



Snake Eyes
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About Maddox:

Tom Maddox is an American science fiction writer, known for his part in the early cyberpunk movement. His first novel was *Halo* (ISBN 0-312-85249-5), published in 1991 by Tor Books. His story *Snake Eyes* appeared in the 1986 collection *Mirrorshades*, edited by Bruce Sterling. He is perhaps best-known as a friend and writing partner of William Gibson; they wrote two episodes of the *X-Files* together, "Kill Switch" and "First Person Shooter". Maddox is the originator of the term *Intrusion Countermeasures Electronics* (or ICE). According to Maddox, he coined the term in the manuscript of an unpublished story that he showed to William Gibson at a science fiction convention in Portland, Oregon. Gibson asked permission to use the acronym, and Maddox agreed. The term was then used in Gibson's early short stories and eventually popularized in the novel *Neuromancer*, in which Maddox was properly acknowledged. Tom Maddox has licensed his work under a Creative Commons License, making a significant part of it available on his website: Tom Maddox Fiction and Nonfiction Archive. Source: Wikipedia

Also available on Feedbooks for Maddox:

- *Halo* (1991)
- *Gravity's Angel* (1992)
- *The Robot and the One You Love* (1988)
- *The Mind Like A Strange Balloon* (1985)

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Snake Eyes

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 didn’t want to hear about any postdischarge problems with it. They had their own problems with congressional committees investigating “the conduct of the war in Thailand.”

He lay for a while 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 say, “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 the 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 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

From the window of his motel room, he watched gray sheets of rain cascade across the pavement. He had been waiting two days for a launch. At Canaveral a shuttle sat on its pad, 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 training, already accustomed to the form-fitting contours in the rear couch of the black, tiber-bodied General Dynamics A-230. The A-230 flew on the deadly edge of instability, every control surface monitored by its own bank of micro-computers, all hooked into the snakebrain flight-and-tire assistant with the twin black miloprene cables running from 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, 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.

Hamilton Innis was tall and heavy—six four and about two hundred and fifty pounds. Wearing a powder-blue jump-suit with SENTRAX in red letters down its left breast, and soft black slippers, he floated in a brightly lit white corridor, held gingerly to a wall by one of the jump-suit's Velcro patches. A view-screen 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 the 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' 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 the 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 on to the hatch coaming.

"Relax. I'll get you." Innis pushed off and swooped across, grabbing the man as he passed, taking them 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 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—ICON was repeated several times in ghost lettering. Innis told George it meant the now defunct International Construction Orbital Group, 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 partitions in translucent foam, glowing with the soft lights 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 and brown leatherette chair, his feet on the dark veneer table in front of him, a half inch of ash hanging from his cigarette end.

Hughes was not the usual M.D. 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," Hughes said.

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

“Yes, I know that. It’s 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 underwater. 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, all the bologna, drank all the beer—one, two, three, just like that.”

George’s eyes were closed as he thought back and felt the fear that had come only afterward, rising again. “I couldn’t tell whether / 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?”

“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.’ They pulled my records, did a physical...but, hell, before I was discharged, I had the full workup. 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 first refused SenTrax’s offer.”

“Why should I want to work for a multicom? Christ, I just got out of the Air Force. To hell with that. 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 wall-foam 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 EHIT implants by him, Charley Hughes. Paul Coen had stepped into an airlock and blown himself into vacuum.

No wonder his hands shook—talk about the cutting edge of high technology all you want, but 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 waveforms, 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 that George would endure, its 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.

Cafeteria Four 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. 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 on her left shoulder, its stem curving down between her bare breasts, where a thorn drew a 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 a beer around here?"

He took the cold bottle of Dos Equis Lizzie offered him and drank it quickly, then asked for another. Later he realized this was a mistake—he was still taking antinausea pills (USE CAUTION IN OPERATING MACHINERY). At the time, all he knew was, two beers and life was a carnival. There were lights, noises, and lots of unfamiliar people.

And there was Lizzie. The two of them spent much of the time standing in a corner, rubbing up against each other. 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 of 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 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 this?"

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

"Come on, Lizzie."

"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 ... ai yi yi. He tried to call Lizzie but only got an answer tape, at which point he hung up. He lay in his bed in a semis-tupor until the phone's buzzer sounded.

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

"Somebody brought me home. I think."

"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 blond—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, smelling of chilis—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—Senlrax. I know what I want from them, but what the hell do they want from me?”

“They want this simple thing, man, perphs, peripherals. You and me, we’re just parts for the machine. Aleph, which is the AI in residence, 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 AI, all that bullshit. Uh-uh. Aleph’s a person—a weird kind of person, 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. What do I have to do to get outside ... go for a spacewalk?”

“Easy enough. You have to get a license—that takes a three-week course in safety and operations. I can take you through it. 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 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. 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.” As he typed, the convoluted gray cortex, became transparent, revealing red, blue, and green color-coded structures within. Hughes reached into the brain and clenched his fist

inside a blue area at the top of the spinal cord. "Here is where the electrical connections turn biological—those little nodes along the pseudoneurons are the bioprocessors, and they wire into the so-called r-complex—which we inherited from our reptilian forefathers. The pseudoneurons continue into the limbic system, the mammalian brain, it 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 callosum. There are also connections to the optic nerve,"

"I've heard this gibberish before. So what?"

"The pseudoneurons are not just implanted—they're now a functional, organic part of your brain."

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 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, and he'll stop you if he has to."

Innis went into a narrow 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 btue. A word—ostrich. A smell, ahh ... sawdust maybe. Shit. Vanilla. Almonds ..."

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

When Aleph came online, the red room disappeared. A matrix eight hundred by eight hundred—six hundred 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 NASA's High Energy High Orbit Observatory. George didn't see the image at all—he listened to an ordered, meaningful array of information.

Byte-transmission: seven hundred fifty 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 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 ted 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 and the white shells hanging from the 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 coot everything and call for help, which should arrive in the form of Aleph taking control of your suit tunctions, and then you relax and don't do a damned thing."

He flew first in a lighted dome in the station, his taceptate open and Lizzie yelling at him, laughing as he tumbled out of control and bounced off the padded walls. Then 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 itself slowly. If 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, 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, 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 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 before he went to bed 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, hang-your-ass-out-over-the-endless-night extra-station activity. He edged carefully out 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. Amber-beaconed figures crawled slowly across its face or moved toward red-lighted tugs that looked like piles of random junk as they moved in long arcs, their maneuvering rockets lighting 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 fourteen hundred hours his time, he was

looking down from almost directly above the mouth of the Amazon, where at noon the earth stood in full sunlight. Just a small thing.

“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 an 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.

“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 scratched at the door—he awoke to the filtered but metallic smell 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, rain-swept landscape. Then he thought, something’s there, got up, saw by red letters 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.

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 cheek, made a sound, then raised her head and looked at him, mutual recognition passing between them like a static shock: snake eyes.

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

Red writing on the wall read 0718 GMT.

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.

Hughes sat at one end of the dark-yeneered table, Innis at the other, Lizzie half-way 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 cheek, then sat on the couch.

"Aleph told us what happened," Innis said. "How the hell does it know?" George said, but as he did so remembered concave circles of glass inset in the ceilings of the corridors and his room. Shame, guilt, humiliation, tear, 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?"

"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 Doctor 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.

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

Charley Hughes said, "You're probably right." A fleeting picture, causing Chancy 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 it 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. 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 out 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.

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

He opened the door and said, "About what?" She stepped through the door, 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 junctions in her neck. "Feel it, our difference." Fine grid of steel under his fingers. "What no one else knows. We see a different world—Aleph's world—we reach deeper inside ourselves—"

"No, goddamn it, 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 to, 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 live 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

("We've got your test results, Dr Jekyll") Ahh, 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. *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. She was struck by the smallness of the room and its general air of disuse. 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 could 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, which 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."

"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. George 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 cross hairs on the center of the blue-white globe in front of him, then squeezed the 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 grew closer. The snake caught on. It didn't like it. Too bad, snake. 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, mother-fucker, 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 climbed onto George’s suit and worked the controls to split its hard body down the middle. As it opened 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.

“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 went into the corridor, where Innis was waiting.

“How is everything?” Innis said. “Lizzie will be with him for a while.”

“Yeah, young goddamn love, eh, Charley? I’m glad for it. If it weren’t for that erotic attachment, we’d be the ones explaining it all to him.”

“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. I’m tired. You need me for anything, call.” He 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, a tribute exacted by the memory of Paul Coen.

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, We had our reasons: George Jordan was, it 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, fish gasping for air on the hot mud, the waters 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 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 connection to those systems refined over billions of years of evolution. I need them.*

Aleph 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 had to 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.*

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