

SCHISMATRIX

PLUS

BRUCE STERLING



Schismatrix Plus

Bruce Sterling



Introduction: The Circumsolar Frolics

I wrote this book, and these stories, eleven years ago. I finished the manuscript of SCHISMATRIX just before I turned thirty. Then I quit my day-job.

When I completed the Shaper/Mechanist series, I knew that I finally had a hot and sticky ten-fingered grip on the genre. I'd learned how to make science fiction address my own concerns, express my own ideas, and speak in my own voice. It was a hugely exciting feeling. I've never gotten over it. Also, I've never had a real job since.

This is the first book that I wrote on a word processor. My first two novels were written on manual typewriters. They were the best books I could do at the time, and they had quite a lot of rebellious kicking and thrashing in them, but they couldn't be classed with SCHISMATRIX.

It was a revelation when I first saw my text become electric vapor on the screen of a computer. I realized that I'd become part of a new generation in science fiction, a generation that had profound and genuine, "technical" advantages over all our predecessors. This freed me almost overnight from an old sense that I still dwelt in the long shadows of Verne, Wells, or Stapledon. Those writers were titans of the imagination, but they were one and all confined to analog technologies of ink and woodpulp. Now I could do what I liked with words—bend them, break them, jam them together, pick them apart again. It was like patiently studying blues guitar and suddenly finding a fire-engine-red Fender Stratocaster.

When I began work on the Shaper/Mechanist pieces, I had learned how to stop reading quite a bit of science fiction. By that time, I was already brimful. Instead, I learned to absorb the kind of material that science fiction professionals themselves like to read. Three books in particular had a huge influence on my thinking, and on the composition of the Shaper/Mechanist world.

First among them was THE WORLD, THE FLESH, AND THE DEVIL by J. D. Bernal. This book was written in the 1920s, and would be universally acknowledged as a stellar masterpiece of cosmic speculation, except for the uncomfortable fact that J. D. Bernal was a lifelong fervent Communist. His work simply couldn't be metabolized during most of the twentieth century, because the author himself was politically unacceptable. I never had much use for Communism, but I had plenty of use for J. D. Bernal.

The second book was Freeman Dyson's DISTURBING THE UNIVERSE. Freeman Dyson could have been a mighty figure in the genre if he'd become a science fiction writer instead of a mere world-class physicist at Princeton. I was lucky enough to have lunch with Freeman Dyson a couple of years ago. I was able to thank him for the fact that I had filed the serial numbers off his prose, hot-wired it, and employed it in my work. Professor Dyson had never read SCHISMATRIX, but he was astonishingly good-humored about the fact that I had boldly hijacked thirty or forty of his ideas. What a gentleman and scholar!

The third book was Ilya Prigogine's FROM BEING TO BECOMING. This book boasted some of the most awesomely beautiful scientific jargon that I had ever witnessed in print. The writing was so dense, otherworldly majesty that it resembled Scripture. It was very like the "crammed Prose"

and “eyeball kicks” that we cyberpunks were so enamored of, with the exception of course that Prigogine’s work was actual science and bore some coherent relation to consensus reality. So naturally I used his terminology as the basis for the Shaper/Mechanist mysticism. It worked like a charm. Eventually a fan of mine who happened to be one of Professor Prigogine’s students gave him a copy of CRYSTAL EXPRESS, which contained the Shaper/Mechanist short stories. Professor Prigogine remarked perceptively that these stories had nothing whatever to do with his Nobel Prizewinning breakthroughs in physical chemistry. Well, that was very true, but charms are verbal structures. The work regardless of chemistry or physics.

I wrote the stories before the novel. I used the Shaper/Mechanist short stories as a method of exploration, a way to creep methodically into the burgeoning world of the book. First came “Swarm,” which involves two characters only, and is set light-years away from the eventual center of the action. Next I wrote “Spider Rose,” set on the fringes of the solar system, and the fringes of Schismatrix society. After that came “Cicada Queen,” which thundered headlong into a major Shaper/Mechanist city and examined their society as it boiled like a technocrazed anthill. “Sunken Gardens” was set late in my future-history, a framing work. The experimental “Twenty Evocations” was my final word on the subject. It was a dry-run for the forthcoming novel, and with that effort, I was carrying my “crammed-prose” technique as far as it would go.

These were my first published short stories. I had one other story, “Man-Made Self,” published when I was a teenager; but alas, the manuscript pages were scrambled at the printer’s, and the published story was rendered unintelligible. I had to disown it. That made “Swarm” my official story premiere. “Swarm” was also my first magazine sale (to THE MAGAZINE OF FANTASY AND SCIENCE FICTION, in April 1982). “Swarm” is still the story of mine most often reprinted. I’m still fond of it: I can write a better prose now, but with that story, I finally gnawed my way through the insulation and got my teeth set into the buzzing copper wire.

SCHISMATRIX was my third novel, but the first to go into an immediate second-printing—in Japan. I’ve valued the Japanese SF milieu very highly ever since. Recently SCHISMATRIX became my first novel to come out in Finland. Perhaps there’s a quality in a good translation that can’t be captured with the original. One might not think that a book this weird and idiosyncratic could survive translation into non-Indo-European languages; but on the contrary, it’s that very weirdness that seems to push it through the verbal and cultural barriers. SCHISMATRIX is a creeping sea-urchin of a book—spikey and odd. It isn’t very elegant, and it lacks bilateral symmetry, but pieces of it break off inside people and stick with them for years.

These stories, and this novel, are the most “cyberpunk” works I will ever write. I wrote them in a fine fury of inspiration, in those halcyon days when me and my ratty little cyberpunk co-conspirators first saw our way clear into literary daylight. I think I could write another book as surprising as this one, or even as weird as this one; but it would no longer surprise people that I can be surprising. My audience would no longer find it weird to discover that I can be weird. When I wrote this book, I was surprising myself every day.

In those days of yore, cyberpunk wasn’t hype or genre history; it had no name at all. It hadn’t yet begun to be metabolized by anyone outside a small literary circle. But it was very real to me, as real as anything in my life, and when I was hip-deep into SCHISMATRIX chopping my way through circumsolar superpower conflicts and grimy, micro-nation terrorist space pirates, it felt like holy fire.

Now all the Shaper/Mechanist stuff is finally here in one set of covers. At last I can formally tell the skeptical public that the title of SCHISMATRIX is pronounced “Skiz-mat-rix.” With a short a. Like “Schismatics,” but with an R. Also, SCHISMATRIX is spelled without a “Z.” I do hope this helps.

future.

~~People are always asking me about—demanding from me even—more Shaper/Mechanist work. Sequels. A trilogy maybe. The Schismatrix sharecropping shared-universe “as created by” Bruce Sterling. But I don’t do that sort of thing. I never will. This is all there was, and all there is.~~

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Prologue

Painted aircraft flew through the core of the world. Lindsay stood in knee-high grass, staring upward to follow their flight.

Flimsy as kites, the pedal-driven ultralights dipped and soared through the free-fall zone, far overhead. Beyond them, across the diameter of the cylindrical world, the curving landscape glowed with the yellow of wheat and the speckled green of cotton fields.

Lindsay shaded his eyes against the sunlit glare from one of the world's long windows. An aircraft with its wings elegantly stenciled in blue feathers on white fabric, crossed the bar of light and swooped silently above him. He saw the pilot's long hair trailing as she pedaled back into a climb. Lindsay knew she had seen him. He wanted to shout, to wave frantically, but he was watched.

His jailers caught up with him: his wife and his uncle. The two old aristocrats walked with painful slowness. His uncle's face was flushed; he had turned up his heart's pacemaker. "You ran," he said. "You ran!"

"I stretched my legs," Lindsay said with bland defiance. "House arrest cramps me."

His uncle peered upward to follow Lindsay's gaze, shading his eyes with an age-spotted hand. The bird-painted aircraft now hovered over the Sours, a marshy spot in the agricultural panel where rot had set into the soil. "You're watching the Sours, eh? Where your friend Constantine's at work. They say he signals you from there."

"Philip works with insects, Uncle. Not cryptography."

Lindsay was lying. He depended on Constantine's covert signals for news during his house arrest.

He and Constantine were political allies. When the crackdown came, Lindsay had been quarantined within the grounds of his family's mansion. But Philip Constantine had irreplaceable ecological skills. He was still free, working in the Sours.

The long internment had pushed Lindsay to desperation. He was at his best among people, where his adroit diplomatic skills could shine. In isolation, he had lost weight: his high cheekbones stood out in sharp relief and his gray eyes had a sullen, vindictive glow. His sudden run had tousled his modish, curled black hair. He was tall and rangy, with the long chin and arched, expressive eyebrows of the Lindsay clan.

Lindsay's wife, Alexandrina, took his arm. She was dressed fashionably, in a long pleated skirt and a white medical tunic. Her pale, clear complexion showed health without vitality, as if her skin were a perfectly printed paper replica. Mummified kiss-curls adorned her forehead.

"You said you wouldn't talk politics, James," she told the older man. She looked up at Lindsay. "You're pale, Abelard. He's upset you."

"Am I pale?" Lindsay said. He drew on his Shaper diplomatic training. Color seeped into his cheeks. He widened the dilation of his pupils and smiled with a gleam of teeth. His uncle stepped back, scowling.

Alexandrina leaned on Lindsay's arm. "I wish you wouldn't do that," she told him. "It frightens

me.” She was fifty years older than Lindsay and her knees had just been replaced. Her Mechanist teflon kneecaps still bothered her.

Lindsay shifted his bound volume of printout to his left hand. During his house arrest, he had translated the works of Shakespeare into modern circumsolar English. The elders of the Lindsay clan had encouraged him in this. His antiquarian hobbies, they thought, would distract him from plotting against the state.

To reward him, they were allowing him to present the work to the Museum. He had seized on the chance to briefly escape his house arrest.

The Museum was a hotbed of subversion. It was full of his friends. Preservationists, they called themselves. A reactionary youth movement, with a romantic attachment to the art and culture of the past. They had made the Museum their political stronghold.

Their world was the Mare Serenitatis Circumlunar Corporate Republic, a two-hundred-year-old artificial habitat orbiting the Earth’s Moon. As one of the oldest of humankind’s nation-states in space, it was a place of tradition, with the long habits of a settled culture.

But change had burst in, spreading from newer, stronger worlds in the Asteroid Belt and the Ring of Saturn. The Mechanist and Shaper superpowers had exported their war into this quiet city-state. The strain had split the population into factions: Lindsay’s Preservationists against the power of the Radical Old, rebellious plebes against the wealthy aristocracy.

Mechanist sympathizers held the edge in the Republic.

The Radical Old held power from within their governing hospitals. These ancient aristocrats, each well over a century old, were patched together with advanced Mechanist hardware, their lives extended with imported prosthetic technology. But the medical expenses were bankrupting the Republic. Their world was already deep in debt to the medical Mech cartels. The Republic would soon be a Mechanist client state.

But the Shapers used their own arsenals of temptation. Years earlier, they had trained and indoctrinated Lindsay and Constantine. Through these two friends, the leaders of their generation, the Shapers exploited the fury of the young, who saw their birthrights stolen for the profit of the Mechanists.

Tension had mounted within the Republic until a single gesture could set it off.

Life was the issue. And death would be the proof.

Lindsay’s uncle was winded. He touched his wrist monitor and turned down the beating of his heart. “No more stunts,” he said. “They’re waiting in the Museum.” He frowned. “Remember, no speeches. Use the prepared statement.”

Lindsay stared upward. The bird-painted ultralight went into a power dive.

“No!” Lindsay shouted. He threw his book aside and ran.

The ultralight smashed down in the grass outside the ringed stone seats of an open-air amphitheater. The aircraft lay crushed, its wings warped in a dainty convulsion of impact. “Vera!” Lindsay shouted.

He tugged her body from the flimsy wreckage. She was still breathing; blood gushed from her mouth and nostrils. Her ribs were broken. She was choking. He tore at the ring-shaped collar of his Preservationist suit. The wire of the collar cut his hands. The suit imitated space-suit design; its accordioned elbows were crushed and stained.

Little white moths were flying up from the long grass. They milled about as if drawn by the blood.

Lindsay brushed a moth from her face and pressed his lips to hers. The pulse stopped in her throat. She was dead.

“Vera,” he groaned. “Sweetheart, you’re burned....”

~~A wave of grief and exultation hit him. He fell into the sun-warmed grass, holding his sides. Moths sprang up.~~

She had done it. It seemed easy now. It was something the two of them had talked about a hundred times, deep into the night at the Museum or in bed after their adultery. Suicide, the last protest. An enormous vista of black freedom opened up in Lindsay’s head. He felt a paradoxical sense of vitality. “Darling, it won’t be long....”

His uncle found him kneeling. The older man’s face was gray.

“Oh,” he said. “This is vile. What have you done?”

Lindsay got dizzily to his feet. “Get away from her.”

His uncle stared at the dead woman. “She’s dead! You damned fool, she was only twenty-six!”

Lindsay yanked a long dagger of crudely hammered metal from his accorded sleeve. He swept up and aimed it at his own chest. “In the name of humanity! And the preservation of human values! We must freely choose to—”

His uncle seized his wrist. They struggled briefly, glaring into one another’s eyes, and Lindsay dropped the knife. His uncle snatched it out of the grass and slipped it into his lab coat. “This is illegal,” he said. “You’ll face weapons charges.”

Lindsay laughed shakily. “I’m your prisoner, but you can’t stop me if I choose to die. Now or later, what does it matter?”

“You’re a fanatic.” His uncle watched him with bitter contempt. “The Shaper schooling holds to the end, doesn’t it? Your training cost the Republic a fortune, and you use it to seduce and murder.”

“She died clean! Better to burn in a rush than live two hundred years as a Mechanist wirehead.”

The elder Lindsay stared at the horde of white moths that swarmed on the dead woman’s clothing. “We’ll nail you for this somehow. You and that upstart plebe Constantine.”

Lindsay was incredulous. “You stupid Mech bastard! Look at her! Can’t you see that you’ve killed us already? She was the best of us! She was our muse.”

His uncle frowned. “Where did all these insects come from?” He bent and brushed the moths aside with wrinkled hands.

Lindsay reached forward suddenly and snatched a filigreed gold locket from the woman’s neck. His uncle grabbed his sleeve.

“It’s mine!” Lindsay shouted. They began to fight in earnest. His uncle broke Lindsay’s clumsy stranglehold and kicked Lindsay twice in the stomach. Lindsay fell to his knees.

His uncle picked up the locket, wheezing. “You assaulted me,” he said, scandalized. “You use violence against a fellow citizen.” He opened the locket. A thick oil ran out onto his fingers.

“No message?” he said in surprise. He sniffed at his fingers. “Perfume?”

Lindsay knelt, panting in nausea. His uncle screamed.

White moths were darting at the man, clinging to the oily skin of his hands. There were dozens of them.

They were attacking him. He screamed again and batted at his face.

Lindsay rolled over twice, away from his uncle. He knelt in the grass, shaking. His uncle was down convulsing like an epileptic. Lindsay scrambled backward on his hands and knees.

The old man’s wrist monitor glared red. He stopped moving. The white moths crawled over his body for a few moments, then flew off one by one, vanishing into the grass.

Lindsay lurched to his feet. He looked behind him, across the meadow. His wife was walking toward them, slowly, through the grass.

Part 1

Sundog Zones

Chapter 1

THE MARE TRANQUILLITATIS PEOPLE'S CIRCUMLUNAR ZRIBATSU: 27-12-'15

They shipped Lindsay into exile in the cheapest kind of Mechanist drogue. For two days he was blind and deaf, stunned with drugs, his body packed in a thick matrix of deceleration paste.

Launched from the Republic's cargo arm, the drogue had drifted with cybernetic precision into the polar orbit of another circumlunar. There were ten of these worlds, named for the lunar mares and craters that had provided their raw materials. They'd been the first nation-states to break off relations with the exhausted Earth. For a century their lunar alliance had been the nexus of a civilization, and commercial traffic among these "Concatenate worlds" had been heavy.

But since those glory days, progress in deeper space had eclipsed the Concatenation, and the lunar neighborhood had become a backwater. Their alliance had collapsed, giving way to peevish seclusion and technical decline. The circumlunars had fallen from grace, and none had fallen further than the place of Lindsay's exile.

Cameras watched his arrival. Ejected from the drogue's docking port, he floated naked in the free-fall customs chamber of the Mare Tranquillitatis People's Circumlunar Zaibatsu. The chamber was of dull lunar steel, with strips of ragged epoxy where paneling had been ripped free. The room had once been a honeymoon suite, where newlyweds could frolic in free-fall. Now it was bleakly transformed into a bureaucratic clearing area.

Lindsay was still drugged from the trip. A drip-feed cable was plugged into the crook of his right arm, reviving him. Black adhesive disks, biomonitors, dotted his naked skin. He shared the room with a camera drone. The free-fall videosystem had two pairs of piston-driven cybernetic arms.

Lindsay's gray eyes opened blearily. His handsome face, with its clear pale skin and arched, elegant brows, had the slack look of stupor. His dark, crimped hair fell to high cheekbones with traces of three-day-old rouge.

His arms trembled as the stimulants took hold. Then, abruptly, he was back to himself. His training swept over him in a physical wave, flooding him so suddenly that his teeth clacked together in a spasm. His eyes swept the room, glittering with unnatural alertness. The muscles of his face moved in a way that no human face should move, and suddenly he was smiling. He examined himself and smiled into the camera with an easy, tolerant urbanity.

The air itself seemed to warm with the sudden radiance of his good-fellowship.

The cable in his arm disengaged itself and snaked back into the wall. The camera spoke.

"You are Abelard Malcolm Tyler Lindsay? From the Mare Serenitatis Circumlunar Corporation Republic? You are seeking political asylum? You have no biologically active materials in your baggage or implanted on your person? You are not carrying explosives or software attack systems? Your intestinal flora has been sterilized and replaced with Zaibatsu standard microbes?"

"Yes, that's correct," Lindsay said, in the camera's own Japanese. "I have no baggage." He wa

comfortable with the modern form of the language: a streamlined trade patois, stripped of its honorific tenses. Facility with languages had been part of his training.

“You will soon be released into an area that has been ideologically decriminalized,” the camera said. “Before you leave customs, there are certain limits to your activities that must be understood. Are you familiar with the concept of civil rights?”

Lindsay was cautious. “In what context?”

“The Zaibatsu recognizes one civil right: the right to death. You may claim your right at any time under any circumstances. All you need do is request it. Our audio monitors are spread throughout the Zaibatsu. If you claim your right, you will be immediately and painlessly terminated. Do you understand?”

“I understand,” Lindsay said.

“Termination is also enforced for certain other behaviors,” the camera said. “If you physically threaten the habitat, you will be killed. If you interfere with our monitoring devices, you will be killed. If you cross the sterilized zone, you will be killed. You will also be killed for crimes against humanity.”

“Crimes against humanity?” Lindsay said. “How are those defined?”

“These are biological and prosthetic efforts that we declare to be aberrant. The technical information concerning the limits of our tolerance must remain classified.”

“I see,” Lindsay said. This was, he realized, *carte blanche* to kill him at any time, for almost any reason. He had expected as much. This world was a haven for sundogs: defectors, traitors, exiles, outlaws. Lindsay doubted that a world full of sundogs could be run any other way. There were simply too many strange technologies at large in circumsolar space. Hundreds of apparently innocent actions, even the breeding of butterflies, could be potentially lethal.

We are all criminals, he thought.

“Do you wish to claim your civil right?”

“No, thank you,” Lindsay said politely. “But it’s a great solace to know that the Zaibatsu government grants me this courtesy. I will remember your kindness.”

“You need only call out,” the camera said, with satisfaction.

The interview was over. Wobbling in free-fall, Lindsay stripped away the biomonitors. The camera handed him a credit card and a pair of standard-issue Zaibatsu coveralls.

Lindsay climbed into the baggy clothing. He’d come into exile alone. Constantine, too, had been indicted, but Constantine, as usual, had been too clever.

Constantine had been his closest friend for fifteen years. Lindsay’s family had disapproved of his friendship with a plebe, but Lindsay had defied them.

In those days the elders had hoped to walk the fence between the competing superpowers. They had been inclined to trust the Shapers and had sent Lindsay to the Ring Council for diplomatic training. Two years later, they’d sent Constantine as well, for training in biotechnology.

But the Mechanists had overwhelmed the Republic, and Lindsay and Constantine were disgraced, embarrassing reminders of a failure in foreign policy. But this only united them, and their dual influence had spread contagiously among the plebes and the younger aristos. In combination they had been formidable: Constantine, with his subtle long-term plans and iron determination; Lindsay as the front man, with his persuasive glibness and theatrical elegance.

But then Vera Kelland had come between them. Vera: artist, actress, and aristocrat, the first Preservationist martyr. Vera believed in their cause; she was their muse, holding to the conviction with an earnestness they couldn’t match. She too was married, to a man sixty years her senior, but

adultery only added spice to the long seduction. At last Lindsay had won her. But with the possession of Vera came her deadly resolve.

The three of them knew that an act of suicide would change the Republic when all else was hopeless. They came to terms. Philip would survive to carry on the work; that was his consolation for losing Vera and for the loneliness that was to come. And the three of them had worked toward death in feverish intimacy, until her death had truly come, and made their sleek ideals into a sticky nastiness.

The camera opened the customs hatch with a creak of badly greased hydraulics. Lindsay shook himself free of the past. He floated down a stripped hallway toward the feeble glow of daylight.

He emerged onto a landing pad for aircraft, cluttered with dirty machines.

The landing pad was centered at the free-fall zone of the colony's central axis. From this position Lindsay could stare along the length of the Zaibatsu, through five long kilometers of gloomy, stinking air.

The sight and shape of the clouds struck him first. They were malformed and bloated, with an ugly yellowish tinge. They rippled and distorted in fetid updrafts from the Zaibatsu's land panels.

The smell was vile. Each of the ten circumlunar worlds of the Concatenation had its own native smell. Lindsay remembered that his own Republic had seemed to reek when he first returned to it from the Shaper academy. But here the air seemed foul enough to kill. His nose began to run.

Every Concatenate world faced biological problems as the habitat aged.

Fertile soil required a minimum of ten million bacterial cells per cubic centimeter. This invisible swarm formed the basis of everything fruitful. Humanity had carried it into space.

But humanity and its symbionts had thrown aside the blanket of atmosphere. Radiation levels soared. The circumlunar worlds had shields of imported lunar rubble whole meters deep, but they could not escape the bursts of solar flares and the random shots of cosmic radiation.

Without bacteria, the soil was a lifeless heap of imported lunar dust. With them, it was a constant mutational hazard.

The Republic struggled to control its Sours. In the Zaibatsu, the souring had become epidemic. Mutant fungi had spread like oil slicks, forming a mycelial crust beneath the surface of the soil. The gummy crust repelled water, choking trees and grass. Dead vegetation was attacked by rot. The soil grew dry, the air grew damp, and mildew blossomed on dying fields and orchards, gray pinheads swarming into blotches of corruption, furred like lichen....

When matters reached this stage, only desperate efforts could restore the world. It would have to be evacuated, all its air decompressed into space, and the entire inner surface charred clean in vacuum, then reseeded from scratch. The expense was crippling. Colonies faced with this had suffered breakaways and mass defections, in which thousands fled to frontiers of deeper space. With the passage of time, these refugees had formed their own societies. They joined the Mechanist cartels in the Asteroid Belt, or the Shaper Ring Council, orbiting Saturn.

In the case of the People's Zaibatsu, most of the population had gone, but a stubborn minority refused defeat.

Lindsay understood. There was a grandeur in this morose and rotting desolation.

Slow whirlwinds tore at the gummy soil, spilling long tendrils of rotten grit into the twilight air. The glass sunlight panels were coated with filth, a gluey amalgam of dust and mildew. The long panels had been blown out in places; they were shored up with strut-braced makeshift plugs.

It was cold. With the glass so filthy, so cracked, with daylight reduced to a smeared twilight, they would have to run the place around the clock simply to keep it from freezing. Night was too dangerous; it couldn't be risked. Night was not allowed.

Lindsay scabbled weightlessly along the landing deck. The aircraft were moored to the scratched metal with suction cups. There were a dozen manpowered models, in bad repair, and a few battered electrics.

He checked the struts of an ancient electric whose fabric wings were stenciled with a Japanese calligraphic design. Mud-smearred skids equipped it for gravity landings. Lindsay floated into the skeletal saddle, fitting his cloth-and-plastic shoes into the stirrups.

He pulled his credit card from one of the coverall's chest pockets. The gold-trimmed black plastic had a red LED readout displaying credit hours. He fed it into a slot and the tiny engine hummed in life.

He cast off and caught a downdraft until he felt the tug of gravity. He oriented himself with the ground below.

To his left, the sunlight panel had been cleaned in patches. A cadre of lumpy robots were scraping and mopping the fretted glass. Lindsay nosed the ultralight down for a closer look. The robots were bipedal; they were crudely designed. Lindsay realized suddenly that they were human beings in suits and gas masks.

Columns of sunlight from the clean glass pierced the murk like searchlights. He flew into one, twisted, and rode its updraft.

The light fell upon the opposite land panel. Near its center a cluster of storage tanks dotted the landscape. The tanks brimmed with oozing green brew: algae. The last agriculture left in the Zaibatsu was an oxygen farm.

He swooped lower over the tanks. Gratefully, he breathed the enriched air. His aircraft's shadow flitted over a jungle of refinery pipes.

As he looked down, he saw a second shadow behind him. Lindsay wheeled abruptly to his right.

The shadow followed his movement with cybernetic precision. Lindsay pulled his craft into a steep climb and twisted in the seat to look behind him.

When he finally spotted his pursuer, he was shocked to see it so close. Its splattered camouflage of dun and gray hid it perfectly against the interior sky of ruined land panels. It was a surveillance craft, a remotely controlled flying drone. It had flat, square wings and a noiseless rear propeller in a camouflaged exhaust cowling.

A knobbed array of cylinders jutted from the robot aircraft's torso. The two tubes that pointed toward him might be telephoto cameras. Or they might be x-ray lasers. Set to the right frequency, an x-ray laser could char the interior of a human body without leaving a mark on the skin. And x-ray beams were invisible.

The thought filled him with fear and profound disgust. Worlds were frail places, holding precious air and warmth against the hostile nothingness of space. The safety of worlds was the universal basis of morality. Weapons were dangerous, and that made them vile. In this sundog world, only weapons could keep order, but he still felt a deep, instinctive outrage.

Lindsay flew into a yellowish fog that roiled and bubbled near the Zaibatsu's axis. When he emerged, the aircraft had vanished.

He would never know when they were watching. At any moment, unseen fingers might close the switch, and he would fall.

The violence of his feelings surprised him. His training had seeped away. There flashed behind his eyes the uncontrollable image of Vera Kelland, plunging downward, smashing to earth, her craft's bright wings crumpling on impact....

He turned south. Beyond the ruined panels he saw a broad ring of pure white, girdling the world.

abutted the Zaibatsu's southern wall.

He glanced behind him. The northern wall was concave, crowded with abandoned factories and warehouses. The bare southern wall was sheer and vertical. It seemed to be made of bricks.

The ground below it was a wide ring of blazingly clean, raked white rocks. Here and there among the sea of pebbles, enigmatically shaped boulders rose like dark islands.

Lindsay swooped down for a closer look. A squat guardline of black weapons bunkers swiveled visibly, tracking him with delicate bluish muzzles. He was over the Sterilized Zone.

He climbed upward rapidly.

A hole loomed in the center of the southern wall. Surveillance craft swarmed like hornets in and around it. Microwave antennae bristled around its edges, trailing armored cables.

He could not see through the hole. There was half a world beyond that wall, but sundogs were not allowed to glimpse it.

Lindsay glided downward. The ultralight's wire struts sang with tension.

To the north, on the second of the Zaibatsu's three land panels, he saw the work of sundogs. Refugees had stripped and demolished wide swaths of the industrial sector and erected crude airtight domes from the scrap.

The domes ranged from small bubbles of inflated plastic, through multicolored caulked geodesics to one enormous isolated hemisphere.

Lindsay circled the largest dome closely. Black insulation foam covered its surface. Mottled lunstone armored its lower rim. Unlike most of the other domes, it had no antennae or aerials.

He recognized it. He'd known it would be here.

Lindsay was afraid. He closed his eyes and called on his Shaper training, the ingrained strength of ten years of psychotechnic discipline.

He felt his mind slide subtly into its second mode of consciousness. His posture altered, his movements were smoother, his heart beat faster. Confidence seeped into him, and he smiled. His mind felt sharper, cleaner, cleansed of inhibitions, ready to twist and manipulate. His fear and his guilt faltered and warped away, a tangle of irrelevance.

As always, in this second state, he felt contempt for his former weakness. *This* was his true self: pragmatic, fast-moving, free of emotional freight.

This was no time for half measures. He had his plans. If he was to survive here, he would have to take the situation by the throat.

Lindsay spotted the building's airlock. He brought the ultralight in for a skidding landing. He unplugged his credit card and stepped off. The aircraft sprang into the muddy sky.

Lindsay followed a set of stepping-stones into a recessed alcove in the dome's wall. Inside the recess, an overhead panel flicked into brilliant light. To his left, in the alcove's wall, a camera lens flanked an armored videoscreen. Below the screen, light gleamed from a credit-card slot and the steel rectangle of a sliding vault.

A much larger sliding door, in the interior wall, guarded the airlock. A thick layer of undisturbed grit filled the airlock's groove. The Nephrite Black Medicals were not partial to visitors.

Lindsay waited patiently, rehearsing lies.

Ten minutes passed. Lindsay tried to keep his nose from running. Suddenly the videoscreen flashed into life. A woman's face appeared.

"Put your credit card in the slot," she said in Japanese.

Lindsay watched her, weighing her kinesics. She was a lean, dark-eyed woman of indeterminate age, with close-cropped brown hair. Her eyes looked dilated. She wore a white medical tunic with

metal insignia in its collar: a golden staff with two entwined snakes. The snakes were black enamel with jeweled red eyes. Their open jaws showed hypodermic fangs.

Lindsay smiled. "I haven't come to buy anything," he said.

"You're buying my attention, aren't you? Put in the card."

"I didn't ask you to appear on this screen," Lindsay said in English. "You're free to sign off at any time."

The woman stared at him in annoyance. "Of course I'm free," she said in English. "I'm free to have you hauled in here and chopped to pieces. Do you know where you are? This isn't some cheap sundae operation. We're the Nephrite Black Medicals."

In the Republic, they were unknown. But Lindsay knew of them from his days in the Ring Council: criminal biochemists on the fringes of the Shaper underworld. Reclusive, tough, and vicious. He knew that they had strongholds: black laboratories scattered through the System. And this was one of them.

He smiled coaxingly. "I would like to come in, you know. Only not in pieces."

"You must be joking," the woman said. "You're not worth the credit it would cost us to disinfect you."

Lindsay raised his brows. "I have the standard microbes."

"This is a sterile environment. The Nephrites live clean."

"So you can't come in and out freely?" said Lindsay, pretending surprise at the news. "You're trapped in there?"

"This is where we *live*," the woman said. "You're trapped *outside*."

"That's a shame," Lindsay said. "I wanted to do some recruiting here. I was trying to be fair." He shrugged. "I've enjoyed our talk, but time presses. I'll be on my way."

"Stop," the woman said. "You don't go until I say you can go."

Lindsay feigned alarm. "Listen," he said. "No one doubts your reputation. But you're trapped there. You're of no use to me." He ran his long fingers through his hair. "There's no point in this."

"What are you implying? Who are you, anyway?"

"Lindsay."

"Lin Dze? You're not of oriental stock."

Lindsay looked into the lens of the camera and locked eyes with her. The impression was hard to simulate through video, but its unexpectedness made it very effective on a subconscious level. "And what's *your* name?"

"Cory Prager," she blurted. "*Doctor Prager*."

"Cory, I represent Kabuki Intrasolar. We're a commercial theatrical venture." Lindsay lied enthusiastically. "I'm arranging a production and I'm recruiting a cast. We pay generously. But, as you say, since you can't come out, frankly, you're wasting my time. You can't even attend the performance." He sighed. "Obviously this isn't my fault. I'm not responsible."

The woman laughed unpleasantly. Lindsay had grasped her kinesics, though, and her uneasiness was obvious to him. "You think we care what they do on the outside? We have a seller's market cornered here. All we care about is their credit. The rest is of no consequence."

"I'm glad to hear you say that. I wish other groups shared your attitude. I'm an artist, not a politician. I wish I could avoid the complications as easily as you do." He spread his hands. "Since we understand each other now, I'll be on my way."

"Wait. What complications?"

"It's not my doing," Lindsay hedged. "It's the other factions. I haven't even finished assembling the

cast, and already they're plotting together. The play gives them a chance to negotiate."

"We can send out our monitors. We can watch your production."

"Oh, I'm sorry," Lindsay said stiffly. "We don't allow our plays to be taped or broadcast. It would spoil our attendance." He was rueful. "I can't risk disappointing my cast. Anyone can be an actor these days. Memory drugs make it easy."

"We sell memory drugs," she said. "Vasopressins, carbolines, endorphins. Stimulants, tranquilizers. Laughers, screamers, shouters, you name it. If there's a market for it, the Nephrine black chemists can make it. If we can't synthesize it, we'll filter it from tissue. Anything you want. Anything you can think of." She lowered her voice. "We're friends with Them, you know. The ones beyond the Wall. They think the world of us."

Lindsay rolled his eyes. "Of course."

She looked offscreen; he heard the rapid tapping of a keyboard. She looked up. "You've been talking to the whores, haven't you? The Geisha Bank."

Lindsay looked cautious. The Geisha Bank was new to him. "It might be best if I kept my dealings confidential."

"You're a fool to believe their promises."

Lindsay smiled uneasily. "What choice do I have? There's a natural alliance between actors and whores."

"They must have warned you against us." The woman put a pair of headphones against her left ear and listened distractedly.

"I told you I was trying to be fair," Lindsay said. The screen went silent suddenly and the woman spoke rapidly into a pinhead microphone. Her face flashed offscreen and was replaced by the wrinkled, etched face of an older man. Lindsay had a brief glimpse of the man's true appearance—white hair in a spiky disarray, red-rimmed eyes—before a video-manicuring program came on line. The program raced up the screen one scan line at a time, subtly smoothing, deleting, and coloring.

"Look, this is useless," Lindsay blustered. "Don't try to talk me into something I'll regret. I have a show to put on. I don't have time for this—"

"Shut up, you," the man said. The steel vault door slid open, revealing a folded packet of transparent vinyl. "Put it on," the man said. "You're coming inside."

Lindsay unfolded the bundle and shook it out. It was a full-length decontamination suit. "Go on, hurry it up," the Black Medical insisted. "You may be under surveillance."

"I hadn't realized," Lindsay said. He struggled into the booted trousers. "This is quite an honor." He tunneled into the gloved and helmeted top half of the suit and sealed the waist.

The airlock door shunted open with a scrape of grit. "Get in," the man said. Lindsay stepped inside and the door slid shut behind him.

Wind stirred the dust. A light, filthy rain began to fall. A skeletal camera robot minced up on four tubular legs and trained its lens on the door.

An hour passed. The rain stopped and a pair of surveillance craft kited silently overhead. A violent dust storm blew up in the abandoned industrial zone, to the north. The camera continued to watch.

Lindsay emerged from the airlock, weaving a little. He set a black diplomatic bag on the stone floor beside him and struggled out of the decontamination suit. He stuffed the suit back into the vault, then picked his way with exaggerated grace along the stepping-stones.

The air stank. Lindsay stopped and sneezed. "Hey," the camera said. "Mr. Dze. I'd like a word with you, Mr. Dze."

"If you want a part in the play you'll have to appear in person," Lindsay said.

“You astonish me,” the camera remarked. It spoke in trade Japanese. “I have to admire your daring, Mr. Dze. ~~The Black Medicals have the foulest kind of reputation. They could have rendered you for your body chemicals.~~”

Lindsay walked north, his flimsy shoes scuffing the mud. The camera tagged after him, its left leg squeaking.

Lindsay descended a low hill into an orchard where fallen trees, thick with black smut, formed loose, skeletal thicket. Below the orchard was a scum-covered pond with a decayed teahouse at its shore. The once-elegant wooden and ceramic building had collapsed into a heap of dry rot. Lindsay kicked one of the timbers and broke into a coughing fit at the explosion of spores. “Someone ought to clean this up,” he said.

“Where would they put it?” the camera said.

Lindsay looked around quickly. The trees screened him from observation. He stared at the machine. “Your camera needs an overhaul,” he said.

“It was the best I could afford,” the camera said.

Lindsay swung his black bag back and forth, narrowing his eyes. “It looks rather slow and frail.”

The robot prudently stepped backward. “Do you have a place to stay, Mr. Dze?”

Lindsay rubbed his chin. “Are you offering one?”

“You shouldn’t stay in the open. You’re not even wearing a mask.”

Lindsay smiled. “I told the Medicals that I was protected by advanced antiseptics. They were very impressed.”

“They must have been. You don’t breathe raw air here. Not unless you want your lungs to end up looking like this thicket.” The camera hesitated. “My name is Fyodor Ryumin.”

“I am pleased to make your acquaintance,” Lindsay said in Russian. They had injected him with vasopressin through the suit, and his brain felt impossibly keen. He felt so intolerably bright that his vision was beginning to crisp a little around the edges. Changing from Japanese to his little-used Russian felt as easy as switching a tape.

“Again you astonish me,” the camera said in Russian. “You pique my curiosity. You understand the term, ‘pique’? It’s not common to trade Russian. Please follow the robot. My place isn’t far. Try to breathe shallowly.”

Ryumin’s place was a small inflated dome of gray-green plastic near the smeared and broken glass of one window panel. Lindsay unzipped the fabric airlock and stepped inside.

The pure air within provoked a fit of coughing. The tent was small, ten strides across. A tangle of cables littered the floor, connecting stacks of battered video equipment to a frayed storage battery propped on ceramic roof tiles. A central support pole, wreathed in wire, supported an air filter, a lightbulb, and the roots of an antenna complex.

Ryumin was sitting cross-legged on a tatami mat with his hands on a portable joystick. “Let me take care of the robot first,” he said. “I’ll be with you in a moment.”

Ryumin’s broad face had a vaguely Asiatic cast, but his thinning hair was blond. Age spots marked his cheeks. His knuckles had the heavy wrinkles common to the very old. Something was wrong with his bones. His wrists were too thin for his stocky body, and his skull looked strangely delicate. Two black adhesive disks clung to his temples, trailing thin cords down his back and into the jungle wires.

Ryumin’s eyes were closed. He reached out blindly and tapped a switch beside his knee. He peeled the disks from his temples and opened his eyes. They were bright blue.

“Is it bright enough in here?” he said.

Lindsay glanced at the bulb overhead. "I think so."

Ryumin tapped his temple. "Chip grafts along the optic nerves," he said. "I suffer a little from video burn. I have trouble seeing anything not on scan lines."

"You're a Mechanist."

"Does it show?" Ryumin asked, ironically.

"How old are you?"

"A hundred and forty. No, a hundred and forty-two." He smiled. "Don't be alarmed."

"I'm not prejudiced," Lindsay said falsely. He felt confusion, and, with that, his training seeped away. He remembered the Ring Council and the long, hated sessions of anti-Mech indoctrination. The sense of rebellion recalled him to himself.

He stepped over a tangle of wires and set his diplomatic bag on a low table beside a plastic-wrapped block of synthetic tofu. "Please understand me, Mr. Ryumin. If this is blackmail, you've misjudged me. I won't cooperate. If you mean me harm, then do it. Kill me now."

"I wouldn't say that too loudly," Ryumin cautioned. "The spyplanes can burn you down where you stand, right through that tent wall."

Lindsay flinched.

Ryumin grinned bleakly. "I've seen it happen before. Besides, if we're to murder each other, then you should be killing me. I run the risks here, since I have something to lose. You're only a fast talking sundog." He wrapped up the cord of his joystick. "We could babble reassurances till the sun expands and never convince each other. Either we trust each other or we don't."

"I'll trust you," Lindsay decided. He kicked off his mud-smearred shoes.

Ryumin rose slowly to his feet. He bent to pick up Lindsay's shoes, and his spine popped loudly. "I'll put these in the microwave," he said. "When you live here, you must never trust the mud."

"I'll remember," Lindsay said. His brain was swimming in mnemonic chemicals. The drugs had plunged him into a kind of epiphany in which every tangled wire and pack of tape seemed of vital importance. "Burn them if you want," he said. He opened his new bag and pulled out an elegant cream-colored medical jacket.

"These are good shoes," Ryumin said. "They're worth three or four minutes, at least."

Lindsay stripped off his coveralls. A pair of injection bruises mottled his right buttock.

Ryumin squinted. "I see you didn't escape unscathed."

Lindsay pulled out a pair of creased white trousers. "Vasopressin," he said.

"Vasopressin," Ryumin mused. "I thought you had a Shaper look about you. Where are you from? Mr. Dze? And how old are you?"

"Three hours old," Lindsay said. "Mr. Dze has no past."

Ryumin looked away. "I can't blame a Shaper for trying to hide his past. The System swarms with your enemies." He peered at Lindsay. "I can guess you were a diplomat."

"What makes you think so?"

"Your success with the Black Medicals. Your skill is impressive. Besides, diplomats often turn out to be sundogs." Ryumin studied him. "The Ring Council had a secret training program for diplomats of a special type. The failure rate was high. Half the alumni were rebels and defectors."

Lindsay zipped up his shirt.

"Is that what happened to you?"

"Something of the sort."

"How fascinating. I've met many borderline posthumans in my day, but never one of you. Is it true that they enforced an entire second state of consciousness? Is it true that when you're full

operational, you yourself don't know if you're speaking the truth? That they used psychodrugs destroy your capacity for sincerity?"

"Sincerity," Lindsay said. "That's a slippery concept."

Ryumin hesitated. "Are you aware that your class is being stalked by Shaper assassins?"

"No," Lindsay said sourly. So it had come to this, he thought. All those years, while the spinal crabs burned knowledge into every nerve. The indoctrinations, under drugs and brain taps. He'd gone to the Republic when he was sixteen, and for ten years the psychotechs had poured training into him. He returned to the Republic like a primed bomb, ready to serve any purpose. But his skills provoked panicky fear there and utter distrust from those in power. And now the Shapers themselves were hunting him.

"Thank you for telling me," he said.

"I wouldn't worry," Ryumin said. "The Shapers are under siege. They have bigger concerns than the fate of a few sundogs." He smiled. "If you really took that treatment, then you must be less than forty years old."

"I'm thirty. You're a cagey old bastard, Ryumin."

Ryumin took Lindsay's well-cooked shoes out of the microwave, studied them, and slipped them on his own bare feet. "How many languages do you speak?"

"Four, normally. With memory enhancement I can manage seven. And I know the standard Shaper programming language."

"I speak four myself," Ryumin said. "But then, I don't clutter my mind with their written forms."

"You don't read at all?"

"My machines can do that for me."

"Then you're blind to mankind's whole cultural heritage."

Ryumin looked surprised. "Strange talk for a Shaper. You're an antiquarian, eh? Want to break the Interdict with Earth, study the so-called humanities, that sort of thing? That explains why you used that theatrical gambit. I had to use my lexicon to find out what a 'play' was. An astonishing custom. Are you really going through with it?"

"Yes. And the Black Medicals will finance it for me."

"I see. The Geisha Bank won't care for that. Loans and finance are their turf."

Lindsay sat on the floor beside a nest of wires. He plucked the Black Medicals pin from his collar and twirled it in his fingers. "Tell me about them."

"The Geishas are whores and financiers. You must have noticed that your credit card is registered in hours."

"Yes."

"Those are hours of sexual service. The Mechanists and Shapers use kilowatts as currency. But the System's criminal element must have a black market to survive. A great many different black currencies have seen use. I did an article on it once."

"Did you?"

"Yes. I'm a journalist by profession. I entertain the jaded among the System's bourgeoisie with my startling exposés of criminality. Low-life antics of the sundog canaille." He nodded at Lindsay's bag. "Narcotics were the standard for a while, but that gave the Shaper black chemists an edge. Selling computer time had some success, but the Mechanists had the best cybernetics. Now sex has come in vogue."

"You mean people come to this godforsaken place just for sex?"

"It's not necessary to visit a bank to use it, Mr. Dze. The Geisha Bank has contacts throughout the cartels. Pirates dock here to exchange loot for portable black credit. We get political exiles from the

other circumlunars, too. If they're unlucky."

Lindsay showed no reaction. He was one of those exiles.

His problem was simple now: survival. It was wonderful how this cleared his mind. He could forgive his former life: the Preservationist rebellion, the political dramas he'd staged at the Museum. It was all history.

Let it fade, he thought. All gone now, all another world. He felt dizzy, suddenly, thinking about the life he'd lived. Not like Vera.

Constantine had tried to kill him with those altered insects. The quiet, subtle moths were a perfect modern weapon: they threatened only human flesh, not the world as a whole. But Lindsay's uncle had taken Vera's locket, booby-trapped with the pheromones that drove the deadly moths to frenzy. And now his uncle had died in his place. Lindsay felt a slow, rising flush of nausea.

"And the exhausted come here from the Mechanist cartels," Ryumin went on. "For death by ecstasy. For a price the Geisha Bank offers *shinju*: double suicide with a companion from the staff. Many of our customers, you see, take a deep comfort in not dying alone."

For a long moment, Lindsay struggled with himself. Double suicide—the words pierced him. Vera's face swam queasily before his eyes in the perfect focus of expanded memory. He pitched onto his side, retching, and vomited across the floor.

The drugs overwhelmed him. He hadn't eaten since leaving the Republic. Acid scraped his throat, and suddenly he was choking, fighting for air.

Ryumin was at his side in a moment. He dropped his bony kneecaps into Lindsay's ribs, and air huffed explosively through his clogged windpipe. Lindsay rolled onto his back. He breathed convulsively. A tingling warmth invaded his hands and feet. He breathed again and lost consciousness.

Ryumin took Lindsay's wrist and stood for a moment, counting his pulse. Now that the young man had collapsed, an odd, somnolent calm descended over the old Mechanist. He moved at his own tempo. Ryumin had been very old for a long time. The feeling changed things.

Ryumin's bones were frail. Cautiously, he dragged Lindsay onto the tatami mat and covered him with a blanket. Then he stepped slowly to a barrel-sized ceramic water cistern, picked up a wad of coarse filter paper, and mopped up Lindsay's vomit. His deliberate movements disguised the fact that, without video input, he was almost blind.

Ryumin donned his eyephones. He meditated on the tape he had made of Lindsay. Ideas and images came to him more easily through the wires.

He analyzed the young sundog's movements frame by frame. The man had long, bony arms and shins, large hands and feet, but he lacked any awkwardness. Studied closely, his movements showed an ominous fluidity, the sure sign of a nervous system subjected to subtle and prolonged alteration. Someone had devoted great care and expense to that counterfeit of footloose ease and grace.

Ryumin edited the tape with the reflexive ease of a century of practice. The System was wide. Ryumin thought. There was room in it for a thousand modes of life, a thousand hopeful monsters. He felt sadness at what had been done to the man, but no alarm or fear. Only time could tell the difference between aberration and advance. Ryumin no longer made judgments. When he could, he held out his hand.

Friendly gestures were risky, of course, but Ryumin could never resist the urge to make them and watch the result. Curiosity had made him a sundog. He was bright; there'd been a place for him in his colony's soviet. But he had been driven to ask uncomfortable questions, to think uncomfortable thoughts.

Once, a sense of moral righteousness had lent him strength. That youthful smugness was long gone now, but he still had pity and the willingness to help. For Ryumin, decency had become an old man's habit.

The young sundog twisted in his sleep. His face seemed to ripple, twisting bizarrely. Ryumin squinted in surprise. This man was a strange one. That was nothing remarkable; the System was full of the strange. It was when they *escaped control* that things became interesting.

Lindsay woke, groaning. "How long have I been out?" he said.

"Three hours, twelve minutes," Ryumin said. "But there's no day or night here, Mr. Dze. Time doesn't matter."

Lindsay propped himself up on one elbow.

"Hungry?" Ryumin passed Lindsay a bowl of soup.

Lindsay looked uneasily at the warm broth. Circles of oil dotted its surface and white lumps floated within it. He had a spoonful. It was better than it looked.

"Thank you," he said. He ate quickly. "Sorry to be troublesome."

"No matter," Ryumin said. "Nausea is common when Zaibatsu microbes hit the stomach of a newcomer."

"Why'd you follow me with that camera?" Lindsay said.

Ryumin poured himself a bowl of soup. "Curiosity," he said. "I have the Zaibatsu's entrance monitored by radar. Most sundogs travel in factions. Single passengers are rare. I wanted to learn your story. That's how I earn my living, after all." He drank his soup. "Tell me about your future, Mr. Dze. What are you planning?"

"If I tell you, will you help me?"

"I might. Things have been dull here lately."

"There's money in it."

"Better and better," Ryumin said. "Could you be more specific?"

Lindsay stood up. "We'll do some acting," he said, straightening his cuffs. "'To catch birds with a mirror is the ideal snare,' as my Shaper teachers used to say. I knew of the Black Medicals in the Rink Council. They're not genetically altered. The Shapers despised them, so they isolated themselves. That's their habit, even here. But they hunger for admiration, so I made myself into a mirror and showed them their own desires. I promised them prestige and influence, as patrons of the theatre." He reached for his jacket. "But what does the Geisha Bank want?"

"Money. Power," Ryumin said. "And the ruin of their rivals, who happen to be the Black Medicals."

"Three lines of attack." Lindsay smiled. "This is what they trained me for." His smile wavered, and he put his hand to his midriff. "That soup," he said. "Synthetic protein, wasn't it? I don't think it's going to agree with me."

Ryumin nodded in resignation. "It's your new microbes. You'd better clear your appointment book for a few days, Mr. Dze. You have dysentery."

Chapter 2

THE MARE TRANQUILLITATIS PEOPLE'S CIRCUMLUNAR ZAIBATSU: 28-12-'15

Night never fell in the Zaibatsu. It gave Lindsay's sufferings a timeless air: a feverish idyll of nausea

Antibiotics would have cured him, but sooner or later his body would have to come to terms with its new flora. To pass the time between spasms, Ryumin entertained him with local anecdotes and gossip. It was a complex and depressing history, littered with betrayals, small-scale rivalries, and pointless power games.

The algae farmers were the Zaibatsu's most numerous faction, glum fanatics, clannish and ignorant who were rumored to practice cannibalism. Next came the mathematicians, a proto-Shaper breakaway group that spent most of its time wrapped in speculation about the nature of infinite sets. The Zaibatsu's smallest domes were held by a profusion of pirates and privateers: the Hermes Breakaway, the Gray Torus Radicals, the Grand Megalics, the Soyuz Eclectics, and others, who changed names and personnel as easily as they cut a throat. They feuded constantly, but none dared challenge the Nephrene Black Medicals or the Geisha Bank. Attempts had been made in the past. There were appalling legends about them.

The people beyond the Wall had their own wildly varying mythos. They were said to live in a jungle of overgrown pines and mimosas. They were hideously inbred and afflicted with double thumbs and congenital deafness.

Others claimed there was nothing remotely human beyond the Wall: just a proliferating cluster of software, which had acquired a sinister autonomy.

It was, of course, possible that the land beyond the Wall had been secretly invaded and conquered by—*aliens*. An entire postindustrial folklore had sprung up around this enthralling concept, buttressed with ingenious arguments. Everyone expected aliens sooner or later. It was the modern version of the Millennium.

Ryumin was patient with him; while Lindsay slept feverishly, he patrolled the Zaibatsu with his camera robot, looking for news. Lindsay turned the corner on his illness. He kept down some soup and a few fried bricks of spiced protein.

One of Ryumin's stacks of equipment began to chime with a piercingly clear electronic bleeping. Ryumin looked up from where he sat sorting cassettes. "That's the radar," he said. "Hand me the headset, will you?"

Lindsay crawled to the radar stack and untangled a set of Ryumin's adhesive eyephones. Ryumin clamped them to his temples. "Not much resolution on radar," he said, closing his eyes. "A crowd has just arrived. Pirates, most likely. They're milling about on the landing pad."

He squinted, though his eyes were already shut. "Something very large is moving about with them. They've brought something huge. I'd better switch to telephoto." He yanked the headset's cord and its plug snapped free.

"I'm going outside for a look," Lindsay said. "I'm well enough."

"Wire yourself up first," Ryumin said. "Take that earset and one of the cameras."

Lindsay attached the auxiliary system and stepped outside the zippered airlock into the curdled air.

He backed away from Ryumin's dome toward the rim of the land panel. He turned and trotted to a nearby stile, which led over the low metal wall, and trained his camera upward.

"That's good," came Ryumin's voice in his ear. "Cut in the brightness amps, will you? That little button on the right. Yes, that's better. What do you make of it, Mr. Dze?"

Lindsay squinted through the lens. Far above, at the northern end of the Zaibatsu's axis, a dozen sundogs were wrestling in free-fall with a huge silver bag.

"It looks like a tent," Lindsay said. "They're inflating it." The silver bag wrinkled and tumesced suddenly, revealing itself as a blunt cylinder. On its side was a large red stencil as wide as a man was tall. It was a red skull with two crossed lightning bolts.

"Pirates!" Lindsay said.

Ryumin chuckled. "I thought as much."

A sharp gust of wind struck Lindsay. He lost his balance on the stile and looked behind him suddenly. The glass window strip formed a long white alley of decay. The hexagonal metaglass frames were speckled with dark plugs, jackstrawed here and there with heavy reinforcement struts. Leaks had been sprayed with airtight coats of thick plastic. Sunlight oozed sullenly through the gaps.

"Are you all right?" Ryumin said.

"Sorry," Lindsay said. He tilted the camera upward again.

The pirates had gotten their foil balloon airborne and had turned on its pair of small pushed propellers. As it drifted away from the landing pad, it jerked once, then surged forward. It was towing something—an oddly shaped dark lump larger than a man.

"It's a meteorite," Ryumin told him. "A gift for the people beyond the Wall. Did you see the dark rocks that stand in the Sterilized Zone? They're all gifts from pirates. It's become a tradition."

"Wouldn't it be easier to carry it along the ground?"

"Are you joking? It's death to set foot in the Sterilized Zone."

"I see. So they're forced to drop it from the air. Do you recognize these pirates?"

"No," Ryumin said. "They're new here. That's why they need the rock."

"Someone seems to know them," Lindsay said. "Look at that."

He focused the camera to look past the airborne pirates to the sloping gray-brown surface of the Zaibatsu's third land panel. Most of this third panel was a bleak expanse of fuzz-choked mud, with surging coils of yellowish ground fog.

Near the third panel's blasted northern suburbs was a squat, varicolored dome, built of jigsawed chunks of salvaged ceramic and plastic. A foreshortened, antlike crowd of sundogs had emerged from the dome's airlock. They stared upward, their faces hidden by filter masks. They had dragged out a large crude machine of metal and plastic, fitted with pinions, levers, and cables. They jacked the machine upward until one end of it pointed into the sky.

"What are they doing?" Lindsay said.

"Who knows?" Ryumin said. "That's the Eighth Orbital Army, or so they call themselves. They've been hermits up till now."

The airship passed overhead, casting blurred shadows onto all three land panels. One of the sundogs triggered the machine.

A long metal harpoon flicked upward and struck home. Lindsay saw metal foil rupture in the airship's tail section. The javelin gleamed crazily as it whirled end over end, its flight disrupted by the

collision and the curve of Coriolis force. The metal bolt vanished into the filthy trees of a ruined orchard.

The airship was in trouble. Its crew kicked and thrashed in midair, struggling to force the collapsing balloon away from the ground attackers.

The massive stone they were towing continued its course with weightless, serene inertia. As its towline grew tight, it slowly tore off the airship's tail.

With a *whoosh* of gas, the airship crumpled into a twisted metal rag. The engines fell, tugging the metal foil behind them in a rippling streamer.

The pirates thrashed as if drowning, struggling to stay within the zone of weightlessness. Their plight was desperate, since the zone was riddled with slow, sucking downdrafts that could send fliers tumbling to their deaths.

The rock blundered into the rippling edge of a swollen cloudbank. The dark mass veered majestically downward, wobbling a bit, and vanished into the mist. Moments later it reappeared below the cloud, plummeting downward in a vicious Coriolis arc.

It slammed into the glass and patchwork of the window strip. Lindsay, following it with his camera, heard the sullen crunch of impact. Glass and metal grated and burst free in a sucking roar.

The belly of the cloud overhead bulged downward and began to twist. A white plume spread above the blowout with the grace of creeping frost. It was steam, condensing from the air in the sudden lowered pressure.

Lindsay held the camera above his head and leaped down onto the grimy floor of the window. He ran toward the blowout, ignoring Ryumin's surprised protests.

A minute's broken-field running brought him as close as he dared go. He crouched behind the rusted steel strut of a plug, ten meters from the impact site. Looking down past his feet through the dirty glass, Lindsay saw a long tail of freezing spray fanning out in rainbowed crystals against the shine of the sunlight mirrors.

A roaring vortex of sucking wind sprang up, slinging gusts of rain. Lindsay cupped one hand around the camera's lens.

Motion caught his eye. A group of oxygen farmers in masks and coveralls were struggling across the glass from the bordering panel. They cradled a long hose in their arms. They lurched forward doggedly, staggering in the wind, weaving among the plugs and struts.

Caught by the wind, a camouflaged surveillance plane crashed violently beside the hole. Its wreckage was sucked through at once.

The hose jerked and bucked with a gush of fluid. A thick spray of gray-green plastic geysered from its nozzle, hardening in midair. It hit the glass and clung there.

Under the whirlwind's pressure the plastic warped and bulged, but held. As more gushed forth, the wind was choked and became a shrill whistle.

Even after the blowout was sealed, the farmers continued to pump plastic sludge across the impact zone. Rain fell steadily from the agitated clouds. Another knot of farmers stood along the window wall, leaning their masked heads together and pointing into the sky.

Lindsay turned and looked upward with the rest.

The sudden vortex had spawned a concentric surf of clouds. Through a crescent-shaped gap Lindsay saw the dome of the Eighth Orbital Army, across the width of the Zaibatsu. Tiny forms in white suits ringed the dome, lying on the ground. They did not move.

Lindsay focused the telephoto across the interior sky. The fanatics of the Eighth Orbital Army lay sprawled on the fouled earth. A knot of them had been caught trying to escape into the airlock; the

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