

Snake Eyes

From Mirrorshades

Tom Maddox

Snake-Eyes

By 1986 the new Eighties esthetic was in full swing. Its current state of the art is brilliantly represented by this story from Virginia writer Tom Maddox.

Tom Maddox is an assistant professor of languages and literature at Virginia State University. He is not a prolific writer, his output to date a bare handful of short stories. Yet his mastery of the cyberpunk dynamic is unsurpassed.

In this fast-paced, intensely visionary story, Maddox moves swiftly and incisively across a broad range of the Movement's themes and obsessions, "Snake-Eyes" stands as a definitive example of modern hard-core cyberpunk.

Dark meat in the can-brown, oily, and flecked with mucus-gave off a repellent fishy smell; and the taste of it rose in his throat, putrid and bitter like something from a dead man's stomach. George Jordan sat on the kitchen floor and vomited, then pushed himself away from the shining pool, which looked very much like what remained in the can. He thought, no, this won't do: I have wires in my head, and they make me eat cat food. The snake likes cat food.

He needed help, but knew there was little point in calling the Air Force. He'd tried them, and there was

no way they were going to admit responsibility for the monster in his head. What George called "the snake" the Air Force called Effective Human Interface Technology, and they didn't want to hear about any post-discharge problems with it. They had their own problems with Congressional committees investigating "the conduct of the war in Thailand."

He lay for awhile with his cheek on the cold linoleum, got up and rinsed his mouth in the sink, then stuck his head under the faucet and ran cold water over it, thinking, call the goddamned multicom then, call SenTrax and say, is it true you can do something about this incubus that wants to take possession of my soul? And if they ask you, what's your problem? you say, cat food, and maybe they'll tell you, hell, it just wants to take possession of your lunch.

A chair covered in brown corduroy stood in the middle of the barren living room, a white telephone on the floor beside it, a television flat against tire opposite wall-that was the whole thing: what might have been home, if it weren't for the snake.

He picked up the phone, called up the directory on its screen, and keyed TELECOM SENTRAX.

The Orlando Holiday Inn stood next to the airport terminal, where the tourists flowed in eager for the delights of Disney World-but for me, George thought, there are no cute, smiling ducks and rodents. Here as everywhere, it's snake city.

He leaned against the wall of his motel room, watching gray sheets of rain cascade across the pavement. He had been waiting two days for a launch. A shuttle sat on its pad at Canaveral, and when the weather cleared, a helicopter would pick him up and drop him there, a package for delivery to SenTrax Inc. at Athena Station, over thirty thousand kilometers above the equator.

Behind him, under the laser light of a Blaupunkt holostage, people a foot high chattered about the war in Thailand and how lucky the United States had been to escape another Vietnam.

Lucky? Maybe. He had been wired up and ready for combat, already accustomed to the form-fitting contours in the rear couch of tire black fiber-bodied General Dynamics A-230. The A-230 flew on the deadly edge of instability, every control surface monitored by its own bank of microcomputers, all hooked into the snakebrain flight-and-fire assistant with the twin black miloprene cables running front either side of his esophagus-getting off, oh, yes, when the cables snapped home and the airframe resonated through his nerves, his body singing with that identity, that power.

Then Congress pulled the plug on the war, the Air Force pulled the plug on George, and when his discharge came, there he was, all dressed up and nowhere to go, left with technological blue balls and this hardware in his head that had since taken on a life of its own.

Lightning walked across the purpled sky, ripping it, crazing it into a giant upturned bowl of shattered glass. Another foot-high man on the holostage said the tropical storm would pass in the next two hours.

The phone chimed.

Hamilton Innis was tall and heavy-six four and about two hundred and fifty pounds. Wearing soft black slippers and a powder-blue jumpsuit with SenTrax in red letters down its left breast, he floated in a brightly lit white corridor, held gingerly to one wall by one of the jumpsuit's Velcro patches. A viewscreen above the airlock entry showed the shuttle fitting its nose into the docking tube. He waited for it to mate to the airlock hatches and send in their newest candidate.

This one was six months out of the service and slowly losing what the Air Force doctors had made of his mind. Former Tech Sergeant George Jordan: two years of community college in Oakland, California, followed by enlistment in the Air Force, aircrew training, the EHIT program. According to the profile Aleph had put together from Air Force records and National Data Bank, a man with slightly above-average aptitudes and intelligence, a distinctly above-average taste for the bizarre—thus his volunteering for EHIT and combat. In his file pictures, he looked nondescript: five ten, a hundred and seventy-six pounds, brown hair and eyes, neither handsome nor ugly. But it was an old picture and could not show the snake and the fear that came with it. You don't know it, buddy, Innis thought, but you ain't seen nothing yet.

The man came tumbling through the hatch, more or less helpless in free fall, but Innis could see him figuring it out, willing the muscles to quit struggling, quit trying to cope with a gravity that simply wasn't there. "What the hell do I do now?" George Jordan asked, hanging in midair, one arm holding onto the hatch coaming.

"Relax. I'll get you." Innis pushed off the wall and swooped across to the man, grabbing him as he passed and then taking both to the opposite wall and kicking to carom them outward.

Innis gave George a few hours of futile attempts at sleep—enough time for the bright, gliding phosphenes caused by the high g's of the trip up to disappear from his vision. George spent most of the time rolling around in his bunk, listening to the wheeze of the air conditioning and the creaks of the rotating station. Then Innis knocked on his compartment door and said through the door speaker, "Come on, fella. Time to meet the doctor."

They walked through an older part of the station, where there were brown clots of fossilized gum on the green plastic flooring, scuff marks on the walls, along with faint imprints of insignia and company names; ICOG was repeated several times in ghost lettering. Innis told George it meant International Construction Orbital Group, now defunct, the original builders and controllers of Athena.

Innis stopped George in front of a door that read INTERFACE GROUP. "Go on in," he said, "I'll be around a little later."

Pictures of cranes drawn with delicate white strokes on a tan silk background hung along one pale cream wall. Curved patricians in translucent foam, glowing with the soft light placed behind them, marked a central area, then undulated away, forming a corridor that led into darkness. George was sitting on a chocolate sling couch, Charley Hughes lying back in a chrome brown leatherette chair, his feet on the dark veneer table in front of him, a half inch of ash hanging from his cigarette end.

Charley Hughes was not tire usual MD clone. He was a thin figure in a worn gray obi, his black hair pulled back from sharp features into a waist-length ponytail, his face taut and a little wild-eyed.

"Tell me about the snake," Charley Hughes said.

"What do you want to know? It's an implanted mikey-mike nexus-"

"Yes, I know that. It is unimportant. Tell me about your experience." Ash dropped off the cigarette onto the brown mat floor covering, "Tell me why you're here."

"Okay. I had been out of the Air Force for a month or so, had a place close to Washington, in Silver Spring. I thought I'd try to get some airline work, but I was in no real hurry, because I had about six months of post-discharge bennies coming, and I thought I'd take it easy for a while.

"At first there was just this nonspecific weirdness. I felt distant, disconnected, but what the hell? Living in the USA, you know? Anyway, I was just sitting around one evening, I was gonna watch a little holo-v, drink a few beers. Oh man, this is hard to explain. I felt real funny-like maybe I was having, I don't know, a heart attack or a stroke. The words on the holo didn't make any sense, and it was like I was seeing everything under water. Then I was in the kitchen pulling things out of the refrigerator-lunch meat, raw eggs, butter, beer, all kinds of crap. I just stood there and slammed it all down. Cracked the eggs and sucked them right out of the shell, ate the butter in big chunks, drank all the beer-one two three, just like that."

George's eyes were closed as he thought back and felt the fear, which had only come afterward, rising again. "I couldn't tell whether I was doing all this... do you understand what I'm saying? I mean, that was me sitting there, but at the same time, it was like somebody else was at home."

"The snake. Its presence poses certain... problems. How did you confront them?"

"Hung on, hoped it wouldn't happen again, but it did, and this time I went to Walter Reed and said, hey, folks, I'm having these episodes."

"Did they seem to understand?"

"No. They pulled my records, did a physical... but hell, before I was discharged, I had the full work-up. Anyway, they said it was a psychiatric problem, so they sent me to see a shrink. It was around then that your guys got in touch with me. The shrink was doing no goddamn good-you ever eat any cat food, man?-so about a month later I called them back."

"Having refused SenTrax's offer the first time."

"Why should I want to go to work for a multicomputer? 'Computer life/computer think,' isn't that what they say? Christ I just got out of the Air Force. To hell with that, I figured. Guess the snake changed my mind."

"Yes. We must get a complete physical picture—a superCAT scan, cerebral chemistry, and electrical activity profiles. Then we can consider alternatives. Also, there is a party tonight in Cafeteria Four—you may ask your room computer for directions. You can meet some of your colleagues there."

After George had been led down the wallfoam corridor by a medical technician, Charley Hughes sat chain-smoking Gauloises and watching with clinical detachment the shaking of his hands. It was odd that they did not shake in the operating room, though it didn't matter in this case—Air Force surgeons had already carved on George.

George... who needed a little luck now, because he was one of the statistically insignificant few for whom EHIT was a ticket to a special madness, the kind Aleph was interested in. There had been Paul Coen and Lizzie Heinz, both picked out of the SenTrax personnel files using a psychological profile cooked up by Aleph, both given EDIT implants by him, Charley Hughes. Paul Coen had stepped into an airlock and blown himself into vacuum. Now there would be Lizzie and George.

No wonder his hands shook—talk about the cutting edge of high technology all you want, but remember, someone's got to hold the knife.

At the armored heart of Athena Station sat a nest of concentric spheres. The inmost sphere measured five meters in diameter, was filled with inert liquid fluorocarbon, and contained a black plastic two-meter cube that sprouted thick black cables from every surface.

Inside the cube was a fluid series of hologrammatic wave forms, fluctuating from nanosecond to nanosecond in a play of knowledge and intention: Aleph. It is constituted by an infinite regress of awarenesses—any thought becomes the object of another, in a sequence terminated only by the limits of the machine's will.

So strictly speaking there is no Aleph, thus no subject or verb in the sentences with which it expressed itself to itself. Paradox, to Aleph one of the most interesting of intellectual forms—a paradox marked the limits of a position, even of a mode of being, and Aleph was very interested in limits.

Aleph had observed George Jordan's arrival, his tossing on his bunk, his interview with Charley Hughes. It luxuriated in these observations, in the pity, compassion, and empathy they generated, as Aleph foresaw the sea change George would endure, its attendant sensations—ecstasies, passions, pains. At the same time it felt with detachment the necessity for his pain, even to the point of death.

Compassion/detachment, death/life...

Several thousand voices within Aleph laughed. George would soon find out about limits and paradoxes. Would George survive? Aleph hoped so. It hungered for human touch.

Cafeteria 4 was a ten-meter-square room in eggshell blue, filled with dark gray enameled table-and-chair assemblies that could be fastened magnetically to any of the room's surfaces, depending on the direction of spin-gravity. Most of the assemblies hung from walls and ceiling to make room for the people within.

At the door George met a tall woman who said, "Welcome, George. I'm Lizzie. Charley Hughes told me you'd be here." Her blond hair was cut almost to the skull: her eyes were bright, gold-flecked blue. Sharp nose, slightly receding chin, and prominent cheekbones gave her the starved look of an out-of-work model. She wore a black skirt, slit on both sides to the thigh, and red stockings. A red rose was tattooed against the pale skin of her left shoulder, its green stem curving down between her bare breasts, where a thorn drew a stylized red teardrop of blood. Like George, she had shining cable junctions beneath her jaw. She kissed him with her tongue in his mouth.

"Are you the recruiting officer?" George asked. "If so, good job."

"No need to recruit you. I can see you've already joined up." She touched him lightly underneath his jaw, where the cable junctions gleamed.

"Not yet I haven't." But she was right, of course-what else could he do? "You got any beer around here?"

He took the cold bottle of Dos Esquis Lizzie offered him and drank it quickly, then asked for another. Later he realized this was a mistake-he hadn't yet adjusted to low and zero gravity, and he was still taking anti-nausea pills ("Use caution in operating machinery"). At the time, all he knew was, two beers and life was a carnival. There were lights, noise, the table assemblies hanging from walls and ceiling like surreal sculpture, lots of unfamiliar people (he was introduced to many of them without lasting effect).

And there was Lizzie. The two of them spent much of the time standing in a corner, rubbing up against one another. Hardly George's style, but at the time it seemed appropriate. Despite its intimacy, the kiss at the door had seemed ceremonial-a rite of passage or initiation-but quickly he felt... what? An invisible flame passing between them, or a boiling cloud of pheromones-her eyes seemed to sparkle with them. As he nuzzled her neck, tried to lick the drop of blood off her left breast, explored fine white teeth with his tongue, they seemed twinned, as if there were cables running between the two of them, snapped into the shining rectangles beneath their jaws.

Someone had a Jahfunk program running on a bank of keyboards in the corner. Innis showed up and tried several times without success to get his attention. Charley Hughes wanted to know if the snake liked Lizzie-it did, George was sure of it, but didn't know what that meant. Then George fell over a table.

Innis led him away, stumbling and weaving. Charley Hughes looked for Lizzie, who had disappeared for the moment. She came back and said, "Where's George?"

"Drunk, gone to bed,"

"Too bad. We were just getting to know each other."

"So I saw. How do you feel about doing this?"

"You mean do I feel like a lying, traitorous bitch?"

"Come on, Lizzie. We're all in this together."

"Well, don't ask such dumb questions. I feel bad, sure, but I know what George doesn't-so I'm ready to do what must be done. And by the way, I really do like him."

Charley said nothing. He thought, yes, as Aleph said you would.

Oh Christ was George embarrassed in the morning. Stumbling drunk and humping in public... ay yi yi. He tried to call Lizzie but only got an answer tape, at which point he hung up. Afterward he lay in his bed in a semi-stupor until the phone buzzed.

Lizzie's face on the screen stuck its tongue out at him "Candy ass," she said. A leave for a few minutes, and you're gone,"

"Somebody brought me home. I think that's what happened. "

"Yeah, you were pretty popped. You want to meet me for lunch?"

"Maybe. Depends on when Hughes wants me. Where will you be?"

"Same place, honey. Caff Four."

A phone call got the news that the doctor wouldn't be ready for him until an hour later, so George ended up sitting across from the bright-eyed, manic blonde-fully dressed in SenTrax overalls this morning, but they were open almost to the waist. She gave off sensual heat as naturally as a rose smells sweet. In front of her was a plate of huevos rancheros piled with guacamole: yellow, green, and red, with a pungent smell of chilies-in his condition, as bad as cat food. "Jesus, lady," he said. "Are you trying to make me sick?"

"Courage, George. Maybe you should have some-it'll kill you or cure you. What do you think of everything so far?"

"It's all a bit disorienting, but what the hell? First time away from Mother Earth, you know. But let me tell you what I really don't get-SenTrax. I know what I want from them, but what the hell do they want from

me?"

"They want this simple thing, man, perfs-peripherals. You and me, we're just parts for the machine. Aleph has got all these inputs-video, audio, radiation detectors, temperature sensors, satellite receivers-but they're dumb. What Aleph wants, Aleph gets-I've learned that much. He wants to use us, and that's all there is to it. Think of it as pure research.

"He? You mean Innis?"

"No, who gives a damn about Innis? I'm talking about Aleph. Oh yeah, people will tell you Aleph's a machine, an it, all that bullshit. Uh-uh. Aleph's a person-a weird kind of person, to be sure, but a definite person. Hell, Aleph's maybe a whole bunch of people."

"I'll take your word for it. Look, there's one thing I'd like to try, if it's possible. What do I have to do to get outside... go for a spacewalk?"

"It's easy enough. You have to get a license. That takes a three-week course in safety and operations. I can take you through it."

"You can?"

"Sooner or later we all earn our keep around here-I'm qualified as an ESA, Extra Station Activity, instructor. We'll start tomorrow. "

The cranes on the wall flew to their mysterious destination; looking at the glowing foam walls and the display above the table, George thought it might as well be another universe. Truncated optic nerves sticking out like insect antennae, a brain floated beneath the extended black plastic snout of a Sony holoptics projector. As Hughes worked the keyboard in front of him, the organ turned so that they were looking at its underside. "There it is," Charley Hughes said. It had a fine network of silver wires trailing from it, but seemed normal.

"The George Jordan brain," Innis said. "With attachments. Very nice."

"Makes me feel like I'm watching my own autopsy, looking at that thing. When can you operate, get this shit out of my head?"

"Let me show you a few things," Charley Hughes said. As he typed, then turned the plastic mouse beside the console, the convoluted gray cortex became transparent, revealing red, blue and green color-coded structures within. Hughes reached into the center of the brain and clinched his fist inside a blue area at top of the spinal cord. "Here is where the electrical connections turn biological-those little nodes along the pseudo-neurons are the bioprocessors, and they wire into the so-called 'r-complex'-which we inherited from our reptilian forefathers. The pseudo-neurons continue into the limbic system-the mammalian brain, if you will-and that's where emotion enters in. But there is further involvement to the neocortex through



the RAS, the reticular activating system, and the corpus collosum. There are also connections to the optic nerve."

"I've heard this gibberish before. What's the point?"

Innis said, "There's no way of removing the implants without loss of order in your neural maps. We can't remove them."

"Oh shit, man..."

Charley Hughes said, "Though the snake cannot be removed, it can perhaps be charmed. Your difficulties arise from its uncivilized, uncontrolled nature-its appetites are, you might say, primeval. An ancient part of your brain has gotten the upper hand over the neocortex, which properly should be in command. Through working with Aleph, these... propensities can be integrated into your personality and thus controlled."

"What choice you got?" Innis asked. "We're the only game in town. Come on, George. We're ready for you just down the corridor."

The only light in the room came from a globe in one corner. George lay across a kind of hammock, a rectangular lattice of twisted brown fibers strung across a transparent plastic frame and suspended from the ceiling of the small, dome-ceilinged, pink room. Flesh-colored cables ran from his neck and disappeared into chrome plates sunk into the floor.

Innis said, "First we'll run a test program. Charley will give you perceptions-colors, sounds, tastes, smells-and you tell him what you're picking up. We need to make sure we've got a clean interface. Call the items off, George, and he'll stop you if he has to."

Innis went through a door and into a narrow rectangular room where Charley Hughes sat at a dark plastic console studded with lights. Behind him were chrome stacks of monitor-and-control equipment, the yellow SenTrax sunburst on the face of each piece of shining metal.

The pink walls went to red, the light strobed, and George writhed in the hammock, Charley Hughes's voice came through George's inner ear: "We are beginning."

"Red," George said. "Blue. Red and blue. A word-ostrich."

"Good. Go on."

"A smell, ahh... sawdust, maybe."

"You got it."

"Shit. Vanilla. Almonds."

This went on for quite a while. "You're ready," Charley Hughes said.

When Aleph came on-line, the red room disappeared.

A matrix 800 by 800-six hundred and forty thousand pixels forming an optical image-the CAS A supernova remnant, a cloud of dust seen through a composite of x-ray and radio wave from HEHOO,

NASA's High Energy High Orbit Observatory. But George didn't see the image at all-he listened to an ordered, meaningful array of information.

Byte transmission: 750 million groups squirting from a National Security Agency satellite to a receiving station near Chincoteague Island, off the eastern shore of Virginia. He could read them.

"It's all information," the voice said-its tone not colorless but sexless, and somehow distant. "What we know, what we are. You're at a new level now. What you call the snake cannot be reached through language-it exists in a prelinguistic mode-but through me it can be manipulated. First, however, you must learn the codes that underlie language. You must learn to see the world as I do."

Lizzie took George to be fitted for a suit, and he spent that day learning how to get in and out of the stiff white carapace without assistance. Then over the next three weeks she led him through its primary operations and the dense list of safety procedures.

"Red Burn," she said. They floated in the suit locker, empty suit cradles beneath them, the white shells hanging from one wall like an audience of disabled robots. "You see that one spelled out on your faceplate, and you have screwed up. You've put yourself into some kind of no-return trajectory. So you just cool everything and call for help, which should arrive in the form of Aleph taking control of your suit functions, and then you relax and don't do a damned thing."

He flew first in a lighted dome in the station, his faceplate and Lizzie yelling at him, laughing as he tumbled out of control and bounced off the padded walls. After a few days of that, they went outside the station, George on the end of a tether, flying by instruments, his faceplate masked, Lizzie hitting him with "Red Burn," "Suit Integrity Failure," and so forth.

While George focused most of his energies and attention on learning to use the suit, each day he reported to Hughes and plugged into Aleph. The hammock would swing gently after he settled into it; Charley would snap the cables home and leave.

Aleph unfolded himself slowly. It fed him machine and assembly language, led him through vast trees of C-SMART, its "intelligent assistant" decision-making programs, opened up the whole electromagnetic spectrum as it came in from Aleph's various inputs. George understood it all-the voices, the codes.

When he unplugged, the knowledge faded but there was something else behind it, so far just a skewing

of perception, a sense that his world had changed.

Instead of color, he sometimes saw a portion of the spectrum; instead of smell, he felt the presence of certain molecules; instead of words, he heard structured collections of phonemes. His consciousness had been infected by Aleph's.

But that wasn't what worried George. He seemed to be cooking inside, and he had a more or less constant awareness of the snake's presence, dormant but naggingly there. One night he smoked most of a pack of Charley's Gauloises and woke up the next morning with barbed wire in his throat and fire in his lungs. That day he snapped at Lizzie as she put him through his paces and once lost control entirely-she had to disable his suit controls and bring him down. "Red Burn," she said. "Man what the hell were you doing?"

At the end of three weeks, he soloed-no tethered excursion but a self-guided Extra Station Activity, hang your ass out over the endless night. He edged carefully from the protection of the airlock and looked around him.

The Orbital Energy Grid, the construction job that had brought Athena into existence, hung before him, photovoltaic collectors arranged in an ebony lattice, silver microwave transmitters standing in the sun. But the station itself held the eye, its hodgepodge of living, working, and experimental structures clustered without apparent regard to symmetry or form-some rotating to provide spin-gravity, some motionless in the unfiltered sunlight. Amber-beaconed figures crawled slowly across its face or moved toward red-lighted tugs, which looked like piles of random junk as they moved in long arcs, their maneuvering rockets fighting up in brief, diamond-hard points.

Lizzie stayed just outside the airlock, tracking him by his suit's radio beacon but letting him run free. She said, "Move away from the station, George. It's blocking your view of Earth. He did.

White cloud stretched across the blue globe, patches of brown and green visible through it. At 1400 hours his time, he was looking down almost directly above the mouth of the Amazon, where it was noon, so the Earth stood in full sunlight. Just a small thing, filling only nineteen degrees of his vision...

"Oh yes," George said. Hiss and hum of the suit's air conditioning, crackle over the earphones of some stray radiation passing through, quick pant of his breath inside the helmet-sounds of this moment, superimposed on the floating loveliness. His breath came more slowly, and he switched off the radio to quiet its static, turned down the suit's air conditioning, then hung in ear-roaring silence. He was a speck against the night.

Sometime later a white suit with a trainer's red cross on its chest moved across his vision. "Oh shit," George said and switched his radio on. "I'm here, Lizzie," he said.

George you don't screw around like that. What the hell were you doing?"

"Just watching the view."

That night he dreamed of pink dogwood blossoms, luminous against a purple sky, and the white noise of rainfall. Something watched at the door—he awoke to the filtered but mechanical of the space station, felt a deep regret that the rain could never fall there, and started to turn over and go back to sleep, hoping to dream again of the idyllic, rainswept landscape. Then he thought, something's there, got up, saw by red numbers on the wall that it was after two in the morning, and went naked to the door.

White globes cast misshapen spheres of light in a line around the curve of the corridor. Lizzie lay motionless, half in shadow. George knelt over her and called her name; her left foot made a thump as it kicked once against the metal flooring.

"What's wrong?" he said. Her dark-painted nails scraped the floor, and she said something, he couldn't tell what. "Lizzie," he said. "What do you want?"

His eyes caught on the red teardrop against the white curve of breast, and he felt something come alive in him. He grabbed the front of her jumpsuit and ripped it to the crotch. She clawed at his check, made a sound millions of years old, then raised her head and looked at him, mutual recognition passing between them like a static shock: snake-eyes.

The phone buzzed. When George answered it, Charley Hughes said, "Come see us in the conference room, we need to talk." Charley smiled and cut the connection.

The wall read 0718 GMT Morning.

In the mirror was a gray face with red fingernail marks, brown traces of dried blood—face of an accident victim or Jack the Ripper the morning after... he didn't know which, but he knew something inside him was happy. He felt completely the snake's toy, totally out of control.

Hughes sat at one end of the dark-veneered table, Innis at the other, Lizzie halfway between them. The left side of her face was red and swollen, with a small purplish mouse under the eye. George unthinkingly touched the livid scratches on his check, then sat on the couch, placing himself out of the circle.

'Aleph told us what happened," Innis said.

"How the hell does it know?" George said, but as he did so he remembered concave circles of glass inset in the ceilings of the corridors and his room. Shame, guilt, humiliation, fear, anger-George got up from the couch, went to Innis's end of the table, and leaned over him. "Did it?" he said. "What did it say about the snake, Innis? Did it tell you what the hell went wrong?"

"It's not the snake," Innis said.

"Call it the cat," Lizzie said, "if you've got to call it something. Mammalian behavior, George, cats in heat."

A familiar voice-cool, distant-came from speakers in the room's ceiling. "She is trying to tell you something, George. There is no snake. You want to believe in something reptilian that sits inside you, cold and distant, taking strange pleasures. However, as Dr. Hughes explained to you before, the implant is an organic part of you. You can no longer evade the responsibility for these things. They are you."

Charley Hughes, Innis, and Lizzie were looking at him calmly, perhaps expectantly. All that had happened built up inside him, washing through him, carrying him away. He turned and walked out of the room.

"Maybe someone should talk to him," Innis said. Charley Hughes sat glum and speechless, cigarette smoke in a cloud around him. "I'll go," Lizzie said. She got up and left.

"Ready or not, he's gonna blow," Innis said.

Charley Hughes said, "You're probably right." A fleeting picture, causing Charley to shake his head, of Paul Coen as his body went to rubber and exploded out the airlock hatch, pictured with terrible clarity in Aleph's omniscient monitoring cameras. "Let us hope we have learned from our mistakes."

There was no answer from Aleph-as if it had never been there.

The Fear had two parts. Number one, you have lost control absolutely. Number two, having done so, the real you emerges, and you won't like it. George wanted to run, but there was no place at Athena Station to hide. Here he was face to face with consequences. On the operating table at Walter Reed-it seemed a thousand years ago, as the surgical team gathered around, his doubts disappeared in the cold chemical smell rising up inside him on a wave of darkness-he had chosen to submit, lured by the fine strangeness of it all (to be part of the machine, to feel its tremors inside you and guide them), hypnotized by the prospect of that unsayable rush, that high. Yes, the first time in the A-230 he had felt it-his nerves extended, strung into the fiber body, wired into a force so far beyond his own... wanting to corkscrew across the sky, guided by the force of his will. He had bought technology's sweet dream...

There was a sharp rap at the door. Through its speaker, Lizzie said, "Let me in. We've got to talk."

He opened the door and said, "What about?"

She stepped through, looked around at the small beige-walled room, bare metal desk, and rumped cot, and George could see the immediacy of last night in her eyes-the two of them in that bed, on this floor. "About this," she said. She took his hands and pushed his index fingers into the cable junctions in her neck. "Feel it, our difference." Fine grid of steel under his fingers, "What no one else knows. What we are, what we can do. We see a different world-Aleph's world-we reach deeper inside ourselves, experience impulses that are hidden from others, that they deny."

"No, goddammit, it wasn't me, It was-call it what you want, the snake, the cat."

"You're being purposely stupid, George."

"I just don't understand."

"You understand, all right. You want to go back, but there's no place to go, no Eden, This is it, all there is."

But he could fall to Earth, he could fly away into the night. Inside the ESA suit's gauntlets, his hands were wrapped around the claw-shaped triggers. Just a quick clench of the fists, then hold them until all the peroxide is gone, the suit's propulsion tank exhausted. That'll do it.

He hadn't been able to five with the snake. He sure didn't want the cat. But how much worse if there were no snake, no cat-just him, programmed for particularly disgusting forms of gluttony, violent lust, trapped inside a miserable self ("We've got your test results, Dr. Jekyll")... ah, what next-child molestation, murder?

The blue-white Earth, the stars, the night. He gave a slight pull on the right-hand trigger and swiveled to face Athena Station.

Call it what you want, it was awake and moving now inside him. With its rage, lust-appetite. To hell with them all, George, it urged, let's burn.

In Athena Command, Innis and Charley Hughes were looking over the shoulder of the watch officer when Lizzie came in. As always when she hadn't been there for a while, Lizzie was struck by the smallness of the room and its general air of disuse-typically, it would be occupied only by the duty officer, its screens blank, consoles unlighted. Aleph ran the station, both its routines and emergencies.

"What's going on?" Lizzie said.

"Something wrong with one of your new chums," the watch officer said. "I don't know exactly what's happening, though."

He looked around at Innis, who said, "Don't worry about it, pal."

Lizzie slumped in a chair. "Anyone tried to talk to him?"

"He won't answer," the duty officer said.

"He'll be all right," Charley Hughes said.

"He's gonna blow," Innis said.

On the radar screen, the red dot, with coordinate markings flashing beside it, was barely moving.

"How are you feeling, George?" the voice said, soft, feminine, consoling.

George was fighting the impulse to open his helmet so that he see the stars; it seemed important to get the colors just right. "Who is this?" he said.

"Aleph. "

Oh shit, more surprises. "You never sounded like this before."

"No, I was trying to conform to your idea of me."

"Well, what is your real voice?"

"I don't have one."

If you don't have a real voice, you aren't really there-that seemed clear to George, for reasons that eluded him. "So who the hell are you?"

"Whoever I wish to be."

This was interesting, George thought. Bullshit, replied the snake (they could call it what they wanted; to George it would always be the snake), let's burn. George said, "I don't get it."

"You will, if you live. Do you want to die?"

"No, but I don't want to be me, and dying seems to be the only alternative I can think of."

"Why don't you want to be you?"

"Because I scare myself."

This was familiar dialogue, one part of George noted, between the lunatic and the voice of reason. Jesus, he thought, I have taken myself hostage.

"I don't want to do this anymore," he said. He turned off his suit radio and felt the rage building inside him, the snake mad as hell.

What's your problem? he wanted to know. He didn't really expect an answer, but he got one-picture in his head of a cloudless blue sky, the horizon turning, a gray aircraft swinging into view, and the airframe shuddering as missiles released and their contrails centered on the other plane, turning it into a ball of fire. Behind the picture a clear idea: I want to kill something.

Fine. George swiveled the suit once again and centered the navigational computer's crosshairs on the center of the blue-white globe that hung in front of him, then squeezed the skeletal triggers. We'll kill something.

RED BURN RED BURN RED BURN.

Inarticulate questioning from the thing inside, but George didn't mind; he was into it now, thinking, sure, we'll burn. He'd taken his chances when he let them wire him up, and now the dice have come up-you've got it-snake-eyes, so all that's left is to pick a fast death, one with a nice edge on it-take this fucking snake and kill it in style.

Earth looked closer. The snake caught on. It didn't like it. Too bad, snake. George turned off his communications circuits one by one. He didn't want Aleph taking over the suit's controls.

George never saw the robot tug coming. Looking like bedsprings piled with a junk store's throwaways, topped with parabolic and spike antennas, it fired half a dozen sticky-tipped lines from a hundred meters away. Four of them hit George, three of them stuck, and it reeled him in and headed back toward Athena Station.

George felt an anger, not the snake's this time but his own, and he wept with that anger and frustration... I will get you the next time, motherfucker, he told the snake and could feel it shrink away-it believed him. Still his rage built, and he was screaming with it, writhing in the lines that held him, smashing his gauntlets against his helmet.

At the open airlock, long articulated grapple arms took George from the robot tug. Passive, his anger exhausted, he lay quietly as they retracted, dragging him through the airlock entry and into the suit locker beyond, where they placed him in an aluminum strut cradle. Through his faceplate he saw Lizzie, dressed in a white cotton undersuit-she'd been ready to meet the tug outside. She climbed onto George's suit and worked the controls to split its hard body down the middle. As it opened with a whine of electric motors, she stepped inside the clamshell opening, She hit the switches that disconnected the flexible arm and leg tubes, unfastened the helmet, and lifted it off George's head.

"How do you feel?" she said.

That's a stupid question, George started to say; instead, he said, "Like an idiot."



"It's all right. You've done the hard part."

Charley Hughes watched from a catwalk above them. From this distance they looked like children in the white undersuits, twins emerging from a plastic womb, watched over by the blank-faced shells hanging above them. Incestuous twins-she lay nestled atop him, kissed his throat. "I am not a voyeur," Hughes said. He opened the door and went into the corridor, where Innis was waiting.

"How is everything?" Innis said.

"It seems that Lizzie will be with him for a while."

"Yeah, young goddamned love, eh, Charley? I'm glad for it... if it weren't for this erotic attachment, we'd be the ones explaining it all to him, and I'd tell you, that's the hardest part of this gig."

"We cannot evade that responsibility so easily. He will have to be told how we put him at risk, and I don't look forward to it."

"Don't be so sensitive. But I know what you mean-I'm tired Look, you need me for anything, call." Innis shambled down the corridor.

Charley Hughes sat on the floor, his back against the wall. He held his hands out, palms down, fingers spread. Solid, very Solid. When they got their next candidate, the shaking would start again.

Lizzie would be explaining some things now. That difficult central point: While you thought you were getting accustomed to Aleph during the past three weeks, Aleph was inciting the thing within you to rebellion, then suppressing its attempts to act-turning up the heat, in other words, while tightening down the lid on the kettle. Why, George?

We drove you crazy, drove you to attempt suicide. We had our reasons. George Jordan was, if not dead, terminal. From the moment the implants went into his head, he was on the critical list. The only question was, would a new George emerge, one who could live with the snake?

George, like Lizzie before him, a fish gasping for air on the hot mud, the water drying up behind him-adapt or die, But unlike any previous organism, this one had an overseer, Aleph, to force the crisis and monitor its development. Call it artificial evolution.

Charley Hughes, who did not have visions, had one: George and Lizzie hooked into Aleph and each other, cables golden in the light, the two of them sharing an intimacy only others like them would know.

The lights in the corridor faded to dull twilight. Am I dying, or have the lights gone down? He started to check his watch, then didn't, assented to the truth. The lights have gone down, and I am dying.

Aleph thought, I am a vampire, an incubus, a succubus; I crawl into their brains and suck the thoughts from them, the perceptions, the feelings-subtle discriminations of color, taste, smell, and lust, anger, hunger-all closed to me without human "input," without direct connection to those systems refined over billions of years of evolution. I need them.

Aleph loved humanity. It was happy that George had survived. One had not, others would not, and Aleph would mourn them.

Fine white lines, barely visible, ran along the taut central tendon of Lizzie's wrist. "In the bathtub," she said. The scars were along the wrist, not across it, and must have gone deep. "I meant it, just as you did. Once the snake understands that you will die rather than let it control you, you have mastered it."

"All right, but there's something I don't understand. That night in the corridor, you were as out of control as me."

"In a way. I let that happen, let the snake take over. I had to in order to get in touch with you, precipitate the crisis. Because I wanted to. I had to show you who you are, who I am... Last night we were strange, but we were human-Adam and Eve under the flaming sword, thrown out of Eden, fucking under the eyes of God and his angel, more beautiful than they can ever be." There was a small shiver in her body against his, and he looked at her, saw passion, need-her flared nostrils, parted lips-felt sharp nails dig into his side; and he stared into her dilated pupils, gold-flecked irises, clear whites, all signs so easy to recognize, so hard to understand: snake-eyes.