

The kitchens of All Souls College smelled like a slaughterhouse. As they should do, Mark Cassell told himself as he tied his apron. There was a faint smell of the disinfectant cleaner that signified the wash-down at the end of last night's duties, but other than that the only other smell was that emanating from the dead boar on the steel worktop before him.

He flared his nostrils appreciatively, savouring the aroma. The animal's own nostrils, like its mouth, were wide open as if still struggling for breath – or trying to release something. Something black and wormlike. Mark Cassell leant his huge bulk forward, frowning.

Now that was strange. The carcass had been bled fully before it had been hung; yet some blood had obviously remained hidden, as if waiting for the arrival of the head chef of All Souls before seeping out to greet him.

Well, well, he mused. Life was full of surprises, but death could still throw a few in your path as well. He dipped a chubby finger into the black, clotted liquid leaking from the left nostril, tracing a thick line down to the drainer. It had the thickness of sump oil but its smell was unique.

To other noses it would have been the stench of death, rotting body fluids and the corruption of flesh. To the head chef of All Souls College it was the heavenly scent of life itself. His skills with herbs and spices would not only transform the meat into something exquisite – a piece of art far superior to the garish dishes paraded on television by the celebrity chefs he despised – it would turn the dead animal into a giver of life. From corrupted flesh would come the promise of salvation.

Survival. The planet and its peoples safe from the ravages of *Her*. For another year, at least.

The kitchens were silent, and save for him, deserted. It was something he insisted on every year. Apart from Peter Ford, one of the longer-serving kitchen workers who was fully trusted with the secrets of the Feast, the rest of the catering staff would come in later, just before noon, to begin work. That gave Mark Cassell plenty of time alone with his work. The boar was his alone. His canvas.

His art. Mark Cassell had been in professional catering for so long he couldn't remember doing anything else – and all within the kitchens of All Souls. He hadn't needed tuition from the recognised catering colleges, or any sabbaticals to the famous eating-houses of Britain and Europe. Everything he had learned was either self-taught or passed on from the head chef before him. Since graduation, over twenty five years had been spent here. Learning every technique, every preparation. Every secret.

However, the last few years had been a trial, a new learning experience, as he and his team had taken on board the techniques required to cater for the higher end of the market – the conference and corporate hospitality market that the College had entered. With the lack of students the College had been forced to diversify, to open its doors to other means of income.

Feedback from the Catering Office had been favourable, but some of the clients had remarked on a 'lack of originality'. Cassell wasn't concerned with that. Like all of the College's most devoted servants, he was a creature of tradition. Traditionalists didn't concern themselves with innovation, originality. If they wanted that, Cassell ranted to the Bursar one day, they could bugger off to Heston Blumenthal's or Marco Pierre-Whites. They were outsiders, anyway. How dare they presume to tell *him* what food would be served? The purpose of the kitchens of All Souls was the preparation of dishes that remained true to the original recipe for hundreds of years. And in the case of the boar, thousands.

This dish had a sense of purpose, a gastronomic experience that went beyond satisfying taste buds and filling bellies. It wasn't just living history on a plate. It was life itself.

He raised his head from the worktop and stared out of the one window he hadn't pulled the blind down on. It looked out onto the woods behind Cloister Court. His puffy eyes narrowed as they swept over the tops of the snow-drenched trees. But the only intruder in the woods was the first ray of dawn sunlight.

Franklin's news of the intruder last night had unnerved him. No matter how much the head porter may try to play the matter down, it was obvious to all that something had gone badly wrong. Rumours amongst the kitchen staff had flown about the increasingly concerned meetings of the College Council. The Fellows had been seen leaving the pre-breakfast emergency meeting yesterday white-faced and in visible distress. David Searles, it was murmured, was on the verge of a nervous breakdown. Many wagged fingers, pointing to the Master and his wavering last year as the reason for the crisis All Souls was facing.

Only Mark Cassell had been entrusted by Franklin with the full story. Because only Mark Cassell could perform the necessary preparation work with the boar. He was left in no doubt as to the scale of the crisis facing them all.

But now, faced with his yearly and most cherished task, the crisis was forgotten. This was what mattered. It was this that was important. This was the task he had been born for, the reason he had been put on this planet. Some would feel it an onerous task, maybe an unbearable one. Not Mark Cassell. His duty may have dealt in death, but he saw it as a celebration of life itself. Preparing meat to be gorged upon, washed down with the ever flowing wine from the cellars of All Souls. Wine had replaced beer and mead in the last few centuries, an attempt at sophistication along

with the use of cutlery and tablecloths, a civility that tried to distance the Feast from its more medieval – and arguably, more barbaric – origins.

Arguably. Cassell chuckled softly as he sliced into the belly of the beast. Those individuals Franklin was so concerned about obviously considered the task the Fellowship of All Souls was performing to be worse than barbaric. What did they know? What could they know? Franklin was right, they couldn't be reasoned with. It was unfortunate that they had to be dealt with in the manner they had, but too much was at stake.

He was so engrossed with the slicing of the meat, the parting of furred skin and fatty dark flesh, that he didn't hear the footsteps shuffling through the snowbound courtyard outside. A sharp knocking on the locked doors jerked him out of his concentration and had him looking impatiently around.

“*Mr Cassell.*” The unmistakable Edinburgh brogue of Franklin's voice.

Cassell sighed and reluctantly put his knife down. Rinsing his bloodstained hands in the steel washbasin next to the worktop, he half-heartedly shook them dry and walked to the doors and unlocked them. His eyes widened in surprise when he saw that the head porter was not alone.

“Master!”

David Searles nodded in greeting. He looked tired. Worse than tired, Cassell decided. The rumours were obviously true, then.

He stepped aside to allow the Master of All Souls entry to the kitchens.

Searles didn't so much walk in as creep in, the mark of a bowed and weary – and worryingly, *defeated* – man. He had visibly aged since the Feast last December. The stress of the responsibility had taken its toll.

His grey, pallid face wrinkled in disgust at the sight of Cassell's handiwork. A thin, trembling hand covered his mouth and nose to block out what Cassell considered to be sweet perfume.

The head chef allowed himself a momentary pang of contempt for the Master. His weakness, his inability to lead the Fellowship in anything but the most trivial of administrative duties. This could all be forgiven if he rose to the one task for which he was appointed. But even that seemed to be beyond him. The unforgivable omission in the final act of communion last year could have doomed them all. It could still do, if the remedy this year was not accepted.

He caught Franklin's eye, noted with satisfaction that the head porter shared Cassell's contempt – as well as the frustration that the College Council felt for their inability to overturn Searles' decision.

The Master of All Souls seemed to be regaining his composure – or at least was aware of the unflattering scrutiny and was making an effort to appear that he was. He took his hand away from his face and turned to the head chef. Now there was contempt in *his* eyes. Contempt for the huge, bulk of the head chef, sweating copiously even though the kitchens were cold enough for the breath of the three men to turn to mist. His nose wrinkled at the sour smell coming from Cassell's armpits, almost as overpowering as that emanating from the dead boar on the worktop.

“I'm sorry to disturb you, Cassell...”

Cassell shrugged his shoulders, a half-mocking smile on his greasy lips.

“Quite all right, Master.”

Searles coughed, looked as though he was going to vomit. “Doubtless Franklin has informed you of, ah, recent developments?”

“The Lotsons? Yes. Unfortunate I know, but – “

Searles raised a hand. “It didn’t quite go to plan. Hughes was arrested, but he managed to escape before Detective Inspector Boyd could get him to Parkside.”

Cassell’s face darkened. “He *escaped*? How?”

Franklin answered. “It would appear he had assistance from a friend of Michaels.”

“*Michaels!*” Cassell snorted. “Then that means...”

“Yes. We have to assume that Hughes knows Michaels met his end here.”

Searles stared at the open belly of the boar.

“That in itself is not really an issue,” Franklin continued. “Hughes is hardly likely to go to the police with his accusations, not now he’s been implicated in the...resolution, of Philip Lotson. And the killing of several police officers. What *is* an issue is the fact that Hughes has a girlfriend. She came here.”

Cassell opened his mouth. Then shut it. Franklin nodded.

“Jennifer Callaby,” Cassell sighed. “This is very awkward.”

“Precisely, Cassell. Very awkward indeed. But Andrew Hughes is not the only unwelcome guest we can expect soon.” Searles spoke with a waver in his voice. And, Cassell noted, guilt in his eyes.

“Go on,” Cassell folded his arms and stared hard at the Master.

“Jason escaped from Phoenix this morning. He killed two deliverymen and stole their van.”

“He’s coming, Mark.” Franklin used the head chef’s first name in what felt like years. “He’s coming back to finish the job.”

Cassell chuckled softly. In the chilled emptiness of the kitchens it had an eerie quality. Eerie enough to make Searles shudder.

“He *thinks* he’s going to finish the job.” Cassell moved between Searles and Franklin, back to his porcine canvass. “The young man just can’t take a hint, can he?” Chuckling again, he picked up the flaying knife and stroked a finger lovingly down the blade.

“Sorry to disappoint you, Mark.” Franklin took the knife from him. “I’ll be taking care of young Jason.”

Disappointment clouded the head chef’s face. Searles opened his mouth to protest, but Franklin cut him off. “This is a sign from *Her*. A second chance.”

“But the offerings have been prepared!” Searles protested. “There’s no time for Jason – “

“I don’t think there’ll be any need for prep-work on Jason,” Franklin said firmly as he placed the knife on the worktop. The blade reflected the dull yellow tusks of the boar and the glare of the fluorescent strip lighting. “He’ll be accepted as he is, I’m certain. She has been kept waiting too long for him. I don’t think she’ll be too...fussy.” His eyes fixed upon Cassell.

“I need you to keep an eye out for Hughes and any friend he brings along. If he knows about Michaels he’ll know what awaits Callaby. It is only a matter of time before he comes here.” He tapped a finger on Cassell’s knife. It rocked on the metal worktop, sending reflected flashes of light into the eyes of the Master and the head chef. “You just make sure that if they do find their way into the kitchens that they don’t leave in anything less than several large pieces.”

Cassell grinned. “Pieces, eh? Shame Callaby is spoken for. It would have been nice to reunite the lovers in death. Putting Hughes and Callaby together...it would make one hell of a jigsaw.”

Searles' eyes blazed in disapproval of Cassell's gallows humour. "As you said, Cassell. Callaby is spoken for. You will leave her alone. Perhaps we should leave you to continue your duties in peace."

"Maybe you should, Master," Cassell smirked. "I know how squeamish you are."

Searles bristled. "Squeamish? That's the least of the insults I've had spoken about me. If I am visibly affected by the sight of what you do it is because I haven't forgotten what it means to be human!"

Cassell took a step backwards, eyes widening. This was a side of the Master he hadn't seen before. Real fire in him, anger that was not in his nature. It meant he really was close to breaking point.

"No matter," Searles breathed. "I've already been through this matter with the Council. They can't understand so I don't expect a mere...*cook* will."

He nodded towards the boar, a finger raised and pointed to the gaping hole in its belly before sweeping out of the kitchen.

"Enjoy your work, Cassell."