

Iain looked up at the glowing red for the fourth night in a row and wondered for the thousandth time what the hell was going on. The new sky glowed again like it did every night - every night being four days since it had appeared.

Four days ago the sky had been replaced. Iain had gone to bed and the globe curtain was customary black, sprinkled with F. Scott Fitzgerald's silver pepper. In the morning, instead of the expected blue, it was a sheet of glowing red. It wasn't just the colour though. Where the old sheet had a tint range visible from light horizon to deep sea apex, then graduating back down to paler shades of blue on black as the ovoid globe turned, the new one was completely monochromatic, with only occasional stripes of light streaking across the red slab.

As Iain looked up he decided it was sort of solid, thicker than cloud but not quite jelly. Reports said planes trying to approach the newness lost power, as though the ceiling of the atmosphere had been severely lowered.

Unfortunately, the new sky had appeared on a Monday, so Iain hadn't been able to afford it a lot of thought, apart from a few looks on the way to and from the great hamster wheel of work in the morning and evening.

The project he was currently assigned to by the firm was life sapping insanity itself. He had colleagues dropping in hives and applying cortisone all around him.

It was now Thursday morning – he would think about the sky on the weekend.

Right now he had to catch a train.

He was standing in the financial district with all the red tinged skyscrapers arching above him. As he looked up, his cornea curved them at the top to complete unnatural angles beneath an unnatural sky. It was like the city was an upturned insect on its back, he was walking the lines of its stomach and the towers were its flailing legs – the sky was its vision, red tinged with rage from being unable to right itself from its very birth.

The Monday rush was in full swing. It was also hard to look up when you keep getting jostled by people in black. All around were the workers of the financial district. If you ran your finger through the air you could pick up the black dust of desperation that begrimed their faces. Iain got his elbows working in the tide to propel him towards the Metro sign. It felt good to descend into the cavern that was the underground station. He quoted Dante every day as his leather soles clipped off the edge of the stairs. The quoting aided descending towards what he considered eight hours of complete and voluntary purgatory. Still, he thought, the frustration of this was less than that of going without food. It was only ten working days until Easter, then another two hundred till the end of year break.

Apart from the sky, it was going to be another fabulous day of machine like operation. Yes indeed, he thought, another carbon copy day of doing stuff that wasn't really him so he could buy stuff to look like someone else or so that others thought of him as someone other than who he was - marvellous.

He skipped off the steps to the artificial underground brightness as the latest train went screaming away. It was one of those perfectly timed descents when a wave of humanity had just crushed into the interior walls of a train to be turbulently whisked into a darkened hole. He sped up quickly to stand in the middle of the platform and savour thirty seconds. Then the ripples of the next wave started coming past him. He

shuffled forward quickly. In a minute the entire station was once more rammed with debt-workers.

So many, he always thought, to the point humanity hasn't had a good clear out for ages, we are due for something to happen.

The next train came screaming tortured metal round the bend and started squealing to a halt. It was at the moment the metal started shrieking that Iain became aware someone was watching him.

It was not a tingle on the neck, someone behind, looking at the back of his head but actually looking at the train type of scenario. This was a face off to the side, tipped towards him, studying him acutely.

As he turned his head to look, there was a sea-change and he was being carried toward and through the open cargo doors. He managed to catch a quick glimpse before the movement blur. It was a face not too dissimilar to his - dark features atop tallness, although the face was partly obscured by wraparound sunglasses. Iain had to snap his head back forward, trying to look as vision became a jogging handycam movement through to the brighter light of the carriage.

The human wave dispersed left and right and Iain settled down against a chair, surrounded by multi-coloured waves of human froth. The train jerked forward and he started to focus on tuning out and away from other people in close proximity. In the top left hand corner of the hurtling metal box was a distended circular mirror that warped space to take in the entire carriage, the type normally seen in the corners of shops and concealed driveways. This one was in the corner probably put up as a public benefit, with a camera behind and an eye behind that, taking it all in.

He started to sway rhythmically with the train, humming a silent tune to himself and tapping his fingers on the seat in the space between his legs. He looked up at the mirror. A train whipped by in the opposite direction, doubling the noise and influx of air through the open windows and ventilation ducts. In the mirror, three rows back and looking directly at him was the man he saw briefly on the platform. Iain tilted his head back to the mirror for a closer look. Beyond the sunglasses, he could see wavy dark hair and a grey trench coat. Iain looked away and then back again. He noticed how the man looked very much like himself. The man was still looking straight at him, his head hadn't moved – the man's eyebrows raised twice in quick succession of acknowledgement.

Then the lights went out.

For a split second, Iain wondered whether was awake or still asleep. It felt like that moment of confusion when you sleep in a place of maximum dark and it makes no difference when you open your eyes, to the point you can't decide whether you've done it or not. The train lurched him back to the presence of moving metal and the rising volume of voices around, made him become present again to the surroundings. The lights flickered intermittently and the train lurched again like a kicked midriff. A woman started screaming. There were two loud bangs on the roof, then stamping, as though someone was up there with metal shoes on.

Iain heaved up onto his feet as the lights flickered again and grabbed hold of the pole in front of him.

Whatever is going to happen, he decided, I'd rather be standing.

The train bucked again and it started to feel like the driver had lost control. With his elbow hooked around the pole, he was swung around to face the window. The

stamping on the roof was getting louder. The lights were flicking continuously now, creating a near strobe light effect. There was a large lurch to the right this time and he was swung back towards the inside of the train to come face to face with himself.

It was the man in the grey trench coat, sunglasses and distance between them gone – Iain was looking at himself in the face. There was a moment where time stopped, like that split second slowing of time and speeding of portent when you know you've lost control of the car but haven't yet hit the barrier. A microsecond of silence that lasts an eternity before sound explodes. Iain was frozen unbelieving and didn't have a clue what to do. Suddenly, unseen, in-between light flicks, eye blinks and people cowering, there was a knife at his throat coming out of the man's sleeve. Not his hand holding a knife, but a big blade coming straight out of the sleeve, like one of those freaks in an old James Bond movie with part of an arm replaced by a weapon. Iain watched in disbelief as he watched himself in other clothes lean forward, apply pressure to the blade against his windpipe and tell him in his own voice,

'If you want to wake up tomorrow, do exactly what I say.'

Iain nodded, after all, the man had a big fuck off knife for a hand, and it was nuzzling his trachea. The stamping had stopped and sounds of ripping metal were coming from above. The train was bucking wildly under the flickering lights and the whole thing had the distinct possibility of becoming a discotheque of death.

'Turn around.' The man who looked like Iain's doppelganger instructed.

Iain slowly turned. The doppelganger was now behind him, knife still to the throat.

He whispered in Iain's ear, 'In ten seconds I'm going to throw you through the window. You are going to hit the top of a pile of sand. I suggest adopting a sort of diving motion to break through the top and then roll down the other side. See you at home. Coming in at five,' Iain felt a hand crunched his collar, 'four' he was adjusted slightly to fully face the window, 'three,' another hand crunched the clothes at the small of his back, 'two,' he took a step back but was pushed forward and steadied again, 'one-'

At the last count he was hurtled forward by a massive force before he could even take half a step. He heard another scream as he approached the glass at an extreme horizontal velocity, just managing to reflex raise his arms as he smashed through the glass to disappear into the black.

As he exited two more people dropped into the car from the roof, further down in the carriage to where Iain had been standing. Their clothes were a dark shade of grey. They landed on their feet, straightened up and looked around.

Iain hit something but went through it in the dark. With a face full of sand his body dropped and he was sliding down the other side of the sand pile and onto eventual concrete.

In the flickering darkness of the train carriage, screams of metal and people intermingled freely. The two new descendants from the roof looked left and right. The man who looked exactly like Iain was in the middle of the aisle at the top of the carriage, looking at the new entrants. People were strewn everywhere from the jolting of the train and self-preservation diving when the roof ripped off and the newcomers came crashing in. The two swivelled their heads to see the Iain lookalike. They marched towards him menacingly in the strobing light, hurling aside a few people who were in the way as though they were unwanted toys. Two steps away from the

man who looked like Iain, shotguns appeared from the back of trench coats to be pressed against his forehead. The Iain lookalike smiled. Triggers were depressed.

There was a massive roar and intensified screaming as passengers scrambled over each other towards the other side of the carriage. The Iain lookalike disintegrated into a swirling DNA pattern of byte size circles that dissipated across the floor and into nothingness. The two assailants made a three fingered sign and cursed. They turned and dove out the closest windows in a crash and hail of glass. The lights in the carriage stopped flickering. The passengers were thrown forward as the emergency brakes engaged. They hung on tightly until the squealing stopped, then slowly started to get up. There was no blood to be seen where the guns had been fired. All that remained was two shotgun holes in the wall, a largish hole in the roof and three broken windows.

Iain lay on cold concrete and sand. He moaned for his own benefit; coughed and spat sand out of his mouth and away from his lips. Slowly, he pushed his chest up, lifted his legs beneath him and swivelled his torso until he arrived in a sitting position. He had been well flung and could now surmise he'd hit a construction area off the track.

He could see a light in the distance, otherwise he wouldn't have been able to tell up from down in the tunnel. He stood up and brushed himself off. He had a few grazes on his hands and his left elbow was a bit tender but he was inherently alright. He could vaguely make out a one metre service platform on either side against the wall.

The tunnel narrowed to darkness ahead of him but for the next ten metres there was all manner of physical labour paraphernalia – tape, plastic cordons, shovels and some plastic orange boxes. It was seven thirty in the morning and obviously the employees of the Metro, or their contractors where not required to be anywhere near here.

He looked up at the distant light through the vision mists of being slightly dazed.

He shook the sand out of his hair and thought for the thousandth and one time, what the hell was going on?