

As Rob pulled away he frowned at the Toyota parked in front of Kelly's Rover. It looked familiar, somehow. He peered over the steering wheel, trying to see if there was anyone inside. Probably was, there was a hell of a lot of condensation inside.

*Ah, fuck it. I'll be seeing ghosts next...* he turned on the radio as he waited in the queue of traffic on the Elizabeth Way roundabout. He occasionally glanced at the Green Man, all too aware of the strange glances it was getting from oncoming motorists. He wound down the window and tossed the butt of a cigarette out, then promptly lit a fresh one. He coughed, hawked and spat something green onto the road.

A weather report on the radio. More heavy snow forecast tonight, possibly two or three inches. Then clear skies and sunshine. It would freeze again. The bookies had slashed the odds against having a white Christmas, but with all the accidents – including the horrific A14 snarl up yesterday – it seemed that people had had enough of the festive winter wonderland and were almost hoping for good old-fashioned British rain.

“Never happy, are we shitbag?” Still, last day of work before the Christmas shut down. Then he could relax, catch up on some sleep.

As he approached the Granta Office Supplies depot a song was playing on the radio, one he hadn't heard for years. Not one of his favourites, but a welcome break from the usual Christmas bollocks playing - The Eagles' *Hotel California*.

*In the Master's chambers, they gather for their feast.*

The doors were closed. He checked his watch. Eight o'clock – normally open by now, but perhaps it was too cold for Jim.

*They stab it with their steelen knives but they just can't kill the Beast...*

He shivered as he shut the engine down. He looked warily at Jasper. Then at the Green Man. In the side mirror he could see a face appear in the upstairs window. A face that frowned and disappeared.

“Harrison Terry...don't give me any grief today, sunshine. I ain't in the mood. C'mon, boy.”

He dragged open the sliding door and beckoned for Jasper to enter. Jasper sniffed at the doorway and whined, He sat down and looked beseechingly at Rob.

“C'mon, shitbag. Get in there.”

Jasper followed Rob in slowly, unwillingly. He waited by the door, as though ready to make a swift getaway. He sat with his tail beating feebly, disturbing the fine layer of black ash that coated the grey concrete slab of the warehouse floor. It eddied and whirled like dust clouds, and Rob could see now why Higgins and Terry had kept the warehouse door shut. He turned and dragged the exterior door closed again.

At the far end of the warehouse, Higgins and Terry stood, staring at him.

“Morning, gents,” Rob nodded. “No Jim today?”

Higgins and Terry looked at each other. Terry was trying, not very successfully, to hide his smirk. Higgins at least had the grace to look uncomfortable.

“He’s upstairs. I asked him to leave us, so that we could have a word in private.”

Rob noticed a small brown envelope in his hand. “What’s that, Christmas card?”

“It’s a card of a sort, Benson,” Harrison Terry was grinning now. “It’s your card, and it’s been marked.”

“Fuckin’ what?” Rob roared. “You sacking me? Why?”

“A formal complaint from the college of All Souls – from the Bursar, no less. Didn’t like your attitude when you delivered the toner.”

“Bursar? I didn’t deliver that, And – “ *oh, fuck. What did you do, Andy?*

“And what? As if that wasn’t enough the desk delivered to the Master was broken – damaged in transit? Rubbish. I know deliberate damage when I see it.” Higgins’ cheeks were red. “I had to go out personally to help Harrison pick it up. Then eat humble pie and promise the Master we’d get it replaced before the new term.”

Rob was no longer listening. His eyes were fixed on the black ash on the floor. It was darker, no longer a powdery grey. It was a thick, almost viscous black – and it was moving.

“You’ve had enough warnings, Benson,” Terry said smugly. “I said that if you – “

Now he was aware of the black ash. All three men watched the streams of coarse powder flowing into the centre of the warehouse. From behind the returns cages, from underneath Jim Maskell’s desk, from the charging generator of the

forklift truck...the black ash was flowing rapidly into the area where the three men stood. Almost liquid in its movements, a black sea that was taking shape.

Terry's rage diminished, fading into confusion as the ash flowed over his Oxfords. He yelped as though a snake had crawled over him and jumped backwards, banging his elbow on one of the returns cages. Rob stepped backwards and glanced briefly at Higgins. Higgins met his eyes and a look of fearful understanding passed between them. Because like Rob, he knew where this ash had come from.

It blew upwards, into the air, into their faces, swirling like a miniature desert storm. Rob coughed, feeling nauseous at the taste of cremated pork.

He felt even more nauseous as the cloud of ash settled, the particles less animated as they formed a shape in the air. Like one of those 'invisible man' films he remembered watching as a kid, where dust or sand is blown across an unseen intruder to give him a definite outline, the ash cloud formed the image of a pig like creature, a sculpture made entirely of black sand. And then, as though the force behind it was intent on making its creation as realistic as possible, textures were added. Hollows and lighter patches, concave sections, a perfect three dimensional sculpture. Then the ash settled, became darker, even more dense. Rob blinked, and in that split second the ash was indistinguishable from the black bristles that raced along the animal's spine.

A few seconds passed, the only sound the terrified barking of Jasper, and then the ash was gone. Every part of the thing was coated in the same glossy, thick fur that bristled as it took its first deep, shuddering breaths of air.

Black fur parted on two equidistant points on the beast's head, and Rob Benson found himself facing again those terrible black eyes of the boar he had run over in the woods of All Souls the night before.

The boar sniffed the air. Its nostrils twitched wetly, twin plumes of steam snorted into the air from its snout as it effortlessly released its first reborn breath. The flanks of the beast moved like a pair of bellows, contracting and expanding. Each breath that escaped the animal rumbled in its throat, each breath a warning. And then it stood.

Its bristling hide sounded like white noise in the silent warehouse. Its black, dead eyes scanned the warehouse slowly, as if it was contemplating its surroundings – or searching for prey. The unnatural white tusks gleamed like ivory in the glare of the ceiling lights.

The eyes narrowed as they fixed on the van - an almost human gesture, Rob thought, as though the beast recognised it and hated it.

And when the beast's head turned to regard the three men standing horrified and disbelieving behind it the eyes narrowed again. Rob Benson knew then that the creature recognised him.

But what else did it remember? What had it come back for? Rob stared into the eyes of the boar. He backed away slowly, edging to the rear wall of the warehouse. The boar stood, motionless save for the heaving of its flanks, the

steam pouring into the cold air – breath that reeked, stank of decomposing organs and rotten meat. The stench of death.

Now he knew why Jasper had been so fearful, so reluctant to enter the warehouse. He looked to the double doors, saw Jasper sitting by the gap in the doors. His hackles had risen, the lips pulled back from his teeth. Both ears were fully erect.

The boar squealed as Rob tried to move past him, its wickedly sharp tusks rolling in his direction. He froze against the wall, remained still. The boar roared again, its message clear. *Remain where you are!*

Rob looked over to the charging unit, feeding the forklift truck electricity. The tines were still coated in the greenish-black juices that had come from the beast when they had forked it off the van yesterday.

*No harm in trying again*, he thought. The boar was staring at Terry and Higgins, both men frozen immobile in horror and fear. Its eyes were off Rob, now was the time –

It moved like lightning, tearing its bulk around to block his path to the forklift. It lowered its head and one of its tusks prodded his calf. He let out a sharp yelp of pain. Then another nod forward from the boar, another jabbing, sharp pain in his other calf. He fell to his knees, his face level with the boar's. He stared at it, saw its red eyes gleam with anticipation. The tiny red pinpricks of its pupils dilated, scarlet holes of death widening to take him. Black saliva dripped from its gaping mouth, pooling on the floor like tar. It moved closer, its tusks brushing against his throat.

And then the hypnotic gaze was broken. The boar roared, black spittle flying in Rob's face as it was torn from its victim. Rob staggered backwards, watching in disbelief as the speckled black and white fur mingled with the black bristles, sharp canine fangs clashing with porcine tusks. Jasper's teeth sank into the beast's flank and tore away a piece of flesh that came away with a wet tearing sound. Jasper didn't even spit it out. It was in his black-blood stained mouth for a brief moment and then his jaws bared once more. His throat was empty and Rob realised with horror that Jasper had swallowed it.

The roaring of the boar, scarcely noticing the wound in its flank, was matched in volume by the ferocious barking of Jasper. Rob knew Jasper didn't have a chance.

But he'd given his caretaker one. He wasted no time. In spite of the pain from his bleeding calves, he leapt to his feet, raced to the charging unit and pulled the power lead from its connecting socket. He leapt into the cab of the machine, twisting the key.

The machine hummed into life. Rob pressed his foot hard on the Monotrol pedal and swung the wheel in a hard right lock. He looked behind him and saw the boar throw Jasper clear across the warehouse floor, right up to the gap in the doors. Jasper landed heavily on his back with a yelp, his paws scrabbling in the air.

Rob brought the forklift around, its tines scraping on the concrete with an ear piercing screech, to face the creature. But it wasn't hanging around. Having dealt with Jasper it turned to the nearest human.

Jasper's shattered ribcage made a sickening clicking sound as he hauled himself along the warehouse floor, whining as he tried to escape the slaughterhouse. His hind legs dangled uselessly, nothing but dead weight now his backbone had been broken. His nose twitched as it met the cold clean air of the outside world.

Higgins let out a groan, his stomach bulging. The boar snorted wetly, shaking its head to dislodge its tusks from Higgins' belly – or rather, Rob realised, to enlarge the wound it had made. Because the tusks came free with a triumphant flourish and a sickening, squelching sound. The beast shook its head again, more vigorously, in an attempt to remove the garland of blue and red intestine that trailed around its tusks. Higgins screamed again as he saw his own internal organs pulled out and dropping to the floor.

Higgins sank to the floor like a split sack of potatoes. His legs gave way and he fell heavily to his knees before toppling into the glistening pile of blood and offal in front of him. The boar turned its head to the ground, raising a paw to rid itself of the lower intestine that crowned it. It seemed oblivious to the mechanical yellow monster speeding towards it.

Instead it turned its attention to the horrified Harrison Terry who was standing to one side of the now dead director of Granta Office Supplies, his feet

sliding in the red mess. The boar stood its ground, steam rising from its gaping maw, daring Harrison Terry to move.

*"I'm marking YOUR card, motherfucker!"* Rob screamed, aiming the machine to the beast. His words echoed around the warehouse, rolled through the partially-open doorway leading to the offices and the workers beyond. He pulled down on the lever that controlled the elevation of the mast. With a whine the forks moved upwards.

He saw Terry break free, running towards him and the forklift truck. He took his foot off the Monotrol pedal, realising that if he carried on he would impale Harrison Terry and not the boar.

"KISSARSE!" he bellowed. "SHIFT! Fucking MOVE!" To get the speed was one thing, difficult enough in this limited space – but he needed to get the angle right. First time.

Harrison Terry stumbled, slipping on the pool of blood from his boss. That was all the boar needed. Its right tusk tore into the back of his thigh and drove upwards at a sharp angle, up through his buttock and beyond

Even over the noise of the electric motor Rob could hear the scrape of tusk against pelvic bone as it worked its way through Harrison's groin and burst through in an explosion of blood and urine. Terry's scream was barely human.

The boar continued its charge, with a flick of its powerful neck muscles flipping the writhing sales rep over its head. Its tusk slid out with a sickening plopping sound, and Harrison Terry crumpled in a heap besides Higgins, bleeding and weeping.

Now the boar was in Rob's sights. He made another, final adjustment on the elevation. Only when the tines were level with the softer grey fur of its belly did the beast seem aware of what was coming.

It tried to move sideways but wasn't fast enough. Its left flank was angled towards the speeding truck when the forks struck.

The left tine entered the creature's throat smoothly, passing out just below its right ear, while the right struck the ribcage with a jarring thud. The creature roared and thrashed on the impaling tines, the wheel spun in Rob's hands and he fought to control it, burning the skin of his palms in the process. The rubber wheels of the forklift painted black smears on the warehouse floor, but Rob fought to keep the machine moving. He pulled down on the mast elevation, raising the beast to his eye level, and kept his foot on the Monotrol pedal. The machine bumped, tilted to the left as it ran over something, then came back down to the floor with a crash. He could smell the acrid stench of acid escaping from the battery cells behind him.

Only when the red coated tines hit the far wall, crashing into the brickwork on the side of the entrance doors, was the truck halted. He pulled on the park brake and jumped out of the cab, sank to his knees, shuddering and watching the beast buck and writhe its agonised death on the forks. Black blood splattered and dripped on the floor along with chunks of masonry and clouds of white brick dust. He kept his eyes closed against the beast's horrifying shriek of pain, a noise that sounded almost human. He kept his eyes squeezed shut, coughing up the brick dust. The noise was worse, the screaming that of a man in –

He opened his eyes and gasped.

The tines of the forklift had struck something else before they had entered the wall. The right had entered David Higgins' already gored belly like a final insult. The left...

*Oh, dear God.* The left...he stayed on his knees, clasping the sides of his head, moaning. He couldn't look up. He stared at the floor, gibbering.

He could see Higgins' entrails, crowned with an envelope that had been brown once, with his name written on it. He kept his eyes riveted on it. Far better that than what was impaled on the forks of the truck.

He heard voices from behind the closed door. He stood up shakily, knew he had to move. No one would believe him if he told them why he had run the forklift into the wall.

*No, he decided* as he ran blindly towards the exit, his eyes stung by the dissipating clouds of ash and black dust. *When the rest of the crew start work there's only one conclusion they're gonna draw.*

The boar had disappeared. All that remained of it was the black dust that seared Rob's throat, stung his eyes. No sign of the creature that Rob had run through with the forklift.

Just the impaled bodies of David Higgins and Harrison Terry, the latter's groin pierced and pinned not by the tusk of a creature that had no right to exist, but the steel of an industrial machine operated by a man.

Rob sobbed as he picked up the shattered body of Jasper, already going cold in the morning air. He was dimly aware of curious faces pressed against the

windows of the office building opposite but concentrated more on opening the side door, getting Geoff Michael's dog into the van. His head rolled on the wooden partition, blood oozing from the gored holes in his body. Blood that soaked into the bubblewrapped shotgun that Andy had brought with him.

Rob slammed the door shut, sobbing uncontrollably, but this time with rage and grief rather than fear.

Now he believed.