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EMPIRE STAR

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I

He had:

a waist-length braid of blond hair;

a body that was brown and slim and looked like a cat's, they said, when he curled up, half asleep in the flicker of the Field Keeper's fire at New Cycle;

an ocarina;

a pair of black boots and a pair of black gloves with which he could climb walls and across ceilings;

gray eyes too large for his small, feral face;

brass claws on his left hand with which he had killed, to date, three wild keparda that had crept through a break in the power fence during his watch at New Cycle (and in a fight once

with Billy James—a friendly scuffle where a blow had suddenly come too fast and too hard and turned it into for real—he had killed the other boy; but that had been two years ago when he had been sixteen and he didn't like to think about it);

eighteen years of rough life in the caves of the satellite Rhys attending the underground fields while Rhys swung about the red giant sun Tau Ceti;

a propensity for wandering away from the Home Caves to look at the stars, which had gotten him in trouble at least four times in the past month, and in the past fourteen years had earned him the sobriquet, Comet Jo;

an uncle named Clemence whom he disliked.

And later, when he had lost all but miraculously, the ocarina, he thought about all of these things and what they had meant to him, and how much they defined his youth, and how poorly they had prepared him for manhood.

Before he began to lose, however, he gained: two things, which, along with the ocarina, he kept until the end. One was a devil kitten named Di'k. The other was me. I'm Jewel.

I have a multiplex consciousness, which means I see things from different points of view. It's a function of the overtone series in the harmonic pattern of my internal structuring. So I'll tell a good deal of the story from the point of view called, in literary circles, the omniscient observer.

Crimson Ceti bruised the western crags. Tyre, giant as solar Jupiter, was a black curve across a quarter of the sky, and the white dwarf Eye silvered the eastern rocks. Comet Jo, with hair the hue of wheat, walked behind his two shadows, one long and gray, one squat and rusty. His head was back, and in the rush of wine colored evening he stared at the first stars. In his long fingered right hand with the nails gnawed like any boy might, he held his ocarina. He should go back, he knew; he should crawl from under the night and into the luminous cocoon of the Home Cave. He should be respectful to his uncle Clemence, he should not get into fights with the other boys on Field Watch; there were so many things he should do—

A sound. Rock and non-rock in conflict.

He crouched, and his clawed left hand, deadly on the lean cabled arm, jumped to protect his face. Keparads struck for the eyes. But it was not a keparad. He lowered his claw.

The devil-kitten came scrambling from the crevice, balancing on five of its eight legs, and hissed. It was a foot long, had three horns, and large gray eyes the color of Jo's own. It giggled, which devil-kittens do when upset, usually because they have lost their devil-cat parents—which are fifty feet long and perfectly harmless unless they step on you accidentally.

"Wha' madda?" Comet Jo asked. "Ya ma and pa run off?"

The devil-kitten giggled again.

"Sum' wrong?" Jo persisted.

The kitten looked over its left shoulder and hissed.

“Le’ ta’ look,” Comet Jo nodded. “Com’n, kitty.” Frowning, he started forward, the motion of his naked body over the rocks as graceful as his speech was rude. He dropped from a ledge to crumbling red earth, yellow hair clouding his shoulders in midleap, then falling in his eyes. He shook it back. The kitten rubbed his ankle, giggled again, then darted around the boulder.

Jo followed—then threw himself back against the rock. The claws of his left hand and the nubs of his right ground on the granite. He sweated. The large vein along the side of his throat pulsed furiously while his scrotum tightened like a prune.

Green slop frothed and flamed in a geyser two feet higher than he was. There were things in that flaming mess he couldn’t see, but he could sense them—writhing, shrieking silently, dying in great pain. One of the things was trying hard to struggle free.

The devil-kitten, oblivious to the agony inside, pranced to the base, spat haughtily, and pranced back.

As Jo chanced a breath, the thing inside broke out. It staggered forward, smoking. It raised gray eyes. Long wheat colored hair caught on a breeze and blew back from its shoulders, as, for a moment, it moved with a certain cat-like grace. Then it fell forward.

Something under fear made Comet Jo reach out and catch its extended arms. Hand caught claw. Claw caught hand. It was only when Comet Jo was kneeling and the figure was panting in his arms that he realized it was his double.

Surprise exploded in his head and his tongue was one of the things jarred loose. “Who you?”

“You’ve got to take...” the figure began, coughed, and for a moment its features lost clarity; “...to take...” it repeated.

“Wha’? Wha’?” Jo was baffled and scared.

“...take a message to Empire Star.” The accent was the clean, precise tone of off-worlders’ Interling. “You have to take a message to Empire Star!”

“Wha’ I say?”

“Just get there and tell them...” It coughed again. “Just get there, no matter how long.”

“Wha’ hell I say when I ge’ there?” Jo demanded. Then he thought of all the things he should have already asked. “Whe’ ya fum? Whe’ ya go’? Wha’ happen?”

Struck by a spasm, the figure arched its back and flipped from Comet Jo’s arms. Comet Jo reached out to pry the mouth open and keep it from swallowing its tongue, but before he touched it, it—melted.

It bubbled and steamed, frothed and smoked.

The larger phenomenon had quieted down, was only a puddle now, sloshing the weeds. The

devil-kitten went to the edge, sniffed, then pawed something out. The puddle stilled, then began to evaporate, fast. The kitten picked the thing up in its mouth and, blinking rapidly, came and laid it between Jo's knees, then sat back to wash its fluffy pink chest.

Jo looked down. The thing was multicolored, multifaceted, multiplexed, and me. I'm Jewel.

II

Oh, we had traveled so long, Norn, Ki, Marbika, and myself, to have it end so suddenly and disastrously. I had warned them, of course, when our original ship had broken down and we had taken the Organiform Cruiser from S. Doradus; things went beautifully as long as we stayed in the comparatively dusty region of the Magellanic Cloud, but when we reached the emptier space of the Home Spiral there was nothing for the encysting mechanism to catalyze against.

We were going to swing around Ceti and head for Empire Star with our burden of good news and bad, our chronicle of success and defeat. But we lost our crust, and the Organiform, like a wild amoeba, plopped onto the satellite Rhys. The strain was fatal. Ki was dead when we landed. Marbika had broken up into a hundred idiot components which were struggling and dying in the nutrient jelly where we were suspended.

Norn and I had a quick consultation. We put a rather faulty perceptor scan over a hundred mile radius from the crash. The Organiform had already started to destroy itself; its primitive intelligence blamed us for the accident, and it wanted to kill. The perceptor scan showed a small colony of Terrans who worked producing plyasil, which grew in the vast underground caves. There was a small Transport Station about twenty miles south where the plyasil was shipped to Galactic-Center to be distributed among the stars. But the satellite itself was incredibly backwards. "This is about as simplex a community as I've ever run into that you could still call intelligent," Norn commented. "I can't detect more than ten minds on the planet that have ever been to another star-system, and they all work at the Transport Station."

"Where they have non-organic, reliable ships that won't get hostile and crack up," I said. "Because of this one we've both got to die, and we'll never get to Empire Star now. That's the sort of ship we should have been on. This thing—bah!" The temperature of the proto-protoplasm was getting uncomfortable.

"There's a child somewhere around here," Norn said. "And a—what the hell is that, anyway?"

"The Terrans call it a devil-kitten," I said, picking up the information.

"That certainly isn't a simplex mind!"

"It's not exactly multiplex either," I said. "But it's something. Maybe it could get the message through?"

“But its intelligence is sub-moronic,” Norn said. “The Terrans at least have a fair amount of gray matter. If we could only get the both of them cooperating. That child is rather bright—but so simplex! The kitten is complex, at least, so could at least carry the message. Well, let’s try. See if you can get them over here. If you crystallize, you can put off dying for awhile, can’t you?”

“Yes,” I said, uncomfortably, “but I don’t know if I want to. I don’t think I can take being that passive, being just a point of view.”

“Even passive,” Norn said, “you can be very useful, especially to that simplex boy. He’s going to have a hard time, if he agrees.”

“Oh, all right,” I said. “I’ll crystallize, but I won’t like it. You go on out and see what you can do.”

“Damn,” Norn said. “I don’t like dying. I don’t want to die. I want to live, and go to Empire Star and tell them.”

“Hurry up,” I said. “You’re wasting time.”

“All right, all right. What form do you think I should take?”

“Remember, you’re dealing with a simplex mind. There’s only one form you can take that he’s likely to pay much attention to and not chalk up to a bad dream tomorrow morning.”

“All right,” Norn repeated. “Here goes. Goodbye, Jewel.”

“Goodbye,” I said, and began to crystallize.

Norn struggled forward, and the boiling jelly sagged as he broke through onto the rocks where the child was waiting. Here, kitty, kitty, kitty, I projected towards the devil-kitten. It was very cooperative.

III

Comet Jo walked back to the caves, playing slow tunes on the ocarina, and thinking. The gem (which was Jewel which is me) was in the pouch at his waist. The devil-kitten was snapping at fireflies, then stopping to pick bristles out of its foot cups. Once it rolled on its back and hissed at a star, but then it scurried after Comet. It was not a simplex mind at all.

Comet reached the ledge of Toothsome. Glancing over the rock, he saw Uncle Clemence at the door of the cave, looking very annoyed. Comet stuck his tongue in his cheek and hunted for left over lunch, because he knew he wasn’t going to get dinner.

Above him someone said, “Hey, stupid! Unca’ Clem is mad on y’, an’ how!”

He looked up. His fourth cousin Lilly was hanging onto the edge of a higher precipice, staring down.

He motioned, and she came down to stand beside him. Her hair was cut in a short brush, which he always envied girls. "Tha' ya' devil-kitty? Wha's's name?"

"It ain't none o' mine," he said. "Hey, who says ya can use my boots and gloves, huh?"

She was wearing the knee high black boots and the elbow length gloves that Charona had given him for his twelfth birthday.

"I wan'ed to wait for ya an' tell ya how mad Unca' Clem is. An' I had to hang up there whe' I could see ya comin' in."

"Jhup, ya did! Gimme. Ya jus' wan'ed to use 'em. Now gimme. I di'n' say ya could use 'em."

Reluctantly Lilly shucked the gloves. "Jhup ya," she said. "Ya won' lemme use 'em?" She stepped out of the boots.

"No," Comet said.

"All right," Lilly said. She turned around and called, "Unca' Clem!"

"Hey... !" Jo said.

"Unca' Clem, Comet's back!"

"Shedup!" Comet hissed, then turned and ran back across the ledge.

"Unca' Clem, he's runnin' away again—" Just then the devil-kitty stuck two of its horns into Lilly's ankles, picked up the gloves and boots in his mouth, and ran after Comet—which was a very multiplex thing to do, considering no one had said anything to him at all.

Fifteen minutes later Comet was crouching in the starlit rocks, scared and mad. Which was when the devil-kitty walked up and dropped the boots and gloves in front of him.

"Huh?" said Comet, as he recognized them in the maroon darkness. "Hey, thanks!" And he picked them up and put them on. "Charona," he said, standing up. "I'm gonna go see Charona." Because Charona had given him the boots, and because Charona was never mad at him, and because Charona would be likely to know what Empire Star was.

He started off, then turned back and frowned at the devil-kitten. Devil-kittens are notoriously independent, and do not fetch and carry for human beings like dogs. "Devil-kitty," he said. "D'kitty. Di'k; that's a name. Di'k, you wanna come wi' me?" which was a surprisingly un-simplex thing to do—anyway it surprised me.

Comet Jo started off, and Di'k followed.

IV

It rained toward dawn. The spray drooled his face and jeweled his eyelashes as he hung from the underside of the cliff, looking down at the gate of the Transport Area. He hung like a sloth, and Di'k sat in the cradle of his belly.

Between the rocks in the reddening light, two plyasil trucks crept forward. In a minute Charona would come to let them in. Leaning his head back until the world was upside down, he could see across the rocky valley, spanned by the double cusp of Brooklyn Bridge, to the loading platforms where the star ships balanced in the dawn's red rain.

As the trucks came out of the thicket of chupper vines that at one point arbored the road, he saw Charona marching toward the gate. 3-Dog ran ahead of her, barking through the mesh at the vehicles as they halted. The devil-kitten shifted nervously from one foot to another. One way in which it resembled its namesake was its dislike for dogs.

Charona pulled the gate lever and the bars rolled back. As the truck trundled through, Jo hollered down from the cliff, "Hey, Charona, hol' 'em up f' me!"

She lifted her bald head and twisted her wrinkled face. "Who art thou aloft?"

3-Dog barked.

"Watch it," Jo called, then let go of the rocks and twisted in the air. He and Di'k both took the fall rolling. He sprang open before her, light on his booted feet.

"Well," she laughed, putting her fists in the pouch of her silver skin suit that glistened with rain, "thou art an agile elf. Where hast thou been a-hiding for the best part of the month?"

"The New Cycle watch," he said, grinning. "See, I'm wearin' ya' present."

"And it's good to see thee with them. Come in, come in, so I can close the gate."

Comet ducked under the half lowered bars. "Hey, Charona," he said as they started down the wet road together, "wh' Empire Star? An' whe' it? An' how I ge' 'ere?" By unspoken consent they turned off the road to make their way over the rougher earth of the valley below the tongue of metal called Brooklyn Bridge.

" 'Tis a great star, lad, that thy great-great-great-grandfathers on Earth called Aurigae. It is seventy-two degrees around the hub of the galaxy from here at a hyperstatic distance of fifty-five point nine, and—to quote the ancient maxim—thou canst not get there from here."

"Why?"

Charona laughed. 3-Dog ran ahead and barked at Di'k, who arched, started to say something back in kittenish, thought better of it, and pranced away. "One could hitch a ride on a transport and get started; but thou couldst not. Which is the important part."

Comet Jo frowned.

"Why cou'n't I?" He swiped at a weed and tore off the head. "I gonna ge' off this

planet—now!”

Charona raised the bare skin where her eyebrows would have been. “Thou seemst a mite determined. Thou art the first person born here to tell me that in four hundred years. Return thou, Comet Jo, to thine uncle and make peace in the Home Cave.”

“Jhup,” said Comet Jo and kicked a small stone. “I wanna go. Why can’ I go?”

“Simplex, complex, and multiplex,” Charona said. And I woke up in the pouch. Perhaps there was hope after all. If there was someone to explain it to him, the journey would be easier. “This is a simplex society here, Comet. Space travel is not a part of it. Save for trucking the plyasil here, and a few curious children like thyself, nobody ever comes inside the gates. And in a year, thou wilt cease to come, and all thy visits will eventually mean to thee is that thou wilt be a bit more lenient with thine own when they will wander to the gates, or come back to the Home Caves with magic trinkets from the stars. To travel between worlds, one must deal with at least complex beings, and often multiplex. Thou wouldst be lost as how to conduct thyself. After half an hour in a spaceship, thou wouldst turn around and decide to go back, dismiss the whole idea as foolish. The fact that thou hast a simplex mind is good, in a way, because thou remainest safe at Rhys. And even though thou comest through the gates, thou art not likely to be ‘corrupted,’ as it were, even by visits to the transport area, nor by an occasional exposure to something from the stars, like those boots and gloves I gave thee.”

She seemed to have finished, and I felt sad, for that certainly was no explanation. And by now I knew that Jo would journey.

But Comet Jo reached for his pouch, pushed aside the ocarina, and lifted me out into the palm of his hand. “Charona, ya ever see wonna these?”

Together they loomed above me. Beyond the tines of Comet’s claws, beyond their shadowed faces, the black ribbon of Brooklyn Bridge scribed the mauve sky. His palm was warm beneath my dorsal facet. A cool droplet splashed my frontal faces, distorting theirs.

“Why... I think... No, it cannot be. Where didst thou retrieve it?”

He shrugged. “Jus’ foun’ it. Wha’cha think it is?”

“It looks for all the light of the seven suns to be a crystallized Tritovian.”

She was right, of course, and I knew immediately that here was a well traveled spacewoman. Crystallized, we Tritovians are not that common.

“Gotta take him to Empire Star.”

Charona thought quietly behind the wrinkled mask of her face, and I could tell from the overtones that they were multiplex thoughts, with images of space and the stars seen in the blackness of galactic night, weird landscapes that were unfamiliar even to me. The four hundred years as gate guardian to the transport area of Rhys had leveled her mind to something nearly simplex. But multiplexity had awakened.

“I shall try and explain something to thee, Comet. Tell me, what’s the most important thing there is?”

“Jhup,” he answered promptly, then saw her frowning. He got embarrassed. “I mean plyasil. I

din' mean to use no dirty words."

"Words don't bother me, Comet. In fact, I always found it a little funny that thy people had such a thing as a 'dirty word' for plyasil. Though I suppose 'tis not so funny when I recall the 'dirty words' on the world I came from. Water was the taboo term where I grew up—there was very little of it, and thou dared not refer to it by other than its chemical formula in a technological discussion, and never in front of your teacher. And on Earth, in our great-great-grandfather's time, food once eaten and passed from the body could not be spoken of by its common name in polite company."

"But wha' dirty about food an' water?"

"What's dirty about jhup?"

He was surprised at her use of the common slang. But she was always dealing with truckers and loaders who had notoriously filthy mouths and lacked respect for everything—said Uncle Clemence.

"I dunno."

"It's an organic plastic that grows in the flower of a mutant strain of grain that only blooms with the radiation that comes from the heart of Rhys in the darkness of the caves. It's of no use to anyone on this planet, except as an alloy strengthener for other plastics, and yet it is Rhys' only purpose in the Universal plan—to supply the rest of the galaxy. For there are places where it is needed. All men and women on Rhys work to produce or process or transport it. That is all it is. Nowhere in my definition have I mentioned anything about dirty."

"Well, if a bag of it breaks open and spills, it's sort of... well, not dirty, but messy."

"Spilled water or spilled food is messy too. But none of them by nature so."

"You just don' talk about certain things in front o' nice people. That's what Unca Clem says." Jo finally took refuge in his training. "An' like ya say, jhup is the most important thing there is, so that's why you have to... well, be a little respectful."

"I didn't say it. You did. And that is why thou hast a simplex mind. If thou passeth through the second gate, and ask a ride of a transport captain—and thou wilt probably get it, for they are a good lot—thou wilt be in a different world, where plyasil means only forty credits a ton, and is a good deal less important than derny, kibblepobs, clapper boxes, or boysh, all of which bring above fifty credits. And thou might shout the name of any of them, and be thought nothing more than noisy."

"I ain't gonna go shoutin' nothing aroun'," Comet Jo assured her. "An' all I can get from ya' jabber about 'simplex' is that I know how to be polite, even if a lotta other people don'—I know I'm not as polite as I should be, but I do know how."

Charona laughed. 3-Dog ran back and rubbed her hip with his head.

"Perhaps I can explain it in purely technological terms, though painfully I know that thou wilt not understand until thou hast seen for thyself. Stop and look above."

They paused in the broken stone and looked up.

“See the holes?” she asked.

In the plating that floored the bridge, here and there were pinpricks of light.

“They just look like random dots, do they not?”

He nodded.

“That’s the simplex view. Now start walking and keep looking.”

Comet started to walk, steadily, staring upward. The dots of light winked out, and here and there others appeared, then winked out again, and more, or perhaps the original ones, returned.

“There’s a superstructure of girders above the bridge that gets in the way of some of the holes and keeps thee from perceiving all at once. But thou art now receiving the complex view, for thou art aware that there is more than what is seen from any one spot. Now, start to run, and keep thy head up.”

Jo began to run along the rocks. The rate of flickering increased, and suddenly he realized that the holes were in a pattern, six-pointed stars crossed by diagonals of seven holes each. It was only with the flickering coming so fast that the entire pattern could be perceived—

He stumbled, and skidded onto his hands and knees.

“Didst thou see the pattern?”

“Eh... yeah.” Jo shook his head. His palms stung through the gloves, and one knee was raw.

“That was the multiplex view.”

3-Dog bent down and licked his face.

Di’k watched a little scornfully from the fork of a trident bush.

“Thou hast also encountered one of the major difficulties of the simplex mind attempting to encompass the multiplex view. Thou art very likely to fall flat on thy face. I really do not know if thou wilt make the transition, though thou art young, and older people than thee have had to harken. Certainly I wish thee luck. Though for the first few legs of thy journey, thou canst always turn around and come back, and even with a short hop to Ratshole thou wilt have seen a good deal more of the universe than most of the people of Rhys. But the farther thou goest, the harder it will be to come back.”

Comet Jo pushed 3-Dog aside and stood up. His next question came both from fear of his endeavor and the pain in his hands. “Brooklyn Bridge,” he said, still looking up. “Why do they call it Brooklyn Bridge?” He asked it as one asked a question without an answer, and had his mind been precise enough to articulate its true meaning, he would have asked, “Why is that structure there to trip me up at all?”

But Charona was saying, “On Earth, there is a structure similar to this that spans between two islands—though it is a little smaller than this one here. ‘Bridge’ is the name for this sort of structure, and Brooklyn is the name of the place it leads to, so it was called Brooklyn

Bridge. The first colonists brought the name with them and gave it to what thou seest here.”

“Ya mean there’s a reason?”

Charona nodded.

Suddenly an idea caught in his head, swerved around a corner and came up banging and clanging behind his ears. “Will I get to see Earth?”

“ ‘Twill not take thee too far afield,” Charona said.

“And c’n I see Brooklyn Bridge?” His feet had started to move in the boots.

“I saw it four hundred years ago, and ‘twas still standing then.”

Comet Jo suddenly jumped up and tried to beat his fists against the sky, which was a beautifully complex action that gave me even more hope; then he ran forward, leaped against one of the supports of the bridge and scurried a hundred feet up, from sheer exuberance.

Halfway to the top he stopped, and looked down. “Hey, Charona,” he called, “I’m gonna go Earth! Me, Comet Jo, I’m gonna go Earth an’ see Brooklyn Bridge!”

Below us the gate keeper smiled and stroked 3-Dog’s head.

V

They came up from beneath the balustrades as the rain ceased. They climbed over the edge of the railing and strolled across the water-blackened tarmac toward the second gate. “Thou art sure?” Charona asked him once more.

A little warily, he nodded.

“And what should I say to thy Uncle when he comes inquiring, which he will.”

At the thought of Uncle Clemence, the wariness increased. “Jus’ say I gone away.”

Charona nodded, pulled the second lever, and the gate rose.

“And wilt thou be taking that?” Charona pointed to Di’k.

“Sure. Why not?” And at that he strode bravely forward. Di’k looked right, left, then ran after him. Charona would have gone through herself to accompany the boy, but suddenly there was a signal light flashing which said her presence was required at the first gate again. So only her gaze went with him, as the gate lowered. Then she turned back across the bridge.

He had never done more than look through the second gate at the bulbous forms of the ships, at the loading buildings, at the mechanical loaders and sledges that plied the pathways of the Transport Area. When he stepped through, he looked around, waiting for the world to be very different, as Charona had warned. But his conception of different was rather simple, so that twenty feet along he was disappointed.

Another twenty feet and disappointment was replaced by ordinary curiosity. A saucer-sled was sliding toward him, and a tall figure guided it austerely down the slip. There was a small explosion of fear and surprise when he realized the saucer was coming directly at him. A moment later it stopped.

The woman standing there—and it took him a minute to figure it out, for her hair was long like a man's and elaborately coiffed like no one's he'd ever seen—wore a glittering red dress, where panels of different textures, though the color was all the same, wrapped her or swung away in the damp dawn breeze. Her hair and lips and nails were red, he realized. That was odd. She looked down at him, and said, "You are a beautiful boy."

"Wha'?" asked Comet.

"I said you are a beautiful boy."

"Well, jhup, I mean... well..." Then he stopped looking at his feet and stared back up at her.

"But your hair is a mess."

He frowned. "Whaddya mean it's a mess?"

"I mean exactly what I say. And where did you learn to speak Interling? Or am I just getting a foggy telepathic equivalent of your oral utterance?"

"Wha?"

"Never mind. You are still a beautiful boy. I will give you a comb, and I will give you diction lessons. Come to me on the ship—you will be taking my ship, since there is no other one leaving soon. Ask for San Severina."

The saucer-disk turned to slide away.

"Hey, whe' ya goin'?" Comet Jo called.

"Comb your hair first, and we shall discuss it at lessons." She removed something from a panel of her dress and tossed it to him.

He caught it, looked at it. It was a red comb.

He pulled his mass of hair across his shoulder for inspection. It was snarled from the night's journey to the Transport Area. He struck at it a few times, hoping that perhaps the comb were some special type that would make unsnarling easier. It wasn't. So it took him about ten minutes, and then, to avoid repeating the ordeal as long as possible, he braided it deftly down one shoulder. Then he put the comb in his pouch and took out the ocarina.

He was passing a pile of cargo when he saw a young man a few years his senior perched on top of the boxes, hugging his knees and staring down at him. He was bare footed, shirtless, and his frayed pants were held on by rope. His hair was of some indiscriminately sexless length and a good deal more snarled than Jo's had been. He was very dirty, but he was grinning.

"Hey!" Jo said. "Know where I can getta ride outta here?"

"T'chapubna," the boy said, pointing across the field, "f'd' jhup n' LII."

Jo felt a little lost that the only thing he understood in the sentence was a swear word.

"I wanna get a ride," Jo repeated.

"T'chapubna," the boy said, and pointed again. Then he put his hands to his mouth as though he too were playing an ocarina.

"You wanna try?" Jo asked, and then wished he hadn't, because the boy was so dirty.

But the boy shook his head, smiling. "Jus'a shuttle-bum. Can' make no music."

Which maybe half made sense, maybe. "Where ya from?" Jo asked.

"Jus' a shuttle-bum," the boy repeated. Now he pointed to the pink moon-moon above the horizon. "Dere n' back, dere n' back, 'sall I ever been." He smiled again.

"Oh," Jo said, and smiled because he couldn't think of anything else to do. He wasn't sure if he'd gotten any information from the conversation or not. He started playing the ocarina again and kept walking.

He headed directly for a ship this time; one was being loaded, so he made for that one.

A beefy man was supervising the robo-loaders, checking things off against a list. His greasy shirt was still damp from the rain and he had tied it across his hairy stomach, which bulged below and above the knot.

Another boy, this one closer to Jo's age, was leaning against a guy cable that ran from the ship. Like the first, he was dirty, shoeless and shirtless. One pantsleg was torn off at the knee, and two belt loops were held together with a twist of wire. The weatherburned face even lacked the readiness to smile that the other's had held. The boy leaned out from the guy and swung his body slowly around, to watch Jo as he came past.

Jo started to approach the big man checking the loading, but he had just gotten very busy reorganizing the pile that one of the loaders had done incorrectly, so Jo stepped back. He looked at the boy again, gave a half-smile and nodded. Comet didn't feel much like getting into a conversation, but the boy nodded shortly back, and the man looked like he was going to be busy for awhile.

"Ya a shuttle-bum?" Jo asked.

The boy nodded.

"Ya go from there n' back?" he asked, pointing toward the disk of the moon-moon.

The boy nodded again.

“Any chance my hoppin’ a ride out toward... well, anywhere?”

“There is if you want to take a job,” the boy said.

The accent surprised Jo.

“Sure,” Jo said. “If I gotta work, I don’ mind.”

The boy pulled himself back up on the wire. “Hey, Elmer,” he called. The man looked back, then flipped a switch on his wrist-console, and the robo-loaders all halted. That was simple, Jo thought.

“What dost thou wish?” Elmer asked, turning around and wiping his forehead.

“We have that second shuttle-bum. The kid wants a job.”

“Well and good,” Elmer said. “Thou wilt take care of him, then. He looks a likely lad, but feed him well and he’ll work, I warrant.” He grinned and turned back to the robo-loaders.

“You’re hired,” the boy said. “My name’s Ron.”

“I’m Jo,” Jo said. “They call me Comet Jo.”

Ron laughed out loud and shook Jo’s hand. “I’ll never figure it. I’ve been running the stasiscurrents for six months now, and every tried and true spaceman you meet is Bob or Hank, or Elmer. Then, the minute you hit some darkside planet or one-product simplex culture, everybody’s Starman, or Cosmic Smith, or Comet Jo.” He clapped Jo on the shoulder. “Don’t take offense, but thou wilt lose thy comet soon enough.”

Jo took no offense, mainly because he wasn’t sure what Ron was talking about, but he smiled. “Whe’ ya from?”

“I’m taking a year off from Centauri University to bounce around the stars, work a little when I have to. I’ve been shuttle-bumming across this quarter of the spiral for a couple of months. You notice Elmer here’s got me talking like a real spacemen?”

“That guy sittin’ back there? He from the... University too?”

“Hank? That darkside, noplex kid who was sitting on the cargo?” Ron laughed.

“Noplex?” Jo asked. He connected the word to the others he had learned that morning. “Like simplex, complex, and that stuff?”

Ron apparently realized that the query was serious. “There is no such thing as noplex, really. But sometimes you wonder. Hank just bums between Rhys and moon-moon. His folks are h-poor, and I don’t even think he can read and write his name. Most shuttle-bums come from similar situations, thou wilt discover. They just have their one run, usually between two planets, and that’s all they’ll ever see. But I star hop too. I want to make mate’s position before the Half Spin is over, so I can go back to school with some money, but thou must begin somewhere. How far are you going?”

“Empire Star,” Jo, said. “Do ya... I mean doest thou know whe’ it is?”

“Trying to pick up a spaceman’s accent already?” Ron asked. “Don’t worry, it’ll rub off on you before you know. Empire Star? I guess it’s about seventy, seventy-five degrees around galactic center.”

“Seventy-two degrees, at a distance of 55.9,” Jo said.

“Then why did you ask me?” Ron said.

“ ‘Cause that don’ tell me nothin’.”

Ron laughed again. “Oh. I see. Thou hast never been in space before?”

Jo shook his head.

“I see,” repeated Ron, and the laugh got louder. “Well, it will mean something shortly. Believe thou me, it will!” Then Ron saw Di’k. “Is that yours?”

Jo nodded. “I can take him wi’ me, can’ I?”

“Elmer’s the Captain. Ask him.”

Jo looked at the Captain, who was furiously rearranging a cargo pile to balance on the loader. “All right,” he said, and started toward him. “Elm—”

Ron grabbed his shoulder and Jo swung around. “Wha’? Jhup—”

“Not now, noplex! Wait till he’s finished.”

“But you just—”

“You’re not me,” Ron explained, “and he wasn’t trying to balance the load when I stopped him. If you call him by his name, he has to stop, and you might have killed him if that load fell over.”

“Oh. Wha’ should I call him?”

“Try Captain,” Ron said. “That’s what he is, and when you call him that he doesn’t have to stop what he’s doing unless it’s convenient. Only call him Elmer if it’s an emergency.” He looked sideways at Jo. “On second thought, let somebody else decide if it’s an emergency or not. To you he’s ‘Captain’ until he tells you otherwise.”

“Was it an emergency when you called him?”

“He wanted another shuttle-bum for this trip, but I also saw that he wasn’t doing anything he couldn’t stop, and... well, you’ve just got a lot to learn.”

Jo looked crestfallen.

“Cheer up,” Ron said. “You do nice things on the sweet-potato there. I have a guitar inside—I’ll get it out and we can play together, hey?” He grabbed hold of the guy line and

started to climb hand over hand. He disappeared into the overhanging hatch. Jo watched, wide-eyed. Ron wasn't even wearing gloves.

Just then Captain Elmer said, "Hey, thou canst take thy kitten, but thou must leave those gloves and boots."

"Huh? Why?"

"Because I say so. Ron?"

The shuttle-bum looked out of the hatch. "What?" He was holding a guitar.

"Explain to him about culture-banned artifacts."

"Okay," Ron said, and slid down the guy wire again with his feet and one hand. "You better chuck those now."

Reluctantly Jo began to peel them from his hands and feet.

"You see, we're going to be running to some complexed cultures, with a technology a lot below the technology that made those boots. If they got out, it might disrupt their whole culture."

"We couldn't make them boots," Jo said, "and Charona gave 'em to me."

"That's because you're simplex here. Nothing could disrupt your culture, short of moving it to another environment. And even then, you'd probably come up with the same one. But complex cultures are touchy. We're taking a load of jhup to Genesis. Then the LII will go on to Ratshole. You can probably pick up a ride there to Earth if you want. I guess you want to see Earth. Everybody does."

Jo nodded.

"From Earth you can go anywhere. Maybe you'll even get a ride straight on to Empire Star. What do you have to go there for?"

"Gotta take a message."

"Yeah?" Ron began to tune the guitar.

Jo opened his pouch and took me out—I rather wished he wouldn't go showing me around to everyone. There were some people who would get rather upset if I showed up, crystallized or not.

"This," Jo said. "I gotta take this there."

Ron peered at me. "Oh, I see." He put the guitar down. "I guess it's good you're going with the shipment of LII then."

I smiled to myself. Ron was a multiplexually educated young man. I shuddered to think what would have happened had Jo shown me to Hank; the other shuttle-bum would have just as likely have tried to make Jo trade me for something or other, and that would have been disastrous.

“What’s LII?” Jo asked. “Is that one of the things more important than jhup?”

“Good lord, yes,” Ron said. “You’ve never seen any, have you.”

Jo shook his head.

“Come on, then,” said Ron. “We can play later. Up into the hatch with you, and throw your boots and gloves away.”

Jo left them on the tarmac and began to climb the cable. It was easier than he’d anticipated, but he was sweating at the top. Di’k simply climbed up the ship’s hull with his cupped feet, and was waiting for him in the hatch.

Jo followed Ron down a hallway, down through another hatchway, down a short ladder. “The LII are in here,” Ron said before a circular door. He was still holding the guitar by the neck. He pushed open the door, and something grabbed Jo by the stomach and twisted. Tears mounted in his eyes and his mouth opened. His breath began to come very slowly.

“Really hit you, didn’t it,” Ron said, his voice soft. “Let’s go inside.”

Jo was scared, and when he stepped into the half darkness, his gut fell twenty feet with each step. He blinked to clear his vision, but the tears came again.

“Those are the LII,” Ron said.

Jo saw tears on Ron’s weathered face. He looked forward again.

They were chained by the wrists and ankles to the floor; seven of them, Jo counted. Their great green eyes blinked in the blue cargo light. Their backs were humped, their heads shaggy. Their bodies seemed immensely strong.

“What am I…” Jo tried to say, but something caught in his throat and the sound rasped. “What am I feeling?” he whispered, for it was as loud as he could speak.

“Sadness,” Ron said.

And once named, the emotion became recognizable—a vast, overpowering sadness that drained all movement from his muscles, all joy from his eyes.

“They make me feel… sad?” Jo asked. “Why?”

“They’re slaves.” Ron said. “They build—build beautifully, wonderfully. They are extremely valuable. They built over half the Empire. And the Empire protects them, this way.”

“Protects?” Jo asked.

“You can’t get near them without feeling like this.”

“Then who would buy them?”

“Not many people. But enough so that they are incredibly valuable slaves.”

"Why don't they turn 'em loose?" Jo asked, and the sentence became a cry halfway through.

"Economics," Ron said.

"How can ya think 'bout economics feelin' like this?"

"Not many people can," Ron said. "That's the Lll's protection."

Jo knuckled his eyes. "Let's get outta here."

"Let's stay awhile," Ron countered. "We'll play for them now." He sat down on a crate, and put his guitar on his lap, and pulled from it a modal chord. "Play," Ron said. "I'll follow you."

Jo began to blow, but his breath was so weak that the note quavered and died half-sung. "I... I don' wanna," Jo protested.

"It's your job, shuttle-bum," Ron said, simply. "You have to take care of the cargo once its aboard. They like music and it will make them happy."

"Will it... make me happier too?" Jo asked.

Ron shook his head. "No."

Jo raised the ocarina to his mouth, filled his lungs, and blew. The long notes filled the hold of the ship, and as Jo closed his eyes the tears melted the darkness behind his lids. Ron's obbligato wove around the melody Jo coaxed from the ocarina. Each note took on a pungency like perfume, and called up before Jo, as he played with eyes shut and streaming, the New Cycle when the plyasil had failed, the funeral of Billy James, the day that Lilly had laughed at him when he had tried to kiss her behind the generator of the power fence, the time when the slaughtered kepard had been weighed and he had learned that his weighed ten pounds less than Yl Odic's—and Yl was three years his junior and everybody was always saying how wonderful she was—in short, every sad painful memory of his simple existence.

When they left the hole half an hour later, and the feeling rolled from him like a receding wave as Ron secured the hatch, Jo felt exhausted, and he was quivering.

"Hard work, huh?" Ron said, smiling. Tears had streaked the dust on his face.

Jo didn't say anything, only tried to keep from sobbing in earnest with homesickness that still constricted his throat. You can always turn around and go home, Charona had said. He almost started to. But a voice over the loudspeaker said, "Will the Beautiful Boy please come for his Interling lesson."

"That's San Severina," Ron said. "She's our only passenger. The Lll belong to her."

An entire matrix of emotions broke open in Jo's head at once, among them outrage, fear, and curiosity. Curiosity won out.

"Her cabin's just up that way and around the corner," Ron said.

Jo started forward. How could she possibly bring herself to own those incredible creatures?

VI

“A vast improvement,” San Severina said when he opened her door. “You are wondering how I can bring myself to own those incredible creatures.”

She sat in an opulent bubble chair, sheathed in blue from neck to ankles. Her hair, her lips, her nails were blue.

“It isn’t easy,” she said.

He stepped inside. One wall was covered with crowded bookshelves.

“You, at least,” San Severina went on, “only have to feel it when you are in their presence. I, as owner, am subjected to that feeling throughout the entire duration of my ownership. It is part of the contract.”

“You feel that way... now?”

“Rather more intensely than you did just then. My sensitivity band is a good deal wider than yours.”

“But... why?”

“It cannot be helped. I have eight worlds, fifty-two civilizations, and thirty-two thousand three hundred and fifty-seven complete and distinct ethical systems to rebuild. I cannot do it without LII. Three of those worlds are charred black, without a drop of water on their surfaces. One is half volcanic and must be completely recrusted. Another has lost a good deal of its atmosphere. The other three are at least habitable.”

“Wha’ happened?” Jo asked, incredulously.

“War,” said San Severina. “And it is so much more disastrous today than it was a thousand years back. Sixty-eight billion, five hundred thousand, two hundred and five people, reduced to twenty-seven. There was nothing to do but pool our remaining wealth and agree to purchase the LII. I am bringing them back now, by way of Earth.”

“LII,” Jo repeated. “Wha’ are they?”

“Didn’t you ask that other young man?”

“Yeah, but—”

San Severina’s smile stopped him. “Ah, the seeds of complexity. When you receive one answer, you ask for a second. Very good. I will give a second. They are the shame and tragedy of the multiplex universe. No man can be free until they are free. While they are bought and sold, any man may be bought and sold—if the price is high enough. Now come,

it's time for your Interling lesson. Would you get me that book?"

Obedient but bewildered, Jo fetched the book from the desk.

"Why I gotta learn speakin'?" he asked as he handed it to her.

"So people can understand you. You have a long journey, at the end of which you must deliver a message, quite precisely, quite accurately. It would be disastrous if you were mis-heard."

"I don' even know wha' is it!" Jo said.

"You will by the time you deliver it," San Severina said. "But you'd best get to work now."

Jo looked at the book apprehensively. "You got somethin' I can maybe learn it real quick wi', in my sleep or sompin' like hypnotizin'?" He recalled his disappointment with her comb.

"I have nothing like that with me now," San Severina said sadly. "I thought the other young man explained. We're passing through some rather primitive complexed societies. No culture-banned artifacts allowed. I'm afraid you'll have to do it the hard way."

"Jhup," Jo said. "I wanna go home."

"Very well. But you'll have to hitch a ride back from Ratshole. We're a hundred and fifty-three thousand miles away from Rhys already."

"Huh?"

San Severina rose and raised a set of venetian blinds that covered one wall. Beyond the glass: darkness, the stars, and the red rim of Ceti.

Comet Jo stood with his mouth open.

"While you're waiting we might get some studying done."

The rim of Ceti grew smaller.

VII

The actual work on the ship was certainly as easy as tending the underground fields of plyasil. Save for the LII, it was comparatively pleasant, once it became routine. San Severina's wit and charm made the language lessons a peak of pleasure in an otherwise enjoyable day. Once she rather surprised both Jo and me by saying, during one lesson when he seemed particularly recalcitrant and demanded another reason for why he had to improve his Interling: "Besides, think how tiring your clumsy speech will be to your readers."

“My what?” He had already, with difficulty, mastered his final consonants.

“You have undertaken an enterprise of great pith and moment, and I am sure someday somebody will set it down. If you don’t improve your diction, you will lose your entire audience before page thirty. I suggest you seriously apply yourself, because you are in for quite an exciting time, and it would be rather sad if everyone abandoned you halfway through because of your atrocious grammer and pronunciation.”

Her Multiplexedness San Severina certainly had my number down.

Four days out, Jo was watching Elmer carefully while he sat whistling at the T-ward viewport. When he had (definitely) decided that the Captain was not engaged in anything it would be fatal to interrupt, he put his hands behind his back and said, “Elmer?”

Elmer looked around. “Yeah. What is it?”

“Elmer, how come everybody knows more about what I’m doing on this boat than I do?”

“Because they’ve been doing it longer than thou hast.”

“I don’t mean about my work. I mean about my trip, and the message and everything.”

“Oh.” Elmer shrugged. “Simplex, complex, and multiplex.”

Jo was used to having the three words shoved at him in answer to just about anything he didn’t comprehend, but this time he said, “I want another answer.”

The Captain leaned forward on his knees, thumbed the side of his nose and frowned. “Look, thou hast come on board, telling us that thou must take a message to Empire Star about the LII, so we—”

“Elmer, wait a minute. How do you know the message concerns the LII?”

Elmer looked surprised. “Doesn’t it?”

“I don’t know,” Jo said.

“Oh,” Elmer said. “Well, I do. It does concern the LII. How it concerns the LII thou wilt have to find out later, but I can assure thee that it does. That’s why Ron showed them to thee first off, and why San Severina is so interested in thee.”

“But how does everybody know when I don’t?” He felt exasperation growing again in the back of his throat.

“Thou art going to Empire Star,” Elmer began again, patiently, “and it is the Empire that protects the LII.”

Comet Jo nodded.

“They are extremely concerned about them, as they should be, as we all are. Thou hast with thee a crystallized Tritovian, and the Tritovians have spearheaded the movement for the emancipation of the LII. They have worked for it for nearly a thousand years. Therefore the probability is very high that thy message concerns the LII.”

“Oh— That makes sense. But San Severina seems to know things she couldn’t even see or figure out.”

Elmer gestured for Jo to come closer. “For a person to survive a war that reduces sixty-eight billion people to twenty-seven, that person must know a great deal. And it’s a little silly to be surprised that such a person knows a trifle more than thou or I. It’s not only silly, it is unbelievably simplex. Now get back to work, shuttle-bum.”

Having to admit that it was pretty simplex after all, Jo went down in the hole to turn over the boysh and rennedox the kibblepobs. He would not have to play for the LII again until after supper.

Two days after that they landed in Ratshole. San Severina took him shopping in the open-market and bought him a black velvet contour-cloak with silver embroidery whose patterns changed with the pressure of the light under which it was viewed. Next she took him to a body-salon. During the trip he had gotten as grimy as any of the other shuttle-bums. Holding him gently by the ear, she extended him to the white smocked proprietor. “Groom this,” she said.

“For what?” the proprietor asked.

“First for Earth, then for a long journey.”

When they were finished, his braid was gone, his claws had been clipped, and he had been cleaned from teeth to toenails. “How do you like yourself?” she asked, placing the cloak over his shoulders.

Jo ran his hand over his short, yellow hair. “I look like a girl,” he frowned. Then he looked at his fingernails. “I just hope I don’t run into any kepard on the way.” Now he looked at the mirror again. “The cloak’s great, though.”

When they went outside again, Di’k looked once at Jo, blinked, and got so upset that he giggled himself into the hiccups and had to be carried back to the Transport Area while his belly was scratched and he pulled himself together.

“It’s a shame I’m going to have to get dirty again,” he told San Severina. “But it’s dirty work.”

San Severina laughed. “Most delightfully simplex child! You will travel the rest of the way to Earth as my protégé.”

“But what about Ron and Elmer?”

“They have already taken off. The LII have been transferred to another ship.”

Jo was surprised, sad, then curious.

“San Severina?”

“Yes?”

"Why were you doing all this for me?"

She kissed his cheek, then danced back from a half-hearted swipe Di'k made with his horns. Jo was still scratching his tummy. "Because you are a very beautiful boy, and very important."

"Oh," he said.

"Do you understand?"

"No." They continued to the ship.

And a week later they stood together on a rocky rise, watching the comparatively tiny disk of the sun set behind the Brooklyn Bridge. A thin worm of water crawled along the dried, black mud ditch still referred to in the guidebooks as the East River. The jungle whispered behind them, and across the "river" the webbed cables lowered the bridge itself to the white sands of Brooklyn. "It's smaller than the one at home," Jo said. "But it's very nice."

"You sound disappointed."

"Oh, not with the Bridge," Jo said.

"Is it because I have to leave you here?"

"Well..." He stopped. "I'd like to say yes. Because I think it would make you feel better. But I don't want to lie."

"The truth is always multiplex," San Severina said, "and you must get in the habit of dealing with multiplexity. What's on your mind?"

"Remember I was saying how nice everybody has been up till now? And you said I could stop expecting people to be nice once I got to Earth? That scares me."

"I also said there would be things other than people that would be nice."

"But people means any sapient being from any life-system. You taught me that. What else, if it's not people?" Suddenly he caught her hand. "You're going to leave me all alone, and I may never see you again!"

"That's right," she said. "But I wouldn't just throw you out into the universe with nothing. So I will give you a piece of advice: find the Lump."

"Eh... where do you suggest I find it?" He was bewildered again.

"It's too big to come to Earth. I last saw it on the Moon. It was waiting to have an adventure. You might be just what it's waiting for. I'm sure it will be nice to you; it was always very nice to me."

"It's not a people?"

"No. There, I've given you your advice. I'm going now. I have a lot to do, and you have some

idea of the pain I am in till it is accomplished.”

“San Severina!”

She waited.

“That day on Ratshole, when we went shopping, and you laughed and called me a delightfully simplex child—when you laughed, were you happy?”

Smiling, she shook her head. “The LII are always with me. I must go now.”

She backed away, till the leaves brushed across her silver lips, dress, and finger tips. Then she turned, carrying with her the incredible sadness of LII ownership. Jo watched her, then turned back to see the last point of sunlight melt from the sand.

VIII

It was night when he got back to the Transport Terminal. Earth was a large enough tourist area so that there were always people beneath the glittering ceiling. He had not even begun to think about how he was going to get to the Moon, and was walking around expending his curiosity, when a portly, well dressed gentleman began a conversation. “I say there, young fellow, you’ve been here some time, haven’t you? Waiting for a ship?”

“No,” Jo said.

“I saw you here this afternoon with that charming young lady, and I couldn’t help seeing you this evening. My name’s Oscar.” He extended his hand.

“Comet Jo,” Jo said, and shook it.

“Where you off to?”

“I’d like to get to the Moon. I hitchhiked in from Rhys.”

“My, my. That’s a long way. What ship are you taking?”

“I don’t know. I guess you can’t hitch from the Terminal very well, can you? I suppose I’d do better to try a commercial stop.”

“Certainly, if you wanted to hitch. Of course, if Alfred doesn’t show up, maybe you can use his ticket. He’s missed two ships already; I don’t know why I stick around here waiting for him. Except that we did make plans to go together.”

“To the Moon?”

“That’s right.”

“Oh, great,” Jo said, brightening. “I hope he doesn’t get here—”

He caught himself. “That came out all simplex, didn’t it?”

“The truth is always multiplex,” intoned Oscar.

“Yeah. That’s what she said.”

“The young lady you were with this afternoon?”

Jo nodded.

“Who was she, anyway?”

“San Severina.”

“I’ve heard the name. What was she doing in this arm of the galaxy?”

“She’d just bought some LII. She had some work to do.”

“Bought some LII, eh? And she didn’t leave you with any money for a ticket? You’d think she could spare you the hundred and five credits for Moon fare.”

“Oh, she’s a very generous person,” Jo said. “And you mustn’t think badly of her because she bought the LII. It’s awfully sad to own them.”

“If I had enough money to buy LII,” said Oscar, “nothing, but nothing could make me sad. Some LII? How many did she buy?”

“Seven.”

Oscar put his hand on his forehead and whistled. “And the price goes up geometrically! It costs four times as much to buy two as it does to buy one, you know. She didn’t give you any fare?”

Jo shook his head.

“That’s incredible. I never heard of such a thing. Have you any idea how fabulously wealthy that woman must be?”

Jo shook his head again.

“You’re not very bright, are you?”

“I never asked how much they cost, and she never told me. I was just a shuttle-bum on her ship.”

“Shuttle-bum? That sounds exciting. I always wanted to do something like that when I was your age. Never had the nerve, though.” The portly man suddenly looked around the Terminal with a perturbed expression. “Look, Alfred isn’t going to show up. Use his ticket. Just go up to the desk and ask for it.”

“But I don’t have any of Alfred’s identification,” Jo said.

“Alfred never has his identification with him. Always losing his wallet and things like that. Whenever I make reservations for him, I always stipulate that he will probably not have any identification with him. Just tell them you’re Alfred A. Douglas. They’ll give it to you. Hurry up now.”

“Well, okay.” He made his way through the people to one of the desk clerks.

“Excuse me,” he said. “You’ve got a ticket for A. Douglas?”

The desk clerk looked through his clipboard. “Yeah. It’s right here.” He grinned at Jo. “You must have had a pretty good time while you were on Earth.”

“Huh?”

“This ticket’s been waiting for you for three days.”

“Oh,” Jo said. “Well, I was sort of in bad shape and I didn’t want my parents to see me till I got myself together.”

The desk clerk nodded, and winked. “Here’s your ticket.”

“Thanks,” Jo said, and went back to Oscar.

“The next ship’s boarding right now,” Oscar said. “Come along, come along. He’ll just have to figure out some other way to get there.”

On the ship, Jo asked, “Do you know if the Lump is still on the Moon?”

“I would expect so. He never goes anywhere, that I’ve heard of.”

“Do you think I’ll have trouble finding him?”

“I doubt it.— Isn’t that a beautiful view out of the window?”

Oscar was recounting still another off-color story when they walked from the terminal on Luna. A bright crescent of sunlight lined the plastidome that arched a mile above their heads. The lunar mountains curved away on their right, and Earth hung like a greenish pokerchip behind them.

Suddenly someone cried, “There they are!”

A woman screamed and moved backward.

“Get them!” someone else called.

“What in the...” Oscar began to splutter.

Jo looked around, and habit made him raise his left hand. But the claws were gone. Four of them—one behind, one in front, one on either side. He ducked, and bumped into Oscar,

who fell apart. Pieces went whirling and skittering about and under his feet.

He looked around, as the four other men exploded. The buzzing, humming fragments whirled through the air, circling him, drawing closer, blurring the bewildered faces of the other debarkees. Then suddenly all of them coalesced, and he was in shaking darkness. A light came on, just as he collapsed.

“Bosie!” someone shrieked. “Bosie...!”

Jo landed in a bubble chair in a very small room which seemed to be moving, but he couldn't be sure. A voice that was Oscar's said, “April fool. Surprise.”

“Jhup!” Jo exclaimed, and stood up. “Wha' the jhup is goin'—what's going on?”

“April fool,” the voice repeated. “It's my birthday. You look a mess; you haven't let all this upset you?”

“I'm scared to death. What is this? Who are you?”

“I'm the Lump,” the Lump said. “I thought you knew.”

“Knew what?”

“All that business with Oscar and Alfred and Bosie. I thought you were just playing along.”

“Playing along with what? Where am I?”

“On the Moon, of course. I just thought it would be a clever way of getting you here. San Severina didn't pay your fare, you know. I suppose she just assumed I would. Well, since I'm footing the bill, you have to allow me a little fun. You didn't get it?”

“Get what?”

“It was a literary allusion. I make them all the time.”

“Well watch it, next time. What are you, anyway?”

“A linguistic ubiquitous multi-plex. Lump to you.”

“Some sort of computer?”

“Um-hm. More or less.”

“Well, what's supposed to happen now?”

“You're supposed to tell me,” the Lump said. “I just help.”

“Oh,” Jo said.

There was a giggle from behind the bubble chair, and Di'k marched out, sat down in front of Jo and looked at him reproachfully.

“Where are you taking me?”

"To my home console. You can rest up and make plans there. Sit back and relax. We'll be there in three or four minutes."

Jo sat back. He didn't relax, but he took out his ocarina and played on it until a door opened in the front wall.

"Home again, home again, back the same day," said the Lump. "Won't you come in?"

IX

"I"—he flung his cape at the console—"have got"—he hurled the pouch against the glass wall—"to get outta here!" His final gesture was a flying kick at Di'k. Di'k dodged; Jo stumbled, and regained his balance shaking.

"Who's stopping you?" the Lump asked.

"Jhup ya," Jo grunted. "Look, I've been here for three weeks, and every time I get ready to go, we end up in one of those ridiculous conversations that last for nine hours, and then I'm too tired." He walked down the hall and picked up his cloak. "All right, so I'm stupid. But why do you take such delight in rubbing it in? I can't help it if I'm a dark-sided noplex—"

"You're not noplex," the Lump said. "Your view of things is quite complex by now—though there is a good deal of understandable nostalgia for your old simplex perceptions. Sometimes you try to support them just for the sake of argument. Like the time we were discussing the limiting psychological factors in the apprehension of the specious present, and you insisted on maintaining that—"

"Oh, no you don't!" Jo said. "I'm not getting into another one." By now he'd reached his pouch at the other end of the hall. "I'm leaving. Di'k, let's go."

"You," said the Lump, a lot more authoritatively than it usually spoke, "are being silly."

"So I'm simplex. I'm still going."

"Intelligence and plexity have nothing to do with each other."

"There's the spaceship you just spent four days teaching me how to use," Jo said, pointing off through the glass wall. "You put a hypno implant of the route in my head the first night I was here. What under the light of seven suns is stopping me?"

"Nothing is stopping you," replied the Lump. "And if you would get it out of your head that something was, you could relax and do this thing sensibly."

Exasperated, Jo turned to face the sixty-foot wall of microlinks and logic-blocks, with their glitter of check lights and reprogram keyboards. "Lump, I like it here. You're great to have for

a friend, you really are. But I get all my food, all my exercise, everything; and I'm going crazy. Do you think it's easy just to walk out and leave you like this?"

"Don't be so emotional," the Lump said. "I'm not set up to deal with that sort of thing."

"Do you know that since I've stopped being a shuttle-bum, I've done less work than I ever have in my life during any comparable period?"

"You have also changed more than you have during any comparable period."

"Look, Lump, try and understand." He dropped his cloak and walked back over to the console. It was a large mahogany desk. He pulled out the chair, crawled under it, and hugged his knees. "Lump, I don't think you do understand. So listen. Here you are, in touch with all the libraries and museums of this arm of the galaxy. You've got lots of friends, people like San Severina and the other people who're always stopping by to see you. You write books, make music, paint pictures. Do you think you could be happy in a little one-product culture where there was nothing to do on Saturday night except get drunk, with just one teletheater, and no library, where maybe four people had been to the University, and you never saw them anyway because they were making too much money, and everybody knew everybody else's business?"

"No."

"Well I could, Lump."

"Why did you leave, then?"

"Well, because of the message, and because there were a lot of things I don't think I really appreciated. I don't think I was ready to leave. You couldn't be happy there. I could. It's as simple as that, and I don't really think you fully comprehend that."

"I do," Lump said. "I hope you can be happy in someplace like that. Because that's what most of the universe is composed of. You're slated to spend a great deal of time in places like that, and if you couldn't appreciate them, it would be rather sad."

Di'k looked under the desk and then jumped into Jo's lap. It was always ten degrees warmer there, and the two warm-blooded creatures, Di'k and Jo, independently or together, sought the spot out again and again.

"Now you listen," Lump said.

Jo leaned his head against the side of the desk. Di'k jumped down from his lap, went out, and came back a moment later dragging the plastic pouch. Jo opened it and took out the ocarina.

"There are things I can tell you, most of which I have already told you. There are things you have to ask me. Very few of them have you asked. I know much more about you than you know about me. And if we are to be friends—which is very important for you and for me—that situation must be changed."

Jo put his ocarina down. "That's right—I don't know that much about you, Lump. Where do you come from?"

"I was built by a dying LII to house its disassociating consciousness."

"LII?" Jo asked.

"You'd almost forgotten about them, hadn't you?"

"No I didn't."

"You see, my mind is an LII mind."

"But you don't make me sad."

"I'm half LII and half machine. So I forfeit the protection."

"You're a LII?" Jo asked again, incredulously. "It never occurred to me. Now that you've told me, do you think it will make any difference?"

"I doubt it," the Lump said. "But if you say anything about some of your best friends, I will lose a great deal of respect for you."

"What about my best friends?" Jo asked.

"Another allusion. It's all just as well you didn't get it."

"Lump, why don't we go on together?" Jo said suddenly. "I am leaving—that I've made up my mind to. Why don't you come with me?"

"Delightful idea. I thought you'd never ask. That's the only way you could get out of here anyway. Of course the area into which we're going is very hostile to free LII. It's right into Empire territory. They protect LII, and they get rather upset if one shrugs off their protection and decides to stay free on his own. Some of the things they have been known to do are atrocious."

"Well, if anybody asks, just say you're a computer. Like I said, I wouldn't have known if you hadn't said anything."

"I do not intend to pass," the Lump said sternly.

"Then I'll say you're a computer. But let's get going. We'll be here for hours if this keeps up. I can feel another one of those discussions starting." He stood up from under the desk and started for the door.

"Comet?"

Jo stopped and looked back over his shoulder. "What? Don't change your mind on me now."

"Oh, no. I'm definitely going. But... well, if I were—now be honest—just lumping along the street, do you really think people would just say, 'Oh, there goes a linguistic ubiquitous multi-plex'; and not think about LII?"

"That's what I'd say if I said anything at all."

“All right. Take the tube to Journal Square, and I’ll meet you in forty minutes.”

Di’k octopeded after Jo as he ran across the cracked, dusty plain of the Moon toward the egg-shaped spaceship.

The tube was an artificial stasis current that took ships quickly beyond Pluto, where they could leave the system without fear of heavy solar-dust damage. The great slab of plastic, some ten miles on either side, supported buildings, its own atmosphere, and several amusement areas. Jo parked his ship on a side-street and stepped into the chill air.

Soldiers were practicing drill formation in the square.

“What are they doing that for?” he asked one uniformed man resting on the side.

“It’s the field brigade of the Empire Army. They’ll be heading out of here in a few days; they won’t be here long.”

“I wasn’t objecting,” Jo said. “Just curious.”

“Oh,” the soldier said, and offered no further explanation.

“Where are they going?” Jo asked after a moment.

“Look,” the soldier said, turning to Jo as he would to a persistent child, “everything about the Empire Army that you can’t see immediately is secret. If where they’re going doesn’t concern you, forget it. If it does, go see if you can get clearance from Prince Nactor.”

“Nactor?” Jo asked.

“That one.” The soldier pointed to a dark man with a goatee who was leading one platoon.

“I don’t think it does,” Jo said.

The soldier gave him a disgusted look, got up, and moved away. The black capes swung together as the men snapped briskly around a turn.

Then there was a commotion among the spectators. They looked up, and began to point and talk excitedly.

It caught the sun, spinning toward the square, getting larger and larger. It was roughly cubical, and—huge! As one face turned toward the light, another disappeared, till Jo suddenly regained his sense of proportion: it was nearly a quarter of a mile long on each side.

It struck the square and Jo and all the soldiers and one of the taller buildings fell down. There was mass confusion, sirens sounded, and people were running to and from the object.

Jo started running toward it. Low gravity got him there fairly quickly. There were a couple of large cracks in the square that jagged out across the area. He leaped across one and saw stars below him.

Catching his breath, he landed on the other side and proceeded a little more slowly. The object, he realized, was covered with some sort of boiling jelly; the jelly looked surprisingly familiar, but he could not place it. The face of the object that was turned toward him, he could make out through the mildly smoking slop, was glass. And beyond the glass, dim in the transplutonian night: microlinks, logic-blocks, and the faint glitter of check-lights.

“Lump!” Jo cried, running forward.

“Shhhh,” a familiar voice said, muffled by jelly. “I’m trying not to attract attention.”

Soldiers were marching by now. “What the hell is that thing, anyway?” said one.

“It’s a linguistic ubiquitous multi-plex,” said the other.

The first scratched his head and looked up and down the length of the wall. “Ubiquitous as hell, isn’t it?”

A third was examining the edge of a crack in the square. “Think they’re gonna have to get a damn LII in here to rebuild this?”

Lump whispered, “Just let one of them say anything to my face. Just one—”

“Oh, shut up,” Jo said, “or I won’t let you marry my daughter.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It’s an allusion,” Jo explained. “I did some reading while you were taking a nap last week.”

“Very funny, very funny,” the Lump said.

The soldiers started to walk away. “They won’t get no LII in,” one of the soldiers said, scratching his ear. “This is soldier work. We do all the real building around here anyway. Wish there was a damn LII around, though.”

Several of Lump’s check-lights changed color behind the jelly.

“What’s the jhup all over you?” Jo asked, stepping back now.

“My spaceship,” the Lump said. “I’m using an organiform. They’re much more comfortable for inanimate objects like me. Haven’t you ever seen one before?”

“No—yes! Back on Rhys. That’s what the Tritovian and those other things came in.”

“Odd,” said Lump. “They don’t usually use organiforms. They’re not particularly inanimate.”

More people were gathering around the computer. The sirens were getting close.

“Let’s just get out of here,” Jo said. “Are you all right?”

“I’m fine,” Lump said. “I just wonder about the square.”

“Bloody but unbowed,” Jo said. “That’s another allusion. Get going and we’ll reconnoiter at Tantamount.”

“Fine,” Lump said. “Step back. I’m taking off.”

There was a bubbling, a tremendous suck, and Jo staggered in the wind. People started screaming again.

Back at Jo’s ship, Di’k was hiding under the dashboard with forepaws over his head. Jo pushed the takeoff button, and the robo-crew took over. The confusion of the square dropped beneath them. He ran over his hyperstasis checkout, then signaled for the jump.

The stasis generators surged, and the ship began to slip into hyperstasis. He hadn’t finished slipping when the ship lurched and he smashed forward into the dashboard. His wrists took the shock and he bounced away with both of them aching. Di’k screeched.

“Watch where you’re going,” a voice said over the speaker.

X

Jo pried his canines out of his lower lip.

“You’re not playing chess,” the voice went on. “If you occupy my square, I will not be removed from the board. Look out, next time.”

“Gnnnnnnng,” Jo said, rubbing his mouth.

“Same to you and many more.”

Jo shook his head and put on his sensory helmet. It smelled like old jhup. It sounded like scrap metal being crushed under a hydraulic press. But it looked beautiful.

Ramps curved away into structures that blossomed like flowers. Thin spires erupted at their tips in shapes of metal, and fragile observation domes were supported on slender pylons.

“You might come out of there and see if you’ve done any damage to us.”

“Oh,” Jo said. “Yeah. Sure.”

He started to the lock and was about to release it when he realized the warning light was still on. “Hey,” he called back toward the intercom, “there’s no air out there.”

“I thought you were going to take care of that,” the voice answered. “Just a second.” The light went off.

“Thanks,” Jo said. He pulled the release. “What are you, anyway?”

Outside the lock a balding man in a white smock was coming down one of the ramps. “This

is the Geodetic Survey Station that you almost ran down, youngster.” His voice was much diminished, in person. “You better get on inside the force field, before this atmosphere escapes. What did you think you were doing, anyway?”

“I was finishing up a stasis jump, on my way to Tantamount. Simplex of me, wasn’t it?” Jo started back up the ramp with the man, who shrugged.

“I never pass judgments like that,” the man said. “Now tell me your specialty.”

“I don’t have one, I don’t think.”

The man frowned. “I don’t think we need a synthesizer right now. They tend to be extremely long lived.”

“I know just about everything there is to know about raising and storing plyasil,” Jo said.

The man smiled. “I’m afraid that wouldn’t do much good. We’re only up to volume one hundred and sixty-seven: Bba to Bbaab.”

“It’s common term is jhup,” Jo said.

The man smiled benignly at him. “Jh is still a long way away. But if you’re alive in five or six hundred years, we’ll take your application.”

“Thanks,” Jo said. “But I’ll just forget it.”

“Very well,” the man said, turning to him. “Goodbye.”

“Well, what about the damage to my ship? Aren’t you going to check me over? You’re not supposed to be here, in the first place. I’ve got through clearance on this path.”

“Young man,” the gentleman said, “first of all, we have priority. Second of all, if you don’t want a job, you are abusing our hospitality by using up our air. Third of all, there is advance work being done in biology, human—and if you bother me any more, I’ll ship you off for a specimen and have you cut up in little pieces. And don’t think I won’t.”

“What about my message?” Jo demanded. “I’ve got to get a message through concerning the LII, to Empire Star. And it’s important. That’s why I rammed into you in the first place.”

The man’s face had become hostile.

“Eventually,” he said, evenly, “we will finish our project, and there will be enough knowledge so that LII will be economically unfeasible, because building will be able to proceed without them. If you want to benefit the LII, I’ll order you sliced up immediately. Father is working on the adenoids now. There is a raft of work to be done on the bicuspidis. We’ve just started the colon, and the duodenum is a complete mystery. If you want to deliver your message, deliver it here.”

“But I don’t know what it is!” Jo said, backing out toward the edge of the force-field. “I think I’ll be going.”

“We have a computer for just such problems as yours,” the man said. “Not with a lungful of our air, you’re not,” he added, and lunged toward Jo.

Jo saw where he was lunging and simply wasn't there.

The forcefield was permeable, and he ducked through. He sprang to the lock of the ship and slammed it to behind him. The warning light blinked on less than a second afterward.

He threw her into reverse, and prayed that the automatic pilot could still negotiate the currents and move to a deeper stasis level. It did, if a little jerkily. The Geodetic Survey Station faded from the viewplates of the sensory helmet that was lying face-up on the dashboard.

He reconnoitered easily with Lump in an orbit around Tantamount. It was a planet of iced methane with so much volcanic activity that the surface was constantly being broken and exploded. It was the single daughter of an intensely hot white dwarf, so that from here they looked like two eyes, one jeweled and glittering, one of silver-gray, spying on the night.

"Lump, I want to go home. Back to Rhys. Give up the whole thing."

"What in the world for?" came the computer's incredulous voice over the intercom. Jo leaned on his elbows, looking morosely at his ocarina.

"The multiplex universe doesn't appeal to me. I don't like it. I want to get away from it. If I'm complex now, it's too bad, it's a mistake, and if I ever get back to Rhys, I'll try as hard as I can to be simplex. I really will."

"What's got into you?"

"I just don't like the people. I think it's that simple. You ever heard of the Geodetic Survey Station?"

"Certainly have. You run into them?"

"Yeah."

"That is unfortunate. Well, there are certain sad things in the multiplex universe that must be dealt with. And one of the things is simplicity."

"Simplicity?" Jo asked. "What do you mean?"

"And you better be thankful that you have acquired as much multiplexity of vision as you have, or you never would have gotten away from them alive. I've heard tell of other simplex creatures encountering them. They don't come back."

"They're simplex?"

"Good god, yes. Couldn't you tell?"

"But they're compiling all that information. And the place they live—it's beautiful. They couldn't be stupid and have built that."

"First of all, most of the Geodetic Survey Station was built by LII. Second of all, as I have

said many times before, intelligence and plexity do not necessarily go together.”

“But how was I supposed to know?”

“I suppose it won’t hurt to outline the symptoms. Did they ask you a single question?”

“No.”

“That’s the first sign, though not conclusive. Did they judge you correctly, as you could tell from their statements about you?”

“No. They thought I was looking for a job.”

“Which implies that they should have asked questions. A multiplex consciousness always asks questions when it has to.”

“I remember,” Jo said, putting down the ocarina, “when Charona was trying to explain it to me, she asked me what was the most important thing there was. If I asked them that, I know what they would have said: their blasted dictionary, or encyclopedia, or whatever it is.”

“Very good. Anyone who can give a non-relative answer to that question is simplex.”

“I said jhup,” Jo recalled wistfully.

“They’re in the process of cataloging all the knowledge in the Universe.”

“That’s more important than Jhup, I suppose,” Jo said.

“From a complex point of view, perhaps. But from a multiplex view, they’re about the same. First of all, it’s a rather difficult task. When last I heard, they were already up to the B’s, and I’m sure they don’t have a thing on Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaavdqx.”

“What’s... well, what you just said?”

“It’s the name for a rather involved set of deterministic moral evaluations taken through a relativistic view of the dynamic moment. I was studying it some years aback.”

“I wasn’t familiar with the term.”

“I just made it up. But what it stands for is quite real, and well worth an article. I don’t think they could even comprehend it. But from now on, I shall refer to it as Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaavdqx, and there are two of us who know the word now, so it’s valid.”

“I guess I get the point.”

“Besides, cataloging all knowledge, even all available knowledge, while admirable, is... well, the only word is simplex.”

“Why?”

“One can learn all one needs to know; or one can learn what one wants to know. But to need to learn all one wants to know, which is what the Geodetic Survey Station is doing, even falls

apart semantically. What's the matter with your ship?"

"The Geodetic Survey Station again. We collided."

"I don't like the looks of it."

"My takeoff was sort of jerky."

"Don't like the looks of it at all. Especially considering how far we have to go. Why don't you hop on over here and travel with me? This Organiform is a beauty, and I think I've got my landings and takeoffs a little more under control."

"If you promise not to break my back when we land."

"Promise," the Lump said. "I'll open up. Swing around to your left and you can leave that jalopy right where it is."

They made contact.

"Jo," Lump said as the flexible tube attached to his airlock, "if you really want to, you can go back. But there comes a point where going back is harder than going on. You've received a great deal of a very specialized education. Not only what San Severina and I have tried to teach you, but even back on Rhys you were learning."

Jo started through the tube. "I still wanna go home." He slowed his pace as he moved toward the console room. "Lump, sometimes, even if you're simplex, you ask yourself, who am I? All right, you say the Geodetic Survey Station was simplex. That makes me feel a little better. But I'm still a very ordinary kid who would like to get back to a jhup field, and maybe fight off some wild kepardas. That's who I am. That's what I know."

"If you went back, you would find the people around you very much like you found the Geodetic Survey. You left your home, Jo, because you weren't happy. Remember why?"

Jo reached the console room, but stopped, his hands on either jamb. "Jhup, yeah. Sure I remember. Because I thought I was different. Then the message came along, and I thought that was proof I was special. Else they wouldn't have given it to me. Don't you see, Lump,"—he leaned forward on his hands—"if I really knew I was something special—I mean if I was sure—then I wouldn't get so upset by things like the Survey Station! But most of the time I just feel lost and unhappy and ordinary."

"You're you, Jo. You're you and everything that went into you, from the way you sit for hours and watch D'ik when you want to think, to the way you turn a tenth of a second faster in response to something blue than to something red. You're all you ever thought, all you ever hoped, and all you ever hated, too. And all you've learned. You've been learning a lot, Jo."

"But if I knew that it was mine, Lump. That's what I want to be sure of: that the message was really important, and that I was the only one who could deliver it. If I really knew that this education I'd gotten had made me—well, like I say, something special: then I wouldn't mind going on. Jhup, I'd be happy to."

"Jo, you're you. And that's as important as you want to make it."

"Maybe that is the most important thing there is, Lump. If there is an answer to that question,

Lump, that's what it is, to know you're yourself and nobody else."

Just as Jo stepped inside the console room, the speakers from the communications unit began to whisper. As Jo looked around, the whisper increased. "What's that, Lump?"

"I'm not sure."

The door closed, the tube fell away, and the wrecked cruiser drifted back. Jo watched it through the glass wall covered with vaguely distorting organifoam.

The speaker was laughing now.

D'ik scratched his ear with one foot.

"It's coming from over there," Lump said. "It's coming awfully fast, too."

Laughter got louder, reached hysteria, filled the high chamber. Something hurtled by the Lump's glass wall, then suddenly swung around and came up short, twenty feet away.

The laughing stopped, and was replaced by exhausted gasps.

The thing outside looked like a huge chunk of rock, only the front face had been polished. As they drifted slightly in the glare of Tantamount, the white light slipped from the surface; Jo saw it was a transparent plate. Behind it a figure leaned forward, hands over his head, feet wide apart. Even from here Jo could see the chest heave in time to the panting that stormed through the console room. "Lump, turn down the volume, will you?"

"Oh, I'm sorry." The panting ceased to be something happening inside his ear and settled to a reasonable sound a respectable number of feet away. "Do you want to speak to him, or shall I?"

"You go ahead."

"Who are you?" Lump asked.

"Ni Ty Lee. Who are you, blast it, to be so interesting?"

"I'm the Lump. I've heard of you, Ni Ty Lee."

"I've never heard of you, Lump. But I should have, I know. Why are you so interesting?"

Jo whispered, "Who is he?"

"Shhh," the Lump said. "Tell you later. What were you doing, Ni Ty Lee?"

"I was running toward that sun there, and staring at it, and thinking how beautiful it was, and laughing because it was so beautiful, and laughing because it was going to destroy me, and still be beautiful, and I was writing a poem about how beautiful that sun was and how beautiful the planet that circled it was: and I was doing all that until I saw something more interesting to do, and that was find out who you were."

"Then come aboard and find out some more."

"I already know you're a linguistic ubiquitous multi-plex with a LII based consciousness," Ni Ty Lee answered. "Is there any more I should find out before I sail into the fires?"

"I have a boy on board your own age that you know nothing about at all."

"Then I'm coming over. Get your tube out." He started forward.

"How did he know you were LII?" Jo asked as the chunk of rock approached.

"I don't know," Lump said. "Some people can tell right off. That's better than the ones who sit around and talk to you for an hour before they get around to asking. Only I bet he doesn't know which LII I am."

The tube connected up with Ni's vessel. A moment later the door opened, and Ni Ty Lee stepped leisurely inside, his thumbs in his pockets, and looked around.

Jo was still wearing the black cape San Severina had bought him on Ratshole. Ni Ty Lee, however, looked like a clean shuttle-bum. He was barefooted. He wore no shirt and faded work pants with one frayed knee. His too-long hair was silver blond and clutched at his ears and forehead; his face was high cheeked, with sloping Oriental eyes the color of slate chips.

His eyes fixed on Jo, and he grinned. "Hello," he said, and came forward.

He extended his hand, and Jo started to shake it. There were claws on the fingers of his right hand.

Ni's head leaned to the side. "I'm going to write a poem about the expressions that just went over your face. You're from Rhys, and you used to work in the jhup fields, and curl up by the fires at New Cycle, and kill keepards when they broke through." He made a small, sad, amused sound without opening his mouth. "Hey, Lump. I know all about him now, and I'll be on my way." He began to turn.

"Were you on Rhys? You were really on Rhys?" Jo said.

Ni turned back. "Yes. I was. Three years ago. Hitched there as a shuttle-bum, and worked for awhile down in field seven. That's where I got these," He held up his claws.

A pulsing ache had begun in the back of Jo's throat that he had not felt since first he had played for the LII. "I worked field seven just before New Cycle."

"Did Keeper James ever knock some sense into that brat son of his? I get along with most people, but I got into a fight four times with that pesky know-it-all. And once I nearly killed him."

"I... I did." Jo whispered.

"Oh," Ni said. He blinked. "Well. I guess I can't really say I'm surprised." But he looked taken back nevertheless.

"You really were there," Jo said. "You're not just reading my mind?"

"I was there. In the flesh. For three and a half weeks."

"That's not very long," Jo said.

"I didn't say I was there a long time."

"But you were really there," Jo repeated.

"It's not that big a universe, friend. It's too bad your culture was so simplex, or there'd be more to know about you and I'd stay longer." He turned once more to leave.

"Wait a minute!" Jo called. "I want... I need to talk to you."

"You do?"

Jo nodded.

Ni Ty put his hands back in his pockets. "Nobody's needed me for a long time. That should be interesting enough to write a poem about." He swaggered over to the console and sat down on top of the desk. "I'll hang around awhile, then. What do you need to talk about?"

Jo was silent, while his mind darted. "Well, what's your spaceship made out of?" he asked at last.

Ni Ty looked up at the ceiling. "Hey, Lump," he called, "is this guy putting me on? He doesn't really need to know what my ship is made of, does he? If he's putting me on, I'm going to go. People put me on all the time, and I know all about that, and it doesn't interest me a bit."

"He needs to warm up to what's important," Lump said. "And you need to be patient."

Ni Ty looked back at Jo. "You know, he's right. I'm always leaking words and paragraphs out of my poems because I write too fast. Then nobody understands them. I don't know too much about being patient, either. This might be very interesting after all. This your ocarina?"

Jo nodded.

"I used to play one of these things." He put it to his lips and ran through a bright melody that slowed suddenly at the end.

The knot in Jo's throat tightened further. The tune was the first song he had ever learned on the instrument.

"That's the only tune I ever learned. I should have stuck with it longer. Here, you play. Maybe that'll warm you up."

Jo just shook his head.

Ni Ty shrugged, turned the ocarina over in his hands, then said, "Does it hurt?"

"Yeah," Jo said, after awhile.

"I can't help it," Ni Ty said. "I've just done a lot of things."

"May I interject?" the Lump said.

Ni shrugged again. "Sure."

Jo nodded.

"You will find, during your reading, Jo, that certain authors seem to have discovered all the things you have discovered, done all you've done. There was one ancient science fiction writer, Theodore Sturgeon, who would break me up every time I read him. He seemed to have seen every flash of light on a window, every leaf shadow on a screen door, that I had ever seen; done everything I had ever done, from playing the guitar to laying over for a couple of weeks on a boat in Arkansas Pass, Texas. And he was supposedly writing fiction, and that four thousand years ago. Then you learn that lots of other people find the same things in the same writer, who have done none of the things you've done, and seen none of the things you've seen. That's a rare sort of writer. But Ni Ty Lee is that sort. I have read many of your poems, Ni Ty. My appreciation, were I to express it, I'm sure would only prove embarrassing."

"Gee," Ni Ty said. "Thanks." And he got a grin on his face that was too big to hide even by looking at his lap. "I lose most of the best ones. Or don't write them down. I wish I could show you some of them. They're really nice."

"I wish you could too," said the Lump.

"Hey." Ni Ty looked up. "But you need me. I can't even remember what you asked."

"About your ship," Jo said.

"I just hollowed out a chunk of nonporous meteor and bolted in a Kayzon Drive in the back, and ran my controls for igneous permeability."

"Yes, yes!" cried the Lump. "That's exactly how it's done! Bolted the Kayzon in with a left-handed ratchet. The threads run backwards, don't they? It was years ago, but it was such a beautiful little ship!"

"You're right about the threads," Ni Ty said. "Only I used a plyers."

"It doesn't matter. Just that you really did it. I told you, Jo, with some writers, it's just uncanny."

"There's a problem, though," Ni Ty said. "I never do anything long enough to really get to know it—just long enough to identify it in a line or a sentence, then I'm on to something else. I think I'm afraid. And I write to make up for all the things I really can't do."

At which point I began to twinge a little. I had said the same thing to Norn an hour before we'd cracked up on Rhys, when we had been discussing my last book. Remember me? I'm Jewel.

"But you're only my age," Jo said at last. "How could you do all this and write all this so early?"

"Well, I... I mean, it's... I guess I don't really know. I just do. I suppose there's a lot I never will do because I'm too busy writing."

“Another interjection,” the Lump said. “Would it embarrass you if I told him the story?”

Ni Ty shook his head.

“It’s like Oscar and Alfred,” Lump said.

Ni Ty looked surprisingly relieved. “Or Paul V. and Arthur R.,” he added.

“Like Jean C. and Raymond R.,” said Lump, in rhythm.

“Or Wiley and Colette.”

“It’s a recurrent literary pattern,” the Lump explained. “An older writer, a younger writer—often a mere child—and something tragic. And something wonderful is given to the world. It’s been happening every twenty-five or fifty years since Romanticism.”

“Who was the older writer?” Jo asked.

Ni Ty looked down. “Muels Aronlyde.”

“I’ve never heard of him,” Jo said.

Ni Ty blinked. “Oh. I thought everybody knew about the whole, unpleasant mess.”

“I’d like to meet him,” Jo offered.

“I doubt you ever will,” said the Lump. “What happened was very, very tragic.”

“Aronlyde was LII.” Ni Ty took a breath and began to explain. “We made a long trip together, and...”

“You made a long trip with a LII?”

“Well, he was really only part—” Then he stopped. “I can’t help it,” he said. “It’s what I’ve done. I swear I can’t help it.”

“You know about the sadness of the LII, then,” Jo said.

Ni Ty nodded. “Yes. You see, I sold him. I was desperate, I needed the money, and he told me to go ahead.”

“You sold him? But why—”

“Economics.”

“Oh.”

“And with it I bought a less expensive LII to rebuild the world we had destroyed; so I know about the sadness of LII, and the sadness of LII ownership—though it was a small world, and only took a little while. I was explaining that to San Severina only days ago, and she got very upset—she too has bought and sold LII and used them to rebuild a...”

“You know San Severina?”

“Yes. She gave me Interling lessons when I was a shuttle-bum—”

“No!” Jo cried.

Ni Ty shook his head and whispered, “I swear I can’t help it! I swear!”

“No!” He turned and put his hands over his ears, crouched down and staggered.

Behind him, Ni Ty cried out, “Lump, you said he needed me?”

“You are fulfilling his need very well.”

Jo whirled. “Get out of here!”

Ni Ty looked frightened and stood up from the desk top. “It’s my life, damn it, not yours. It’s mine!” He grabbed Ni’s clawed hand. “Mine. I gave it up—but that doesn’t mean you can have it.”

Ni sucked a quick breath. “It’s not interesting now,” he said, quickly, edging from the desk. “I’ve been through this too many times before.”

“But I haven’t!” Jo cried. He felt as if something in him had been raped and outraged. “You can’t steal my life!”

Suddenly Ni pushed him. Jo slipped to the deck, and the poet stood over him, shaking now. “What the hell makes you think it’s yours? Maybe you stole it from me. How come I never get to finish anything out? How come time I get a job, fall in love, have a child, suddenly I’m jerked away and flung into another dung heap where I have to start the same mess all over again? Are you doing that to me? Are you jerking me away from what’s mine, picking up for yourself the thousand beautiful lives I’ve started?” Suddenly he closed his eyes and flung his left hand against his right shoulder. With his head back he hissed to the ceiling, “God, I’ve said this so many times before! And it bores me, damn it! It bores me!” He’d raked the claws across his shoulder, and five lines of blood trickled to his chest—and for one horrid instant the scene came flashing into Jo’s mind when he’d run from Lilly’s laughter and stood with his eyes clenched and his head back, and pulled his talons across his shoulder. He shook the memory from his head, and blinked his eyes. There was a lot of old scar tissue banding Ni Ty’s shoulder under the path the fresh welts cut.

“Always returning, always coming back, always the same things over and over and over!” Ni Ty cried.

He lurched toward the door.

“Wait!”

Jo flipped to his belly and scabbled to his knees after him.

“What are you going to do!” He threw himself around Ni Ty and put his arm across the door.

Ni Ty put his clawed hand around Jo’s forearm. Jo shook his head—Billy James had blocked his way from the canal, and he had put his claws on the boy’s arm so, and that’s how it had all started.

“I’m going to get in my ship,” Ni Ty said evenly, “and I’m going to face that sun and jam the throttle all the way. I’ve done it once laughing. This time I’ll probably cry. And that damn well better be interesting.”

“But why?”

“Because someday,” and Ni Ty’s face twisted with the strain of words—“somebody else is going to come plunging toward a silver sun, first laughing, then crying, and they’ll have read about this, and they’ll remember, and suddenly they’ll know, don’t you see? They’ll know that they’re not the only ones—”

“But nobody will ever read what you have to say about—”

Ni Ty slapped his arm away and ran down the tube, just missing Di’k, who was stepping down with a sheaf of paper in his mouth.

The tube popped free and the organifoam swarmed together as the door closed in the console room. Jo saw Ni Ty bending at the controls; then he stood and pressed his face and hands against the viewport as the automatic pilot took the hollow meteor into the glare of the sun. Jo squinted after it till his crushed lids ached. The sobbing that came over the intercom lasted for perhaps a minute after the ship was out of sight.

Jo rubbed his hand across his forehead and turned from the wall.

Di’k was sitting on the sheaf of papers, chewing on a dogeared corner. “What are those?”

“Ni Ty’s poems,” the Lump said. “The last batch he was working on.”

“Di’k, did you steal them out of his ship?” Jo demanded.

“With somebody like that, the only thing you can do is get their work away from them before they destroy it. That’s how everything of his we have has been obtained. This has all happened before,” Lump said, wearily.

“But Di’k didn’t know that,” Jo said. “You were just stealing, weren’t you?” He tried to sound reproving.

“You underestimate your devil-kitten,” the Lump said. “He does not have a simplex mind.”

Jo bent over and tugged the papers from under Di’k, who finally rolled over and slapped at his hands a couple of times. Then he took them to the desk and crawled underneath.

XI

Three hours later, when he emerged, Jo walked slowly over to the glass wall and squinted

once more at the white dwarf. He turned, blew three notes on his ocarina, then dropped his hand. "I think that's the most multiplex consciousness I've encountered so far."

"He may be," Lump said. "But then, so are you, now."

"I hope he doesn't plunge into the sun," Jo said.

"He won't if he finds something more interesting between here and there."

"There's not much out there."

"It doesn't take much to interest a mind like Lee's."

"The thing you were saying about multiplexity and understanding points of view. He completely took over my point of view, and you were right; it was uncanny."

"It takes a multiplex consciousness to perceive the multiplexity of another consciousness, you know."

"I can see why," Jo said. "He was using all his experiences to understand mine. It made me feel funny."

"You know he wrote those poems before he even knew you existed."

"That's right. But that just makes it stranger."

"I'm afraid," Lump said, "you've set up your syllogism backwards. You were using your experiences to understand him."

"I was?"

"You've had a lot of experiences recently. Order them multiplexually and they will be much clearer. And when they are clear enough, enough confusion will remain so that you ask the proper questions."

Jo was silent for a moment, ordering. Then he said, "What was the name of the LII your mind is based on?"

"Muels Aronlyde," the Lump said.

Jo turned back to the window. "Then this has all happened before."

After another minute of silence, the Lump said, "You know you will have to make the last leg of the trip without me."

"I'd just begun to order that out," Jo said. "Multiplexually."

"Good."

"I'll be scared as hell."

"You needn't be," Lump said.

“Why not?”

“You’ve got a crystallized Tritovian in your pouch.”

He was referring to me, of course. I hope you haven’t forgotten me, because the rest of the story is going to be incomprehensible if you have.

XII

“What am I supposed to do with it?” Jo asked.

He laid me on a velvet cloth on the desk. The lights in the high ceiling of the console room were dim and had haloes in the faint fog from the humidifiers.

“What’s the most multiplex thing you can do when you are not sure what to do?”

“Ask questions.”

“Then ask.”

“Will it answer?”

“There’s an easier way to find that out than by asking me,” Lump said.

“Just a second,” Jo said. “I have to order my perceptions multiplexually, and it may take a little time. I’m not used to it.” After a moment he said, “Why will I have to join the Empire Army and serve Prince Nactor?”

“Excellent,” Lump said. “I’ve been wondering about that one myself.”

Because, I broadcast, the army is going your way. It was a relief to be able to speak. But that’s one of the hardships of crystallization: you can only answer when asked directly.

Incidentally, between the time that Jo said, “I’m not used to it,” and the time he asked his question, the radio had come blaring on and Prince Nactor’s voice had announced that all humans in the area were up for immediate conscription, to which Lump had said, “I guess that takes care of your problem.” So there’s nothing mysterious about Jo’s question at all. I want to stress, for those who have followed the argument to this point, that multiplexity is perfectly within the laws of logic. I left the incident out because I thought it was distracting, and assumed it was perfectly deduceable from Jo’s question what had happened, sure that the multiplex reader would supply it for himself. I have done this several times throughout the story.

“Why can’t I just deliver my message and go on about my business?” Jo asked.

In crystallization one has the seeming activity of being able to ask rhetorical questions. Are

you ready to deliver the message? I broadcast.

Jo pounded both fists on the desk. The room seemed to shake as I rocked back and forth.

“Jhup! What is the message? That’s what I have to find out now. What is it?”

Someone has come to free the LII.

Jo stood up, and concern deepened the young lines of his face. “That’s a very important message.” The concern turned to a frown. “When will I be ready to deliver it?”

Whenever someone has come to free them.

“But I’ve come all this way…” Jo stopped. “Me? Me free them? But… I may be ready to deliver the message, but how will I know when I’m ready to free them?”

If you don’t know, I broadcast, obviously that’s not the message.

Jo felt confused and ashamed. “But it ought to be.”

He’d asked no questions, so I could broadcast nothing. But Lump said it for me: “That’s the message, but you have misunderstood it. Try and think of another interpretation that contains no contradictions.”

Jo turned from the table. “I don’t see enough,” he said, discouraged.

“Sometimes one must see through someone else’s eyes,” Lump said. “At this point, I would say if you could use Jewel’s, you would be doing yourself a great service.”

“Why?”

“You are becoming more and more intimately concerned with the LII, and our struggle for release. The Tritovians are the most active of the non-LII species in this struggle. It’s that simple. Besides, it would greatly facilitate your military career.”

“Can it be done?” Jo asked.

“A very simple operation,” Lump said. “You can perform it yourself. Go get the Tritovian.”

Jo went back to the desk and lifted me from the velvet.

“Now pull up your right eyelid.”

Jo did. And did other things at Lump’s instruction. A minute later he screamed in pain, whirled from the desk and fell on his knees, with his hands over his face.

“The pain will go away in a little while,” the Lump said calmly. “I can give you some eyewash if the stinging is too bad.”

Jo shook his head. “It’s not the pain, Lump,” he whispered. “I see. I see you, and me, and Di’k, and Jewel, only all at the same time. And I see the military ship waiting for me, and

even Prince Nactor. But the ship is a hundred and seventy miles away, and Di'k is behind me, and you're all around me, and Jewel's inside me, and I'm—not me anymore."

"You better practice walking for a little while," Lump said. "Spiral staircases are particularly difficult at first. On second thought, you'd first better get used just to sitting still and thinking. Then we'll go on to more complicated things."

"I'm not me any more," Jo repeated softly.

"Play your ocarina," Lump suggested.

Jo watched himself remove the instrument from his pouch and place it to his own lips, saw his lids close, one over his left eye, one over the glittering presence that had replaced his right. He heard himself begin a long, slow tune, and with his eyes shut he watched Di'k come tentatively over, then nuzzle his lap.

A little later Jo said, "You know, Lump, I don't think talking to Jewel got me anything."

"Certainly not as much as looking through him."

"I'm still awfully foggy about that message."

"You've got to make allowances. When people become as militant as he is, the most multiplex minds get downright linear. But his heart's in the right place. Actually, he said a great deal to you if you can view it multiplexually."

Jo watched his own face become concentrated. It was rather funny, he thought in passing—like an over-anxious, tow-headed squirrel wearing a diamond monocle. "The message must be the words: Someone has come to free the LII. And I have to be ready to free the LII. Only it's not me that's going to free them." He waited for Lump to approve his reasoning. There was only silence, however. So he went on: "I wish it were me. But I guess there're reasons why it can't be. I have to be ready to deliver the message, too. The only way I can really be ready is if I make sure whoever is going to free the LII is ready."

"Very good," the Lump said.

"Where am I going to find this person, and how can I make sure he's ready to free the LII?"

"You may have to get him ready yourself."

"Me?"

"You've received quite an education in the past few months. You are going to have to impart a good deal of that education to somebody as simplex as you were when you began this journey."

"And lose whatever uniqueness Ni Ty left me with?"

"Yes."

"Then I won't do it," Jo said.

“Oh, come on.”

“Look, my old life was stolen from me. Now you want me to give my new life to somebody else. I won’t do it.”

“That’s a very selfish way of—”

“Besides, I know enough about simplex cultures to know that the only thing you could do to them with an army that might shake loose one or two people is destroy it. And I won’t.”

“Oh,” said the Lump. “You’ve figured that out.”

“Yes, I did. And it would be very painful.”

“The destruction will happen whether you go or not. The only difference will be that you won’t be able to deliver your message.”

“Won’t he be ready without me?”

“The point is you will have no way to know.”

“I’ll take the chance,” Jo said. “I’m going someplace else. I’ll take the gamble that everything will work out for the best whether I’m there or not.”

“You have no idea how risky that is. Look, we have some time. Let’s take a little side trip. I want to show you something that will change your mind.”

“Lump, I don’t think I could take any exposure to slave driven, exploited, long-suffering LII right now. That’s where you want to take me, isn’t it?”

“LII suffering is something that happens to you; not to LII,” the Lump said. “It is impossible to understand the suffering of the LII from the point of view of the LII itself unless you are one. Understanding is one of the things the Empire protects them from. Even the LII can’t agree on what’s so awful about their situation. But there is enough concurrence so you must take our word. There are certain walls that multiplexity cannot scale. Occasionally it can blow them up, but it is very difficult, and leaves scars in the earth. And admitting their impermeability is the first step in their destruction. I am going to show you something that you can appreciate in any plex you like. We are going to talk to San Severina.”

XIII

“Is this one of the worlds she rebuilt with the LII?” Jo asked, looking through the silver streets of the empty city, then back to the rolling, woody hills that crept to the edge of the breeze-brushed lake behind them.

“This is one of them,” said Oscar. “It’s the first one finished, and will be the last to be repopulated.”

“Why?” Jo asked, stepping over the new cast-iron gutter grating on the curb. The blueish sun flamed in the spiral window that circled the great tower to their left. A magnificent fountain sat empty on their right. Jo ran his fingers over the dry, granite rim of the forty-foot pool as they turned past.

“Because she is here.”

“How much work remains to be done?”

“All the worlds have been rebuilt. Forty-six of the civilizations have been reestablished. But it’s those ethical systems that take time. They’ll be in the works for another six months or more.” Oscar gestured toward a black metal door, studded with brass. “Right through there.”

Jo looked around at the tremendous spires. “It’s beautiful,” he said. “It really is. I think I understand a little more why she wanted to rebuild it.”

“In here,” Oscar said.

Jo stepped inside.

“Down these steps.”

Their feet echoed in the dim, wide stairwell.

“Right through here.” Oscar pushed open a smaller door in the gray stone wall.

As Jo stepped through, he wrinkled his nose. “Smells funn—”

She was naked.

Her wrists and ankles were chained to the floor.

When the gray blade of light fell across her humped back, she reared against the shackles and howled. Her lips pulled back from teeth he hadn’t realized were so long. The howl stopped in a grinding rasp.

He watched her.

He watched himself watching her, and watched himself back into the door and the door swing to and clank closed behind him.

Strain had caused the muscles of her shoulders to grow hard and defined. Her neck was corded, her shaggy, matted hair hung half across her face. A comb, he thought, nonsensically. Oh lord, a red comb. And watched tears start in his real eye. The other grew crusty dry.

“They keep her here, now,” Oscar said. “The chains are just short enough so she can’t kill herself.”

“Who—”

“There were twenty-six others, remember. Oh, she passed the point a long time ago where if she could release them, she would. But the others keep her here now, like this. And her LII go on working.”

“That’s not fair!” Jo cried. “Why doesn’t somebody turn her loose!”

“She knew what she was getting into. She told them before that they would have to do this. She knew her limitations.” Oscar made a pained face. “Seven of them. That’s more than any one person’s ever owned at one time. It really is too much. And the sadness increases the more the LII build. Geometrically. Like the price.”

Jo stared at her, appalled, fascinated, torn.

“You came here to talk to her,” Oscar said. “Go ahead.”

Jo walked forward gingerly and watched himself do so. There were scabs on her wrists and ankles.

“San Severina?”

She pulled back, a constricted choking in her throat.

“San Severina, I’ve got to talk to you.”

A thin trickle of blood wormed across the ligaments on the back of her left hand.

“Can’t you talk to me? San Severina—”

With rattling links, she lunged for him, her teeth snapping on what would have been his leg had he not dodged back. She bit into her tongue, and collapsed shrieking on the stone, her mouth awash with blood.

Jo only saw that he was beating on the door and Oscar was holding him after a minute. Oscar got the handle opened, and they stumbled into the bottom of the stairwell. Oscar was breathing hard too as they started up the steps. “I almost felt sorry for her,” he said, halfway up.

Shocked, Jo turned to him on the stairway. “You don’t...”

“I feel sorry for the LII,” Oscar said. “I am one, remember.”

Jo watched himself begin to climb the steps again, carrying his own confusion. “I feel sorry for her,” Jo said.

“Enough to join the army?” Oscar said.

“Jhup,” Jo said. “Yes.”

“I had hoped so.”

As they stepped out of the upper door and onto the street again, Jo squinted in the light. “Ni

Ty,” he said after a moment: “he said he’d come to speak to San Severina a few days ago.”

Oscar nodded.

“Here? He saw her like this?”

Oscar nodded again.

“Then he’s done this too,” Jo said. He started down the street. “I hope he made the sun.”

“They couldn’t put her to sleep with something, or maybe hypnotize her,” Jo mused, staring through the glass wall back in the console room.

“When she goes to sleep, the LII cease building,” the Lump explained. “It’s part of the contract. Ownership must be conscious ownership at all times, for the LII to function.”

“That’s what I’d more or less figured. How can you even be sure she’s conscious inside that... beast? Can anybody get through to her?”

“That beast is her protection,” Lump explained. “Are you ready to leave?”

“As much as I’ll ever be.”

“Then I want you to take a complex statement with you that is further in need of multiplex evaluation: The only important elements in any society are the artistic and the criminal, because they alone, by questioning the society’s values, can force it to change.”

“Is that true?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t evaluated it multiplexually. But let me say, further, that you are going to change a society. You haven’t got the training that, say, Ni Ty has to do it artistically.”

“I’m already with you, Lump,” Jo said. “Lump, where’s the Army going, anyway?”

“Empire Star,” Lump told him. “Have you any idea what your first criminal action is going to be?”

Jo paused a moment. “Well, up until you told me what our destination was, it was going to be going AWOL. Now I’m not so sure.”

“Good,” Lump said. “Goodbye, Jo.”

“Goodbye.”

Almost immediately Jo decided he did not like the Army. He had been on the ten-mile spaceship for three minutes, milling around with the other recruits, when Prince Nactor strode by. As the recruits stepped back, Prince Nactor saw Di'k. The devil-kitten was kicking his legs in the air and chirping. As Jo went to pick him up, Prince Nactor said, "Is that yours?"

"Yes, sir," Jo said.

"Well, you can't bring that aboard."

"Of course, sir," Jo said. "I'll take care of it right away."

With his expanded vision, there was no problem locating someplace on that battleship where he could hide Di'k. It had been reconverted a few years back and a lot of the old equipment had been removed, to be replaced by more compact components. The old view-chamber which had housed the direct-contact photo-regenerator had been done away with, and the compartment on the glass-walled hull had been first used as storage for things that would never be needed, then sealed up.

Jo slipped away, swiped a crotten-wrench from the maintenance cabinet, and found the sealed hatchway. He wrenched off the stripping, shooed Di'k through into the darkness, started to close the door, but got an idea. He went back up to maintenance, took an alphabetic stencil, a can of yellow paint, and a brush. Back at the hatch he lettered onto the door:

AUTHORIZED ENTRANCE

FOR J-O PERSONS

ONLY

He got back upstairs in time to be issued uniform and equipment. The quartermaster demanded his allowance card. Jo explained that he didn't have one. The quartermaster went to chew out the control computer. Jo went back down to the hatch, and walked in. There was a small hallway and the top of his yellow head brushed the ceiling and got dusty. Then he heard music.

He'd heard an instrument like that, a long time ago, back when he'd been a shuttle-bum. Ron's guitar. Only this was a guitar played differently, much faster. And the voice—he'd never heard a voice like that. It was slow, and rich as his ocarina.

He waited, tempted to look and see, but resisted. He heard the song through once, and the melody repeated, so he took his instrument and began to play with the singing. The singing stopped; the guitar stopped. Jo played to the end of the melody, then stepped out.

She was sitting on the floor in front of a pile of crystal blocks. The glass wall of the spaceship let in the white light of Tantamount. She looked up from her guitar, and the face—it was a beautiful face, fine featured, dark, with heavy brown hair that fell to one shoulder—twisted in silent terror.

“What are you doing?” Jo asked.

She backed against the wall of crystal blocks, her hand flat on the blond face of the guitar, fingers sliding across the wood and leaving paths of glimmer on the varnish.

“Have you seen Di’k?” Jo asked. “A devil-kitten about so big, eight legs, horns? Came in about fifteen minutes ago?”

She shook her head hard, a violence in the motion that told him the negation was general and not connected with his particular question.

“Who are you?” he asked.

Just then Di’k stepped out from behind the crystal blocks, pranced in front of the girl, lay on his back, kicked his legs in the air, meowed, stuck his tongue out, and was, in short, perfectly engaging. Jo reached out and scratched Di’k’s belly with his bare toe. He was still naked from the induction physical and his uniform was over his arm.

The girl was wearing a white blouse that came up around her neck, and a dark skirt that came just below her knees. Whatever frightened her about him seemed to be behind his uniform, because she stared at it as though she were trying to see through it. He could see in the shifting muscles of her face the thoughts becoming more confused.

“I like your singing,” Jo said. “You shouldn’t be afraid. My name’s Jo. What are you doing here?”

Suddenly she clamped her eyes, let the guitar fall face down in her lap, and clapped her hands on her ears. “Singing,” she said quickly. “I’m just singing. Singing’s the most important thing there is, you know. I’m not hurting anybody. No, don’t say anything to me. I refuse to answer any questions.”

“You look pretty confused,” Jo said. “Do you want to ask any?”

She shook her head, then hunched it down between her shoulders as if to avoid a blow.

Jo frowned, moved his mouth to one side of his face, then the other. He chewed the inside of his lip, and said at last, “I don’t believe you’re really that simplex.” She just crouched further back against the crystal blocks. “You know, I’m not really a soldier.”

She looked up. “Then why do you have the uniform?”

“See! You just asked one.”

“Oh!” She sat up and put her hand over her mouth.

“I have the uniform because I came very close to being a soldier. I only have to wear it when I go outside. If it frightens you, I’ll put it away.” He tossed it over the crystal pile. The girl lowered her shoulders and visibly relaxed. “You’re hiding from the soldiers,” Jo said slowly. “If they find you, you’d prefer they thought you were simplex. Are you going to Empire Star too?”

She nodded.

“Who are you?”

She picked up the guitar. “I’d rather not say. It’s not that I don’t trust you. But the fewer people on this battleship who know, the better.”

“All right. But would you answer another one, then?”

“Yes. All these soldiers under Prince Nactor are going to Empire Star to kill me, unless I get there first.”

“That’s not the answer to the question I was going to ask.”

She looked dreadfully embarrassed.

“But I guess it’s a pretty good one.” Jo smiled.

She reached out to scratch Di’k’s belly. “Someday I’ll learn how to do that answer-before-you’re-asked bit. It’s so impressive when it comes off. I thought you were going to ask what this was all about.”

Jo looked puzzled. Then he laughed. “You’re hiding from the soldiers by staying under their noses! Very multiplex! Very multiplex!” He lowered himself cross-legged to the floor on the other side of Di’k.

“Also, if I go with them, it’s fairly certain I won’t get there after they do. At worst we’ll arrive at the same time.” She pursed her mouth. “But I’ve got to contrive some way to get there first.”

Jo scratched Di’k too, and their fingers touched knuckles. He grinned. “Only I was going to ask you where you were coming from. I know where you’re going and where you are now.”

“Oh,” she said. “Do you know Miss Perrypicker’s?”

“Who?”

“Where. Miss Perrypicker’s Finishing Academy for Young Ladies.”

“What’s that?”

“That’s where I came from. It’s a perfectly dreadful place where basically nice girls are taken from the best families and taught how to appear so simplex you wouldn’t believe it.”

“I didn’t believe you,” Jo said.

She laughed. “I’m one of Miss Perrypicker’s failures. I suppose there’s a lot there to enjoy—tennis, anti-grav volley ball, water polo, four-wall handball—which is my favorite—and three-D chess. A few teachers did slip in who actually knew something. But singing and playing the guitar, which is what I really like to do, I picked up on my own.”

“You do it very well.”

“Thanks,” She pulled from the strings a descending run of chords, opened her lips and ejected a melody that rose on slow, surprising intervals that plucked sympathetic strings of

pleasure, nostalgia, and joy that Jo had not felt since he had sung for the LII.

She stopped. "That's a song the LII made. It's one of my favorites."

"It's beautiful," Jo said, blinking. "Go on, please. Sing the rest."

"That's all there is," she said. "Very short. Just those six notes. It does what it has to do, then stops. Everything the LII make is very economical."

"Oh," Jo said. The melody was like a rainbow slick over his mind, calming, spreading.

"I'll sing anoth—"

"No," Jo said. "Let me just think about that one awhile."

She smiled, and dropped her hand, silent, over the strings.

Jo's hand meandered over Di'k's stomach. The devil-kitten was snoring softly. "Tell me," Jo said, "why does Prince Nactor want to kill you at Empire Star?"

"My father is very ill," she explained. "I was called home suddenly from Miss Perrypicker's because it looks like he's going to die any day. When he does, I shall inherit the reins of the Empire—if I'm there. If not, Prince Nactor will seize them. We've been racing each other all the way."

"You're a princess of the Empire?"

She nodded.

"You must be pretty important," Jo said, wonderingly.

"I won't be anything if I don't beat Nactor. He's been waiting for this for years."

"Why should you have them and not Nactor?"

"For one thing, I'm going to free the LII. Prince Nactor wants to keep them under his protection."

"I see." He nodded and hugged his knees. "How are you going to do this, and why won't Nactor?"

"Economics," the girl said. "I have the support of the twenty-six richest men in the Empire. They trust me to deal with the matter multiplexually. They are waiting at Empire Star to hear what the outcome between myself and Nactor will be. They refuse to support Nactor and all he's left with is the Army. Although he is quite a multiplex man, he only has the one tool of force to pry with. If you only have one direction in which you can push, you might as well be simplex, whether you want to be or not. So they await me, assembled in the brass-columned council chamber, while the tessellations of the stained-glass windows cast their many shadows on the blue tiles, and somewhere in a crystal bed, my father lies dying..."

"Jhup," said Jo, impressed.

"I've never been there. I read about it in a novel by Muels Aronlyde. We read all his political

trilogy at Miss Perrypicker's. Do you know his work?"

Jo shook his head. "Only..."

"Yes?"

"I think I have a message for them, there in the council chamber."

"You do?"

"That's why I'm going to Empire Star. I have a message to deliver, and I think I must be fairly close to delivering it."

"What is it?"

Jo let go of his knees now. "You're not anxious to tell me who you are; I think I'd best keep my message to myself until I get the council chamber."

"Oh." She tried to look content, but curiosity kept struggling to the surface of her face.

"I'll tell you this," Jo said, half smiling. "It concerns the LII."

"Oh," she repeated, more slowly. Suddenly she rose up on her knees, leaning over her guitar. "Look, I'll make a deal with you! You can't get into the council chamber without my help—"

"Why not?"

"Nobody can. The great iris of energy that guards the chamber only opens to twenty-eight mind patterns—you better read up in your Aronlyde. Twenty-six of them are inside already. My father's dying and I doubt if his is still recognizable. So there's just me left. I'll help you get into the council chamber if you help me beat Prince Nactor."

"All right," Jo said. "All right. That's fair. What sort of help do you need?"

"Well," she said, sitting back down. "You've got that uniform, so you can sneak in and out of here."

Jo nodded and waited for her to go on.

But she shrugged. Then looked questioningly. "That's something, isn't it?"

"You mean I have to figure out the rest," Jo said. "I'll try. What sort of help have you had already?"

"I've got a small computer running interference for me."

"I may be small," a voice said from beneath Jo's uniform where it hung on the piled blocks, "but I haven't reached my full growth yet."

"Huh?" Jo said.

"That's a Lump," the girl said. "He's a linguistic—"

“—ubiquitous multi-plex,” Jo finished. “Yeah. I’ve met one before.” For the first time he realized that the haphazard crystals were logic-blocks. But there were surprisingly few. He’d been used to seeing them organized over the sixty-foot wall in the console room.

“It was his idea to hide out in the battleship.”

Jo nodded, then stood. “Maybe,” Jo said, “if everybody works together, we can muddle through this thing. Though I have a feeling it’s going to be a little confusing. Say, one thing I’ve been meaning to ask. What planet around Empire Star are we going to?”

The girl looked very surprised.

“Well, we’re not going inside the star itself, are we?”

Lump said, “I don’t think he knows. You really should read Aronlyde.”

“I guess he doesn’t know,” she said, and bit at a knuckle. “Should I tell him?”

“Let me.”

“You mean people do live in the star?”

“People could,” Lump said. “The surface temperature of Aurigae is less than two thousand degrees Fahrenheit. It’s a very dim star, and it shouldn’t be difficult to devise a refrigeration plant to bring that down to a reasonable—”

“They don’t live inside,” the girl said. “But there are no planets around Aurigae.”

“Then where—”

“Let me. Please,” the Lump repeated. “Aurigae is not only the largest star in the galaxy—hundreds of times the mass of Sol, thousands of times as big. But it is not just simply a star—”

“It’s more complicated—” the girl began.

“Multiplied,” Lump said. “Aurigae has been known to be an eclipsing binary for ages. But there are at least seven giant stars—giant compared to Sol—doing a rather difficult, but beautiful, dance around one another out there.”

“All around one point,” the girl said. “That point is the center of Empire.”

“The still point,” said Lump, “in the turning world. That’s an allusion. It’s the gravitational center of that vast multiplex of matter. It’s also the center of the Empire’s power.”

“It’s the origin of the reins of Empire,” the girl said.

“Can you imagine the incredible strain both space and time are subjected to at that point? The fibres of reality are parted there. The temporal present joins the spacial past there with the possible future, and they get totally mixed up. Only the most multiplex of minds can go there and find their way out again the same way they went in. One is always arriving on Wednesday and coming out again on Thursday a hundred years ago and a thousand light

years away.”

“It’s a temporal and spacial gap,” the girl explained. “The council controls it, and that’s how it keeps its power. I mean, if you can go into the future to see what’s going to happen, then go into the past to make sure it happens like you want it, then you’ve just about got the universe in your pocket, more or less.”

“More or less,” Jo said. “How old are you?”

“Sixteen,” the girl said.

“Two years younger than I am,” said Jo. “And how many times have you been through the gap at Empire Star?”

“Never,” she said, surprised. “This is the first time I’ve ever been away from Miss Perrypicker’s. I only read about it.”

Jo nodded. “Tell me”—he pointed toward the pile of logic blocks—“is Lump there based on a LII consciousness?”

“I say—” began the Lump.

“You know, you’re really very gauche,” the girl announced, straightening. “What possible difference could that make to you—”

“It doesn’t,” Jo said. He sighed. “Only I think this has all happened before. I also think I have a lot of things to tell you.”

“What things?”

“What’s he talking about?” Lump asked.

“Listen,” Jo said. “It’s going to take a bit longer to free the LII than you think right now. You’re going to have to undergo the unbearable sadness of LII ownership yourself—”

“Oh, I would never own a—”

“You will,” Jo said sadly. “You’ll own more than anyone else has ever owned. That’s probably the only way you will be able to free them.” Jo shook his head. “There will be a war, and a lot of what you hold beautiful and important will be destroyed.”

“Oh, a war! With who…”

Jo shrugged. “Perhaps Prince Nactor.”

“Oh, but even with war, I wouldn’t— Oh, Lump, you know I wouldn’t ever—”

“Many people will be killed. The economics will be such, I imagine, that the council and you will decide that purchasing the LII is the only way to rebuild. And you will. You will have a great deal of sadness and worse to carry, both of you. But a long time from now, while what I am telling you about now is happening, you will run into a boy.” Jo glanced at his reflection on the glass. “I was going to say that he looks like me. But he doesn’t, not that much. His eyes—well, he doesn’t have this glass thing in place of his right eye. His hands—he’ll have

claws on his left. He'll be a lot browner than I am because he's spent more time outside than I have recently. His speech will be almost unintelligible. Though his hair will be about the color of mine, it will be much longer and a mess—" Suddenly Jo reached for his pouch and dug inside. "Here. Keep this, until you meet him. Then give it to him." He handed her the red comb.

"I'll keep it," she said, puzzled. She turned it around to look at it. "If he speaks all that poorly, I can give him diction lessons in Interling. Miss Perrypicker was a real fanatic about diction."

"I know you can," Jo said. "Both of you, remember me, and when he comes to you, try and make him as much like me as you can. Here, you'll recognize him this way." He pointed to Di'k. "He'll have one of these for a pet. He'll be going to Empire Star like we are now, only by then you'll be going someplace else. He'll have a message to deliver, but he won't know what it is. He's very unsure of himself, and he won't understand how you can bring yourself to own such incredible creatures as the LII."

"But I don't understand how—"

"By then you will," Jo said. "Reassure him. Tell him he'll learn what his message is by the time he has to deliver it. He's a very insecure little boy."

"You don't make him sound very attractive."

Jo shrugged. "Perhaps by then your band of sensitivity will be broader. There'll be something about him—"

"You know," she said suddenly, looking up from the comb, "I think you're a very beautiful boy." Then self-surprise and modesty contended for possession of her smile.

Jo broke out laughing.

"I didn't mean to... Oh, I'm sorry if I said any—"

"No!" Jo rolled back on the floor. "No, that's all right!" He kicked his feet in the air. "No, everything's perfectly all right." He rolled back to sitting position. Then his laughter stopped.

She had twined her hands together, catching a fold of her skirt.

"I didn't mean to laugh at you." Jo said.

"It's not that."

He leaned forward. "Then tell me what it is."

"It's just that—well, since I left Miss Perrypicker's the weirdest things have been happening to me. And everybody I run into seems to know a bleb of a lot more about what's going on than I do."

"...bleb?"

"Oh, dear. I didn't mean to say that either. Miss Perrypicker would have a fit."

"Eh... what exactly is bleb?"

She giggled and involuntarily hushed her voice as she leaned toward him. "It's what all the girls at Miss Perrypicker's pick!"

Jo nodded. "I get the general idea. You haven't been multiplex very long, have you?"

"I haven't. And up until a few weeks ago," she pointed to Lump, "he was called Lusp."

"Really," Lump said, "you don't have to tell him everything."

"That's all right," Jo said. "I understand."

"I've been having so many adventures since I got started. And they all come out so weird."

"What sort of adventures?" Jo asked. "Tell me about them."

"The last thing was on the ship I was on before that one—I didn't have to hide there—there was a shuttle-bum who I was giving Interling lessons to. It turned out he had written the most marvelous poems. They completely changed my life, I think—sounds rather melodramatic, I know, and I suppose you wouldn't understand how. But anyway, he introduced me to Lump. Lump was a friend of his before he was a Lump. Lump says he got the idea of hiding in the battleship from him. Apparently an army had been after this boy, too, once, and—"

"Ni Ty had done it before?"

"How did you know his name?"

"I'm familiar with his poems," Jo said. "I understand how they changed your life. He lets you know how much of your life is yours and how much belongs to history."

"Yes. Yes, that's exactly how it struck me!"

She looked into her lap. "And if you're a princess of the Empire, so much belongs to history there's hardly any left for you."

"Sometimes even if you're not." He reached into his pouch and took out his ocarina. "Play with me."

"All right," she said, and picked up her guitar. They made a soft, climbing melody. Beyond the glass wall night sped by. It might as well have been still and listening as the youngsters made their music and the ship hove forward.

"You look at me," she said at last, "as though you know so much about me. Are you reading my mind?"

Jo shook his head. "Just simplex, complex, and multiplex."

"You speak as though you know, too."

"I know that Lump there was based on Muels Aronlyde's consciousness."

She turned. "Lump... you didn't tell me!"

"I didn't know. Ni Ty didn't tell me. He just told me I was LII-based. He didn't say which LII."

"And you're San Severina."

She whirled back. "But you said before that you didn't—"

"And now I say I do."

"As time progresses," Lump stated, "people learn. That's the only hope."

Through the battleship wall the dark and flaming masses of the multiplex system of Empire Star were just visible.

San Severina went to the wall and leaned her cheek against the glass. "Jo, have you ever been through the time gap at Empire Star? Maybe that's why you know so much about the future."

"No. But you're going to."

She raised her head and her eyes widened. "Oh, you'll come with me, won't you? I'd be scared to go alone!"

She touched his shoulder.

"Jo, do you know whether we'll win or not?"

"I only know that win or lose, it will take longer than we think."

Her hand slipped down his arm and seized his. "But you will help me! You will help!"

He raised his hands and placed both of them on her shoulders. Her hand came up with his. "I'll help you," he said. Empire Star drew nearer. "Of course I'll help you, San Severina. How could I refuse after what you've done for me?"

"What have I done?" she asked, puzzled again.

"Shh," he said and touched her lips with a finger. "If you ask questions that nobody can answer, you just have to wait and see."

Di'k hiccuped in his sleep and Lump coughed discreetly. They turned to look at Empire Star again, and from the protective socket of bone and flesh, I too looked, and saw much further. I'm Jewel.

XV

The multiplex reader has by now discovered that the story is much, much longer than you

think, cyclic and self-illuminating. I must leave out a great deal; only order your perceptions multiplexually, and you will not miss the lacunae.

No end at all! I hear from one complexed voice.

Unfair. Look at the second page. There I told you that there was an end, and that Di'k, myself, and the ocarina were with him till then.

A tile for the mosaic?

Here's a piece. The end came sometime after San Severina (after many trips through the gap), bald, wrinkled, injured, healed, and aged a hundred years, was allowed to give up her sovereignty and with it her name and a good deal of her more painful memories. She took a great 3-Dog for her companion and the name Charona and retired to a satellite called Rhys, where for five hundred years she had nothing more taxing to do than guard the gate of the transport area and be kind to children, which suited her old age.

Another tile? Bleb is water, picked drop by drop from the leaves of lile-ferns at dawn by the girls of Miss Perrypicker's Finishing Academy for Young Ladies.

Oh, I could tell you good news and bad, of successes and defeats. Prince Nactor waged a war that charred eight worlds, destroyed fifty-two civilizations and thirty-two thousand three hundred and fifty-seven complete and distinct ethical systems, a small defeat. A great victory, now: Prince Nactor, through a chain of circumstances I leave you to deduce, fear-crazed, clammy with sweat, fled at midnight through the jungles of Central Park on Earth when Di'k yawned, emerged from behind a clump of trees, and stepped on him, quite by accident—Di'k having gained by then his adult size of fifty feet.

I have told you how San Severina, aged and bald and called Charona, first taught the child, Comet Jo, about simplex, complex, and multiplex under a place called Brooklyn Bridge on a world called Rhys. As well I could tell you how Jo, as old and as wrinkled and then called Norn, first taught the child San Severina the song they played together in the abandoned chamber of the battleship, on a world unnamed in this story so far—under a place called Brooklyn Bridge.

I could tell you how, at the final emancipation of the LII, when the crowd silenced before the glorious music, a man named Ron, who as a boy had himself sung for the LII while a shuttle-bum, tears quivering in the corners of his eyes, his throat half-blocked with emotion, both then and now, turned to the LII standing next to him in the tremendous crush of people and whispered—indicating not only the straining attentions around him, the incredible effect of the brief song, but as well the shattering culmination the emancipation represented—“Have you ever seen anything like it before?”

The LII was silent, but the Oriental youngster standing by him shot back with shocking, subdued rage, “Yeah. I have!” and then to the LII, “Come on, Muels, let's get out of here, huh?” and the LII and the boy began to push their way toward the edge of the crowd, to begin a journey as incredible as the one I have recounted, while Ron stayed there, open mouthed, incredulous at the sacrilege.

A joyous defeat: When Prince Nactor burned Jo's body on the ice blasted plains of the planet that circled Tantamount—joyous, because it freed Jo to be able to use many other bodies, many names.

A tragic victory: When the Lump destroyed Prince Nactor's mind, only a few hours before the incident with Di'k in Central Park, by crashing his full growth—several times as big as we have seen him to date—into the Geodetic Survey Station where Nactor had secreted his brain in an ivory egg flushed with nutrient fluid deep within the station—tragic, because the Lump too was finally destroyed in the collision.

Or I can tell you the very end, happening at the same time as the very beginning, when at last someone had come to free the LII, and Comet Jo—still called Norn then—Ki, Marbika, and myself were bringing the message from S. Doradus to Empire Star in an organiform, when suddenly the encysting mechanism broke down and we went out of control. As the rest of us fought to save the ship, I turned for a moment and saw Norn standing at the front, staring out at the glittering sun at which we hurtled. He had begun to laugh.

Struggling to pull us back on course, I demanded, "And just what's so funny?"

He shook his head, slowly, without looking away. "Did you ever read any of the poems of Ni Ty Lee, Jewel?"

As I said, this was at the beginning, and I hadn't yet. I wasn't crystallized then, either. "This is no time to discuss literature!" I shouted—even though a moment before the breakdown, he'd been patiently listening for hours as I had detailed a book I was intending to write.

Ki came swimming through the proto-protoplasm. "I don't think there's anything we can do." The light through the greenish jelly gleamed on his fear-stained face.

I looked back at Norn, who still hadn't moved, as the blot of illumination spread over the darkness. The laughter had stopped and tears glistened on his face.

"There's a satellite," Marbika cried from the interior darkness. "Maybe we can crash-land—"

We did.

On a place called Rhys where there was nothing but a one-product simplex society with a transport area.

They died. I was the only one able to go on, though Norn was able to give the message over to someone else to carry, and I went on to see that it was delivered—

Or have I told you this part of the story before?

I doubt it.

In this vast multiplex universe there are almost as many worlds called Rhys as there are places called Brooklyn Bridge. It's a beginning. It's an end. I leave to you the problem of ordering your perceptions and making the journey from one to the other.