

The blood and skin had dried, creating a dark, wavy pattern along the serrated edge of the kitchen knife. And beside it was the electrical flex, carefully arranged into the same neck-shaped loop that had ended John Gresham's life less than an hour ago.

"What the f...?"

Tate stumbled, cracking his elbow against the doorway with a sharp stab of pain. Alarm bells clamoured in his head, searching for an explanation that wouldn't come. There had been no witnesses, no telltale footsteps behind during his escape. Someone was playing games and Tate did not find it amusing.

A hand touched his shoulder. "You'll need...?"

Tate's reaction was explosive. He spun, a clenched fist collapsing the attendant's windpipe with a single blow. She fell in a dull crumple, beverage jugs clattering across the checker-plate floor with a gurgle of tea and coffee. Tate staggered back, glaring at the body. The stupid bitch, what the hell was she thinking, creeping up on him like that? He furtively scanned up and down the compartments, dropping to his knees to examine her. The eyes flickered as he felt for the carotid pulse, but Tate already knew the result. He scooped up the knife and flex, a dryness in the back of his throat as he spotted a small printed card on the toilet lid.

Terribilis est locus iste.

Tate wrestled the body inside the cubicle, cursing when it refused to co-operate. He stepped back, grasping the door surround, extracting a bone splintering crack from the torso's upper limb as he booted it free of the washbasin. The arm flopped backwards over the left shoulder and the door slammed shut.

It was an effort to breathe, anger and frustration boiling over at the realisation that someone on this train knew him, someone knew what he'd done.

Then he saw her. The woman with the laptop in the carriage beyond the buffet car, teetering along the aisle, hands moving over the backs of the seats, bracing herself against the train's motion. Tate's jaw tightened. He sprinted after her, glaring through the clear panel of the door as he waited for it to open. Her head turned towards him.

The smile was gone, her face pallid, skin stretched tight across sunken cheekbones like dry parchment. Tate met the expressionless eyes and had a vision of the plastic surgeon from hell. He'd seen the look a dozen times before, but never on the living.

"Please take your seat sir."

Tate jolted at the voice from behind. It took a second to fix the source, a

small uniformed man at a dining table near the bar. He paused to glance back at the woman, but she'd already returned to her faltering journey.

"Where in blazes did you spring from?" he snarled.

"You just passed by me sir, I tried to catch your attention, but you seemed a little err...distracted."

Tate glowered uncertainly, his knuckles turning white on the seat backrests. This game of hide and seek was becoming tedious.

"I'm afraid there's been a clerical error sir. Nothing to worry about, we're meeting someone at the down-line station to correct the problem."

"Station?" Tate's lip twitched.

Almost immediately there was a hiss of brakes and a lurch as the carriages closed up. A blurred station sign raced by, light flooding in as the train slowed to a halt. Tate made a snap decision. The train was a death trap, outside he stood a chance, especially with a hostage. He grabbed the old man by the neck, pressing the kitchen knife to his throat.

The station was dilapidated, bare bulbs hanging from twisted flex, rows of discoloured tiles arching from floor to ceiling and a moth-eaten sign with an unsurprising title. A real shit hole thought Tate, but there on the other side of the platform was his ticket to freedom. The down-line train was stationery,

waiting to head back in the opposite direction. A solitary figure stepped out. Tate froze.... NO!... not possible...

John Gresham's stride was brisk, lips curling into a broad, toothy grin as he approached with the thumbless hand outstretched. "I'd shake, but as you can see, I'm slightly incapacitated."

How...how in hell? The man was dead, windpipe crushed tighter than a duck's arse in winter.

Tate backed up into the carriage, a falter in his step as he tightened his grip around the old man's neck. Gresham followed. "I see you two are getting acquainted, and what in heaven's name have you done to the buffet car lady?" Tate turned to a noise from behind. The drinks attendant wore an embarrassed smile as she fought to get a grip on the flailing arm, a strange gurgling sound emanating from her ruptured larynx. She caught hold, wrenching it into place with a sickening crunch. Tate's vision blurred, a taste of vomit in the back of his throat.

Instinct took over.

He slashed the blade deep across the old man's throat, ripping through flesh and muscle to the spinal vertebrae.

The old man did not move.

"Please sir, YOUR TICKET!"

The half-severed head rotated full circle to meet him with glistening black eyes.

"We're simply trying to sort out your ticket so you can join the other passengers."

Tate gawped, his entire body numb as the head and torso stepped away. Gresham held out a slip of paper.

"I believe this belongs to you now."

Tate's head was bursting. He wanted to run, to scream, anything to escape this nightmare.

He tried to back away, but found himself reaching inexorably for the ticket. It was cold to the touch, sickening, like a tide of dark inertia washing over his fingers. He imagined his hand anaesthetised, numb, being amputated without pain, the nerve endings shrivelling away like weeds under a poison spray.

Gresham placed an arm around the old man's shoulders. "Unfortunately for you, I signed a binding contract with this gentleman's boss concerning the ownership of my soul in fifty years time.

I simply cannot die till then. Nothing can change that, not even your futile attempt to murder me.

The even worse news is that the ticket cannot be revoked."

Tate looked down at the paper. Gresham's name was fading and his own replacing it below the same familiar words. Gresham laughed.

"It says 'Terrible is this place.' Don't suppose I need to spell out which place it refers to. Oh, and I think you have something that belongs to me." Tate could only watch as Gresham's hand extracted the small cling film parcel from his pocket. He was dimly aware of the stationmaster's whistle and Gresham heading back towards the down-line train and home.

Tate watched, transfixed, unable to move, brain screaming as the effects of the ticket crept onwards and upwards, past his neck, across his lips and on to his eyes. The old man placed a comforting hand on his shoulder. A gentle sway and the train was moving, Gresham was gone, outside the darkness of the tunnel returned and Tate became aware of his own reflection in the glass.

There was no need to look, he knew the eyes staring back were not those of the living.