

Looking directly into the mirror in front of him, obscuring his image was a white envelope stuck to the glass bearing the words THE NEXT HIT but what startled him even more was what was written above it on the mirror, in someone's blood;

Terribilis est locus iste

He ripped the envelope away and grimaced at the transference of blood onto his fingers that had dripped in lines downwards from the message. He wiped it on a paper towel as he turned to leave the cubicle, his shoes sticking against the floor which he then realized was covered in blood also. He cursed as he stepped back out into the corridor, leaving bloodied footprints with each step, his pulse racing and his mind filling with numerous gruesome images of what may have taken place here.

Tate looked tentatively into the carriage through which he had just passed, noticing that it was still deserted, the envelope now considerably crumpled from his grip. He eyed it suspiciously for a moment before continuing to the buffet car, where he was certain to find someone if there was indeed anyone left on this train other than he.

He almost ran into the car in his eagerness to make human contact and hopefully get an answer to some of the increasing questions racing through his mind.

To his dismay and increasing frustration there was no one to be seen.

Everything was as it should be except for the staff that would normally be busying themselves serving customers begrudgingly paying inflated prices.

But here there was no one.

The train was obviously deserted, except for him.

Where had everyone gone? Was everyone dead? The blood-covered toilet indicated that something terrible had come to pass. He began to wonder how long he had been asleep and thought perhaps everyone had got off at a stop if there had been a stop. As little as he wanted to admit it, he knew this wasn't the case. Nobody would leave without taking their belongings and the cups of coffee that had barely been touched had still been steaming hot. And all that blood in the cubicle. No something was terribly wrong here.

He stood, almost frozen, as fear gripped him. Rarely had he ever known such an emotion as it was something he only saw in his victims, but right now he was SCARED. He wavered slightly with the motion of the train, trying to think, trying to clear his mind and bring some rationality to the situation, to think of what to do next. Then he remembered the envelope, crumpled and still in his hand.

He ripped furiously at the seal and withdrew the solitary sheet of paper inside, reading the hand-written message.

""At the only stop a tall man dressed all in black will board the train. He is the hit. Business as usual.""

That was it, nothing more. There was no details of the man, no name, no accurate description. What if more than one man boarded the train fitting the criteria? Tate then reckoned this was unlikely as his employers always did their research well. The last bit of the note indicated to him that they would be requiring another thumb or finger from the victim, or whatever might identify the hit to those who paid him.

His thoughts then changed to his employers. How had they known where he would be? Or that he would even be on a train? Were they following his movements closely enough to know this? Why would they do that? Were they perhaps targeting him for a hit also? He wondered also why the assignment had been given to him in a such a restricted setting as a train where there would be witnesses or little avenue of escape should something go wrong.

But there were no witnesses.

A cold sweat formed on his brow as he placed the note back inside the envelope and tucked it into the pocket that contained the severed digit of his last victim.

The questions that had been troubling him suddenly began to give way to certain possibilities that were emerging. Was there another hitman already on the train? Everyone was gone that was for sure. Perhaps they had all been removed so they wouldn't be around to witness what was coming to pass. This indicated that the hit was a major one. Either that or Tate himself was the hit. Another thought he pondered was that there was going to be one stop. This would give him a chance to exit the train and get the hell out. However, if his bosses did want this tall man in black assassinated and he did not deliver, then it would only be a matter of time before his own name would be at the top of a new contract.

Tate pondered this briefly looking left and right, before running at pace back to his own carriage, everything remaining as it was in each compartment when he had passed through them the first time. He bumped his shoulders several times on the seats as he passed them, the speeding train rocking from side to side.

He stopped beside the laptop that the woman in his compartment had left unattended and clicked the mouse on one of the minimised windows on the bottom toolbar. It immediately flashed up onto the screen, in bright

text, hundreds of words and a lump formed in his throat when he saw written over and over;

Terribilis est locus iste

In that precise moment the mobile left by the young man began to ring in that familiar annoying ringtone. Initially it had startled him but as it rang now relentlessly it just irritated him more and more. He eyed it menacingly, wanting to smash it into a thousand pieces, but instead walked over and picked it up. He bit his lip nervously as it vibrated in his palm and finally pressed his thumb against the OK button to receive the call.

""Hello"" he said quietly, the apprehension evident in his voice, not sure at what to expect.

""Terribilis est locus iste"" a distinctly inhuman voice growled at him quietly, ""Terribilis est locus iste.""

More consumed by terror than rage, Tate turned and threw the phone with force against the window of one of the compartment doors, smashing both to smithereens.

In that moment the train screeched to a halt and through the window he eyed a solitary tall figure dressed all in black, who entered the train and his compartment.

Tate suddenly realised he had none of the weapons of his trade about his person and froze as the tall man stood opposite him, his face obscured. He watched as the man withdraw a huge serrated knife, similar to the one he had used himself earlier, only bigger.

He turned to run but his path was blocked by all the missing passengers who each eyed him menacingly, eyes blazing and mouths open to reveal long and grotesque fangs. They submerged upon him as the tall stranger drew closer, and then everything went black.

Tate awoke on the cold platform in a pool of blood. He looked to the throbbing pain in his hand and realised his thumb was missing. He remembered the envelope and took it out to read it again. It was as he recalled but when he turned the page over he saw his own name, FRANK TATE.

In that moment he realised he was dressed entirely in black. Terror gripped him as it was apparent the hit was HIM. As he whispered the words *terribilis est locus iste* to himself he knew what they meant. THAT DREADED PLACE. As reality sunk in the words of the train steward earlier that he had not heard echoed in his ears, ""Last train to hell now boarding!""

Tate felt a great heat and turned to see the burning fires beyond huge black cast-iron gates bearing the words;

TERRIBILIS EST LOCUS ISTE