

WAYNE WIGHTMAN and RICHARD PAUL RUSSO

THE IDIOT'S DREAM

Richard Paul Russo is the author of *Inner Eclipse*, *Subterranean Gallery*, *Carlucci's Edge*, and his new novel, *Carlucci's Heart*, has just been published. Wayne Wightman's most recent book is a collection, *Ganglion & Other Stories*. Neither have done much collaborative writing before, but they found that this surreal and cerebral tale went surprisingly smoothly. Their key to success, quips Mr. Wightman, is that "Richard is sincere, and I don't care."

At least, we think he was joking.

Tarrant found the blind man in the back of the cave. Sitting against the rear sandstone wall, the man was naked, his milkywhite eyes open and unblinking. His thick-lipped mouth hung open, and dirt-streaked saliva trailed from his chin to his soft thighs. At first Tarrant thought the man might be dead, but then he saw the slow, deep intake of breath --chest filling, nostrils quavering -- then a few moments later a long, slow exhalation.

It was nearly a full minute before he took another breath.

Tarrant crouched in front of the blind man, gazing at him. The cave was small, in the lower foothills just outside Los Gatos; though Tarrant had often hiked through the area, he had never seen the cave before. Today he had taken a long lunch-break from the lab, had driven to the base of the hills as he often did, and had set off on one of his regular treks through the trees. A half hour into his hike he had come across the cave entrance, just to the side of a large boulder, where he was certain that before there had been only dirt and brush. The rainstorm the day before, Tarrant decided, must have opened the cave.

As he crouched in front of the motionless figure, Tarrant wondered how long the blind man had been sitting in this place. The ground under the soft flesh was packed hard and worn smooth, as though he might have been sitting there for weeks...or even longer. Tarrant leaned forward, inspecting the naked man, and a sudden chill traced over his face and arms -- the blind man's long pale hair seemed to have rooted into the surface of the cave wall behind him.

How long had this man been here? How had he stayed alive? Had someone been caring for him, feeding him? Tarrant looked around at the loose dirt of the cave floor. There were only his own footprints.

Tarrant waved his hand back and forth in front of the man's eyes, but there was no response. "Hey," Tarrant said. "Hey!" Still no response. Was the man deaf as well? Or maybe asleep. Did blind people sleep with their eyes open?

He should do something, Tarrant thought. Bring the man back to town, to a hospital, or call an ambulance, something. Tarrant reached out and touched the

blind man on the shoulder. The skin was cool, nearly cold, and unnaturally smooth. The man didn't move, didn't even flinch. Tarrant took a firm hold of the blind man's shoulder and gave him a brisk shake. "Hello? Can you hear me?"

The blind man cried out, arched his body, and the cave walls moaned as rubble shook loose and crumbled away, showering down on Tarrant and the blind man. Tarrant released the man and staggered back. The blind man twisted where he sat, head anchored to the wall by his hair, then vomited up a black chunky fluid. The ground shook, knocking Tarrant to the cave floor, cracks appeared in the cave walls, and the blind man jerked his head back and forth, making a choking sound.

Then, just as quickly as it had begun, everything calmed. The blind man went silent and settled back against the cave wall, motionless. The ground stopped shaking. Except for Tarrant's heart pounding in his ears, everything was quiet.

Tarrant remained on his hands and knees for a few moments, staring at the dead eyes of the naked blind man, then got to his feet and ran out of the cave.

The large, black sphere -- hovering high above him in its stasis field -- trembled slightly, then shook once with an enormous jolt. The Regulator noted the movement (two circles flashing red on the wall console before him), then quickly fingered a keyboard, and brought the sphere back to relative stability.

He looked over the vast chamber, at the huge dark sphere above him, and confirmed with his own eyes that it continued to tremble, though only slightly, then turned back to the bank of displays and readouts and light columns on the wall. His breath was smoke in the cold air. Only his hands and head were visible outside the bulky, convoluted black pressure suit.

His attention shifted constantly between the sphere, the readouts and displays and light columns, and his suit monitor. Occasionally his fingers flicked across one of the keyboards, or brushed a strip of glowing squares. A droplet of ice formed on the tip of his nose.

The Regulator turned and gazed at the sphere, and wondered what had caused the instability of the system.

In a dark Berlin apartment, Ulrike Walter woke with a start. A sharp pain arced through her belly, but she thought it was a sound that had awakened her, not the pain. Somebody crying out?

Ulrike lay in bed, listening, but could hear only traffic sounds outside, loud and regular. She sat up. The lighted crucifix at the end of the bed cast flickering dark shadows across the room. When she had first received the crucifix in return for her donations to the International Ministries of the Heart, the shadows had frightened her, but she was familiar with them now and could easily pray herself back to sleep when she awakened.

The pain eased somewhat but continued to pulse through her. She lay with her eyes barely open, murmuring the secret IMH prayers she had received by mail.

In the middle of the Third Prayer of Repose, a loud thought broke into the middle of everything. I must go to America.

America? That was crazy. What made her think that? She resumed her prayers.

Go to America.

Although it made her fear for her soul, she ceased praying for a moment. What about her job, she thought, and what about money? And how long in America? She didn't know anyone there. She had thought that someday she might make the trip, but certainly not now.

The knife-pain in her stomach flared up. She stifled a moan and began the Third Prayer again.

Go to America. And the pain gouged into her at every syllable.

Why was this? What was happening to her?

She knew she was a weak person, perhaps prone to hysteria, but the pain....

A pale globe seemed to form out of the ceiling over her head. She knew it was only some trick of her tired eyes and the shadows from the crucifix light. She prayed and the sphere made a noise like a sudden exhalation of breath. Her eyes opened wide, convinced the figment would now vanish, but it didn't.

It was a face protruding through the plaster of her ceiling, a thick-lipped moronic-looking face, and though the eyes were open, there was nothing in them.

Ulrike prayed rapidly, knowing that everything in her life was at the desire of Jesus, all things, the fall of every sparrow, and she prayed rapidly, not taking her eyes off the face, until something wet and slow and thick dropped onto her cheek, and she flinched and cried out.

It felt like every organ in her body was being attacked with thorns.

Go to America.

"Yes," Ulrike gasped, "yes, yes, I'll go, I'll go."

And as easily as that, the face and the pain were gone.

Ulrike murmured the First Prayer of Acceptance, over and over until morning, and then she packed a small bag and went to the airport where she joined the other haggard, sleepless travelers who filled up the seats near her, all waiting for the first available flight.

When Tarrant got back to the med lab, Muskie and Vang were cleaning up. The place was a mess -- glassware broken, fluids spilled, electrical equipment down

or sputtering smoke. Something had blown up, and over in the corner, brown liquid dripped from the ceiling.

Muskie was laughing, and waved as Tarrant crossed the room. "Man, you really missed something," Muskie said. "It put us back about three weeks on some stuff, but it was almost worth it to see Vang's expression when he pulled all his fried little cultures out of the incubator. You should have seen it. He looked like he'd lost his best friend. Knowing Vang, he probably did."

"What, an earthquake?" Tarrant asked, thinking of the ground shaking inside the cave.

"Nope. That would have made more sense. Nothing shook at all, exactly, but all hell broke loose. First thing that happened, the coffee pot exploded." He gestured at the dripping brown stains.

"A good thing," Vang grumbled from the back corner, where he had the cover up on one of the centrifuges. "Save us from pancreatic cancer."

Through the heavy glass partition that separated the pathology lab from Electrophysiology, Tarrant saw Pascali bent over one of his new digital 12-lead EKG units. Through the open glass door, Tarrant heard the old Italian cursing the machine.

"Pascali was speaking in tongues for twenty minutes," Muskie said.

Tarrant turned back to his colleagues, feeling like his announcement would be an anticlimax. "I found something a little strange during my walk today. Does the phone still work?"

"Forget the phone. Check the waiting room, straighten it out, all right?" Muskie said to him. "We don't want our subjects to come in here and get their bowels in an uproar."

"I found a guy in a cave, about a quarter of a mile from here. Blind, deaf, maybe, and--"

"Hobo," Vang said, dropping the remains of the coffee pot into a trash can and watching the pyrex disintegrate. "Big deal."

Tarrant could see Muskie and Vang had no interest in his find. Looking at the mess in the two labs, he could understand. He crossed the room and stuck his head into Pascali's lab.

"Hey. Pascali."

Pascali looked up, frowning. "What the hell do you want? The lab blows up and everybody wants something."

"I just want to borrow one of your portable 12-lead EKGs tomorrow at lunchtime."

I've got something I need to check out."

"What, find out if your girlfriend's got a heart?"

"Pascali..."

The old man nodded. "Sure, sure, if the damn thing still works. Just take care of it, all right?" Pascali turned back to his new EKG unit, cursed again, and kicked the table it sat on.

"Thanks, Pascali. I'll take care of it."

"Hey!" Muskie called. "Tarrant! The waiting room?"

Tarrant nodded. "All right, I'll see what I can do."

The Regulator paced slowly along the banks of displays and readouts. He had been unable to bring about complete stability, and the fluctuations continued -- a number flashing, a light column circling erratically, a depression pulsing when it should have been glowing steadily. He moved along the wall and tapped at keyboards.

He had, hopefully, set in motion the processes which would return the sphere to complete stability, but he did not know how long that would take, and until then he had to prevent the deviation from worsening.

The Regulator stopped for a moment and glanced at the huge black sphere. It continued to tremble.

Half way into the flight, the pilot announced goodnaturedly that because of unforeseen factors they would be arriving in San Francisco two hours early. Ulrike's concentration had been numbed by exhaustion, and at first the announcement meant nothing to her.

Then it struck her that the flight was supposed to go to Los Angeles. She sat up for a moment, looked around to see if anyone else was surprised. Everyone in the plane, including the stewardesses, looked numbed and dull, the same as she felt.

The attendants would listlessly mumble to the passengers, probably asking them what they wanted to drink. The passengers would not respond, and something would be set before them and remain untouched until it was picked up and thrown away.

Ulrike tediously dug through her purse for her ticket -- it was so much work. She was almost sure the ticket listed Los Angeles as the destination. When she found it, she took it out and flipped it open. The destination slot was blank. So was the rest of the ticket. The right half of the ticket had nothing at all on it -- the print had faded away.

For a brief moment Ulrike was terrified, but then, just as quickly, she realized it all had to be a part of her Lord's plans. She breathed slowly and deeply

several times, calming herself. Then, staring at the empty ticket, she silently began the Fourth Prayer of Contemplation of the Mysteries.

Tarrant entered the cave, breathing heavily from carrying all the equipment up the hillside -- portable 12-lead, blood pressure cuff, phlebotomy tray. He stood just inside the cave, shoulders aching, and let his eyes adjust to the light.

The naked blind man was still there, motionless against the cave wall, eyes open, and saliva continued to string from his thick lips to his folded legs. Tarrant laid out all his equipment on the cave floor, and began setting things up.

Simple things first, Tarrant told himself. Blood pressure, run an EKG. Then...then try to stick him for a little blood.

Tarrant was careful and gentle as he wrapped the cuff around the blind man's left arm. He had a hell of a time picking up the man's pulse, mainly because it was so slow -- like his respiration -- down to about six or seven beats a minute. Once he felt it, he started pumping air into the cuff.

As the pressure increased, slight tremors moved through the blind man, then through the cave floor.

"What the hell...?"

Tarrant stopped pumping, placed the stethoscope, and twisted the air release valve. At that moment, the floor of the cave calmed. Tarrant waited a long time, hearing nothing, then finally the first tone came through. More waiting. Eventually he felt the second tone, but never did hear it. Jesus. Thirty-four over palp. The guy should be about dead. What was he, in hibernation?

He removed the cuff and set things up for the EKG. He placed half a dozen electrodes on the man's chest, struggling to get them to stick to the almost slimy skin, strapped bands around the man's wrists and ankles, then plugged everything into the 12-lead. Tarrant turned on the power and started the EKG, watching the tracing feed emerge from the unit.

He'd expected odd tracings because of the low pulse rate, but not as strange as he was now getting. All three lines in the AVR lead were completely straight, as if the electrodes weren't picking up anything at all. Even the lines in leads I-III were strange, with dozens of tiny jumps between peaks of the QRS complexes, as though the ventricles were fibrillating constantly between beats.

Tarrant let the EKG run for close to ten minutes, then shut everything down and packed it away, tucking the printouts into his coat pocket. He'd have Pascali take a look at them. Something was wrong with this person.

Now, though, came the difficult part. Blood.

Tarrant prepared a drawing syringe and several vacuum tubes, though he had a

feeling he'd be lucky to get even one. The blind man trembled, his arm twitched, and he moaned softly when Tarrant tied the tourniquet on the left arm to bring up a vein. Tarrant felt like shouting at the man, yelling at him to knock it the hell off, he was trying to help him.

Another tremor ran through the floor of the cave.

A vein gradually appeared, fat and dark. Tarrant swabbed with alcohol, placed the needle point on the skin, braced himself, and drove the needle in.

The blind man howled and bucked, twisting violently, but Tarrant held tight and kept the needle in the vein. Dark blue fluid, almost black, flowed into the syringe as Tarrant pulled back the plunger. The ground convulsed, the blind man moaned and howled, yanking and twisting in Tarrant's grip. Dirt crumbled and fell from the cave roof.

Losing control, Tarrant released the tourniquet, jerked out the syringe and stumbled back, landing on his butt. The earth tremors and the blind man's own convulsions continued, and Tarrant was afraid to move.

Then, like the first time, the shaking abruptly ceased. The blind man became still, and the haze of dust slowly settled throughout the cave, except where it landed on the blind man. There, strangely, it danced and slid away, as if the dust and the skin carried opposing electrical charges.

Tarrant got to his feet, syringe still in his hand. He quickly pumped the blood into a vacuum tube, packed up everything, then with one last look at the blind man, hurried out of the cave.

The fluctuations were getting worse. Another massive jolt had hit the black sphere, and though he'd managed to soften the subsequent vibration, the sphere continued to shake, and threatened to destabilize completely.

The Regulator moved more quickly now, from one danger point to another, keying corrections into the keyboards, running his fingers along strips of light, depressing glowing plates he could barely reach. Behind and far above him, the sphere trembled and shook.

The pilot announced that they were passing over New York City.

Ulrike sighed heavily, but otherwise did not react much. Several hours earlier, the plane had left New York City. She glanced out the window now and saw the Statue of Liberty waist deep in the harbor. She wondered for a moment if there would be enough fuel to keep flying all the way to San Francisco, but then assured herself that Jesus would provide. Ulrike looked back at the movie screen.

She thought they must be playing the third or fourth movie now -- a comedy, as nearly as she could tell, about a man reincarnated as a dog, but it seemed strangely scrambled and the screen periodically broke into images of grotesque

violence, cannibalism, and blood-drinking.

Abruptly and without explanation, the screen blanked and the stewardesses again began lethargically distributing drinks and food --the second full meal of the flight.

Like the other passengers, Ulrike observed passively, sat quietly, accepted what was given her, and waited only for her arrival in San Francisco. Or wherever.

Tarrant barely made it back to the lab. His car kept dying, and if it hadn't been downhill most of the way, he'd have had to walk back. All the new potholes, which hadn't been there on his way up, didn't help much either. As it was, he coasted into the tiny parking lot and just managed to get the car into one of the spaces.

When he entered the lab, Vang and Muskie were, as usual, bent over their work, Muskie staring through his microscope, counting blood cells, and Vang putting a few numbers at a time into his computer and then staring glumly at the screen.

"Listen," Tarrant said, putting the case on a stool and talking to their backs, "either this EKG's blown its little mechanical mind, or I've found someone who's got only part of a heart and the weirdest looking blood I've --"

"We've been discussing how to murder you," Muskie said, making a few more checks on his eosinophil column.

"What?"

"You know," Vang said, "planning your demise, separating your various pieces in a lethal manner."

"What are you guys talking about? I'm trying to tell you, I've found someone extraordinary, someone who's honest-to-god unique."

"Vang suggested keeping you half-sedated and cutting off little parts over a long period of time," Muskie said, putting a big check in the basophil column. "I told him his ethnicity was showing."

"We agreed to keep it simple and shotgun you," Vang said, finally turning away from his screen. "The American way."

"Yeah," Muskie agreed. "Ten gauge to the head."

Tarrant noticed Pascali standing in the doorway, glaring at him but not saying a word.

"What's going on here? What're you guys talking about?"

"Because," Muskie said, "every time you walk out of here, everything goes to hell. You see what I'm counting here? Look at this." He held up the chart.

Tarrant looked at it a moment and said, "Jesus Christ, what did you test, your tuna sandwich?"

"He looked like a person to me," Muskie said. "But I could've been wrong."

"Aliens," Vang said. "We got an alien infestation. Look at what Pascali's got."

Pascali waved Tarrant over to a terminal just inside his lab. "Here in front of me," he said, indicating his computer screen, "I have the EKG of Miss Ravinder Chilatavong. Care to glance at it, Tarrant?"

Across the screen were nine parallel scribbles, all of them dense and nasty-looking with dozens of fluctuations between the complexes, lines that shouldn't have come out of the EKG box -- and an AVR series that was utterly blank.

Tarrant looked at Pascali, at Vang, and then at Muskie.

"What is all this?" he asked quietly.

"Take a look at our new coffee pot," Vang said.

Over in the corner, the wall and the floor were splashed brown. Shattered pyrex had blown across the counter and lay in the sink and in the puddle on the floor.

Muskie wadded up his count-sheet and dropped it on the floor. "We're a tiny lab, guys, and if we turn in results like this, the docs are going to think we're over here having ether parties. We'll be selling aluminum siding next month."

"The 12-lead I was using on this guy in the cave gave me the same kind of reading. Maybe something happened to our equipment."

"This," Muskie said, "is a microscope. You look through it and you see what's at the other end. What can go wrong with that? We've got something very serious here, Tarrant, and I don't know what it is, but two days now, you leave for your postprandial stroll and about half an hour later, the coffee pot blows up and everything turns to shit." His face was red now. "What the hell are you doing out there besides destroying our lab? How are you doing it?"

"That's what I've been trying to tell you. Look, for Christ's sake." He held up the tube of blood he'd managed to draw from the blind man. It was dark indigo in color, nearly black.

"What's that?" Pascali asked. "Ink?"

"Blood," Tarrant replied. "From the guy I found in the cave." He looked at Vang. "The guy you said was a hobo. 'Big deal,' you said."

Vang shrugged. "I still say big deal. We measure reality here, not make up

stories for the National Inquirer."

Tarrant shook his head and proceeded to tell them the whole story, everything that had happened since he'd first seen the open cave. They didn't believe him.

"You want to tell us some halfwit moron is causing all this crap?" Muskie said, gesturing at the lab messes. "What's he supposed to be, some mutant with paranormal powers? Or--what is it, Vang-- the thing about Shiva dreaming the world, and if he wakes up, we're all history? Maybe you found Shiva -- in California. That make sense to you, Tarrant? Bullshit. Bums and earthquakes -- no connection."

"And it blows up our coffee pot just because you've disturbed him?" Vang added. "You white people are crazy."

All Pascali said was, "I'd like to run an EEG on this guy, see what's going on inside his head."

Tarrant nodded. "That's exactly what I want to do. Just check it out. What could it hurt? I mean, what could it hurt?"

The Regulator was losing control. No new disruptions had hit the system, but the sphere continued shaking. The air around him crackled and hissed, and he thought the temperature in the chamber was rising.

The Regulator could not quite keep up with the warnings that flashed at him across the wall, though he moved quickly from one trouble spot to the next, pounding at the keyboards, flicking charged toggles, adjusting dials and strips and elevated columns. He was sweating heavily now, and the suit's cooling units kicked in. He did not know how long he could maintain stability.

Ulrike Walter stood in the middle of the San Francisco terminal amidst great confusion, though she herself and many other passengers remained quite calm. Apparently flights were coming in inexplicably late or early. The electronic nerve-net on which the airport depended had begun to behave erratically, and passengers by the hundreds were blithely walking through security checks without pausing.

At one point, Ulrike glanced up at an arrival-departure monitor, and instead of seeing the usual text naming cities and flight numbers, she saw a human shape being consumed in flames. The monitor cabinets changed colors, shifting randomly from one glowing hue to another.

As she moved through the terminal, a dense fog began to drift along the floor, passing unhindered through the solid glass windows. It floated around Ulrike, cool and comforting.

She was not disturbed. She thought nothing. She went out the hissing doors and, with hundreds of other calm baggageless passengers, she waited for the bus she knew would take her south and into the mountains.

Vang stayed in the lab while Tarrant led Muskie and the grumbling Pascali back through the mountains to the cave. Vang was supposed to watch a voltmeter they'd hooked up to the lab's electrical supply and examine a few blood samples both now and after they returned. They'd borrowed a coffee pot from Vang's mother, and when they'd left, Vang was eating a sandwich and counting Muskie's leukocytes, the smell of fresh coffee filling the air.

Up on the hill, however, there was no aroma of fresh coffee, only a faintly rancid smell. Pascali looked at the cave opening. "We're supposed to go in there?" he said. "Jesus." It was late afternoon by now, and storm clouds had rolled in, blocking out the sun. Inside the cave it was dark, quiet.

Tarrant said nothing but stooped low and stepped under the bushy outcropping and into the gloom. Muskie followed him with the portable EEG module in the aluminum case, and Pascali came last, muttering about bats.

When Tarrant shined the flashlight on the naked man, Muskie gasped and Pascali fell silent.

"How long has he been here?" Pascali asked, his voice now low and professional.

"This is the third day that I know of, but the first day, the floor showed no footprints but my own, and I saw his hair had grown into the sandstone wall behind his head."

Muskie stared at him a moment, muttered, "Bullshit," and then snapped the case open. "Shine that down here, I can't see what I'm doing."

In the half-light Pascali knelt and began hooking the battery to the oscilloscope.

"He doesn't like to be touched," Tarrant told Muskie as he pulled out the contact pads and untangled the wires. "I mean, he really doesn't like to be touched."

"What's he going to do," Muskie said, "drool on me? Get the light on the side of his head."

"Just go easy," Tarrant whispered.

"Scope's ready," Pascali said. His face and hands glowed green from its light. Tarrant looked down and saw the smooth lines suddenly spike and dance, filling up the small screen.

The blind man moaned softly -- Muskie had the first contact above the left ear.

Pascali clicked several knobs. "This doesn't look right," he mumbled.

"I can't see this," Muskie complained as he tried to part the man's hair for the

second contact. "Get the light here." Tarrant moved the flashlight. When the second electrode touched skin, the oscilloscope flared brilliantly, filling the cave with green light.

Pascali gasped. "I saw -- ! I saw something!"

"Good," Muskie murmured. "We know your retinas are functional."

"No, I mean...." Pascali was pointing at the screen that now fluttered and flashed erratically. "I saw a man with a...wearing a pressure suit or something!"

Muskie breathed heavily, working on another electrode, trying to make it stick. "Let's not get too weird, all right?"

Pascali stared into the green light. "His face was...it wasn't human."

"Jesus Christ," Muskie said, "I can't see a god damned thing back here and you're down there on the ground hallucinating." He bumped the naked man's head and the idiot moaned. "Maybe I can just hold these in place. What are you getting?"

Tarrant thought he felt the cave floor tremble.

Pascali's face was bright with sweat. "This isn't...I think this must have been knocked around on our way up here. It's not giving me...." He turned the dials, the soft clicks sounding gauzy and unreal in the musty air. He cranked up the gain, tried adding and dropping frequency filters.

"If it is working right," Tarrant said, "what does it mean?"

"It means...." He took a deep breath. "This means massive brain damage, a comatose condition approaching brain death, but here --" He kept playing with the dials, making adjustments. "But...I don't know, at the same time it indicates some kind of intense, organized activity. It doesn't make any --"

The screen fluttered and flashed again.

"God damn it," Muskie said.

"I saw it again!" Pascali said. "He was there again!"

"You didn't see anything," Muskie snapped, pulling away the contacts. "We can't get shit with me holding these things in place -- it screws everything up."

"But I saw --"

"Let's get the goon out of here," Muskie said. "This is ridiculous. I wasn't trained to work in the dark."

Pascali still stared into the screen, which now showed only smooth lines. "If we took him back to the lab we could arrange to image his head with the MR over at the University. That would show us what we've got here."

Muskie had already stuffed the contacts back in the aluminum case and had moved to the far side of the naked man. "Get his other arm, Tarrant. Let's get him out of here and get some light on the subject. You gather up our stuff," he said to Pascali.

"We have to be careful," Tarrant said. "Every time I moved him--"

"Just get him under his other arm," Muskie said.

Tarrant reached down, hesitated, then took hold of the blind man's arm and shoulder.

"Now," Muskie said.

They lifted. The ground shook violently for a moment, and dirt fell from the cave roof.

"Let him go! Let him go!" Tarrant shouted. "Every time I've moved him, that's happened."

Muskie glared at him through the falling dust. "It's an earthquake, asshole. You're in California. Get his arm again."

The tremors had ceased and the dirt settled, but they couldn't move the blind man any farther -- his hair was still rooted firmly in the cave wall.

"Tarrant," Muskie said, "pull his hair out of the dirt there, will you? Then we can get him out of here."

"No," Tarrant said, "I don't think --"

"Jesus. You brought us up here. Just yank his god damned hair loose and we can get on with this."

"I don't think -- "

Muskie stepped around the naked man and swept his hand between head and wall.

Tarrant heard a ripping sound as the blind man's hair tore free of the cave wall. An electrical jolt burst through Tarrant, and suddenly he couldn't see a thing. He heard Pascali, or perhaps it was Muskie, screaming something about his eyes. Everything seemed milky, muffled, and very slow.

Whatever was in Tarrant's hands...what was it he had grasped?...whatever it was had turned hard and knobby, like an old tree limb, and something dribbled from his hands down his arm and dripped off his elbow...why couldn't he see? Why

didn't he care? He tried to release what he was holding but his hands wouldn't come free. Krazy Glue, he thought absurdly. Where was he?

He thought he was moving, staggering, dragging something in some direction, though he couldn't feel his feet, and at the moment he at last realized something had gone terribly wrong, at that moment, he was hit by a wall of light and slammed to the ground.

Red erupted across the wall.

Light columns pulsed rapidly with angry crimson, circles of glaring red flashed at the Regulator. Alarm bells sounded, clanging through the chamber.

The stasis field was malfunctioning.

The Regulator turned, looked up at the black sphere, which now trembled violently. Tiny filaments of electric blue sparkled in the air around the sphere.

Suit monitors blinked red into his eyes; the Regulator hit the emergency panels and he heard the clicks and hissing of the vents opening in all the walls, heard the rush of the clear blue gel-fluid pouring into the chamber. The Regulator held his hands away from him, fingered the green tab inside his left wrist.

The clear helmet emerged from his neck collar, quickly formed a bubble over his head, then sealed; air hissed, the suit's internal circulation and heat systems kicking in. Two more flexible, contoured bubbles emerged from the wrist collars, sealed over his hands like gloves as the gel fluid poured into the chamber at an incredible rate and reached as high as his waist.

The clear blue fluid continued to flood the chamber, and the Regulator watched it rise, watched the sphere shaking above him, watched the swirl of electric color around it as the stasis field weakened, sputtered, threatened to completely collapse.

The fluid rose to his neck, then a few seconds later was above his head. The Regulator floated up toward the sphere.

* * *

Ulrike sat quietly in the bus as it rounded the mountain curves and lurched over deep black potholes. Ahead of the bus, like a great metalbacked caterpillar, other buses trailed each other at high speed with no more than half a meter separating them. She looked down at the limp purse she held in her lap and began reciting the Second Canticle of Trust. Her fingers, neatly folded over the black leather, separated from her hands and crawled over her lap like worms.

Her mouth opened, but no sound came out as she broke off her murmuring; in desperation she began saying to herself the Hymn of Horror...no, that wasn't right. The Hymn of Heaven. Yes. The Hymn of --

As she began the opening lines, she looked up and saw a wide, black chasm crossing the narrow road. It could not have been caused by an earthquake -- it couldn't have been caused by...anything. It was like an erasure, like her ticket, a gap of nothing across the asphalt, and beyond it rose up a milky vagueness, without trees or sky or ground.

She tried to call from memory the Prayer of Failure, no, of Feigning-she was so confused! The Prayer of Fantasy -- no, not right either.

Her fingers melted into gobs of red slime and the man next to her began frantically tearing his clothes off his body. He had black scales over his chest, and his lips became hard and thin with sharp nubs of teeth behind them.

The bus was enveloped in whiteness and silence, and when Ulrike screamed, there was no sound, not even a whisper.

The Regulator rose from the floor, adrift in the thick fluid. He thought he could feel the cold seeping through the suit, overwhelming the heating units, but he knew that was impossible.

He drifted slowly upward, gazing at the dark sphere now shaking violently, the gel-fluid not quite high enough yet. Then a few seconds later the fluid reached the sphere, washing out the crackle of electricity, rapidly enveloped it, and rose the rest of the way to the ceiling. The chamber was full.

Nothing moved. The sphere, its stasis field completely neutralized, no longer shook, no longer trembled. It floated without rising, its buoyancy perfectly neutral.

The Regulator's new sea-like world was nearly silent. The air circ system hummed quietly inside the suit; his own breath was a series of regular hisses. He moved his legs and arms, awkwardly swimming upward.

Figures glowed brightly on the sphere, delicate patterns of bright green that might have been letters or ideographs. He swam toward the sphere, then drifted in front of it for a minute, staring at the glowing markings, trying to make some sense of them. Then he moved forward, stretched his arms and legs wide; the Regulator drifted, spread-eagled until he made contact with the sphere, then wrapped his limbs across the dark black metal and green glowing figures. He pressed his helmeted face against the sphere and began to melt into it.

Tarrant's brain worked like an erratically flashing light bulb. For a few moments it would work and he could think, more or less, and then his thoughts would black out, and when he could see again, everything had changed.

In the moments he was conscious, he kept getting momentary flashes of bizarre images, of vast violence, of cannibalism and blood-drinking, of screaming mobs tearing bodies apart with their hands, of thundering destructive earthquakes, and of a world drowned in blood that would quench none of the endless fires.

He seemed to be...in the mountains, standing in the open air, with Muskie and Pascali, and at their feet lay the smiling, unconscious body of....

(torrents of fire swelled from the earth like virgin springs, incinerating the screaming helpless who stood lashed tight to stakes)

Tarrant's feeble attention was drawn to movement below him, down the mountainside. Gleaming silver buses disgorged hundreds of passengers who walked as though they were numb and half blind, as Tarrant himself felt. The passengers moved toward the embankment and began clawing their way up toward them.

Tarrant wanted to ask Muskie, beside him, why this was happening....

(holding a knife high above his head, in the perfect air, the man shouted, "My obedience, my honor, my love, my life, my God!" and brought the blade down in a violent strike, burying it with a ripping slash in his own intestines)

"Muskie? Where are you? Pascali?"

In blinks and flashes, he saw the exhausted mass slowly making their way up the mountainside. They were dressed in odd, colorful clothes, many of the men wearing narrow-brimmed canvas hats and shorts, some in heavy coats, while the women were dressed in everything from expensive formal wear with glittery jewelry to jeans with daypacks.

Tourists, Tarrant thought. Tourists in tour buses? What in hell is....

(men in chain mail, on rearing horses inside a cathedral, slashing at screaming worshippers, the horses lunging and plunging blood up to their bellies]

At his feet sprawled the naked idiot, legs bent like the figure 4, and his eyes slightly opened, but with only white showing. Through his parted lips, passed a dull "Uhhhh...."

As Tarrant stared down at him, trying to imagine what he had done to cause this, reality began flickering in and out rapidly, fibrillating and in the spaces between seeing the sprawled idiot and the approaching dull-faced tourists, Tarrant saw what Pascali must have seen in the oscilloscope.

Against a field of blue, floated a pressure-suited black figure, and inside the bubble that blossomed out of the shoulders was a face that was not human -- there was a stiff look to the skin, and something strange about the eyes.

Tarrant could see its lips moving but the clattery voice faded in and out. The black figure touched a lighted bar on his chest and his words came in more clearly, in English, at least.

"Return...return the god...to His resting place. Return Him to the

Tarrant gave up all pretense of self-control and assumptions about the rational world following known rules.

As quickly as the black figure had appeared across his vision, it vanished, but everything around him, the mountains, the trees and brush, the tourists, Muskie and Pascali, everything had a queer heaving quality to it, as though the reality-screen on which everything was projected was about to rip.

Tarrant struggled to move toward Muskie, and when he looked into Muskie's stunned eyes, he knew he was seeing the same distorted world.

"Muskie --"

No response.

"Muskie!" He grabbed a handful of his shirt collar and gave it one shake. "Help me move him!"

Muskie's eyes focused on Tarrant's face. "What did we do?" he mumbled slackly.

"Help me move him!" He pulled Muskie forward by the shirt collar. "Take his arm. Reach down, god damn it, and take his arm!"

When they first moved him, light and darkness flickered around Tarrant, but he tried to keep his feet under him and his hands on the soft flesh of the moaning idiot.

"Pull, Muskie!" Tarrant yelled into his face. "Come on!"

Muskie whimpered, his eyes widening and then squinting as he looked down at the soft body they dragged toward the cave mouth. Suddenly Muskie yanked his hands away, staring at the idiot, his teeth bared and his breath rough in his throat.

"Muskie --!"

But then Tarrant saw that the thing they carried was now roughscaled, black, more reptile than human, and it looked up at them with helpless and malignant eyes. Tarrant wondered if it was still blind.

Across Tarrant's perceptions, the pressure-suited figure reappeared and commanded, "Return the god to His place of meditation."

Tarrant reached across and slapped Muskie. Muskie looked up at him, eyes wide, then backed away and dropped to his knees, moaning.

"Muskie!" Tarrant shouted.

Muskie didn't respond. But then Pascali appeared at Tarrant's side and said, "I'll help you." The old Italian seemed quite calm. Pascali moved around to the other side of the idiot, bent over and took an arm.

The idiot hissed at them as they began dragging him toward the cave. Sharp, metallic teeth glinted in its mouth. Then the scales began multiplying, shrinking in size and increasing in number, rippling across the idiot's body as they changed color from deep black to pale white.

Just as they reached the mouth of the cave, extra limbs sprouted across the thing's body -- pale and fragile arms emerged from the neck and chest, and short, thick legs grew from the belly and thighs. It refused to be one thing, as though its reality had become unsettled.

Tarrant almost released his grip, but Pascali shook his head and said, "Hang on." Tarrant hung on.

On the extra limbs, just inches under Tarrant's face, long thin toes and fingers sprouted and waved gently, mesmerizing Tarrant. Pascali called to him, breaking him out of a trance. And then, as Tarrant and Pascali resumed dragging the naked thing, the extra limbs melted away and the body began to glow, illuminating the interior of the cave.

The scales began rippling again, turning a deep, blood-red. Fingers and toes transformed into dark, sharp claws, and it hissed at them again. The milky white film over its eyes faded, then returned, glowed bright crimson like the scales, then turned white once more.

The ground rumbled, and the light around them flickered. Tarrant didn't know if it was the beast's glow that flickered, or his own vision. He and Pascali dragged it deeper into the cave, toward the wall that had held its hair.

The thing no longer struggled, but it continued to hiss at them. The scales melted away, replaced by a rough, knobby hide. Then the rough hide, too, melted away, replaced in turn by an incredibly clear, plastic-film skin. Arteries and veins, muscle and organs, cartilage and bone -- all of it abnormally shaped and linked -- were clearly visible inside the body.

They finally reached the back wall, and Tarrant and Pascali propped the blind idiot into a sitting position, head and back against the sandstone wall. The thing's hair snaked away from its head and rooted itself in the wall. Tarrant and Pascali released its arms, and backed away.

The idiot seemed to grow larger as they watched. The flabbiness of its limbs smoothed away, and the muscle increased, flexing, firming. One last time, it hissed through its metallic teeth.

"Jesus." Tarrant stood motionless, staring at it. The clear vinyl skin turned milky, became shiny and solid, yet still it gave off a bright glow. Even the film over its eyes glowed. Limbs and digits flexed. Its teeth clicked together, growing longer and sharper even as Tarrant watched in horrid fascination.

"We have to get the hell out of here," he said to Pascali. He backed away toward

the cave mouth, but Pascali didn't move; the old Italian just stared at the monstrous thing glowing and hissing and clicking in the darkness of the cave.
"Pascali, come on."

Pascali finally turned and looked at Tarrant. He nodded once, then with a long look back at it, he followed Tarrant out of the cave.

Outside, a strange, strobe-like flickering illuminated the growing darkness. The tourists from the buses, led by a tall, blonde woman, were climbing up the hillside, headed directly for the cave. Muskie still crouched in the dirt, whimpering.

"Go back!" Tarrant shouted. "For Christ's sake, go back!"

They all stopped except for the blonde woman in the lead. She continued up the hill, making for the cave mouth. Tarrant moved in front of her, blocking the way.

"You can't go in there," he told her. "There's...there's something horrible inside."

The woman just smiled gently at him. After a moment, she said, very softly, "My Lord awaits me."

The woman started forward again, and, feeling helpless, Tarrant stepped back and let her pass. Unable to move, unable to utter a sound, he watched her enter the cave.

Ulrike entered the cave, then paused for a moment. The glowing light pulsed gently from the rear of the cave, and she could feel it enter her with a healing warmth. The light and heat coursed through her, bright and glowing.

She moved farther into the cave. The heat and light increased, washing over and through her, enclosing and purging her at the same time. The cave walls shimmered, and an incredibly soothing warmth rose from the cave floor.

When she reached the back of the cave, she stopped in front of a brilliant white presence...her Lord. Now Ulrike could see nothing but the Light, feel nothing but the Heat. Both increased around her and within her, and she realized she was becoming One with her Lord.

Heat and Light, Light and Heat, growing and cleansing, swelling inside her. Then it all came together and blossomed in glory.

Tarrant stood by the cave mouth, watching the light flickering inside it. Muskie, though still on his hands and knees, seemed to have regained some of his senses.

"Why didn't you stop her?" he asked Tarrant.

Tarrant opened his mouth, but had trouble speaking. "I...I..."

"He couldn't," Pascali said. His voice was still calm. "No one could have."

Tarrant knew Pascali was right, but he didn't take much comfort from the old man's words.

A tremendous roar erupted from the cave, followed by a rending scream that was quickly choked off. A wet crunching sound came from within, then quickly ceased.

Another roar went up, this time from the tourists on the slope below. They stampeded, not down the hill as Tarrant had expected, but up the hill and toward the cave. Pasted on their faces were ecstatic smiles, eyes were open wide and glittering, and they held their arms out, ready to embrace...what?

Tarrant scrambled out of the way as the tourists converged on the cave and rushed inside. It was a screaming frenzied mob, and Tarrant knew there was no stopping them. He stood beside Pascali, watching the tourists fight their way inside. Muskie got to his feet, swayed unsteadily for a few moments, then put his hand on Tarrant's shoulder for support.

"What the hell is going on?" Muskie's voice was hoarse.

Tarrant shook his head. How could he know? How could any of them know?

Another roar erupted from within the cave, long and continuous, now intercut with cries and screams and shouts of joy. Joy? Yes, that's what it sounded like. And it sounded like carnage.

The tourists continued to shove and push their way into the cave, maybe three or four hundred altogether, all of them still smiling as they clawed their way inside. Already more people had pressed into the cave than it could possibly hold, Tarrant was certain of that, but they continued to stream into the glowing interior of the hillside. And the roars and screams and shouts sounded from the cave.

Madness, Tarrant thought, utter madness. The light and sky continued to flicker around them, and when he looked down the hill he saw that the empty buses hovered a few inches above the ground. He wondered how he could see so well when it was almost night. The sky above, when it wasn't flickering white, was nearly black and filled with the immense contours of thunderheads. He thought he could hear rain falling, but he felt none and saw none.

The three of them stood on the side of the hill, watching the sky and watching the tourists fight their way over each other and into the cave, listening to the screams, the roars, the choking sounds and cries and shouts and all the rest of the madness. Tarrant felt helpless, frozen by a strange, overriding inertia, overwhelmed by confusion. What could he do? Nothing but wait until it all was over.

Time passed in a kind of numbness. The number of tourists dwindled as they continued to disappear into the cave. No one emerged. Tarrant could no longer focus on what that meant. He turned away from the cave and gazed up at the flickering sky, his attention dissipating in the clouds above.

And then, catching him by surprise, silence fell. The last tourist was gone, and when he looked at the cave, it seemed to be empty except for an intense glow of white light coming from the back.

The ground lurched once, then swelled and sank, like a long, rolling earthquake. A loud crack sounded, followed by a rumble, and the side of the hill above the cave collapsed, rock and dirt and brush descending in a small avalanche.

The ground stilled, the flickering light above them ceased, and then a heavy downpour drenched them in cold rain from the thunderheads. But less than two minutes after it began, the cloudburst stopped, and the thunderheads rolled away, clearing the sky and revealing bright thickets of stars and a nearly full moon above them, illuminating the hillside with a clean, silver light.

Tarrant looked once again at the cave...except there was no cave anymore. The hillside had collapsed to completely cover its opening, and in fact it looked as if there never had been a cave, and that there had never even been an avalanche.

"Down there," Muskie said softly, pointing down the hill. Tarrant turned, but didn't see anything. Then he realized that was just what Muskie meant: the buses were gone. Trees, earth, sky, all looked as it had earlier in the day.

Everything appeared to be back to normal. Normal. Except that several hundred people were gone, vanished, and without leaving a trace.

"We should go back," Muskie said. "Back to the lab. See how Vang is."

Tarrant nodded absently, still burdened with inertia.

"I'm staying up here for a while," Pascali said.

Tarrant turned to look at the old Italian.

Pascali shrugged. "I've seen some things tonight," he said. "And I need to think about what I've seen. So I'll be back later." He paused. "I need to think."

"You're out of your mind," Muskie said.

But Tarrant understood, and he nodded to Pascali. Things were back to normal, but they could never really be normal again. "Let him be," Tarrant said. "I'll go back with you."

Muskie started to say something more, but Tarrant abruptly shook his head, cutting him off. "Let's just go."

Muskie sighed, shaking his head. Tarrant turned to Pascali. "We'll see you back at the lab."

Pascali nodded. Tarrant and Muskie started down the hill, and as they entered the trees Tarrant stopped and looked back. He saw Pascali sit on a flat rock in front of the spot where the cave had been and stare at the hillside. How could any of them ever see the world the same way again? What was the world? He turned back and followed Muskie down the hill, the question ringing over and over in his thoughts.

The Regulator stood and gazed out over the chamber, at the wall banks, and at the dark, motionless sphere suspended in the air above him. There was not a trace of movement in the sphere, not a glimmer of abnormal readings anywhere. Everything was stable. Everything was in equilibrium once again.

Overall, the disturbance had actually been quite mild. Less than four hundred people destroyed. Nothing compared to some of the disturbances in the past when thousands, even millions of deaths had occurred before he could intervene to regain stability. This time had been practically nothing.

The Regulator turned back to the banks of readouts, checking them all, satisfied. For a while, now, he knew he could relax.

He retracted his helmet into the collar of his protective suit, thinking about the inevitable Final Disturbance. As he slowly drew apart his eyelids, he contemplated the fury of the idiot's dream and the elaborate silence of non-existence.