

Darkwinter's Eve

The wind had been howling about the walls of the cabin for hours since it had started getting dark. The russet fox had been ferrying wood in throughout the day from the pile beside it for three hours before then; preparing for the night ahead. Now, with the fire lit, he had been busy cooking and laying out food in preparation for the night's feast. Venison, fowl, roots, cookies, pastries and rich wines had all been laid out on the large table in front of the fire.

His only companion until this point had been a medium sized quadruped dog, a Rottweiler at first glance, who had followed him and kept up a dry, one-sided banter to which its bipedal companion had merely made non-committal shrugs. Most of it had been at how much of a waste the food was.

The Rottweiler couldn't eat. It wasn't actually a dog.

"So who IS coming? This seems like a lot of trouble to go to for a meal for one, boss."

The fox had set himself down on one of the chesterfields with a glass of wine two more logs fresh on the fire. "You'll see, Jeeves, you'll see...." As the wind continued to howl around the outside of the cabin, piling snowdrifts up against the north wall.

As if on cue a faint knocking could be heard on the thick wooden door. Jeeves jumped up and tilted his head. "You hear that, boss? Not a life-sign active for a hundred meters and..." The knock came again. The rottie bolted behind the chesterfield as Gordon got up and made his way to the door; setting his glass down and picking up an earthenware vessel from the top of the mantle before opening the door.

The figure outside looked ghastly. A badger, bipedal, wearing dishevelled robes of fur and rotten leather. A greatsword hung on its back, the rust on the blade and rotting of the scabbard mirroring the degraded state of his clothing. The face was dead as if for centuries though mummified; eyes sunken pits burning with a red-orange glow.

"Dewch I mewn, hynafiad cleufryd, ac yn cael chi groesawu." Gordon said, holding out the vessel in both hands. Despite Gordon's remarkable stature of nearly two meters the revenant was nearly a dozen centimeters taller than the fox was.

"Diolch am eich lletygarwch, bach." Replied the badger, gracefully taking the vessel from the fox and stepping inside. The voice was dry and cold as the ice and had trouble forcing the words out. It seemed very respectful, though, and friendly. The badger idly closed the door with one massive, rotting foot, and took a deep draught of the beverage.

The Rottweiler watched with amazement from behind the main chesterfield as the badger suddenly began to fill out again, bringing him almost quite literally to life. By the time the badger had set the vessel back on the mantle it looked as if he'd never been dead; though the unearthly fire still burned bright in the renewed eyes.

And to all Jeeve's sensors the badger was dead as a doornail.

Gordon had, in the meantime picked up a clay mug and, pressing into the badger's hands, wrapped his arms around the beast in a hug; the badger taking the mug and answering in one fluid motion. "Ahhhh, it is good to see you again. Your brew has gotten better since last year!"

The fox laughed and patted the badger's back. "Ah, well, I've been practicing. Nothing in my usual arsenal comes close to practice for this for some reason." And they disengaged, "Take a look around at the feast, take a seat and kick up. How long will the rest take? Anyone new this year?"

The badger nodded solemnly "Gawaine. Border raid this fall just after harvest. Sad business. The rest should be along any minute, now." Gordon nodded sadly and stayed by the door with the next cup in his paws.

Within the hour the cabin was packed and Jeeves had let his guard down enough to mingle between the warriors and wainwrights, witches and warlocks, farmers and freemasons who had come to the door. Each one stone dead and enjoying themselves. He'd finally managed to sidle up to his master once more after enduring pets and the gabbing hands of ghost children who ran between the feet eating sweets and heedless of the adults around them.

"Who are these creatures? There are at least forty-seven of them!" He whispered urgently to Gordon who was sitting to one side with a couple of bites of the cheese platter in his hand. "And they're all stone dead!"

Gordon nodded. "Yes, they are. Ancestral spirits or revenants of the local community. This is their night to walk with the living again if they are restless and have not found rest or rebirth...yet." And popped another piece of cheese into his muzzle. "They're here because I don't fear them."

Jeeves stared, at his master and the conclusion suddenly leapt to his brain. "Because you won't die... you don't fear the dead."

"Mmmhmmm." Another piece of cheese popped in. "This is the first year I have brought any of you around to see because I figured you wouldn't know what to make of them and, I don't know, might shoot them or something." He took another sip of his drink. "And besides, I like the company. They remind me of people... not to say you aren't but you're not the same." The hasty addition cut the Rottweiler off. "Different experience, being 'alive'."

Jeeves nodded slowly. "So you keep them company and they keep you company and you get to see the people a little longer...." His voice trailed off; cutting off in the soft whine of a speaker powering down.

Gordon nodded, looking very solemn, and said at length. "It's hard, outliving everyone you meet. I like it here." And then smiled. "Come on, Gawaine could probably use a cheer-up. Hard stuff being dead." And picked a glass of wine up and walked over to the sad looking rabbit that was standing in the corner by the fireplace.