

He let out a cry of alarm and pushed away from the cubicle. He slammed into the side of a seat. The shock of pain was distant and didn't distract him from what he was staring at.

He pulled ragged breaths into his lungs. He was still recovering from the run to catch this train.

He should have let it go.

The pounding of his heart almost drowned out the thought.

He stared, wide-eyed at the mirror and the face staring back at him.

It was the face of the man he had killed. Smiling. The bloated black tongue distorted the mouth. And those glittering bloodshot eyes glaring at Tate in vile post-mortem amusement.

Tate locked stares with the apparition. Certain this shouldn't be happening. Knowing instinctively that it was.

His body locked itself in position, fear deadened his muscles, paralysed him. It was a fear he hadn't felt since he was eleven and listened to his father beat his mother as he lay covering his head with a pillow. Waiting for his turn.

The reflection was speaking. Tate couldn't hear the words. He could only see the mouth form the syllables awkwardly around the bloated tongue. A phrase repeated three times. Tate couldn't read lips, but he knew what the dead man was saying to him.

After the third repetition the lights in the carriage blinked out, wrapping Tate in darkness.

The darkness rushed into the carriage like a giant predator had been allowed in through the windows. He felt as though he were being probed, examined.

The lights came on again. He flinched expecting to still be staring at the distorted face of his most recent victim. All he saw was himself, frightened, pale and sweating.

It roused him from his fear.

With his strength came anger, at himself. He shook with the rage that filled him, and it took a lot to get Tate so wound up. He prided himself on being dispassionate in all things, after all if you could handle killing people and mutilating their corpses, nothing was going to cause you problems.

Nothing.

Tate's face twisted and he felt the urge to smash the mirror with his fist.

Then there was darkness again. It lasted a lot longer this time.

Tate looked around in the darkness. It was a hopeless exercise. He couldn't see anything. He decided to stay still, to try and think this out.

Perhaps someone was playing some practical joke on him. It seemed unlikely, it was too elaborate for anyone he knew to pull off. And no one he knew would be stupid enough to try anyway. There was no one close enough to him that he would allow to get away with it.

Somehow a small smile played across his lips, he got plenty of job satisfaction, but he made few friends. Funny how that was occurring to him just now.

The lights in the carriage flickered back to life.

Cautiously he turned to the mirror and walked up to it. It was a normal mirror against an equally mundane wall, no tricks.

He left the cubicle again and checked up and down the carriage. Still empty. As he made this observation the lights went out for a third time.

Unable to contain it any longer, Tate was about to shout, to tell his unseen tormentors what he was going to do to them, when he felt the temperature in the darkened carriage drop.

It was so sudden and extreme that when he drew in a breath he stopped short. It was like inhaling a snowdrift, stinging and unpleasant.

He took a defensive stance. He felt threatened, even though he was alone.

"But you're not alone, Frank."

The voice was as cold and bitter as the air in the carriage had become. The lights came on in response to the voice. A small voice that instilled unnameable terror within him.

A girl stood at the far end of the carriage.

She was no more than seven or eight, emaciated and pale-skinned. Deformities of the frail body were visible through the grubby grey dress that she wore. She seemed to possess more joints than was natural and they all jutted at impossible, uncomfortable angles.

Her smile, though, disturbed Tate far more than the sight of her ravaged body. The broken and yellowed teeth were not the cause, and the cracked, thin lips were even less relevant to him. It was nothing so tangible and it spoke of intelligence far in excess of what any adult, let alone a child, should possess. The small, black eyes glittered with the same malign power.

Frank's breath was blasting out even harder than it had after he sprinted for the train. It clouded in front of his face as it touched the Arctic cold air.

Some base part of his mind wanted to rush forward and kick this waif, crush her skull. A deeper, more primal part kept him from moving.

The girl's grin widened.

"You have never been alone, Frank. We have watched you all your life. We like what we see and we have something for you." The voice made Tate shiver.

Unable to speak, Tate stared at the twisted thing at the other end of the carriage.

He detected movement out of the corner of his eye.

In the toilet.

Lying draped and quivering over the seat was something Tate had no words to describe. It was the size of a Labrador but bore no relation to any dog. It looked like no animal that Tate had ever seen, because it had no arms, legs, tail or even a head.

Its flesh was yellow with tufts of coarse hair sprouting from it. Large, dark veins bulged and pulsed under the skin. Unseen organs twitched idiotically inside the wretched thing.

He'd seen nothing like it before, yet it was familiar to him. He felt drawn to it.

"You know what to do, Frank," the child said in a horribly intimate way.

Without pausing he fell upon the insensate thing and bit into it. The jaundiced flesh was soft and his teeth sank easily into it. The smell of putrefaction filled his mouth and flooded his nostrils. Something popped

and released some thick, toxic liquid down his throat. Indescribable substances dribbled down his chin. He ate.

He kept going until all that was left were the foul substances exuded by his grotesque meal. He wiped his mouth, fighting back nausea and realised the deformed girl was standing next to him. Watching him.

He wanted to speak, couldn't.

This seemed to amuse the girl, "We're close to hell, but that was never your destination. This is an initiation."

He stared at her, not even attempting to speak. Questioning all the same.

"Why, to keep doing what you do best, Frank. Your place in the world shall be terrible."

With that she laughed and the laughter stayed with Frank as he left the empty train.

He patted the pocket with the severed thumb. *Terribilis est locus iste*, he thought and smiled darkly. He wondered what other rewards awaited him once he had completed this job.

His smile became a cold laugh.