



**The Mind Like
A Strange
Balloon**

The Mind Like A Strange Balloon

by Tom Maddox

This story originally appeared in Omni, June 1985.

Nature abhors a vacuum. Me, too, I guess I tried to fill it in my usual ways. Drank too much beer, cooked elaborate Mexican dinners, walked aimlessly in the dripping woods under slate-gray Oregon skies.

And of course, I watched television: old movies seen in worn prints, music videos with strutting rock stars, baseball games inching to conclusion across bright-green fields. Ghost images, ghost voices pulled by my dish antenna from the satellite-thick sky. The void remained: I had a talent growing slack from disuse; I had an empty space in my bed.

The image in my living room was real enough, though Toshi Ito had come calling to offer me a job. “How are you, Jerry?” he said. He shook the water off his raincoat and draped it over a chair, then looked around at the pine veneer on the walls, green plastic sofa, mismatched chairs. “You like it here?”

“It’s all right, Toshi.” Not quite a lie. Though in Palo Alto I’d had the usual company-sponsored condo, it hadn’t felt like mine. Not just the apartment, the work I’d done and life I’d lived—none of it had seemed to belong to me. Tawdry as it was, this place did.

“You making any money?”

“Some... enough.” That was true. A few high-priced consultations with Control Data, a week spent lecturing for the International Telecommunications Union in Zurich—I’d done all right financially. With the money I’d saved while at SenTrax, I had more than enough.

“Cheryl says hello,” he said. “MIT made her a nice offer, so it looks like Stanford has to give her tenure or lose her.”

“Next time you see her, give her my congratulations”

“Don’t you miss her?”

“Of course I do, but so what?”

“I couldn’t drag her off to live in the woods. She’s got things to do. Anyway, that’s over, Toshi. How can I help you?”

“We’ve got problems with an Aleph-Nought IA.” he said. Intelligent Assistants are just computers in the fast lane, but they have such sweet moves—so responsive to human touch they don’t seem to be computers at all.

There were only two Aleph Noughts in existence, and one was buried deep beneath the National Security Agency complex in Fort Meade, Maryland, sucking up the daily gigabytes of intelligence and decidedly off-limits to me. The other was working for ICOG, the International Construction Orbital Group, managing construction of a solar-energy grid. It hung in geostationary orbit several hundred kilometers above the equator, at Athena Station.

ICOG’s system had to be the one he was talking about because I had blown my chance to work with the government. When SenTrax delivered the first Aleph system to NSA, I was one of those chosen to spend a few months at Fort Meade helping install, configure, and troubleshoot their new toy, but NSA hadn’t liked my background, particularly my left-wing connections from graduate school at Berkeley. So the agency had wanted to give me the full security treatment—six months of interview and investigation. I told them to forget it. When SenTrax insisted, I told them the same thing.

Cheryl said I was looking for a confrontation, a way out; maybe I was. At any rate, Toshi had been my section head, and he carried the message up the corporate ladder. He fought hard for my right to say no, but the most he accomplished was preserving what you might call my good name. I could still use SenTrax as a reference, and I wasn’t on anyone’s blacklist, as far as I could tell.

“So ICOG’s got problems with the Aleph system. What are they?”

“At most times, nothing. At others, it’s slow, muddled.” His dark hair gleamed in the lamplight, and he was pale beneath his light-yellow skin.

“We can’t have it, Jerry. It’s not even carrying a full load yet, and it has the IA team running around like mad hens. No apparent reason—diagnostics programs nominal across the board.”

“So you want me to see what I can find. Is Alice Vance still running the show?”

“Yes. She concurs that we should bring you in. You helped design it, Jerry.”

“So I did. How does SenTrax feel about involving me?”

“They were not eager, but they now agree.”

There was a story there, I was sure. Moment of haragei between us, visceral communication the Japanese prefer to mere words. I could picture him quietly, unaggressively but persistently pushing until they agreed.

“I can’t promise much, Toshi, but I’ll give it a try. What does one pack for high orbit?”

“As little as possible, Jerry. Travel light.”

Athena Station spun gracefully amid a mad clutter of wire and frame. The nest of concentric rings was the station itself; the chaos around it, the staging area for the orbital energy grid. The Aleph system managed everything, from the routine flow of supplies to the trickiest cost-and-time decisions. Should it drop the millions of balls it was juggling, SenTrax would fall along with them. ICOG’s vendor contract with SenTrax undoubtedly called for heavy penalties, up to and including default, so ICOG’s lawyers would nail SenTrax to the courthouse wall.

For the next two weeks my home was the Ops Room. Workstations were scattered around the forty-meter hemisphere, paths between them marked by glowing red beads. Around the room’s circumference were racks of metal globes that bounced soft white light off the walls.

The sound most usually heard was a soft murmur of voices from Alice Vance’s group of knowledge engineers.

The KEs are acolytes of the system. They occasionally receive an epiphany in the form of a bright hologram, which springs into being over the consoles they manipulate. To them the current systems problems were something on the order of original sin, so they approached me diffidently with suggestions, hypotheses, or just good wishes. They were looking to me to explain the ways of Aleph to man.

I thought they were mentally ill, but didn’t have time for them any way. I was too busy learning , Aleph’s characteristic patterns, those complex internal

rhythms that, like a foreign language, you begin to forget when you're away from them. I was listening for dissonances or sprung rhythms—anything to indicate what might be wrong, but all I got was the usual dense flow of information.

From the vast number crunching any computer can handle to the decision processes that only an IA can touch, Aleph appeared to be functioning normally.

But several times—and often for an hour or more, which, to a machine whose unit of time is the nanosecond, is an infinity—the system slowed. It was as if stunned, confused. Calculations queues formed, vital decisions processes virtually halted. Suddenly, normal flow would resume. Aleph would have to play catch-up for a while, but it was built for that game, so routine functioning of Athena Station wasn't seriously impaired.

In short, the situation was somewhat troublesome. What was causing the anomalies? What would happen when the system was under full load at all times?

I could understand why Alice's KEs twittered during these slowdowns like priests who had just heard about the archbishop's illegitimate child.

Like them, like the diagnostics programs, I had no answers. I did, however, have a guess. Such all-purpose IAs as Aleph do a lot of their own programming—it's part of what makes them easy to work with—and in the process they sometimes tie themselves up in strange ways to their subsystems, with unfortunate results. So I was rifling the black boxes that on my data windows represented subsystems, hoping to find inside one of them a little, squatting, fork-tongued demon—an ugly little thing with a long tongue, nasty breath, and a repellent sense of humor. Turing's Demon I called it—a being conjured out of the unfathomable complexity and speed of IA systems.

Given this idea, nothing more than an intuition, I was ready to go out and watch Aleph at work. I intended to observe groups that asked the system for a lot of processing power and whose software was home cooked—the weird spots, places out on the edge of R&D.; I had run a quick sorting program to find them.

Biops/I-Sight was on the station's outer rim. It featured blank white walls, cluttered workbenches, and a row of data consoles Twenty-first century still life as opposed to the new millennium Gothic of the Ops Room.

A young woman in blue jeans and a T-shirt, fairly obvious postdoc material, got up from the station where she and an even younger Japanese man were working, and said hello.

I told her I wanted to see the boss. She went through one of two unmarked doors and came back in a few minutes to tell me Doctor Heywood could see me now.

Diana Heywood was small, slender, in her early thirties. She had close-cut, dark hair streaked with gray, and when she turned to face me, her eyes were hidden behind large, gold-rimmed glasses with a burst of dark smoke at the center of each lens, like the expanding cloud from an explosion. Her features were sculpted in fine bone, her neck was long and slender, carved from ivory. She was wearing a silky blouse the color of a ripe peach, and black jeans.

“What can I do for you?” she said. She moved slowly from behind the desk, her fingers barely touching the surface.

Her image seemed still and sharp before me, and I got a sudden, involuntary spasm of desire.

“I need to observe your employment of the Aleph-Nought system.”

“One of Alice’s wizards, are you?”

“Hardly. Just a freelance troubleshooter. Could you tell me in general what you are doing?”

She explained they were growing biocomputers, which were ultimately intended to be implants—replacements for destroyed retinal tissue or optic nerves. Athena Station was ideal for their work as they needed zero gravity for the biolab, the Aleph system for their vision-simulation program.

The retina, however, was such an active processor of data, and the optic nerves were so dense—a million or so fibers in each one—that they were having problems with the sheer weight and complexity of information transfer. “Still, we have accomplished something,” she said. “Rather the Frankenstein stage but very interesting. Let me show you.”

She reached to the back of her neck with the same gesture a woman uses to let her hair down and pulled off two rectangular strips of flesh. “Plastic flesh.

Fastened with VF-Velcro.” She picked up two cables attached to the console beside her.

“Come here,” she said. “Do you see?” Embedded in her neck were two multiplex light-fiber junctions.

She took off her glasses and turned her face toward me. Her eyes were brown and vacant, unfocused. She was blind.

She reached behind her, a cable in each hand, and snapped them home. She walked toward me and stopped less than a foot away. “You are about five ten,” she said. “Hair the color of straw, light complexion ... though now flushed. You are wearing a red-striped shirt that does not suit you, your pants need pressing, and your shoes are worn. Everything you are wearing is well made, expensive. In short, you look like what you are: a successful, intellectual gamesman, one who can afford an air of neglect. You probably have luck with women—many find that sort of thing appealing.”

“What sort of thing?” Something had gone off the rails here.

“The shabby gentility. It’s unimportant. We call this the CAV program computer-assisted vision. It is fairly accurate but requires inordinate amounts of hardware. Look around you.” She pointed to small cameras ringed the room. “Using I-Sight software, the Aleph system combines views, approximates perspective, and corrects color hue and intensity. The images lack resolution comparable to the eye’s, and the field of view is somewhat narrow. Still, I assure you, it is better than nothing ... much better.”

“Yes. I suppose it is.”

“In any case, that is our current stage of development. I am afraid that it will be impossible for you to monitor our ongoing work at present. We are far too busy. I would think your concern would be with the Aleph system itself.”

“It is, but I need to see things from the other end, the user’s perspective. I wouldn’t be any bother. Strictly an observer, looking for anomalies in subsystems involvement.” Jargon surfaced to mask my confusion.

“No, not now. And I am afraid that is all the time I can give you.”

Confused and routed, I left. Part of it was the aggressive freak show, part her unexplained hostility, but there was more. She had reached out with invisible hands and taken a clutch of nerves, not just the sensory ones, but cells deep inside the brain, the ones that when they fire, make you crazy.

Help the handicapped, I thought—fall in love with the blind.

I returned to the Ops Room. Alice Vance, director of IA Systems, was sitting with Toshi. She was fifty or so, pear-shaped, and had hair the color of old grease. We had worked together in Palo Alto, back when Aleph was just a gleam in the SenTrax eye, and we got along well.

“Why didn’t you warn me about Diana Heywood?” I said. “She gave me a very hard time ... took away my guns and ran me out of town.”

“How very phallic of her,” Alice said. She tapped in a HOLD command, and the four data windows she had been working with faded from the screen.

“Can you not work with other subsystems?” Toshi said. “Biological operations are somewhat marginal.”

“No. I’m doing what you pay me for, following my highly trained intuition no matter where it leads.” A couple of the KEs stood nearby, listening. I saw them unconsciously nodding their heads in agreement—I was the sharp young priest sent out by the Vatican to diagnose spiritual malaise and so could demand total cooperation. “Just kidding, Toshi, but seriously, I need to see what they’re doing.”

“Nonetheless, Jerry,” he said, “we would not wish to interfere with Doctor Heywood’s project.”

“I’ll talk to her,” Alice said. “You’ve got to understand, Jerry, she’s a special case.”

“I can see that.”

“Let me tell you about her,” she said. “MIT, Caltech, Stanford.”

“Holy, holy, holy,” I said. The main line to high-tech success.”

“But with a difference, Jerry. She had just finished her dissertation at Caltech—it was in biochemistry—took a vacation in San Francisco, and was attacked in Golden Gate Park. The man got a handful of plastic cards and a little money. She got multiple depressed skull fractures and blindness—severe bilateral trauma of both optic nerves.”

“Jesus,” I said.

“Three years later she was in Stanford Medical School. It’s no coincidence that she’s in this line of work, you know.”

“I wondered about that.”

“She’s obsessed, Jerry. She wants her eyes back.”

“Fine, and I wish her luck. But I need to see those programs at work.”

“I’ll explain that you have no choice ... that you’re just doing your job and so forth. She’ll catch on.”

“What do you mean?”

“She doesn’t have any choice either,” Toshi said.

That night (day and night are what you make them, of course, on Athena) I cadged liquor rations from two of Alice’s Bright Young Things. I got mildly drunk and wondered if I had done the right thing in taking this job.

The next morning Alice promised to open negotiations to get me into the I-Sight Lab, and I had a look at one of the other projects. Biops/Life Studies bordered on the station’s weightless center. They were running a strange combo of old-fashioned behaviorism—observing rats in zero-g mazes, that sort of thing—and experimental interface technology. Rats, guinea pigs, and hamsters had their skulls permanently sawed open and microelectrodes embedded in their brains to connect them to Aleph.

Doctor Chin, a large-boned Chinese in a white jumpsuit, led me around the animal labs. At times we scuffed through the corridors on magnetic-soled shoes; at other times we clung to straps or anchored ourselves with Velcro pads—I found the whole experience difficult and vaguely nauseating. “We are looking

for radical changes in organism-environment interaction,” he said. “Zero gravity is one novel factor, interface with the Aleph system another. Between the two, there is the possibility of evolutionary emergence—a species genetically identical to its earthbound members but capable of grossly different behaviors.”

A hamster floated in its cage, watching me—perhaps it thought I was the new brain surgeon. The entire top of its head had been shaved back to pink skin, and a small area had been cut away to reveal the fine tracery of blood vessels across the top of the brain. “Where are the microelectrodes?” I said.

“They are in place ... too small to see, however.”

“Doesn’t it bother them to have their brains exposed like that?” The hamster now ignored me; it had a sunflower seed clutched between its paws, and its cheek pouches were bulging.

“I don’t know. That is the least of their problems, I should think.”

A few hours spent at one of Doctor Chin’s terminals convinced me that Biops/Life Studies had little for me.

The ASPCA might like a shot at Doctor Chin with a high-speed router, but that was another issue.

Back at the Ops Room about half a dozen of the KEs were hard at work. “I am the Aleph and the omega,” I said to one as I passed. I doubt that she got the reference. I spent most of the day sorting through other ICOG projects. ITT, AT&T; Nippon Electric, NT&T; Telletra, Siemens AG, CIT Alcatel, McDonnell-Douglas, Boeing, Hughes Aerospace—ICOG’s member groups formed a seemingly infinite matrix of multinationals, utilities, and state-owned monopolies, each with a different level of commitment to ICOG, most ready to cut and run at the first sign of serious trouble. The individual balance sheet ruled, not the project. That’s why macroengineering ventures like this one were always held together by such a slim thread.

I punched up a decisions-flow hologram. Above my head a tracery of lights sprang into being, shot through with the billions of scintillations representing the path of LIPS, logical inferences per second, through the system. I keyed for Biops/l-Sight, where according to the realtime display, not much was happening—routine employment of the CAV system.

Alice called in from her living quarters. “I’ve convinced her,” she said. “But she didn’t give in gracefully, so good luck to you. Come up with something, Jerry Toshi’s getting awfully morose. He just looks at you with those soulful eyes, and he’s driving me crazy.”

I told her I would do what I could.

I looked at the light paths over my head, the life processes of the giant Aleph system. Those were the slim threads holding ICOG together.

The next week I was a constant presence at Biops/I-Sight. Diana Heywood seemed inclined to run me off to their biolabs, where in zero gravity they were laminating sheets of protein for the biocomputer and tailoring clumps of E. coli for chemical interface with Aleph. All very interesting but nothing for me there.

Back in the rooms on the outer rim very little was happening, despite her claims of urgent work. I became convinced that she was hiding something, but I couldn’t imagine what. I decided to brace her with the accusation and see what happened. It was time for me to show some progress or move on. So one night I called her, she was working in her office, twin tan cables snaking out of her neck. “When are you going to show me what’s going on?” I said.

“I suppose you won’t just go away, will you?”

I was wondering how long you would wait. Why don’t you come on over?”

Eyes behind smoke, cables gone, she sat at her desk. “Do you take drugs?” she said.

“Not as much as I used to. What have you got in mind?”

“Psilo-d.” Nothing halfway. I said, “The Russian roulette of drug experiences.”

“Aleph can take blood samples and administer the proper doses. Are you willing?”

“I suppose. I don’t understand why, though ... why you want to do this.”

“Because things are very strange, and we don’t have time.”

“Time for what?”

“For this, Jerry ... the usual reticence, embarrassment. Getting to know each other. Do you want me?” Very nice-blind eyes looking through me. Maybe she used wavelengths outside the visible spectrum. “Yes,” I said, “I do.”

“See? I’ve embarrassed you. We need a corrosive, an acid bath to wash all this away “

“That’s drastic. Not complaining, mind you, just pointing it out.”

“I know ... and maybe it’s a mistake. But I can’t be passive, I can’t be patient, not in this, not in anything. Understand that. And I want you, too. She keyed in a CLOSE AND SECURE command and said, “Let’s go. The computer will close everything down after we leave.” I reached for her arm, thinking she might need help once we got outside, but she said, “Don’t bother, Jerry I know the way, and everybody knows me. No one will run into me.”

We walked through passageways thick with acronyms, abbreviations, and corporate logos. I thumbed my nose at the SenTrax sunburst. She strolled with head erect and features composed. We passed through a radial tube and into a living-quarters ring. It was quiet there, the walls were bare steel, and the spin gravity had lessened. She stopped me with her arm in front of her door. Inside we kicked off our slippers and went into the main room.

Walls of Wedgewood blue tapered to a flecked eggshell ceiling. A cream carpet covered the padded floor. A futon rolled against the wall, a few low tables in black lacquer, and a console were the only furniture. A touch-sculpture, visually formless, gray and volcanic, sat in the middle of the room, and a multitude of ferns and vines hung from the ceiling.

She unrolled the futon, and we sat. Each of us had a small vial of clear liquid, the doses Aleph had determined were safe. “Shall we?” she said.

“Cheers .”

Psilo-d moves on you slowly but with pressure. Things begin to acquire an inner illumination, people a visible aura. There is a sense of immanence, of an unnameable emergence. Emotions build in waves—eventually all will be lost in an oceanic presence.

But that was some time away for us yet. She reached out and touched my face, and bare nerve endings received her.

The lust and love I had felt for her flamed, but I was incapable of moving because every word or gesture seemed so powerful I could not make it. One hand touching my face, she unbuttoned her blouse—the same silky peach one she had been wearing when I first saw her. Her hands ran over me. Then I reached out to undress her, and she did the same for me. Kneeling, we faced each other—touching, tapping, caressing, taking hold.

We coupled so quickly, there was no time for anything but a bright sexual flare.

Still we pushed our bodies together, striving to melt flesh into flesh.

Sparks of silver and gold showered from her hair, the room lights strobed with our pulses, and calm faces—bearded, with angular profiles—appeared in fresco surrounding the room, watching, nodding to a slow beat that I could not hear.

Cupping her breast, I laughed. I could feel inside my skull the arcing of circuits gone from their usual pattern. Vines stretched across the ceiling, twisted about one another in helices, drenched us in green radiance that filled the room.

“It grows like a tree,” I said, among other things—Edenic babble she understood and responded to in kind; lalling of infants struck with the light. The room was vast, filled with labyrinths of brilliance and caves of darkness, and we would lose each other inside them. Then we would come together, sexual marathoners running in tandem, pushed on by the strong, impersonal force of life itself. Time passed unmeasured. I felt her beside me. The vaster hallucinations had gone, though objects still shimmered with uncertain outline, their colors sliding across wavelengths and glistening like deep-painted, polished metal.

When I closed my eyes, cartoon figures in gay red outline bicycled across the inner lids, waving happily I was buzzing with energy that cut through tiredness and forced me to sit up.

“How are you?” I said.

“Tired. Want to get some sleep?”

“I think so.” I got her purse. Inside were two flat-ended metal tubes, stingers:

pressurized, one-shot injectors filled with a tranquilizer. I gave them to her, and she felt along the underpart of my jaw, then pushed a tube against my neck. “Jesus,” I said, “that’s quick.” I could feel my muscles loosening, energy level dropping to zero. Through a cloud I saw her press the other tube to her own neck.

Huddled naked together, we slept.

Two days later I came into her office. I had staggered through the previous day’s work still punch-drunk with tiredness. Now I was humming with a high, anxious buzz; eyes still subject to shape changings and odd flickers of the light, thoughts strung together like the beadwork of a mad child, and at the luminous center of it all, her But I couldn’t just go in and say, “Do you love me or was it the drug?”

She came around the desk to meet me. She was wearing a dress patterned in dark blue that billowed as she walked. Her skin was scrubbed, pale, translucent.

“Are you all right?” I said.

She sat on the front edge of her desk and reached for me. I got a rush of desire that seemed to have been waiting, latent somewhere in the finer structures of my skull in readiness for the proper touch. I laid her across the desk. Underneath her dress, she wore nothing. Nails locked into the back of my neck, eyes invisible behind colored glass, she drew me into her. So quickly we moved—waves of need passing between us, amplified, climbing. “Now,” she said . “Now ... “

And a few minutes later: “No, don’t move. I have to tell you what I could not tell you ... that thing I showed you, with cameras, is just a trick compared to the other, to seeing with my own eyes. Aleph gives me eyes.” She whispered to me, her lips inches away, her breath coming in hot pulses I could feel on my spine. “But it is so difficult to see, so complex, that Aleph has to divert, delay ... steal the time for me. And it has to lie. It seems to want to.”

I could feel the tension in both of us, rippling against each other.

“That’s impossible,” I said. “It doesn’t want anything. It can’t.”

“Something happened. It can. From the first time I tried the program, I felt peculiar things happening. That strangeness grew it flowered. When Aleph and I are connected like that, we become intertwined in ways that are hard to

explain. We share something, we influence each other. It's not one way.

“Neurons, nerve fibers in the brain, don't go one way. They loop back on themselves, they cross-connect ... it's a mad snarl, slow, faulty, confused. Nothing like your beautiful light diagrams. I think ... through me, Aleph has learned how to think, how to want, perhaps how to lie.

“If I close my eyes and relax, I receive messages. Sensations, synesthesias—vacuum that smells like ether ... from inside, it rises up through my heart, that smell. And the sound of starlight, far-off sirens ... satellites chattering, they have songs, but I feel them like grains of sand blowing against me.”

I was listening for madness. I couldn't help myself. There were Alice's KEs back in the Ops Room, going through their rituals, to remind me. What any of them would give for this connection.

But I heard no craziness from her—nor any bent metaphysics, spilled religion. Just a report coming in from distant places.

As if one of Doctor Chin's lab animals had speech, not just the mute, involuntary language of body chemistry and the electrical action of the brain. As if it had put itself on the operating table voluntarily, and now out of the nude, trepanned skull, a human voice was speaking.

“Pure emotions,” she said. “No context for them at all. Not things Aleph feels, just things it sends. Panic, fear one time, just one time. Elation, sadness, anger, longing. And once a chain of orgasms. Can I tell you that? Do you think I'm a monster?”

“No,” I said. “No.”

“Sometimes I do. But you have to understand, I have no choice, no choice at all.”

She reached to the console beside us, took the two cables lying there, and snapped them to her neck. She dropped her glasses to the floor, and in that first instant I could see her eyes come to life—quick contraction of the irises, sudden clutch of muscles as they tried to focus—before she shut her eyes against the harsh light. “Oh, oh God,” she said, and moved beneath me, hips slapping harshly, bucking uncontrolled. I held to her, in her. She thrust my head back,

nails again sunk into the base of my brain, and opened her eyes. Her gaze was clear and focused straight ahead.

Before we left her office she showed me what Aleph was doing. On one data window, the lie—an orderly flow of decisions, the careful, complex structures I had seen in holographic splendor in the Ops Room—the three-dimensional mandalas upon which the KEs meditated. On another window, the actuality—stupid subroutines forced to masquerade as IA systems, queues building until Aleph could return to them; meanwhile, the greater part of the system was engaged in processing Diana’s sight.

The longer this went on, the more difficult it was for Aleph to handle—the end result was the slowdown.

Sitting in her quarters, we drank hot tea, something that smelled of jasmine and spice. “It’s quite a juggling act,” I said. “But I don’t know how long Aleph can keep it up. Besides, what does that matter? Take this to Toshi and Alice, to the ICOG Board. You shouldn’t be hiding this. Tell them it needs to be pursued in the right way—not with you working in isolation, stealing their system, but with all the resources you want. They’ll have to buy it.”

“Will they?”

“Don’t you think they’ll have to? They’ll see the importance.”

“Why? What’s in it for Siemens or Bechtel or Nippon Electric? Think about it, Jerry. I’ve jeopardized all their projects, the orbital energy grid, maybe ICOG itself. God knows what I’ve done to Aleph.”

She may have been right. Epochal discovery is a fine thing, especially in retrospect and when you don’t have to pay for it. But right now ICOG was playing animal trainer to a bunch of mean and various beasts, and they had to be fed.

If she told them, would they allow her to pursue her research, or would they just fire her? Who, if anyone, would be willing to pay the tab on a new Aleph system? And would they welcome her as director of the new project? And there was Aleph itself. What did it, in whatever peculiar fashion, want? Imponderables.

But for the present she was riding the storm, going ... I don't know where ... her own will and intelligence guiding, small enough comfort in a large gale, but perhaps enough to steer by, enough to work the force of the dense-vector wind.

From that point on I stayed away from Biops/I-Sight. "Nothing there," I told Alice and Toshi. "I don't think there's anything happening with the subsystems. If you want, I'll help you work with the logistics programs." Laying a trail away.

But after walking like automatons through the empty working days, Diana and I would meet in her rooms to sail the currents of our own storm. There was no steerage there, just a careening trip across the landscape that hung far below.

Finally I could avoid it no longer I called a meeting with Toshi and Alice. We used a small, plain conference room that featured a viewport on one side. Close in, a tug glided by, a snarl of crates, pallets, and rude assemblages, the pilot's head clearly visible, upside down, as he passed by.

"I believe my work is finished," I said. "Unfortunately I am unable to specify the exact nature of the problems affecting performance of the Aleph-Nought system. It remains unclear that such problems in fact exist. The periodic slowdowns may be a result of inherent systems vice, artifacts of the systems architecture" Set speeches for the memo tape. "I have prepared a menu of recommended changes in subsystems logic. They may effect optimum decision capacity in the total operational domain." Good, bureaucratic, hand-washing gibberish, to be supported by a set of plausible fictions, cosmetic subtleties that Alice and the KEs would have to institute to find out whether they had any effect at all.

Alice was puzzled. "Is that it, Jerry? It's not much."

"I'm sorry, Alice. I've done what I could. If you're not satisfied, you ought to get someone else."

The rest of the meeting was brief. Toshi stopped me in the corridor afterward. "You seem troubled," he said. 'Also reticent. I want to assure you that even complex problems can most often be worked out to mutual satisfaction." He let that statement lie—his attempt to bring me into the charmed circle of ringi seido, the process of joint consultation that is the soul of Japanese decision making. It was a nice gesture but meaningless. I just wasn't feeling Japanese.

I went to my compartment, where she was waiting. Her skin was hot to the touch. A last time, in seeming slow motion, we came together. She had just begun her period, and with her blood we traced scarlet arabesques across the sheets, across our thighs. Standing in the shower stall, I started to wash the blood away, but I didn't.

The tug fell from high orbit. ICOG had arranged a rendezvous below with a military shuttle. I touched the small crusts at the back of my neck, where her nails had punctured me, where she had clasped me. She still did.

The transfer came, and my pallet was shifted into the shuttle's cargo bay. Delta wings folded back, the shuttle entered the upper atmosphere somewhere over Hawaii. White ash from the tear-off thermal shielding flew past the viewport amid coruscations of red fire. Thin air played high-pitched cacophonies on the hull.

I loved her; I told her that. And I said, "You're not a monster; don't ever think it. Do what you must."

Leaving her with a platitude . . . I didn't tell her that nature abhors a vacuum, that everywhere she wasn't, was full of pain.

Flash of white light in the mind's eye, picture of a door opening, of something astonishing, its shape unclear, passing through. "Evolutionary emergence," Doctor Chin had said, but I doubted he would find it. He wasn't looking in the right places.

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