

The entire side of the cubicle was missing. Where the wall should have been was a black, gaping wound.

Tate stood motionless for a moment, blinking.

What the hell was going on? Had there been an explosion? He hadn't heard anything.

He hadn't noticed he'd been holding his breath and he abruptly let out a long sigh as he stared into the yawning chasm. How quiet it was. He couldn't hear the clatter of the wheels on the tracks, nor feel the vibrations beneath his feet. Not so much as a breeze came from the hole in the wall.

Had the train stopped?

He stepped back into the space between the carriages.

There it was! He could feel it again, a thrumming vibration. The train was moving.

He stepped over to the exit door and tugged at the window. A blast of cold air hit him full in the face, tugging at his hair.

He stepped back into the cubicle. Stillness again.

Carefully, hands pressed to the wall, he edged towards the dark hole. Still not a breath emanated from within. As he got nearer his eyes began to adjust to the darkness and he thought he could see a sign. Yes it was a station sign, dimly illuminated in the light from the train. He could make out the words;

RENNES LE CHATEAU

Where the hell was he? He'd never heard of the place. Is this where everyone on the train had gone?

He poked his head out of the opening. Apart from the dim light illuminating the sign, the sky was pitch-black. Not a single star shone in the sky, no matter how hard he stared. As he looked along the platform, into the darkness, he thought he could make out a pale fog. He hopped down from the train and took a few steps towards it, his feet crunching on the gravel. No it was a light. He was sure of it. He quickened his pace. Maybe now he'd get some answers.

As he got nearer he could make out the dim shape of a building, coming into focus with each step. It was a low, single-storey, stone building. He could see no windows only the light shining from an open archway. Tate stood beneath the archway, his eyes drawn towards an inscription carved above it;

Terribilis est locus iste

This was getting beyond a joke. Taking a deep breath he stepped through the archway.

Tate raised a hand to shield his eyes from the piercing brightness as he entered the room. Gradually he became accustomed to the light and was struck by the starkness of the room. The walls a rudimentary stone, the roof cracked plaster. The far wall contained four crude stained-glass windows and several rows of wooden benches lined the concrete floor. A Church.

Tate shivered; he'd given up on the Holy Ghost a long time ago.

Suddenly he froze as he noticed a figure kneeling amongst the benches. Where had he come from? Tate was sure he wasn't there a moment ago.

The man was dressed in dark robes; thick black hair slicked back on his head. He was praying. Even in that position Tate could see that he was a powerful thickset man.

Before Tate could speak, the man looked over in his direction. Tate noticed the dog collar around his neck. He was a priest.

"Welcome, Monsieur, welcome," the priest said, in a broad French accent, a smile playing across his face.

He tapped the bench beside him. "Come sit."

Tate didn't move.

Still smiling the priest tapped the bench again

"Please," he insisted. " We do not have much time."

Tate tried to resist but felt strangely compelled to obey. Slowly he walked towards the priest and sat down.

His mind raced. What was he doing? Why couldn't he stop himself?

He gritted his teeth in an effort to move, to speak but he could do neither.

He was completely and utterly frozen to the spot.

"Now," the priest continued. "I believe you have something that belongs to us, yes?"

Tate's eyes flicked wildly in his sockets as the priest reached across and slid a hand inside his jacket and pulled out the small plastic bag. He held it up to the light.

"Yes. I think this is what we are looking for," the priest grinned as he tucked the bag into his own pocket.

He held Tate's right hand between his own hands and shook it firmly.

"Thank you for returning it, Monsieur. It was careless of us to misplace it."

Although Tate could not see his own hand he could feel the searing pain coursing through his thumb up his right arm. He could also smell the stench of burning flesh - a smell he knew only too well. He let out a silent scream that only he could hear and just as he thought it couldn't get any worse he caught a glimpse of flashing steel.

"Ah, I almost forgot. A little souvenir," the priest smiled, as he slowly turned the knife in front of Tate's eyes. "It is customary to take a souvenir, no?"

The blade flashed and as the pain hit Tate's brain his stomach convulsed and he found, as he projectile vomited across the bench, that he could move once more.

On his knees, bent double with pain, Tate rocked backwards and forwards until gradually the convulsions subsided. Slowly he sat back on his haunches and held his mutilated hand up to his face. Blood oozed from the stump where his little finger had been. It was then that he noticed the burn mark on his thumb. A small mark on the lower knuckle that looked like a staring eye.

Slowly his mind began to clear and he remembered the priest. He quickly swung round.

The priest. Where was he?

The room was empty.

All of a sudden, from outside, Tate heard the shrill note of a Guard's whistle.

The train? It's leaving!

Cradling his bloody hand, he lurched towards the door.

Tate stood in the corridor between the carriages. He reached with his good hand into a pocket inside his jacket and pulled out a pair of leather gloves. The finest leather. Very gently he began pulling a glove over the mutilated hand, wincing at each careful tug. By using his teeth he found that he could pull on the other glove.

Trying to look as normal as possible, Tate stepped through into the First Class compartment. There was the young man reading the magazine, the woman tapping on her laptop and the balding man still listening to the portable CD player. None of them looked up as he passed. Fine by him. The less attention, the better.

As he reached his old seat he felt a coldness envelope his heart. He held onto the seat to steady himself. He didn't know it – that realisation would come later – but his soul, such as it was, was no longer his own. His head

began to swim as he sat back in the seat. The last thing he noticed, before he passed out, were the streetlights speeding by the window.