

MAYDAY

Somewhere over Missouri, 35,000 feet above the patchwork quilt of the rich land below, United flight 333 sped peacefully toward its destination. The gaily-painted 747 seemed motionless as it floated above the cottony thunderheads in the steamy midsummer sky.

Within the antiseptic confines of the cabin, an assortment of businessmen, vacationers, students and the elderly settled deeply into their seats. They whiled away the two hour flight from Indianapolis to Phoenix with magazines and books, peanuts and ginger ale, or by escaping into the crackling, barely audible sounds of Barry Manilow, Michael Jackson or Broadway show tunes on the plastic earphones thoughtfully provided. Somewhere in the rear of the cabin, the soft sound of shuffling cards could be heard.

Karen, the head flight attendant, had just completed her galley check. Her troops had efficiently removed all vestiges of the "in-flight snack," consisting today of petite ham sandwiches, chips, a pickle and a small packet of imported mustard. She instructed Mark, one of her attendants, to please approach the passenger in seat 23-A and ask the woman if her infant needed anything.

James Riley, the flight commander, sipped his cooling coffee and regarded the imposing array of instruments which surrounded him and his co-pilot, Phil Dewey. To the side, navigator Al Vollbracht had moments earlier reported relatively smooth skies ahead, despite scattered cumulonimbus formations. Minimal turbulence could be expected for the next hour. All was normal. All was routine.

Karen patrolled first class, her section, and noticed the elderly woman who had fallen asleep with her cheek against the window. Taking a pillow from the overhead compartment, she gently placed it beneath the sleeping woman's head.

In the next row, a bespectacled, red-faced businessman chimed the bell once more, ordering his fourth gin and tonic. Karen mixed it for him, realizing that she'd have to cut him off after this one. She had little patience for drunken passengers.

"What's with the altimeter, skipper?" Dewey casually asked the captain. "You taking her down a couple thou?"

"No," said Riley, the barest ghost of concern in his voice. He noticed that the pressure altimeter was indicating 33,000 feet -- some 2000 below his proper cruising altitude.

"I'll take her back up," he said, doing so.

The jet nosed upward, appearing to regain its lost altitude. The reaction of the behemoth machine felt smooth and normal to the captain who had piloted hundreds of them.

But the gauge disagreed; now it showed 30,000 feet.

"What the hell," Riley muttered, readjusting the controls once more. Dewey straightened himself to an alert position, initiating, without being told, a routine series of tests.

"We should be at 35, skipper," he said, scratching his head.

Riley thumped the instrument with his forefinger. He saw it slowly, but perceptibly, edge downward. 23.

The co-pilot leaned over, glancing out the cockpit window. All, in fact, did appear normal. The green quilt below them seemed as distant as ever.

"I couldn't swear by it, skipper," he said, "but I don't think we're losing at all."

"Tell Kansas City we've got an instrument problem," the captain ordered, his voice now taking on a professional edge. Dewey called in the message. Kansas City said they'd be standing by. They also told them not to worry. They said the 747 was cruising safely at 35, no matter what the instrument was telling them.

"Get ahold of Phoenix," Riley told Dewey. "We'll need ATC to help us down once we get there."

"You're going to cruise right on through?"

"Yeah, unless something else comes up. It's no big deal. And you better get Karen in here."

Within moments, there was a soft knock at the cabin door. The attendant put a friendly hand on the captain's shoulder. "What's up?" she asked, her tone suggesting that she sensed something out of the ordinary.

"Minor problem with the altimeter, kid," he said, glancing back. "We're gonna take her straight on into Phoenix, but do a cabin check for me anyway, would you? Just in case. And give the folks a look at your pretty face, and a bit of that easy voice of yours."

"You got it captain," she said with a smile.

As she closed the cabin door, Karen brought a hand to her forehead. She could feel her head beginning to throb with a migraine, a nasty one. It worried her. She never got headaches.

She took the mike and faced the rows of passengers. A sudden, strangely comic smile appeared on her face.

"Ladies and gentlemen," she said sweetly. "We hope you're enjoying your flight this afternoon. We're presently cruising at 35,000 feet and Captain Riley informs me that we'll be having mostly clear skies all the way to Phoenix. We should be arriving on schedule. The temperature is 102 degrees right now. For those of you from Indianapolis, I hope you didn't bring any coats."

A mild chuckle rippled through the cabin.

"For those on the left side of the aircraft, you may want to catch a glimpse of the beautiful town of Coffeyville, Kansas -- the Gateway to the South." Several passengers peered out their windows. Some had a puzzled look on their face.

Karen paused, as if thinking of something else to say. She put a hand to her throbbing forehead and then smiled widely.

"We're. . .we're. . ." she began. The passengers looked at her in uneasy expectation.

"It's. . .it's, 83 degrees in downtown Coffeyville right now," she stammered, still smiling. "And I would guess that our ETA in Coffeyville this afternoon will be in approximately. . ." She paused to look at her watch.

"Two minutes."

Inside the cockpit, the altimeter finally landed on zero.

"Looks like we've hit bottom, skipper," Dewey said with a chuckle.

The galley curtains opened as the crew peered out in curiosity. They thought at first that this was some kind of joke. But Karen never joked.

The red-faced drinker in first class was the first to grow alarmed. He was sitting directly before Karen, enjoying the view of her legs, when he saw her hand settle on the stainless steel handle of the forward exit door.

Through the slowly gaining din of passenger chatter, Karen's voice continued calm and serene over the intercom.

"Please place your trays in the upright position," she said. "We hope you've had a pleasant flight. Thank you for flying the friendly. . ."

The red-faced drinker was now quite terrified. His gin and tonic fell from his hand, the plastic cup falling silently onto the carpet, as Karen grasped the handle firmly. His eyes stared wildly; he seemed to be trying to say something. To ask a question.

The door disappeared in an instant. Karen, her hand still clutching its handle, went in the first split second. The sound was a roar -- a sudden screaming of wind, rushing air and the deafening thunder of the engines. Several passengers in the rear were able to catch but a glimpse of Karen's red hair and a blur of her blue uniform streaking across the cloud-flecked sky.

She was followed immediately by the first four rows of the first-class section, including the unfortunate man with the gin and tonic -- chairs, passengers, luggage and debris -- tumbling in a frenzied mass out the gaping hole which the depressurization tore from the jet's frail skin.

The entire cabin was buffeted with a tornado of dust, magazines, pillows and sweaters. A young mother in economy class clung screaming to her little boy's hand as the vortex sought to yank his floating body out of the aircraft. The cabin immediately grew as cold as a tomb.

"Jesus Christ!" exclaimed Captain Riley, attempting to control the suddenly bucking aircraft. "We've got a hole somewhere, a big one! Adjust the flaps! Compensate!"

"Go check on the cabin!" he ordered his navigator. "Find out what the hell's going on!"

Dewey screamed into his mike. "Kansas City! Kansas City! This is United 333! Mayday! Mayday! We've got depressurization! We've lost engine two at least! We're going down! Mayday! Mayday!"

Despite every effort, and every manipulation of the controls which their experience had taught them, they could not influence the aircraft's performance. It seemed as if the 747 was using its own mind, and that mind had suddenly grown deranged. It pointed its massive nose directly downward despite all efforts to set it aright. It gained speed relentlessly, until it screamed with its own velocity and shook violently with the force of its rapid descent.

Captain Riley and Commander Dewey worked frantically at throttles, switches, levers and sticks, but the plane would not obey them. Their eyes bulged, their faces grew ashen, as the green countryside hurtled ever nearer.

Riley finally stopped fighting the unresponsive controls of his deathbent airplane. Instead he stared silently, in horrified disbelief, at the altimeter. Through the cockpit window he could clearly see the fences, the roads, the trees of the countryside below.

And the altimeter, steadily climbing, indicated 35,000 feet.

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IN THE CHARNEL HOUSE

The figure before him was stark and impassive. Cerf sat regally upon his throne like some ancient statue. His eyes, wide open, seemed to stare blankly at the wall before him, but Switch knew that they saw everything.

Part of him wanted to leave. He knew he couldn't. He hadn't been summoned; there was no need. He knew that Cerf desired his presence. The skinhead, uncomfortable after standing silent for some minutes, finally cleared his throat.

The sound attracted Cerf's attention.

"You let them escape. The holy men." His voice, flat and without emotion, was a cold, malignant breeze.

Switch fidgeted and looked at his Doc Martins. He held one hand behind his back so that Cerf would not see that it trembled.

But he did see, of course.

"I cannot always do this work, you know. *Your* work. You do not fully understand my ways, I realize this, but you must know it takes a great measure of my strength to manifest myself in -- how would you term it? -- physical ways. It detracts me from the great tasks at hand."

"I'm sorry . . . we got there too late. We couldn't find them."

Cerf smiled narrowly. "Indeed. You let two mere shamans get the better of you. And the woman. You got there too late for her too. Didn't you?"

"It wasn't our . . ."

"Yes! It was your fault!"

He rose from the throne, and seeming to glide gently, drew near to Switch's level. He stopped inches before Switch's face.

"The woman, you see, was surprisingly powerful in her own way. More than I expected. More than I thought possible. She could see, see things I can't see myself. Things *about* myself. It was knowledge that had to be denied her at any price. And yet she drew so near, her vision grew so sharp, that I was forced to handle things myself. I couldn't wait for you to come to my aid. Time, as they say, waits for no one. Even me."

"I'm sorry, Cerf. I'll do better. I'll . . ."

"No! Not better! You must never fail me again! Do you understand? I have known many disappointments in my time, and now, now that I am closer than ever to my ultimate goal, I will not abide further disappointments."

"I'll get the preachers. Don't worry about it." Switch's tone was beginning to lose some of its respect.

"Perhaps you will, sooner or later. But I'm troubled. I cannot afford to take any more chances. They may be harmless, these pathetic holy men. Then again, the woman may have imbued them with some of the knowledge she was able to gain. In that case, you see, they could become a problem. I want them removed. Immediately. And now I'm beginning to wonder whether or not you're capable of such a task."

Switch stepped closer to Cerf and hid any fear he may have felt. His voice was sharper now, louder, the voice he might use in dealing with subordinate skinheads.

"Why are you fucking with me? You knew we were only minutes away -- maybe seconds -- from getting the woman. Why didn't you *let* us do our job? Why did you take that away from us? To humiliate us? To show how weak we are?"

Cerf's smile disappeared. "You fool. That is not so. You plead for time, and I had no time."

"What do you want from me? I'm sorry. We're only humans. Lowly humans, Cerf. I don't know what the fuck you are -- some kind of god maybe -- but we're only humans, man. We have to use our legs and arms, and our feeble brains, to do anything. You can't expect us to be like you."

Cerf listened to the unfamiliar defiance and turned away. He brought his attention to a brick from one of the piles and took it into his hands, fondling it, studying its lines with his hands. Clearly he had shamed and angered the boy, and that was good. But more than that, he felt pride. The boy had fortitude. He had known that from the beginning.

He returned to Switch and placed a gentle hand upon his shoulder. An almost beatific smile appeared on his face.

"We must not fight, my son. I have no desire to humiliate you, nor do I wish to anger you. But I *do* expect you to be like me. Don't you see? You are me! And I am you! We are merely on different levels, but our essence is identical. I am like the ice upon a frozen lake, and you are the water beneath. Our substance and our purpose is one."

Switch understood. He had always understood, on an animalistic, instinctive level. And to hear Cerf -- to hear his father -- speak these words, warmed the chill he was beginning to feel. He felt whole again, full, his direction restored. In fact, Switch realized that he had never felt so complete, so full of purpose.

It was now Switch's turn to place a hand on Cerf's shoulder. It felt hard and cold.

"I will not fail you again, father."

"I know that."

"But there are still things I don't understand. I feel them, but I don't understand them."

Switch paused, almost ashamed to utter the words.

"Why do I love you?"

Cerf smiled paternally. "There are things your mind cannot grasp, my son, even though your heart can feel them. Behold."

He stooped to the floor and picked up an old green glass bottle. He placed it in the palm of his hand so that Switch could readily see it. When Cerf spoke, his voice was that of the wind rushing through a deep, endless canyon.

"This is what I am."

The bottle lost its form -- either melted or disintegrated -- in Cerf's hand. Its base elements hissed and bubbled as they gave up their structure, the green liquid dripping through Cerf's fingers and massing upon the floor.

"You love me because you are me!"

Switch dropped to his knees and scooped up a handful of the molten silica. He rose and brought it to his lips and drank deeply of the searing fluid. It did not burn him. It caused him no pain. He smiled as the green liquid dribbled down his chin.

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CHAOTICS

According to the clocks, it must have been sunset, but there were no outward signs of that in Coffeyville. The pall effectively obscured all visible rhythms of day and night. The glow was constant, persistently dim.

Abigail had risen from a fitful slumber in the Guard officer's quarters, set up in the livery barn of the old fairgrounds. The three-hour rest had relieved much of the fatigue from the long trip, but she still felt hazy and disoriented. Perhaps after a meal and a nice walk, she thought, she'd feel like herself again.

She had been designated her own room, really no more than a canvas-enclosed cubicle which, to judge from its fragrance, was probably a former animal stall. But it was clean, equipped with a comfortable cot, a small Coleman lantern and a handy folding table.

The priest and the rabbi had been quartered in similar cubicles adjacent to hers. As she passed these cubicles, Abigail could clearly see the yellow glow peering from beneath the canvas flaps enclosing their makeshift rooms.

Egan sat alone, his crucifix and Bible laid out neatly before him on his folding table. He was whispering Vespers to himself in his customary Latin, but was having difficulty concentrating. There was a certain face that he was finding himself unable to forget.

Next door, Charvonias was similarly occupied with prayers to mark the arrival of evening. He had concluded his Ma'ariv and was sitting atop the simple cot. He ran a hand through his hair and sighed in weariness. He glanced toward the table and started.

He'd left one of his sacred texts -- the Talmud -- lying open on the table. It was an unpardonable error, he knew. The demon *Shomer Dappim* was the guard of the pages -- the mischievous spirit known to injure holy men negligent enough to forget to close their sacred texts. It was more than superstition to him. Charvonias had witnessed far too many wonders for that. He couldn't remember when he had last displayed such carelessness. Perhaps his mind was preoccupied with the imminent approach of Rosh Hashonah, the Jewish new year.

Abigail heard the book slam shut within the rabbi's cubicle, paused, and moved on.

At the door of the officer's quarters, Abigail was halted by a guard.

"Evening, ma'am. Going to the chow hall?"

"Maybe later. I'm in the mood for a walk, if that's okay."

"The general says it's alright for you to move around the camp, everything behind the barbed wire. Everything else is off limits. And whatever you do, stay away from the chaotic compound."

"What's that?"

"Detention for the...um...the prisoners. You know, the crazy ones. You can't miss it, it's right near the entrance to the camp, surrounded by ten feet of chain-link fence. Anyway, it's so noisy in there you could probably hear them a mile away."

"Thanks. I'll be careful."

The sentry smiled shyly as she passed and admired her figure as she walked into the gloom.

It was quiet within the camp, and dim, save for the brilliant beams of the searchlight perched atop the former community theater. Most of the soldiers were apparently having their dinner, or seeing to other duties, as Abigail found herself alone.

She felt this must have been a happy place, in better times than these. The military camp had only recently been the Coffeyville Fairgrounds. Its miscellaneous buildings -- formerly the scene of barbecues, birthday parties, plays and livestock contests -- had become the mess hall, officers quarters, barracks and command center for the National Guard. What was once the playground was now the logistics center, its large tents and prefab metal structures sharing space with a swingset, slides and a merry-go-round now rendered immobile.

Abigail hated herself for wondering how many of the children who had once played here were now dead.

She walked past green military vehicles in the general direction of the main entrance and stopped when she came to the place she had been warned about.

Abigail couldn't resist looking inside the chaotic compound, and approached the tall fence which enclosed it. She couldn't see well through the pall, but she was able to discern the massive tent which had been erected within its center, apparently so that the guarding troops could have a clear view from all four sides.

The compound itself was quiet, with only a subtle, almost conversational, din coming from inside the tent. Within moments, however, there was movement. Three or four figures left the tent, somehow aware of her presence, and began walking, slowly and methodically, the thirty or so yards to the fence.

Their gait was steady, but somehow strange, as if the movement itself was being forced, or required great effort on their part. Abigail had an impression that some great invisible puppeteer was dictating their movements.

They reached the fence and stood directly before her. There was a middle-aged man, handsome and surprisingly well-groomed; a woman, elderly and frail, dressed in some sort of party dress, the kind that square dancers wear; and a young girl, maybe nine years old, with matted hair and dark stains on her face which Abigail feared might be blood.

"Hi," the man said in a friendly, warm tone.

"Hi," Abigail returned nervously.

"Are you coming to take us home?" the little girl inquired, her wide gray eyes focusing innocently on Abigail's face.

The old woman in the dancer's dress smiled blankly and remained silent.

Abigail stammered in reply to the girl's question. "Well, I, uh . . . well, I hope that you'll be going home soon."

The girl protruded her lower lip petulantly. "I want to go home!" she shouted, stamping her foot. She took the old woman's arm and began stroking it in long sweeping motions. The caress reminded Abigail of a girl and her doting grandmother, but the child's angry expression remained unchanged.

"I want you to take me home!" she ordered.

Abigail couldn't reply.

But the girl wasn't finished. "Watch this, you cunt!"

She sank her baby teeth into the fleshy part of the old woman's vein-crossed arm, and shook her head like a hungry predator taking its first bite out of its prey.

Abigail put her hand to her mouth and backed away.

The old woman let off one great wail of pain before she struck the girl with her free hand, loosening the canine grip and sending her sprawling into the dust. Her arm was bloodied, and the girl's innocent face now bore fresh stains.

Abigail shuffled sideways to get away from the mad scene. The three chaotic kept pace with her, almost mimicking her clumsy sidelong steps. All had regained their original expressions -- the child's innocence, the man's pleasant smile, the old woman's blank gaze.

They had to stop when they reached the corpse.

Abigail saw it too. A portly old lady in a tan polyester pant suit had somehow died on the chain-link fence. The body stared glassily at Abigail. The death grip of her fingers wrapped around the wire still held the corpse firmly to the fence. Her hair was bluish, as old lady's hair tends to be, and her face and arms were splotched with house paint -- a hideous chartreuse. Abigail saw the neck of a Jack Daniels bottle peering from her back pocket.

She tried to scream, but all that she managed was a choking gasp.

She finally did scream when she felt the hands grab her from behind.

"Get away from the fence, lady!" She was spun around to face two soldiers.

"How'd you get out of there?" one soldier demanded. "Is there a hole in the fence?"

Abigail was desperate. "No! I'm not one of them! I just . . ."

"Sure," the soldier replied mockingly. "We've heard 'em all, lady. Jack, let's take her back in."

"Wait a minute," the other soldier said. "She's got an ID, Phil. She's OK. She's non-chaotic."

Abigail had forgotten the special tag Timmoner had ordered her and the others to wear at all times. It was a simple blue card on a chain around her neck. It bore a Polaroid photograph of her face, and was stamped: "Non-Chaotic."

"Yes!" she said holding it out. "You see? The general gave it to me this morning."

The soldier named Phil sighed in relief, but he was clearly angry. "Then he must have told you that this area is off limits, lady! Get away from here, and don't let us see you poking around again. Got it?"

She nodded meekly, wasting no time leaving the chaotic and the irate soldiers behind. They stood watching her carefully after brusquely ordering the three chaotic to return at once to their special tent, and Abigail felt relieved when she lost sight of the nervous guards.

She meandered through the remainder of the camp and found herself back at the playground area. Exhausted, she sat upon one of the idle swings and rocked herself gently.

She hadn't expected to hear the stories Timmoner had told them that morning. But then, what *did* she expect? She had come to Coffeyville with absolutely no expectations -- with a clean slate.

And yet the stories terrified her. There were so many things wrong here, the events were so numerous and so bizarre, and so lacking in pattern or reason. Or, as Timmoner put it, "without apparent logic."

Abigail, the priest and the rabbi had listened in stunned silence to Timmoner's briefing. It took two hours for the general to relate everything he thought important, and Abigail noticed how different parts of the story affected the respective listeners differently.

They heard about the hangings, and Abigail saw how Egan winced at the ghastly inhumanity of it. They heard Charvonnia's deep sigh as Timmoner recapped the story of the plane crash, which he believed was somehow the starting point of the whole thing. They heard of the Dalton Defenders Days massacre, of the erratic performance of mechanical things, of the murders and rapes, the many instances of almost comic behavior among the people, even among the animals. And over it all, like some oppressive blanket of enigma, hung the omnipresent pall.

"Before we got here," the general told them, "every damn variety of specialist and scientist was brought in to try to make sense of this. They looked at the water, tested the air, examined people's minds, checked out every possible toxic pollutant. Nothing added up, people. Absolutely nothing made sense."

"So all of these people you speak of, these scientists, they are absolutely sure they have no explanations?" Charvonnia asked.

"That's correct, rabbi."

"The natural question then," Egan asked, "is why you summoned us? Why were *we* selected?"

Timmoner sighed. "We discussed it a great deal, and let me tell you, my superiors in Washington weren't overjoyed about going along with this. But I convinced them that we had nothing to lose. You see, the scientists, the psychologists, the specialists -- the people I call the left-brainers -- had their chance. They gave it their best shot. Therefore, I felt it was time to at least explore another sort of specialist -- the right brainers, so to speak. People like the three of you. People who have an understanding of the paranormal or mystical. People who don't require scientific proof."

"You are convinced, then, that this situation is of a spiritual, or mystical, nature?" Charvonnia pressed.

"I'm not convinced of anything, rabbi, but I'm open to any possibility, even that. Once I got clearance, I began to search for experts in the area of demonic possession. It took some doing, but after many phone calls, both you and Father Egan emerged as the most likely candidates for this unusual task. Your reputations, you might say, precede you. I know of your expertise in dealing with -- what is the phrase? -- dybbuk possession, rabbi. And father, the highest members of your church know your name and respect the power you apparently wield."

Charvonnia and Egan looked down briefly, as if embarrassed to reveal their pride.

"So you believe it's possession," Abigail said.

"It would have to be more than that," Egan interjected, looking at Timmoner rather than Abigail. "Something like this would have to be, at the very least, an outbreak of mass possession."

"That's my hunch, father," Timmoner rejoined. "That's been known to happen, hasn't it?"

Egan rubbed the bridge of his nose and closed his eyes briefly. "It's not unknown, general, although cases of mass possession have been extremely rare in modern times. There was an unexplained epidemic of such cases in 16th century Europe. I read of a case in Rome where 82 possessed women ran amok throughout the city. A year later, an entire orphanage, also in Rome, underwent some kind of mass possession. And in Amsterdam, in 1566, I believe, thirty boys in a state hospital were mass possessed. During their exorcism, they were said to have vomited all kinds of things -- needles, pieces of cloth, shards of glass, clumps of hair. . ."

"Gott in Himmel," Charvonnia muttered. "It reminds me of Sodom, not only the stories from the 16th century, but this town as well. The Torah relates how the people of that stricken city grew consumed

with their own quests for evil things. They were normal and pious people, but they allowed themselves to become engulfed in darkness."

Timmoner rose. "I want you to help me determine whether such a thing is happening here. To experiment, if you will; to do whatever it takes to give me an answer. If it's going to take a mass exorcism, or whatever, I'll go along with it. What do you say?"

Egan cleared his throat. "General, from what you've told me, I consider mass possession a possibility here. Of course, I can't be sure, but I'm willing to try an exorcism."

Timmoner beamed. "And will you need some sort of permission for that?"

"My superiors in the order, and in Rome, have been known to look the other way. But it's possible that any of them could get upset over something like this. I'm willing to take that risk."

"That's fine. And what about you, rabbi?"

"I take my guidance from Hashem alone," Charvonias responded. "I am not pleased with how I was brought here. I have already stated that, but I am always willing to obey the commandment of mitzvah -- to perform good deeds on behalf of my fellow man."

"I thank you for that. But I must ask you: These dybbuks of yours, these possessing spirits, are they capable of affecting people not of the Jewish faith?"

"They are indeed, Mr. Timmoner. A Jewish dybbuk may well possess a Gentile person. And a Gentile dybbuk may well possess a Jew. The world in which they live, or exist, cares little for such distinctions. I have devoted my entire life to the mystical realm, and the truth is I have far more questions than I have answers."

Abigail started to pace. "Wait a minute. All of you seem so convinced that possession is the answer here. Isn't that leaving something out? What about the weather? The machines? The animals? Are they all possessed too?"

Egan fielded the questions. "Yes," he said, catching her eye for the briefest moment and then looking away. "It may sound ridiculous to you, but these things could conceivably be possessed as well. I've known of priests who have exorcised houses -- not people -- and unless I'm mistaken, there have been rabbis who have done the same."

Charvonias nodded. "It is true."

"I see your point though, Miss Corbett," Timmoner stated. "And it illustrates the complexity of this situation perfectly. Possession is only one of many options that I may have to consider. I'm forced to keep an open mind. I want your thoughts as well. What can *you* do?"

"It's difficult for me to explain. I watch. I listen. I feel."

She reviewed some of the highlights of her experiences as a telepath and her vague reason for coming to Coffeyville. She told them, in a very simplistic manner, of the inner door in her mind.

"The field of parapsychology recognizes my gift as telepathy. It's trifling to use the phrase 'mind reader', but that's about as good a layman's term as there is."

Egan and Charvonias fell into an uncomfortable silence.

"And whose mind do you propose to read in Coffeyville?" asked Timmoner.

"I don't know. Perhaps I could pick a subject, an individual you call chaotic. I presume the priest and the rabbi will use the same approach. But like you, general, I have to keep an open mind; I am open to any possibility as well. Just give me a little time."

"You've impressed me so far, Miss Corbett. And I appreciate your candor. Just let me know what you'll be needing. But there's one thing I don't have -- a great deal of time. I'm not sure how long we'll be able to remain here."

"This morning I sent a detachment up to Independence. Whatever's happening here is starting up there as well. They're losing control. Rapidly. I have a theory -- and like everything else it's only a theory -- that this malaise, this chaos, is spreading. I believe that Coffeyville is ground zero for the whole damn thing, and it's spreading from here in a virtually perfect, outward-spreading concentric circle. And I think it's moving faster. There are reports about strange things going on in Tulsa, some eighty miles due south of here, and in Lawrence, which is more than a hundred miles away. People, you can see why I'm concerned."

Charvonias spoke. "Mr. Timmoner, that only leaves me with one question: What happens if we fail?"

The general frowned. "Then God help us."

The meeting was over. Timmoner expressed a desire to cooperate when each of them was ready. He would offer any assistance they required.

Abigail didn't know when she would be ready. Seeing the chaotic tonight had frightened her badly. Her instincts warned her against opening the door on such people, on such minds. But she knew she would have to.

She rose from the squeaking, forgotten swingset and felt it. Someone was watching.

She began to scan the playground in the dim light, sure that someone was lurking there. The faintest gleam of small eyes gave away the lurker's position.

He was tiny, and he was in a brightly painted concrete culvert which had served as a crawling tube for the children. Now it was a hiding place. She took a tentative step closer.

He was a child, possibly no older than seven or eight. Abigail could see his long, tangled hair. Dark splotches of mud and dirt stained his childish cheeks. He was wearing a grownup's football jersey, bright red with the name "Red Ravens" in large white block letters. On his tiny frame, it looked more like a dress or a gown.

Their eyes met briefly. Abigail felt that the boy wanted to talk to her, to tell her something. But he was frightened, unsure. So was Abigail. Her first thought was the fear that this young boy was possibly a chaotic who had gotten lose.

"Hello," she said timidly.

The boy said nothing.

She took another step closer. "I'm not going to hurt you. I want to talk with you."

The boy bolted. He scooted through the tube and onto the playground with amazing speed. Abigail took off after him, following him by the large number 9 on the back of his jersey.

The chase took them through the playground and past the Guard's long rows of storage containers. She was gaining on him, she knew, was almost able to reach out and seize him, when they reached the perimeter fence.

Beneath the rolled concertina, a narrow hole had been burrowed out, just large enough for him to crawl through. The boy squirmed his way out of the camp and stopped. He turned to face Abigail, now panting helplessly beyond the barbed wire.

"Please. . . please don't be frightened," she gasped. "Let me help you."

He looked at her like a wounded animal, that vague pleading look still in his eyes. But he said nothing and quickly fled into the concealing trees, running across a sunken old sidewalk paved of bricks -- Coffeyville bricks, Abigail noticed, just like the ones she'd seen in Wichita. The sight of them now disturbed her, almost as if the linear quality of their shape was incongruous with their surroundings. As if they didn't belong here somehow, and yet they did.

Abigail's eyes followed the sidewalk to its vanishing point on the horizon, squinting into the area beyond the safety of the camp, into the forbidden zone that had once been the peaceful town of Coffeyville.

Where was the boy going? What awaited him out there? She shuddered.

On the horizon, in the direction taken by the boy, she saw the stark outline of a large building, seemingly constructed of steel, as if for industrial purposes. Whatever it was, Abigail immediately sensed its importance.

In Eugene she had felt a powerful tugging from the East, a sensation which had guided her half-way across the continent. It had reminded her of the man she'd encountered at the courthouse years ago, the man who had known -- had sensed -- her presence, and her knowledge.

It still reminded her of him. And as she looked at the looming, dark building, she knew that this was the source of that feeling. It emanated from there. She felt its life, its very heartbeat deep within its bowels.

Although it frightened her more than anything she had ever known, she knew she would have to face it sooner or later. And she would have to face it there.

#

THE BALD ONE

The night was ebony black in spite of the smog, its darkness interrupted only by the flashing, surreal neon of the carnival, whose madness went on across the channel on Terminal Island. Here, amidst the industrial squalor of San Pedro, one could barely hear the screams of the people on the rides, the drunken laughter of the sailors and whores, the meaty pounding of rock music driven through cheap speakers.

The carnival provided the only view for the two lovers atop the abandoned warehouse, the dull thrum of the Harbor Freeway the only symphony to accompany their lovemaking. The night was cool and damp, the air redolent with the concrete scent of Los Angeles, the full moon murky and faint above them.

Eve was on her hands and knees, arching her naked back, anticipating the fervent thrusts of her mate. A hand enclosed within a fingerless glove grabbed her short jet black hair and violently rammed himself into her. She squealed with the pain and pleasure. Her mate grunted as his movements grew more forceful, his wrenching of her hair more violent. He leaned over her sweating form and took a fold of her skin into his teeth and bit until she moaned. They climaxed, quickly and tremulously, like desperate cats in heat. Eve howled as their orgasms converged.

Switch panted as he beheld the garish carnival across the channel, shaking his hairless head, like a jaguar who has just completed a bloody meal.

She rolled onto her back and lay prone, her legs spread carelessly, the gravel of the roof tickling her ass. "Throw me a smoke, babe."

He took the pack from her crumpled jeans and tossed them to her, not taking one himself. She lit a Marlboro and stared into the starless sky.

Switch rose, his tautly muscled body reflecting carnival colors, and put on his tight jeans. He ran his hand across the dome of his head and sighed deeply. The sex had calmed only his body; he was far from being at peace. He sat against a rusting ventilator and stared moodily into space.

"What is it?" she asked, not really expecting an answer.

He surprised her. "What do you mean?"

"Come on, Switch, something's bugging you. I can tell. You're not yourself, babe. It's like your mind is somewhere else."

He turned to face her, his black eyes taking in her magnificent form. "Everything. And nothing. I don't know. Just don't worry about it."

Eve tossed the cigarette over the side and rose, walking lankly toward him. She embraced him, her hardened nipples pressing against his taut, smooth chest. He did not return the affection.

His physical needs met, Switch pulled on his Doc Martins and wove the yellow laces through the numerous eyelets of the heavy boots, fully aware of the status they symbolized. He pulled a black T-shirt over a face that might have been considered strikingly handsome. He placed his braces -- long thin suspenders -- over muscular shoulders, one tattooed with the classic SS lightning bolt emblem interwoven with a swastika, the other bearing a simple letter "A" enclosed within a circle. He paid no heed to Eve as she dressed herself, and went back into the warehouse, via the roof entrance, without her.

The third floor of the derelict cinderblock structure was home. Here, amidst broken down machinery and assorted debris, Switch's bizarre little family lived within a labyrinth of

rooms and chambers whose original purpose was impossible to identify. One wall was adorned with the bright crossed bars of the Confederate flag, a contribution from Scab, a veteran of Houston's Confederate Hammer Skins. Another was covered with the unmistakable banner of the Third Reich. Switch himself had donated this particular item.

Lit only by candles in beer bottles, the various rooms featured mattresses and blankets captured in numerous outings to alleys and docks. The largest room, highlighted by a battered and rusted Coleman stove, served as the dining hall and central meeting area. The room was busy tonight, filled with the family, all of them hungrily consuming dinner, their plastic forks and spoons dipping into cans of stew, beans and fruit cocktail. At least fifteen people were crowded here, most of them men with heads as smoothly shaven as was their general's. The smoke of their cigarettes filled the unventilated space; their numerous bottles of beer littered the floor on which they sat.

Switch entered, his step slow and purposeful as he approached the room's solitary chair, which had, as always, been left respectfully vacant for him. He refused Spider's offer of an icy Coors, and took no food for himself. He stared at the wall to his side, studying the clippings which had been torn from recent editions of the **Herald Examiner** and **Los Angeles Times**. The display was something of a trophy case for the family, a shrine to its higher achievements. The clippings reported stories about vandalism -- swastikas spray-painted on Jewish storefronts in Brentwood; about gang fights -- violent encounters with Bloods in Watts; about armed robberies and burglaries in Palos Verdes Estates; about increased drug sales in the San Pedro area.

All of them attributed the crimes to a band of skinheads described variously as "renegade," "unaffiliated," or "mysterious."

But the wall seemed to have lost all fascination for Switch. No longer did it inspire the sort of pride he felt when all of this began. This puzzled him.

Switch felt a movement beside him. The massive, muscular frame of Spider settled down in its accustomed place, at his right, as befitted his unquestionable status as second-in-command. At six foot three, with a body builder's girth, Spider dwarfed everyone in the room, but next to Switch he appeared somehow child-like, almost timid.

"What's the haps?" Spider asked in his baritone.

Switch ignored the comment, continuing to stare at nothing.

Spider looked rather hurt by this rebuff, which was not terribly surprising. All of the skins knew of Spider's fierce devotion to Switch; the strange loyalty, almost love, with which he idolized him. So far as anyone knew, Spider had never had a girlfriend, nor had he exhibited any trace of friendship or warmth with any other member of the family. That Spider would readily die, or kill, for his leader was a given.

Spider was almost thirty years old, easily making him the senior skin. He had never held a job above that of dishwasher or common laborer, but had found his life's calling nonetheless. Within the nocturnal reality of skinheads, Spider was a professional, if ever there could be such a thing as a professional skinhead.

The laces on his Doc Martins had been yellow for at least five years, representing the fact that people had been murdered by his hand. He was virtually a legend in San Francisco where, as a member of BASH -- the Bay Area Skin Heads -- he had forged a trail of violence, fearlessness and pure racist hatred. He was nearly as well known in Los Angeles, at least in the skin community, where his reputation had only grown. Here, he served as an enforcer, responsible for the more difficult, frequently more bloody, assignments. And at these he excelled.

Spider's reputation as a brass-balls enforcer, however, had suffered a serious setback several months ago. He was summoned to deal with a particular problem named Switch. That skin, who, like Spider, was a member of LASH, had committed the unforgivable sin of rebellion. Switch had gone renegade, disregarding all respect and discipline within the group. Spider's job was to take him out before Switch managed to organize a gypsy band of rebels like himself.

But Switch proved to be an elusive target. He'd disappeared into the maze of abandoned buildings strewn across San Pedro. For three weeks, Spider stalked his prey amidst the docks and alleys and never once did Switch give him so much as a glimpse. As it turned out, the real prey was Spider himself.

They met in this very warehouse, late at night, face to face. It was obvious that Switch had been waiting for him; just as obvious that he didn't fear him. For the first time in his life, Spider was outmatched. His superiority in size and strength meant nothing. Switch had no trouble overpowering his hulking enemy with speed and cunning -- his only weapons his fists. In less than five minutes, Spider lay panting on the filthy floor -- three of his ribs, his jaw and his sternum, all neatly broken.

Even then, Switch was not finished.

"Something to remember me by, asshole," he whispered softly into Spider's ear as he raised the gleaming Buck knife before the beaten form which lay before him. He cut swiftly and deeply in a perfect arc, stretching from Spider's eyebrow to his chin.

Spider came back for him, it was true, but not in the way one might have expected. He came not as an avenger but as a disciple, with a twisted sense of loyalty, an undying respect for the slender man who had bested him. Spider would thus become the first recruit in Switch's band of gypsies.

The cut had healed into a thick elongated scar which would last the rest of Spider's life. It was that very scar that Switch now caressed, as Spider sat beside him in melancholy silence. The gesture was strangely gentle and caring, almost an apology, and Spider understood perfectly. They looked deeply into each other's eyes for a full minute, the master and the dog communicating silently.

"What's on for tonight?" asked the dog.

The master surveyed his crew, awaiting his word in respectful silence. They'd finished their dinner and were restless as the night progressed. "Skins come out at night," was one of their favorite sayings, and their pallid faces revealed that they practiced what they preached.

Shiv, his dark hair already forming a shadow on his shaven pate, swayed uncertainly at his place. As had become common of late, he'd had a few too many beers tonight. Switch frowned on excessive drinking and drugging -- he'd kicked many an intoxicated ass -- but he knew that Shiv could always be counted on to hold his own when the time was right. Only with Shiv would he cut some slack.

In the back, partially hidden in shadow, was the new kid -- a wanna-be. Nobody knew his name at this point, nor did they care to. Nobody said a word to him. He would be treated with respect only after having proven himself, and the family was anxious to give the youth his rightful chance. The youngster, his head still pink from its recent shave, only sipped at his beer. He didn't wish to squander this one chance for acceptance.

Switch smiled for the first time. "Who wants to bash?" he tempted.

They raised their bottles and yelped like hungry, feral dogs.

Switch rose at last, and his followers imitated the movement. "I'm in the mood for some dark meat," he announced. "I want some Crips for dinner." The family understood perfectly. They laughed, a bitter, determined edge to their hilarity.

The skins quickly filed out of the warehouse to a long neglected alley where their vehicle awaited them. All fifteen crowded into the back of the ancient step-van, a battered and cancerous relic of the Fifties, when it had seen service as a delivery truck. Its fading logo, a loaf of steaming bread labeled "Holsum," still appeared on the side. With a great wheeze and rattle, the van headed out into the night, Eve's steady hand upon the gigantic black steering wheel. Switch, as always, rode shotgun, standing beside the rattling, lever-controlled door, a vigilant captain on an unlikely pirate man-of-war.

The truck lumbered onto the Harbor Freeway. The traffic was relatively light tonight, allowing them smooth sailing as they headed north. The ride was short. When they reached the Artesia Boulevard exit, they abandoned the freeway for the alien streets of Compton.

The truck attracted little notice as it joined the busy traffic on Artesia. They traversed streets bordered by towering palms and yellowed grass, lined with cheap taverns, liquor stores and used car lots, their flashy colors and signs sharing space with window bars and security doors. They shared the street with tiny-wheeled Cadillacs and Lincolns, many with stereo speakers booming bass notes into the tense night air.

As they veered onto Beach Avenue, where an odd dichotomy of industrial and residential structures greeted them, the skins grew silent. Though it was getting late and the night was cool, the porches and sidewalks were fairly filled with people. And every face they beheld was black.

They turned, at last, away from the busy street and drove slowly into a quiet neighborhood. Here, where it seemed even the locals feared to tread, the stucco walls of the squat two-story apartment buildings were defaced with graffiti. The scrawling on the pastel walls was as unintelligible as hieroglyphics, yet somehow graceful with its intricate lines and cabalistic symbols. Among the skins, only Switch understood their strange messages. He knew that they had penetrated the very heart of Crips domain.

Switch ordered Eve to park. She brought the truck to a rest well away from any curious windows, out of the range of glaring streetlights, beneath the shade of a towering hedge. He cranked open the door and walked out. He gestured for Spider, and Spider alone, to accompany him.

The two strode boldly into the dark street. They found sticks on the ground and with them, began making annoying noises along the chain link fences and window bars along their way. Clearly, but quietly, as if they were calling a stray pet, they repeated in sing-song: "Niggers. Niggers. Niggers."

The stroll lasted four blocks. Their forms were suddenly illuminated by the headlights of an oncoming car. The BMW, black with fluorescent yellow trim, sped by. Once past them, the car careened with screeching tires, pulling a 180. The lights bathed the skinheads in white, and then blinked off, returning the scene to darkness. The riders had seen that the skins were unarmed -- an idiotic mistake. Leaving their formidable arsenal inside the car, five figures emerged from the BMW and approached the trespassing white faces.

Switch immediately knew they were Crips -- each was clothed in an expensive warm-up suit and Nikes. Though it was dark, each of them wore shades. And around the head of each was the unmistakable emblem -- a blue bandanna.

The Crips approached their prey wordlessly. They formed before them in a neat row, staring down the two strangers.

"Shit," one of them muttered. His fellows snickered along.

"What's up, cuz?" The voice belonged to Switch, who knew Crips lingo and who knew how to speak in a mocking Negro accent.

The Crips laughed derisively. The tall one spoke. "Check this out, man. We got us a couple cue balls. Must've rolled in from the Valley or somethin'. You lost your way or what?" His voice was pure rap diss.

Switch crossed his arms and kept his gaze fixed on the tall one's eyes. "Check this out," he said, maintaining his black, mocking accent. "These spooks think we're lost, Spider. Can you believe these coons?"

The Crips lost their smiles. They began rocking restlessly on their heels, anticipating action. The tall one removed his shades, his voice taking on a harder edge. But there was a trace of uncertainty as well. Something in this encounter, he knew, just wasn't cool.

"You got a death wish, white boy?" he asked, staring into Switch's eyes. "What're you doing down here anyway? This is our turf. Crips turf. You're gonna pay for trespassing, man."

Switch didn't blink. "You gonna make me fucking pay, tax-man?" The skinheads' fists were clenched.

The Crips surrounded the two and began to move in slowly.

It was time.

Switch's voice pierced the night. "Oi!" he shouted, loud and clear. The Crips looked rather puzzled at this strange exclamation. They wondered, for a moment, why Switch and Spider were suddenly letting their braces down.

But not for long. They heard the approaching footsteps and realized -- belatedly -- that escape was out of the question. "Oi," they now knew, had been a war cry, a call to arms. For surrounding the entire scene were more than a dozen skins, each grasping a Louisville slugger, and slapping it impatiently against the palm of a hand. The skins moved in.

The tall Crip was the first to get it. He had no time to ward off the bat which smashed against the back of his skull, sending him reeling onto the pavement. The combat which followed was strangely quiet, the only sounds being an occasional muffled curse or cry of pain, the fleshy sound of wood striking bone. One Crip tried to make for the BMW and its cache of weapons. Three skins pounced, pounding his face with hardened fists. Two Crips had momentary success in warding off the team of skins which assaulted them, managing a few moments of frantic resistance before they bolted. Seeing them run, two more succeeded in breaking free of their assailants, and ran for their lives into darkened alleys. Switch gave a silent order, instructing his troops not to pursue the escapees into unfamiliar territory. Time was limited.

The tall one, the leader, was left behind.

He slowly came to, writhing in pain, a trickle of blood running from his nose. Fear crossed his face as he regarded the full pack of skins -- freed from their combat -- as they towered over him. Switch knelt next to the prone man and removed a trace of blood from his face with a finger.

The black man spoke shakily. "Hey, cuz," he said. "We can make a deal here, can't we?"

"What did you have in mind, cuz?" Switch replied, contemplating the drying blood on his fingertip.

"I got shit, man. I got some good shit in the car. You can take all of it."

Switch smiled. "Ain't much of a deal, now is it? It's ours anyway, nigger." He signaled for a weapon. Spider handed him a bat.

"Looks to me like you time's kinda runnin' out," he said to the bleeding, sweating figure below him.

"Come on, man," the tall Crip pleaded. "What the fuck?"

"What the fuck is right," Switch said, rising to his feet. He looked around, searching for a face. He spotted the new kid, the wanna-be, and gestured with his bloodied finger for him to come forward. When the kid came close, Switch saw the gleam in his eye. He handed him the bat.

"You ready, wanna-be?"

The kid nodded.

Switch spoke quietly and sternly. "Good. Then finish this nigger off."

The kid hesitated for a moment.

"Hey. . ." the Crip began. And then the bat came down. Once. Twice. Three times.

The skins were silent as the bat did its work. They moved away from the pummeled corpse and turned to Switch for instructions.

Switch licked the dead man's blood off his fingertip at last.

"Alright," he said. "Spider, take care of the car." He turned toward one well-hidden alley. "Oi!" he cried again, and the bread truck rumbled to life. Eve guided it to the street and the skins piled in.

Spider came running, his burly arms filled with MAC-10s and assorted pistols. The BMW behind him erupted into flame as he joined his comrades. As Eve shoved the van into first gear, Switch stood on the step of the open door and breathed deeply of the fragrance of the cool night air, now laced with burning gasoline. Would the Crips get here first, he wondered, or would the cops? What the fuck?

A few blocks away, with Eve expertly guiding the van through backstreets, they heard the loud explosion as the BMW finally went up. A wail of distant sirens followed immediately.

* * * * *

They were euphoric. Exhilarated.

The central lair of the San Pedro warehouse was bustling with a frenzy of congratulation and bravado. Beer was being consumed greedily and bottles were banging together in frequent, boisterous, toasts to the evening's triumph. Over it all, the relentless, virtually atonal, thrash of Skrewdriver thundered through the good speakers of a boombox, only recently the property of a group that called itself the Compton Crips.

"A great step forward for the white race! A great kick in the ass for niggerkind!"

Spider -- well into his fifth Coors -- stood atop the discarded utility wire spool which served the skins as a table, and raised the brew in yet another toast. His comrades cheered and howled in a cacophony of rebel yells and shouts of "Oi!"

Switch shoved Spider rudely from the spool and took his place at center stage. He clutched a wrinkled paper sack in his hand.

"Shut the fuck up, people," he commanded quietly. The skins immediately complied. Satisfied that he had their attention, he pointed a finger at the wanna-be, occupying his usual place in the rear.

"Come here," he ordered. The new kid stepped slowly forward.

"You did good tonight, kid," he said in a fatherly tone. "Which means you didn't fuck up. Lucky for you." Several skins snickered knowingly. "Get rid of those shoes." The kid removed his battered Adidas.

Switch addressed the group as a whole. "I got somebody I want you to meet, people." He hesitated for a moment, and then placed his gloved hand on the rough bristle of the new kid's head. "You're a skin now, motherfucker. And you'll be needing a name."

He closed his eyes, as if seeking inspiration. It finally came. "I dub thee," he said, grasping the new skin's head tighter, "Viper." In a polite, almost formal, show of approval, the group lightly tapped the palms of their hands together. Viper beamed.

Switch opened the bag, removing two shiny new Doc Martin boots. "Try these on for size, Viper," he commanded. Viper did not hesitate, and paused only when he realized that the black boots had no laces.

"Guess you'll be needing these too." Switch held aloft a pair of bright yellow laces, still in their wrapper. Their significance, especially for a new recruit, was well understood.

The celebration was immediately resumed, and only now went into high gear.

Tonight's affair marked the fifth such bestowal of the coveted yellow laces since the group was formed some three months ago. Five times, skins under Switch's command had committed murder for no more motivation than to perpetuate the group's very existence. Switch's band, which had never taken a name, was nonetheless earning a fierce reputation. The police were certainly aware of them. Five murders, at least ten arsons, numerous instances of individual harassment and assault, at least twenty cases of vandalism or desecration at area houses of worship and cemeteries -- all these had been attributed to a "renegade skinhead clan." The authorities had no idea as to the political orientation of the band, its leadership structure or the location of its headquarters, so elusive were they, so clever in the execution of their crimes, so tight-lipped and loyal were its ranks.

No less aware of this invisible army were the other nocturnal armies that crawled through the streets and alleys of greater Los Angeles. The Hispanic gangs had begun referring to them as Los Calvos -- the bald ones -- with some degree of resentful respect. The black gangs were aware of them too, and would be more so after they learned of tonight's activities in Compton.

Nobody was more aware of Switch's band, however, than the rival skinhead gangs, especially the Los Angeles Skin Heads -- LASH -- who were growing increasingly concerned about this brood of rebels from out of its own ranks. Switch had earned his own name and Doc Martins as a member of LASH. That was two years ago. He had gone from raw recruit to an upper echelon lieutenant in a surprisingly short time, the result of his inherent smarts and unparalleled fondness for ruthless violence.

Switch, however, was born to be a leader and not a soldier.

LASH, under the leadership of one "Buster," had successfully swelled its ranks with eager skins -- individuals impassioned with its white supremacist, neo-Nazi ideology. The band was known and respected nationally, at least among other major skinhead organizations. Even the Ku Klux Klan and the White Aryan Resistance had come to LASH, politely and submissively, in order to recruit new, and dedicated, members for their movements.

Only Switch, it seemed, was not held in awe by Buster or his girlfriend, Eve. He challenged the former and seduced the latter. Buster found both offenses intolerable. In short order, Switch learned of a death threat against him, issued by no less than his own superior. He knew Buster well enough to take the threat seriously and disappeared deep within the bowels of San Pedro in order to challenge Buster, and LASH, more effectively. Spider's defection to Switch was only the first of at least a dozen soldiers that Switch would steal from LASH. The skins who surrounded him now, mostly LASH renegades, were the further proof of his success. Switch now knew that Buster feared him, and the headlines no longer mentioned the weak, half-hearted activities of LASH.

There was no doubt that of the two, Switch was the superior commander. While his new band of gypsies maintained some adherence to white supremacist ideals -- which Switch wisely tolerated -- their leader was restricted by no such ideological limitations. He refused to allow his army to be used or manipulated by the pot-bellied hypocrites of the Klan or profiteer buffoons like Tom Metzger. He knew only too well the fate of Hitler's Brown Shirts.

Switch had a vision that was all-encompassing and universal. He had no use for petty disputes between tribes or races. His only cause, indeed his only god, was anarchy. And Switch realized that anarchy was very definitely an equal opportunity employer.

He had a strange sort of compassion, an understanding, of his followers' need for purpose. Without their swastikas, their hate literature, their skinhead rituals, they were lost, hopelessly unable to translate their need for anarchy into action. After all, how could they understand the purity that Switch alone understood? The freedom?

That freedom was total and absolute, Switch knew. He was free even from the restraints and restrictions of his own past, for he had none. His earliest memory was being taken in by a group of hate mongers and fanatics who called themselves skinheads. Of his entire life before that moment, Switch's memory was a pervasive blank. There were subtle clues as to his personal history -- an accent which some described as faintly Australian, unusually refined table manners, an abhorrence for alcohol and drugs, and more physical evidence. The mysterious scars on his back which might have been caused by burning cigarettes. The broken ribs that had never been properly set, and had reformed themselves in odd, crooked configurations.

Other than these, Switch had only fleeting snippets of memory -- a large and sunny house, a red rubber ball, a broken, leering jack-in-the-box. These came to him most clearly -- most terrifyingly -- in dreams.

The revelry in San Pedro continued well into the wee hours. He had little to do with the boisterous celebration, spending most of the evening sequestered in a corner by himself. The more perceptive of those present, Spider especially, noticed his gloomy reticence and were disturbed by it.

At last, Switch pulled back the olive-drab canvas tarp which concealed the doorway to his room, and disappeared behind it. Eve followed immediately. She began to remove her

clothes. Switch's performance tonight, his firm command over the violence, had turned her on like it always did. She wanted him again.

"No," he said softly but sternly. She looked at him in puzzlement, wanting to say something, but fearful of his mood. Silently, she refastened her bra and left the room.

Switch sat atop the mattress and gazed at the room's only decoration -- a large poster of an insolent-looking James Dean, cigarette dangling from his lip. The poster had been altered so that Dean's hair had been replaced with the sleek skull of a newly shaven skinhead.

"Rebel without a cause," Switch whispered softly to himself.

He could no longer ignore it. He wasn't satisfied. Tonight should have been a skinhead's wet dream, yet Switch found the fight itself and its murderous climax satisfying for but a moment. He found the skins' beery celebration, their macho shouts, ridiculous and lacking. Something was missing.

His gaze left James Dean at last. From beneath the mattress, where it had been hidden for several weeks, he retrieved a battered Union 76 road map of the United States. He spread it before him on the mattress, and in the dim candlelight studied its snaking roads and highways.

Something was out there.

Something was waiting for him on one of those highways or roads. He traced his finger along Interstate 10, as if he could feel some lurking presence through his fingertip. For all of his many talents, however, Switch was no psychic. His fingertip detected nothing. The Promised Land would not prove to be such easy quarry.

It didn't matter. It was out there and it was calling to him. Switch would find it.

He carefully refolded the map and replaced it beneath the mattress. He blew out the candle and tried to ignore the noise outside his room. He laid on his back and stared at the ceiling.

"Yeah," he muttered. "What the fuck. It's time to take this act on the road."

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