

Equinoctial

PARAMETER KNEW SHE WAS being followed. They had been behind her for days, always far enough behind that they couldn't get a permanent fix on her, but never so far that she could lose them. She was in danger, but now was not the time to worry about it.

Now was one of the big moments in her life. She proposed to savor it to the full

and refused to be distracted by the hunters. She was giving birth to quintuplets.

Uni, Duo, Tri, Quad... Hopelessly trite. Doc, Happy, Sneezy, Grumpy—no, there were seven of those. Army, Navy, Marine, Airforce, Coastguard? That was a pentagon, for an interesting pun. But who wanted to be called Coastguard?

What

was a Coastguard, anyway?

She put the naming ordeal out of her mind. It wasn't important; they would pick

their own names when the time came. She just thought it might be nice with five

to have something to tag them with, if only for bookkeeping purposes.

"They just got another sighting," she thought, but it wasn't her own thought. It

was the voice of Equinox. Equinox was Parameter's companion, her environment, her space suit, her alter ego; her Symb. She looked in the direction she had come from.

She looked back on the most spectacular scene in the solar system. She was 230,000 kilometers from the center of Saturn, according to the figures floating

in the upper left corner of her field of vision. To one side of her was the yellow bulk of the giant planet, and all around her was a golden line that bisected the universe. She was inside the second and brightest of the Rings. But Saturn and the Rings was not all she saw. About ten degrees away from Saturn

and in the plane of the Rings was a hazy thing like the bell of a trumpet. It was transparent. The wide end of the bell was facing her. Within this shape were

four lines of red that were sharp and well-defined far away but became fuzzy as

they neared her. These were the hunters. All around her, but concentrated in the

plane of the Rings, were slowly moving lines of all colors, each with an arrow

at one end, each shifting perspective in a dazzling 3-D ballet.

None of it—the lines, the bells, the "hunters," even Saturn itself—none of it was any more real than the image in a picture tube. Some of it was even less real than that. The shifting lines, for instance, were vector representations of

the large chunks of rock and ice within radar range of Equinox.

The bell was closer than it had been for days. That was bad news, because the space-time event it represented was the approach of the hunters and their possible locations projected from the time of the last fix. The fuzzy part was

almost touching her. That meant they could be very close indeed, though it wasn't too likely. They were probably back in the stem where the projection looked almost solid, and almost certainly within the four lines that were their

most probable location. But it was still too close.

"Since they know where we are, let's get a fix on them," Parameter decided, and

as she thought it the bell disappeared, to be replaced by four red points that grew tails even as she watched.

"Too close. Way too close." Now they had two fixes on her: one of their own, and the one she had given them by bouncing a signal off them. From this, their Symbs could plot a course; therefore, it was time to alter it. She couldn't afford to change course in the usual way, by bouncing off a rock.

The hunters were close enough that they would detect the change in the rock's velocity and get a better idea of where she was. It was time for thrusters, though she could ill afford the wasted mass.

"Which way?" she asked.

"I suggest you move out of the plane. They won't expect that yet. They don't know you're in labor."

"That's pretty dangerous. There's nothing to hide in out there."

Equinox considered it. "If they get any closer, you'll have to do something at least that drastic, with less chance of success. But I only advise."

"Sure. All right, do it, my green pasture."

The world around her jerked, and all the colored lines started moving down around her, bending as their relative velocity changed. There was a gentle pressure at the small of her back.

"Keep an eye on them. I'm going back to the business of giving birth. How are they doing, by the way?"

"No sweat. One of the girls is in the tube right now—you can feel her—"

"You can tell me that three times..."

"—and she's a little puzzled by the pressure. But she's taking it well. She tells you not to worry, she'll be all right."

"Can I talk to her yet?"

"Not for another few hours. Be patient."

"Right. It shouldn't be long now."

And that was very true. She felt the wave of sensation as her uterus contracted again. She looked down at herself, absently expecting to see the first head coming out. But she could no longer see that far; her belly stuck out. Nothing that Parameter saw was real; all was illusion. Her head was completely enclosed in the thick, opaque substance of Equinox, and all the sensory data she received was through the direct connection from Equinox's senses into her own brain. Much of this information was edited and embellished in ways that made it easier for Parameter to interpret.

So it was that when she looked down at herself she saw not the dark-green surface of Equinox, but her own brown skin. She had asked for that illusion long ago, when it had become a matter of some importance to her to believe she still had her own body. The illusion was flawless. She could see the fingerprints on her hand, the mole on her knee, the color of her nipples, the sentimental scar on her forearm, all illuminated by the soft diffusion of light from the Rings.

But if she tried to touch herself, her hand would be stopped while still a good distance from what she saw as the surface of her body. Equinox was invisible to

her, but she was certainly there.
She watched as the contraction caused her stomach to writhe and flow like putty.
This was more like it. She remembered her other deliveries, before she married Equinox. One had been "natural" and it hadn't worked all that well. She didn't regret it, but it had been painful, not something she would want to repeat. The other had been under anesthetic, and no fun at all. She might as well not have bothered; there had been no pain, no pleasure, no sensation. It was like reading about it in the newspaper. But this one, her third birth, was different. It was intense, so intense she had difficulty concentrating on eluding the hunters. But there was no pain. All she felt was a series of waves of pleasure-pain that didn't hurt, and could be related to no other sensation humans had ever experienced. One of the lines ahead seemed to point almost directly at her. It was a thick red line, meaning it was seventy percent ice and about a million kilograms in mass. The vector was short. It was moving slowly enough that rendezvous would be easy. She took the opportunity and altered course slightly with the sure instinct she had developed. The line swung, foreshortened even more, then flashed brighter and began to pulse. This was the collision warning from Equinox's plotting sector. When the rock was close enough to see as an object rather than a simulated projection, she rotated until her legs pointed at it. She soaked up the shock of the landing, then began to scuttle over the surface in a manner quite astonishing, and with a speed not to be believed. She moved with the coordinated complexity of a spider, all four limbs grasping at the rock and ice. To an observer, she was a comical sight. She looked like a barbell with arms and legs and a bulge at the top that just might be a head. There were no creases or sharp lines anywhere on the outer surface of Equinox; all was gentle curves, absolutely featureless except for short claws on the hands and feet. At the ends of her legs were grasping appendages more like oversized hands than feet. And her legs bent the wrong way. Her knees were hinged to bend away from each other. But she swarmed over the rock with effortless ease, not even hampered by her pregnancy, though the labor "pains" were getting intense. When she was where she wanted to be, she pushed off with both hands and peds, rising rapidly. She was now on a course about ninety degrees away from her pursuers. She hoped they would not be expecting this. Now she had to rely on the screening effect of the billions of tiny rocks and ice crystals around her. For the next few hours she would be vulnerable if they beamed in her direction, but she didn't think it likely they would. Their Symbs would be plotting a course for her almost opposite to the one she was actually taking. If she had continued

that way they would certainly have caught her later when she was burdened with five infants. Now was the time for audacity. Having done that, she put the matter out of her mind again, and none too soon. The first baby had arrived. The head was just emerging as she pushed off the rock. She savored the delicious agony as the head forced its way through her body, struggling to reach the air. It would never reach it. There was no air out here, just another womb that Equinox had prepared, a womb the baby would live in for the rest of its life. No first breath for Parameter's children; no breath at all. The babies were not full-term. Each had been growing only seven months and would not be able to survive without extensive care. But Equinox was the world's best incubator. She had counseled, and Parameter had agreed, that it would be best to birth them while they were still small and get them out where Equinox could keep a closer eye on them. Parameter moved her strangely articulated legs, bringing the hand-like peds up to the baby. She pressed slowly and felt the peds sink in as Equinox absorbed the outer covering. Then she felt the head with her own nerve endings. She ran her long fingers over the wet ball. There was another contraction and the baby was out. She was holding it in her peds. She couldn't see much of it, and suddenly she wanted to. "This is one of the girls, right?" "Yes. And so are two, three, and five. Navy, Marine, and Coastguard, if you want to get more personal." "Those were just tags," she laughed. "I didn't even like them." "Until you think of something else, they'll do." "They won't want them." "Perhaps not. Anyway, I'm thinking of shifting the boy around to fifth position. There's a little tangling of the cords." "Whatever you want. I'd like to see her. 'Army,' I mean." "Do you want a picture, or should I move her?" "Move her." She knew it was only a semantic quibble as to whether she would actually "see" her child. The projection Equinox could provide would look just as real, hanging in space. But she wanted the picture to coincide with the feel she was getting of the baby against her skin. By undulating the inner surface of her body, Equinox was able to move the infant around the curve of Parameter's belly until she was visible. She was wet, but there was no blood; Equinox had already absorbed it all. "I want to touch her with my hands," Parameter thought. "Go ahead. But don't forget there's another coming in a few minutes." "Hold it up. I want to enjoy this one first." She put her hands on the invisible surface of Equinox and they sank in until she was holding the child. It stirred and opened its mouth, but no sound came.

There

seemed to be no trauma involved for the brand-new human being; she moved her arms and legs slowly but seemed content to lie still for the most part.

Compared

to most human children, she hadn't really been born at all. Parameter tried to

interest her in a nipple, but she didn't want it. She was the prettiest thing Parameter had ever seen.

"Let's get the next one out," she said. "This is so extravagant I still can't believe it. Five!"

She drifted into a wonderful haze as the others arrived, each as pretty as the

last. Soon she was covered with tiny bodies, each still tied to an umbilicus. The cords would be left in place until Equinox had finished her childbirth and

had five semiautonomous baby Symps to receive the children. Until then, the children were still a part of her. It was a feeling Parameter loved; she would

never be closer to her children.

"Can you hear them yet?" Equinox asked.

"No, not yet."

"You'll have to wait a while longer for mind contact. I'm tuning out. Are you all right? I shouldn't be longer than about two hours."

"Don't worry about me. I'll be fine. In fact, I've never been happier." She stopped verbalizing and let a wave of intense love flood over her; love for her

invisible mate. It was answered by such an outpouring of affection that Parameter was in tears. "I love you, earthmother," she said.

"And you, sunshine."

"I hope it'll be as good for you as it was for me."

"I wish I could share it with you. But back to business. I really think we've shaken the hunters. There's been no signal from them for an hour, and their projected path is well away from us. I think we'll be safe, at least for a few

hours."

"I hope so. But don't worry about me. I'll get along while you're away. I'm not

scared of the dark."

"I know. It won't be for long. See you later."

Parameter felt her mate slipping away. For a moment she was afraid, but not of

the dark. She was afraid of the loneliness. Equinox would be unavailable to her

for the time it took to give birth to her children, and that meant she would be

cut off from the outside. That didn't matter, but the absence of Equinox from Parameter's mind was a little frightening. It recalled an unpleasant incident in

her past.

But as the lights faded she realized she was not alone. Cut off from sight, sound, smell, and taste by the shutdown of Equinox's interpretative faculties,

she still had touch, and that was enough.

She floated in total darkness and felt the sharp tingle as a mouth found a nipple and began to suck. Imperceptibly, she drifted into sleep.

She awoke to a vague feeling of discomfort. It was small and nagging, and impossible to ignore. She felt in her mind for Equinox, and couldn't find her.

So she was still in the process of giving birth.

But the feeling persisted. She felt helpless in the dark, then she realized it wasn't totally dark. There was a faint pinkness, like looking into closed eyelids. She could not account for it. Then she knew what was wrong, and it was worse than she could have imagined. The babies were gone. She felt over her body with increasing panic, but they were nowhere to be found. Before her panic overwhelmed her, she tried to think of what could have happened that would have separated them, and all she could come up with was the hunters. But why would they take the babies? Then she lost control; there was nothing she could do in the darkness without Equinox to create the universe for her. She was drawn back to rationality by a thought so black she could hardly credit it. In torment, she opened her eyes.

She could see. She was floating in the center of a room hollowed out of bare rock. There was another person in the room, or rather another symbiote; all she could see was the dark-green, curved form of the Symb. "Equinox!" she yelled, and heard herself. In a dream, she looked down at her body and felt the bare reality of it. She touched herself; there was no resistance. She was alone. Half of her was gone. Her mind was dissolving; She watched it go, and knew it to be preferable to facing life without Equinox. She said good-bye to the last shreds of reality, rolled her eyes up into her head, and swallowed her tongue.

The figure looked like a cartoon of a human drawn by a three-year-old, one who was confused about sex. The broad shoulders and bullish neck were ludicrously like the build of a weightlifter, and the narrowing waist and bulbous ass were a moron's idea of a well-built woman. He was green, and featureless except for an oval opening where his mouth should have been. "Just why do you want to become a Ringer?" The sound issued from the hole in his "face." Parameter sighed and leaned back in her chair. The operation at Titan was anything but efficient. She had spent three days talking to people who had been no help at all and finally found this man, who seemed to have the authority to give her a Symb. Her patience—never very long—was at an end. "I should make a tape," she said. "You're the fourth bastard who's asked me that today." "Nevertheless, I must have your answer. And why don't you keep the smart remarks to yourself? I don't need them. For two cents I'd walk out of here and forget about you." "Why don't you? I don't think you can even get out of that chair, much less walk out of here. I never expected anything like this. I thought you Consers wanted new people, so why are you giving me such a runaround? I might get up and walk out myself. You people aren't the only Ringers."

He proved her wrong by rising from the chair. He was awkward but steady, and, even more interesting, there was something in his hand that could only be a gun.

She was amazed. He was sitting in a bare room, and had been empty-handed. Suddenly there was this gun, out of nowhere.

"If you mean that you're thinking of going over to the Engineers, it's my duty

to blow your brains out. You have ten seconds to explain yourself." There was no

trace of anger. The gun never wavered.

She swallowed hard, keeping very still.

"Uh, no, that's not what I meant."

The gun dropped slightly.

"It was a foolish remark," she said, her ears burning with shame and anger.

"I'm

committed to the Conservationists."

The gun vanished into the Symb he was wearing. It could still be in his hand for

all she could tell.

"Now you can answer my question."

Keeping her anger rigidly in check, she started her story. She was quite good at

it by now, and had it condensed nicely. She recited it in a singsong tone that

the interrogator didn't seem to notice.

"I am seventy-seven Earth years old, I was born on Mercury, the Helios Enclave,

the child of an extremely wealthy energy magnate. I grew up in the rigid, confining atmosphere that has always existed in Mercury, and I hated it. When I

turned twelve, my mother gave me twenty percent of her fortune and said she hoped I'd use it wisely. Luckily for me, I was an adult and beyond her reach, because I disappointed her badly.

"I bought passage on the first ship leaving the planet, which happened to be going to Mars. For the next sixty years I devoted myself to experiencing everything the human organism can experience and still survive.

"It would be tedious and overlong to tell you everything I did, but so you won't

think I'm hiding something, I can give you a random sample.

"Drugs: I tried them all. Some only once. Others for years at a time. I had to

have my personality rebuilt three times and lost a lot of memory in the process.

"Sex: with two, three, four partners; seven partners; thirty partners; three hundred partners. All-week orgies. Men, women, girls, boys. Infants. Elephants.

Pythons. Corpses. I changed sex so many times I'm not sure if I grew up as a male or a female.

"I killed a man. I got away with it. I killed a woman and got away again. I got

caught the third time and spent seven years in rehabilitation.

"I traveled. I went to the Belt, to Luna, to the moons of Saturn, Uranus, Neptune. I went to Pluto, and beyond with a holehunter.

"I tried surgery. I joined up with a pair-cult and was connected for a year to

another woman as a Siamese twin. I tried out weird new organs and sex systems. I

tried on extra limbs.

"A few years ago I joined a passivity cult. They believed all action was meaningless, and demonstrated it by having their arms and legs amputated and

relying on the mercy of random strangers to feed them and keep them alive. I lay

for months in the public square beneath Coprates. Sometimes I went hungry and thirsty. Sometimes I stewed in my own filth; then someone would clean me up, usually with a stern lecture to quit this way of life and go straight. I didn't

care.

"But the second time a dog used me for a urinal, I gave it up. I asked someone

to carry me to a doctor, and walked out a changed woman. I decided I had done everything and had better start looking for an elaborate and original suicide. I

was so bored, so jaded, that breathing seemed like too much of a bother.

"Then I thought of two places I'd never been: the sun and the Rings. The sun is

the fancy suicide I told you about. The only way to get to the Rings is in a Symb. I tend to sympathize with you people over the Engineers. So here I am." She settled back in her chair. She was not optimistic about being allowed to join the Conservationist Church, and was already planning ways to get over to the Engineers. If there was ever an unprepossessing story, it was hers, and she

knew it. These Consers were supposed to be dedicated people, and she knew she couldn't present a very convincing line. In point of fact, she didn't give any

thought at all to the Grand Design of the Engineers. Why should she care if a band of religious fanatics were trying to paint one of Saturn's Rings?

"The next to the last statement was a lie," the man informed her.

"Right," she spat. "You self-righteous bastards. It's the custom in polite society to inform someone when they're undergoing a lie-detector test. Even ask

their consent." She got up to go.

"Please sit down, Parameter." She hesitated, then did so.

"It's time some false impressions were cleared up. First, this is not 'polite society,' this is war. Religious war, which is the dirtiest kind. We do what we

have to in the interest of security. The sole purpose of this interview was to

determine if your story was true. We don't care what you have done, as long as

you haven't been consorting with our enemy. Have you?"

"No."

"That is a true statement. Now for the other mistake. We are not self-righteous

bastards. We're pragmatists. And we're not religious fanatics, not really, though we all come to believe deeply in what we're doing out here. And that brings us to the third mistake. The primary reasons we're out here have little

to do with defeating the Engineers. We're all out here for our own personal reasons, too."

"And what are they?"

"They're personal. Each of us had a different reason for coming. You are out here to satisfy the last dregs of a jaded appetite; that's a common reason. You

have some surprises coming up, but you'll stay. You'll have to. You won't be able to bear leaving. And you'll like it. You might even help us fight the Engineers."

She looked at him with suspicion.

"We don't care why you're out here. Your story doesn't impress me one way or the

other. You probably expected condemnation or contempt. Don't flatter

yourself.

As long as you're not here to help paint Ring Beta red, we don't care."

"Then when do I get a Symb?"

"As soon as you can undergo a bit of surgery." For the first time he unbent a little. The corners of the slit that covered his mouth bent up in a silly attempt at a smile. "I must confess that I was interested by one thing you said.

How do you have sex with an elephant?"

Parameter kept a perfectly straight face.

"You don't have sex with an elephant. The best you can do is have sex at an elephant."

The Symb was a soft-looking greenish lump in the center of the room. With the best will in the world, Parameter could not see that it resembled anything so much as a pile of green cow manure. It was smaller than she had expected, but that was because it had no occupant. She was about to remedy that.

She stumped over to it and looked down dubiously. She had no choice but to walk

awkwardly; her legs were no longer built for walking. They had been surgically

altered so that the best she could do was a grotesque bowlegged prancing, stepping high so her long fingers would clear the floor. She was now ideally suited for a weightless existence. In a gravitational field, she was clumsy beyond belief.

The man who had interviewed her, whom she now knew by the name of Bushwacker, was the only other occupant of the room. He handled himself better than she did,

but only slightly. He was itching to get back to the Rings; this base duty galled him. Gravity was for poor flatfoots.

"Just touch it, that's all?" she said. Now that it had come to it, she was having second thoughts.

"That's right. The Symb will do the rest. It won't be easy. You'll have between

six weeks and three months of sensory deprivation while the personality develops. You'd go crazy in two days, but you won't be alone. All you'll have to

hang on to will be the mind of the Symb. And it'll be a baby, hard to get along

with. You'll grow up together."

She took a deep breath, wondering why she was so reluctant. She had done things

easily that were much more repulsive than this. Perhaps it was the dawning realization that this would be much more than a simple lark. It could last a long time.

"Here goes." She lifted her leg and touched one of her ped-fingers to the blob.

It stuck. The Symb slowly began stirring.

The Symb was... warm? No, at first she thought so, but it would be more accurate

to say it was no temperature at all. It was thirty-seven degrees: blood temperature. It oozed up her leg, spreading itself thinner as it came. In a short time it was inching up her neck.

"Inhale," Bushwacker advised. "It'll help a little."

She did so, just as the Symb moved over her chin. It moved over her mouth and nose, then her eyes.

There was a moment of near-panic when part of her brain told her she must take a

breath, and she dutifully tried to. Nothing happened, and she wanted to scream.

But it was all right. She didn't need to breathe. When she opened her mouth

the
Symb flowed down her throat and trachea. Soon her lungs were filled with the interface tissue whose function it was to put oxygen in her blood and remove carbon dioxide. It filled her nasal passages, slithered up the eustachian tube to her inner ear. At that point she lost her balance and fell to the floor. Or she thought she did; she could no longer be sure. She had felt no impact. A wave of dizziness swept over her; she wondered what a Symb would do about vomiting. But it didn't happen, and she suspected it never would. It was a shock, even though she had expected it, when the Symb entered her anus and vagina. Not a bad shock. Rather a thrill, actually. It filled the spaces in her uterus, wound into the urethra to fill the bladder, then up the ureter to mingle with the kidneys. Meanwhile another tendril had filled the large and small intestine, consuming the nutrients it found there, and joined with the tendril coming from her mouth. When it was done, she was threaded like the eye of a serpentine needle, and was revealed to any that could see as a topological example of a torus. The silence closed in. It was absolutely quiet for a period of time she was powerless to measure, but couldn't have been longer than five minutes. The obvious place where the human brain is accessible without violating any solid membranes is alongside the eyeball and through the supraorbital foramen. But the Symb would not be able to get a very substantial tendril through in the tight confines of the eye. So the genetic engineers, elaborating on the basic design for oxygen breathers received over the Ophiuchi Hotline, had given the Symb the capability of forcing an entry through the top of the skull. Parameter felt a twinge of pain as a two-centimeter hole was eaten in the top of her head. But it subsided as the Symb began to feel out the proper places to make connections. The Symb was still a mindless thing, but was guided infallibly by the carefully designed instinct built into it. Suddenly she was surrounded by fear; childish, inconsolable fear that frightened her out of her wits but did not come from her mind. She fought it, but it only became more insistent. In the end, she abandoned herself to it and cried like a baby. She became an infant, sloughing off her seventy-odd years there in the impalpable darkness like they had never happened. There was nothing; nothing but two very lost voices, crying in the void.

There had been a debate raging for centuries as to whether the Symbiotic Space-Environment Organisms were really a form of artificial intelligence. (Or alien intelligence, depending on your definition.) The people who lived in them were unanimously of the opinion that they were. But the other side—who were mostly psychologists—pointed out that the people who actually lived in them were in the worst possible place to judge. Whatever one's opinion on the subject, it

was based on personal prejudice, because there could be no objective facts. The Symbots were genetically tailored organisms that could provide a complete, self-contained environment for a single human being in space. They thrived on human waste products: urine, feces, heat, and carbon dioxide.

They contained several chlorophyll-like enzymes and could accomplish photosynthesis utilizing the human's body heat, though at a low efficiency. For

the rest of the energy needs of the pair, the Symbot could use sunlight. They were

very good at storing energy in chemical compounds that could be broken down later at need. Together with a human, a Symbot made a self-contained heat engine.

They were a closed ecology, neither host nor parasite: a symbiosis.

To the human being, the Symbot was a green pasture, a running brook, a fruit tree,

an ocean to swim in. To the Symbot, the human was rich soil, sunshine, gentle rain, fertilizer, a pollinating bee. It was an ideal team. Without the other, each was at the mercy of elaborate mechanical aids to survive. Humans were adapted to an environment that no longer existed for their use in a natural state; wherever humans lived since the occupation of the Earth, they had to make

their own environment. Now the Symbots were to provide that environment free of charge.

But it hadn't worked that way.

The Symbots were more complicated than they looked. Humans were used to taking from their surroundings, bending or breaking them until they fit human needs. The Symbots required more of humanity; they made it necessary to give.

When inside a Symbot, a human was cut off entirely from the external universe. The

human component of the symbiosis had to rely on the Symbot's faculties. And the sensory data were received in an unusual way.

The Symbot extended a connection directly into the human brain and fed data into

it. In the process, it had to get tied up in the brain in such a way that it could be difficult to say where human left off and Symbot began. The Symbot reorganized certain portions of the human brain, freeing its tremendous potential for computation and integration, and using those abilities to translate the sensory data into pictures, sounds, tastes, smells, and touches,

going directly through the sensorium. In the process, a mind was generated.

The Symbot had no brain of its own, it merely was able to utilize the human brain

on a time-sharing basis, and utilize it better than its original owner had been

able to. So it would seem impossible that it could have a mind of its own.

But

every Ringer in the system would swear it had. And that was the crux of the debate: Was it actually an independent mind, parasitically using the human brain

as its vehicle for sentient thought, or was it merely schizophrenia, induced by

isolation and projection?

It was impossible to decide. Without a human inside it, there is nothing more helpless than a Symbot. Without the human brain in combination with the genetic information and enzymatically coded procedures, the Symbot can do no more than lie

there inert like the green turd it so closely resembles. It has only rudimentary

musculature, and doesn't even use that when alone. There is no good analogy for

a Symb without a human; nothing else is so dependent on anything else. Once combined with a human, the pair is transformed, becoming much more than the sum of its parts. The human is protected against the harshest environment imaginable. The livable range with a Symb extends from just outside the orbit of Earth (radiation limit) to the orbit of Neptune (sunlight limit). The pair feed each other, water each other, and respire each other. The human brain is converted into a supercomputer. The Symb has radio and radar sender and receiver organs, in addition to sensors for radiation and the electromagnetic spectrum from one thousand to sixteen thousand angstroms. The system can gain mass by ingesting rock and ice and the Symb can retain the valuable minerals and water and discard the rest. About all the pair cannot do is change velocity without a chunk of rock to push against. But it is a small matter to carry a rocket thruster instead of the whole apparatus of a space suit. In the Rings, they didn't even do that. The Symb could manufacture enough gas for attitude control. For major velocity changes, the Ringers carried small bottles of compressed gas. So why weren't all humans in space installed in Symb? The reason was that the Symb needed more than most people were willing to give. It wasn't a simple matter of putting it on when you needed it and taking it off later. When you took off your Symb, the Symb ceased to exist. It was probably the heaviest obligation a human ever had to face. Once mated with a Symb, you were mated for life. There had never been a closer relationship; the Symb lived inside your mind, was with you even when you slept, moving independently through your dreams. Compared with that, Siamese twins were utter strangers who pass in the night. It was true that all the humans who had ever tried it swore they hadn't even been alive before they joined their Symb. It looked attractive in some ways, but for most people the imagined liabilities outweighed the gains. Few people are able to make a commitment they know will be permanent, not when permanent could mean five or six hundred years. After an initial rush of popularity the Symb craze had died down. Now all the Symb in the system were in the Rings, where they had made possible a nomadic existence never before known. Ringers are loners by definition. Humans meet at long intervals, mate if they are of a mind to, and go their separate ways. Ringers seldom see the same person twice in a lifetime. They are loners who are never alone.

"Are you there?"

?????

"I can sense you. We have to do something. I can't stand this darkness, can you?"

Listen: Let there be light!"

?????

"Oh, you're hopeless. Why don't you get lost?"

Sorrow. Deep and childish sorrow. Parameter was drawn into it, cursing

herself
and the infantile thing she was caught with. She tried for the thousandth
time
to thrash her legs, to let someone out there know she wanted out. But she had
lost her legs. She could no longer tell if she was moving them.
From the depths of the Symb's sorrow, she drew herself up and tried to stand
away from it. It was no use. With a mental sob, she was swallowed up again
and
was no longer able to distinguish herself from the infant alien.

Her chest was rising and falling. There was an unpleasant smell in her
nostrils.
She opened her eyes.
She was still in the same room, but now there was a respirator clamped to her
face, forcing air in and out of her lungs. She rolled her eyes and saw the
grotesque shape of the other person in the room with her. It floated, bandy
legs
drawn up, hands and peds clasped together.
A hole formed in the front of the blank face.
"Feeling any better?"
She screamed and screamed until she thankfully faded back into her dream
world.

"You're getting it. Keep trying. No, that's the wrong direction; whatever you
were doing just then, do the opposite."
It was tentative; Parameter hadn't the foggiest idea of what opposite was,
because she hadn't the foggiest idea of what the little Symb was doing in the
first place. But it was progress. There was light. Faint, wavering,
tentative;
but light.
The undefined luminance flickered like a candle, shimmered, blew out. But she
felt good. Not half as good as the Symb felt; she was flooded by a proud
feeling
of accomplishment that was not her own. But, she reflected, what does it
matter
if it's my own or not? It was getting to where she no longer cared to haggle
about whether it was she who felt something or the Symb. If they both had to
experience it, what difference did it make?
"That was good. We're getting there. You and me, kid. We'll go places. We'll
get
out of this mess yet."
Go? Fear. Go? Sorrow. Go? Anger?
The emotions were coming labeled with words now, and they were extending in
range.
"Anger? Anger, did you say? What's this? Of course, I want to get out of
here,
why do you think we're going through this? It ain't easy, kid. I don't
remember
anything so hard to get a grip on since I tried to control my alpha waves,
years
ago. Now wait a minute..." Fear, fear, fear. "Don't do that, kid, you scare
me.
Wait. I didn't mean it..." Fear, fear loneliness, fear, FEAR! "Stop! Stop,
you're scaring me to death, you're..." Parameter was shivering, becoming a
child
again.
Black, endless fear. Parameter slipped away from her mind; fused with the
other
mind; chided herself; consoled herself; comforted herself; loved herself.

"Here, take some water, it'll make you feel better."
"Ggggwwway."
"What?"
"Goway. Gway. Goaway. GO. A. WAY!"
"You'll have to drink some water first. I won't go away until you do."
"Go 'way. Murder. Murder'r."

Parameter was at a loss.

"Why, why won't you do it? For me. Do it for Parameter."

Negation.

"You mean 'no.' Where do you get those fancy words?"

Your memory. No. Will not do it.

Parameter sighed, but she had acquired patience, infinite patience. And something else, something that was very like love. At least it was a profound admiration for this spunky kid. But she was still scared, because the Symb was

beginning to win her over and it was only with increasing desperation that she

hung onto her idea of getting the child to open the outside world so she could

tell someone she wanted out.

And the desperation only made matters worse. She couldn't conceal it from the Symb, and the act of experiencing communicated it in all its raw, naked panic.

"Listen to me. We've got to get off this merry-go-round. How can we talk something over intelligently if I keep communicating my fear to you, which makes

you scared, which scares me, which makes you panicky, which scares me more, which... now stop that!"

Not my fault. Love, love. You need me. You are incomplete without me. I need commitment before I'll cooperate.

"But I can't. Can't you see I have to be me? I can't be you. And it's you who's

incomplete without me, not the way you said."

Wrong. Both incomplete without the other. It's too late for you. You are no longer you. You are me, I am you.

"I won't believe that. We've been here for centuries, for eons. If I haven't accepted you yet, I never will. I want to be free, in time to see the sun burn

out."

Wrong. Here for two months. The sun is still burning.

"Aha! Tricked you, didn't I? You can see out, you're further along than you told

me. Why did you trick me like that? Why didn't you tell me you knew what time it

was? I've been aching to know that. Why didn't you tell me?"

You didn't ask.

"What kind of answer is that?"

An honest one.

Parameter simmered. She knew it was honest. She knew she was belaboring the child, who couldn't tell a lie any more than she could. But she clung to her anger with the sinking feeling that it was all she had left of herself.

You hurt me. You are angry. I've done nothing to you. Why do you hate me?

Why?

????? I love you. I'm afraid you'll leave me.

"I... I love you. I love you, godhelpme, I really do. But that's not me. No! It's something else. I don't know what yet, but I'll hang on. Hang on to it.

Hang on to it."

Where are you?

Parameter?

"I'm here. Go away."

"Go away."

"You have to eat something. Please, try this. It's good for you. Really it is.

Try it."

"Eat!" She turned in the air with sudden cramps of hunger and revulsion. She retched up stale air and thin fluid. "Get away from me. Don't touch me.

Equinox!

Equinox!"

The figure touched her with its hand. The hand was hard and cold.

"Your breasts," he said. "They've been oozing milk. I was wondering..."

"Gone. All gone."

Parameter.

"What is it? Are you ready to try again with that picture?"

No. No need. You can go.

"Huh?"

You can go. I can't keep you. You think you are self-sufficient; maybe you're right. You can go.

Parameter was confused.

"Why? Why so sudden?"

I've been looking into some of the concepts in your memory. Freedom.

Self-determination. Independence. You are free to go.

"You know what I think, what I really think about those concepts, too.

Unproven

at best. Fantasies at worst."

You are cynical. I recognize that they may indeed be real, so you should be free. I am detaining you against your will. This is contrary to most ethical codes, including the ones you accept more than any others. You are free to go. It was an awkward moment. It hurt more than she would have thought possible.

And

she was unsure of whose hurt she was feeling. Not that it mattered.

What was she saying? Here was what might be her one and only chance, and she was

acknowledging what the kid had said all along, that they were already fused.

And

the kid had heard it, like she heard everything.

Yes, I heard it. It doesn't matter. I can hear your doubts about many things.

I

can feel your uncertainty. It will be with you always.

"Yes. I guess it will. But you. I can't feel much from you. Not that I can distinguish."

You feel my death.

"No, no. It isn't that bad. They'll give you another human. You'll get along. Sure you will."

Perhaps. Despair. Disbelief.

Parameter kicked herself in the mental butt, told herself that if she didn't get

out now, she never would.

"Okay. Let me out."

Fade. A gradual withdrawal that was painful and slow as the tendril began to disengage. And Parameter felt her mind being drawn in two.

It would always be like that. It would never get any better.

"Wait, kid. Wait!"

The withdrawal continued.

"Listen to me. Really! No kidding, I really want to discuss this with you.

Don't

go."

It's for the best. You'll get along.

"No! No more than you will. I'll die."

No you won't. It's like you said; if you don't get out now, you never will. You'll... all right... bye...

"No! You don't understand. I don't want to go anymore. I'm afraid. Don't leave

me like this. You can't leave me."

Hesitation.

"Listen to me. Listen. Feel me. Love. Love. Commitment, pure and honest commitment-forever-and-ever-till-death-us-do-part. Feel me."

"I feel you. We are one."

She had eaten, only to bring it back up. But her jailer was persistent. He was

not going to let her die.

"Would it be any better if you got inside with me?"

"No. I can't. I'm half gone. It would be no good. Where is Equinox?"

"I told you I don't know. And I don't know where your children are. But you won't believe me."

"That's right. I don't believe you. Murderer."

She listened groggily as he explained how she came to be in this room with him.

She didn't believe him, not for a minute.

He said he had found her by following a radio beacon signaling from a point outside the plane of the Rings. He had found a pseudosymb there; a simplified Symb created by budding a normal one without first going through the conjugation

process. A pseudo can only do what any other plant can do: that is, ingest carbon dioxide and give out oxygen from its inner surface. It cannot contract into contact with a human body. It remains in the spherical configuration. A human can stay alive in a pseudosymb, but will soon die of thirst.

Parameter had been inside the pseudo, bruised and bleeding from the top of her

head and from her genitals. But she had been alive. Even more remarkable, she had lived the five days it had taken to get her to the Conser emergency station.

The Consers didn't maintain many of the stations. The ones they had were widely separated.

"You were robbed by Engineers," he said. "There's no other explanation. How long

have you been in the Rings?"

After the third repeat of the question, Parameter muttered, "Five years."

"I thought so. A new one. That's why you don't believe me. You don't know much

about Engineers, do you? You can't understand why they would take your Symb and

leave you alive, with a beacon to guide help to you. It doesn't make sense, right?"

"I... no, I don't know. I can't understand. They should have killed me. What they did was more cruel."

No emotion could be read on the man's "face," but he was optimistic for the first time that she might pull through. At least she was talking, if fitfully.

"You should have learned more. I've been fighting for a century, and I still don't know all I'd like to know. They robbed you for your children, don't you see? To raise them as Engineers. That's what the real battle is about: population. The side that can produce the most offspring is the one that gains

the advantage."

"I don't want to talk."

"I understand. Will you just listen?"

He took her lack of response to mean she would.

"You've just been drifting through your life. It's easy to do out here; we all just drift from time to time. When you think about the Engineers at all, it's just a question of evading them. That isn't too hard. Considering the cubic kilometers out here, the hunted always has the advantage over the hunter. There are so many places to hide; so many ways to dodge.

"But you've drifted into a rough neighborhood. The Engineers have concentrated a lot of people in this sector. Maybe you've noticed the high percentage of red rocks. They hunt in teams, which is not something we Consers have ever done. We're too loose a group to get together much, and we all know our real fight doesn't begin for another thousand years.

"We are the loosest army in the history of humanity. We're volunteers on both sides, and on our side, we don't require that individuals do anything at all to combat the Engineers. So you don't know anything about them, beyond the fact that they've vowed to paint Ring Beta red within twenty-five thousand years." He at last got a rise out of her.

"I know a little more than that. I know they are followers of Ringpainter the Great. I know he lived almost two hundred years ago. I know he founded the Church of Cosmic Engineering."

"You read all that in a book. Do you know that Ringpainter is still alive? Do you know how they plan to paint the Ring? Do you know what they do to Consers they catch?"

He was selective in his interpretations. This time he took her silence to mean she didn't know.

"He is alive. Only he's a she now. Her 'Population Edict' of fifty years ago decreed that each Engineer shall spend ninety percent of her time as a female, and bear three children every year. If they really do that, we haven't got a chance. The Rings would be solid Engineers in a few centuries."

She was slightly interested for the first time in weeks.

"I didn't know it was such a long-term project."

"The longest ever undertaken by humans. At the present rate of coloring, it would take three million years to paint the entire Ring. But the rate is accelerating."

He waited, trying to draw her out again, but she lapsed back into listlessness.

He went on.

"The one aspect of their religion you don't seem to know about is their ban on killing. They won't take a human or Symb life."

That got her attention.

"Equinox! Where..." she started shaking again.

"She's almost certainly alive."

"How could they keep her alive?"

"You're forgetting your children. Five of them."

The last thing anyone said to Parameter for two years was, "Take this, you might want to use it. Just press it to a red rock and forget about it. It lasts forever."

She took the object, a thin tube with a yellow bulb on each end. It was a Bacteriophage Applicator, filled with the tailored DNA that attacked and broke down the deposits of red dust left by the Engineers' Ringvirus. Touching the end of it to a coated rock would begin a chain reaction that would end only when

all

the surface of the rock was restored to its original color.

Parameter absently touched it to her side, where it sank without a trace in the

tough integument of Equinox's outer hide. Then she shoved out the airlock and into fairyland.

"I never saw anything like this, Equinox," she said.

"No, you certainly haven't." The Symb had only Parameter's experiences to draw

on.

"Where should we go? What's that line around the sky? Which way is it to the Ring?"

Affectionate laughter. "Silly planteater. We're in the Ring. That's why it stretches all around us. All except over in that direction. The sun is behind that part of the Ring, so the particles are illuminated primarily from the other

side. You can see it faintly, by reflected light."

"Where did you learn all that?"

"From your head. The facts are there, and the deductive powers. You just never

thought about it."

"I'm going to start thinking a lot more. This is almost frightening. I repeat:

Where do we go from here?"

"Anywhere at all, as long as it's away from this awful place. I don't think I want to come back to the Ringmarket for about a decade."

"Now, now," Parameter chided her. "Surely we'll have to go back before that. Aren't you feeling the least bit poetic?"

The Ringmarket was the clearinghouse for the wildly variant and irresistibly beautiful art that was the byproduct of living a solitary life in the Rings. Art

brokers, musicmongers, poetry sellers, editors, moodmusic vendors... all the people who made a living by standing between the artist and the audience and raking off a profit as works of art passed through their hands; they all gathered at the Ringmarket bazaar and bought exquisite works for the equivalent

of pretty-colored beads. The Ringers had no need of money. All exchanges were straight barter: a fresh gas bottle for a symphony that would crash through the

mind with unique rhythms and harmonies. A handful of the mineral pellets the Ringers needed every decade to supply trace elements that were rare in the Rings

could buy a painting that would bring millions back in civilization. It was a speculative business. No one could know which of the thousands of works would catch the public taste at high tide and run away with it. All the buyers knew was that for unknown reasons the art of the Rings had consistently captured the

highest prices and the wildest reviews. It was different. It was from a whole new viewpoint.

"I can't feel poetic back there. Besides, didn't you know that when we start to

create, it will be music?"

"I didn't know that. How do you know?"

"Because there's a song in my heart. Off-key. Let's get out of here."

They left the metallic sphere of the market and soon it was only a blue vector

line, pointed away from them.

They spent two years just getting used to their environment. The wonder never wore off. When they met others, they avoided them. Neither was ready for companionship; they had all they needed.

She was sinking, and glad of it. Every day without Equinox was torture. She had come to hate her jailer, even if his story was true. He was keeping her alive, which was the cruelest thing he could do. But even her hatred was a weak and fitful thing. She stared into the imaginary distance and seldom noticed his comings and goings. Then one day there were two of them. She noted it dispassionately, watched as they embraced each other and began to flow. So the other person was a female; they were going to mate. She turned away and didn't see, as the two Symb merged in their conjugation process and slowly expanded into a featureless green sphere within which the humans would couple silently and then part, probably forever. But something nagged at her, and she looked back. A bulge was forming on the side of the sphere that was facing her. It grew outward and began to form another, smaller sphere. A pink line formed the boundary between the two globes. She looked away again, unable to retain an interest as the Symb gave birth. But something was still nagging. "Parameter." The man (or was it the woman?) was floating beside her, holding the baby Symb. She froze. Her eyes filled with horror. "You're out of your mind." "Maybe. I can't force it on you. But it's here. I'm going now, and you'll never see me again. You can live or die, whichever you choose. I've done all I can."

It was a warm day in the Upper Half. But then it was always a warm day, though some were warmer than others. Ringography is an easy subject to learn. There are the Rings: Alpha, Beta, and the thin Gamma. The divisions are called Cassini and Encke, each having been created by the gravitational tug-of-war between Saturn and the larger moons for possession of the particles that make up the Rings. Beyond that, there is only the Upper Half and the Lower Half, above and below the plane, and Inspace and Outspace. The Ringers never visited Inspace because it included the intense Van Allen-type radiation belts that circle Saturn. Outspace was far from the traveled parts of the Rings, but was a nice place to visit because the Rings were all in one part of the sky from that vantage point. An odd experience for children, accustomed from birth to see the sky cut in half by the Rings. Parameter was in the Upper Half to feed on the sunlight that was so much more powerful there than in the Rings. Equinox was in her extended configuration. The pair looked like a gauzy parabolic dish, two hundred meters across. The dish was transparent, with veins that made it look like a spider web. The illusion was heightened by the small figure spread-eagled in the center of it, like a fly. The fly was Parameter. It was delicious to float there. She looked directly at the sun, which was bright even this far away and would have burned her eyes quickly if she had been

really looking at it. But she saw only a projection. Equinox's visual senses were not nearly as delicate as human eyes.

The front of her body was bathed in radiance. It was highly sensual, but in a new way. It was the mindless joy of a flower unfolding to the sun that Parameter

experienced, not the hotter animal passions she was used to. Energy coursed through her body and out into the light-gathering sheets that Equinox had extended. Her mind was disconnected more completely than she would have believed

possible. Her thoughts came hours apart, and were concerned with sluggish, vegetable pleasures. She saw herself as naked, exposed to the light and the wind, floating in the center of a silver circle of life. She could feel the wind

on her body in this airless place and wondered vacantly how Equinox could be so

utterly convincing in the webs of illusion she spun.

There was a sudden gust.

"Parameter. Wake up, my darling."

"Hmmm?"

"There's a storm coming up. We've got to furl the sails and head into port."

Parameter felt other gusts as she swam through the warm waters back to alertness.

"How far are we from the Ring?"

"We're all right. We can be there in ten minutes if I tack for a bit and then use a few seconds of thrust."

In her extended configuration, Equinox was a moderately efficient solar sail. By

controlling the angle she presented to the incoming sunlight she could slowly alter velocity. All Parameter had to do was push off above or below the Rings in

a shallow arc. Equinox could bring them back into the Rings in a few days, using

solar pressure. But the storm was a danger they had always to keep in mind. It was the solar wind that Equinox felt, a cloud of particles thrust out from the sun by storms beneath the surface. Her radiation sensors had detected the first speed-of-light gusts of it, and the dangerous stuff would not be far behind.

Radiation was the chief danger of life in the Rings. The outer surface of a Symb

was proof against much of the radiation the symbiotic pair would encounter in space. What got through was not enough to worry about, certainly never enough to

cause sickness. But stray high-energy particles could cause mutations of the egg

and sperm cells of the humans.

The intensity of the wind was increasing as they furled their sails and applied

the gas thrusters.

"Did we get moving in time?" Parameter asked.

"There's a good margin. But we can't avoid getting a little hard stuff. Don't worry about it."

"What about children? If I want to have some later, couldn't that be a problem?"

"Naturally. But you'll never give birth to a mutation. I'll be able to see any

deviations in the first few weeks and abort it and not even have to tell you."

"But you would tell me, wouldn't you?"

"If you want me to. But it isn't important. No more than the daily control I exert over any of your other bodily processes."

"If you say so."

"I say so. Don't worry; I said. You just handle the motor control and leave the busy work to me. Things don't seem quite real to me unless they're on the molecular level." Parameter trusted Equinox utterly. So much so that when the really hard wind began buffeting them, she didn't worry for a second. She spread her arms to it, embraced it. It was strange that the "wind" didn't blow her around like a leaf. She would have liked that. All she really missed was her hair streaming around her shoulders. She no longer had any hair at all. It got in the way of the seal between the two of them. As soon as she thought it, long black hair whipped out behind her, curling into her face and tickling her eyes. She could see it and feel it against her skin, but she couldn't touch it. That didn't surprise her, because it wasn't there. "Thank you," she laughed. And then she laughed even harder as she looked down at herself. She was covered with hair; long, flowing hair that grew as she watched it. They reentered the Ring, preceded by a twisting, imaginary train of hair a kilometer long.

Three days later she was still staring at the floating ball. On the fifth day her hand twitched toward it. "No. No. Equinox. Where are you?" The Symb was in its dormant state. Only an infant Symb could exist without a human to feed and water it; once it had become attached to a human, it would die very quickly without one. But in dormancy, they could live for weeks at a low energy level. It only needed the touch of her hand to be triggered into action. The hunger was eating its way through her body; she ignored it completely. It had become a fact of life, something she clutched to her to forget about the real hunger that was in her brain. She would never be forced to accept the Symb from hunger. It didn't even enter the question. On the ninth day her hand began moving. She watched it, crying for Equinox to stop the movement, to give her strength. She touched it.

"I think it's time we tried out the new uterus."
"I think you're right."
"If that thing out there is a male, we'll do it." Equinox had in her complex of capabilities the knack of producing a nodule within her body that could take a cloned cell and nurture it until it grew into a complete organ; any organ she wished. She had done that with one of Parameter's cells. She removed it, cloned it, and let it grow into a new uterus. Parameter's old one had run out of eggs long ago and was useless for procreation, but the new one was brimming with life. She had operated on her mate, taking out the old one and putting in the new. It

had been painless and quick; Parameter had not even felt it. Now they were ready to have a seed planted in it. "Male," came the voice of the other figure. Before, Parameter would have answered by saying, "Solitude," and he would have gone on his way. Now she said, "Female." "Wilderness," he introduced himself. "Parameter." The mating ritual over, they fell silent as they drifted closer. She had computed it well, if a little fast. They hit and clung together with all their limbs. Slowly the Symbs melted into each other. A sensation of pleasure came over Parameter. "What is it?" "What do you think? It's heaven. Did you think that because we're sexless, we wouldn't get any pleasure out of conjugation?" "I guess I hadn't thought about it. It's... different. Not bad at all. But nothing like an orgasm." "Stick around. We're just getting started." There was a moment of insecurity as Equinox withdrew her connections, leaving only the one into her brain. She shuddered as an unfamiliar feeling passed over her, then realized she was holding her breath. She had to start respirating again. Her chest crackled as she brought long-unused muscles into play, but once the reflex was started she was able to forget about it and let her hindbrain handle the chore. The inner surface started to phosphoresce, and she made out a shadowy figure floating in front of her. The light got brighter until it reached the level of bright moonlight. She could see him now. "Hello," she said. He seemed surprised she wanted to talk, but grinned at her. "Hello. You must be new." "How did you know?" "It shows. You want to talk. You probably expect me to go through an elaborate ritual." And with that he reached for her and pulled her toward him. "Hold on there," she said. "I'd like to know you a little better first." He sighed, but let her go. "I'm sorry. You don't know yet. All right, what would you like to know about me?" She looked him over. He was small, slightly smaller than her. He was completely hairless, as was she. There didn't seem to be any way to guess his age; all the proper clues were missing. Growing out of the top of his head was a snaky umbilicus. She discovered there was really little to ask him, but having made a point of it, she threw in a token question. "How old are you?" "Old enough. Fourteen." "All right, let's do it your way." She touched him and shifted in space to accommodate his entry. To her pleasant surprise, it lasted longer than the thirty seconds she had expected. He was an accomplished lover; he seemed to know all the right moves. She was warming deliciously when she heard him in her head. "Now you know," he said, and her head was filled with his laughter. Everything before that, good as it was, had been just a warm-up.

Parameter and the baby Symb howled with pain.

"I didn't want you," she cried, hurling waves of rejection at the child and at herself. "All I want is Equinox."
That went on for an endless time. The stars burnt out around them. The galaxy turned like a whirligig. The universe contracted; exploded; contracted again. Exploded. Contracted and gave it up as a waste of time. Time ended as all events came to an end. The two of them floated, howling at each other.

Wilderness drifted away against the swirling background of stars. He didn't look back, and neither did Parameter. They knew each other too well to need good-byes. They might never meet again, but that didn't matter either, because each carried all they needed of the other.
"In a life full of cheap thrills, I never had anything like that."
Equinox seemed absorbed. She quietly acknowledged that it had, indeed, been superduper, but there was something else. There was a new knowledge.
"I'd like to try something," she said.
"Shoot."

Parameter's body was suddenly caressed by a thousand tiny, wet tongues. They searched out every cranny, all at the same time. They were hot, at least a thousand billion degrees, but they didn't burn; they soothed.
"Where were you keeping that?" Parameter quavered when it stopped. "And why did you stop?"

"I just learned it. I was watching while I was experiencing. I picked up a few tricks."

"You've got more?"

"Sure. I didn't want to start out with the intense ones until I saw how you liked that one. I thought it was very nice. You shuddered beautifully; the delta waves were fascinating."

Parameter broke up with laughter. "Don't give me that clinical stuff. You liked it so much you scared yourself."

"That comes as close as you can come to describing my reaction. But I was serious about having things I think we'll like even better. I can combine sensations in a novel way. Did you appreciate the subtle way the 'heat' blended

into the sensation of feathers with an electric current through them?"

"It sounds hideous when you say it in words. But that was what it was, all right. Electric feathers. But pain had nothing to do with it."

Equinox considered it. "I'm not sure about that. I was deep into the pain-sensation center of you. But I was tickling it in a new way, the same way

Wilderness tickled you. There is something I'm discovering. It has to do with the reality of pain. All you experience is more a function of your brain than of

your nerve endings. Pain is no exception. What I do is connect the two centers—pain and pleasure—and route them through other sensorium pathways, resulting in..."

"Equinox."

?????

"Make love to me."

She was in the center of the sun, every atom of her body fusing in heat so hot

it was icy. She swam to the surface, taking her time through the plastic waves

of ionized gas, where she grew until she could hold the whole sputtering ball in her hand and rub it around her body. It flicked and fumed and smoked, gigantic prominences responding to her will, wreathing her in fire and smoke that bit and tickled. Flares snaked into her, reaming nerves with needle-sharp pins of gas that were soft as a kiss. She was swallowed whole by something pink that had no name, and slid down the slippery innards to splash in a pool of sweet-smelling sulfur.

It melted her; she melted it. Equinox was there; she picked her up and hurled her and herself in a wave of water, a gigantic wave that was gigatons of pent-up energy, rearing itself into a towering breaker a thousand kilometers high. She crashed on a beach of rubbery skin, which became a forest of snakes that squeezed her until the top of her head blew off and tiny flowers showered around her, all of them Equinox.

She was drawn back together from the far corners of the solar system and put into a form that called itself "Parameter" but would answer to anything at all.

Then she was rising on a rocket that thrust deep into her vagina, into recesses that weren't even there but felt like mirrors that showed her own face. She was a fusion warhead of sensation; primed to blow. Sparks whipped around her, and each was a kiss of electric feathers. She was reaching orbital velocity; solar escape velocity; the speed of light. She turned herself inside out and contained the universe. The speed of light was a crawl slower than any snail; she transcended it.

There was an explosion; an implosion. She drew away from herself and fell into herself, and the fragments of her body drifted down to the beach, where she and Equinox gathered them and put them in a pile of quivering parts, each smaller than an atom.

It was a long job. They took their time.

"Next time," Parameter suggested, "try to work in some elephants."

Someone had invented a clock. It ticked.

Parameter woke up.

"Did you do that?"

No answer.

"Shut the damn thing off."

The ticking stopped. She rolled over and went back to sleep. Around her, a trillion years passed.

It was no good; she couldn't sleep. "Are you there?" Yes.

"What do you think we ought to do?" Despair. We've lost Equinox. "You never knew her."

Part of her will always be with you. Enough to hurt you. We will always hurt.

"I want to live again."

Live with hurt?

"If there's no other way. Come on. Let's start. Try to make a light. Come on,

you can do it. I can't tell you how; you have to do that yourself. I love you.

Blend with me, wash me clean, wipe out the memory."

Impossible. We cannot alter ourselves. I want Equinox.

"Damn you, you never knew her."

Know her as good as you. Better. In a way, I am Equinox. But in another way, I

can never be.

"Don't talk in riddles. Merge with me."

Cannot. You do not love me yet.

"You want to sleep on it another few thousand years?"

Yes. You are much nicer when you are asleep.

"Is that an insult?"

No. You have loved me in your sleep. You have talked to me, you have taught me,

given me love and guidance, grown me up to an adult. But you still think I'm Equinox. I'm not. I am me.

"Who is that?"

No name. I will have a name when you start really talking to me.

"Go to sleep. You confuse me."

Love. Affection. Rockabye, rockabye, rockabye.

"You have a name yet?"

"Yes. My name is Solstice."

Parameter cried, loud and long, and washed herself clean in her own tears.

It took them four years to work their way around to Ringmarket. They traded a song, one that had taken three years to produce, a sweet-sad dirge that somehow

rang with hope, orchestrated for three lutes and synthesizer; traded it and a promise of four more over the next century to a tinpan alleycat for an elephant

gun. Then they went out on a trail that was four years cold to stalk the memory

of those long-ago pachyderm days.

In the way that an earlier generation of humans had known the shape of a hill,

the placement of trees and flowers on it, the smell and feel of it; and another

generation could remember at a glance what a street corner looked like; or still

another the details of a stretch of corridor beneath the surface of the moon; in

that same way, Parameter knew rocks. She would know the rock she had pushed off

from on that final day just before Equinox was taken from her, the rock she now

knew to have been an Engineer way-station. She knew where it had been going on

that day, and how fast, and for how long. She knew where it would be now, and that was where she and Solstice were headed. The neighborhood would be

different, but she could find that rock.

They found it, in only three years of search. She knew it instantly, knew every

crevice and pit on the side she had landed on. The door was on the other side.

They picked a likely rock a few kilometers away and settled down for a long wait.

Seventy-six times Saturn turned below them while they used the telescopic sight

of the gun to survey the traffic at the station. By the end of that time, they knew the routine of the place better than the residents did. When the time came for action they had worked over each detail until it was almost a reflex. A figure came out of the rock and started off in the proper direction. Parameter squinted down the barrel of the gun and drew a bead. The range was extreme, but she had no doubt of a hit. The reason for her confidence was the long red imaginary line that she saw growing from the end of the barrel. It represented the distance the bullet would travel in one-thousandth of a second. The figure she was shooting at also had a line extending in front of it, not nearly so long. All she had to do was bring the ends of the two lines together and squeeze the trigger.

It went as planned. The gun was firing stunbullets, tiny harmonic generators that would knock out the pair for six hours. The outer hide of a Symb was proof against the kinetic energy contained in most projectiles, natural or artificial. She didn't dare use a beam stunner because the Engineers in the station would detect it. They set out in pursuit of the unconscious pair. There was no hurry; the longer it took to rendezvous, the farther they would be from danger. It took five hours to reach them. Once in contact, Solstice took over. She had assured Parameter that it would be possible to fuse with an unconscious Symb, and she was right. Soon Parameter was floating in the dark cavity with the Engineer, a female. She put the barrel of the gun under the other's chin and waited.

"I don't know if I can do it, Solstice," she said.

"It won't be something you'll ever be proud of, but you know the reasons as well as I. Just keep thinking of Equinox."

"I wonder if that's a good idea? I'd rather do something for her that I would be proud of."

"Want to back out? We can still get away. But if she wakes up and sees us, it could get awkward if we let her live."

"I know. I have to do it. I just don't like it."

The Engineer was stirring. Parameter tightened her grip on the rifle. She opened her eyes, looked around, and seemed to be listening. Solstice was keeping the other Symb from calling for help.

"I won't give you any trouble," the woman said. "But is it asking too much to allow me a few minutes for my death ritual?"

"You can have that and more if you're a fast talker. I don't want to kill you, but I confess I think I'll have to. I want to tell you some things, and to do it, I'll need your cooperation. If you don't cooperate, I can take what I need from you anyway. What I'm hoping is that there'll be some way you can show me that will make your death unnecessary. Will you open your mind to me?"

A light came into the woman's eyes, then was veiled. Parameter was instantly suspicious.

"Don't be nervous," the Engineer said, "I'll do as you ask. It was just something of a surprise." She relaxed, and Parameter eased herself into the

arms
of Solstice, who took over as go-between.
They had a lot staked on the outcome of this mutual revelation.

It came in a rush, the impalpable weight of the religious fervor and dedication.
And above it all, the Great Cause, the project that would go on long after everyone now alive was dead. The audacity of it! The vision of Humanity the mover, the controller, the artist; the Engineer. The universe would acknowledge the sway of Humanity when it gazed at the wonder that was being wrought in the Rings of Saturn.
Ringpainter the Great was a Utopian on a grand scale. He had been bitterly disappointed in the manner in which humanity had invaded the solar system. He thought in terms of terraforming and of shifting planets in their courses. What he saw was burrows in rock.
So he preached, and spoke of Dyson spheres and space arks, of turning stars on and off at will, of remodeling galaxies. To him and his followers, the universe was an immensely complex toy that they could do beautiful things with. They wanted to unscrew a black hole and see what made it tick. They wanted to unshift the red shift. They believed in continuous creation, because the big bang implied an end to all their efforts.
Parameter and Solstice reeled under the force of it; the conviction that this admittedly symbolic act could get humanity moving in the direction Ringpainter wanted. He had an idea that there were beings out there keeping score, and they could be impressed by the Grand Gesture. When they saw what a pretty thing Ring Beta had become, they would step in and give the forces of Ring-painter a hand.
The woman they had captured, whose name they learned was Rosy-Red-Ring 3351, was convinced of the truth of these ideas. She had devoted her life to the furtherance of the Design. But they saw her faith waver as she beheld what they had to show her. She cringed away from the shrunken, hardened, protectively encased memory of the days after the theft of Equinox. They held it up and made her look at it, peeling away the layers of forgetfulness they had protected themselves with and thrusting it at her.
At last they let her go. She crouched, quivering, in the air.
"You've seen what we've been."
"Yes." She was sobbing.
"And you know what we have to do to find Equinox. You saw that in my mind. What I want to know is, can this cup pass from us? Do you know another way? Tell me quick."
"I didn't know," she cried. "It's what we do to all the Consers we capture. We can't kill them. It's against the Law. So we separate them, keep the Symb, leave the human to be found. We know most of them are never found, but it's the best

we can do. But I didn't know it was so bad. I never thought of it. I almost think--"

"No need to think. You're right. It would be more merciful to kill the human. I

don't know about the Symb. I'll have to talk to Equinox about that. At first I

wanted to kill all the Engineers in the Rings, with a lot of care put into the

project so they didn't die too quick. I can't do that any more. I'm not a Conser. I never was. I'm not anything but a seeker, looking for my friend. I don't care if you paint the Ring; go ahead. But I have to find Equinox, and I have to find my children. You have to answer my question now. Can you think of a

way I can let you live and still do what I have to do?"

"No. There's no other way."

Parameter sighed. "All right. Get on with your ritual."

"I'm not sure if I want to any more."

"You'd probably better. Your faith has been shaken, but you might be right about

the scorekeepers. If you are, I'd hate to be the cause of you going out the wrong way." She was already putting her distance between herself and this woman

she would kill. She was becoming an object, something she was going to do something unpleasant to; not a person with a right to live.

Rosy-Red-Ring 3351 gradually calmed as she went through the motions of her auto-extreme unction. By the time she had finished she was as composed as she had been at the start of her ordeal.

"I've experienced the fullness of it," she said quietly. "The Engineers do not

claim to know everything. We were wrong about our policy of separating symbiotic

pairs. My only regret is that I can't tell anyone about our mistake." She looked

doubtfully at Parameter, but knew it was useless. "I forgive you. I love you, my

killer. Do the deed." She presented her white neck and closed her eyes.

"Umm," Parameter said. She had not heard her victim's last words; she had cut herself off and could see only the neck. She let Solstice guide her hands.

They

found the pressure points as if by instinct, pressed hard, and it was just like

Solstice had said it would be. The woman was unconscious in seconds. Now she must be kept alive for a few minutes while Solstice did what she had to do.

"Got it," came Solstice's shaken thought.

"Was it hard?" Parameter had kept away from it.

"Let's don't talk about it. I'll show it to you in about a decade and we can cry

for a year. But I have it."

So the other Symb was already dead, and Solstice had been with it as it died. Parameter's job would not be nearly so hard.

She put her thumbs on the woman's neck again, bent her ear to the chest. She pressed, harder this time. Soon the heartbeat fluttered, raced briefly. There was a convulsion, then she was dead.

"Let's get out of here."

What they had acquired was the Symb-Engineer frequency organ. It was the one way

the inhabitants of the Rings had of telling friend from foe. The radio organs of

the Symb were tuned from birth to send on a specific frequency, and the

Engineers used one band exclusively. The Consers employed another, because they had a stake in identifying friends and foes, too. But Parameter no longer identified with either side, and now had the physical resources to back up her lack of conviction. She could send on either band now, according to the needs of the moment, and so could move freely from one society to the other. If caught, she would be seen as a spy by either side, but she didn't think of herself as one. It had been necessary to kill the Engineer pair because the organ could not be removed without causing the death of the Symb. The organ could be cloned, and that was the escape Parameter had offered the other two. But it had been refused. So now Solstice had two voices; her own, and the one from the other organ which she had already implanted in herself. In addition to the double voice, they had picked up information about the life of the Engineers without which it would be impossible to function without immediate exposure. They knew the customs and beliefs of the Engineers and could fit in with them as long as they didn't go into sexual rapport. That could get sticky, but they had a dodge. The most reliable way to avoid intercourse was to be pregnant, and that was what they set out to do.

It didn't seem too important, but his name was Appoggiatura. They had encountered him during the third week after the murder. It was a risk—a small one, but a risk all the same. He had been easy about it. He learned all about Parameter's deeds and plans during their intercourse and remained unperturbed.

Fanatic dedication was rare among Consers; the only real fanatic Parameter had

met was Bushwhacker, who had offered to shoot her at the hint of treason. Parameter and Solstice were aware that what they were doing was treason to the

Conser cause. Appoggiatura didn't seem to care, or if he did, he thought it was

justified after what they had been through.

"But have you thought about what you'll do if you find Equinox? I don't know what you think, but it sounds like a thorny problem to me."

"It's thorny, all right," Solstice agreed. "To me, especially. Don't talk to me

about problems until you've gone through the insecurity I've felt when I think

about that day."

"It's my insecurity, too," Parameter said. "We don't know. But we do know we have to find her. And the children, though that isn't so strong. I only saw them

for a few minutes, and they'll be seven years old now. I can't expect much there."

"I wouldn't expect much from Equinox, either," he said. "I know something about

what happens to a Symb when it's separated from a human. Something dies; I don't

know what. But it has to start over again from the beginning. She'll be a part

of one of your children now, whichever one of them she took over when she was

separated from you. You won't know her, and she won't know you."
"Still, we have to do this. I want to leave you now."

For six months they drifted, allowing Parameter's body to swell to the point that it would be obvious she was pregnant and not available for sex. During that

time they thought.

Countless times they decided they were being foolish; that to complete their search would be to finish their life's mission and be faced with what to do with

the next thousand years. But they could not just go through the motions.

Perhaps

one person could do that, but it wouldn't work with two. There was always that

alter ego telling you by her very presence that you were living a lie.

And there was Rosy-Red-Ring 3351. If they quit, her murder would have been for

no purpose. That would have been too much to bear. They had her in their memory,

always cherishing her, always ashamed of what they had done. And the Symb, whose

name Solstice had not yet been able to mention. One day Parameter would have to

go through that killing again, but closer. Solstice was, if anything, even more

determined than Parameter to verify the necessity of that terrible act.

So they started back to the Engineer-infested sector where so long ago Equinox

had been made a prisoner of war.

There was a nervous moment the first time they used the stolen transmitter organ, but it went off smoothly. After that, they were able to move freely in Engineer society. It was a strange world, steeped in ritual that would have instantly confounded a novice. But they had received an instant course in religion and fell back on the memories of Rosy-Red-Ring that were burned into their minds.

They took the name Earth-Revenger 9954f, a common name attached to a random number with the "f" added as a mark of status. Only Engineers who had borne a hundred children were supposed to add the letter to their names.

Theoretically,

births were supposed to be recorded at Ringpainter Temple, clear across the Ring

from them, where what records it was possible to keep in Ring society were stored. But there was no danger once they had verified that their stolen transmitter would fool the Engineers. Even in Engineer society, where social contact was more important than among Consers, the chance of meeting the same person twice was small. The chance of Parameter and Solstice meeting the real Earth-Revenger 9954f was not even worth thinking about.

The place they stayed around was the very rock she had pushed off from on the day of her capture, the rock from which Rosy-Red-Ring had left on her final day.

It was a communications center, a social hall, a gossip rendezvous; the means by

which the Engineers were able to keep their cohesiveness against the formidable

odds of empty space.

She took over the job of station manager, a largely informal, voluntary post that meant you stayed in the station and loosely coordinated the activities there. These consisted of posting in written form information that was too important to entrust to word of mouth, and generally trying to pump each incoming Engineer for that type of information. As such, it was ideally

suiting
for what she wanted to do.
There was the problem of her pregnancy. Pregnant women needed a lot of
sunshine
and rock and ice, and generally didn't take the job. She faced a lot of
questions about it, but got away with her story about just plain liking the
job
so much she didn't want to give it up.
But the problem of getting enough sunlight was real. The location of the
station
was deep enough inside the Rings by now that the incident sunlight was low.
She
should have gone above the plane to where the light wasn't scattered off so
many
rocks, but she couldn't.
She compromised by spending all her free time outside the station with
Solstice
in her extended configuration.
The prime topic of conversation was the failure of the Pop Edict, and it was
this that led her to information about Equinox.
Under the Edict, each Engineer was to undergo a sex change and spend nine
years
as a female for every year as a male. Three children were to be borne each of
those years. The figures told a different story.
It was the first resistance to an Edict; unorganized, but still disturbing.
There was much debate about it, and much solemn rededication. Everyone vowed
to
bear as many children as she could, but Parameter wondered how sincere it
was.
Her own sampling of Engineers revealed that females did outnumber males, but
only by three to one, not nine to one.
There were several causes discussed for it. One, and the most obvious, was
simple preference. Statistically, 90 percent of all people had a preferred
sex,
and of those, it was evenly divided as to which sex was the preferred one.
For
the target percentages to be in effect, 35 percent of the Engineers would
have
to be living as the sex they did not prefer. The actual figures indicated
that
not many of them were doing so. They were remaining defiantly male.
Then there was the logistical problem. To gain enough useful mass to produce
one
baby, a Symb-human pair had to ingest almost a thousand kilograms of rock and
ice. Only a tiny fraction of it was the chemicals needed to produce a baby.
Then, to convert the mass to useful form, energy was required. The pair had
to
spend long hours in the sunlight. After all that, there was little time for
painting the Ring, and that was what most Engineers saw as their prime
mission,
not becoming baby factories.
It was said that Ringpainter was in meditation, and had been for the past ten
years, trying to find a way out of the dilemma. She saw her Grand Gesture
being
slowed down to the point where it was actually in jeopardy. If, in the far
future, the Engineer birthrate didn't outstrip the Conser birthrate, it would
mean trouble. The time of the great Conser effort was yet to come. As things
now
stood, a Conser might not even see a painted rock in three or four days; they
were too far apart. But as the number of painted rocks grew, the rate of

recoloring would also grow. Then the Engineers would have to depend on the sheer rate of repainting to overpower the negative effect of the Consers. If their populations were nearly equal, it would be a stalemate, and only the Consers could win a stalemate. To accomplish the Grand Design, 90 percent of the rock in Ring Beta must be painted. To reach this figure, the Engineers must outnumber the Consers by ten to one, otherwise the number of painted rocks would stabilize below the target figure. It was a crisis of the first magnitude, though no one alive would see the outcome.

In discussing this with one of the Engineers, a woman named Glorious-Red-Ring 43f, the break came. She was one of the early followers of Ringpainter, had been in the Ring for two hundred years. She had birthed 389 children, and acknowledged it was below her quota. She was living proof that the goals of Ringpainter were unrealistic, but she had unshakable faith that it was the right policy. She blamed herself that she had not had six hundred children, and had dedicated herself to meeting her quota within the next century. To do that, she must bear five hundred children. Parameter thought she was pathetic. She was pregnant with septuplets.

"I see these young ones coming in here with twins in their wombs and wonder how they can call themselves Engineers," she complained. "Only last month I saw one with a single child on the way. One! Can you imagine? How many do you have there?"

"Three. Maybe it should have been more." Parameter tried to sound guilty about it.

"That's all right. Three is the right number. I won't ask if you had three last year.

"And the number of males I see makes me weep. I make it 7.43 to 2.57, female to male." She lapsed into a brooding silence.

"If that wasn't bad enough," Parameter prompted, "I understand the Conser birthrate has equalled ours."

"Has it?" She was concerned at this bit of news, and would have been relieved to learn it was totally spurious. Parameter used that line frequently to lead someone into a discussion of Conser women in general and one Conser in particular who had been captured around here several years ago while birthing quint.

"But it shouldn't surprise me," the Engineer said. "So many of the Consers we've taken lately have been pregnant with three, four, even five."

This was more like it. Parameter considered remarks that might draw the woman out.

"I recall, almost ten years ago... or was it five? I get confused. There was this Conser some of our people took. Five children she had just borne."

Parameter was so surprised she almost let the opportunity slip by.

"Five?" she managed to croak. It was enough.

"That's right. How long has it been since you saw one of ours give birth to five? And those anarchists don't even have a Pop Edict to tell them to do it. She was doing it for fun."

"Were you there when it happened? When they captured the woman?"

"I heard about it later. They had the pups around here for a few days. Didn't know what to do with them. No one had heard about the crèche."

"Crèche?"

"You, too. The newsmongering around here has fallen down. It should have been posted and circulated."

"I'll surely see that it's done if you'll tell me about it."

"There's a crèche for POW children about fifty thousand kilometers forward from

here. That's where we're supposed to take captured Conser children for indoctrination."

They digested that, didn't like the taste of it.

"The indoctrination's pretty successful, is it?"

"Great Red Ring, I hope so. Haven't been there myself. But we need everything we

can get these days."

"Just where is this crèche? I should post the orbital elements around here."

The triplets were a failure. During the tenth month, on the way to the crèche,

Solstice notified Parameter that it was hopeless; they hadn't gotten enough energy and raw materials during their stay at the way-station. It was no longer

possible to hold their development back, and it was too late to amass the necessary minerals to do the job.

Solstice aborted them and reabsorbed the dead bodies. With the extra energy from

the abortion, they were able to make good time to the crèche. It only took two

years.

The crèche was deserted; an empty shell. News traveled slowly in the Ring.

Inquiring around, Parameter discovered that it had not been operating for fifteen years. So her children had never arrived, though they had set out.

This was the time for despair, but they were beyond despair. Somewhere on the way to the crèche they had stopped believing it was possible to do what they were trying to do. So it wasn't a blow to find the crèche deserted. Still, it was hard to accept that their search ended here; they had been on the trail for

nine years.

But the figures were unimpeachable. The volume of Ring Beta was seventy billion

cubic kilometers, and any one of them could hide a thousand children.

They hung around the crèche for a few weeks, questioning Engineers, trying to find an angle that would enable them to defeat the statistics. Without a known

destination for their children, there was no way out; they could be anywhere, and that was so vast it didn't bear thinking about.

In the end they left, and didn't know where they were bound.

Three days later they encountered another Conser, a male, and mated with him. He

was sympathetic to their plight, but agreed with them that there was no chance

of finding their children. Solstice carefully saw to it that Parameter was not

fertilized. They had had enough of pregnancy for the next century or so.

And after they left the Conser, they found themselves falling asleep. Only they

knew it wasn't sleep.

Before she even opened her eyes, Parameter reached frantically for the top of her head.

"Solstice..."

"I'm here. Don't make any sudden moves. We've been captured. I don't know by whom, but he's armed."

She opened her eyes. She was in a conjugation sphere and the tendril from Solstice was still firmly planted in her head. There was another person with her, a small person. He waved his gun at her and she nodded.

"Don't be alarmed," he said. "If you can answer a few questions you'll probably

come out of this alive."

"You can set your mind at ease. I won't cause any trouble."

She realized he was a child, about eleven years old. But he seemed to know about

stunners.

"We've been watching you for about a week," he said. "You talked to Engineers,

so we naturally assumed you were one. But just now you spoke to a Conser, and on

the Conser frequency. I want an explanation."

"I was originally a Conser. Recently I killed an Engineer and stole her transmitter organ." She knew she couldn't think of a convincing lie quickly enough to be safe from his stunner. She wasn't sure there was a convincing lie

to cover her situation.

"Which side do you identify with now?"

"Neither side. I want to be independent if anyone will allow that."

He looked thoughtful. "That may be easier than you know. Why did you kill the Engineer?"

"I had to do it so I could move in Engineer society, so I could hunt for my children and the Symb who was taken from me several years ago. I have been--"

"What's your name?"

"Parameter, and Solstice."

"Right. I've got a message for you, Parameter. It's from your children.

They're

all right, and looking for you around here. We should be able to find them in a

few days' search."

The children recognized the awkwardness of the situation. As they joined the group conjugation, emerging from the walls of the slowly enlarging sphere, they

limited themselves to a brief kiss, then withdrew into a tangle of small bodies.

Parameter and Solstice were so jittery they could hardly think. The five children they could get to know, but Equinox? What about her?

They got the distinct feeling that the children recognized Parameter, then realized it was possible. Equinox had been talking to them while still in the womb, urging their minds to develop with pictures and sounds. Some of the pictures would have been of Parameter.

Ring children are not like other human children. They are born already knowing

most of what they need to survive in the Rings. Then they are able to join with

an infant Symb and help guide its development into an adult in a few weeks. From

there, the Symb takes over for three years, teaching them and leading them to the places they need to go to grow up strong and healthy. For all practical purposes they are mature at three years. They must be; they cannot count on being with their mother more than the few weeks it takes them to acquire an adult Symb. From that time, they are on their own. Infant physical shortcomings

are made up by the guidance and control of the Symb.
Parameter looked at these strange children, these youngsters whose backyard was billions of cubic kilometers wide and whose toys were stars and comets. What did she know of them? They might as well be another species. But that shouldn't matter; so was Solstice. Solstice was almost hysterical. She was gripped in fear that in some way she couldn't understand she was going to lose Parameter. She was in danger of losing her mind. One part of her loved Equinox as hopelessly as Parameter did; another part knew there was room for only one Symb for any one human. What if it came to a choice? How would they face it?
"Equinox?"
There was a soundless scream from Solstice. "Equinox?"
?????

"Is that you, Equinox?"
The answer was very faint, very far away. They could not hear it.
"It's me. Parameter."
"And Solstice. You don't know me—"
I know you. You are me. I used to be you. I remember both of you. Interesting. But the voice didn't sound interested. It was cool.
"I don't understand." No one was sure who said it.
But you do. I am gone. There is a new me. There is a new you. It is over.
"We love you."
Yes. Of course you do. But there is no me left to love.
"We're confused."
You will get over it.
The children floated together: quietly, respectfully; waiting for their mother to come to grips with her new reality. At last she stirred.
"Maybe we'll understand it some day," Parameter said.
One of the girls spoke.
"Equinox is no more, Mother," she said. "And yet she's still with us. She made a choice when she knew we were going to be captured. She reabsorbed her children and fissioned into five parts. None of us got all of her, but we all got enough."
Parameter shook her head and tried to make sense out of it. The child who had brought her here had not been willing to tell her anything, preferring to wait until her children could be with her.
"I don't understand how you came to find me."
"All it took was patience. We never reached the crèche; we were liberated on the way here by Alphans. They killed all the Engineers who were guarding us and adopted us themselves."
"What's an Alphan?"
"Alphans are the Ringers who live in Ring Alpha, who are neither Conser nor Engineer. They are renegades from both sides who have opted out of the conflict. They took care of us, and helped us when we said we wanted to find you. We knew where we had been going, and knew it was only a matter of time until you showed up here, if you were still alive. So we waited. And you got here in only nine

years. You're very resourceful."

"Perhaps." She was looking at her children's legs. They were oddly deformed. And

what were those blunt instruments at the ends of them? How odd.

"Feet, Mother," the child said. "There are surgeons in Alpha, but we could never

afford to go there until we had found you. Now we'll go. We hope you'll go with

us."

"Huh? Ah, I guess I should. That's across the Cassini Division, isn't it? And there's no war there? No killing?"

"That's right. We don't care if they paint Ring Beta with stripes and polka dots. They're freaks: Conser and Engineers. We are the true Ringers."

"Solstice?"

"Why not?"

"We'll go with you. Say, what are your names?"

"Army," said one of the girls.

"Navy," said another.

"Marine."

"Airforce."

"And Elephant," said the boy.