

Terribilis est Locus Este

Each of the oversized letters looked hastily scrawled upon the back wall of the cubicle. Fresh trails of blood oozed from the base of each letter, some already reaching the floor.

Tate gagged.

The stench was overbearing, rocking his typically implacable composure, his stomach churning, bile welling in his throat. In a flash, he scanned the rest of the cubicle, looking for anything that could help identify the culprit. As his gaze fixed upon the contents of the metal bowl he shuddered. Floating in the murky filth were three dismembered fingers, each one horribly bruised about the knuckle. "Jesus," he murmured, "one more and I've got a full set."

Then he heard it. A sound, faint at first, but gradually getting louder: a dragging, shuffling, somewhere further up the train. His heart pounded as his mind shifted into overdrive.

Tate blinked, rubbing his eyes, trying to regain some self-control. Again he looked around the cubicle, his new goal to secure some insurance. Deftly he drew his pocket-knife and cut the wire curtain-rail from the window, taking care not to chink the thin flex as he wound it around the handle. Sliding it back into his pocket, he allowed himself the faintest of smiles as his

fingers brushed the bag containing his bounty. He inhaled a deep, composing breath, and stepped outside.

The carriage was empty.

Staring into the gloom of the adjacent carriage, he could just make out the outline of a dark shape advancing towards the adjoining door; coming his way. He froze.

The old Spidey Sense is tingling again, he thought, instinctively backing around the toilet doorway, concealing himself in the shadows. The black shape continued to move, quickly covering the full distance to the doorway in under a second. Tate's thoughts sharpened, honed by the surge of adrenalin coursing thorough his body.

It was the hydraulic whoosh of the connecting door that triggered his action. In one fluid movement, Tate exploded across the eight-foot gap between himself and the door, uncoiling the makeshift garrotte in mid-flight. No mistakes, not tonight. Working quickly, his hands moved in concentric circles, winding the wire around his quarry, feeling it tighten under the strain of his powerful grip. He tensed, pulling the wire tighter and tighter, but what happened next left him cold and sickened. To his horror, the flesh yielded; not the usual gristly resistance proffered by a human neck. His arms folded about his body, shoulders burning with pain as the wire sprung free of its mark.

"Jesus F'in...", he yelled, jumping back as the severed head toppled from the quivering body, landing with a thud at his feet.

Tate stared in disbelief. "No way," he said aloud. The hollow, malevolent eyes of Patrick McAllister, an IRA gunman he'd hit last winter, bored into him; a sly, hateful smile spreading across the ghoulis face.

"Alright, Frankie-boy, how are ya? Can't get rid o' me that easily you know." The words splattered from his vile, thin lips, blood oozing from between the rotting teeth. Later Tate considered it odd how he'd focused on McAllister's strong Belfast accent, still so apparent despite his dissected voice-box.

His reaction was instantaneous. As a fearless child would crush a bug, Tate smashed his boot into the gunman's face. The nauseating crack of McAllister's skull splitting sounded like the report from a starting pistol, the rent opening wide enough to allow Tate's foot to carry on into the spongy mass of brain-matter. The unexpected weight transfer overbalanced him, sending him sprawling headlong into the adjoining carriage. Landing awkwardly, his head snapped forward and crashed into floor. As if the plug had been pulled from his consciousness, Tate's world drained to black.

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"Frank. Wake up." The voice was distant, dreamlike; yet somehow familiar.

"Christ, get that shit outta my face." Tate yanked his head away, choking on the sulphurous vapours coming from the small glass vial.

"How are you feeling?"

"Like shit," Tate snapped, one hand rubbing his swollen forehead.

"I'm impressed, Frank. That curtain-rail thing was amazing, real genius."

"Danny?" Tate gawped up at the robed figure looming over him, the oversized cowl theatrically hanging down over the unseen face. "Jesus, Danny, is that you? What the hell's going on?"

"It's complicated."

Tate looked around. "I seem to have some time," he muttered.

"Where to begin..."

Tate interrupted again. "You can start by taking that bloody hood down."

"Sorry, Frank, it's policy. We try and look professional for our new recruits."

Danny lowered the hood, revealing his familiar, grinning face.

Frank Tate smiled at his younger brother. "Jesus, Danny, how long's it been?"

"Four years?" Danny mused.

"More like five. Not a goddamn thing in five years. Where've you been?"

Danny drew a long breath, waiting for Frank to be quiet.

"I went through a bad patch, Frank. I got depressed."

"You got depressed? You always were a selfish prick; didn't you think about the rest of us?"

"FRANK!"

"Sorry, go on."

"Not long after I left, everything turned to shit. I ended up in the gutter: drunk, sticking heroine in my veins, prostituting myself for every new hit. Just surviving. By chance I fell into the care of an Egyptian named Markov.

He saved my life. As spiritual leader of the Order of Horus, he'd travelled from Cairo to spread its influence, seeking disciples to join the flock."

"The Order of whores?" Frank said sardonically.

Danny ignored the outburst. Frank had always had an insufferable wit.

"The Order's purpose is simple: to ready the world for the coming war."

"War?"

"Each religion tells it differently: Christianity forewarns of Satan's return, rising from hell to reclaim his domain. Egyptian mythology depicts Set, ruler of the underworld, awakening to stake his claim on men's souls."

"And that's got what to do with me exactly?"

"We represent the all-seeing eye. The eye of Horus: preparing the world for the final battle."

"Danny, this is all bullshit. Was that really McAllister back there? And those finger pens, what was that about?"

"You've been pardoned, Frank. This is the place of Judgement. Terribilis est locus este: God's Court. Only here could Horus fully exonerate your sins. Those things you saw, reflections of your own personal hell."

"And in return, I join your little cult," Tate said bluntly.

"That man you killed, the one with the tattoo on his thumb. Taking his life allowed Horus to summon you. Now we can work together again. Forever!"

Frank Tate paused, considering his brother's words.

Then he smiled.

"Are the wages any good?"

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Tate's eyes chinked open. The train had stopped in the station. Twisting around, he saw laptop woman buttoning her overcoat. The bald man had already departed, scurrying along the illuminated platform. Behind Tate, a mobile phone started ringing. Tate swivelled, calling to the youth. "Are you gonna answer that?" To his surprise, the youth tossed over the phone.

"It's for you," announced the youth.

"Hello?"

"The woman," said the voice.

Tate knew what he had to do. Reaching into his jacket, his thumb gently rubbed the edge of his blade.

He stood up.

"Excuse me, miss, can I have a word?"