who had to stay inside,’ I told him. ‘I mean after a while.’

‘Why?’

I started walking again. ‘Come on, let’s fix your arm and get you cleaned up.’

I washed the wet stuff off his face, and scraped the dry stuff from beneath it, which had been there at least two days. Then I got some antibiotic into him.

‘You smell funny, Da.’

‘Never mind how I smell. Let’s go outside again.’ I put down a cup of black coffee too fast. It and my hangover had a fight in my stomach. I tried to ignore it and do a little looking around. But I still couldn’t find anybody. That got me mad. I mean he’s independent, sure: he’s mine. But he’s only two.

Back on the beach we buried the dead sloth in sand; then, through the ecologarium’s fogged and dripping walls, I pointed out the new, glittering stalks of the tiny crystal plants. At the bottom of the pond, in the jellied mass of ani-wort eggs, you could see the tadpole forms quivering already. An orange-fringed shelf fungus had sprouted nearly eight inches since it had been just a few black spores on a pile of dead leaves two weeks back.

‘Grow up,’ Antoni chirped, with nose and fists against the plastic. ‘Everything grow up, and up.’

‘That’s right.’

He grinned at me. ‘I grow!’

‘You sure as hell do.’

‘You grow?’ Then he shook his head, twice: once to say no, and the second time because he got a kick from

shaking his hair around – there was a lot of it. ‘You don’t grow. You don’t get any bigger. Why don’t you grow?’

‘I do too,’ I said indignantly. ‘Just very slowly.’

Antoni turned around, leaned on the plastic and moved one toe at a time in the sand – I can’t do that – watching me.

‘You have to grow all the time,’ I said. ‘Not necessarily get bigger. But inside your head you have to grow, kid-boy. For us human-type people that’s what’s important. And that kind of growing never stops. At least it shouldn’t. You can grow, kid-boy; or you can die. That’s the choice you’ve got, and it goes on all of your life.’

He looked back over his shoulder. ‘Grow up, all the time, even if they can’t get out.’

‘Yeah,’ I said. And was uncomfortable all over again. I started pulling off my overalls for something to do. ‘Even –’ The zipper got stuck. ‘Goddamn it – if you can’t get out.’ *Rnrnrnrnrn* – it came loose.

The rest got back that evening. They’d been on a group trip around the foot of the mountain. I did a little shouting to make sure my point got across about leaving Antoni alone. Didn’t do much good. You know those family arguments:

He didn’t want to come. We weren’t going to force –

So what. He’s got to learn to do things he doesn’t want –

Like some other people I could mention!

Now look –

It’s a healthy group. Don’t you want him to grow up a healthy –

I'll be happy if he just grows up period. No food, no medical –

But the server was chock full of food. He knows how to use it –

Look, when I got home the kid's arm was swollen all the way up to his elbow!

And so on and so forth, with Antoni sitting in the middle looking confused. When he got confused enough, he ended it all by announcing matter-of-factly: 'Da smell funny when he came home.'

Everyone got quiet. Then someone said, 'Oh, Vyme, you didn't come home that way again! I mean, in front of the children . . .'

I said a couple of things I was sorry for later and stalked off down the beach – on a four-mile hike.

Times I got home from work? The ecologarium? I guess I'm just leading up to this one.

The particular job had taken me a hectic week to get. It was putting back together a battleship that was gutted somewhere off Aurigae. Only when I got there, I found I'd already been laid off. That particular war was over – they're real quick now. So I scraped and lied and browned my way into a repair gang that was servicing a traveling replacement station, generally had to humiliate myself to get the job because every other drive mechanic from the battleship fiasco was after it too. Then I got canned the first day because I came to work . . . smelling funny. It took me another week to hitch a ride back to Sigma. Didn't even have enough to pay passage, but I made a deal with the pilot I'd do half the driving for him.

We were an hour out, and I was at the controls when something I'd never heard of happening happened. We came *this* close to ramming another ship. Consider how much empty space there is; the chances are infinitesimal. On top of that, every ship should be broadcasting an identification beam at all times.

But this big, bulbous keeler-intergalactic slid by so close I could *see* her through the front viewport. Our inertia system went nuts. We jerked around in the stasis whirl from the keeler. I slammed on the video-intercom and shouted, 'You great big stupid . . . *stupid* . . .' so mad and scared I couldn't say anything else.

The golden piloting the ship stared at me from the view-screen with mildly surprised annoyance. I remember his face was just slightly less Negroid than mine.

Our little *Serpentina* couldn't hurt him. But had we been even a hundred meters closer we might have ionized. The other pilot came bellowing from behind the sleeper curtain and started cursing me out.

'Damn it,' I shouted, 'it was one of those . . .' and lost all the profanity I know to my rage – 'golden . . .'

'This far into galactic center? Come off it. They should be hanging out around the Star Pit!'

'It was a keeler drive,' I insisted. 'It came right in front of us.' I stopped because the control stick was shaking in my hand. You know the *Serpentina* colophon? They have it in the corner of the view-screen and raised in plastic on the head of the control knobs. Well, it got pressed into the ham of my thumb so you could make it out for an hour, I was squeezing the control rod that tight.

When he set me down, I went straight to the bar to

cool off. And got into a *really* stupid argument that turned into a shoving match with some guy probably just visiting. I mean, *I'd* never seen him before. When I reached the beach I was broke; I had a bloody nose (he'd shoved pretty high there once); I was sick and furious.

It was just after first sunset, and the kids were squealing around the ecogarium. Then one little girl I didn't even recognize ran up to me and jerked my arm. 'Da, oh, Da! Come look! The ani-worts are just about to -'

I pushed her, and she sat down, surprised, on the sand.

I just wanted to get to the water and splash something cold on my face, because every minute or so it would start to burn.

Another bunch of kids grabbed me, shouting, 'Da, Da! The ani-worts, Da!' and tried to pull me over.

First I took two steps with them. Then I just swung my arms. I didn't make a sound. But I put my head down and barreled against the plastic wall. Kids screamed. Aluminum snapped; the plastic cracked and went down. My boots were still on, and I kicked and kicked at red earth and sand. Shade palms went down and the leaves tore under my feet. Crystal plants broke like glass rods beneath a piece of plastic. A swarm of lizards flittered up around my head. Some of the red was Sigma; some was what burned behind my face.

I remember I was still shaking and watching water run out of the broken lake, then soak in so that the wet tongue of sand expanded a little, raised just a trifle around the edge. Then I looked up to see the kids coming back down the beach, crying, shouting, afraid and clustered around Antoni's ma. She walked steadily toward me

– steady because she was a woman and they were children. But I saw the same fear in her face. Antoni was on her shoulder. Other grown-ups were coming behind her.

Antoni's ma was a biologist, and I think she had suggested the ecologarium to the kids in the first place. When she looked up from the ruin I'd made, I knew I'd broken something of hers too.

An odd expression got caught in the features of her – I remember it, oh-so-beautiful – face, with compassion alongside the anger, contempt alongside the fear. 'Oh, for pity's sake, Vyme,' she cried, not loudly at all. 'Won't you ever grow up?'

I opened my mouth, but everything I wanted to say was too big and stayed wedged in my throat.

'Grow up?' Antoni repeated and reached for a lizard that buzzed his head. 'Everything stop growing up, now.' He looked down again at the wreck I'd made. 'All broken. Everything get out.'

'He didn't mean to break it,' she said to the others for me, then knifed my gratitude with a look. 'We'll put it back together.'

She put Antoni on the sand and picked up one of the walls.

After they got started, they let me help. A lot of the plants were broken. And only the ani-worts who'd completed metamorphosis could be saved. The flying lizards were too curious to get far away, so we – they – netted them and got them back inside. I guess I didn't help *that* much. And I wouldn't say I was sorry.

They got just about everything back except the sloths.

We couldn't find them. We searched for a long time, too.

The sun was down so they should have been all right. They can't negotiate the sand with any speed so couldn't have reached the jungle. But there were no tracks, no nothing. We even dug in the sand to see if they'd buried themselves. It wasn't till more than a dozen years later I found out where they went.

For the present I accepted Antoni's mildly adequate, 'They just must of got out again.'

Not too long after that I left the procreation group. Went off to work one day, didn't come back. But like I said to Antoni, you either grow or die. I didn't die.

Once I considered returning. But there was another war – and suddenly there wasn't anything to return to. Some of the group got out alive. Antoni and his ma didn't. I mean there wasn't even any water left on the planet.

When I finally came to the Star Pit, myself, I hadn't had a drink in years. But working there on the galaxy's edge did something to me – something to the part that grows I'd once talked about on the beach with Antoni.

If it did it to me, it's not surprising it did it to Ratlit and the rest.

(And I remember a black-eyed creature pressed against the plastic wall, staring across impassable sands.)

Perhaps it was knowing this was as far as you could go.

Perhaps it was the golden.

Golden? I hadn't even joined the group yet when I first heard the word. I was sixteen and a sophomore at Luna



Vocational. I was born in a city called New York on a planet called Earth. Luna is its one satellite. You've heard of the system, I'm sure. That's where we all came from. A few other things about it are well known. Unless you're an anthropologist, though, I doubt you've ever been there. It's way the hell off the main trading routes and pretty primitive. I was a drive-mechanics major, on scholarship, living in and studying hard. All morning in Practical Theory (a ridiculous name for a ridiculous class, I thought then) we'd been putting together a model keeler-intergalactic drive. Throughout those dozens of helical inserts and superinertia organus sensitives, I had been silently cursing my teacher; thinking, about like everyone else in the class, 'So what if they can fly these jalopies from one galaxy to another. Nobody will ever be able to ride in them. Not with the Psychic and Physiologic shells hanging around this cluster of the universe.'

Back in the dormitory I was lying on my bed, scraping graphite lubricant from my nails with the end of my slide rule and half reading at a folded-back copy of *The Stellar Mechanic* when I saw the article and the pictures.

Through some freakish accident, two people had been discovered who didn't crack up at twenty thousand light-years off the galactic rim, who didn't die at twenty-five thousand.

They were both psychological freaks with some incredible hormone imbalance in their systems. One was a little Oriental girl; the other was an older man, blond and big-boned, from a cold planet circling Cygnus-beta: golden. They looked sullen as hell, both of them.

Then there were more articles, more pictures, in the

economic journals, the sociology student-letters, the legal bulletins, as various fields began acknowledging the impact that the golden and the sudden birth of intergalactic trade were having on them. The head of some commission summed it up with the statement: 'Though interstellar travel has been with us for three centuries, intergalactic trade has been an impossibility, not because of mechanical limitations, but rather because of barriers that till now we have not even been able to define. Some psychic shock causes insanity in any human – or for that matter, any intelligent species or perceptual machine or computer – that goes more than twenty thousand light-years from the galactic rim; then complete physiological death, as well as recording breakdown in computers that might replace human crews. Complex explanations have been offered, none completely satisfactory, but the base of the problem seems to be this: as the nature of space and time are relative to the concentration of matter in a given area of the continuum, the nature of reality itself operates by the same or similar, laws. The averaged mass of all the stars in our galaxy controls the 'reality' of our microsector of the universe. But as a ship leaves the galactic rim, 'reality' breaks down and causes insanity and eventual death for any crew, even though certain mechanical laws – though not all – appear to remain, for reasons we don't understand, relatively constant. Save for a few barbaric experiments done with psychedelics at the dawn of spatial travel, we have not even developed a vocabulary that can deal with 'reality' apart from its measurable, physical expression. Yet, just when we had to face the black limit of intergalactic space, bright resources glittered within.

Some few of us whose sense of reality has been shattered by infantile, childhood, or prenatal trauma, whose physiological orientation makes life in our interstellar society painful or impossible – not all, but a few of these golden . . . ’ at which point there was static, or the gentleman coughed, ‘ . . . can make the crossing and return.’

The name golden, sans noun, stuck.

*Few* was the understatement of the millennium. Slightly less than one human being in thirty-four thousand is a golden. A couple of people had pictures of emptying all mental institutions by just shaking them out over the galactic rim. Didn’t work like that. The particular psychosis and endocrine setup were remarkably specialized. Still, back then there was excitement, wonder, anticipation, hope, admiration in the word: admiration for the ones who could get out.

‘Golden?’ Ratlit said when I asked him. He was working as a grease monkey out here in the Star Pit over at Poloscki’s. ‘Born with the word. Grew up with it. Weren’t no first time with me. Though I remember when I was about six, right after the last of my parents was killed, and I was hiding out with a bunch of other lice in a broke-open packing crate in an abandoned freight yard near the ruins of Helios on Creton VI – that’s where I was born, I think. Most of the city had been starved out by then, but somebody was getting food to us. There was this old crook-back character who was hiding too. He used to sit on the top of the packing crate and bang his heels on the aluminum slats and tell us stories about the stars. Had a couple of rags held with twists of wire for clothes, missing two fingers off one hand; he kept plucking the loose

skin under his chin with those grimy talons. And he talked about them. So I asked, "Golden what, sir?" He leaned forward so that his face was like a mahogany bruise on the sky, and croaked. "They've been *out*, I tell you, seen more than ever you or I. Human and inhuman, kid-boy, mothered by women and fathered by men, still they live by their own laws and walk their own ways!" Ratlit and I were sitting under a streetlamp with our feet over the Edge, where the fence had broken. His hair was like breathing flame in the wind; his single earring glittered. Star-flecked infinity dropped away below our boot soles, and the wind created by the stasis field that held our atmosphere down – we call it the 'world-wind' out here because it's never cold and never hot and like nothing on any world – whipped his black shirt back from his bony chest as we gazed on galactic night between our knees. 'I guess that was back during the second Kyber war,' he concluded.

'Kyber war?' I asked. 'Which one was that?'

Ratlit shrugged. 'I just know it was fought over possession of a couple of tons of di-allium; that's the polarized element the golden brought back from Lupe-galaxy. They used y-adna ships to fight it – that's why it was such a bad one. I mean worse than usual.'

'Y-adna? That's a drive I don't know anything about.'

'Some golden saw the plans for them in a civilization in Magellanic-9.'

'Oh,' I said. 'And what was Kyber?'

'It was a weapon, a sort of fungus the golden brought back from some overrun planet on the rim of Andromeda. It's deadly. Only they were too stupid to bring back the antitoxin.'

‘That’s golden for you.’

‘Yeah. You ever notice about golden, Vyme? I mean just the word. I found out all about it from my publisher, once. It’s semantically unsettling.’

‘Really?’ I said. ‘So are they. Unsettling I mean.’

I’d finished a rough, rough day installing a rebuilt keeler in a quantum transport hull that just wasn’t big enough. The golden having the job done stood over my shoulder the whole time, and every hour he’d come out with the sort of added instruction that would make the next sixty-one minutes miserable. But I did it. The golden paid me in cash and without a word climbed into the lift, and two minutes later, while I was still washing the grease off, the damn five-hundred-ton hulk began to whistle for takeoff.

Sandy, a young fellow who’d come looking for a temporary mechanic’s job three months back (but hadn’t given me cause to fire him yet), barely had time to pull the big waldoes out of the way and go scooting into the shock chamber when the three-hundred-meter doofus tore loose from the grappers. And Sandy, who, like a lot of these youngsters drifting around from job to job, is usually sort of quiet and vague, got loud and specific. ‘. . . two thousand pounds of nonshockproof equipment out there . . . ruin it all if he could . . . I’m not expendable, I don’t care what a . . . these golden out here . . .’ while the ship hove off where only the golden go. I just flipped on the ‘not open’ sign, left the rest of the grease where it was, left the hangar, and hunted up Ratlit.

So there we were, under that streetlamp, sitting on the Edge, in the world-wind.

‘Golden,’ Ratlit said under the roar. ‘It would be much

easier to take if it were grammatically connected to something: golden ones, golden people. Or even one gold, two golden.'

'Male golden, female goldene?'

'Something like that. It's not an adjective, it's not a noun. My publisher told me that for a while it was written with a dash after it that stood for whatever it might modify.'

I remembered the dash. It was an uneasy joke, a fill-in for that cough. Golden *what*? People had already started to feel uncomfortable. Then it went past joking and back to just 'golden'.

'Think about that, Vyme. Just golden: one, two, or three of them.'

'That's something to think about, kid-boy,' I said.

Ratlit had been six during the Kyber war. Square that and add it once again for my age now. Ratlit's? Double six and add one. I like kids; and they like me. But that may be because my childhood left me a lot younger at forty-two than I should be. Ratlit's had left him a lot older than any thirteen-year-old has a right to be.

'No golden took part in the war,' Ratlit said.

'They never do.' I watched his thin fingers get all tangled together.

After two divorces, my mother ran off with a salesman and left me and four siblings with an alcoholic aunt for a year. Yeah, they still have divorces, monogamous marriages and stuff like that where I was born. Like I say, it's pretty primitive. I left home at fifteen, made it through vocational school on my own, and learned enough about what makes things fly to end up – after that disastrous

marriage I told you about earlier – with my own repair hangar on the Star Pit.

Compared with Ratlit I had a stable childhood.

That's right, he lost the last parent he remembered when he was six. At seven he was convicted of his first felony – after escaping from Creton VI. But part of his treatment at hospital *cum* reform school *cum* prison was to have the details lifted from his memory. 'Did something to my head back there. That's why I never could learn to read, I think.' For the next couple of years he ran away from one foster group after the other. When he was eleven, some guy took him home from Play Planet where he'd been existing under the boardwalk on discarded hot dogs, souvlakia, and falafel. 'Fat, smoked perfumed cigarettes; name was Vivian?' Turned out to be the publisher. Ratlit stayed for three months, during which time he dictated a novel to Vivian. 'Protecting my honor,' Ratlit explained. 'I had to do *something* to keep him busy.'

The book sold a few hundred thousand copies as a precocious curiosity among many. But Ratlit had split. The next years he was involved as a shill in some illegality I never really understood. He didn't either. 'But I bet I made a million, Vyme! I earned at least a million.' It's possible. At thirteen he still couldn't read or write, but his travels had gained him fair fluency in three languages. A couple of weeks ago he'd wandered off a stellar tramp, dirty and broke, here at the Star Pit. And I'd gotten him a job as grease monkey over at Poloscki's.

Ratlit leaned his elbows on his knees, his chin in his hands. 'Vyme, it's a shame.'

'What's a shame, kid-boy?'

‘To be washed up at my age. A has-been! To have to grapple with the fact that this –’ he spat at a star – ‘is it.’

He was talking about golden again.

‘You still have a chance.’ I shrugged. ‘Most of the time it doesn’t come out till puberty.’

He cocked his head up at me. ‘I’ve been pubescent since I was nine, buster.’

‘Excuse me.’

‘I feel cramped in, Vyme. There’s all that night out there to grow up in, to explore.’

‘There was a time,’ I mused, ‘when the whole species was confined to the surface, give or take a few feet up or down, of a single planet. You’ve got the whole galaxy to run around in. You’ve seen a lot of it, yeah. But not all.’

‘But there are billions of galaxies out there. I want to see them. In all the stars around here there hasn’t been one life form discovered that’s based on anything but silicon or carbon. I overheard two golden in a bar once, talking: there’s something in some galaxy out there that’s big as a star, neither dead nor alive, and sings. I want to *hear* it, Vyme!’

‘Ratlit, you can’t fight reality.’

‘Oh, go to sleep, grandpa!’ He closed his eyes and bent his head back until the cords of his neck quivered. ‘What is it that makes a golden? A combination of physiological and psychological . . . what?’

‘It’s primarily some sort of hormonal imbalance as well as an environmentally conditioned thalamic/personality response –’

‘Yeah. Yeah.’ His head came down. ‘And that X-chromosome heredity nonsense they just connected up with



it a few years back. But all I know is *they* can take the stasis shift from galaxy to galaxy, whereas you and I, Vyme, if we get more than twenty thousand light-years off the rim, we're dead.'

'Insane at twenty thousand,' I corrected. 'Dead at twenty-five.'

'Same difference.' He opened his eyes. They were large, green, and mostly pupil. 'You know, I stole a golden belt once. Rolled it off a staggering slob about a week ago who came out of a bar and collapsed on the corner. I went across the Pit to the Calle-J where nobody knows me and wore it around for a few hours, just to see if I felt different.'

'You did?' Ratlit had lengths of gut that astounded me about once a day.

'I didn't. But people walking around me did. Wearing that two-inch band of yellow metal around my waist, nobody in the worlds could tell I wasn't a golden, just walking by on the street, without talking to me awhile, or making hormone tests. And wearing that belt, I learned just how much I hated golden. Because I could suddenly see, in almost everybody who came by, how much they hated me while I had that metal belt on. I threw it over the Edge.' Suddenly he grinned. 'Maybe I'll steal another one.'

'You really hate them, Ratlit?'

He narrowed his eyes at me and looked superior.

'Sure, I talk about them,' I told him. 'Sometimes they're a pain to work for. But it's not their fault we can't take the reality shift.'

'I'm just a child,' he said evenly, 'incapable of such fine

reasoning. I hate them.’ Ratlit looked back at the night. ‘How can you stand to be trapped by anything, Vyme?’

Three memories crowded into my head when he said that.

First: I was standing at the railing of the East River – runs past this New York I was telling you about – at midnight, looking at the illuminated dragon of the Manhattan Bridge that spanned the water, then at the industrial fires flickering in bright, smoky Brooklyn, and then at the template of mercury streetlamps behind me bleaching out the playground and most of Houston Street; then, at the reflections in the water; here like crinkled foil, there like glistening rubber; at last, looked up at the midnight sky itself. It wasn’t black but dead pink, without a star. This glittering world made the sky a roof that pressed down on me so I almost screamed. . . . That time the next night I was twenty-seven light-years away from Sol on my first star-run.

Second: I was visiting my mother after my first few years out. I was looking in the closet for something when this contraption of plastic straps and buckles fell on my head.

‘What’s this, Ma?’

She smiled with a look of idiot nostalgia and crooned, ‘Why that’s your little harness, Vymey. Your first father and I would take you on picnics up at Bear Mountain and put you in that and tie you to a tree with about ten foot of cord so you wouldn’t get –’ I didn’t hear the rest because of the horror that suddenly flooded me, thinking of myself tied up in that thing. Okay, I was twenty and had just joined that beautiful procreation group a year back

on Sigma and was the proud father of three and expecting two more. The hundred and sixty-three of us had the whole beach and nine miles of jungle and half a mountain to ourselves; maybe I was seeing Antoni caught up in that thing, trying to catch a bird or a beetle or a wave – with only ten feet of cord. I hadn't worn clothes for anything but work in a twelvemonth, and I was chomping to get away from the incredible place I had grown up in called an apartment and back to wives, husbands, kids, and civilization. Anyway, it was pretty terrible.

The third? After I had left the proke-group – fled them, I suppose, guilty and embarrassed over something I couldn't name, still having nightmares once a month that woke me screaming about what was going to happen to the kids, even though I knew one point of group marriage was to prevent the loss of one, two, or three parents being traumatic – still wondering if I wasn't making the same mistakes my parents made, hoping my brood wouldn't turn out like me, or worse like the kids you sometimes read about in the paper (like Ratlit, though I hadn't met him yet), horribly suspicious that no matter how different I tried to be from my sires, it was just the same thing all over again. . . . Anyway, I was on the ship bringing me to the Star Pit for the first time. I'd gotten to talking to a golden who, as golden go, was a pretty regular gal. We'd been discussing inter- and intragalactic drives. She was impressed I knew so much. I was impressed that she could use them and know so little. She was digging in a very girl-way the six-foot-four, two hundred-and-ten-pound drive mechanic with mildly grimy fingernails and that was me. I was digging in a very boy-way the slim,

amber-eyed young lady who had seen it *all*. From the view deck we watched the immense, artificial disk of the Star Pit approach, when she turned to me and said, in a voice that didn't sound cruel at all, 'This is as far as you go, isn't it?' And I was frightened all over again, because I knew that on about nine different levels she was right.

Ratlit said: 'I know what you're thinking.' A couple of times when he'd felt like being quiet and I'd felt like talking I may have told him more than I should. 'Well, cube that for me, dad. That's how trapped *I* feel!'

I laughed, and Ratlit looked very young again. 'Come on,' I said. 'Let's take a walk.'

'Yeah.' He stood. The wind fingered at our hair. 'I want to go see Alegra.'

'I'll walk you as far as Calle-G,' I told him. 'Then I'm going to go to bed.'

'I wonder what Alegra thinks about this business? I always find Alegra a very good person to talk to,' he said sagely. 'Not to put you down, but her experiences are a little more up-to-date than yours. You have to admit she has a modern point of view. Plus the fact that she's older.' Than Ratlit anyway. She was fifteen.

'I don't think being "trapped" ever really bothered her,' I said. 'Which may be a place to take a lesson from.'

By Ratlit's standards Alegra had a few things over me. In my youth kids took to dope in their teens, twenties. Alegra was born with a three-hundred-milligram-a-day habit on a bizarre narcotic that combined the psychedelic qualities of the most powerful hallucinogens with the addictiveness of the strongest depressants. I can sympathize. Alegra's mother was addicted, and the tolerance

was passed with the blood plasma through the placental wall. Ordinarily a couple of complete transfusions at birth would have gotten the newborn child straight. But Alegra was also a highly projective telepath. She projected the horrors of birth, the glories of her infantile hallucinated world on befuddled doctors; she was given her drug. Without too much difficulty she managed to be given her drug every day since.

Once I asked Alegra when she'd first heard of the golden, and she came back with this horror story. A lot were coming back from Tiber-44 cluster with psychic shock. The mental condition of golden is pretty delicate, and sometimes very minor conflicts nearly ruin them. Anyway, the government that was sponsoring the importation of micro-microsurgical equipment from some tiny planet in that galaxy, to protect its interests, hired Alegra, age eight, as a psychiatric therapist. 'I'd concretize their fantasies and make them work them through. In just a couple of hours I'd have 'em back to their old, mean, stupid selves again. Some of them were pretty nice when they came to me.' But there was a lot of work for her; projective telepaths are rare. So they started withholding her drug to force her to work harder, then rewarding her with increased dosage. 'Up till then,' she told me, 'I might have kicked it. But when I came away, they had me on double what I used to take. They pushed me past the point where withdrawal would be fatal. But I *could* have kicked it, up till then, Vyme.' That's right. Age eight.

Oh, yeah. The drug was imported by golden from Cancer-9, and most of it goes through the Star Pit. Alegra

came here because illegal imports are easier to come by, and you can get it for just about nothing – if you want it. Golden don't use it.

The wind lessened as Ratlit and I started back. Ratlit began to whistle. In Calle-K the first night lamp had broken so that the level street was a tunnel of black.

'Ratlit?' I asked. 'Where do you think you'll be, oh, in say five years?'

'Quiet,' he said. 'I'm trying to get to the end of the street without bumping into the walls, tripping on something, or some other catastrophe. If we get through the next five minutes all right, I'll worry about the next five years.' He began whistling again.

'Trip? Bump the walls?'

'I'm listening for echoes.' Again he commenced the little jets of music.

I put my hands in my overall pouch and went on quietly while Ratlit did the bat bit. Then there was a catastrophe, though I didn't realize it at the time:

Into the circle of light from the remaining lamp at the other end of the street walked a golden.

His hands went up to his face, and he was laughing. The sound skittered in the street. His belt was low on his belly the way the really down and broke –

I just thought of a better way to describe him. The resemblance struck me immediately. He looked like Sandy, my mechanic – who is short, twenty-four years old, muscled like an ape, and wears his worn-out work clothes even when he's off duty. ('I just want this job for a while, boss. I'm not staying out here at the Star Pit. As soon as I save up a little, I'm gonna make it back in toward

galactic center. It's funny out here, like dead.' He gazes up through the opening in the hangar roof where there are no clouds and no stars either. 'Yeah. I'm just gonna be here for a little while.'

'Fine with me, kid-boy.'

(That was three months back, like I say. He's still with me. He works hard too, which puts him a cut above a lot of characters out here. Still, there was something about Sandy . . .) On the other hand Sandy's face is also hacked up with acne. His hair is always nap short over his wide head. But in these aspects, the golden was exactly Sandy's opposite, come to think of it. Still, there was something about the golden . . .

He staggered, went down on his knees still laughing, then collapsed. By the time we reached him, he was silent. With the toe of his boot Ratlit nudged the hand from the belt buckle.

It flopped, palm up, on the pavement. The little fingernail was three-quarters of an inch long, the way a lot of the golden wear it. (Like his face, the nails on Sandy's fingers are masticated wrecks. Still, something . . .)

'Now isn't that something.' Ratlit shook his head. 'What do you want to do with him, Vyme?'

'Nothing,' I said. 'Let him sleep it off.'

'Leave him so somebody can come along and steal his belt?' Ratlit grinned. 'I'm not that nasty.'

'Weren't you just telling me how much you hated golden?'

'I'd be nasty to whoever stole the belt and wore it. Nobody but a golden should be hated that much.'

'Ratlit, let's go.'

But Ratlit had already kneeled down and was shaking the golden's shoulder. 'Let's get him to Alegra's and find out what's the matter with him.'

'He's just drunk.'

'Nope,' Ratlit said. ''Cause he don't smell funny.'

'Look. Get back.' I hoisted the golden up and laid him across my neck, fireman's carry. 'Start moving,' I told Ratlit. 'I think you're crazy.'

Ratlit grinned. 'Thanks. Maybe he'll be grateful and lay some lepta on me for taking him in off the street.'

'You don't know golden,' I said. 'But if he does, split it with me.'

'Sure.'

Two blocks later we reached Alegra's place. (But like I say, Sandy, though well built, is little; so I didn't have much trouble carrying him.) Halfway up the sagging stairs Ratlit said, 'She's in a good mood.'

'I guess she is.' The weight across my shoulders was becoming pleasant.

I can't describe Alegra's place. I can describe a lot of places like it; and I can describe it before she moved in because I knew a derelict named Drunk-roach who slept on that floor before she did. You know what never-wear plastics look like when they wear out? What non-rust metals look like when they rust through? It was a shabby crack-walled cubicle with dirt in the corners and scars on the windowpane when Drunk-roach had his pile of blankets in the corner. But since the hallucinating projective telepath took it over, who knows what it had become.

Ratlit opened the door on an explosion of classical beauty.