

Ragnarök

by karelia

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Chapter 1 of 1

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Disclaimer: I own pretty much nothing, least of all the characters you recognise.

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1998

Severus finally allowed himself to breathe again. This had gone better...much better...than expected. "Heilsa¹, Minerva," he whispered, honouring the ancient greeting of the path both witch and wizard had been walking for what seemed like forever.

She smiled, and unlike Dumbledore's, her smile was genuine.

Strengthened by her words, and even more so by her reassuring smile, he faced the future and what it might hold, walking taller in its wake.

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"Look ... at ... me ..." he whispered.

The green eyes found the black, but after a second something in the depth of the dark pair seemed to vanish, leaving them fixed, blank and empty.*

As Potter and Weasley hurried out of the shack, Potter carefully balancing the vial with Snape's memories, the Muggle-born turned her attention to the almost dead wizard. "Please, Professor. You can't die! You've never even got to live properly!" she pleaded.

He remained still for a few more moments, not certain if he could gather enough strength to speak, not even certain he shouldn't just accept and even welcome death. "I have done my duty regardless of who did or did not do theirs," he finally rasped as he opened his eyes. A memory of her buck teeth flashed before him, and the need for forgiveness was overwhelming. "Forgive me. Please. I never meant..." He'd run out of strength, and his eyes closed of their own accord.

"I forgive you, Professor. I know you never meant anything bad, and I know you've always done your utmost best to protect us," she said.

When he opened his eyes again, he saw tears stream down her face. *This isn't right. A girl so young shouldn't mourn her most detested teacher.*

"Professor, please, let me take you to the hospital wing," she pleaded.

He didn't manage to shake his head, so he put the last of what little strength he had left into his fading voice. It was barely a whisper now. "No. If you see Minerva, tell her where I am, but make your own survival a priority. If you need to flee, flee. Do not become another victim."

She nodded her understanding and slowly stood up.

With a last effort he uttered, "There, beyond Good and Evil, is a field. We shall meet there. Hermione."

Her sob was the last sound he heard before everything went dark and silent. Then, he found himself beside an Ancient, compared to whom Hagrid was a dwarf.

His heart clamped until he realised there was no need for fear. He couldn't be dead than dead. Curiosity overcame him. "Being dead is at least painless, but why am I met by a Frost Giant?"

The giant laughed softly...a complete dichotomy to his looks and even more so his reputation. "Not all Frost Giants are on the Dark side, and you are not in Helheim. I will now lead you to Thor."

Thor. Now, that was worth a spark of excitement. Far more so than the tidbit about not being dead.

* * *

Severus woke up reluctantly, not sure what to expect, but was mollified instantly by the reassuring voice of a female. "All is well. Worry not. You are healing fine."

He had no doubt he was at Eir, Minerva's get-away. St Mungo's would have had a much busier feel to it. He spent the next hours or days or weeks between sleeping soundly and being awake momentarily, always long enough to hear the Healer's soothing voice, but never long enough to care about the state of the world.

Until...

"I see you've made yourself quite at home in my earthship, Severus." Minerva's crisp voice ripped him out of a pleasant dream where he was having a conversation with Thor, learning, learning, and more learning.

"Really? Did you have to intrude just this moment? I was actually enjoying speaking with Thor," he grumbled. Then he sat up abruptly. "How long have I been out? And where the hell am I?"

Minerva smiled one of her rare smiles. "Oh, Severus. It's so good to see you alive and healing! You know you are in Eir. Another Eir, a Healer I trust, has been looking after you."

He knew a moment of panic when the memory of Nagini biting him returned. "What? Where is the Dark Lord? Are you hiding me from him?"

"Severus!" Minerva laughed. "All is well! He's gone for good! Potter... We came out the winner because of Harry Potter. Thanks to the memories you shared. And you're alive thanks to Miss Granger. She told me, and I found you in time. Kingsley, who is now Minister, has ensured personally that your war pension is paid into your Gringotts vault every month. Nobody else knows you're alive."

"Good. Let's keep it that way. I need a break." Not having to worry about an income was a rather pleasant side effect of the war, he thought.

"You do," Minerva agreed. "Stay here as long as you need to."

"Thank you, lady."

"I have much to make good, Severus." Minerva sighed. "Now, get well!" With a soft, "Heilsa," she departed before he had a chance to protest.

The short conversation had exhausted him, and he drifted away again, idly wondering if Minerva was going to have tea with Eir the Healer inside Eir the earthship.

1999

Finally! Restlessness had become a problem, and even increasingly long walks in the surrounding woods were no longer sufficient to quell it, but finally, Eir had declared Severus fit and healthy, and to his surprise, he found the world was his oyster. He could return to the wizarding world if he so wished; Kingsley had made it clear on his visit a few days ago. There were no consequences for his misdeeds now the truth was on the table. In fact, Kingsley had mentioned an Order of Merlin, First Class, and with his pension, he did not even have to work.

Only Severus was no longer interested in such mundane praises. Solitude and anonymity sounded far more attractive. Furthermore, he craved warmth. He'd never really encountered warm weather, nor had he been bothered by the clammy cold that persisted in the Hogwarts dungeons even on warm summer days, but it was as if Nagini's bite had instilled in him the need for a warmth that only the sun could provide.

Spain seemed like the natural answer to his cravings. The followers of the Ancient paths were still numerous, thanks to a large exile movement from the Germanic countries decades past, so a request sent to the Gods followed by some correspondence resulted in suitable, if simple, accommodation in a village north of Barcelona where winters were mild and summers warm.

Severus settled in easily. March in Scotland had been cold and rainy with intermittent snow, but here, in Northern Spain, the early spring promised summer already...pleasant, sunny days, and no rain in sight. The old man who'd let the small bungalow introduced him to necessities such as markets, shops, and a small but useful wizarding village nearby that even included a public house offering tasty tapas.

Going for long walks, collecting wild-growing herbs and garlic and dandelion and nettles, finding new potion ingredients even, strolling barefoot along the beach and stopping at one of the stalls for a sangria, all in good weather, contributed to his improved strength, both physical and spiritual.

Spring slid into summer until it brought very warm temperatures, leading him to adjust his routine; now he took walks in the early mornings and beach strolls in the evenings. Markets he visited as needed.

Autumn was mostly taken up with harvesting and drying various leaves and roots and flowers and fungi, and suddenly the calendar showed winter.

Severus was content, more than he'd ever thought to be. Minerva wrote to him occasionally, and he wrote to her occasionally, and it was just enough for him.

2000

Time seemed to fly, and before he knew it, the spring equinox arrived. He'd been in Calella an entire year...a year of much healing. He'd never been so whole in his life, so untroubled. Joy was perhaps some way away still, but knowing that much damage had been undone sufficed. Nightmares were a thing of the past, as was the need for Dreamless Sleep.

As Severus settled into his second year in the Mediterranean, his intention focused on spiritual growth now that he'd left behind the destructive path entirely, dreams began

to invade his sleep. They weren't regular, or perhaps he simply didn't remember all of them; they occurred...always the same theme...just often enough to occupy his mind.

He hovered above his body in the Shrieking Shack, watching his life fade after Nagini's bite, having a conversation of sorts with Potter's Muggle-born sidekick, hearing her words of forgiveness.

Severus shook his head. *Why?* He heard no answer.

"Yes, I know I was tortured, believe it or not," the girl said, her voice laced with tartness. "I also know...or at least I'm assuming...that the one true pair of friends Professor Snape had was the Malfoys, and you owe Mrs Malfoy your life, and Professor Snape as well, Harry! The least you can do is speak up for her, if not for both of them. You know the Wizengamot will listen to you!"

He watched as Potter convinced the Wizengamot not to have the Malfoys incarcerated in Azkaban.

Upon waking, he groaned. *Better write to Minerva and find out what happened to Lucius and Narcissa...* Embarrassment and shame washed over him; he'd spared barely a thought for them since his recovery at Eir in the Scottish Highlands. It didn't take long to have a quick shower and Apparate to the wizarding village to find an owl. He considered travelling to Barcelona, or even Madrid or Toulouse, to find an owl of his own, but then dismissed the idea quickly. Three or four letters a year did not warrant owning an owl; the bird would only get bored.

Heilsa, Severus!

It is so good to hear from you without my prodding for once. I'm surprised you are not in contact with the Malfoys, though perhaps I shouldn't be. The Malfoys got away mildly. About half their fortune was reallocated to ease the pains of survivors of the war, such as orphans, abandoned familiars, and severely injured survivors. From what I understand from Mr Potter, the couple as well as Draco are content. They have not been associated with any Dark magic since the end of the war.

Severus, don't be so elusive! Would you mind if I pop over for tea one afternoon? I would love to see you.

On a different note, I believe something is happening on our planet. The more aware have started to feel an anticipation of sorts, though none can put their fingers on it.

Heilsa, my friend,

Minerva

Severus breathed a sigh of relief. Since he'd sent the letter off to Minerva, the Malfoys' fate had kept him occupied, and he'd been having horrible visions of them chained in cells in Azkaban. To know they were free eased his mind; he nearly wrote a note to Minerva welcoming her for tea.

Then he thought better. She'd become a good friend...always had been, really, even when she was acting unreasonably...but it did not warrant inviting her just because she wished it, he figured.

On the other hand, Minerva would not suggest something might be up if she did not truly believe so. Come to think of it, he had reason to believe so, too. It was rather unusual to have those dreams... And there was an anticipation in the air he couldn't put his finger on. Of course, perhaps it was just the fallout of the hype leading to the turn of the millennium.

Minerva,

By all means, pop in for a cup of tea.

Heilsa,

Severus

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It was nearly the end of the year before Minerva took him up on his reluctant invitation.

Severus,

Please have some olives and fresh things for tea. I'm tired of bangers and mash and over-cooked vegetables from a tin.

Heilsa,

Minerva

Severus couldn't help but grin at the missive. *Typical.*

"Welcome to my humble abode." He bowed and waved her inside. "Just follow your nose; you can't get lost here."

"Oh, Severus, look at you! You look healthy. And it's lovely here." Minerva smiled. "You really seem to feel at home here, and what a cosy home it is!" She looked around, appearing to absorb the paint-washed walls, the colourful rugs, the wooden furniture, the stained glass windows, all in the traditional Mediterranean style.

"Thank you," he offered. "Make yourself comfortable while I get some tea and *olives and fresh things*, but don't bet on the *fresh*. 'Tis winter here as well, though that does mean pomegranates straight from the tree and of course any shape and form of citrus you've ever dreamed of."

When they were both seated opposite each other, Minerva delicately switching between sipping tea and chewing an olive or a piece of Garrotxa or Montsec or nibbling some preserved fig and occasionally slurping a wedge of pomegranate, Severus asked, "So, what's new in the land of the cold North?"

"Nothing much on the surface. The school is running well enough, although we could do with a better Potions professor; Zabini does not quite make the cut compared to you."

Severus scoffed. "Zabini is the best you could find?" He shook his head.

"Perhaps not the best, but certainly the most... let's say... opportune choice. To be honest, I put my foot down where recruitment was concerned when the school reopened, and I recruited as many Slytherins as I could get away with. I still think it was a good strategy, for Slytherins are already losing their notoriety as outcasts." Minerva took one olive after another now, and he rose to refill her plate.

Sitting down again, he said. "Yes, that was a good strategy. I fully agree." He nodded for her to continue.

"I'm trying to convince Hermione Granger to join the staff to teach Ancient Runes. She has another couple of years to go with her training but has already gained a reputation, and her teaching at Hogwarts would count towards her mastery. She has also discovered the path of the Ancients." Minerva smiled.

"Why am I not surprised..." Severus muttered. "Inevitable, really, if you strive to master runes."

"Severus..." Minerva's voice trailed momentarily. "I think she's a priestess in the making."

Severus frowned. There hadn't been a true priestess in a few hundred years. "What makes you think that? Wasn't she your most precious Gryffindor princess?"

"Yes, she was." Minerva was entirely unfazed by the slight jab. "There'd been nobody of your level of intelligence until she joined Hogwarts, and there has been no-one since... Her insight into runes is incredible. She's never lost her kindness and compassion, despite all she went through during the war. She risked her life when she searched for me that night Voldemort nearly killed you..."

He frowned. "I do remember telling her to make her own survival a priority."

"Yes, Severus. She told me as much last year. She also explained why she couldn't."

"Pray tell."

"Oh, really, it's not important in the grand scheme." Minerva sipped her tea again and took some Manchego with quince preserve, keeping her from saying more.

"I'm not fooled by your antics. You know I respect you a great deal, but I do not appreciate being Dumbledored."

Minerva laughed. "Oh, what a perfect expression, Severus!" She turned serious and sighed. "Miss Granger *couldn't* have just let you die and forget about it. She said if she'd made her own survival a priority, her guilt would have eaten her. She felt you, more than anyone else, deserved to know a *good* world, one without Voldemort." Minerva swallowed hard. "Miss Granger made a Pledge of Faith shortly after the war. She appears to have an affinity with Sif. *Sif*, Severus!"

"Are you serious?" He wasn't sure he believed his ears.

"Aye!" Her particularly strong Scottish brogue, which generally showed when she was excited, nearly made him smile.

"Another few years until *Ragnarök*, yes?"

"I don't think it will happen before 2012, at least according to all the prophecies, though the signs are showing already. She has enough time to come into her own power, and she's doing well. I think we have a chance to win this one, too. After Voldemort, nothing seems impossible." Minerva took another olive.

"Is she looking to you for guidance?" Severus helped himself to some cheese.

"I think she prefers to walk a solitary path mostly, but she does visit regularly, and we often talk about the possibilities of the future. She has studied all the prophecies in detail, of course."

"Of course," he muttered. This was about the know-it-all after all.

When Minerva left, Severus had much food for thought. During the years before Voldemort's second rise, the Norse path had been frowned upon by many, linking it to the supremacist ideas of Voldemort's philosophies. That a Muggle-born should emerge as the first priestess in hundreds of years was ironic, and it would most certainly do much towards the Ancient paths regaining their once-renowned standing.

First of all, he was glad the next day was market day; Minerva had considerably diminished his staples, and he was looking forward to tasting...and choosing...various olives and cheeses. One could spend an entire lifetime exploring the abundance of Spanish nibbles.

2001

Life was comfortably slow in the Spanish countryside...much more so than in Britain...and yet time seemed to accelerate.

Another year had passed, and Severus was once again honouring the High Gods of Asgard in celebration of another winter solstice. After breakfast, he took his favourite copy of the Elder Edda outside to read and spend the day in contemplation. The poems of the Edda never ceased to intrigue him...more so than the prose; he'd always found something new, no matter how many times he'd read them, and this time was no different. He randomly opened a page and arrived at Odin's quest after the runes.

*Hidden Runes shalt thou seek and interpreted signs,
many symbols of might and power,
by the great Singer painted, by the high Powers fashioned,
graved by the Utterer of gods.***

He thought it curious that the page should fall open on the subject of runes and calmed his mind to contemplate.

A new, more in-depth, study of the runes might be in order. He had a decent working knowledge of them, just like any follower of the Ancient Norse path, but something drove him to deepen it.

The year had been a good one for him personally, but looking at world events, the signs of changing times were becoming evident...perhaps it was the beginning of the end. Even Muggles were waking up to the fact that not everything was as it seemed. He was looking forward to spending the eve of the Muggle New Year with Minerva. *Must buy twice as much cheese and olives as I think I'll need.*

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"Oh, these olives are *so* good!" Minerva exclaimed, and Severus couldn't hide a grin. She'd been munching on them since she'd arrived in the afternoon, first with tea and now with an oak-aged Rioja. "So, do tell me more about your plan to build an earthship."

Severus relished his cheese before replying. "Well, at Eir... I think I treasured the feel an earthship gives off, and now I decided it will best be attained by building my own dwelling in a similar manner." Shrugging, he continued. "Perhaps it was the beginning of a new life for me that made me fond of it, or perhaps it is the closeness to earth. In any case, it so happened that Heimdal, my landlord, mentioned he had an acre of land for sale, just where the flatland meets the hills, a couple of miles further inland."

"Oh, that's wonderful, Severus!" Minerva looked pleased. "Have you drawn up plans yet?"

"Of course I have. I've also looked at other earthships in the area. It's surprising how many there are, to be honest."

"They aren't easy to spot, but I'm not surprised at all they're in this area, too. It is the ideal dwelling in any climate. I chose it because warming charms only last so long, and I knew I wouldn't be able to visit for months at a time, so any ordinary house would have suffered from cold weather. Even Muggles have caught on to the concept. Here in the South, people are more likely to choose this design to keep cool, and Muggles can save considerably on their energy bills."

He nodded. "And then there is the space above. Growing potion ingredients on the roof; imagine." The idea made him smirk every time he thought about it.

Talk switched to Muggle events of the year, but as midnight approached, Minerva insisted on more pleasant subjects. "If we enter the new year being gloomy, we'll suffer for twelve months, so let's talk about something joyful." She was silent for a moment. "Severus... Is it strange that I'm feeling hopeful for our future in spite of all that's been happening in the world? Sometimes I wonder."

"Well, some would no doubt conceive it as strange, but it simply shows us Ragnarök may not be quite the battle the ancient prophecies suggest. On a small scale, it seems more people are finding their ways back to their roots, learning how to live in kindness rather than indulging in control, even if the opposite is true for the greater scale."

Minerva nodded slowly. "Yes, I think you're right. When I skim the Muggle papers occasionally, it looks like utter chaos out there, but it is not what I see in everyday life on the admittedly rare occasions I venture out. Hermione has also said something to that effect. It's better to be prepared for the worst while hoping for the best than to ignore the worst-case-scenario potential."

The bells of the local churches began to sound, and Severus took a bottle of Cava from the fridge, popped it, and filled two glasses. "Happy New Year! May the Gods be able to return in peace."

Minerva raised her glass and took a swig. "Happy New Year! Ye gods, no wonder you like it so in Spain. They surely know how to make good wines!"

2002

The cool breeze brought relief as Severus cast spells, dug with a shovel, uttered more spells, removed various critters to safer grounds while apologising for uprooting them, and eventually sat down to compare his handiwork with his drawn-up plans and have a well deserved cup of coffee from a flask he'd spelt to maintain a temperature of just below boiling.

Perfect.

Now was a good time to purchase straw bales to place as wall insulation. No rain was forecast for the next several days...a rarity in January. The Gods were obviously on his side.

By February, Severus knew he'd be in his very own home to celebrate the vernal equinox. Spinner's End had been his after his father died and his mother disappeared, of course, but it was filled with nothing but bad memories, and he'd sold it to the first willing buyer who'd made an offer well below the market price just to be rid of it.

This house...earthship, he corrected himself...was different. It was to be his true home, and whilst it would not be wholly complete by the equinox, it would be inhabitable. And once he lived in it, he had the advantage of not having to Apparate to and fro in order to work on it.

Late February brought unusual frost, almost unheard of in the region. *Ragnarök*? he wondered. Every single prophecy forecast harsh winters before it. An owl from Minerva confirmed the same.

Severus,

Do you mind if I visit on Saturday or Sunday? I'm so desperate to escape this unbelievable cold. Goodness gracious! I don't expect mild winters in Scotland, but this year I have to be afraid of freezing my arse off when I go outside. The house-elves can hardly keep up with restocking all the fires, and for the first time in history, Hogwarts may well run out of wood by the time the solstice arrives.

I hope you are well. How is the earthship coming along?

Heilsa,

Minerva

Something drove him to invite her for the weekend. If Minerva complained about the cold, it was cold. Northern Spain was much warmer, even though it was gearing up to be one of the coldest winters on record in the region.

Minerva,

By all means come over. The spare room is all set up if you wish to stay overnight. It is colder here than usual, but not quite as cold as Scotland sounds.

Yes, yes, olives and cheese and Rioja are awaiting you.

Heilsa,

Severus

Severus Apparated to the wizarding village and chose a particularly sturdy-looking owl for the journey. It wouldn't do for it to freeze half-way there.

Suddenly, it seemed right to go looking for an owl of his own, now he was settling down in his very own home. He followed his hunch, ignored the cold as best as he could by donning his warmest woollen cloak and changing his everyday boots to the heavier dragonhide ones, then Apparated straight to the wizarding area of Toulouse, which he knew had a reputable owl emporium.

Owls galore. Perhaps he should return home and do some research about the properties of all the owls. But he discovered each breed came with an extensive information sheet that told him more than he'd likely ever needed to know.

Two hours later, he had reduced his choices to three breeds.

Another hour passed, and he finally settled on a long-eared owl for several reasons, not least because it was the most secretive species and preferred conifer woods as its habitat, something his land offered in abundance. He picked a female from a long line of wizarding owls used to flying across countries.

"You must name her before leaving the shop," the saleswizard insisted. "We do not keep any records like Muggles do, but we insist on each owl being named to ensure at least a modicum of relationship between owner and bird."

It made sense to Severus, and he thought for a moment. "Vör. I shall name her Vör." Naming an owl after a goddess of wisdom couldn't be wrong, no matter how he looked at it. Besides, Vör sounded... right.

The five Galleons he paid for the bird made him wonder why he hadn't bought one much earlier; each letter he'd sent to Minerva had cost him one Galleon.

He held on to the bird's talons as he Apparated back to his own land, then told the owl, "You are free to live in the trees or in the kitchen; it's your choice. I expect you to turn up when I call you by your name or, if you're further away, like so:" he whistled, "and you will mostly fly between here and Scotland in addition to a few local journeys, though that may change over time, who knows? In any case, welcome home, Vör. I haven't entirely moved here yet, though it will be just a few more days before I settle. Feel free to stay or come to my current home with me." He abruptly broke eye contact with the bird, wondering if he was being stupid to expect the owl to understand.

Vör hooted and took off for the conifers. Severus grimaced. He didn't remember ever having his own familiar, though he doubted Vör was exactly that. Perhaps she would

be one day.

It was cold, but Severus decided to make the most of the remaining daylight and worked on the earthship. At the end of the day the walls were done, and the fireplace was in working order. Perhaps tomorrow he would deal with the floors; the wood for them had been delivered days ago. He could have chosen to simply cover the earth with carpets...many earthship dwellers did...but he liked the feel of wood beneath his feet, and this home already meant more to him than any other place he'd ever inhabited. He promised himself that everything about it...and in it...would suit his own tastes.

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"It is so lovely and warm here!" Minerva greeted him as Severus opened the door. She stepped in. "You have no idea how unbelievably cold it is back home. Minus ten is the norm during the day, and I shudder to think how cold it gets at night." She shuddered in an ironic confirmation of her words.

Severus led the way to the living room. "February so far is shaping up to be the coldest I've ever known, and I heard Germany has been experiencing temperatures never seen before. I suppose the Frost Giants are showing their power." He smirked. "Are you sure we have to wait till 2012 or beyond?"

"Oh, I think so, Severus. My hope is that if it's starting now, it'll spread over more years and be much *milder* than anticipated in the prophecies." She sat down, and as he went to the kitchen to put together some Mediterranean nutrients for the elder witch, he wondered if the extreme weather would adversely affect olive harvests.

"I decided to install a fireplace in the earthship. No wizarding home here has one because it never gets cold enough to make use of it, but with the current weather, I think it may be prudent, even if I only use it once every ten years," he said. "And I now have an owl. I went to Toulouse right after I sent you the last letter."

"Severus, that's wonderful! A fireplace is never wrong, and an underground one will be far less obvious and less likely to out you as a snob. I suppose not many locals would invest in a fireplace... And an owl. What did you choose?"

"A long-eared. I named her Vör. We can go over in the morning; perhaps she'll meet us. So far, she's shown herself every time I went, as if checking on my progress. Funny creature."

Minerva laughed.

* * *

Two days before the equinox...it was still uncommonly cold...Severus handed his old home's keys to Heimdal. "Thank you for letting me stay in your house, and thank you for selling me your land. I hope we'll stay in touch, Heimdal," he said, feeling oddly touched.

The old wizard exposed a toothless smile. "It's been a pleasure to get to know you. Here's to a continuing friendship." He pulled a small bottle out of his pocket and conjured two glasses out of nowhere, then poured the drink and handed one glass to Severus. It was far too early to drink, but declining would have been rude; after all Heimdal had been a great help since the day he'd arrived, so Severus accepted the glass and downed its contents. *Bliss*. He had a feeling he wouldn't feel cold for the next few hours or even days, no matter what.

"I hope you'll visit, Heimdal," Severus said, and upon Heimdal's nod and soft "Heilsa," he turned and Apparated to the front of his new home.

He descended the nine stairs, opened the door, and entered the corridor. The left...eastern...side brought in plenty of light, thanks to a whole range of windows taking up the top third of the wall, all tilted skyward, and from the right, several doors led to other rooms. The corridor was still impersonal, but it was something he could work on while living there.

Severus took the first door to the right. Vör hooted at him from her perch by the western window of the kitchen. "Here, I brought you some bacon." He unwrapped it and held his hand out. The owl hopped more than flew onto his left arm to pick the bacon pieces from his hand. Then she hooted approvingly before hopping back to her perch and through the just-open window; from there she took off towards the conifers.

Severus took in the sight of his kitchen. *His* kitchen. It wasn't particularly... stylish, but it was functional and comfortable. At the bottom of the largest window of the earthship was a wide sill...wide enough to grow the more delicate potions ingredients in winter...and beneath it a large ceramic sink. Just below the sill, several branches of aged wood gnarled their way into the kitchen and then back into the wall...the ideal perch for Vör...he'd found the odd-shaped olive branches on one of his walks in the hills a couple of years ago and brought them home, certain he would have use for them one day. A large work space with a sizeable chopping board inserted in the marble-like counter took up the area next to the sink. He could chop to his heart's content here, be it for meals or potion ingredients.

One wall featured a large Welsh dresser. He would have to shop for more plates, perhaps some beautiful china, though more likely the rustic pottery pieces typical for the area, but even nearly bare the dresser looked perfectly imposing...the emperor of the kitchen.

Severus had chosen a greyish blue for the walls because most of the year it was quite warm, and the blue would at least give the illusion of coolness while the grey hues would satisfy his need for non-colours. The rest of the walls were taken up by haphazardly put-together furniture to house cauldrons, food and potions supplies, and the few bits and pieces of crockery he owned. Severus made a mental note to do some shopping in the near future. Perhaps he'd find some crockery to complement the colour of the walls. But first, there was work to do in the other rooms.

The bedroom was functional, if scant, containing just a bed and a wardrobe. It would do for now.

Upgrading the bathroom to a functional state was more important, and he started by re-reading sections of the *Wizarding Manual of Plumbing* before getting to work.

By evening Severus was able to enjoy a well deserved hot shower. He hoped to eventually feed the water supply mostly from filtered rain water, but until then, magic was the way to go. Perhaps he would look into drilling a well one day.

Barking interrupted his preparation of a tortilla for dinner, and he stepped outside to investigate.

A dog, by the look of it a Pyrenean Mountain breed, wagged its tail when it saw him. The beast stood right in front of his door, as if expecting to gain entrance.

"Hello. Where have you come from?" Severus asked, not expecting any answer.

The dog barked again and continued its tail wagging.

Severus frowned and took a closer look. No collar, but it didn't look neglected. It was dirty, but not overly so, considering the white colour of its fur was still obvious. "What am I going to do with you?" he wondered.

The dog barked again, and now it sounded almost joyful.

Vör appeared, landing on a nearby pine branch, and waited for his arm to stretch out, then settled on it and hooted.

"Are you saying this beast is here to join us?" Severus asked his not-so familiar and was surprised when she hooted her agreement.

"Hm, perhaps I should make some food then." He faced the dog again. "I suppose you must be hungry; judging by the way you look, you've spent the day hiking." He received a bark of agreement.

Severus addressed Vör. "Would you mind staying with this dog? I'll go and prepare some food. The shops are closed, and I can hardly let it starve."

The owl hooted and hopped off his arm, too close to the dog for his taste, but he trusted her instinct.

When Severus returned with a dish of rice and rehydrated meat, Vör and the dog had obviously made friends already, occasionally hooting and barking at each other and generating an overall friendly atmosphere. Severus put the dish in front of the dog. "Here. Enjoy."

It didn't need a second invitation, but was polite enough not to wolf down the offering. It licked its lips several times, throwing glances at Severus.

"I shall retire to bed now. Feel free to go on your way, dog." He nodded at Vör and returned to the comfort of his earthship to settle for the night.

* * *

"What on earth shall I call you?" It had been three weeks now, and the dog was still there, barking mornings and evenings, spending time with Vör, and accompanying Severus whenever he went out. April had finally brought back the typical mild weather of Northern Spain, and Severus was slowly returning to his routine of dividing his waking hours between making potions for the local wizarding population and going for long walks. The earthship...he'd considered naming it Eir, but then discarded the idea...was not yet perfect, but close enough to abandon further progress in favour of outdoor life for now.

The dog barked once.

"I don't even know if you're male or female," Severus mused aloud, and to his surprise, it lay down and turned on her back, displaying several teats. "Aha, all right. A female name, then." He pondered for a while, idly rubbing her belly, which she very obviously enjoyed.

Vör hopped around the ground as if excited. *Hoot.*

"Well, I shan't name her Hoot, Vör." Severus chuckled. Having a not-so familiar was growing on him, and by the looks of it, he now had two of the sort. "How about I name you Raidho? After all, you have journeyed here to relocate, at least for now, I take it. You have your own rhythm, too, so yes, be Raidho."

Vör hooted again, this time with an approving tone.

Raidho stood as soon as he stopped rubbing her belly and barked once.

"I suppose you prefer the outdoors, but should you wish to come inside, I'm sure you'll find a way to let me know. One warning, though: if you choose to come in, my first act will be to shower you; let's be clear on that."

The threat obviously didn't bother Raidho. She followed him inside this time. Vör took the flight route through the kitchen window.

Once Raidho was thoroughly showered, an activity she didn't mind in the least, she was a creamy white and looked...he had no other word for it...gorgeous.

The first night in the earthship, Raidho slept in the kitchen. Sometime during the second night, she crept into the bedroom, and Severus nearly stepped on her when he rose from bed. "Silly dog."

He Apparated to the market to buy a rug for her, surprised she was right by his side when he arrived. *A dog with Apparating capability?* "Raidho, you surprise me."

Raidho wagged her tail, sniffed a ridiculous rainbow-coloured rug, and barked.

"All right. This one it is. Thank you for relieving me of the pressure of choosing."

* * *

The spring of normal temperature turned into a summer that was cooler than usual, and by autumn, it was clear many crops had been affected. The price of olives and fruits had risen considerably, but apparently, sheep and goats really liked cold weather; the world...or at least Northern Spain...was flooded with good cheeses.

The figs were plentiful but watery. Severus had hoped to preserve some, but most tasted leathery, courtesy of the cold winter. Quinces, on the other hand, were not only abundant but particularly tasty. He made a few batches of quince preserve to go with various cheeses or as a spread on buttered bread.

It was November by the time he realised he hadn't heard from Minerva in months.

"Vör, I need you to take a letter to Hogwarts in Scotland."

Vör hooted and flew to the backrest of a kitchen chair, waiting for further instructions, and Severus realised the Gods did indeed look at him in a most benevolent manner these days. Not many people were blessed with two companions of the non-chatting variety.

Minerva,

I have not heard from you in quite a while. I gather the summer wasn't as bad as the winter, and perhaps you've finally had your fill of olives. Which is just as well, since the harvest this year has been the poorest in decades.

I am also quite certain you have not exited your meat suit, as no doubt you would have me informed of such an event after the fact by one means or another.

I've lived in the earthship nearly six months now. I have not yet named it, as I cannot think of an appropriate name, so for now I'm simply calling it "home."

Come over for a Saturday or Sunday or weekend or, well, any day?

Trusting everything is well with you.

Heilsa,

Severus

Severus tied the parchment to Vör's foot and sent her on her way.

Raidho yowled for a while until Severus rehydrated some venison Heimdal had shared with him the previous autumn and fed it to her. It didn't seem to make her happy, but she was at least pacified.

The next day brought the kind of weather every lover of the Mediterranean claimed *as the* reason why the area was so worthy of being worshipped: blue skies, sunshine, and that final insistence of summer being superior over other seasons. A good day for the beach, Severus decided.

"Come with me, Raidho? I'll meet you by the water." He had become used to Raidho following him everywhere, whether he walked or Apparated or, on rarer occasions, raced through the air with or without a broom. He'd so far considered it pointless to look into the why or how; only the fact that she did remained important. Clearly, she had been sent by the Gods, be it for company or lessons, he didn't know, nor did he care.

The beach...sand as far as the eye could see...was only sparsely populated. The odd out-of-season tourist, a few elderly locals, mostly Muggles, and a wizard or witch here and there, just enough people to keep the one remaining sangria stall from packing up early.

Severus strolled along the water edge, Raidho racing in and out of the water, occasionally shaking herself until he was as wet as her. He pondered a swim for a moment, then decided against it. The air felt warm now, but another hour and the incoming winter would assert its rule and bring colder air the sun no longer had the power to penetrate with warm rays.

When Raidho started to bark, her tail wagging furiously, he followed the direction she barked at...a spot in the distance. "Vör?"

As the owl closed in, Severus held his arm out for her, and she landed with a plop. "Well done, girl," he murmured as he untied the parchment from her leg.

Raidho yelped and barked and danced, her tail wagging so hard it would have exhausted anyone watching her.

Vör hopped off Severus's arm the moment he'd relieved her of the parchment and joined Raidho on the ground, hooting at her in approving, soothing notes.

Severus unfolded the parchment.

Severus,

Talk about coincidence; I had a letter ready to send to you when Vör arrived with yours.

It's been an eventful few months in every respect, though nothing really tangible. An ousting of a well loved Ministry employee here and there, someone trying to turn Filius into a monster who abuses first years (as if he would ever do anything like that!), the disappearance of two purebloods, seemingly unrelated. It feels like the days before Voldemort, only much bigger. If you have no objections, I will be there Friday evening and leave Saturday evening, as I have to meet with the school governors on Sunday morning.

Heilsa,

Minerva

For reasons unknown, he *needed* a sangria now. "Come, you two. I wish to make use of that sangria stall before it packs up for the season." He walked toward the stall, Raidho following him with Vör on her back. It looked rather spectacular, he thought as he turned to see if his not-so-familiars followed him, not caring just how strange it would come across to any Muggle to see an owl on the back of a dog, neither breed particularly common.

The young Spaniard grinned at him. "Heilsa! Interesting friends you have here." He nodded at Raidho and Vör.

"Heilsa. Yes, all my family members are in favour of inter-species relations." Severus smirked at the youngster, feeling entirely at home around the odd, unexpected Odinit and uncaring how the guy behind the counter had figured out he was one himself. Chances were he knew Heimdal or one of the market stallholders; it didn't matter. It was one of the beautiful aspects of living in this part of the world; as independent as the followers of the Ancient paths were...they did know *of* each other at least.

Back home, Vör on her wood branch in the kitchen and Raidho on the patch of floor nearest to Vör, Severus took stock of his edibles. It might be time to buy some more foods. If the past winter and summer were any indication, the planet was indeed heading for that final battle of dark and Light. In a way, he felt almost relieved he'd had experience to that regard, if on a much smaller scale.

2005

New Year's Eve with Minerva had become something of an annual occasion. Sure, she visited more often...never letting more than a few months pass at most...but welcoming the brand-new year with her had become important; Severus wondered if he saw that particular event as a regular link to the world he'd left behind, but the reason didn't really matter. It was inevitable that in their contemplation of the year gone, Minerva would talk much about wizards and witches he knew or knew of.

Potter now had offspring. The youngest Weasley male had put all his energy into becoming a decent Auror...good for him. Arthur ran some department at the Ministry involving Muggles and was very happy. As was Molly, having been gifted with a few grandchildren and an ever-increasing family. Granger still hadn't taken up the offered position as Ancient Runes professor at Hogwarts...according to Minerva because she had no interest in teaching and her own findings were far too controversial. Filius and Pomona had finally announced their engagement...it was about time, too; he had no idea why they'd waited *that* long. Skeeter was reinstated as a *Daily Prophet* reporter, which made him sigh despite rumours of her having turned into a follower of truth.

The weather had returned to what was considered normal; the crops had been plentiful, but for reasons unknown, prices had never fallen after the steep rise a few years earlier. Still, it was not enough to worry; observing...at least for now...would suffice. Severus had a year's worth of food supplies, and his garden would have been the envy of many a Muggle gardener had it been visible from the road. He was perfectly aware he would never come close to the success of a herbologist...even Longbottom counted as a true success amongst that profession according to Minerva...but he wouldn't be a potioneer if he didn't have a fair idea about gardening and wasn't at least reasonably competent at it.

Raidho barked and rushed to the door, alerting Severus of Minerva's arrival. He followed her and opened the door. "Heilsa."

Minerva smiled. "Heilsa. Has it really been almost four months? I must make a point of visiting more often. This place is heaven on earth. Have you invented peace-inducing charms or something?" She stepped inside and petted Raidho with relish. "You know, lass, you're the *only* dog I've ever liked, though I bet *you* would be kind even to my feline self." She chuckled as Raidho's tail wagged so hard it looked as if it were spinning; the dog only calmed when Vör landed on her back, hooting softly. "Hello, Vör, dear owl. I trust you are well." She lightly patted the owl's head, and Vör closed her eyes.

Minerva made her way into the living room where Severus was busy placing snacks on the table and pouring tea into mugs. "You know, if someone had told me ten years ago I would see you surrounded by familiars and acting like one happy family, I would have declared them insane."

Severus raised an eyebrow. "Surely, stranger things have happened?"

"I'm sure; only I can't remember any." Minerva chuckled and sat down, her eyes falling on the several bowls filled with olives. "Oh, I should consider retirement in this corner of the world." A contented sigh escaped her as she tasted the first olive, one stuffed with anchovy.

"Don't let olives lead you astray," Severus said. "Though come to think of it, you would probably do well enough. Plenty of your ilk, both Muggle and wizard." He smirked at her indignant frown.

"So, do tell," he blatantly changed the subject, "what's new on the island?"

"Don't you read the *Prophet*, Severus?" she asked, the corners of her lips turned up. "Apparently, the Muggle government wishes to *collaborate* with the Ministry of Magic. Several members of our esteemed government are wholly in favour, seeing all the shiny coins promised to do good to our world. No mention of taxes, of course. Thankfully, Kingsley has steadfastly refused so far. The day he was born is a blessed one, honestly."

Severus nodded slowly. "Indeed. It is good to see someone who is not a politician in the highest position in our world." He stopped for a moment, then, "Do you think it's the Frost Giants at work, taking over the Muggle government?"

Minerva nodded. "It's quite possible. How else can you explain how initially decent people are corrupted in a matter of days after being voted into Parliament?"

"Yes, as in the Muggle world. And it's so repetitive there...has been for decades. New man or woman turns up on the scene, makes promises, gets voted into the government, and breaks all promises. And these poor Muggles have no idea what hit them."

Minerva frowned. "Please tell me you haven't acquired sympathy for them. I have no idea how they managed to be this blinded."

"Not sympathy," he allowed. "Perhaps compassion? I don't know. Life here isn't sheltered from Muggles the way Hogwarts or Hogsmeade is, and I grew up with one foot in the Muggle world. I glance at their papers when I go shopping; I even watch their TV news once in a while when I go to the tapas bar, and it looks to me like they've had cotton wool pulled over their eyes so wholly they have no chance to remove it."

"True enough," Minerva allowed. "I suppose the Frost Giants *are* very clever. Yet they won't win."

Severus snorted. "Of course not. The Dark Lord was very clever, and he didn't win. The law of nature dictates that evil never wins. A good law, I dare say."

"Oh, yes. And just in time to broach more positive sayings," Minerva said, looking pointedly at the clock above the fireplace.

"Time to get the Cava out already?" Severus was surprised. What had seemed minutes had apparently been hours. He had to rush to the fridge to get the bottle and open it in tune with the church bells ringing all around them.

"May this year be a good one," he said softly as he clinked glasses with Minerva.

"May this year be the best yet," Minerva said and took a healthy sip.

Raidho barked and Vör hooted.

"Cheers, girls," Severus said, raising his glass towards his not-so familiars and offering Raidho dried venison and Vör bacon.

Minerva followed his lead and raised her glass towards them.

Raidho graciously shared her water bowl with Vör, slurping for the Olympics. Vör looked almost indulgent as she delicately sipped the water in a manner similar to the humans sipping their wine.

2006

January was a normal month with weather ranging from occasional overnight frost to temperatures warm enough to walk barefoot on the beach. Soon February appeared to arrive with the Frost Giants who liked Cold with a capital C.

Severus kept the fire going day and night, yet it never seemed to be comfortably warm. For the first time since his arrival in Spain, he was grateful he'd kept some of the warm clothes from his days in Scotland. *Thor, help me*, he pleaded. If this continues, there won't be any crops.

Thor chose not to help, or perhaps he hadn't heard Severus's plea.

Then, Severus felt hot and cold suddenly. Someone knocked on the door. *Must be Heimdal...* he thought, as his oldest Spanish friend was the only one who would ever turned up unannounced. He went to open the door and started.

"Severus..." Tears streamed down Minerva's cheeks, and she seemed to have shrunk at least an inch since he'd last seen her just a few weeks ago. "Oh, thank the Gods you're home."

He pulled her in. "Get in here before you freeze the place," he said, closed the door, and placed several protection charms on it. Then he went to the kitchen to find something strong to drink and picked up two glasses before joining her in the living room.

"Here." He poured a generous glass of Glenfiddich and handed it to her before sitting down himself with a smaller helping of the drink. "What happened?"

Minerva took a deep swallow, sighed, and pulled out a copy of the *Daily Prophet*. "Kingsley."

Severus read the front page and couldn't help a shudder.

R.I.P. Minister

by Rita Skeeter

He had only just entered his prime and yet had led a life that was and remains an example for anyone who wishes to do right. He joined the now-famous Order of the Phoenix at the tender age of 24 shortly before the first time that He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named rose to power. After Voldemort's second and final defeat, he became the wizarding world's all-time favourite Minister for Magic. Non-political, always doing the right thing even when he had to readjust his opinion in view of new findings: that was Kingsley Shacklebolt.

He was found dead in his office last night by the Head of the Aurory, Harry Potter, a supporter of the Minister since he first took office. The Pathowizards of St Mungo's have concluded he died of a heart attack, a typically Muggle cause of death, which has never been known to affect purebloods.

Look out for our updates!

"Fuck." Severus was almost relieved the word had escaped him. He had no idea what else to say.

"Indeed." Minerva sighed heavily. "If that was a real heart attack, I'll die of a whisky overdose."

Severus nodded. "Didn't you say Kingsley was opposed to cooperating with the Muggle government?"

"Yes. He was. He may not have followed the Ancient path as we do, but he certainly had a healthy idea of right and wrong, and he'd decided from the first meeting it wasn't a good idea to work with them." Her eyes met his. "Oh, Severus. It's terrible. I think *they*ve infiltrated everywhere. And they're invisible! I don't know what to do. I have children to protect and no idea how."

Raidho inched towards her small form and rested her head on her knee. Minerva absent-mindedly stroked her head. "I don't know what to do." It was barely a whisper.

When she'd finished her glass, Severus rose to refill it as well as his own. When Minerva's stomach growled, he retrieved the snacks he knew she was fond of from the kitchen, then sent Vör to the nearest wizard-owned tapas bar with a list of dishes and a couple of Galleons.

Raidho disappeared with Vör, blissfully ignoring the wards he'd placed on the door.

"Do you have anything important tomorrow at the school?" Severus asked.

Minerva shook her head. "No. They'll probably run the gates in to get some form of statement out of me, but I have no plans to give it. I'll die on my own terms, thank you very much."

"Then stay here for the weekend. It may be too cold to walk barefoot, but a woollen cloak will keep you warm, and the waterfront is tranquil. We may even receive some guidance from the Gods."

Minerva's grateful look humbled him to the core. "Thank you."

"Don't thank me, woman," Severus grumbled and was glad when Vör and Raidho arrived back, each carrying a bag full of food.

*

By the time the food had disappeared, Severus had an idea.

"Is Lucius active politically again?"

"Hm," Minerva started, "I'm not sure you could call it "political" activity, but both he and Narcissa have become quite outspoken about fair treatment of all magical species." At his surprised expression, she held up a hand. "No, don't get me wrong. They in no way advocate unions between Muggle-borns and purebloods. But they've been rather active in ensuring that each magical species is not restricted in a way that goes against their nature or beliefs. And they're surprisingly successful with it. Last I heard they spent a couple of weeks in the Forbidden Forest amongst the Centaurs. And there are rumours that unicorns have started visiting the grounds of Malfoy Manor." She hiccuped, then yawned and finally giggled helplessly. "Oh, Gods, I'm tired. And probably drunk. Let's discuss everything after I get a decent night's sleep."

Severus shook his head as he watched her pull off her boots and put her feet up on the couch she'd been sitting on. Within seconds she was out cold, and Severus levitated her to pull out the bed from underneath to ensure she would sleep comfortably and was warm enough. Raidho settled down on the rug in front of her, and Severus felt oddly comforted that his not-so familiar saw his old friend as someone worthy of protection.

"Good night, Raidho. Look after her," he said softly and left for his own bed.

Sleep mostly escaped him that night; thoughts were running too rampant. Long before the sun rose, Severus decided brewing a hangover potion for Minerva would be more productive than a futile attempt to chase sleep.

The potion bottled and ready to bring relief for anyone in need of it, Severus grabbed his warmest cloak and quietly opened the door to go outside.

Light was slowly becoming stronger, infusing the surrounding land with a soft glimmer only the winter sun had the ability to do. Vör hooted from a nearby tree and joined Severus as he stretched out his arm for her to land. "Look, there is the sun," Severus said, pointing with his free hand. "Good morning. May today be peaceful." He bowed slightly as the fireball rose above the horizon.

An owl somewhere nearby hooted, and Vör took off in a hurry. "Found yourself a mate, Vör?" Severus asked, not surprised at the lack of reply. Nature had her way, and it didn't matter if the weather played along or not. Severus sighed and slowly walked back to his home, just in time to add more wood before the fire died.

Minerva stirred. "Oooowwww, did you ply me with whisky last night, you rogue?" she asked, not even bothering to sit up.

Severus rolled his eyes, relieved she was acting like her usual self. "Of course I did. I wanted to have my wicked way with you, don't you know? Here. Drink." He handed her the vial of hangover potion.

She downed it. "Ah. Much better." Minerva sat up, and Raidho wagged her tail, still in the same place as the night before.

"Would you like some omelette for breakfast, perhaps? Or just bread?"

Minerva stretched. "Hm, I think omelette sounds nice. Spanish omelette?" She had a hopeful look about her.

Severus hid his grin and instead chose to sigh purely for effect. "You are in Spain, dear, so, yes, I would assume an omelette means *Spanish* omelette; it would be considered ostentatious at the very least to import eggs from England. And lest you wonder, yes, I was referring to the real deal. With potatoes."

Minerva groaned. "I'd forgotten why I was here. Gods, yes, please, get me some decent breakfast so I'll make it through the day."

Severus first prepared coffee and tea. Minerva wasn't opposed to coffee, but she was upset enough to find the most comfort in tea, and he wouldn't consider a day worth living without coffee, so he prepared both drinks to give the coming day a chance.

Once his guest was enjoying her hot brew, he prepared breakfast, taking occasional sips of coffee, speculating if Vör was having a good time...she'd never abandoned him before when he was cooking, always keen on the odd treat...then wondering what, if anything at all, they could do to stop the Frost Giants...if it were indeed *them*...or plain old terrorists from wreaking further havoc.

"So, I do remember you asking about Lucius being political," Minerva said between bites. "Where were you going with that?"

"I thought if he were, I could probably get him to find out if there are any traitors on our side," Severus admitted. "But from what you were telling me, I figure it may be a futile task."

"Hold on. Are you saying you would actually show yourself in our world?" Minerva asked, her voice sounding incredulous.

Severus sighed, and this time it was genuine. "What do you think? That I'll watch the planet go to hell while preserving my privacy? Is that what you think of me? I enjoy my solitude, yes, but I pledged loyalty to the Gods, and if I have to return to the island in order to continue to serve, then that is what I will do."

Minerva looked sheepish. "I am sorry, Severus. I should never doubt you. I should know better. It's just..." her voice dropped to a whisper, "I feel I'm getting too old to fight another battle, and yet I seem to be in the middle of it. I'm tired." Her eyes met his. "Should anything happen to me, I have given Hermione the coordinates of your location here. She does not know it is you; she only knows it's someone I trust implicitly. I hope you don't mind."

Severus had no answer to that. He could hardly object, given such a carte blanche of trust. Eventually, he said, "I hope she doesn't have a heart attack seeing me alive if ever she needs to come here."

Minerva snorted. "I think she'd need something far more shocking than seeing you alive, dear." Eventually, she pushed her plate away. "Thank you for a most wonderful breakfast. The elves are good cooks, but nothing beats a meal prepared by a human being who knows what he's doing."

"I'm glad you enjoyed it. Do you want to stay in or go for a walk? Go to the beach, perhaps? I'm sure it'll be rather empty in this weather, and we'll probably have to hunt for sangria in one of the bars or make do without."

"I only grabbed my indoor cloak when I left for here. It's been so cold in the Highlands that even students preferred staying in at the last Hogsmeade weekend. If you have a spare woollen cloak, I would love to go to the beach."

Severus retrieved one of his woollen cloaks from the wardrobe in his bedroom, spelling a few inches off, and handed it to Minerva. "This should do."

She donned it. "Perfect."

Raidho wagged her tail.

"All right. Unless you fancy a two-mile walk, I suggest you Side-Along."

"Sod the walk," Minerva said, smiling.

The beach was empty except for a handful of seagulls when they arrived, and Raidho was already there.

"How does she do that?" Minerva asked.

"I have no idea, but she's done it since the day I went to find a rug for her. I Apparated to the market, and she was right there when I arrived." Severus shrugged. Raidho's antics had long stopped bothering him.

"Remarkable dog." Minerva bent down to pet her.

"To get back to the subject," Severus started, "do you have any other ideas?"

"Well..." She stopped at the shore and picked up some shells. "There aren't many Order members left. However, most of the members of Dumbledore's Army are alive, and while not many follow the Ancient paths, they all look to Harry Potter and Hermione Granger as their mentors. I wonder if we could get them together again."

She held up her hand. "I know you have little patience for any follower of Dumbledore. I held him in no high regard either for quite some time. But Dumbledore's Army wasn't quite *his* army. They called it that because he stood for exactly the opposite of Voldemort. Consider that before you give me an opinion."

"Good heavens, woman, as though I didn't know that." Sometimes she showed just how old and inflexible she was. "So, do you think we could get the surviving members of the Order and Dumbledore's Army together? It won't be the same as fighting the Dark Lord, though. The Frost Giants are not exactly tangible."

"No, it's not the same, but they do have experience in all kinds of fights. I would go as far as saying they're our best chance to fight the Frost Giants. Alternatively, we could hide in our respective earthships when things get bad and wait until it's all over. Though I trust that's neither your nor my nature."

They had reached the small pier now, and Severus stepped onto the wooden boards reaching out into the sea. "Get them together. If you need me, you know where to find me," he allowed.

Minerva followed him to the pier. "Believe me, if I had any better idea, I would share it."

"I know."

Severus felt the energy before he saw the green flash and yanked Minerva to the side, but Raidho was faster. She yelped and jumped in front of them at the speed of light, as if taking the width of a ditch, and collapsed.

"Raidho?" He bent down, horrified. "No!"

"Oh, Gods." Minerva bent down next to him, putting her hand on Raidho's back.

Severus rose, his wand out, and looked around. There was no life anywhere nearby.

"Severus. She's... she's dead."

Disbelieving, he bent down again and checked her vitals. "Raidho?" he choked. And suddenly, his brain went into gear. "We need to get the hell out of here." He grabbed her arm and Apparated them back to his front door, then pushed her inside and placed every possible protective ward on the front door and a few on the windows for good measure.

"Someone was out to kill either you or me," he stated once safely back inside.

"And Raidho took the Killing Curse for either you or me. Oh, Gods, Severus," Minerva groaned. "I dare say it was for me, or else she would have jumped in front of you."

Severus let a sigh escape. "I suspect it was for you. I... Though I'm sure *they* know I'm alive. Let me make some coffee and tea."

Heating the fire and doing the automatic movements of preparing the beverages helped him focus on the situation in front of him.

Until he remembered that Raidho's corpse lay on the beach. He put a mug of tea in front of Minerva and said, "I need to retrieve her body. If I'm not back in two hours, call Vör and have her look for me. Don't follow me. You're not safe outside the earthship."

Minerva nodded, holding on to her mug for dear life as he Disapparated.

There was no sign of Raidho's body. Not where she'd gone down nor anywhere near. The tide wasn't close enough for him to assume it had taken her out into the sea either. "Bastards," he murmured. *They'd* probably taken it to make use of the body. He knew they would not stop short of any evil whatsoever and walked a mile in either direction, desperately hoping to retrieve her body so they couldn't desecrate it, but to no avail. Eventually, he returned home.

"Her body is gone."

"I'm sorry," Minerva whispered, still hugging her long-empty mug.

Vör hooted from the kitchen, the saddest sound Severus had ever heard.

He didn't know whom to comfort more and remained seated next to Minerva for a while, his arm around her shoulder, but then moved to the kitchen and retrieved some bacon from the fridge. "I'm sorry, I cannot offer more. I am devastated myself." Vör picked at the bacon before accepting it wholly, occasionally hooting mournfully.

Severus looked at the fridge, then his cupboards, and eventually decided it wasn't a good time to prepare something edible. He returned to the living room to see Minerva still holding onto her mug like a lifeline.

"Minerva!"

She started and looked at him with wide eyes. "Yes?"

"Let's go and eat out. I have no energy to cook, and I think a good meal would do both of us good."

"Oh, Severus." Tears started falling down her face. "How can there be so much evil in our world?"

He wrapped his arms around her again and pulled her close. "Good will win. We are in the last days of a negative timeline that has been played out for thousands of years. You know as well as I do that we've chosen this lifetime in order to be here and fight the good fight."

It took a while before her sobbing subsided. "I know you're right. It's just... Sometimes I'm overwhelmed. So many false flags, so many false hopes. I'm so tired..."

"Come. Let's go and eat. I promise it's a private place; nobody will bother us."

She cast him a grateful look and nodded. "All right. Let's."

They Apparated to a small public house in the middle of nowhere. "Heilsa. I'm a friend of Heimdal, and we would like a quiet place and some comfort food. Can you provide it?"

The elderly lady smiled at his mention of Heimdal. "Heilsa. Any friend of Heimdal is welcome here. Follow me." She led the way from the bar front through a couple of dining rooms until they reached a closed-in courtyard with a large stone oven in the middle that emitted warmth. "Sit here." She pointed to the bench surrounding the oven and moved a cast-iron table closer. "I'll get more wood so you'll be warm."

"Now, is there any vegetable you hate?" the lady asked.

Severus exchanged looks with Minerva. "Nothing aside from peppers and beetroot."

The woman nodded. "Dinner will be ready shortly."

*

Severus's heart was heavy when Minerva Disapparated from the front of his still-unnamed earthship. Vör not having shown herself since the previous day did not help matters; he'd become more used to both his companions' presence than he'd ever realised. Perhaps the not-so familiars had somewhere along the way turned into familiars. Or perhaps their presence had just become habit.

He immediately scolded himself for that thought. *Don't ever take such company for granted!*

The sun began to show a little bit more strength during the days, but nights were still bitterly cold...enough for him to keep the fire going until the morning.

The equinox arrived and with it, finally, near-normal temperatures at least during the day. Severus decided to go for a walk on the beach, though he could not bring himself to visit the one where Raidho had lost her life. He was grateful she'd saved Minerva and had silently thanked her numerous times. But he missed the dog that never quite had been a familiar and yet come to mean so much to him.

Vör seemed to miss her, too. She had become aloof recently...never spent much time in the kitchen anymore and appeared to be busy elsewhere.

Severus was almost relieved he didn't need to contact Minerva; he doubted Vör was in the mood for a trip to the North. "Back to solitude, I guess." He sighed to himself and settled down for an evening of reading.

But concentrating on anything, even the Elder Edda, proved impossible, and eventually, he put the book down, poured a glass of Rioja, and moved in front of the fireplace to contemplate.

Was it time to mend bridges, he wondered. Yes, a voice from nowhere confirmed. Severus sighed. Ever since Minerva had turned up with the news of Kingsley's demise, a feeling had crept over him that his days here were being counted.

His sleeping hours were filled with strange dreams. He went to the Green Land beyond, and Kingsley urged him to do what he had to do. Then he saw the Granger girl fighting or, rather, banishing demons from the edge of the Green Land. She did splendidly; Minerva had been right about her.

Severus woke later than usual, surprised at the sun giving off a strong signal of impending summer. It looked as if once again, the Gods had won over the Frost Giants. There was no doubt the fight was only just beginning, but at least it was a promising start.

I'm not ready to return to the island, he thought. But he granted the idea of a return to his homeland access to his conscious rather than dismissing it.

*

"But don't you *want* another familiar, Severus?" Heimdal asked, sounding surprised. "My life wouldn't be the same without my Kneazles..."

Severus shook his head. "It's not so much that I wouldn't want another companion, or one for Vör; it's... Raidho was a gift from the Gods, and it would feel as if desecrating her memory if I were to look for a replacement. I bought Vör because I was ready to have a familiar and because even if she'd never turned into one, it would have been fine as well; after all, she is a utility bird. But Raidho... She just turned up one day and adopted us."

Heimdal nodded. "I understand. It's just that often, people wait a few months and then are ready to find another familiar, and it's been nearly six months, hasn't it? You're obviously not one of those people." He smiled hesitantly, then fished in his pocket and brought out a flask. "I've just had it refilled at the distillery. This time it's blueberry schnapps."

Severus went to the kitchen and returned with two glasses. Evidently, Heimdal saw his visit as a special occasion for whatever reason; Severus didn't pay much mind to it. His friend was ancient and, as far as he was concerned, perfectly entitled to quirky habits.

Heimdal poured the drinks and then raised his glass towards Severus. "Skål, my old friend."

Severus inclined his head. "Skål." He took a sip and was instantly grateful Heimdal didn't see too many special occasions that required toasting...his first occasion had wielded a far better-tasting brew; then he wondered if he could manage to make the schnapps disappear without it landing in his stomach.

Heimdal chuckled. "It's not to everyone's taste, I know. But the occasion... I wanted to say that when you leave..." Severus couldn't help but note the lack of 'if' "...I will be happy to look after your ship for a few years, but only until the Gods return. Once they return, my work here is done, and I will be happy to move on to Walhal." He took another sip and nodded. "Yes, oh, how ready I will be."

Severus's face softened at the look of Heimdal's expression; the ancient wizard had the right idea. "I thank you, my friend, but I'm not quite ready to leave just yet."

The ancient wizard chuckled again. "You may find yourself back home sooner than you anticipate." Then he rose abruptly. "Alas, as much as I enjoy my rare visits here, I must return and feed the felines." Surprisingly agile, he rushed to the door, then turned around. "Heilsa." With a wave, he disappeared through the door, and a faint pop announced his departure.

Severus shook his head as he picked up the two glasses, his still almost full, and moved to the kitchen. To his surprise, he was greeted by a hoot. "Vör! What a pleasure to see you." Then his mouth formed an O. "I see you've been busy." Three more hoots...these ones much quieter...greeted him.

"Hello, young owls. And what beauties you are," Severus acknowledged and rummaged in the fridge for some bacon. The mother and her brood thanked him by hooting appreciatively as he cut the slices into bite-sized pieces. "I've missed you, Vör."

Vör hooted again and swung her head towards her brood.

"Yes. I guess bringing up young ones is more important than humouring a cantankerous human." Severus smirked when she hooted, this time not so softly. "But now that

your sons and daughters are almost teenagers, I trust you'll visit more often?"

Another hoot.

It was good enough for him.

*

The winter solstice sneaked up, startling Severus. He hoped the owlets were grown enough to make do without their mother for a few days, since he hadn't heard from Minerva in a while, and winter solstice meant a mere ten days until New Year's Eve.

"Vör? Would you be up to taking a letter to Minerva? I have no idea how motherhood works with owls, so if you don't want your children alone, just let me know." He approached her with some bacon, small pieces for the youngsters and the usual size for her.

Vör hooted, feasted on the bacon, and flew to his quickly outstretched arm.

"Thank you. I will keep the window open of course, so if your children wish to spend the day or night in the kitchen, they're free to come and go as they please." He took her to the back rest of the nearest chair to have his hands free to pen a note.

Minerva,

Long time, neither heard from nor seen. Are you on for New Year's Eve? Olives, dried figs, quince preserve, various cheeses, all awaiting you. May your solstice be peaceful.

Heilsa,

Severus

Severus tied the parchment to Vör's leg, and she stopped by her offspring, hooting rapidly as if giving instructions. Then she took off through the window and soon was no more than a speck in the blue sky.

So far, it had been a mild autumn; he wondered briefly if this would be another crazy winter and, taking his copy of the Prose Edda, went outside to find a spot in the sun to read in peace. The young owls soon joined him, hooting occasionally. One after the other found a branch on the nearest tree, one of the rarer pines, and fell asleep.

For the first time since Raidho's death, Severus noticed the tranquillity around him. He knew it wouldn't last, but for now, he would take it. He turned back to the Edda in his hand and read until a sudden cold breeze from the direction of the sea reminded him what day it was. The day might have been mild, but it was winter now, and nature made sure he knew.

*

Severus woke up to Vör's incessant hooting at the door of his bedroom and rushed to let her in and relieve her of the parchment.

Severus,

Of course I will be there! I cannot imagine a New Year's Eve anywhere else these days.

Heilsa,

Minerva

The feeling his days here were numbered increased with Minerva's letter, and though he could not make sense of it, he decided to make this coming New Year's Eve an occasion more special than usual. Perhaps bouillabaisse instead of tapas, he pondered. Or paella. Then he dismissed the thought; after all, he still had more than a week to decide.

Vör and her offspring visited him regularly now the owlets were well on their way to adulthood; it seemed things were returning to his normal way of life. Unfortunately, it didn't last.

Severus was removing some weeds from his herb patch on the roof of the earthship, making use of the couple of warm hours after midday, when a large raven dived down towards him, croaking frantically. Startled, he stretched his arm more out of reflex than conscious. The raven landed surprisingly softly and stretched its leg so he could remove the attached parchment.

Hello,

Minerva gave me the coordinates of your home some time ago, saying you were one of her most trusted friends, and if ever any help were needed to contact you.

Minerva has been injured, as has her friend Eir, one of two Healers she trusts. It was likely an attack by Frost Giants, which isn't all that uncommon these days here in the North. Unfortunately, Madam Pomfrey is busy at Hogwarts, and I am somewhat overwhelmed looking after two injured witches; my knowledge of Healing or potions simply is insufficient, so if you have any knowledge of either, and you have some spare time, please come here to Minerva's home and help me with their care. Hugin, my raven, will wait until you reply, even if it's a simple 'no.'

Respectfully,

Hermione Granger

Severus thought for a moment before springing into action. "Hugin, would you show the way to Eir to my owl and her offspring, please? I will momentarily get a letter ready as well, but I need to make arrangements for my home before I can leave."

The raven croaked, and as if called, Vör arrived with her youngsters, all hooting at various strengths. Hugin nodded at Vör and croaked, receiving a soft hoot in reply.

Severus rushed inside to grab parchment and quill, penned a reply, and took it outside to tie on Hugin's leg.

Miss Granger,

So as to save you from a heart attack, I am Severus Snape. Thank you for alerting me. I'm sending your raven ahead with my owl and her owlets while I put together likely needed potions and ingredients and arrange for my home to be looked after. Expect me shortly. I know where Eir is located.

Heilsa,

S Snape

"Go, and be safe!" Severus told the birds, then addressed Hugin. "Please be easy on them. Vör's offspring have never travelled far." Finally, he added, "I'll see you at Eir."

Injured could mean anything...Granger hadn't given any more information...so he combined ingredients not easily available in Britain with a few of the most commonly used potions he had readily at hand. Eir was probably well enough equipped, but better safe than sorry, he figured. Furthermore, he did not wish to have to go shopping anywhere, lest he be recognised. The wizarding world would learn of his survival soon enough; there was no need to rush the process.

Next, he Apparated to Heimdal's home and, after duly greeting the gang of Kneazles, found the old wizard in his living room reading. "Heimdal."

An amused face greeted him. "Told you, didn't I?"

"Yes, you did." Severus sighed. "Minerva has been injured. I don't know the details, but I need to go. I don't know how long I'll be gone. Vör and her owlets are already on their way there."

Heimdal nodded. "Worry not, my friend. I'll check on your home and air it every few days."

Severus inclined his head. "Thank you. I... You know I appreciate it. If you need to contact me, send an owl to Eir in the Highlands. It will get there."

"Go in peace." Heimdal offered a last smile and waved him out. "Heilsa!"

From the front of Heimdal's home, Severus Apparated straight to the grounds of Eir, then walked the few steps to the entrance, sensing an unusual kind of magic. Since it clearly lacked darkness, he paid it no mind and knocked on the door.

"Professor! Thank you for coming so quickly." Granger looked relieved upon seeing him. At least that was a good start.

"Miss Granger. What happened?" He followed her inside.

"I... I'm not entirely sure. My only guess is that Hagrid was knocked out by giants, though he has no knowledge or recall. He's had a few run-ins with Frost Giants, or at least that's what we think they are. It could have been an ordinary attack by giants, who knows, though Hagrid absolutely dismisses that possibility." She pointed to a sofa. "Please, sit down. Would you like some tea or coffee?"

"No, thank you, not now. I would like to see Minerva and Eir after you tell me what you know." He sat down, though on the edge of the sofa, ready to rise sooner rather than later.

She didn't sit down at all. "I was visiting Minerva, as I do about once a week. I knew she'd been planning to have Eir over for tea as well, and I was looking forward to seeing her again, too. I like her a lot, but we see each other only rarely. Minerva wasn't in her office when I arrived, so I took the chance to walk about the grounds. Something drew me towards Hagrid's garden, and as I approached it, I saw two figures on the ground, rushed there and found Minerva and Eir, both unconscious and obviously injured. I healed the worst-looking scratches and so on and then took them to Poppy, but she is inundated with a dragon pox outbreak, and I really didn't want to take either Minerva or Eir to St Mungo's. There are... rumours about St Mungo's having been taken over by Muggle-like corporations, so I did not want to take the risk. I brought them here...Minerva told me about her hideaway some years ago...and then contacted you, without knowing who you are.

"I've kept both stable as best as I could, but I am no Healer, and while my knowledge of potions isn't bad, I think it takes someone with far greater knowledge than me to get them back to health." She straightened. "If you'd like to see them..."

Severus stood immediately. "Please."

Eir's dilemma was a straight-forward, if severe, concussion. He would have her whole within a couple of days.

Minerva was a different matter, but he was willing to bet on Eir's expertise as long as he could keep her stable until Eir was well enough to take over.

2007

This New Year's Eve would have gone entirely unnoticed, had it not been for Granger.

Severus stepped out of Minerva's room, ready for some quiet time, when Granger called to him from the living room. "It's New Year's Eve. Would you care for a drink? Minerva always waxes rhapsodic over her wonderful New Year's Eves with olives and foreign cheeses." She smiled uncertainly when he approached her. "The olives we get here probably aren't as fresh as in your neck of the woods, but then, olives are olives, and they're all preserved in one way or another. And Waitrose had some decent Spanish cheeses on offer."

Severus stopped and changed direction. "You went to Edinburgh to shop at Waitrose? I appreciate it. Yes, Minerva has been spending the last few New Year's Eves in my place." *And a few more days besides*, he thought as he took an olive. It wasn't bad by any means.

"I rarely splash out, but after the excitement of the last few days, I needed to do something good to myself. And that usually means visiting Waitrose." She smiled again. "I didn't find Rioja at a price I like, but I have some Chardonnay, and of course Cava for midnight."

"Bring on the Chardonnay, then." He didn't hide the smirk. If he hadn't been worrying so much over Minerva, he would have enjoyed this a lot.

As Granger carried two glasses and a bottle to the living room, Eir came out of the room she was occupying. "Is there a party going on?"

"Yes!" Hermione said. "Let me get another glass." She deposited bottle and glasses on the table and returned to the kitchen while Severus opened the bottle and poured.

"Oh, this feels good," Eir said after a long sip. "I haven't had wine for ages!" She took an olive, then some manchego and sighed. "This is good."

"Do you remember anything, Eir?" Hermione asked.

Severus wondered if she'd not asked before, but judging by Eir's reaction, it wasn't a first.

Eir shook her head. "Nothing new. All I remember is us walking around the grounds of Hogwarts, towards Hagrid's hut. But nothing after that." Eir took another sip of wine, grabbed a piece of cheese, and excused herself. "Let me quickly check on Minerva."

"Thank you for coming here so quickly, Professor. I can't tell you how lost I was when I found Minerva and Eir." Hermione twirled the glass in her hand.

"Miss Granger, don't be daft." He couldn't think of anything else to say.

The young woman laughed. "Daft seems to be my specialty!"

Years of experience made him recognise exhaustion easily. "Lady, you will have one glass of Cava at midnight, and then you will go to bed and stay there for at least twelve hours!"

Her eyes widened. "Yes... sir."

Eir returned, smiling. "She isn't awake yet, but I have reason to hope we'll see her awake within the next few days. She is improving."

"Oh!" Hermione sighed. "Best news I've had in ages! Thank the Gods!"

Eir chuckled. "Speaking of Gods, do you feel like reading an Edda poem?"

"Of course. Let me get my copy." Granger rose from her chair to retrieve a printed copy.

"Which part would you like to read, and who wants to read?"

"You," Severus said. "And you chose."

Eir nodded in agreement.

"Okay." Granger squirmed momentarily, then settled, opened a random page, and started reading aloud in a soft voice.

"The Song of Spells.

Those songs I know, which nor sons of men

nor queen in a king's court knows;

the first is Help which will bring thee help

in all woes and in sorrow and strife.

A second I know, which the son of men

must sing, who would heal the sick." ***

Both women looked at Severus. "What are you waiting for?" Eir asked.

Severus stood. "Reserve a drink for me." He left for Minerva's room.

Hermione and Eir sat in silence for a while.

"I think you will do him good," Eir said eventually.

Hermione smiled, but before she could reply, the door opened and Severus returned. "Well, I fully expect her to wake up this year," he said, smirking lightly.

Eir rose immediately. "I will sit with her. You two enjoy the peace of the evening."

"Do call us when she wakes up," Hermione said, and Severus inclined his head in agreement.

He raised his glass. "Skål, Miss Granger."

"Skål, Professor."

He was surprised to find the silence that followed peaceful rather than awkward. After a while, he couldn't help but note the tremendous difference in the young Muggle-born girl from her school days. It wasn't just that she could actually remain silent for more than ten seconds but she also exuded an atmosphere of peace, of tranquillity. "You have changed a lot."

She smiled, taking another sip of wine before speaking. "I suppose everyone changes between leaving school and living the life of a grown-up. I was also lucky that I was gifted with extraordinary challenges that helped me look at the world differently."

"You call fighting the Dark Lord a gift?" he asked incredulously. He comprehended exactly what she meant, but surely, she was far too young to see the gift in it.

"You know it was. Tell me *you* don't see Nagini's bite as a gift from the Gods."

He faltered. The girl had insight, just as Minerva had pointed out a few years ago. "Of course I see it as such. But I've never come across someone as young as yourself who sees it this way."

"No." She sounded saddened now. "We didn't need Voldemort to realise we're living on a planet that is ruled by dark forces. But too many people, and not only Muggles, have given in to consumerism; they allow their ego to grow instead of focussing on spiritual growth. It's not so pleasant these days when I think about the state of the world." Her voice trailed off, and she blushed. "Sorry. I don't usually talk this much, I promise."

He felt a smile wash over his face; he couldn't have fought it if he'd wanted to. "You are right. And yet, there is hope. At least... I think there is."

"Oh, yes!" She looked positively animated now. "If evil doesn't show its most evil side, the majority of people will never learn of its existence! But you can only solve a problem if you know it exists in the first place."

The conversation was interrupted by the sound of a door opening. Eir returned to the living room. "It's not New Year yet, is it?"

Granger laughed. "No. Still nearly half an hour to go!"

"Oh, good! Well, lady and gentleman, Minerva is awake and would love to see both of you. As long as you keep it short, I have no objections." Eir smiled at them. "And in the meantime, I shall catch up with wine and food. Just..." she looked uncertain suddenly "...Can we spend midnight all in the same room? Either here or in Minerva's if she's up to it. I would like to start the new year in good company."

"Of course," Severus and Granger said simultaneously.

Severus added, "That's settled, then," and nodded at Eir before turning to lead the way to Minerva's room.

Hermione followed him at a slower pace.

"Heilsa," he said softly and took Minerva's hand as he sat down next to her bed. "How are you feeling?"

Minerva smiled, looking about twice her age. "Thank you for coming here. I feel as if I've run a marathon the Muggle way, I think."

"We were worried," Hermione admitted. "Though between Eir and Professor Snape, I had no doubt you would recover quickly."

"Thank you for contacting Severus," Minerva said. "While I was out, I had a rather interesting time, but I'm too tired to speak of it now."

Severus rose instantly. "Sleep, Minerva. We'll all still be here in the morning. We shall have to repeat the New Year celebrations when you're well enough. For now, you'll be better off sleeping."

Minerva yawned. "You're right. I'll see you in the morning. Good night, you two." She turned over, and her even breathing indicated she'd fallen asleep already.

Hermione followed Severus out of the room, closing the door quietly behind her.

"Oh, good, you're back. It's still fifteen minutes to go until midnight," Eir said, pointing at the clock over the mantelpiece.

"Time for reflections, then?" Severus asked.

Hermione nodded. "Yes. A good idea."

"My hopes for the coming year are that the Light will win everywhere, though I think it's more realistic to expect the silent war to continue." Eir raised her glass. "Skål."

"Skål," Hermione said. "It's been an interesting year on every level. My hope for the coming year is that we all survive whole and continue to stand up for spiritual values." She raised her glass.

"My hope for the coming year is peace, though I suspect it's too early for that to materialise. Skål." Severus raised his glass, but before he took a sip, asked, "Eir and its surrounding land are warded, correct?"

"All of Minerva's wards are in place, and I also added rune magic for protection," Hermione informed him. "Neither Frost Giant nor anyone with ill intent will be able to come anywhere near."

"Oh, good," Eir said. "I would hate to fall victim to one of those again!"

"Miss Granger, tomorrow, if you don't mind, tell me more about protection with rune magic." Severus remembered he had detected some unfamiliar magic when he arrived. He knew it could be done; he also knew it was a highly advanced form of magic. That one so young was proficient in it astounded him.

"Certainly, Professor," she said and rose. "But now, I will find that Cava and glasses." She left to rummage in the kitchen and returned with three champagne glasses floating in front of her and the bottle in her hand, directed the glasses to land softly on the coffee table, and handed the bottle to Severus.

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Severus was pleased to note Granger had indeed followed his stern instructions the night before. It was past midday before she emerged from her room, looking positively refreshed. "Morning," she muttered. "I need coffee. How is Minerva?"

"Morning," he returned. "Minerva is much improved. She stayed awake for nearly a full hour earlier." He took pity on her and poured a mug of coffee. "Here. I can't start the day without it either. Do you take milk or sugar?"

"Just black, no sugar, thank you." She took the mug from him and sipped. "Oh, that feels good." Granger sat down at the kitchen table, occasionally taking a sip. "Has Minerva spoken of her experience while she was out cold to our world?"

"No. She insisted all three of us be present, and even Eir only got up about half an hour ago...after Minerva went back to sleep." He couldn't help but notice she wore a modest bathrobe that covered her from neck to ankles, pyjama bottoms peeking out from underneath, all in various shades of blue. "Eir is in the bathroom, and the only other bathroom is through Minerva's bedroom. Perhaps you would indulge me with a brief lecture on rune magic? I'm happy to prepare a breakfast for us all in the meantime."

Granger nodded. "Certainly, Professor." She took another sip of coffee, and he rose to refill her mug.

"And by the way, Miss Granger, I'm not your professor. In fact, I'm not anyone's professor these days...haven't been in years."

"I realise that. It's just... I'm so used to calling you that, and calling you *Mr Snape* just sounds strange to my ears," she said.

He realised with surprise just how the years of solitude in the Mediterranean had mellowed him. During his Hogwarts years, he would have scolded her for her reply. Now he was almost pleased or at least indifferent. "My name is Severus, and since you and I seem to be the only ones around here to address each other formally, I dare say it's time to drop the formalities. Hermione."

A few years ago, he would have been delighted to see her blush simply because blushing meant embarrassment. Now he found her burning cheeks charming.

Hermione inclined her head. "Severus, then."

He found he liked his name when she spoke it. That was a first.

"Rune magic isn't all that hard to learn or even understand," she started. "Surely, as a follower of Odin, you know the general meaning of each rune."

He nodded. "Yes."

"Right. Then, all you need to do is put two and two together. For example, you want to protect a place, you'll choose a rune that indicates a possession, such as Fehu or Gebo or Ehwaz, and so on. You'll have to choose carefully of course, but any follower of the old ways knows to be thorough and careful. Go by your intuition as well; think with your heart rather than your head. Then you team that particular rune up with something that will add to the protection. Say you chose Fehu in the first place. You could choose the Ehwaz rune, and it would work. You could also choose another layer before you add Ehwaz, depending on what exactly you want. Joy? Add Sowilo. That's always a good one. I could go on for days on this." She sighed. "And that's essentially the gist of it. I'd be happy to show you how I work when there is something that needs protection."

"Thank you. I never thought someone would be able to offer such insight in such a small amount of time, but there you go." He couldn't help being impressed.

Eir came out of the bathroom. "Oh, breakfast ready? I'll be right there!"

Hermione rose. "I'll have a shower now. Unless breakfast is ready now."

It was.

"In that case, the shower can wait. My stomach will thank me," Hermione said, "after I check on Minerva." She returned and sat down to eat. "She's still asleep, but looks better than last night."

Eir said, "I see no reason why her recovery shouldn't be speedy now." She helped herself to some more omelette. "Oh, this is so good, Severus! You're spoiling me!"

Hermione nodded. "Yes. It's the best breakfast I've had in ages."

For reasons he could not fathom, he was pleased.

* * *

By evening, Minerva was strong enough to stay awake and tell of her adventures during the days she had spent out of her body.

"You know," she began, looking at Severus, "when you woke after Nagini's bite and were disgruntled that I had interrupted your lesson with Thor, I wasn't sure if it was the truth or just some illusion you'd experienced. Now I know you told the unadulterated truth.

"I met Thor only very briefly, just long enough to be certain it was him. A God. He introduced me to Sif..." her eyes turned to Hermione "...who informed me she'd chosen you for your strong spirit. Her message to you is that she is pleased with you." Now Minerva smiled at the young witch who'd blushed deeply.

"I never know if I'm doing the right thing, but Gods, I'm trying," Hermione whispered.

"Stop worrying, child. Just continue on your way." Minerva's eyes met Severus's, then Eir's. "It's not going to be easy, but Sif assured me we are protected, as is everyone working for the Light, and her most urgent message was to think with our hearts." She smiled momentarily and then said in a stern voice, "And then, some inconsiderate wizard serenaded me, ripping me out of a most wonderful time in the Green Land."

Severus raised an eyebrow. "Please forgive me. We thought it was the right thing to do."

"Oh, no doubt it was, Severus," Minerva soothed him, her eyes showing a mischievous glint. "Thank you for healing me, all three of you."

*

By the weekend Minerva had recovered sufficiently to make up for the missed New Year celebrations, and Hermione Apparated again to Edinburgh to rummage through Waitrose's selection of Spanish cheeses and wines.

Severus had added to her shopping list after deciding paella would make a good dinner to offset the harsh cold of the Scottish Highlands. The windows of Eir were covered in snow, and it took at least a couple of people to spell it away to let the light in each morning. He would go out to the coast and find the fish and shellfish to add, but Waitrose would do for rice and the spices he didn't find in Minerva's kitchen.

They left together and walked a bit. "I don't think my rune magic will affect Apparating, but at the same time I don't want to risk anything," Hermione said. "And I have no idea what kind of wards Minerva installed around here, so I think it's safest to walk beyond them all."

He agreed with her and enjoyed the mostly silent walk to the perimeter of the property.

"See you later, then." She smiled at him and disappeared with a pop.

Severus took a moment to decide where to go, then thought the West Coast was likely to be at least a little bit warmer and would possibly offer more choices.

Fish and shellfish secured, he Apparated home to pick up his paella pan; there was no point searching for one in Muggle or wizard areas in Britain. Even if he did find one, it was likely to be overpriced.

Nothing had changed. The earthship still felt like his home, and he was looking forward to returning, perhaps in a few days. Then he scolded himself for not thinking of coming here earlier; it could have saved Hermione the trip to Waitrose. *Alas, too late now...*

* * *

Over the second New Year's celebration, Minerva raised the subject of reactivating the Order and the DA.

Severus was surprised at Hermione's views.

"Forgive me, but I have no wish to work with the Weasleys, and no, this has nothing to do with Ron. He is no more or less than a product of his upbringing, and we both realised in time that we aren't made for each other. And I'm not even referring to him or Ginny, but rather to his parents.

"In our fifth year, Molly made it clear she favoured the stance of 'need to know.' That's essentially how the dark side works." She cast a challenging look at them, as if saying, *I dare you.* "Harry, Ron, and I would have had a much easier time if we had actually known all that was going on, but Molly would not allow it, and Professor Dumbledore agreed or at least humoured her. I'm not saying..." she shot a look at Severus "...it wasn't a valuable lesson for me, but that doesn't mean I agree with that *modus operandi.*"

She took a deep breath. "I've studied Muggle life, and not just the theory. Muggles are ruled by a dark force and don't even know it, and the reason? Exactly that. "Need to know." If those who work in government don't need to know something that's essential for carrying out their job, they won't be told about it. That's why their world is in shambles, even if most aren't even aware just how much everything is upside down, at least spiritually. A whistleblower once said, 'The lie is different at every level,' and that's exactly how Muggle governments work nowadays, and I won't risk being subjected to such ever again.

"At least in the DA, we've always been honest and shared all our knowledge with each other, and I'm certain to this day that's the reason it worked even after Harry, Ron, and I were on the run. And you all remember what happened to Marietta for betraying us." She looked rather embarrassed.

Severus nodded slowly. "You know," he said to Minerva, "she has a valid point."

"I did not want that to happen to her, but by the Gods, tell me she didn't deserve it. She could have dropped out any time."

"Ach, Hermione, it raised your image amongst those of us who were fighting for the Light, believe me," Minerva soothed.

Severus nodded in agreement. "So, you don't want the Weasleys in the reassembled... whatever it is. It's not an issue for me. I personally wish to veto Mundungus. Anyone?" He looked from Hermione to Minerva to Eir.

"I have no opinion, since I've never been part of either, but I'm here to serve, so let me know if you need me for anything," Eir said.

"I want you to be part of it, Eir," Hermione said immediately. "Whether as a Healer or an advisor, I don't care. You're sort of in it, aren't you?" She smiled at the older woman.

"Aye," Minerva chimed in, "Hermione is right."

"How would potential members take the possibility that things may heat up tomorrow or nothing may happen for another few years?" Severus asked.

"Some will feel impatient about it, and others will happily take any advice about what to learn or do," Hermione said. "Though of course I can only speak for the DA members rather than the remaining Order."

"I need a drink now," Minerva stated. "This paella was most delicious, but the fish wants to swim." She rose and made her way to the kitchen.

"So, would you be willing to get them together?" Severus asked Hermione.

"Naturally. I see some of them quite regularly anyway. Perhaps we could plan a get-together for the summer to streamline ideas? In the meantime, we all can practise our defence skills, and I can bore them with lectures about the Norse." She grinned.

"All right. That works," he said and was pleasantly surprised that she'd dared grin at him.

* * *

"Oh, come on, Severus, please stay another couple of days at least," Minerva begged.

Severus sighed. He knew she wanted him to have a *decent* birthday for once, and he couldn't find fault in that; Minerva really was a good friend. Except, her idea and his idea of a *decent* birthday were as different as night and day.

"Honestly, I need to get back home. One day, no doubt, I'll be ready to return more permanently, but I'm not ready yet. I miss the Mediterranean. I miss the walks on the beach even when it's freezing cold. And more importantly, I miss my solitude." His eyes met hers, and she was the first to look away.

"Fine. I had a feeling I couldn't convince you. But at least let's have some drinks together tonight. Don't worry; we won't wish you Happy Birthday early or anything like that!" she rushed to assure him.

He smirked. "All right, then. I'll find Vör and her brood and send them ahead now, and I'll leave in the morning." He went outside to call the owls, picking up some bacon from the kitchen on his way.

Vör soon flew onto his shoulder; she was never far. Two of the owlets...by now almost as large as their mother...followed and perched on nearby branches. "Where is your other child, Vör?" Severus asked and offered the bacon, first to her, then to the two young ones, who took it with enthusiasm.

Vör hooted softly in explanation, but he made neither head nor tail of it. He didn't worry either, since she didn't sound upset, and said, "I'm going back home in the morning. I was wondering if you wish to fly ahead tonight, and we'll meet on my land?"

Another hoot at him, then a few hoots at the owlets, and the three owls flew into the approaching night, leaving him wondering what had happened to the third owl.

The puzzle was resolved soon enough. "Severus!" Hermione approached him as he entered Minerva's home, the missing owl perched on her shoulder. "I think one of your owlets has adopted me." She looked sheepish, embarrassed even. "I tried to convince her to return, but it looked like Vör gave her consent to stay with me. I'm so sorry."

Severus laughed. No wonder Vör hadn't looked worried. "No, no, that's perfectly all right. I think Vör tried to tell me, but I'm not yet fluent in Hoot, and she has already left with her remaining two, so don't fret. I'm sure she'll be happy with you and you with her."

Hermione beamed. "Yes. I am. It feels strange, but at the same time exhilarating, especially as this time, it was the familiar who chose me rather than the other way round. And Hugin is very aloof. I'm thinking of naming her Sunna."

For a moment, he was reminded of Raidho and was surprised thinking of her no longer hurt much. Memories resurfaced, but all he felt was gratitude that she had been part of his life. "Yes," he said softly, "it is a true blessing when a familiar finds you. And a suitable name for Vör's offspring." He turned abruptly and headed for his room in sudden desperation for solitude.

* * *

Home, sweet home, he thought as he entered his living room, finding he'd never appreciated the term when he heard others say it. Vör and her two nearly-adult offspring had welcomed him with hoots, and Heimdal had lit a fire, and he wanted to be nowhere else in the world at that moment.

The final evening at Minerva's had been satisfactory by any means. Minerva was whole again, and with another two weeks' leave, she would be well enough prepared to face the rest of the school year as Hogwarts' headmistress.

Eir had already been receiving calls for healing here and there, and Hermione was doing her own thing, whatever that was. Things seemed to be returning to normal once again. Except it was a ruse. Times were changing...changing rapidly...and he'd never know what the next hour would bring, let alone day.

But for now, the Gods were granting him serenity, and he took it gratefully.

Heimdal came by in the evening. "You're probably not keen on the latest distillery schnapps, so I brought you some Cava," he said, grinning, as he handed him a bottle. "Welcome home. How are Vör and the owlets?"

"Doing well," Severus said and accepted the bottle. It was ice cold, so he Summoned two glasses from the kitchen, opened it, and poured the sparkling wine. "Skål. One owl chose a familiar in Scotland."

"Skål." Heimdal raised his glass. "Clever owl. Happy Birthday."

"Thank you." Severus took a sip. It was far superior to any distillery spirit Heimdal had ever shared with him. "I could get used to this. Stay for dinner?"

Heimdal grinned. "Ah. Finally found something you appreciate! Alas, I only came to wish you a Happy Birthday, and now that I've done that, I must return to my home and the Kneazles. None of them has any intention of finding a new familiar." Sighing, he rose, waved, and left in his usual hurried manner.

Severus picked up a copy of Snorri's Prose Edda and sat down in front of the fire to read, but soon found his thoughts were drifting. He put the book down *Really, old man? Two weeks in female company, and you forget how aloneness equals all-one-ness?* Perhaps it was time to establish a stricter routine again; he would rise early and go for a long walk to start the day, then brew some potions. Discipline had always been a good companion.

*

January made space for February, and the weather promised to maintain the reasonably mild winter. At the end of the month Minerva visited and as always diminished his stock of healthy snack food. To his relief, she was truly well again, and her mind focused once more on Hogwarts.

"Ah, I still wish to engage Hermione, but she evades me every time I ask!" Minerva complained.

Severus couldn't blame either. He knew Hermione would be an asset to the school. He also thought she would wilt in that environment and thus not remain an asset for long. She was too free a spirit to be trapped in a school, no matter what capacity, as long as the school was governed by mostly self-serving wizards and witches, even though he knew Minerva would shield her as much as possible from those.

"If she needs to be there, she will be there," he said mildly. "In the meantime, she's doing what she does best, I suppose."

"Aye, of course. You're right," Minerva agreed, if reluctantly. "She is a scholar with all her heart."

*

By the equinox, Severus felt restless. More giant attacks had been reported...some in the guise of "zombies," others as "drones." But for those with eyes to see, it didn't take much to figure out the truth from reading between the lines of Muggle and wizarding papers.

He spent the morning readying the herb beds on the roof, putting new seeds where there were bare patches, taking out dandelion where he didn't want it to grow and placing it elsewhere, keeping a few tender leaves for his evening salad. Moving on to the garden proper he was thinning out some courgette and tomato seedlings when an owl swooped down on him. He hadn't seen it coming and was startled until recognition dawned.

"Oh, hello, Sunna," he greeted Vör's now-independent offspring. "You have mail for me?" He untied the parchment. "Go to the kitchen. I'll be right there. Just let me read this first."

Severus,

The DA is loosely established again. We have a means of communication (the same way as before; no doubt you know about it), and we've met a number of times to ponder strategies, since the unseen is rather unfamiliar to most of us, and I've done my best to point out useful exercises to become more aware of the unseen.

Obviously, nobody knows you're alive, but I'm wondering if I can look to you for guidance.

What do we need to do to be best prepared? I believe two minds working together will yield more results than one rather inexperienced one.

Heilsa,

Hermione

As he walked towards the kitchen to feed Sunna the promised bacon, he saw her in his mind's eyes: a young woman, her hair long as befits a priestess, for a woman's hair represents the antennae to the Otherworld; petite, certainly, and yet a presence that nobody could deny; her eyes filled with a sparkle that left no doubt about the life force behind them.

The fact that she looked to him for guidance touched him oddly.

You've gone mad, old man. She is likely to have as much interest in you as she has in a snail crossing a road; she'll pick it up and move it to safety purely out of compassion for any being and then forget about it. And yet, he sensed no guilt thinking of her that way...nobody who had crossed paths with Hermione would think of her as anything less than a remarkable human being. Unless they were dunderheads, naturally, and there were plenty of those in the wizarding world, if the student body of Hogwarts in the past was anything to go by.

Vör had found her way to the kitchen as well, so he cut a slice of bacon into small squares and fed the two owls bit by bit, all the while thinking of how to reply.

Was he ready to be considered alive again by the wizarding world? He didn't know. Eventually, he realised it would make no difference. He would still have his home here and could retreat any time he wished, and nobody would be the wiser.

Perhaps he could even convince Narcissa and Lucius to join the side of Light this round. Judging by what Minerva had told him a while ago, there was a good chance of that.

Maybe he would come to know Hermione better, spend some time with her.

Yes, he finally decided. He was ready to rejoin the world of the living in an official capacity. Any hesitance left now would fade soon enough.

Hermione,

I'll impose on Minerva and stay at Eir for a few days as soon as I hear back from her; Vör will leave with Sunna to deliver a letter to her. I'll owl you once there, and we can discuss the situation.

Heilsa,

Severus

He wasn't quite certain how he could offer her guidance...the other way round would be rather more likely but if that was what she needed from him, he would do his best to fill that role, even if his only advantage was twenty years more life experience.

"Sunna, wait. I'll send Vör with you to deliver a letter to Minerva." He cut up another slice of bacon and left it on the windowsill for the owls to enjoy.

*

Scotland was as cold as ever at the end of March. Severus shivered as he tended to the fire in the living room. He cast a few warming charms to eliminate the cold, but still, it took a while before the warmth he associated with Eir suffused the earthship and him.

Vör turned up soon after he'd arrived. "Oh, dear, I have no treats. It'll have to wait until the morrow, Vör," he said. "Perhaps you could take a letter to Hermione; she'll likely have something for you to munch on."

Vör hooted her agreement, and he sat down to pen a quick note.

An hour later, there was a knock on the door.

"Hello. Welcome back to Scotland," she said softly. "And thank you."

"Heilsa." He had nothing else to say for a moment and opened the door to invite her in. "Thank you," he then added. "You know the way to the living room. It's the warmest room in the ship."

She sat down on the sofa.

If I didn't know better, I would say she feels as awkward as I do he thought and then snorted inwardly. *Not likely!*

But suddenly, his thoughts turned a different direction. *What if?* His heart bounced up and down.

"Can I offer you a drink?" Then he added, "Hermione?"

She swallowed visibly. "A coffee. Or a glass of water. Or... anything."

A wave of absurd hope washed through him. He pointedly looked at the clock. "It's nearly five. Perhaps a glass of wine?"

"Why not?" she agreed. "The last time I had wine was here." She smiled, and he no longer felt cold.

Severus poured two glasses of wine and sat down in the living room in a chair opposite the sofa she sat on.

"Skál," she said and raised her glass.

"Skál." He, too, raised his glass, took a sip, then said, "So, what guidance are you expecting from me?"

She blushed. "Any, to be honest. I feel I stepped into a snake pit with no way out. I'm not equipped for another fight, and yet, I seem to have chosen the life of a warrior. It's not as if I was equipped to fight Voldemort either."

He no longer cringed when hearing his former master's name, but it would be a long while before he would use it. "You did well enough fighting the Dark Lord, and you'll do well fighting for the Light again, no doubt," he said, hoping it would reassure her. "Now, how many members do we have?"

They talked, she about progress so far, he about potential tactics and strategies of the group as ideas entered his mind. Occasionally, the talk was interrupted by the sipping of wine or a silence brought about by the need for contemplation.

Eventually, the subject switched from practical and tactical to spiritual and magical, and he realised she was drawing him in completely. He had never in his life experienced a woman so open about herself, her shortcomings, her strengths, someone with a heart as wide open as hers. She instilled awe in him, yet never overpowered. She exuded a power, of which the Dark Lord could not have dreamed of, yet was as humble as a village preacher.

"Everything is connected," she said. "To leave out spiritual aspects is not a mistake I want to ever repeat because it can only lead downward. Fighting evil with evil is futile; Harry proved that with Voldemort. He killed him, yet his soul never ended up tainted because he never fought dirty. And he won because he followed his heart. I know many people in our world still think it was dumb luck, but really, if you look at it, it was everything but."

The beauty about her was that she didn't just sound passionate. She was passion personified.

He had never really thought about how exactly Potter had defeated the Dark Lord, but the way she explained it, it made perfect sense to him. No wonder Minerva held Potter in such high regard, long after he'd lost the appeal of the poor little boy who'd spent ten years of his early life in a dysfunctional home, battered and abused and with no knowledge of his heritage.

Long after the wine was finished, she rose. "I really must leave. My day starts early, and it's late," she said, her voice soft, her eyes smiling.

He was shocked to see it was long past midnight. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to keep you up half the night. But if it helps, I enjoyed the evening tremendously. Perhaps you'd care to repeat it another night?"

"I would love to. Thank you for a wonderful evening; I enjoyed it, too." Now the smile extended to her entire face. "I will owl you after tomorrow evening's DA meeting. If you change your mind and want to come along, just owl me."

*

Severus,

You should have heard the cheer when I told them you're alive and well. It would have warmed your heart.

Harry sends his best wishes and hopes you're willing to see him at some stage in the near future, though they all want to see with their own eyes that you're really you. Perhaps you can come along to the next meeting.

Let me know when it's convenient for you to meet again; I'm free in the evenings, but can rearrange any morning or afternoon obligations if you prefer.

Heilsa,

Hermione

He fed Sunna some extra bacon before writing a reply.

Hermione,

Come here any time. I'm looking forward to seeing you again.

Heilsa,

Severus

He nearly tore the parchment to pieces, but then figured it was best to be short and to the point. Slytherin tactics not only wouldn't work on her but she would expose them in no time. Blunt honesty, on the other hand... He was certain she wouldn't mind that in the least.

*

For a couple of days, Severus didn't hear from her; he was beginning to wonder if he'd done the right thing being so blunt.

It was evening when someone knocked on the door. Though it could have been Minerva or Eir, he instantly knew it was Hermione.

She looked positively dishevelled, her face and hands full of scratches, some of them bleeding, and her cloak torn in places.

"Blimey, woman!" He pulled her inside and shut the door. "What happened?" After he made sure she wasn't badly wounded, he led the way to the living room. "Sit. I'll get you a drink."

"Thank you." She sat down heavily and only then shrugged out of her cloak, though not before digging into one of its pockets and pulling something out.

He returned with two glasses of wine and a healing salve. "Drink, and let me apply this to your scratches while you tell me what happened," he said and was surprised she followed his orders without question.

"Not much to tell," she muttered, cringing as he applied the salve to a particularly deep scratch on her wrist. "Frost Giants happened." She took another sip of wine when he was finished with one hand and switched to the other. "Well, they didn't win this time, and I believe I have something belonging to you." She waited until he had applied the last of the salve and then bent down to retrieve a peculiar-looking hammer.

He stared. This couldn't be. "What...?" he asked hoarsely. "What is that?"

Hermione grinned at him. "I believe its proper name is *Mjölnir*, though most people would know it as Thor's hammer. You have an affinity with Thor, do you not? So I suppose it belongs to you."

He swallowed hard. "How... how did you find it?" He wasn't worthy of this. Not of Thor's hammer. He did not deserve it. He just knew. It must have been a mistake. But he took the proffered hammer from her hand and held it in his own shaking hands. It was indescribable. Powerful, oh, yes. But there was also something about it that he just knew would prevent anyone from committing any crime with it. The hammer wouldn't work in the hands of the likes of the Dark Lord. Probably not in the hands of Dumbledore either. *Why me, then?* "Are you sure this is for me? I cannot imagine..." His voice trailed off.

Her attempt at laughter sounded like an ancient man on his deathbed. "Please, Severus. I suspect the reason it was given to me is because ~~dan~~ convince you it belongs

to you. But please don't make me. Right now I want nothing but a hot bath and then a warm bed."

"That, at least, I can provide." He rose and carefully laid the hammer on the table. "Let me run a bath for you and add some herbs so you heal faster."

He had to look away from the most grateful smile he'd ever received; it was unbearably humbling.

"There. You know where the towels are. Take your time." He refilled her glass. "And enjoy the wine."

"Thank you." Another smile filled with gratitude, and she slipped past him to soak in the tub.

He sat down where she'd sat and picked up the wondrous hammer again. "Why me, Thor?"

The God of Thunder appeared in the middle of the living room. "*She* needed it tonight to save her life. But she has no further need for it now. There will come a time when she will need it again, and you are one of the few willing to part with it as needed. So, for now, it is yours. Take good care of it. Heilsa." As suddenly as he'd appeared he vanished.

Severus took a deep breath and stared again at the hammer. Then he wondered where to keep it. *With you at all times*, he heard Thor's distinctive voice.

How is that going to work? The thing is far too large to fit in my pocket... To his surprise, when he put it close to his pocket, the hammer shrank. "Truly magical," he murmured and refilled his own glass. He needed a drink now.

Finishing the glass, he rose to prepare a bedroom for Hermione, hoping she wouldn't insist on leaving after her bath.

When he returned to the living room, she was there, sipping her wine.

"Would you mind if I slept here tonight? I'm feeling a bit shaken still and don't really want to be alone." Her smile was half hearted. "Don't worry, I won't bother you at all!" she added hastily.

"Hermione, don't be an idiot. I still don't know exactly what happened to you, but even a blind man would notice you're shaken. The bedroom you inhabited over New Year is all ready for you. Now, care to tell me what exactly happened?" He sat down opposite her.

"I Apparated to the grounds here and was greeted by three giants, just outside the wards. They all came at me simultaneously, and honestly, I thought my last minute in this reality had arrived." She shuddered. "I managed to knock down the one nearest to me, but I was too exhausted to deal with the second one. Suddenly I felt the hammer in my hand and Si's voice in my head." Hermione shrugged, then averted her eyes from him.

"Gods, I killed two giants with that hammer," she continued in a choking voice. "I never want to kill, but apparently I'm not ready to die quite yet and perfectly capable of killing if that's what it takes to stay alive." Tears streamed down her face.

"Hermione." He rose and sat down next to her, pulling her into an embrace. *Sod formalities*. "You only defended your own life, which even you can't blame yourself for! You're exhausted, and you're hurt still. Don't be so hard on yourself."

When she curled into his embrace, he pulled her closer and held her. Her sobs soon subsided, and he marvelled at how wonderful she felt in his arms. Her breathing eventually evened out, and he relaxed and allowed himself some sleep.

They woke up simultaneously. "Oh, Gods," she groaned. "I'm so sorry! You can't be comfortable like that!"

"Don't be daft," he murmured. "I've not been this comfortable in, well, since I can remember."

"I'm glad. Me too." She crawled closer, put her arm on his shoulder, and went back to sleep.

*

Hermione's eyes met his. "I hope I didn't make you too uncomfortable! Why didn't you just throw me out?" She looked positively embarrassed with that blush.

He chuckled. "I didn't have the heart. How are you feeling?"

"Amazingly alive," she said, smiling. "And starving."

"I suppose that's my cue to get to the kitchen," he muttered and reluctantly moved her arm so he'd be able to rise from the sofa.

He did feel a bit stiff after sitting on the sofa for the entire night, though he would repeat that happily any time.

"Well, if you put it that way," she said and laughed. "Need help cutting vegetables, beating eggs, whatever?"

"If you're offering... You could slice the potatoes if it's Spanish omelet you're vying for." He smirked at her and was delighted to receive a sheepish smile in return.

He cut the onions and beat the eggs while she sliced the potatoes and boiled water for coffee.

They shared breakfast in the kitchen and pretended it was the coffee that had the reviving effect.

*

Severus agreed to meet the members of the DA, if only to restore peace to Hermione's life. She had been inundated with questions she couldn't answer, and Rita Skeeter had begun to stalk her until Hermione threatened the beetle routine, even going as far as showing the irritating witch the jar she'd started to carry with her.

He was surprised to see the dunderheads of yesteryear had all turned into capable warriors, above all Potter, who was a natural leader together with Hermione. Even Longbottom's presence didn't grate on him. *I must have turned soft over the years...*

"Would you like to join us for a drink, Professor?" Potter asked after everyone but Hermione had duly shaken his hand and expressed their delight over finding him alive and thanked him for his role during the last war before leaving.

His first impulse was to decline the invitation, especially when he remembered he still hadn't owed the Malfoys; surely, they wouldn't appreciate finding out he was alive through the papers, a distinct possibility if he showed up anywhere in public, especially in company as illustrious as Potter's, the wizarding world's favourite saviour. But then he looked at Hermione, who stood there, anticipation written all over her face.

"All right, then. A quick one won't do any harm, I suppose," he muttered, and his day became brighter when she beamed at him.

Unlike the other members of the DA, who had become quite tongue tied when facing him, Potter had no qualms about asking questions. To Severus's surprise, however, the young wizard was not only civil but seemed genuinely interested in his life.

The quick drink at the pub...a fairly new establishment in Hogsmeade...had turned into an enjoyable evening with lively conversations about people, the wizarding world,

the Muggle world and the anticipated Twilight of the Gods, a subject in which Potter was unexpectedly knowledgeable.

*

The Frost Giants were gaining presence everywhere; there weren't just the odd attacks in the more northern countries anymore. Both Muggle and wizarding media continued to refer to them in the most ridiculous manner...zombie attacks, flesh-eating bacteria outbreaks, unmanned spy drones gone out of control...yet those with eyes to see easily removed the wool pulled over their eyes and saw them for what they were.

Severus enjoyed his stay at Eir, especially Hermione's visits, but he was itching to return to his own home. He wondered if Hermione would accept an invitation to visit him in Spain. Perhaps she would, but in the end he decided to wait and perhaps invite her by owl.

He opened the door to let her in.

She looked around. "I had a feeling you were leaving soon."

"I need to get back home," he said. When he saw her expression, he added, "It's not that I don't like it here. I love Minerva's home, and she's always made me feel very welcome in every conceivable way. But it's not *my* home."

"I understand," she said. "I just... I'm... To me it feels like losing a friend." She turned away, and he realised she didn't want him to see her tears.

"Hermione. Look at me." He moved towards her and pulled at her shoulder so she would turn.

"I'm sorry. I'm having a selfish moment." She averted her tear-filled eyes.

"Hermione," he murmured.

Her face suddenly was dangerously close to his, and her lips parted in the most inviting manner.

Irresistible.

"If you object to being kissed, say so now," he whispered hoarsely.

"Never."

Her lips fit his perfectly. Her tongue fit his even better.

The age-old dance began, and it would continue into eternity, though first there was a war to be fought, as the Dark, already aware its days of power were rapidly approaching the end, combined all of its forces so as to not go out without a great fight, hoping to take as many warriors of the Light as possible with them into the abyss.

Neither Severus nor Hermione would shirk the duty they had accepted, even if it did mean the bliss of a sacred union would have to wait, possibly until leaving this life behind.

When they finally parted, both slightly breathless, he couldn't help himself. "What have you done to me, woman? Bewitched my mind as if it's the easiest thing to do..."

She grinned. "Well, you ensnared my senses. And it didn't even take a potion." Then she turned serious again. "It's not going to be easy over the next months or years, is it...?"

"No," he agreed. "I suspect we did not choose this life for an easy time. We'll just have to focus on having a successful time."

"Will I see you again soon?" she asked, and the trepidation in her voice was so palpable he couldn't help but take her in his arms again.

"Of course," he soothed her. "You can visit me any time, and I'm only an Apparation away from you, you know..."

*

He sat down in his living room, taking deep breaths. Over the last hour, Lily had faded into all but a glimpse of a memory, as far gone as the occasional Sunday pub lunch with a benevolent aunt that he'd looked forward to long before the arrival of his Hogwarts letter.

He found he suddenly didn't appreciate being alone at all and was grateful when Heimdal popped in to welcome him back, though the old wizard was not his usual self. "Three Kneazles have been poisoned. If I find the culprit I'll wring his neck," he muttered.

"Poisoned?" Severus asked. That was very unlike any local. Such cruelty just didn't exist here. "You think it was Frost Giants?"

"Yes. No local, wizard or Muggle, would do that. Also? The typical tell-tale signs. I discovered them, and that night the temperature went below freezing. In April! That's unheard of!"

"Want a glass of wine? It's all I have here. I must go shopping tomorrow." Severus poured two glasses, and they sat together in silence until Heimdal stirred again.

"So you found her." It wasn't a question. The old man seemed to read him like an open book, and Severus was grateful he was a friend. An enemy with such an ability might have proven problematic.

"I have no idea what you're talking about." Severus wasn't going to make it easy for him, though.

"Oh, you know exactly what I'm talking about. You are so head over heels in love that you rather put up with my company than be all by yourself because then you miss her so badly it hurts." Heimdal was unfazed by his younger friend's attempt to hide his emotions. "Look, talking about your misery makes me feel better about my own loss, so humour this *viejo*."

Severus gave up. He wasn't in the right frame of mind to play pretend. "For years...decades!...I mourned a love that was never returned. And now... it's... wondrous. I had no idea something like that could happen. It's what happens to the lucky people, you know?"

"Yes. And why wouldn't you be lucky? It's not as if you've never known luck. You survived a fatal snake bite; you have good, loyal friends; and now you've found love. Why on earth not? You deserve it."

"I've never looked at it that way. I'm already missing her."

"But you also have an exaggerated sense of duty, and fighting the Frost Giants takes priority," Heimdal said and nodded. "And I bet she has that same sense of duty because you wouldn't make do with anything less." He chuckled, then turned serious again. "Treasure her, my friend. 'Tis not often in this day and age that twin souls recognise each other. And by the Gods, we will need your combined power."

*

A longing Severus had never known became his most loyal companion. Sometimes, it remained discreetly in the background of his being, but most of the time, it was at the

forefront, whether he secured other wizards' homes against the menace that were Frost Giants...runes had indeed proven most powerful for protection, and Heimdall spread the word fast...or shopped at the market for food or enjoyed a sunset. Her spirit was there with him at all times.

They stole moments together whenever possible. When the longing became too unbearable, he Apparated to her small cottage in remote Cumbria, and if she wasn't there, he would wait for a while, then either spend a few minutes with her over a cup of coffee or leave a note to let her know he'd been there and Disapparate. Then he would wait for her to arrive, even if it was for just a few minutes, and she never failed him, no matter how busy her life was.

Each brought about more awareness of all the world's prophecies about the end days proving true in at least some aspects, Severus in Northern Spain from whence it spread north and south and east and west, and Hermione in England and Scotland, if mostly amongst the wizarding population, though it was bound to spread into the more aware Muggle communities.

The attacks were increasing in Scotland throughout the summer, but the DA was prepared, and damage was kept to a minimum.

Until autumn, nothing worse than scratches happened.

But they hit after the equinox, outright destroying Eir's home. Only her youngest sister had been present...and perished in the attack that froze everything and everyone in its frosty wake. The ice took days to thaw, despite the relatively warm Indian Summer temperatures.

Neville's grandmother's home, hundreds of miles south, was destroyed in the same manner, though Augusta had been lucky enough to be on a cruise on the River Nile in Egypt at the time.

When Minerva informed him of the latest incidents, he sent Vör to Eir with a note.

Eir,

My heart goes out to you. I am so sorry for your loss.

If you need some time away from it all, I have a spare room, and the weather is soothing here.

Heilsa,

Severus

Hermione arrived with Eir the next morning. They shared breakfast before Hermione had to leave again for a lecture on runes in some wizarding institution. "I'll be back later. I actually have nothing on my schedule until Monday, believe it or not." She smiled as she leaned into him.

"Hurry, then, woman, so you can be back here as soon as possible." He watched her as she walked away from his wards and then disappeared with a light pop. An entire weekend with her, he thought. That was unusual, but he wasn't going to question it.

In the meantime, he kept busy with Eir. She wasn't hurt physically, but the images of her sister shrouded in ice, of her home so completely destroyed had devastated her, and he made calming draughts and let her talk, and he listened and offered Vör if she needed to send any letters.

Then Hermione returned, and the world around them became an unimportant speck in the far distance.

"Let's go for a walk on the beach," Hermione said. "It's already a bit cold for that in England, but the weather here is perfect."

They Apparated to a quiet beach, taking Eir along, knowing the ocean would do its part in the healing process, and Hermione waxed lyrical about the power of runes, her enthusiasm infectious.

The walk had worked wonders for Eir, whose practical side had once again taken over. "Thank you, both of you. I'm as ready to face everything as I'll ever be, and I have a feeling I'm needed back home."

Time flew by at an exaggerated speed, and before they knew it, the weekend was over, and Hermione had to return to England. "This is becoming silly," she said, sighing. "All I want to do is be with you, and when you're so far away, it hurts almost physically."

It took no thinking for him to make a decision. "I'll be over tonight. My work here isn't done yet, but there is no reason to spend my free time here with only misery for company."

Her smile brightened his day.

*

The day of the winter solstice arrived and brought with it one of the fiercest snow storms England had ever experienced. "Hm," Hermione said, looking out of the window, "I think we'd better forget about seeing the sun rise over Stonehenge. We'd only freeze, and I doubt the sun will manage to even peek through this layer of clouds."

"All right, then." It would perhaps have been a once-in-a-lifetime experience to witness the solstice sunrise in such a history-laden location, but he was just as content to spend the morning in her bed or by the fire. And hopefully, there would be more solstices to spend with her in the future.

She crawled back into bed with him. "We'll celebrate in our own way..."

Later, they made plans for New Year's Eve. Minerva would want to visit, and Severus was ready to breathe some Mediterranean air and spend a few days in his earthship. "Perhaps we should invite Eir as well," he said and Hermione agreed.

"Better stock up on olives and cheese." She smiled. "Oh, and what about paella? Will you make some for me?"

"Anything you want."

*

Spain was doubly pleasant after the snow storms they'd had, and Hermione and Severus relished the long walks on the beach and in the hills without having to wrap up in layer upon layer of clothing.

One afternoon as both were strolling through the market, choosing olives and cheeses, tasting tapas in preparation for New Year's Eve, Hermione's coin heated up. She took it out, read the message, and paled. "From Harry. Godric's Hollow is under attack."

Severus pulled her along to a back alley, and they Apparated to drop the purchases in the earthship. He sent Vör with a quick note to Heimdall; the old wizard would know what to do. Then they Apparated together, Severus making sure Mjöllnir was in his pocket, and materialised a few hundred feet away from a scene of utter horror.

The Frost Giants were everywhere, floating in the air, wiping out lives with icy breath, on the ground, wielding swords, in front of windows, preventing inhabitants from escaping.

Hermione stood very straight and suddenly seemed taller, her face filled with a look of determination that nothing could penetrate. She took a deep breath. "I need your hammer now, Severus."

He didn't need to do anything; the hammer floated towards her of its own volition, expanding in size as it travelled the short distance into her outstretched hand.

She faced him now. "I have loved you before, I love you now, and I will love you again." Then she kissed him fiercely.

"Hermione! You can't do this alone!" He was horrified when he realised what she was about to do.

"I can, I must, and I will, Severus. Remember: we are protected."

"I will remain beside you." When she took a breath to reply, he put his finger on her lips. "Don't waste valuable energy. Let's go."

Hermione nodded shortly. "There," she pointed in the distance on the farthest edge of the village, "we start on the outside and work our way in. You must not, under any circumstances, cast the Killing Curse, Severus. Frost Giants only use it to become stronger."

"I take it a Disillusionment Charm is allowed?" he asked.

"Yes, good idea."

He cast it as they carefully made their way to the first giant, who kept an entire Muggle family trapped in a half burnt-down house. A fire kindled by hot anger lit within him as the Frost Giant laughed maniacally. "By Gods, they are nasty specimens of earth's inhabitants," he murmured.

"Soulless." Hermione's voice was harder than steel, making him almost shudder.

When they were sufficiently close, Hermione threw the hammer, and the giant crumbled on the ground. She pocketed the hammer and ran to open the door while Severus gestured for the family to come out.

"Leave!" Hermione cut off the woman's profuse thanks. "Walk away from here, and don't return until all the smoke is gone."

They ran now to the next house amidst increasing screams of people trapped indoors and others outside, desperately dodging the giants' idea of having fun: breathing out air so cold it instantly froze whatever it hit.

Trees and grasses frozen in mid-breeze and people frozen in mid-run were becoming a rapidly familiar...and horrifying...sight.

Hermione and Severus had made it half-way through the village when they came across Harry, obviously exhausted, out of breath, but alive and unhurt. "Ginny and Neville are trying to defrost anyone who might still be alive," he rushed to tell them. "Luna and Mrs Malfoy have set up camp to heal the worst of injuries on the southern edge of the village, and Draco and his father are guarding them. Most injuries are light...frostbites and the like. It looks like Muggles have suffered heavier losses, but Luna and Narcissa are helping, and we'll worry about statutes later."

Hermione grinned weakly, looking from Harry to Severus. "All right. Ready for the final leg of the battle?" Two nods and she led the way towards the centre of the village.

Hermione took out another giant with the hammer precisely aimed at the centre of his skull; the loud, disgusting crushing sound the splitting skull made ripped several people nearby out of their stupor, and they started to cheer the three saviours. Severus rolled his eyes inwardly. He couldn't blame these poor souls, but there was no reason to behave as if the queen had arrived. *Well... she has... only they don't know...* By the time he'd completed his thought, Hermione had taken out another giant, Thor's hammer always flying back into her waiting hand when it had done its task.

Nobody saw or felt them creep towards the village-turned battlefield. The Dementors who had been banned from Azkaban were hungry; their losses had been huge, for there hadn't been much to feed on after the fall of Voldemort, but those who'd survived, did so with vigour. And the Frost Giants provided the ideal feeding ground for the few Dementors left.

From the corner of his eye, Severus saw Potter's stag Patronus and heard his cry at the same time; he instinctively cast his, surprised that a raven rushed from his wand instead of the familiar doe, and only then looked up.

The Dementors had mingled with the Frost Giants, and it looked the way a sick mind would imagine a party of followers of Loki or Shaddei.

NO!

* * *

Severus's first sentiment when he came to was utter relief. Hermione was sitting right next to him, her hand resting in his. Then he faced the imposing man in front of him. He wasn't a stranger.

Thor smiled at him, and Sif, seated next to him, smiled at Hermione.

"I've failed, haven't I?" he asked, surprised at the smiles.

"Never," Thor replied.

"I am well pleased with you," Sif said. "Both of you."

Hermione blushed a becoming pink, and Severus squeezed her hand.

"As am I," said Thor. "And before you wonder, you are not in Helheim this time either, Severus. The Green Land is a pleasant location for healing and learning, so we chose it to meet with you." He smiled, and warmth suffused Severus. He knew Hermione experienced the same from the quiet content sigh that escaped her.

"When you return to your respective bodies, the battle will have been fought, and for the first time in many thousands of years, order...true order as envisioned by the wayseers who have retained the soul memory of true freedom throughout time...will be restored on Earth." Thor looked at Sif, and she continued.

"Your wizarding world now has no Minister, for obvious reasons. The no-name excuse of a human who replaced Kingsley Shacklebolt ate himself, so to speak. It's what happens to yes-men, all of them. You will find your planet devoid of those non-entities. Alas, your world is not quite ready to be without rulers entirely." Sif looked from Hermione to Severus to Thor. "You continue, my love."

Thor nodded. "We want one of you to become Minister for Magic. It makes no difference whether it's you or you..." his eyes rested on Hermione for a moment "...after all, you are twin souls. One will be in the spotlight, the other will be guiding from the background. Take your pick. Discuss it amongst yourselves."

Severus nearly gasped.

Hermione did gasp. "I... I couldn't do that!" she exclaimed.

Thor and Sif both chuckled. "Of course you can. You've never failed a worthy task, dearest," Sif soothed her. "And when you make your decision, together with Severus, keep in mind that the planet needs the strength of the feminine divine. Weigh the pros and cons if you still wish to serve."

"Of course I'll continue to serve!" Hermione said, sounding almost annoyed.

Sif chuckled again. "I rest my case. Discuss it amongst yourselves when you're back in what you currently consider your normal state."

Severus pulled at Hermione's sleeve. "You do know that balance can only truly be restored when the divine feminine once again rules, do you not?"

Hermione blushed. "I do."

He continued. "You will always have me by your side, but I believe it's time for a female ruler, for us men will never be able to lead humanity into self-government. We have too much self-serving interest. You, on the other hand, can because you always put others' wellbeing before your own. You could easily lead a nation and act entirely in the nation's interest!"

"Oh, Severus," she whispered. "I wish I had such confidence in myself."

Sif chuckled. "Don't worry about it, Hermione. He has enough confidence in you to make up for your lack of it. Now, allow us to show you around, for your earth can be a similar environment with just a little bit of nurturing."

Hermione and Severus followed Sif and Thor as they led the way.

Plenty of typical English countryside with rolling hills, some forests reminiscent of Scotland, and even barer hills that reminded Severus of his chosen home greeted them as they followed Sif and Thor floating about, though the towns were very different. Markets, yes, but no Muggle-type chain stores. Uniqueness ruled, and everything and everyone seemed to be thriving. There were no signs of schools, hospitals, government offices. People were clearly happy, no matter what age. Even the smaller children were all smiles, and not a single one appeared to be throwing a temper tantrum. The entire scene lacked any commonly known authority figures, such as Aurors or Muggle police or other uniformed people, making for a very peaceful atmosphere where joy rather than fear reigned.

"Earth could easily provide a similar environment," Sif said. "Instead of followers, there will be human beings, whose only authority is the Divine Creator, not some self-styled legal authority with the goal of nothing but exploitation. It will take some effort to achieve such an adjustment, and some people may never be ready to live as truly free and self-responsible, but that won't be your problem...it will remain theirs, and if they choose to leave that plane rather than taking the opportunity to grow, then so be it. They are equally children of the Divine Creator, and they equally have free will to choose their paths."

Observing life in the Green Land was a revelation. Greed was entirely absent. People offered things and services and wisdom depending on their abilities, and all offered their skills and goods freely because sharing was joy. Nobody looked poor or miserable; nobody looked ill or even uncomfortable.

"I can't imagine how life will be back home," Hermione said, stopping to gaze at the lively village square. "Or rather," she corrected herself, "I cannot imagine humanity is ready for such a lifestyle. Even though the gap between those giving and those taking has widened, it is beyond my grasp at the moment how all the greedy ones might suddenly turn into compassionate beings who give freely without claiming to be trodden on."

"I have a feeling that many greedy ones have perished in the recent battle," Severus said and received a nod from Sif. Encouraged, he continued. "For thousands of years, those who chose the Dark side ruled. They sold their souls to the devil and received material riches and power over others in return, if only for a little while. They ended up accidental casualties, or not so accidental. The majority of people were simply brainwashed into a life-long sleep, but that sleep was more and more often interrupted as more advanced souls incarnated and raised the frequency collectively. Most of humanity has forgotten that by being born on this planet, we have a God-given right to live in health and abundance. Over the millennia, little by little so nobody would notice, this right was eliminated until we had what we did before the battle."

Hermione nodded slowly. "That makes sense. It was us, the awkward ones, the misfits of society, especially Muggle society, who upped the frequency so more people could wake up and come out of this stupor they thought was life." She sighed. "I hope so. It would be awful if this is only a short break in this war between good and evil." Then she smiled at Severus. "I do want to reach that field beyond good and evil, you know?"

He was surprised. "You remember that?"

"I never forgot. How could I?" Her smile widened, and both Sif and Thor chuckled. "And besides, my memory seems to be a lot more vivid here than when I'm in my body."

Thor nodded. "Yes. When you leave your body, many restrictions on memory disappear. That's why many of the unconscious people have such trouble returning to their body when they find themselves outside. Once you have a taste of this incredible freedom, it can be hard to return to prison-like circumstances. Though even that will change before long. You will be astounded how the planet will improve from now on and at what speed!"

"I think I could be very content here, too, though I suspect my work isn't *quite* done yet in my current form," Hermione said quietly. Then she looked at Severus. "Please say the same. I think I would have a very hard time without you by my side."

"I'll be with you. Always." He pulled her close, and she leaned into him.

2008

Severus felt Mjölir in his hand. What was it doing there, he wondered. Suddenly, memories flooded him. Hermione telling him she needed the hammer; Hermione determined to defeat the Frost Giants without him; Hermione taking down the first giant; both of them meeting Potter in the village. *Oh, Gods...* He wasn't quite certain he really wanted to open his eyes. In the end, they opened of their own accord.

"Severus, oh, thank goodness," Eir whispered, hovering above his face, but making a fast retreat now. "We were running out of ideas how to get the two of you back to the living!"

"Ugh," was all that came out. His vocal chords had evidently rusted while he'd been cruising the Green Land. He tried again. "H'min?"

Thankfully, Eir was perceptive. "Hermione woke up just a couple of minutes ago."

"Not 'ere."

"She's next door, Severus. We'll move you together as soon as both of you are lucid."

He wanted to scream at her that he was perfectly lucid, and no doubt Hermione was perfectly lucid, too, but somehow, only grunts came out, and he soon gave up, since the grunting hurt his throat, and besides, he was tired. So tired as if he'd just fought a battle.

The next time he woke up, at least Hermione was in his arms. A great improvement, he thought. "Thank you," he croaked to Eir, who was once more far too close to his face, which made him frown deeply.

She huffed. "Be glad your eye is fine again after the ice splinter it received. I would outright refuse to treat you without knocking you out!"

Severus grinned at her. "Hello, dear Eir." His voice had improved, and he was well rested.

Eir grinned back at him. "Oh, Severus! It's so wonderful to see you back to yourself! Are you up to seeing Minerva or Harry Potter? They've both been waiting for weeks! You two gave us such a fright!"

He glanced at Hermione, curled up next to him with no sign of waking up, though looking perfectly content. "Let Minerva in for a minute or two, but keep Potter away until

Hermione wakes up. I doubt I can cope with him on my own." His hatred for the boy might have long gone, but on the other hand, he didn't want to face him alone.

Eir left, and Minerva entered. "Severus! I'm so relieved." She looked as if she was about to cry.

"These battles and attacks are getting old. We shall simply make do without them from now on," he muttered and was glad to see her smile.

"Indeed," she said. "Gods, we were so worried about you and Hermione! Nothing much seemed wrong with either of you besides a few scratches and your eye, which healed in no time, but you simply would not wake up for a month!"

He smirked. "We were kind of busy in the Green Land, you see..."

"I was hoping that was the case. Want to tell me?"

"Not yet. I'll need Hermione to fill in anything I may miss. But perhaps you would care to tell me what happened after the Dementors turned up over Godric's Hollow?"

Minerva chuckled. "No. I wasn't there, and it seems unfair not to let Potter relay his first-hand account to you. And don't you dare let him be all humble about his role. He saved your life, and Hermione's, too; there is no question about it. Eir healed the two of you and then brought you here because firstly, nobody knows this hideaway place of yours and secondly, she said the climate here would probably speed up your recovery. I suspect she's fallen in love with this place." Minerva smiled.

"I'm not surprised," Hermione said sleepily. "Besides, she likes Heimdal."

Severus pulled her closer to him and lifted her chin up with one hand. "Welcome back." He was rewarded with a smile and widening eyes.

"It's... We really were there, weren't we?" she asked.

"Yes. We'll have to compare notes when we're both more awake and not starving. I don't know about you, but I am."

"I'll get you some food," Minerva said, rising from the chair she'd occupied.

*

"What day is it?" Severus asked as he picked up a forkful of potato.

"It's Wednesday, the thirtieth of January," Eir said. "Sorry you missed your birthday. Happy Belated Birthday!"

He couldn't do more than grunt his thanks. His eyes met Hermione's. "Shall we let Potter in and find out what happened?" he asked.

Hermione smiled. "Yes. I'm rather keen on finding out."

Eir stood. "I will find him. He's become rather fond of roaming the hills while waiting for you to wake up."

Hermione and Severus ate in silence. "Ah, that was good," she said when she finally put her fork down. "Amazing what food can do. I already feel much stronger."

Severus chuckled as he put his cutlery on the plate. "I don't think we were exactly weak. It was rather a case of needing to be elsewhere, and the only way to achieve that was to have us...our bodies...asleep. I certainly feel very different now compared to when I woke up after Nagini bit me..."

The door opened again, and Harry Potter entered.

"Oh, Gods, you gave us such a fright, you two!" he uttered and instantly squirmed. "Sorry. Didn't mean to impose on you." If he was shocked to see one of his best friends in bed with his former professor, he didn't show it.

Hermione laughed. "Oh, Harry! It's good to see you as well! We're curious about what happened after we were knocked out, and Minerva refused to tell us. She said you are the one who should. Now, sit down and stop squirming!"

Harry sat down on the squishy chair someone had placed near the bed in Severus's bedroom. "What's the last thing you remember?"

"Your Patronus," Hermione and Severus said in unison.

"Right. I saw a raven Patronus and looked for its origin while gathering strength to cast my next one. I kind of knew the raven was yours, and I saw both of you dropping down at the same time, but a Frost Giant obscured my view, so I didn't know what happened. I cast the Patronus Charm a few more times before Luna and Mrs Malfoy arrived to help. Between the three of us, we thankfully made relatively short work of the Dementors. Mrs Malfoy must have been practising casting her Patronus for years; she had the least trouble.

"Anyway, when I knew she and Luna could cope with the few remaining Dementors, I ran over to you, but the Frost Giant had his head split...I suppose your last action was throwing that hammer at him, Hermione...and was half covering both of you. I couldn't move him with magic, so freeing you took me a while. In the end, Draco and Mr Malfoy came to help, and honestly, I was relieved to find both of you alive." He had talked himself out of breath now and remained silent for a few moments.

"By then, there were no Dementors left, and the Frost Giants were leaving as fast as they could, so I found my coin and alerted Eir. She healed most of your scratches right on the spot and then told me about this place. We brought you here, and well, now you're awake. Finally." He smiled at Hermione, then with less confidence at Severus.

"I don't even know what to say, Harry..." Hermione looked from him to Severus.

"Thank you" will certainly be a good start," Severus said and turned to Potter. "Thank you, Mr Potter...Harry...for saving our lives. I don't know how we'll ever be able to repay you, but I suspect that's a non-issue in any case."

"Well," Potter started, evidently nervous, "you could make a start by not seeing me as just my father's son. And yeah, my friends call me Harry. I suppose you could see me as a friend now that I saved your arse." He offered his hand, and Severus shook it.

"Fair enough, *Harry*. I learned long ago that you are rather different from your father in his youth; as much as I enjoyed disliking you during your years at Hogwarts, I never actually saw you bully anyone, and unlike your father, you never did differentiate between one underdog and another; you would have made a good follower of Odin's way of life."

Potter...he'd always be *Potter* in his mind...was fidgeting in his chair now. "Thanks. I think."

Hermione giggled. "He was serious, you know." She yawned.

"What, woman, you need sleep again? You've only been up a couple of hours," Severus muttered, but squeezed her hand under the quilt.

Potter seized the opportunity to escape. "I'm glad you're all right, both of you. I shouldn't keep you up any longer." Then he addressed Hermione. "The wizarding world needs a new Minister for Magic, did you know? You should think about it, Hermione. The DA will fully back you, as will the Malfoys." He grinned. "Right. See you around!"

Hermione stared at the door long after he'd left. "This is unreal..." she eventually managed.

"No. Not at all." Severus pulled her close, then grabbed his wand to ward the door. Now wasn't the time for any visitor. "You remember our meeting with Sif and Thor and what was said, don't you?"

She nodded, and he continued. "We'll find out soon enough, but my guess is that the wizarding world is now well aware the rumours of my being alive are true, so if you are absolutely opposed to the idea of becoming Minister, I will step in. I'll be able to get the DA and the Malfoys behind me, and the fact that we are together, which no doubt is by now also an open secret, will help attract other wizards and witches to the idea of me leading the nation. Believe me, I know how daunting the idea is, not only for you but for me as well.

"The fact is, though, that no matter who is officially the Minister, you will be the one who rules. I will back you in everything, you will never have to make a decision without hearing my opinion on it, no matter what, and whether you are the Minister or the Minister's partner, the people will look to you, Hermione. I saw you when we reached Godric's Hollow. I saw how you suddenly grew by several inches, I saw how you took in the entire situation within seconds, and I saw how you faced your destiny without even blinking. You *are* a true priestess. Why don't you just accept the role you agreed to take before entering this life?" His eyes held hers, and neither blinked nor looked away.

Without turning, she said, "I'm scared. *I know* that nearly my entire life, I have trained and studied for this, trained to reinsert the *human* into humanity. I'm not afraid of speaking in front of thousands of people. My lectures on Odinism and runes have always attracted large audiences, and if I can talk to a few hundred people, I can to thousands; it makes no difference. I'm not afraid of making decisions; I had to make decisions for Harry, Ron, and myself when we were on the run, and I was barely of age then." She looked lost. "Can you take me to the beach? I need to connect to the earth."

"Are you sure we're up to it?" he asked.

"No. But I think I'll burst if I stay in bed another minute. I have a need to soak my feet in ocean water. It will wash my fears away. I suspect it's merely a leftover from the days of greed. I'm scared of failing, of submitting to my ego, of disappointing the Gods I've pledged loyalty to."

Severus rose slowly out of bed and found he could stand upright without feeling dizzy. He picked some robes and transfigured one for her; then he found his two warmest cloaks and transfigured the softer one to fit her. Together they quietly walked out of the house, ignoring Minerva's and Eir's chatter from the kitchen.

"Do you mind if we fly?"

"With you? I'll even fly on a broom with you," she muttered.

"Brooms are *so* old fashioned, dear. Just hold on to my arm."

He took off with their arms interlinked. She'd never been a heavy weight, but in the air she was as light as a feather. When they landed softly on the deserted beach, she was shining with joy. "That was the best flight ever! Can we do that again soon?"

He chuckled. "Well, we do have to get back home. Unless you prefer to Apparate."

"No, no! We'll fly if you don't mind!"

"Never. I'll fly with you to the end of the world if you so desire."

Hermione laughed. "I may take you up on that offer." She sat down and took her slippers and socks off; in her hurry to get away, neither had bothered with shoes. She stepped into the water and turned to face the sun, stretching her arms out as if to embrace the ball of fire that was sitting low in the sky. "Beautiful, beautiful sun."

Severus sat down on the sand a few feet from her; he had no need to feel the no doubt ice-cold water and chose instead to observe. Her height was rising again as she stood there appreciating the sun, only this time it didn't stop at a mere few inches.

Her full form was regal. Taller than any giant he'd ever come across, yet entirely unimposing. Eventually, she lowered her arms and shrank back to her normal size.

"Thank you," Hermione said when she joined him on the ground and took his hand. "I feel more clear about it now. This trip has also strengthened me physically, it seems. How are you feeling?"

"Good," Severus said, surprised. He hadn't paid attention to himself, but now that she mentioned it, he noticed he felt stronger, too *Thank you, Gods.*

*

Hermione and Severus returned to England after warding his earthship with Eir as the Secret-Keeper. Severus was happy she'd chosen to spend her free time there; it did her good, and it did Heimdal good. Perhaps Heimdal would decide to not leave quite yet, now that the Gods had won in favour of humanity, with Eir on his side.

Minerva had already left for Hogwarts, and Potter had left to be with his family again. Much work was waiting for both: a new way of governing Hogwarts had to be found, for the Board of Governors had lost most of its members, and the Aurory had lost its head and deputy head. Severus had no doubt that both Minerva and Potter were up to sorting their troubles out in no time.

It was, for once, a mild February. There was the occasional frost, but nothing like in recent years. Hermione's front garden was full of snowdrops when they arrived.

"You know," she said upon entering the cottage, "we should, perhaps, consider extending the cottage and add an earthship structure to it. In the long term, we'll need a bit more space, I think."

"Hm... Yes. I like that idea." He wondered if he would miss his Mediterranean earthship. Nothing kept him from returning there at any time of course. But the thought of replicating it to extend Hermione's cottage sounded attractive. They might not be able to Secret-Keep her cottage if there was the Minister position, but nothing could stop them from Secret-Keeping an extension to the cottage...

The *Daily Prophet* was already full of articles about why Hermione Granger should become the next Minister for Magic; Severus had no doubt Sif had her hand in that. Thor, too, of course. Even Rita Skeeter's articles about Hermione were kind. That woman was a true turncoat. Even a realignment of the planet with the most benevolent beings of the universe didn't faze her.

Hermione chuckled when he shared his thoughts with her. "No. She hasn't turned good, never fear. She was given a taste of what the afterlife will be like if she does not make up for her past evils in this life; evil is not in her nature...she simply allowed herself to become a product of temptation."

2012

The winter solstice was approaching, and as he did every year, Severus spent the day before roaming the markets around Calella for the best olives and other nibbles, choosing wines and Cava, and tasting cheeses suitable to accompany the snacks. Eir and Heimdal would spend the solstice with him and Hermione, and a few days later, Minerva would arrive for the New Year celebrations. It was his favourite time of the year and the most peaceful.

All the shopping put away, Severus went outside to enjoy the last rays of the afternoon sun. Vör joined him with a rare display of affection; she settled on his knee and stared at him, hooting quietly every now and then. "What a long way we've come, don't you think, Vör?" He tickled the feathers of her neck, and she closed her eyes.

He thought back to the beginning of Hermione's term as Minister for Magic. When voices...mostly from the older generations...had grown louder about *heimproper*

lifestyle, she silenced them easily. "My sacred marriage is blessed by the Gods. What hypocrite would I be if I were to seek approval from mere humans?" No wizard or witch ever again dared questioning her status, and within a year, she'd ensured prosperity throughout the wizarding world. It was clear her reign would last many years to come; she was successfully nurturing this baby of a Golden Age into childhood and beyond.

No Muggle politician ever managed to reach beyond the odd wizard child to gain control of their world, and it didn't take long for the Muggle empires focussed on control to start crumbling. They weren't quite there yet, but the signs of the end of the Dark days were visible for anyone with eyes to see, and eventually, they, too, would understand that life was better when one served humanity instead of oneself.

Hermione appeared like a vision cast out by the fading sun. "Heilsa."

Severus bowed. "Heilsa." Now his true holiday could begin.

* * *

On the morning of New Year's Eve, Hermione said, "Let's go for a walk. Perhaps towards the hills?"

They wandered together towards the mountains, and Hermione occasionally stopped to take in the scent of some wild-growing rosemary or to watch a bird taking flight out of nowhere. As always, even the simplest activities were a joy when she was by his side.

They had reached a never-before-seen meadow now, its grasses and flowers already whispering about the warmer days ahead, crickets chirping as if spring was already in full gear.

"Is this the field beyond Good and Evil?" she asked, her voice a whisper.

A gift from the Gods, truly. Severus regarded the woman with him, stray strands of hair surrounding her head like a halo, her aura emitting power and, most of all, love. She was so much more than a priestess. "It is," he said softly. "It is indeed. Hermione."

¹ Icelandic, noun meaning health, verb meaning to greet. The term is widely used as both a greeting and parting amongst followers of Odin.

*Quote: Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows

**Quote: The Poetic Edda, Odin's Quest After the Runes, Verse 141

***Quote: The Poetic Edda, The Song of Spells, Verses 145, 146

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