

Charming the Scottish Garden

by MMADfan

A German Herbology master charms a Scottish garden. Will the gardener also charm a Scottish witch? Opens in Hogsmeade in early 1959. **Part of the "Resolving a Misunderstanding" universe series of stories. Can stand alone.**

Chapter One: The Gardener

Chapter 1 of 32

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Chapter One: The Gardener

Johannes flicked his wand, dusting the bread crumbs from the table, then with another flick, he deposited his plate and coffee cup in the sink. As he pushed back from the table, another wave of his wand started the hot water running and a soapy brush to cleaning his few breakfast dishes. He put the cheese and cream back in the cool cupboard by hand, then turned back to the sink to turn off the water and check the dishes for cleanliness and put them in the rack. He normally took the time to dry his dishes and put them away, but that morning, he was in a hurry. He had a new commission, and he did not want to be even one minute late.

He brushed his broad-brimmed hat, double-checked his bag, and then looked in the mirror. He had put on one of his better robes...deep green with even darker green embroidered satin trim...polished his boots, and tied back his long sandy hair with a ribbon that matched his robe. He had even considered whether to wear his gold medallion with his Mastery insignia on it before deciding that would be too ostentatious. Beneath his finer robe, although he often wore trousers for their practicality, that day he had chosen to wear a lightweight robe of pale moss green over which he could then don his heavy work apron once he got down to his task, but he had wanted to make a good impression upon arrival that first day...and not simply because this was a potentially very lucrative commission. The witch who had hired him was the grandmother of one of his friends...and of a former colleague, as well...and it was on the friend's recommendation that the witch had hired him.

Actually, when Johannes allowed himself to reflect upon it, he admitted to himself that it was not only the witch's relationship to Malcolm and Minerva that had prompted him to take extra care with his appearance. The witch herself was quite formidable, and Johannes had the sense that if she decided that you weren't up to scratch, you would be dismissed and never enter her awareness again. Beyond that, or perhaps because of that, Johannes felt himself drawn to the older woman. She was commanding, sharp-witted and equally sharp-tongued, and yet she had a wicked sense of humour, even about herself; she always managed to give the impression that there was something that she knew that you did not, but that if you fell within her good graces, she would share it with you. And all this in a package barely five feet tall.

Siofre Tyree had outlived two husbands, widowed the first time as a young witch with a toddler, and the second time less than two years before. Johannes had met Siofre for the first time shortly before her second husband, Herbert McKenna, had died, and had seen her only a few times since, but each time he had seen her, his admiration

for her had grown. Although she had some reserve and certainly showed no outward sentimentality, she was out-spoken, no wallflower, she, and she very clearly held deeply warm, tender feelings for her family, though she was not especially demonstrative. Her grandson, Malcolm, had made no secret of the fact that his grandmother had been his primary sparring partner when he had been preparing for his sporting duel with Albus Dumbledore, and despite her age, her apparently leisurely life, and her gender, Johannes had the sense that she could probably still out-duel most wizards from any walk-of-life. But then again, from what Minerva had told him of the Tyree witches, that exact impression might be one of her greatest assets in any face-off.

Johannes straightened his robes. Still, he would not underestimate Siofre Tyree, not in any respect. Besides, when he was absolutely honest with himself, he hoped that Siofre Tyree might find him to be more than just a competent, agreeable master Herbologist and magical garden architect. He thought that Siofre was the most attractive witch he had met in years, and he had a wistful hope that she might find him at least worthy of a second glance. It seemed to him that Siofre's husbands had probably been very lucky wizards, indeed. Perhaps they might develop a friendship in addition to their business relationship, and perhaps he might be able to offer her some companionship.

Siofre did not live alone, having moved back to her childhood home after Herbert McKenna died, where her widowed sister-in-law, Lydia Prince Tyree, still lived following the death of Siofre's younger brother, Murdoch, a few years previously. The two witches had apparently always had a congenial relationship, and the arrangement suited them both well. The property was in the Highlands, a part that could be called desolate, protected from the view of Muggles by strong wards, and even with fairly strong wards protecting it from uninvited wizarding visitors.

The Tyree clan had always been independent and even somewhat secretive, particularly those who still lived on the wizarding island of Tíree Beag, an independent island in the Hebrides with only loose ties to mainstream British wizarding society and only a very nominal allegiance to the British wizarding ministry, which had long ago given up trying to enforce British wizarding law on the island. Siofre had spent much of her youth on that island, and it had made its imprint on her. If a witch could be both wild and respectable, Siofre Tyree managed that, and Johannes found the combination intriguing, even enchanting.

Johannes smoothed down the lapels of his over-robe one more time, picked up his bag, and stepped out the door of the Bog End flat he'd rented in Hogsmeade. It was perfectly suited for his temporary residence until he came to a final decision about what he was going to do in the long term. He had left his Hogwarts teaching position several months before, and after having decided not to return to Germany right away, he was still exploring his other options. In the meantime, he had taken several commissions redesigning wizarding gardens or creating new installations, but none as large as the Tyree commission could potentially become. He had been hired to revitalise the herb gardens, but Siofre had asked him to make recommendations of other improvements the gardens and grounds could use, including the wooded areas. His Dendromancy studies had been brief and many decades before, but he had spent the last three days reviewing tree magic and orchard management, and he planned on visiting a friend at the Pertwee Project soon who was an expert in wizarding forestry. By the time he had finished revitalising the herb gardens, he hoped to have a comprehensive plan for the gardens and grounds, one that would impress Siofre and her sister-in-law and win him an extended commission. An extended commission would also allow him the opportunity to offer his friendship to Siofre. And perhaps . . . perhaps he might discover what he should do with the rest of his life.

"So, what's he like, this gardener?" Lydia asked her sister-in-law over breakfast.

"He is not a gardener." Siofre shrugged. "I suppose he is, in a sense, but he is an Herbology master. According to Malcolm, he also did an apprenticeship in Charms, but never did the mastery exams, and one of his specialities is Charmed microclimates. I believe that he is also attaining a reputation for his new hybrids, particularly ones with healing properties. Egeria was impressed by him, at any rate, as was Murdoch."

"But what is he *like*, Siofre? He'll be spending a lot of time at the manor, after all."

Siofre frowned. "I do wish you would cease using that term. It makes us sound like some English purebloods." She shook her head, lifting her lip in distaste. "As for this man, he is a foreigner, but he's not English. He is German, as you know. A friend of Dumbledore's...it was he who brought him to Hogwarts after his family had been murdered by that maniac some years ago. Seems intelligent enough, well-mannered. Has a sense of humour. I believe him to be honest, if that is a concern of yours."

"Oh, the elves would sort him out fast enough if he weren't," Lydia said with a smirk, her black eyes sparkling. "Remember the wizard who was supposed to be working on the roof? And then after the house-elves were through with him, you got in your own spell to give him a final lesson in respect...I do wish you'd teach me some of those spells, sister."

"If you *were* my sister, I would. But they are Tyree spells. It would take more than a few decades of marriage to make a Tyree of you, though you were my brother's little English princess for at least that long," Siofre said, smirking herself.

Lydia took no offence at the seemingly harsh words, but laughed. "I think you can't teach them, *sister*, because they aren't spells at all. They're just the nastier side of the Tyree nature directing itself upon poor hapless wizards who are unfortunate enough to run afoul of a Tyree witch."

Siofre chuckled to herself. "Aye, you may be right about that. As to Magister Birnbaum, I doubt he will encounter any such problems. He's not a fool, whatever else he may be, and I do not believe that he is dishonest, either."

"And is he good-looking?"

Siofre considered the question for a moment. "He is well-built, strong and straight-backed. Blond. Light-coloured eyes, though I didn't note the colour. Decent chin and forehead. Could not call him a homely man." Her eyes sparkled. "Aye, he's a bonny one, Lydia."

"Nice to have a good-looking, strong wizard about the place," Lydia said with a smile. She took a sip of tea. "Do you think he'd mind doing a few odd jobs, aside from the gardening? The house-elves have had no luck at all with the pipes in my wing of the house. They still make the worse noises, you'd think we had a ghoull..."

"Lydia, hen, the man is *not* a handyman. He is not a gardener. He is an Herbologist. A Hogwarts teacher. Magister Birnbaum, or Professor, as you prefer. But use one of his titles if you must remind yourself that he is not a wizard-of-general-work! It would be best, anyway, not to encourage familiarity with . . . the gardener."

The two witches laughed and finished their morning tea.

To be continued . . .

Author's Note: This story is a kind of mini-sequel to *Resolving a Misunderstanding*, and something that I promised a couple of readers quite a long time ago. It focuses on some of the characters from *Resolving a Misunderstanding*, primarily Siofre Tyree and Johannes Birnbaum. Siofre is Minerva's grandmother and Johannes Birnbaum was the Herbology teacher at the time that Minerva began teaching at Hogwarts, but he left at the end of June 1958.

Two of the other characters mentioned were Egeria and Murdoch. Egeria is Minerva's mother (in the *Resolving a Misunderstanding* universe fics), and a Healer midwife. Murdoch, one of Minerva's brothers, is a Potions master and has an apothecary in Edinburgh. Malcolm is Minerva's oldest brother, and he's a curse-breaker, among other things. Gareth McGonagall, Snape's friend in *A Long Vernal Season*, is Malcolm's son.

Albus and Minerva will be making appearances in this little fic, as will a few of the other characters who were in other early RaMverse fics. There is also a tie-in to the Snape-centric fic, *A Long Vernal Season*. I hope you enjoy it!

If you would like to learn more, or refresh your memory, about the RaMverse characters, drop by my WordPress blog and click the link to the "Compendium: Who, When, Where?" There are links to a number of RaMverse character guides there. The link to my blog is available on my TPP author's page.

Chapter Two: The Garden in the Morning

Chapter 2 of 32

Johannes begins his work, and he and Siofre speak of the garden plans and other matters.

Chapter features Johannes, Siofre, and Lydia.



Chapter Two: The Garden in the Morning

Johannes stood from his crouch beside the bed of culinary herbs he had been cleaning up. This was only his second day on the job, and he was doing a lot of very basic work on the kitchen gardens. Madam Tyree had assigned two of her house-elves to help him, but until he had finished sorting out what he wanted done, he had told them to wait until he called for them. He had originally planned to hire a witch or wizard or two to help him...there were a few gardeners whom he worked with regularly...but Madam Tyree and her sister-in-law said they preferred not to have strangers working on the grounds unless it was absolutely necessary.

Johannes wiped his hands on his heavy apron before drawing his wand from its Charmed loop and casting a spell to get rid of the dead plants and other debris he had cleared that morning. Some might have used their wands to do the clearing, but Johannes felt that he got a better sense of the plants and the soil when he did most of it by hand, and he also felt that, regardless of what the wand-wavers might claim, he could be more selective when actually getting down on his knees and weeding and grooming the beds. He found it hardly any faster using his wand, either, and he preferred expending his magic on more sophisticated tasks. Besides, it was satisfying to smell the earth and to feel it between his fingers as he did the work, just casting occasional gloving charms on his hands when he needed to protect them.

He looked over the plots he had cleared, and nodded to himself. The herb garden looked better now, and he could see its original bones, but he thought that the layout could be both more aesthetically appealing and more useful. It was early spring, and although it was too early and too cold to plant a Muggle-style herb garden, with some judiciously applied light microclimate charms, he could plant some new annuals, and with some care, he could have the house-elves help him to move the perennials around.

Johannes turned to the stone table he had Transfigured from a rock earlier that morning, and unrolled the large parchments on it. He moved around so that he could both see the current herb garden and look down at the new plan for the garden that he had carefully drawn on the topmost parchment. After he'd cleared the primary portion of the garden the day before, he had sketched the current layout of the garden, and then that night at his kitchen table, he had drafted three new variations. The one he liked best, the one that he was looking at, changed the layout of the paths and included a few new features, including some raised beds of useful flowering plants. This was the version he planned to recommend to Madam Tyree, but he wanted to do so in the context of an overall plan for the gardens, and he wanted to be able to present the plan for the gardens in conjunction with a plan for the overall grounds. First, though, he had to have a clearer picture of those grounds, and of any existing plans and maps.

The previous day, Madam Tyree had told him that in the library, there were old plans for the house and grounds that he could consult. Johannes drew out his watch and snapped it open. Almost nine. Hopefully a decent enough hour to go up to the house. He had no idea what the witches' daily habits were like, but certainly a house-elf would be able to let him into the library.

Johannes took off his long work apron, quickly cast a few charms to clean up, and slipped on his loose burnt-umber-coloured over-robe. He left his broad-brimmed hat on the table with the work apron and headed up to the house, going to the backdoor off the large kitchen pantry.

He knocked, and a lilac-coloured house-elf wrapped in pink opened the door to him.

"Good morning, Professor!" the elf greeted cheerfully. "You be needing your breakfast?"

"No, thank you," Johannes replied. He heard voices and laughter coming from beyond the kitchen. "Is your mistress available?"

"Madam Siofre or Madam Lydia?"

Johannes hesitated, then said, "Madam Siofre, although if she is unavailable..."

"Please, if you comes through the kitchen, Madam Siofre is in the morning room. I let her know you wants to see her." The house-elf nodded and Disapparated, leaving Johannes to find his way. Although he had cast a cleaning charm on his clothes and hands, he wiped his boots on the coconut fibre mat before stepping into the pantry.

Following the sound of the voices, Johannes walked through the pantry, pushed open the swinging door into the kitchen, then looked around. There were four doors, two on the level and two that each had a few steps leading up to them. Johannes took the steps up to the door to his left, knocked lightly, then opened it to find himself in a bright, cheerful room painted pale blue above a white chair rail, with stencilled designs running along the wall near the ceiling, and large windows that looked out onto the herb gardens where he had just been working.

Siofre was smiling down at two very tiny house-elves who were standing beside her chair. The tartan-clad witch looked up at Johannes and nodded. "Good morning, Professor."

"Good morning, Madam Tyree."

"I was just having my midmorning tea; would you care to join me?"

"Thank you, I would." With a slight hesitation, Johannes chose a chair to Siofre's left, facing the largest bank of windows, but not directly beside her, where the little elves were standing.

"Professor, this is Kilbeena and her brother, Duster. I told these wee bairns that they might watch you work today after their mother has finished their lessons, but they must not be batherin' you, or they will have to stay inside. An you could find some little tasks for them, as well, it would be a kindness...ones not requiring very much magic."

The two tiny elves looked up at Johannes hopefully.

"That would be fine," Johannes said. He'd never worked with house-elf children before, and had never even seen one the entire time he had taught at Hogwarts.

The two elves bounced on their toes and smiled happily.

"Off with you now," Siofre said. "Tell your mammie I said you could play in the gardens with the magister later."

The two house-elves joined hands and scampered off to the kitchen, giggling excitedly and whispering nonsense words to each other. At least, Johannes thought it was nonsense.

"You would like something to eat, as well," Siofre said. "You have been working for a while."

"Do not trouble yourself," Johannes began.

"No trouble. Sorrel!"

The pink-clad house-elf who had answered the door stepped out of the corner. "Yes, ma'am?"

"Fetch something for Professor Birnbaum. Bannocks and cabbock...unless you'd prefer something else?" Siofre asked, looking over at Johannes.

"That would be fine, thank you." He hadn't the faintest idea what cabbock was, but he'd had bannocks before. He found they varied a lot in palatability, but they were filling.

When Sorrel had vanished, Siofre twitched her wand and Summoned a cup and saucer from the sideboard. "Milk and sugar?"

"Milk only, please."

Siofre handed him his cup. "You have accomplished much this morning."

"There is still a good deal to do, and I would like to survey the other gardens today," Johannes replied. "You also said that there were cold frames?"

"Aye, and the wee ones know where they are. They will feel useful if they can show you where they are," Siofre said. "The cold frames are what is remaining of a greenhouse that was here when I was a lass. My mother and grandmother were keen gardeners, but my brother and his wife were less so, and they removed the greenhouse. They did keep the cold frames and used them for hardening off vegetable seedlings for later transplanting into the gardens."

"Where did they start them? In the cold frames themselves?" Johannes asked. If they charmed the cold frames, they would do for starting the seeds.

"Nay, the conservatory, which you have not yet seen. Tastle and Mynok, whom you met yesterday, share the gardening duties. Tastle is in charge of the conservatory, and his brother Mynok has taken care of the grounds. They are both getting on in years, and I think that Fandenz, Gweller, and Multry do most of the actual work, but Tastle and Mynok will show you around when you are ready."

"I would appreciate to hear your views, however," Johannes said. He had hoped to spend some time with Siofre, partly in order to determine what kinds of garden plans would please her and partly just to get to know her.

"You will hear my views, I assure you of that," Siofre said with a little cackle. "You will likely grow tired of hearing my views, if the experience of others is any indicator!"

Johannes smiled slightly. "I came into the house to see the plans you spoke of yesterday, the original plans of the house and grounds. I would like to see those before I tour the grounds myself."

"I'll show them to you, then, after you have eaten."

As if that were a signal, Sorrel popped into the room with a tray of bannocks, butter, and soft white cheese.

"You like bannocks, lad?" Siofre asked after the house-elf had left.

"They are an interesting variation from my usual fare," Johannes said diplomatically.

Siofre chuckled at that. "If you'd prefer something else, you only need say. We may have a few baps left from supper."

Johannes took a wedge of the flatbread and cut off a bit of cheese, shaking his head. "These are fine, I am sure." He hadn't eaten since half past six, so even if the bannocks were hard and dry, washed down with some tea, they would tide him over until lunch. He bit into the bannock and chewed; his eyebrows rose and he nodded appreciatively. "These are good. They are not oaten, though, are they?"

"Beremeal...from Tiree Beag. My cousin's farm there."

"Bere? That is a barley, or?"

"Aye, like barley. Multry uses a lot of butter in her bannocks," Siofre added with a slight grin as Johannes took a second piece and topped it with some of the cheese. "We will have sweet bannocks for tea...she loads them with dried fruit, and they are never the same twice."

"Scones, then?"

"Aye...and some would call these scones, too," Siofre said, gesturing toward the rapidly disappearing bannocks.

The two chatted for a bit about the grounds and the way Siofre remembered them being during her childhood, then the main door to the morning room opened and Lydia stepped in.

"Good morning," Lydia said brightly. As the other two nodded their greetings, she called for Sorrel, who was there in a heartbeat.

"Good morning, Madam Lydia!" Sorrel said cheerfully. "Usual breakfast?"

"Yes, please, Sorrel, but coffee this morning, I think. Clear out my cobwebs!" she replied.

Johannes almost requested a cup of coffee, as well, but then he thought that Siofre might take it amiss...this wasn't a restaurant, after all...and the tea really was quite good, strong, brisk, and slightly tannic in a pleasant way . . . much like Siofre. No, he would not ask for coffee that day.

"Bring a cup for our guest, as well, Sorrel," Siofre said. Hazel eyes sparkling, she looked over at Johannes...to see his reaction, not to seek his approval.

His eyes crinkled and he nodded slightly at her. He liked this witch. As Sorrel Disapparated and Siofre quirked him a brief smile in return, the corners of Johannes's mouth turned up. He liked this witch very much.

"My English sister-in-law is a late riser, sad to say," Siofre said, breaking off a small corner of a bannock wedge and spreading butter on it.

"It's hard to get up before the sun, no matter how late that may be," Lydia grumbled, pulling out the chair between the two and sitting down with a thump.

"After eighty-five years, you should be used to it," Siofre countered. She glanced at the clock on the wall. "And the sun's long been up; Professor Birnbaum arrived with it."

Lydia shrugged and smiled sheepishly. "I was up too late reading my new novel. I just had to finish it."

A pot of coffee, pitcher of cream, and two coffee cups and saucers appeared on the table. Johannes reached for the pot and poured Lydia a cup of coffee.

She smiled at the wizard and poured cream into her cup before handing the pitcher to him. "What are your plans for the day, Professor?"

"He has already cleared the kailyard of weeds and dead plants while you were still abed," Siofre said. "After he has his coffee, I'll show him the library and where to find the old plans for the grounds."

"Do you know anything about pipes?" Lydia asked.

"Pipes? Tobacco pipes?" Johannes asked, confused. "Irrigation pipes?" he guessed again as Lydia shook her head and took a sip of coffee. "Gutters?"

"Lydia, hen, we are not batherin' the magister with these household troubles," Siofre admonished.

"What pipes?" Johannes asked again.

"We will have young Malcolm look at them," Siofre said.

Lydia's breakfast of two soft-cooked eggs, toast, and bacon arrived in front of her. "I just thought that he might know what was wrong." Lydia neatly removed the top from her first egg and turned to Johannes. "The pipes in my wing of the house make a dreadful noise. I think they may be cursed." Seeing Siofre's sceptical brow, Lydia added, "They *sound* cursed. Moaning, whining, whistling, gurgling...and at all times of day, even in the middle of the night."

Johannes shook his head. "Do you have a ghoul?" he suggested.

"No. At least, the house-elves say we don't have a ghoul," Lydia said, "and I think they would know."

Johannes shrugged. "I have some small knowledge of drainage and irrigation pipes, but that is all. I am sorry."

"The man is here to work on the gardens," Siofre said to Lydia. "We will not be wasting his precious time with your skrechin pipes."

After Johannes finished his coffee, Siofre led him out into the main part of the house, pointing out the hallway that led to the conservatory. "The music room is just before the conservatory. We use those rooms, the dining room, and the sitting room quite frequently, but if you take a wrong turn, you may end in a part of the house that we do not often use." She gestured off to their right as they started up the stairs to the first floor. "There is a great hall that my father divided into a billiard room, a lounge, and a ballroom. He never played billiards, and we only ever used the ballroom and lounge a few times a year when we would have parties. Murdoch and Lydia came to use them a bit more, but those days of grand ceilidhs are lang syne gone. Lydia and I have had few family gatherings since I returned here to live, but we might change that. I like a good ceilidh. We do maintain one long-standing tradition in our family. Two, three times a year, we hold bonfire nights for family and friends. I would like you to look at the spot where we currently have the bonfires and think about whether there might not be a better location for them...and whether the landscaping around the area might be more . . . interesting. We'll be doing a Beltane fire, so if you have ideas that we might implement before then, I want to hear them."

Siofre waved her wand as they entered the library, bringing up some of the lamps and drawing the curtains back from the long windows on the far wall. The room was huge, with bookcases both along the walls and in banks perpendicular to them; a balcony ran around the room, with three wrought iron spiral staircases leading up to it and more bookcases. There were, however, several discrete areas of the room furnished with comfortable chairs, couches, tables, and lamps.

"My brother expanded the library a few decades ago by breaking through the ceiling and converting a few of the bedrooms," Siofre explained, gesturing toward the upper level. "We still haven't filled all of the shelves up there, even with the books I brought with me. The plans you're seeking are in that cabinet there and in those folios on that shelf. You may come up here and consult them whenever you need to."

"Thank you, Madam Tyree," Johannes said. He looked around himself. "It is an impressive library."

"We are fortunate." She went to a window and looked out across the grounds. "It is too big for just the two of us, but the children all have their own places...Maisie stayed on in our old house when I moved back here. Her father's house. Lydia's son and daughter-in-law live down in Silloth-on-Solway in Cumberland." She sighed and shook her head. "Tyrees in England. And raising their son Liam there. Perhaps one day they will move back here." She looked up at Johannes and brightened some. "They visit often, though, and young Liam loves this house and these hills. I had hopes that when Malcolm finally returned to settle down, he would come here, but he wishes to be in Hogsmeade within sight of Hogwarts and his witch. We have invited Morgan and Fiona to join us, though, and with four wee bairns, I think they are now inclined to accept."

Johannes smiled. "Yes, Minerva calls them 'the litter.'"

Siofre laughed. "Aye! And I believe that having quadruplets has fulfilled Fiona's wish for motherhood and there will be no more little ones joining them. It would be good to have children here again, though."

"It is a beautiful place," Johannes said, looking out over the grounds.

"And you can make it no more beautiful than it is?" Siofre asked.

"I would not presume," Johannes said, "but I can help you to showcase its beauty, perhaps add to it."

Siofre nodded. "Then I should let you get to work. The day is awasting!"

Johannes was opening the cabinet to look for the earliest plans when Siofre stopped at the door and turned.

"Lunch at noon, Professor."

Johannes turned and looked back at her, smiling. He nodded. "Danke sehr. Thank you, Madam Tyree."

"And . . . dinner is at six, if you would care to stay. You could tell me, us, about your recommendations."

"I would like that, but I do not know whether my recommendations will be complete yet."

"Your impressions, then."

He nodded. "My impressions." He could do that, if he were not entirely overwhelmed by his impression of his hostess. "Yes. Thank you, Madam Tyree."

She smiled. "Good. Don't forget the wee ones will be helping you in the gardens later. Call for Multry, their mother, if they become a nuisance."

Siofre left the library, and Johannes was smiling as he pulled a sheaf of parchments from the cabinet. He would need to impress this witch. Time to get to work.

Chapter Three: The Grandson

Chapter 3 of 32

Malcolm invites Johannes to his place for lunch.

Chapter features Malcolm McGonagall and Johannes Birnbaum.



Chapter Three: The Grandson

"She liked your plans? That's great, mate!" Malcolm exclaimed. He poured two glasses of beer for them before sitting down on the other end of the couch from Johannes. "And she's going to hire you to do the work, I hope!"

"Yes. As it is such a large commission, I have agreed to limit the other work I do and not take any new commissions. I will continue to make occasional visits to a few gardens that I have worked on in the past and perform maintenance, but I will devote most of my time to the Tyree estate. In fact, Madam Siofre has suggested that I stay there during the week."

"Really? You must have made quite an impression on Grandmother and Aunt Lydia. They don't normally have guests. Family, of course, and sometimes friends, but never strangers, and it usually takes years of acquaintance before you go from 'stranger' to 'friend,' not just a week."

Johannes smiled. "Your grandmother is a remarkable woman, Malcolm. I hope that I have won her trust."

"You must have, or she wouldn't have invited you to stay. Will you be in the lodge, then? It's been empty for years. It probably needs a lot of work to get it livable, but the house-elves..."

"No, I'll be in the main house. She is giving me a suite of rooms on the second floor. They are near the second level of the library."

"Huh. Wouldn't have guessed that." Malcolm shrugged. "So how's the work going?"

"Very well. Fandenz and Gweller have been great help, and I have been able to give them many of the basic tasks that need to be done before I can start the new planting. We are laying down new paths now, too, and I hope to have the gardens closest to the house completed soon. I want to create a special play garden for the quads. They are young yet, but I want a good place for them to play, and someplace where they can crawl around now and put things into their mouths without worry, and that I can expand for them as they begin to walk, run, and climb." He grinned. "I thought a tree house, when they're old enough. And they can help with it, make it their own special place."

"You certainly do have long-term plans to work there," Malcolm said with a laugh. "The quads aren't even a year old yet."

Johannes shrugged. "I can return at intervals, if necessary. The grounds will require maintenance. The house-elves can do much of it, of course, but this is a long-term project, in any case. We are considering putting in a greenhouse. There is only so much that one can do with the conservatory and cold frames, even with charms on the cold frames."

"Sounds like Grandmother Siofre is quite ambitious, then." Malcolm grinned. "She'll have her own resident Herbologist-cum-garden-architect. But won't a commitment like this interfere with your own plans? You'll hardly be able to establish yourself if you spend all of your time as the Tyree gardener. I thought you were going to look for some land this spring, start your own greenhouse, build up a business."

"Madam Siofre has given me a generous retainer. When I find the right piece of land, I will be able to buy it."

"You won't be able to work on your own land and in your own greenhouse if you're spending every day working someone else's, though," Malcolm pointed out.

Johannes shook his head. "This is a challenge, it is a beautiful place, and if she is pleased with my work, Madam Siofre will provide me a reference. I have a large budget for the gardens there, more than I could spend on my own place now once I pay for the land itself. In the meantime, perhaps I could work something out with Madam Siofre so that I could have a small garden of my own there, one for growing herbs that I could sell to apothecaries."

"But what about the rest of your life? Your social life? Locked up there all day, every day, won't you get bored?"

"I am hardly an indentured servant, Malcolm." He smiled and gestured, both palms open. "I am here visiting you today, for example."

"I would think that after living where you worked for so many years at Hogwarts, you'd be happy to be able to have your own life for a change, some freedom."

"It's different from Hogwarts, obviously. It is a private residence and the work is my own to schedule. And although Morgan and Fiona will be moving in with the quads next month...or possibly taking the old lodge...four 'wee bairns,' as your grandmother calls them, is hardly the same as a school full of children."

"But what about your social life...your *social* life," Malcolm said. "Friends . . . maybe a lover, if we can find you the right witch. You can hardly have your social life there, invite anyone home for a drink."

"As I said, I am not required to be there. I will keep my apartment in Hogsmeade, visit friends, and as for a lover . . ." He shook his head. "I am happy as things are."

Malcolm shrugged and shook his head. "Living with two old witches, though . . . I love them, and if it weren't for Trudie working at Hogwarts, I probably would have moved back there instead of buying this place, but they're family. My family, that is, not yours. I can't imagine living in someone else's house with a couple other witches I wasn't related to." He grinned quickly and winked. "Well, I *can*, but they'd be younger, and it wouldn't be for work, if you know what I mean! And they'd be more than a little bit younger. Did I ever tell you about Victoria and Constance? English witches living in Rome? No? I'll have to sometime. But that was only for a few weeks. It sounds as though you're thinking in terms of months."

"Ja, but these are gardens, plants, with seasons and growing periods. It is not . . . plumbing," Johannes said with a smile.

Malcolm laughed. "Aye, Grandmother Siofre told me that Aunt Lydia tried to sweet-talk you into looking into her skrechin pipes. I've had a couple big jobs down in the Lake District, but I'll be able to pop up and take a look at the pipes in her wing of the house by the end of the week. We can have a good chin-wag then, and you can tell me if you regret taking on such a massive commission yet. I had thought it would be a good money-maker for you if you were able to win over Grandmother Siofre, but I had no idea that it would be so all-consuming."

"That is not a bad thing, Malcolm. This winter has been a lean one, and even last summer, I was not as busy as I would have preferred."

"As long as you're happy. But if I were you, I'd ask for the lodge and have Morgan, Fiona, and the kiddies move into the main house."

Johannes shrugged one shoulder. "It is as Madam Siofre wishes. So, you invited me for lunch...is there anything other than this? It is very good beer, do not misunderstand, but now I need something more solid."

Malcolm grinned. "Glad you like the beer. Brewed it myself. I thought it turned out well. Yes, there's lunch. It's cassoulet, salad, and bread, all made by yours truly," he said, standing. "Mother tried to send me a house-elf, Orents, but not only was I afraid that Fwisky, his mum, would miss him too much, but I kept forgetting he was here. He made himself quite useful without any direction from me, but I am used to being on my own. So now he comes once a week to do some cleaning, checks up on me for Mother."

As they sat down in the dining room for lunch, another pitcher of beer on the table along side the white bean stew, bread, and salad, Johannes asked, "How is Gertrude?"

"She's great," Malcolm replied, serving some cassoulet to his guest. "Great, great, great. She's coming down for dinner tonight and staying through tomorrow."

"That is good to hear. Your grandmother mentioned to me that she had hoped you would move to the Tyree place when you settled down. I think she was disappointed that you did not."

"Did she say that?" Malcolm asked, breaking off a piece of bread and dipping it in his cassoulet.

"She did not say that she was disappointed. But she said it had been her hope. I presume that she was disappointed when you did not."

Malcolm nodded and swallowed his bread. "I suppose. She did invite me to come live there after my year of teaching was over. I'd told her that I wasn't travelling again right away and wanted to settle down, and so she invited me to join them at the Tyree home, but she didn't say anything more after I told her that I wanted a place in Hogsmeade that would be easy for Gertrude to visit . . . and where I could see the school and know she was there. Not that I told Grandmother that." He gave a quick grin. "Sounds pretty silly when I say it out loud."

"It is romantic," Johannes said. "It is good that Gertrude has a man with some romance in his heart. I was unsure when I first met you, and not simply because of any personal loss on my part. You seemed . . . what is the expression . . . devil-may-care. To see Gertrude taken with you . . . it was surprising . . . and then you moved very quickly. I worried about her."

"Oh, I have had my moments of frivolousness, I admit that, but I haven't been a complete cad in a long, long time. And even then, I was merely young and clueless; I woke up and changed my ways. Not completely, of course. Still liked the lassies." He smiled, his eyes sparkling.

"Like the English girls in Rome?" Johannes said with a raised eyebrow.

"Mmm . . . lovely witches, they were, too. But we were very clear that we were all just having a bit of fun. I'm sure they have some very pleasant memories." He winked and took another swallow of beer.

"You seem to have some, too," Johannes said.

Malcolm shrugged slightly. "I suppose I do, but I don't think of them. I think of my Trudie and of making her happy," he said softly.

"And you are staying the course with her. I see that. And I do not feel any need to worry about her any longer."

Malcolm nodded. "Look, I don't want to over-talk this, but I am glad to hear that. I know it was hard for you. You and Tru were very close friends. I'm sure it wasn't easy for you."

"It was not myself that was a concern of mine. It was she. She seems strong, and she is, but . . ."

"I know. Aye, I know," Malcolm said softly. Gertrude had had too much pain in her life and carried it with her. He looked over at his companion, his vibrant hazel eyes meeting dreamy grey ones. "And you know, too. It was something that you shared . . ." He tore his gaze away and poured himself more beer.

"She seems happy now, though?" Johannes asked.

Malcolm nodded. "I think she does." His eyes lit up, remembering her last visit to him. "Aye, she is happy. And I am happy, too."

"I will have another glass of that beer now," Johannes said "Tell me about those jobs in the Lake District."

An hour later, Johannes stretched as he stood, and said, "Thank you for the lunch. It was very good."

"Good to see you. I'm glad you could come. Tell Lydia I'll be up to see if I can help with her pipes, Thursday, probably. Will you be moved in by then?"

"Ja, on Monday I am moving in."

"I'll stay the night, then, and we two can have a bit of a party and you can have a relief from the two Tyree witches," Malcolm said, leading Johannes down the hall.

Johannes smiled. "Madam Siofre is forever teasing Madam Lydia that she is only a Tyree in name. And I do not believe I need relief from them, but it would be pleasant to spend an evening together...they could join us, if they liked."

"And I am going to make it my mission to keep your social life vital," Malcolm said, clapping the other wizard on the shoulder. "And to start that off, we are going on a date next Saturday."

Johannes stopped and looked at Malcolm, one eyebrow raised quizzically. "Really?"

"Not just the two of us, of course...though I've always liked long blond hair!" Malcolm teased. "No, I am going to find you a date, and you, Gertrude, I, and your date...yet to be determined...will go for a night on the town. Not here, though. Diagon Alley, maybe. I'll think of something. And I'll find a good date for you. No worries there, mate. A witch with a good brain in her head."

"I really don't think so," Johannes began.

"Don't worry, nothing heavy, just a fun night out."

"I don't need a date," Johannes started again.

"Don't think of it as a date, then. Just going out with a couple of old friends and one new one. And keep an open mind about that new one," Malcolm said. "You never know what can come of a new friendship, after all!"

"We can talk on Thursday. I will give your message to Madam Lydia. Thank you for lunch, Malcolm. Have fun on your jobs this week."

After the door had closed behind Johannes, Malcolm nodded and said to himself, "Aye, I'll find you a witch, my friend. You just leave it to me."

Chapter Four: The Witches Tyree

Chapter 4 of 32

A rainy day in the Highlands, Lydia goes out, and Siofre and Johannes stay in.

Chapter features Johannes, Siofre, and Lydia.



Chapter Four: The Witches Tyree

"Thank you so much for fixing the catch on my trunk, Professor," Lydia said with a little laugh. "You truly came to my rescue! I am so glad that I will have my hat for this afternoon!"

Johannes inclined his head. "It was my pleasure, Madam Lydia."

Siofre raised an eyebrow and took a sip of tea.

"I don't know *how* I could have forgotten how that charm worked!" Lydia continued as she poured herself a cup of tea.

"I don't either," Siofre said drily, "as you have had that same trunk for the past eighty years."

"I only use it occasionally, though, and the last time was several months ago." She laughed. "I guess I'm getting a bit forgetful."

"Will you have more coffee, Professor?" Siofre asked. "I can call Multry."

"No, thank you. I wish to work this morning before it rains," Johannes replied, glancing out the morning room windows at the dark grey sky. "Your daughter's forecast predicted rain for most of the day."

Siofre nodded in acknowledgement and turned back to her morning edition of the *Dublin Prophet*, where Maisie's "Words for the Weatherwise" had predicted storms for the islands and the Highlands, lasting all day and moving only slowly eastward.

"I hope the storm doesn't harm your plants!" Lydia exclaimed.

Johannes shook his head. "There will be little damage, I am sure. Good morning, meine Damen."

When he had left, Siofre let out a snort and lowered her newspaper, looking over it at her sister-in-law. *"I don't know how I could have forgotten how that charm worked!"* Siofre said with an exaggerated English drawl and high-pitched giggle. "Honestly, Lydia, whatever are you thinking?"

"I tried and tried to open the trunk last night, and I really do want to wear that hat to tea with Gwyn and Philomena. I couldn't wait for Malcolm to come tomorrow and fix it."

"I am sure that one of the elves could have retrieved your hat for you. Or I could have dealt with the clasp." Siofre pointed her right index finger, let out a little whishing sound from between her teeth, and a small spark glittered at the tip of her finger. "You wouldn't have had any more bather with it."

Lydia laughed. "Yes, and it would probably never close properly again, either! You'd do that just to irritate me, I'm sure. He was quite happy to help."

Siofre shrugged one shoulder and folded her paper. "But inviting the magister into your bedroom to open your trunk...really, Lydia! Do have some discretion, please!" Her burr was more pronounced as her annoyance with her sister-in-law increased.

"Professor Birnbaum is a gentleman," Lydia said. Her eyes sparkled and she added, "And a very 'bonny' one, just as you promised!"

"And young enough to be your son," Siofre pointed out.

"Oh, lighten up! It's just nice to have a wizard around the house again." Lydia picked up a slice of toast and spread elderberry preserves on it. "You enjoy it, too, I can tell."

"You don't need to simper so," Siofre said. "It's unseemly. He's only a wizard, after all. Show some decorum."

"Mmhm," Lydia murmured sceptically as she swallowed her toast. "And I suppose you move from the morning room to the conservatory to the library every day only to get a new view of the grounds, not to watch our gardener at work."

"I have work to do," Siofre said. "I do not have time to read novels all day. And if I happen to glance out the windows occasionally, it is pleasant to see the progress on the gardens. It is also wise to keep an eye out. Remember the roofer."

"You trust the man, Siofre, or you would not have invited him to stay at the manor. You would have him commuting back and forth daily...and providing his own meals. I think you're as happy to have the bonny young German here as I am, or more."

Siofre shook her head and sighed. "You are impossible, Lydia. And just because you're old enough to be his mother doesn't mean he's young."

"But you can't deny that he's handsome, and quite nice to watch at work, too," Lydia said with an unladylike wink.

Siofre did smile slightly at that. "Nay, I canna deny that." She glanced out the window just as Johannes was taking off his outer-robe, leaving him in trousers, shirtsleeves, and waistcoat. She watched as he rolled up his sleeves and then crouched to set to work. The corners of her lips twitched. "And I canna deny that his breeks are . . . fetching. But that's not enough reason to behave like a simpering lass of fifteen."

"I do wish you'd come with me to tea this afternoon," Lydia said, changing the subject. "We're meeting in the Clypeum in Glasgow at three, so you could get some shopping done, too. And you won't have to step foot out of Scotland."

Siofre snorted. "You enjoy yourself. The magister will be here this afternoon. We should not leave the house empty."

"The house-elves are here, and I really don't think that Professor Birnbaum will be absconding with your Charmed silver or your heirloom linens," Lydia teased.

"But he has only been here a few days. I would not wish him to feel abandoned in an unfamiliar environment. If it weren't going to rain and he could work, I might go with you, but I don't want to leave him alone...and I don't want to slog around the Clypeum in the wet, either. Next time."

"I'll hold you to that!"

"I will be in the library working," Siofre said as she rose from the table.

"What is it this time?"

"Examining family documents for the Smethwyck dispute."

"You're still working on that arbitration? And wouldn't it be easier to work in your study?"

"They have a lot at stake, and with the oaths they have taken to abide by my judgment, it is beholden upon me to be assiduous and give them a decision they all are able to understand and to which they will acquiesce even an they do not like it. I will be using some historical resources in the library."

"Have fun!" Lydia pulled her book from her robe pocket and flicked a finger to open it to the last page she'd read.

As she left the morning room, Siofre cast a glance out the window. Johannes was there, standing beside one of the cleared and newly replanted beds, his wand out, a slight smile on his face as he cast charms on the garden, the wind whipping his sandy hair back and reddening his cheeks. Scattered fat drops of rain began to fall, but he continued casting. Siofre turned and headed through the door and up to the library.

Siofre raised her head at the sound of Disapparition coming from the ground floor and echoing up the staircase: Lydia off for her afternoon with Philomena Yaxley and Gwynllian Egidius. She looked across the room where Johannes was working on a large plan for the land to the west of the house. He had a Charmed compass and T-square, and he was completely concentrated on his drawing. He hadn't even twitched at the loud crack made by Lydia's Disapparition. Siofre turned back to the arcane Smethwyck family testaments.

After a half hour, the rain still pouring down outside, Siofre took off her reading glasses and straightened her papers.

"Professor."

Johannes raised his head, his soft grey eyes meeting Siofre's sharp ones. "Yes, Madam Tyree?"

"I am in need of a cup of tea. Would you care to join me in my sitting room?"

Johannes nodded and stood, flicking his wand and rolling up his parchments. "I also would appreciate a cup of tea."

"Or coffee?"

Johannes smiled. "Tea would be fine. Delightful, in fact, in your company," he said with a slight bow.

Johannes followed Siofre out of the library; rather than turning to the left and going downstairs to the main sitting room, she led him across the hall, around a corner, and into another hallway, where Johannes had never been, but where he knew her bedroom was. She twitched her wand and opened the first door to her left, revealing a cosy sitting room.

"On a rainy day like this, I find I enjoy a fire," Siofre said, waving her wand and lighting the logs in the corner fireplace. She turned back to look up at Johannes. "Please, seat yourself. Would you like anything to eat? Sandwiches?"

Johannes shook his head. "Lunch was quite sufficiently filling, thank you. But the tea will help." He stretched his arms and legs slightly as he lowered himself into an armchair. "The rain tends to make me feel a lethargy."

Siofre smiled. "You seemed far from lethargic in the library. You were highly concentrated, I thought."

Johannes tilted his head. "This is important work to me, to do this properly for you."

Siofre nodded shortly and reached for a bell-rope, then after pulling it, she called out for Multry, who was there a few moments later. Siofre requested a pot of tea and a plate of biscuits.

"You have made progress, though, both on the plans and on the gardens. You are diligent."

"I attempt diligence, yes. I hope to have much of the gardens finished by the end of June."

"Ah, so soon!"

"The initial layout I showed you, around the house, not the greater scheme. That will take much more time. But I will commit myself to it. I will not leave it half-finished. After the major work is done, I will continue to return, do work, charm the gardens, inspect the work of your elves . . . I would not abandon the gardens. Or you."

"You may stay on as long as you wish. That is, as long as it is more convenient for your work, and there is sufficient work to hold you here."

Johannes stood and went to the window, pulling back the lacy curtain a bit to look out at the rain. "It is a large work. A large task. There are so many possibilities."

"After Father died...and that was almost thirty years ago, now...Mother didn't spend as much time on the grounds. 'Twas something that Murdoch did not care as much about, so he was happy to leave most of it to her. He and Lydia did enjoy the rose garden and the kailyaird...the kitchen garden. Then Murdoch died and it really was all left

to Mother. Lydia loves flowers and gardens, but she has a black thumb. It seems everything she touches withers. I think she either smothers them with attention or starves them from neglect, with nothing in between. But Mother did well with it all until the last few years of her life, when she was not strong. She told Mynok and Tastle to concentrate on the conservatory, the cooking herbs, the vegetable plots, and the rose garden. The rest did not go completely untended, of course, but . . . She died in the conservatory, you know. Surrounded by all of her favourite flowers." Siofre sighed.

"That was recent?" Johannes asked when Siofre didn't continue.

"About a year before Herbert died."

"I am sorry," Johannes said softly.

"It is life. She had a good one."

Multry popped into the sitting room with a tray. She set everything out on a little table for them, asked if they would like anything else, and then Disappeared with a pop.

"You did not wish to go to tea with Madam Tyree, eh, Madam Lydia?"

"Not today," Siofre replied. "I had work, and I didn't care to spend the day out in the rain."

"It was good to have company as I worked," Johannes said, seeking Siofre's assent with a glance as he reached over and poured her tea for her before pouring his own. "The library felt warmer with your presence."

Siofre handed him the milk. "My study...which is across the hall from this room if you should ever need to find me there...seemed unappealing in this weather, and I knew I would need some of the books from the library." She took a shortbread when Johannes held the plate toward her. "It was also more congenial. The company as well as the room."

They each took a bite of shortbread. Johannes smiled. "Multry is a fine cook and an even better bakeress."

Siofre gave a laugh. "Baker. Just baker. Aye, she has a way with cakes and biscuits."

"Baker," Johannes repeated with a smile. "And her breads...I have not had such excellent Rogenbrot...rye bread...since I left home."

"You still feel Germany is your home, yet you did not return there?"

Johannes shook his head. "I do not know where home is," he said softly. He paused, listening to the rain that pattered steadily against the window. "I thought I would return. I tried. I explored the idea. I looked at properties there. I was on the edge of buying a greenhouse and a small cottage, but then . . . I do not know. Perhaps I am weak, but I could not. I could not face building a life there again, when in every turn, I hear and see my losses. Without them . . . it is not my home any longer. I left my home one sunny morning, kissed my baby and my wife good-bye, and never returned. When I arrived to what had been my home, it was to find them all dead . . . the house still standing, just as I had left it, but devoid of life, and all the gardens withered and the barn burned, the greenhouse . . . only sand."

Siofre drank her tea, allowing a silence to fall, broken only by the sound of rain against the window and teacup against saucer, reflecting on what Johannes had told her, until finally she asked, "And Hogwarts?"

"It was a home of sorts . . . it became one. But the last few years that I was there, I felt . . . in limbo. As though I was living a life that was not mine. That makes no sense, I know. It must sound mad."

"No. It does not sound mad. Madness would be continuing to stay there, abiding in a life that felt not your own."

Johannes smiled. "I am glad you understand."

"And now? Does it feel you are living a life that is your own?"

"Yes, and every day, it feels that way increasingly."

Siofre nodded. "Good."

"That brings me to a subject . . . one personal request," Johannes said hesitantly.

"Yes? You wish different rooms? Or to not stay here?"

"No, no, certainly not. But I wonder whether I might start a garden of my own, just for some special medicinal herbs, some potions plants. A small one, but so that I might begin to supply some apothecaries, begin to build a...what is it that Malcolm calls it? A customer basis?"

"A customer base," Siofre said with a nod. "Aye, that would be prudent. It would tie you here at least for the season, though. If that is agreeable to you, then you may plant your garden. Choose your plot as you wish."

"Thank you, Madam Tyree. I will, of course, give you a percentage, whatever you believe is fair..."

"Nay. No need for that. It will be yours to work as you wish. Consider it a part of your compensation."

"You are generous. Thank you."

Siofre dismissed his comment with a wave of her hand. "We are fortunate to have a talented Herbology master devoting his time to our gardens."

"It is not only a challenge, but a pleasure, I assure you."

"I am glad. We want you to feel at home here," Siofre replied.

"You know, I do."

"More tea?" Siofre asked, reaching for the pot, but looking at him.

Johannes's gaze met hers. He felt his heart seem to skip a beat. She had the most captivating eyes . . .

"Professor, more tea?"

"Yes, thank you." He smiled. A bit of garden of his own, a roof over his head, challenging and invigorating work, and this witch, this zesty Scottish witch, for occasional company. Yes, he was beginning to feel at home. Quite at home.

Chapter Five: Blind Date

Chapter 5 of 32

Johannes meets Malcolm, Gertrude, and his blind date in Diagon Alley.

Chapter features Gertrude Gamp, Malcolm McGonagall, Johannes Birnbaum, and Katherine Fellows.



Chapter Five: Blind Date

Johannes checked himself in the mirror one more time, then sighed. He never should have agreed to Malcolm's idea. His barmy idea, to use one of Dumbledore's favourite expressions. Johannes doubted that he'd enjoy his visit with Gertrude and Malcolm with some strange witch along for the evening. He hadn't seen Gertrude since her birthday party in January, and he had hoped that the three of them could just have a nice relaxed evening together. But Malcolm would not be dissuaded, and so Johannes was going on a blind date. He didn't know which was worse, having to have a blind date with his two friends along or having to sacrifice his evening with his two friends by having a blind date.

He shrugged on a long, loose-fitting grey woollen coat, patted his pocket to check for his wallet, then grasped his wand and Disapparated for Diagon Alley, where he was to meet Malcolm, Gertrude, and his mysterious date. Other than reassuring him that it wasn't one of his former students...the thought of which appalled Johannes...Malcolm would not let on who the witch was, or even whether Johannes was already acquainted with her.

Johannes wound his way through the Saturday evening crowds and headed toward the Leaky Cauldron. Malcolm had said that they would start there, have a quick drink, and then go on to the Phoebus Café, which was going to have live music that night...some friends of Malcolm's who played folk music. After that, Malcolm thought they might go out dancing at the Glimmer Room in Cardiff, which would necessitate Flooing, unless they didn't drink. Johannes thought he might bow out before that, although he did not want to be rude to whatever witch Malcolm had enticed into accompanying them that evening. He supposed she was likely nervous, as well, and perhaps even less pleased with the prospect of a blind date than he was. Presumably, the witch knew Malcolm well enough to feel sure that he wouldn't set her up with a wizard who wasn't a gentleman.

Johannes spotted Gertrude first, her height and her grey hair making her easy to see in the crowded pub. Her back was to him, though, and Malcolm, who was standing beside her at the bar, turned and saw Johannes before she did. Malcolm's smile was instantaneous, and Johannes smiled in return.

Malcolm took a few steps towards him, meeting him with a cheery greeting and a pat on the shoulder. "Come meet a friend of mine, Johannes," Malcolm said, as though it hadn't all been planned in advance. "Katherine, this is Johannes Birnbaum. Johannes, Katherine Fellows." He presented Johannes to a slim, brown-haired witch with gold-brown eyes and a bright, lively expression.

Johannes took Katherine's extended hand and made a quick, shallow bow. "Madam Fellows, it is a pleasure to make your acquaintance."

Katherine smiled. "Katherine, please."

"Katherine."

"Katherine's an Auror, but one of the decent ones. We went to school together," Malcolm said.

Johannes nodded and was saved from having to think of a response by Gertrude, who placed her hand on his arm and said, "It is good to see you. I'm glad you could come out tonight."

Johannes bent his head and kissed Gertrude's cheek. "I have been busy, Gott sei dank, and have not spent much time at home recently, either."

Malcolm popped a nut into his mouth and said to Katherine, "Honnie's taken a commission with my grandmother. He's quite in demand."

"You are a Herbologist, right?" Katherine asked. "And you were Head of Ravenclaw for several years, weren't you?"

"Ja...a beer, please," Johannes said to the bartender when he came up. "Lager." He turned back to Katherine. "Yes, I was Head of Ravenclaw for a while."

"I was in Ravenclaw, actually." She grinned slightly. "I suppose I still am. They say the Houses are for life, after all."

Johannes inclined his head. "That is what is said."

Johannes was grateful when his beer came and he had something to occupy himself. He glanced over at Gertrude. She seemed much the same as she always did in public; it was unlikely they would have their opportunity for a good conversation that evening. He would have to make a point of visiting her at Hogwarts one evening. An evening when the Tyrees were out of the house, perhaps. Or when Siofre was. Despite wanting to catch up with Gertrude, Johannes disliked the thought of sacrificing an evening when he might see Siofre, even if just at the dining table. Lydia was sweet and amusing, too, and he was pleased to play along with her, and he enjoyed seeing her tease Siofre, but it was the thought of Siofre's company that caused his heart to beat faster and his mouth to go dry. He took a long drink of beer.

He and Siofre were both early risers, and her company at breakfast had already become a staple of his day. The prospect of seeing her was his first thought upon waking each morning, and when he had woken that morning in his own bedroom in Hogsmeade, he'd felt deflated when he realised that he would be breakfasting alone that day. He was on commission for them, he had reminded himself as he ate cheese and flat bread with black coffee for his solitary breakfast. Their gardener, basically.

"What do you think, Johannes?" Malcolm asked.

Johannes, who had only heard half the conversation, had no thoughts at all on whatever the topic was, since he hadn't been paying attention. He shrugged. "There is not a single right answer, I think."

Gertrude shot him a smile as though she knew that he hadn't been paying attention. "A diplomatic response," she said. She looked around. "It is becoming noisy here. Shall we go on to the café?"

As they made their way back down Diagon Alley toward the Phoebus Café, Gertrude somehow manoeuvred so that she and Johannes were walking a few steps behind Katherine and Malcolm, who were chattering away about old friends.

"You look well, Johannes."

He nodded. "I feel well." He smiled at her. "You look very well, yourself, Gertrude."

"I am happy that it is now finally the Easter holiday." She gave a sideways grin. "It is not even particularly late this year, but it felt a long time coming. It was a long winter this year."

"You have plans for tomorrow?"

"Yes. Malcolm and I are going to the estate for the day. It is a sacrifice for Malcolm, but he's being a good sport about it."

"How a sacrifice?"

"Dressing up, being on his best behaviour, not having me all to himself . . ." She paused. "And a lot of my extended family will be there."

"Ah."

"Ah," Gertrude agreed with a nod.

"He can play at pureblood, I am sure," Johannes said. "And I suppose he is one, technically, although he'd never say so much."

"Yes, but Quin will be there, and they always goad each other into worse and worse behaviour." Gertrude's lips twitched in amusement. "They are like a couple of little boys. You were there at the picnic in August."

"I believe they disrupted the croquet game and completely scandalised the Blacks, Rosiers, and various Yaxleys. Your mother seemed amused, though," Johannes said.

"Mm. Full grown men playing Shuntbumps with both wizards dressed in kilts? Yes, she was amused initially. Less so when Shuntbumps degenerated further to a wrestling match, both wizards falling off their broomsticks and continuing the match in the middle of the lawn, scattering the croquet balls and the players. They were both a mess." She shook her head in exasperation, but was grinning at the memory. "They hardly set a good example for the kids."

"I believe Alroy was embarrassed."

"At the age Alroy is, nothing Quin does could fail to embarrass him," Gertrude said. "And having his father . . . flashing his goods to the world as he falls from his broomstick, that was 'fatal,' as Alroy told me most melodramatically later that afternoon."

Johannes smiled. "But it is something that Alroy would have found amusing to do himself, I am sure."

"Like father, like son, they say."

"A chip off the old brick," Johannes agreed.

"Block, old block," Gertrude said. "Yes. Say, do you have plans for tomorrow? Easter dinner? I should have asked you earlier."

"I have no plans. I was going to go over to the Three Broomsticks. Yes, I will come. I will try to be a good influence on your two boys," Johannes said with a smile. "When should I arrive?"

"I'm staying in Hogsmeade with Malcolm tonight, and we're Flooing through from the house at eleven. Come by and we'll all go together."

"Very good."

"I'll be in Hogsmeade for the entire holiday. You should come over to the house, come for dinner. Bring a date, if you like," Gertrude said.

"I am staying at the Tyree estate during the week. But I could still come over one evening. It is an easy Apparition to Hogsmeade, not far."

"You aren't taking a holiday at all? Not even Easter Monday?"

"No, not now. I only started the work. There is too much to do. In the winter, there will be less work. I can think then about a holiday."

"You must take a few days in July, though, and come down to the estate. I'm sure they'll manage without you for that long by then."

"Of course."

They reached the café, and Malcolm opened the door for them. The musicians were just setting up, and as the others were seated at a small round table, Malcolm wandered over to talk to his friends.

Johannes held Katherine's chair for her, and she looked up and smiled at him. He nodded and returned her smile as he sat down between her and Gertrude.

"So you have known our Malcolm for a long time," Johannes said, trying to start a conversation that would include Katherine.

"Yes, I suppose you could say that," Katherine replied. "We were in classes together at Hogwarts right from the beginning, of course, and I was Chaser on the Ravenclaw team and he was Beater on his, but we didn't really get to know each other well until fifth year, when we were paired up in Potions. He used to drive me crazy, always wanting to try out the strangest 'novel ingredients,' as he would put it. I thought I was going to Troll out in Potions all because of him and his tossing bits of things into our potions just to see what would happen...and it was *never* good!"

"But you did not?" Johannes asked.

Katherine shook her head and grinned. "We found some room for compromise, and he stopped sabotaging our potions."

"What was the compromise?" Gertrude asked as they accepted menus from the wait-witch.

"Oh, that I would spend time with him one Hogsmeade weekend, which turned into almost every Hogsmeade weekend for the next year." Katherine gave a sideways grin. "He was the first boy to give me a truly memorable kiss. And it was memorable for the right reasons."

Gertrude chuckled. "Ah, so were you the Chaser Malcolm chased? He mentioned something about that. Harder to catch than a Golden Snidget, he said."

Katherine laughed. "I suppose so, although there may have been another, too. You never know with Malcolm."

"What do you never know with me?" Malcolm asked as he came over and sat down across from Johannes.

"Oh, in this case, how many Chasers you've chased, or who have chased you!" Katherine teased, her eyes sparkling.

Malcolm picked up his menu and with an insouciant air said, "I don't know whatever you could be talking about." He quirked a grin and added, "I'm not saying that I haven't known a pretty Chaser or two, and come to know them rather well, but as for the chasing part, well, Katherine was the only Chaser I ever had to chase down. I became a bit more adept at charming rather than chasing after that, and I've never been so fortunate as to have a Chaser chase me . . . but there was a very cute little Finnish Seeker several years back. I did feel a bit like the Snitch in her game." He winked. "Not saying that was a bad thing, mind you!"

Gertrude rolled her eyes, Katherine laughed, and Johannes smiled slightly.

"And only one witch has managed to catch me, to really capture me and hold me." He reached over and took Gertrude's hand. "Katherine, meet the witch who tamed the wild McGonagall." He gazed at Gertrude with a soft, affectionate smile.

"It sounds as though you had your work cut out for you," Kathryn said to Gertrude with a grin.

"It wasn't hard. He dug a hole and fell in it himself," Gertrude said with a wry grin and squeezing Malcolm's hand. "He didn't look where he was going."

"But I ended up right where I wanted to be, so it all turned out well," Malcolm added.

The wait-witch came up, took their orders, and promised that their drinks would be brought over to the table soon.

"What about you, Johannes?" Kathryn asked. "Been lucky in love?"

"I was once very lucky in love . . . but my wife was not so lucky," Johannes said. He looked down and straightened his silverware.

Before Katherine's puzzlement could be expressed in words, Gertrude broke in, "She was *avery* lucky witch to have had you in her life, Johannes. I am sure of that." She turned to Katherine. "Grindelwald was after Johannes. Would have likely kidnapped him and tried to force him to work for him, since Johannes had declined his 'request' to join him. When they didn't find Johannes at home, they killed his family and destroyed his farm."

"Oh, I am so very sorry," Katherine said softly. "I was an Auror then, assigned to the war effort, so I know what kinds of things Grindelwald did to those who wouldn't join him when asked."

Malcolm, trying to gently steer the conversation away from painful topics, said, "Katherine and I actually were on a few missions together. She was always the master of strategy. We had a bit of fun going Dark Wizard hunting, didn't we, Kate?"

"Yes, and some of it wasn't so fun," she replied, accepting her glass of white wine from the wait-witch and taking a long sip.

"In fact, Katherine was there at the end. The ultimate mission. Missed out on that one myself," Malcolm said. "It was official, and I don't do 'official.'"

"You were with Dumbledore when he defeated Grindelwald?" Johannes asked.

"Oh, yes. And spent a few of what I hope remain the most miserable days of my life . . . almost quit the Aurors then. But after some time at St. Mungo's and more time with my mum and dad at the seaside, I was so bored, I was happy to get back to work."

Johannes smiled. "Work is always the best tonic for what ails, I find for myself."

Katherine nodded and accepted the basket of bread that Malcolm passed her. "I know. I'm the same way. Take my work away, and I become depressed," she said as she buttered a roll. "But as I was telling Malcolm a couple days ago, I'm thinking of breaking out on my own. I need some new challenges, and the way things are going in the Ministry right now, I'm not likely to find them there."

"I told her I could give her referrals," Malcolm said. "I do some investigations on the side, as you know, usually simple jobs, like finding errant husbands...or wives...or recovering stolen property, but some of it can be a challenge. I'd be happy to throw some of those jobs your way, Katherine, or bring you in on them. I have more than enough to do with the various beasts, pests, and curses to take care of."

"I still haven't completely decided whether I'm going to make the leap or not. It's a big decision with a lot to consider."

"You Ravenclaws, always so cautious, have to examine things from every angle...twice...and then you still aren't sure," Malcolm said.

"Not so, we just don't dive in head first like some Gryffindors," Katherine countered.

The argument was interrupted by the arrival of their meals; a few minutes later, the musicians began to play, and conversation was sporadic and focussed on the food and the music. Their dessert arrived as the musicians were taking a break, and over chocolate souffle, walnut torte, and vanilla ice cream with fresh berries, the four chatted generally about various things, and Malcolm asked whether anyone was up for dancing at the Glimmer Room. Although Johannes had found Katherine a pleasant witch, he didn't want to extend the evening beyond dinner, and he didn't want to give Katherine any idea that he might be interested in her romantically, so he demurred, claiming fatigue. It turned out that Katherine lived in London not far from Diagon Alley, and she also preferred to go home rather than go to the Glimmer Room, though Johannes was unsure whether that was because she did not want to go or because he was not going and she felt like she'd be a third wheel going along with Malcolm and Gertrude.

Katherine was going to leave through the Leaky Cauldron and walk home, so the four walked back down to the pub together. Johannes had drunk very little, and since his flat wasn't on the Floo Network and he would have to Floo to the Three Broomsticks and then walk home, he decided instead to Apparate, but he accompanied the other three down to the pub anyway.

After Gertrude and Malcolm had Flooed to the Glimmer Room, Johannes turned to Katherine. "Would you like me to see you home?"

"No, that's all right, thanks. It's a nice night and I'll enjoy the walk. I've done it many times before."

"If you will be fine . . ."

"Auror, remember? I'll be fine. Thanks, though. You are a gentleman, just as Malcolm assured me. It was good to meet you."

Johannes nodded once. "Likewise."

"I'm sure we'll run into each other again sometime. Good night, Johannes."

"Good night." He watched her leave the pub, then he exited back to Diagon Alley, where he immediately Disapparated for his flat.

Katherine was pleasant, and if it hadn't been a "blind date," with all the implications that held for him, he would not have minded seeing her again sooner than just "sometime," but only as a friend. She was nice looking, intelligent, almost his own age, and independent...which he liked in a woman...and she seemed to be a kind person, as well. Nonetheless, he felt no spark with her, and certainly no strong desire to spend more time with her.

Johannes was relieved that the evening hadn't been torturous, and was happy, too, that it had come to a natural, and relatively early, end. The next day was Easter Sunday, and if he were going to accompany Gertrude and Malcolm to the Gamp estate in the morning...likely to watch youngsters rolling Easter eggs or some such thing...then he wanted to pack up a few books and other things that he'd left in his flat and had missed at the Tyree estate. He hadn't told Siofre or Lydia when he would return, and he hoped that his arrival on Sunday evening, Easter Sunday evening, would not be an inconvenience for them. He could go straight to his suite of rooms if they had guests or were out themselves.

Johannes smiled to himself. He had a lot to look forward to: an Easter Sunday at the Gamp estate with some of his closest friends present...and a few rather odious acquaintances, as well, but that could not be helped...followed by his return to the Tyree estate and the prospect of breakfast with Siofre on Monday morning. His new life was shaping up quite well.

Author's Note: To see the first time that Johannes and Siofre met, read "A Spree with Albus," available on my WordPress site under the "Read Some Fanfic Now" tab, or read the chapter in *Resolving a Misunderstanding*, "A Spree," which is here on TPP.

If Katherine Fellows seems familiar to you, she was mentioned a few times in *Resolving a Misunderstanding*, including her role in Grindelwald's defeat.

Chapter Six: The Garden in the Afternoon

Chapter 6 of 32

Johannes and Siofre spend some time in the gardens together.

Chapter features Johannes and Siofre.



Chapter Six: The Garden in the Afternoon

"I will meet you in the garden at three, then," Siofre said briskly.

"Very good. I will be in the gardens on the east side of the house near the pond," Johannes replied. He turned to Lydia. "Enjoy your afternoon, Madam Lydia."

Lydia heaved a great sigh. "Hardly. Siofre's making me work on the books this afternoon." She made a face. "I hate that."

"I'll do the calculations for you, hen, but I need you to make sure the records are complete. You're the only one who can tell. You have a mind like a goblin-made trap...you don't miss a detail. You just occasionally forget to note things down."

"I hate maths. Maths makes me sleepy and I itch all over. I think I'm allergic," Lydia said.

Siofre barked a laugh. "And that is why I will do the calculations, as always. You'd think we didn't do this every month."

"I do my very best to forget," Lydia said pitifully.

Johannes left the two witches to their minor squabbling in the family dining room and went through to the music room, then to the conservatory, and out through the south-facing French doors. He took the path into the gardens to the east of the house, feeling the perfect new silvery pea stones crunch satisfyingly underfoot.

A month's work had already transformed the grounds around the house, and Johannes was pleased with the progress they had made. Siofre often joined him for an hour or so in the morning now before she began her own work, and sometimes later in the day, he would come around a corner and find her with Fandenz, working some spot that he hadn't got to yet. She said it was a good break for her, being outdoors in the fresh air. It cleared her head.

Johannes took pleasure in the progress and in Siofre's occasional companionship, but as he worked, he felt that the time was coming closer for his departure from the Tyree home, and that saddened him. There was still enough work left to keep him there through most of the summer, and even after that, he would have to return frequently right through the autumn and beyond. But he could not stay on indefinitely.

He rarely saw Siofre in the afternoons. She would be in her study or in the library, or off meeting clients, though she never called them such. Johannes was unsure what she did, it seemed to vary so much from client to client, but it seemed that all sought her advice or her skills with Charms. Occasionally, she would even go off with Malcolm for a day, returning home late, drained and exhausted, but glowing and happy. A few times, Malcolm returned with her and stayed the night, and he and Johannes lounged by the fire in his sitting room, talking until late.

Johannes worried about Siofre going on jobs with Malcolm, but he knew that Malcolm adored his grandmother and wouldn't expose her to any true danger. Not if he could help it. But Malcolm, as powerful and intelligent as he was, was a Gryffindor, and Johannes had come not to completely trust a Gryffindor to do the sensible thing. Malcolm could make a mistake that he would come to regret for the rest of his life. Malcolm had reassured Johannes that he never brought his grandmother into any real danger; they were just jobs that he couldn't do on his own, where he needed help and knew that his grandmother was the perfect person to lend him a hand. Besides, she clearly enjoyed it, and Malcolm said that he sometimes even learned something new from her. Johannes had to presume that Siofre could take care of herself...indeed, he did presume that, but it somehow didn't keep him from worrying.

So between Siofre's activities and his own work outdoors, Johannes often didn't see Siofre between breakfast and dinner, except occasionally at lunch. That day, however, Siofre would be home and had declared it a day for dealing only with the Tyree estate, and not with anyone else's. She had made plans to take Johannes out to a part of the grounds he hadn't seen yet. The property extended several miles to the north and the east, and was bounded to the west and the south by the sea. The turrets had an excellent view of the sea, and in the afternoon, the water would seem to flash and glitter in the distance. He had not yet walked down to the sea, however, and although he had seen the water from the northwest turret, the shore was not visible, hidden by the rising and falling and rising again of the land between house and sea.

He also had only ventured a mile or so into the woody hills that rose even higher in the north, and had walked only to the perimeter of the lands cultivated and subdued to the east. Beyond that were woods, fields, streams, left to nature for all the generations of Tyrees who had lived and loved that land, a home away from home, one foothold of the Tyree clan in the Highlands. There was another one even further to the north, more Tyree cousins, and southwest of the island of Tiree Beag, another branch of the family had settled in County Meath. But this was the largest Tyree home outside of Tiree Beag; more correctly, it was the largest property owned by Tyrees outside of Tiree Beag. Until about two hundred years before, it had also been home to the most Tyrees not living on the island. But gradual assimilation with the rest of wizarding Britain and

a decreased birthrate had conspired to make this large estate home now only to two Tyree witches, and one of them a Tyree by marriage.

Morgan and Fiona would be moving into the old lodge in a few days, and they and their quadruplets...two sets of identical twins, Branwen and Morgana, and David and Aiden...would raise the population, but they weren't Tyrees. Johannes had begun to understand Siofre's disappointment that Connor Tyree had moved to Cumberland so that he and Elisabeth could be near her family. It was less that he had moved to England...though that irked her...than that he was not carrying on the family there on the Tyree land. It had pleased Siofre that her grandson Morgan and his family would be moving to the estate, but although they were family and Siofre loved them dearly...especially the babies, the boys with their baby blond hair and the girls with their soot black hair...it wasn't quite the same.

Johannes didn't know what part of the grounds Siofre was going to show him. Most of the grounds were to be left to nature, as they had been for decades, and the ones that weren't, he had already seen, surveyed, and incorporated most of it into his plans. He knew that Siofre wanted him to do something different around the lodge now that Morgan and his family were moving in, and to begin work on that in the next couple days. However, he had already created new plans for the lodge gardens and Siofre and Fiona had both liked them, so he doubted that Siofre was going to bring him there...besides, she had clearly said that it was going to be a new area, one he hadn't visited yet.

Johannes was preparing the pond for a new distribution of water plants when he heard Siofre's step approaching on the winding path, and he turned just as she came around some bushy junipers.

He lowered his wand and bowed slightly. "Madam Tyree."

Her lips turned a smile. "Professor."

He gestured toward the pond. "It will soon be ready for the water lilies and lobelia."

"As when I was a lass," Siofre said, smiling.

"I am keeping much rushes, though, here and along the edge opposite," Johannes said, pointing. "They are good for the animals, for the fowl and fishes, to have them here."

Siofre nodded. "That is a very good idea. And they are beautiful in their own way, as well."

"I think that when the children arrive, there should be a . . . a perimeter ward. An alarm or a . . . a barrier. They do not walk yet, but when they do, the pond could be an attraction to them. Until they are older, they should not come here alone, do you agree?" Johannes asked.

"Aye, most certainly," Siofre agreed. "It is good of you to think of these things."

"It is my work for you to consider all aspects of your gardens," Johannes said. "However, I think perhaps someone else might be better suited to creating such a ward. I could do it, and will if you wish, but it is not my forté."

"It is something I can cast," Siofre said. "I have a lot of practice with such charms. I can make the pond dull for them, charm it uninteresting, and then still cast an age-sensitive alarm ward at one perimeter and another barrier ward a bit closer to the pond. Before they could reach the water's edge, a house-elf or one of us would be there to keep them from straying into the water."

"It sounds ideal," Johannes said. He touched the front of his heavy canvas apron. "You are showing me some other part of the grounds now?"

"Aye." She reached out and Summoned his over-robe from where it lay draped across the back of a bench, holding it for him as he pulled off the work apron.

"Thank you." Johannes took the over-robe with its leafy green woven pattern and slipped it on, fastening the hook at the waist.

"Before I bring you where we are heading, show me your garden."

"It is not much to see yet," Johannes said, "but of course I will show you."

They walked back toward the house, skirting the formal gardens, where they could hear Fandenz and Mynok at work. As they passed the house, they could hear Lydia in the music room playing a Chopin etude. Siofre indicated with a slight gesture that she wanted to walk through the kitchen gardens, so they walked around the conservatory to the gardens at the back of the house.

Siofre smiled. "The kailyaird looks beautiful," she said as they walked. "And my mouth already waters at the thought of the vegetables we will have all this summer."

"I expanded the variety, as you know. You must let me know which ones you prefer, or if there are any you do not like, and we can adjust next year. Or Mynok and Fandenz can, of course."

"Is it dull for you to do such mundane gardening after your work at Hogwarts?"

"Not at all," Johannes replied. "I oversaw the vegetable gardens at Hogwarts, too, although there really was little for me to do, other than cast the occasional charm or recommend a particular potion if there were a pest to deter, since the Hogwarts elves and Hagrid did a good job of it. And I have always enjoyed ornamental planting, whether the plants were magical or mundane. I expanded the Hogwarts flower gardens when I was there. I believe that Professor Sprout plans to keep them. And there are many mundane plants with uses in potions, as you know."

"I do a little brewing, myself," Siofre said. "Just a few of the standard household potions, but I enjoy it, and it is particularly satisfying when some of the ingredients are ones I have picked myself from my own gardens."

They exited the kitchen gardens through an opening in the wall bordering it on one side, and Johannes led Siofre down to his garden. It was only a half acre, enclosed by a hedge of Flutterby bushes and Flitterbloom, but he had planted cleverly and made the best use of space that he could. There were already many full-grown plants, since he had purchased or bartered for seedlings from a friend with a commercial greenhouse, and Siofre was impressed.

"Fanged Geranium," she remarked as she stepped out of the way of one particularly lively flower. "Not one of my favourite flowers, I must say."

Johannes chuckled. "They are useful, however, and pretty at a distance."

"At least they don't try to follow a body," Siofre said. "Mother had a problem with leaping toadstools some years ago. I tried to tame them for her, corral them, but they followed me all the way up to the house, and there we were, all of us besieged by the annoying wee things. Couldn't go anywhere on the grounds without some of them following. Malcolm finally paid us a visit, came back from some southern lands, and took care of them. It took him two days. I hope you don't have any leaping toadstools in your garden!"

"In fact, I do, but they are in a well-charmed area," Johannes said, pointing to an area shaded by an awning and a couple arbors. "They are happiest in shade, so I have also provided them with protection from the direct sun. They will not be escaping, I promise. And if any do, by some peculiar chance, I am adept at lulling them and relocating them."

They walked through a portion of the garden that contained both mundane and magical herbs, and Siofre inhaled deeply. "Lovely mixture of fragrances."

"It is."

"You know, I still have the Memory Plant you gave me," Siofre said. "It is doing well, although I keep it in my bedroom. I repotted it last summer, and it grew more, but then in the winter, it seemed less robust than it had. It seems to have recovered this spring. Do you think it should be relocated to the conservatory?"

"I do not know. If your bedroom has sufficient light during the day and it does not become either too cold or too warm, then the plant should do fine there."

"I keep it on my bedside table until the days are very short, then I move it to the window. Was that an error?"

"It was good to give it better light, but it may be cooler near the window. That is easily remedied, however. So this winter, you may wish either to move the Memory Plant to the conservatory or cast a charm on the window and another on the surrounding area."

"I will remember that," Siofre said. She looked up at the tall wizard. "It was a very kind and thoughtful gesture, giving me the Memory Plant after Herbert died. I appreciated it very much."

"I thought it might ease your days some, and if you wished, you could have Murdoch brew you a potion from some of its leaves, as well."

Siofre nodded. "I have not yet had him brew me any potion from it, although I did allow him to harvest some of the leaves last year when he could not find a supply elsewhere. And it did ease my days, but its soothing fragrance also helped me to sleep better than I believe I would have. That was a blessing."

"I am very glad," Johannes said. The two stepped out of the Herbologist's garden, and he said, "You wished to show me something new today?"

Siofre smiled. "Something old, actually, and also bring you to another part of the grounds to show them to you, if that is amenable to you...if you have the time this afternoon."

"My time is yours today, Madam Tyree," Johannes said with a slight bow.

Siofre smiled. "Good, then we will spend the rest of the afternoon together and return for dinner." She turned toward the house and raised her wand, sounding a light but reverberating chime. "Multry!" Looking back up at Johannes, she said, "Multry is occupied with Kilbeena and Duster at the moment, but I have a task for her that they may wish to help her with."

A few moments later, Multry appeared with a sharp crack. "Madam Siofre wishes something?"

"Aye." Siofre placed a hand on Multry's shoulder and walked a few feet away. The two held a brief low conversation, then Multry Disappeared.

Siofre stepped back toward Johannes. "Come, lad, and we will pay our first visit. I will value your opinion. This way." She gestured and began walking down the path toward a heavily wooded area to the southwest. Johannes followed.

Author's Note: Thank you to everyone who has been reviewing this little fic! I appreciate it very much. I'm happy that Johannes, Siofre, Gertrude, Malcolm, and Lydia have some friends out there!

Chapter Seven: A Folly

Chapter 7 of 32

A folly, tea, and poppyseed cakes.

Chapter features Siofre and Johannes.



Chapter Seven: A Folly

Siofre and Johannes walked through the woods, making their way through bracken and over fallen tree branches and lichen-covered rocks.

"There was a good path here, once upon a time," Siofre said. "I will have to set Fandenz to fixing that. Just clear a bit away so the walking is easier, of course, not make a formal path."

"That is good. Walking through the trees like this, it is so pleasant, very natural. It would distract to have a path of stone, I believe. The pine needles make a lovely path."

"Aye, they're springy," Siofre agreed.

The two continued to walk and talk, and after about twenty minutes, Johannes stopped and looked around. "This is an old orchard."

"'Tis what remains of the apple orchard here. Since we have orchards closer to the house, we don't maintain it," Siofre said. "We are near our goal now." She pointed, and Johannes could just make out a structure ahead of them.

A few moments later, the two stepped out into the sunshine, and Johannes saw that they had arrived at a gabled cottage of three stories. Unlike the main house with its towers and turrets, this house was not all stone. It was a combination of half-timbering and uncut natural stone of different colours...quite unusual for Scotland, in Johannes's experience...but very lovely on this woody hill. It seemed half-grown from the land and the surrounding woods.

"This was my great-uncle's home," Siofre said. "He was an artist, a sculptor, and he wanted his own house away from everyone. He built this, designed it himself. No one has lived in it since he died back in . . . ninety-three. But the elves come down a few times a year and do maintenance, cleaning, and so on. Still, it is quite old-fashioned. Not really livable yet."

"You have plans to live here?" Johannes asked, puzzled.

"Nay, not for myself and Lydia, of course not. We will stay at the house, as always. But I have been thinking a lot about my granddaughter recently. Not Dorcas...she lives with Maisie, and that's probably best for them both...but Minerva."

"Minerva?"

"Aye. She is at that school of hers almost the whole year long. She used to have a flat in London when she worked at the Ministry, but now she has nowhere to call her own. An independent witch such as Minerva should not feel reliant on others. She is always welcome at home with Merwyn and Egeria, of course, and she visits Melina or Murdoch or other relatives, and comes to visit me, as well, but . . . I thought a place to call her own. This place." Siofre looked up at Johannes, waiting for his response.

"Ah. I see . . . yes." Johannes nodded.

"What are you not saying, Professor?"

"Ah, it is not for me to say anything."

"Come, come, Professor! I would not bring you here and ask for your opinion if I did not want it."

"I believe that Minerva is pleased to spend her time at Hogwarts, and also there is a place, an island, that Professor Dumbledore has. I believe that during holidays, she spends much time there."

"Aye, his island. It is a land out of time and awareness, Professor. It is not a home where one can invite visitors casually...have you ever been invited there or known anyone whom Minerva has invited?"

"I believe that Malcolm and Gertrude visited for a day last summer," Johannes said tentatively.

"Hmph. Still, it is not hers, and it is desolate." She looked around her. "This is . . . isolated and private, but not set apart the way that island is. And that other, that is Dumbledore's island. Do you know its name? Eilean Tèarmunn. It means 'Refuge Island.' A sanctuary from the wizarding world. Not even a Post Owl can get through to it. That is fine as far as it goes, but for Minerva, I would like her to have a place she could come that is hers if she needs it, and not just that island of Dumbledore's. She can use the cottage or not, as she likes...and bring Dumbledore with her if she wishes."

Johannes twitched a smile and quickly suppressed it. He had heard Minerva's grumbling the previous year when she and Albus had returned to Hogwarts from a visit to her Grandmother Siofre. Not only had Siofre given them separate bedrooms, which would have been appropriate and understandable, but she had put them in far distant parts of the house. Not that that could have stopped Albus and Minerva from spending the night together if they had wanted to, but Minerva had taken offence at it. Johannes had the impression that Albus had been merely amused.

"It is a fine offer for her," Johannes said. "I do not doubt that she will appreciate it."

"I think she will appreciate it more once the place is fixed up. It needs a new kitchen, and the plumbing is antiquated . . . I suppose that when we have the plumbing at the main house re-charmed, I will have the wizard redo all of the plumbing here, too." Malcolm had been able to quiet Lydia's pipes, but he said that the plumbing charms were deteriorating and they should have a specialist come out and look at them before they either had no water pumping into the house or, worse, had a back-up.

"Perhaps you should let Minerva decide whether she wishes to accept your offer before you invest in the decorating," Johannes said.

"You think Minerva might not want it? Even if she uses it seldom, it will be here for her. It can be a holiday cottage for now, if she likes, but she will want a family one day and a home to raise her children. Knowing that she has this house will open up more possibilities for her, I am sure. I will do some redecorating, too, of course. I thought . . . perhaps you might assist. I'd like the gardens redone." Siofre walked toward some brambly looking plants and reached out one hand to them. "There used to be primrose everywhere. So beautiful. Now they are just . . . scraggly. Primrose, Scottish primrose, is my favourite flower. Could you do that? Bring them back? And do some gardens? An herb garden and flowers?"

"Ja, natürlich, and the primrose is easy to bring back to health." Johannes crouched and felt of the soil. He crumbled some in his left hand and passed his right hand over it. "The soil is only tired. We will wake it up," he said, standing and turning to her with a smile. "Your primroses will again be beautiful."

"And perhaps you would help with the redecorating? I know that it isn't gardening, and it isn't a part of your job, but I would value your assistance and advice. Minerva will want to change some things, I am sure, but I would like it to be comfortable for her right from the start. Would you mind?"

"I would enjoy that very much, Madam Tyree."

Siofre's expression brightened. "Lydia will no doubt wish to help, as well, when I speak to her about it. She enjoys such things. You haven't seen the formal dining room yet, but she redid that a few years ago with new colours and patterns, and it is a most pleasing room. And I believe you have seen her suite...including her bedroom," she said with a smirk. "and those she decorated herself, as well. She has a nice sense of colour and of comfort. I think she will be rather excited to have a new project, and one where she may have a bit freer rein than she does in the main house, where tradition dictates certain parameters."

"You haven't spoken with Madam Lydia yet?" Johannes asked.

"I will. We can discuss it tonight at supper. Come, let's go in and take a quick look around before we go on to our next destination."

Siofre gave Johannes a quick tour of the house, which was well laid out, though almost bare of any furniture. The ground floor included a wing that extended behind the cottage and contained the usual kitchen and pantry, but also a sort of atelier, a studio where the artist had created his sculptures. Siofre opened a door that led out of the studio to the back garden, and showed Johannes a large kiln.

"I haven't any idea what to do with this," she said. "I suppose we will just leave it and let Minerva decide."

"It is a nice cottage," Johannes said. "I believe that Minerva will be pleased. You are right, though: it needs work."

"It will be a birthday present. It will be her thirty-fifth birthday this year. Her birthday is in October, so we have time, but I hope we are finished sooner so that she may have use of it this summer." Siofre drew out a watch from around her neck and looked at it. "We don't have more time now, though." She looked up at Johannes. "I had wanted to walk the way down, but . . . I will Apparate us part of the way."

Johannes nodded his assent, and Siofre took his arm and stepped closer. He tried not to notice how warm her hands were, or how close she was standing. He placed his right hand on her left arm and closed his eyes, and the sensation of Side-Along Apparition came over him. It was a smooth Apparition, though, and perhaps the most comfortable Side-Along he had ever experienced.

"You can open your eyes now, laddie, we're there!" Siofre said with a smile.

Opening his eyes, Johannes could feel himself blushing, and he let go of her arm, which he had been grasping more tightly than he realised.

Siofre didn't seem to notice, however, and gestured broadly at the area around them. "So . . . what does the Herbologist think? We really should have waited until May, but we can return then."

Johannes looked around them. "It is beautiful." He crouched and touched some of the delicate-looking plants, gently fingering through them, caressing the small buds.

"Such variety."

Siofre knelt beside him. "Machair."

"Pardon?"

"It is called a machair," Siofre explained. "This area here above the beach, beyond the bog behind us, these plants . . ." Her hand brushed the surface of the plants, and her fingertips met Johannes's hand. Johannes felt the heat rise in his face.

Siofre glanced at him a moment, then stood. "There is a book in the library that I can show you, today or tomorrow, with a chapter on the flora and geology of the machair."

Johannes rose from his crouch, looking away across the machair, certain that his blush was evident and hoping that the cool sea breeze would hide it. "It is very beautiful. I do recognise a few. Butter flowers...no, buttercups they are called. And there are orchids here. It must be wonderful when it all is in full bloom."

"We will return in a few weeks, then," Siofre said briskly. "But this is not our ultimate destination today."

"No?"

"We shall walk the rest of the way," Siofre said. She looked up at him, a teasing sparkle in her eyes. "You do wish to accompany me, don't you, Professor?"

He bowed slightly. "Indeed."

She raised her hand, and he offered her his arm. Resting her hand lightly on his elbow, Siofre led Johannes down the beautifully carpeted machair toward the beach.

"This is wonderfully fertile country," Siofre said. "There is another area, similar to this, where my father grew bere...that barley you like. It was the best bere you could ever taste, sweetly nutty, with a lovely texture. Now, though, the machair has been returned to nature. That was a long time since."

"Perhaps we...you...might grow bere again. What you do not use, I am certain you could sell."

"It would improve the estate's coffers," Siofre said with a nod. "But I do not know . . . I have a green thumb and do well enough with a vegetable garden, but I never learned very much about farming. I believe it takes special skills. So my cousin Martin always tells me when I visit and admire his fields."

"There are certain skills required," Johannes agreed, "but you could learn them. And you have house-elves who would lighten your work quite a bit. Fandenz is quite talented with plants of all sorts, it seems. If you require cash crops, I am certain you could generate a good income. Even this summer, you will have more produce from the kailyard than you and Madam Lydia could possibly use, even sharing it with friends and neighbours. There are, no doubt, restaurants or shops that would appreciate your vegetables and be glad to purchase them."

Siofre looked up at him. "It would be good to have another source of income. Not that we are wanting, of course. But there are expenses, you know, and it is good to put something aside for the family's future."

"Then I will earn my keep and my commission and find you a market for your produce. We can begin immediately...there are many lovely greens that are ready now. And the bere? You would like to grow that again?"

"Aye, perhaps . . . but not here on this machair. I will show you the other sometime. And we can discuss it." Siofre sounded doubtful.

"I had a farm in Germany, as well as the greenhouse. We grew cabbages, potatoes, and such. I did not grow a grain, but when I was a boy, I would help my uncle with his farm, and he grew wheat. I believe I could start the bere crop for you."

"We will think about it. I will discuss it with Lydia and ask Merwyn's advice, too."

"It is a large investment," Johannes said. "It is good to consider it carefully."

"And here we are," Siofre said as the rounded base of a small hill.

"Very charming," Johannes said with a smile. "It is a . . . a . . . what do they call them?" He wanted to say it was a silly, but he knew that didn't sound quite right.

"It is a folly. A shell house." Siofre smiled at Johannes's reaction. "My grandfather had it built for my grandmother for their fifth wedding anniversary in seventeen eighty-two. Come. I'll show you."

The two walked up the shell-inlaid path to the small stone and shell house. It consisted of three rounded sections, and shells decorated the window frames and the doorframe. The shutters were closed, but Siofre waved her wand and opened the shutters and the door. As they stepped into the tiny house, Siofre waved her wand again and opened all of the windows, which swung outward, letting in a fresh breeze.

Inside, the little house was divided neatly into three rooms; each floor was inlaid with both shells and glittering stones in pleasing patterns, geometric and figurative. The centre room, which was the largest, had Poseidon with his trident, surrounded by dolphins, sea serpents, and white-crested waves. The floors of the two rooms on either side each had different scenes of selkies and sea-witches, and fish, dolphins, seabirds, and seals.

The tables, chairs, and benches were all decorated with shells, as were the walls, window frames, fireplaces, and even the ceiling. It was wonderfully whimsical, and Johannes was smiling widely in delight as he gazed at it all.

"This is one part of the grounds we never neglect," Siofre said. "We enjoy it most in the summer, but even in winter, with fires in the fireplaces and the lamps lit, their light glittering off the mother-of-pearl and the other shells, some warm rugs and soft cushions, it is a beautiful place for a casual supper. The waves crash, the wind blows, and in here, it is warm and cosy . . ."

"And romantic. I mean to say, I am sure it must be," Johannes added hastily.

"It is." Siofre ran her hand along one of the shell-encrusted window sills. "My grandmother loved the sea, and this was my grandfather's gift to her, so that she could come down and enjoy the machair, the beach, and the water, no matter the weather. We sometimes have our midsummer bonfire on the beach down below. The last one we had here was a year or two before Mother died. We had fireworks, too. She enjoyed it very much, and it was good for her to be able to come inside and watch from the shelter of the shell house."

"You will do a bonfire here again this year?" Johannes asked.

Siofre shook her head. "I don't know. I haven't thought about it. Now let's see if Multry and her wee ones . . . yes, here we are," she said, opening a shell-inlaid cupboard door. She pulled out a basket and looked into it. "Tea, Professor? We have tea . . . poppyseed cakes . . . and here, some cold milk."

"Yes, thank you," Johannes said. He took the bright blue napkins from the basket and placed them on the nearest small round table, then he helped Siofre set out cups, saucers, and cake plates. He held her chair for her, then he sat down opposite as she poured the tea.

"This is lovely, Madam Tyree. It is kind of you." He put a poppyseed cake on each little plate.

"Nonsense. We need our tea, and you need a bite to eat, too, after working in the fresh air. And we both had a long walk." She stirred her tea. "It has been a good

afternoon. I should thank you."

"I enjoyed it very much." He looked at her over the rim of his cup as he took a sip of tea. She was lovely, her hair slightly windblown, her cheeks rosy, and her eyes so bright. He smiled at her. She had enjoyed his company, it seemed, and he most assuredly had enjoyed hers. He took a steadying breath. "I will be forever grateful to Malcolm for referring me to you. Working here is a pleasure beyond the work itself. I am very glad that I have made your acquaintance, yours and Madam Lydia's."

Siofre nodded. "I am, too. And although it may be a convenience for you to distinguish between the two Madam Tyrees by referring to us as Madam Lydia and Madam Siofre, perhaps you might simplify it."

Johannes raised his eyebrows inquiringly.

"I would not be offended if you simply used my first name," Siofre said, "and I doubt that Lydia would mind if you addressed her so, either. It would be easier." Her cheek twitched as she gave a crooked smile. "And you would sound a bit less like one of our house-elves . . . and more like a friend."

"I accept. Thank you. And you must call me by my Christian name," Johannes said.

"Johannes. That is like John, isn't it?"

"Ja. It is one version of John."

Siofre smiled. "I like the way you pronounce that. 'Tchon.' It is charming."

Johannes blushed.

"Really, I do," Siofre said. "You know, I have heard Malcolm call you something else...Honnie?"

"Yes. It is a sort of nickname a few friends use."

Siofre chuckled. "The first time he said it, I thought he was calling you 'honey'! I was a wee bit taken aback."

Johannes laughed at that. "No, just Honnie."

She nodded. "Would you like another cake?"

"No, thank you."

"More tea?"

He nodded, and she poured.

"May we do something like this again?" Johannes asked. "Perhaps this weekend . . . on Saturday afternoon, I am going to visit a garden I worked on last year. I need only spend a few minutes. If there is work to be done, I will return some other time. Perhaps afterward, I might be able to bring you to tea? If you are not busy, of course."

"I would enjoy that. Thank you." Siofre's eyes sparkled at him from across the table, and Johannes felt exhilarated by her smile.

"It will be my pleasure, Madam Tyree . . . Siofre." Her name seemed a gentle breeze from his lips. He smiled softly. It would be his pleasure.

Chapter Eight: Our Siofre

Chapter 8 of 32

Johannes contemplates Siofre as he works, then later, we get a glimpse of Siofre's day. Lydia provides encouragement and some practical help.

Chapter features Lydia, Johannes, and Siofre.



Chapter Eight: Our Siofre

Lydia offered Johannes another sandwich, which he accepted. The two were having lunch in the morning room since it was just the two of them that day.

"So, it seems you and Siofre had a good time yesterday," Lydia remarked.

"We did. It was a most charming afternoon," Johannes replied, adding some mustard to his sandwich.

"I'll have to go take a look at the cottage soon. It's been years since I've been down there, I must confess. I just trust that the house-elves are keeping it up properly."

"It appeared so."

"And you two have plans, I understand?"

"I did agree to assist Ma, Siofre, with the redecoration," Johannes said, "but when she showed it to me, she said that she would value your assistance. She praised your decorating abilities highly."

"Did she?" Lydia smiled brightly. "She doesn't often say much about anything I've done around the house. But that wasn't what I meant...and I do think it's a brilliant idea to have you help, too...I meant that she said something about being gone with you on Saturday afternoon."

"Ah, yes. I did suggest . . . that I might reciprocate. Tea." Johannes hoped that Lydia was not feeling left out. "As a gesture, because she gave me tea yesterday." That sounded disingenuous, since he had often had tea with one or the other or both witches in the afternoon.

"That is wonderful. I don't think our Siofre gets out enough. Well, she gets *out*, and she probably sees many more people than I do, really, but she doesn't go out and just have fun very often. She claims those jaunts with Malcolm are fun, but really, it's just not the same, is it?"

"No, I suppose that it isn't."

"And even if they have their tea after, or lunch, it's not being taken out," Lydia continued.

Johannes didn't know what to say. He wondered whether he should invite Lydia to join them. He had been looking forward to bringing Siofre out, just the two of them.

"It's good for Siofre to have an outing with a gentleman."

Johannes blushed. "If you would like to join us..."

"Oh, heavens, no!" Lydia exclaimed. "That's completely out of the question. No, no, no! You must take Siofre out and see that she enjoys herself."

"Ah, well, perhaps another time," Johannes said, although he was relieved that Lydia had declined his offer; her vehemence, however, was a bit overwhelming.

"Have you decided where you will have your tea?"

"I am not sure . . ." He had already considered Madam Puddifoot's in Hogsmeade, but he felt unaccountably uncomfortable with that idea. He doubted that it was a Hogsmeade weekend, since the Easter holiday had only just ended and there usually wasn't another Hogsmeade weekend right after a holiday, but Hogsmeade was small and people gossiped. Not that there was anything to gossip about. But people could make up tales out of whole cloth.

"There are a couple places where she enjoys going . . ." Lydia thought for a moment. "Do you know that little tearoom in the Clypeum, the one just next to the bookshop?"

Johannes shook his head. "I do not know Glasgow at all. I have never been to the Clypeum."

"Pity, it's a nice little teahouse, and Siofre always enjoys their scones and cakes. It's called the Primrose Room."

Primroses were Siofre's favourite flower, Johannes remembered. He disliked having to ask Siofre for a Side-Along to the Clypeum to bring her to tea, however. Perhaps he might Floo to somewhere in the Clypeum and reconnoitre before their date...their afternoon tea. On the other hand, he could bring her to the Cailleachan Café in Edinburgh. Which was just steps from her grandson Murdoch's apothecary. He frowned.

"You know, if you like," Lydia said, "we could pop over there this afternoon and you could see whether it's suitable. Just pop over and pop back so you know how to get there. Or tomorrow morning. If you like. I know you have work this afternoon, but it would only take a few minutes."

"Perhaps sometime," Johannes said. "I think we can go to the Cailleachan Café on Saturday. I've often been to McTavish Street."

It was Lydia's turn to frown. "Their tea is fine, and their coffee is quite good, but . . . well, I suppose it is up to you."

"Does Siofre not like the café?" Johannes asked.

"It would be fine, no doubt."

Johannes thought a moment. "If we can leave immediately after lunch, I could see this tearoom and compare it. I really only know the café and Madam Puddifoot's...other than establishments in Diagon Alley, and I have the impression that Siofre does not like Diagon Alley very well."

"Eat up, then," Lydia said, "and we can take a quick trip and you can see if you like the tearoom."

A half hour later, Johannes was back working in the gardens, wearing a wide-brimmed straw hat with his work clothes. Fandenz and Gweller were both helping him that day, and Mynok had popped out for a few minutes to inspect the work of the younger elves and ask Johannes, whom he called "Master Professor," whether their service was adequate. Johannes had reassured the old tufty-eared house-elf that their work was exemplary, far better than adequate, and Mynok had Disapparated again, beaming with pride.

Johannes could hardly keep himself from beaming, either. The Primrose Room had been perfect. It was simple, elegant, and charming, and sunlight streamed in through the large front windows. The Cailleachan Café was atmospheric, but the café was very narrow and deep, and it tended to be dark, even in the afternoon. It could be romantic, but there was something cheerful and pleasant about the tearoom. The smell of scones had been tempting even though Johannes had just eaten lunch. Glad that he had slipped on a robe over his work trousers and jacket, Johannes had even inquired whether reservations were possible. The witch had hesitated a moment, then said that they did not usually reserve tables, but she could hold a table for them if they were prompt.

Setting a spade to turning the earth in the centre of the area he was working that afternoon, Johannes cast his attention on the spare outdoor furniture and the conveniently placed large rocks and boulders that ringed the lawn. He had promised Siofre that the area would be ready in time for the May Day eve bonfire and for the family picnic the first weekend in May. He didn't want to change the basic character of the spot, since the bonfire had been traditionally held there for years, but he did think that cleaning it up, rearranging things, and perhaps adding a few new pieces of furniture, could spruce it up. Since they always had music and singing...Morgan played the fiddle, Malcolm played the recorder and penny whistle, and there was always a Tyree or two with pipes...Johannes thought that having a slightly raised wooden platform for the musicians would be nice, as well. Before the next bonfire, he might make additional improvements, but May Day was in just two weeks, and for the time being, this would do.

Although his training had included a little about garden planning and garden architecture, that had not been its emphasis. There were few Herbologists who specialised in gardening per se, and some even looked down upon it as something one hired others to do, but Johannes enjoyed it, and although his greatest enjoyment came from the more magic-intensive tasks, such as creating microclimates, he also found satisfaction in deciding the layout of the gardens, what to plant and where to plant it. He had used the existing grounds layout as a base and had consulted the original garden plans...the large formal garden would be very much like one that had been designed in the mid-eighteenth century...but he had added many ideas of his own. He was looking forward to the new greenhouse, but that would not be erected until at least July, and he had not yet found a builder for it.

Johannes called Gweller and told him to finish preparing the area for the actual bonfire and to line the pit with stone, then he left for the artist's cottage that Siofre planned to give to Minerva. No time like the present to begin clearing out weeds and determining what to plant and how the soil might need to be treated. He thought that once he had a plan of action, perhaps Multry might find time to work on the weeding and basic preparation. She could bring Duster and Kilbeena with her, and they would have fun helping her with the work, he was sure. The two wee elves had spent time helping him in the gardens a few afternoons each week, and they had proved more useful than Johannes had anticipated, and it amused him to watch them as they worked, occasionally using house-elf magic with varying degrees of success.

He had learned that the nonsense they talked when they whispered and giggled together wasn't nonsense at all, but a house-elf language, for which Multry had scolded them when she caught them speaking it in the gardens with him there. Siofre explained that there was a house-elf taboo on speaking their language in front of humans...or in the presence of any other sentient beings who weren't house-elves. Until they were five or six years old, house-elf children often still spoke it together regardless of who they were with, and the taboo wasn't strictly enforced until they were eight, at which time house-elf children were viewed to be old enough to carry more of the

responsibilities of an adult house-elf, including following the house-elf imposed taboos. By the time they were fourteen, they were considered old enough to serve as a fully adult house-elf, though Siofre explained that although the young elves were given many of the responsibilities of an adult, house-elves considered adulthood to begin at the age of twenty-two, and in a well-run household where the house-elves did not have other codes imposed upon them by their wizarding families, mating only occurred after passing that milestone...provided that a suitable mate was available.

Johannes Apparated to the cottage, but spent only a little time clearing away dead plants, fallen limbs, and weeds. As he worked, though, he envisioned what he could do with the area around the house that would be both attractive and productive, and yet also not require Minerva's on-going attention. He was sure that Siofre would spare an elf once a week or so to come down and do any maintenance that was needed, but he wanted to make the upkeep minimal.

Since he had brought no Charmed garden implements with him, Johannes used his wand to prune back the scraggly looking primrose bushes, then he cast a spell and incinerated the trimmings. He took his handkerchief from his pocket, waved his wand to create a small bag, and collected a soil sample to bring with him and test later. Finally, he selected a primrose that was healthiest and trimmed off a shoot. Although there were some fine primrose bushes in a few of the gardens nearer the house, Johannes felt a curious affection for these old primroses. He doubted that Siofre was speaking of these primrose bushes specifically when she said that the Scottish primrose was her favourite flower, but nonetheless, for what he had in mind, he wanted at least one cutting from these plants. He could transplant or start new plants from other clippings from the main gardens, but there would be one plant sprung from this garden.

Before he left, Johannes strolled around just outside the garden area, examining the surrounding trees, including the apple orchard. He found an old, neglected coppice, and made a mental note to ask Siofre how she wanted it treated. It was an overgrown mess, and he doubted that any of it had been cut in several decades. He wondered whether Siofre's uncle had used some of the coppiced wood to make charcoal for his kiln, or whether he had used the wood for some other purpose...perhaps for making some kind of bent-wood sculptures, or even for furniture or fencing. Siofre might remember.

Johannes smiled as he prepared to Disapparate for the main house. In two days, he would be taking Siofre to tea in the Clypeum. It was good to be making friends with the two witches...some clients whom he might have had could have been far less pleasant and amusing. Lydia was certainly amusing. And Siofre . . . there was something about her that made his heart beat faster, his skin tingle where she touched him, and his mind and heart and eye and ear all pause to capture her, to savour her. It seemed that his thoughts were constantly turning to her, and now, as he held his wand and Disapparated, her name was in his mind, on the tip of his tongue, the whisper of *Siofre* a breeze through his being.

He almost laughed as he opened his eyes and found himself gazing at the witch herself, coming up the walk toward the front doors. She smiled up at him as she approached.

"You had a good day, Professor?"

"I did, indeed, Madam Tyree," Johannes replied with a bow. "And you?"

"It was . . . eventful," Siofre said.

"Eventful? It sounds as though there is a story behind those words." He offered her his arm.

"Aye, there is. And perhaps you shall hear it," Siofre said, placing her hand on his wrist, her fingers grazing the back of his hand. "You are joining us for dinner this evening?"

As he attempted to respond, Johannes's breath caught at the sensation of her magic tingling from her fingertips. "Ah, ah, ja, ah, I eat dinner with you this evening." He tried to control the shudder in his breath.

"Good. I hope you will also join us in the sitting room later. Lydia enjoys your company, and she appreciates having a larger audience when she decides to play the piano after dinner."

"Lydia is accomplished," Johannes replied, opening the front door for them.

"She is," Siofre agreed with a nod. "You will join us?"

"I will . . . if you like." Johannes placed his free hand on Siofre's and caught her eyes with his own.

"It is not only Lydia who enjoys your company," Siofre said briskly, dropping her hand. "I will go see what Multry is planning for dinner. I'll see you later."

Johannes nodded, his nod becoming a slight bow. "Until then, Madam Tyree."

Siofre disappeared down the hall in the direction of the kitchen, and Johannes stepped up the stairs to his rooms. He entered his sitting room first. He had created a miniature greenhouse on a long table by one of the windows, and he took out his sprig of primrose and, after placing it in specially Charmed water, he put it in the glass enclosure. The small bag of soil he placed on the table next to the greenhouse. He could analyse it later that evening.

His rooms were spectacular, richly appointed and beautifully decorated. Even his rooms at Hogwarts had not been so beautiful. The fireplace was large, and the rich wood surround was intricately carved by some master artisan long ago. The heavy velvet draperies were a rich green with gold fringe and matching gold-tasselled tie-back sashes. The furniture was chiefly upholstered in similar hues, and the carpets' designs picked up the colours of the furniture and draperies. The walls, though, had hand-painted scenes depicting life in the Highlands. Above the large fireplace was a massive landscape with wall sconces on either side of its gold frame, three Everlasting Smoke-free Charmed Candles in each sconce. His bedroom was no simpler than the sitting room, and had Johannes been a hedonist, he would have been well-pleased with it; as it was, he was satisfied, and even felt somewhat spoiled by the lavish surroundings. It was quite a contrast with his simple but cozy flat in Hogsmeade.

Johannes went through his bedroom to his dressing room...he'd never had such a thing before and felt it was completely superfluous, but the house-elves had hung his robes in one of the wardrobes in the dressing room, and so he used it. Since it had a marble sink with a well-lit mirror, it was a convenient place to shave, though he also had his own separate bath and toilet. He doubted that royalty could be treated any better than he was there at the Tyree estate. He certainly was wanting for nothing and had more than he needed.

He disrobed, putting his clothes in the hamper provided, then he washed quickly, brushed his hair, and shaved, using just a bit of a sandalwood aftershave potion. Though he usually just wore his work clothes to lunch, he had taken to changing for dinner, at least cleaning up his trousers and putting on a fresh shirt and a different over-robe. That evening, Johannes selected his deep azure blue robes and his well-polished black boots. He examined himself in the mirror once more, then he took a blue ribbon, charmed it to be the same blue as his robes, and he tied his hair back using a slip knot. He felt tidier, but he still took just a smidgen of a hair potion and lightly smoothed back his hair at the sides. He shrugged at himself in the mirror, seeing no real difference in his appearance, and chuckled at his sudden attack of vanity. But then he recalled the sensation of Siofre's fingertips grazing his wrist, and he shivered involuntarily at the mere memory of her touch.

Johannes pushed the memory aside...and any connection it might have with his careful attention to his appearance...and returned to his sitting room to read until the dinner bell rang.

"You said that today was 'eventful,' Siofre," Johannes remarked as he set his soup spoon down.

"Aye." Siofre nodded and took another sip of her soup.

"Weren't you at the Terwilligers' today?" Lydia asked, pushing her soup plate away slightly. At Siofre's nod, she said, "I thought you said that it was going to be a simple spell-casting job. Lengthy but straightforward, you said."

Siofre finished her soup and rang the small bell by her place. The soup plates vanished and a moment later, their dinner plates appeared in front of them, followed by bowls and platters of food.

"'Twas supposed to be simple and straightforward, but Gwyneth has a fool of a neighbour. Bad enough the husband she has, but her neighbours are all fools, from the evidence I saw today." She offered the platter of fish to Johannes, who indicated that she should help herself first. She took a large piece, then passed the platter to him. He served Lydia, then took the last piece for himself as Lydia took the vegetables and passed them on to Siofre before helping herself to the potatoes.

"Don't keep us in suspense, Siofre," Lydia said. "Why are her neighbours fools?"

"Well, p'raps not all of them," Siofre said grudgingly, "but one wizard certainly is. Decided he wanted to know why I was there, but instead of coming up to the front door and knocking...we'd have sent him away with a flea in his ear if he had, of course...he decided to spy through the windows. Fool of a man." Siofre shook her head in disgust. "He didn't understand what he was seeing, and alerted the Ministry. The MLE was swarming all over the place, convinced we were performing some kind of Dark Magic. I should have been home by mid-afternoon, but they held everything up. They didn't appreciate that I wouldn't tell them precisely what I was doing and why, but they did finally leave, since they could find no evidence of Dark Magic, other than a pinprick on Gwyneth's finger, which could have been from anything. Fools everywhere."

"Were the spells effective?" Lydia asked.

Siofre twitched one shoulder. "I think they will be. But I will pop over tomorrow and see her, then again on Monday. The last thing I did before I left was owl Egeria to come and Heal her jaw. Gwyneth had tried to do it herself, but you could tell she hadn't completely healed it, and that was with a Glamour over it."

"He broke her jaw?" Lydia asked, eyes wide.

"Gwyneth said she 'fell.'" Siofre snorted. "As if a simple fall could break a witch's jaw! Believe me, even before today, I'd wanted her to leave Cadoc and report him to the Cornish regional gamot or to the MLE, but she wouldn't. She blames everything but her husband. She wouldn't even let me lay any spells directly on him. She remembers a different man, the one she married, and she wants that man back. We'll see how that goes . . ."

"You don't sound hopeful," Lydia said.

"I may need to take additional measures," Siofre said. "And the spells I cast will only be effective as long as they are in the house. From what I understand, he drinks, then comes home mean. On good nights, he passes out before he does more than shout and make a scene. The nosy neighbour turns a blind eye to the husband's behaviour, though he surely must know of it. Any road, I did what I could to make sure that if he does come home drunk, he passes out straightaway upon crossing the threshold. If he tries to take a drink at home, he'll become ill. Gwyneth claims that when he's not drinking, he's moody, but otherwise fine. Most of the spells I cast were aimed at his drinking...making the consequences miserable for him. I cast a few protective spells around Gwyneth, and I gave her an emergency Portkey, as well. If Cadoc becomes violent or frightens her in any way, she can Portkey to her brother and sister-in-law's home."

"Why would she stay with such a brute?" Johannes asked.

"She does love him, or the man she remembers marrying," Siofre replied, "but she is expecting a baby. It was partly for her baby's sake that I tried to persuade her to leave the man, but she . . . she has her reasons, I suppose."

"He hits her or hexes her and she is pregnant?" Johannes asked, even more appalled than he had been. "The man should be . . . he should be . . . I do not know a suitable punishment, but he does not deserve the family if he cannot treat them with the love and respect that he should. He should be their protector!"

Siofre twitched a slight smile. "Perhaps a lecture in gentlemanly behaviour might do him some good . . . in a few weeks, after the man has ceased drinking. If we can manage that."

"If you cannot?" Johannes asked.

"Then I will take other measures, if I canna' convince Gwyneth to leave him and go to her older brother. I believe that the Bowens would take her in. Dylan has a strong sense of family, and Violet seems a good witch. But if Gwyneth would not go to them, then . . . I may cast a few spells to directly effect Cadoc, whether Gwyneth would have it or no."

"Would that be . . . legal? Those spells?" Johannes asked.

Lydia laughed, and Siofre's eyebrow rose in amusement as she gave a narrow, crooked smile.

"I would not want to see you in trouble," Johannes said. "This man is bad, but I do not want to see you have trouble, neither from the Ministry nor from him."

"Don't worry about legality," Lydia said, reaching over and patting Johannes's hand. "Our Siofre will be just fine."

"And from that wizard? If he learns of it? If he hears that she was there today and guesses something? He could try to . . . to venge himself."

Lydia laughed again. "Then in that case, I do pity the man!"

Johannes cocked his head. He remembered well what he had learned from Minerva about Tyree witches and their reputation, but then he looked at Siofre, petite and slight of build...though not slight of magic...and he couldn't help but worry about her. Nonetheless, he did recognise that she could take care of herself, and take very good care of others, as well. It would be unwise to seem to suggest otherwise.

"I hope that you can help Mrs Terwilliger," Johannes said.

"Siofre will," Lydia said confidently.

"I hope to," Siofre said more moderately. "I usually find some way of achieving my aim . . . but not always."

"When was the last time you failed?" Lydia asked, apparently rhetorically, but Siofre looked at her seriously.

"You remember young Simon Hapsby-Fuller," Siofre replied. "I would say that I failed him."

"Yes, but he's out of Azkaban now, and from the letter you received from him last month, he has a very good life in Toronto now, a fiancée, a good job," Lydia said. "And if it hadn't been for you and your advocacy, I'm sure his Azkaban sentence would have been much longer than it was."

"Azkaban?" Johannes wondered what kinds of people Siofre commonly consorted with. He had a vague memory of a Hapsby-Fuller who had been a student the first couple years he taught at Hogwarts, but he had not taken NEWTs level Herbology and so Johannes hadn't come to know him.

"He very nearly killed his uncle," Lydia said. "But for good reason..."

"This is not talk for the dinner table," Siofre said softly.

"You're right, of course," Lydia agreed. "But Simon is happy now and doing well, and that's important to remember."

Johannes, despite his innate curiosity, was happy to leave the subject behind, particularly if it was one that made Siofre uncomfortable.

Their dessert arrived, and conversation turned to the imminent arrival of Morgan, Fiona, and the quads in just a few days. The house itself was ready, and Johannes had done much to start the kitchen gardens for Fiona, and he'd overseen the house-elves in trimming back the bushes and planting some annual flowers near the front door. Lydia had taken charge of renewing the paths and drive between the main house and the lodge. All that really remained was for the McGonagalls and their furniture to move in.

They rose from the table and started out of the dining room together.

"How would you feel about some nice, melodic Brahms this evening, Siofre? Or perhaps a little Liszt?" Lydia asked, putting her arm through her sister-in-law's. She gave her arm a squeeze. "After the day you've had, I think that might be just the ticket for you. A little romantic music and a nice novel, you'll forget all the worries of the day."

"I have work I was going to fetch from my study," Siofre said. "The income and expenses. There's the plumbing coming up..."

"No, no, not tonight," Lydia said firmly. "Read something light tonight." She looked up at Johannes and reached out with her free hand to take one of his. "You'll persuade our Siofre, won't you, dear? And no work for you, either! You're a pair, you two are! Working dawn to dusk isn't enough for you, you want to work half the night, too...well, not tonight! Tonight, you relax."

Johannes smiled and Siofre let out a good-natured groan of capitulation.

"Now, I'm going to go sort out the sheet music. You two run along and find something light to read...or not to read...whilst I play." Lydia stepped out in front of them and brought their hands together briefly before letting them go. "I'll expect to see you both in a few minutes, then!"

She bustled off through the sitting room to the music room, and Siofre looked up at Johannes with a wry grin. "I believe we have been given our orders, Professor."

"Indeed, just so, Madam Tyree," Johannes said. He touched her hand tentatively, letting his fingers just rest on the back of her hand. "Shall we fetch something to read?"

Siofre nodded. "There is a new book on the myths and history of the warrior witches of Skye that I bought three months ago and haven't started yet. It's by my bed, waiting for me to find the time for it."

"In my sitting room, I have a book I was reading before dinner. It is not light reading, as it is a new Herbology text on Dendromancy, but it is in German, so perhaps Lydia will not notice."

"Aye, she will notice," Siofre said, removing her hand from his, but placing it on his elbow and leading him toward the stairs. "She often reads novels and such in German. French and Italian, too. Lydia is quite clever in her way. Never underestimate a Slytherin, I say."

"Ah. Then I will find something different. I would not wish to disappoint her," Johannes said with a smile.

At the top of the stairs, they paused, and Siofre said, "I will meet you downstairs in a few minutes."

Johannes nodded, still smiling. He took her hand between his. "Light reading and melodic music, as Lydia promised us, 'aye,' Madam Tyree?"

"Aye, Professor, light reading and . . . romantic music." Siofre gave him a crooked grin, then turned quickly and walked away down the hall.

Author's Note: I posted a new one-shot, ["It's not the heat."](#) to the "Cheering Charms" set of drabbles and flashfics. I was suffering in a heat wave when I wrote it. Temps in the low 90s are very welcome "cool" weather at the moment, it was so hot and humid.

Chapter Nine: Breakfast with Siofre

Chapter 9 of 32

Johannes breakfasts with Siofre.

Chapter features Johannes and Siofre, with mention of the Prince family and other canon pureblood families.



Chapter Nine: Breakfast with Siofre

Siofre came into the morning room to find Johannes already eating his breakfast of cheese, thin-sliced cured bacon, and rye bread.

"Good morning, Professor...no, don't get up," she said as he began to stand when she entered the room.

"Good morning, Madam Tyree."

Sorrel popped in. "Still liking salty porridge for breakfast this morning, Madam Siofre?"

"Aye, thank you, Sorrel," the witch replied, taking her seat. "And bacon. Cooked." She looked with distaste at the large slice of pale pink bacon that Johannes was folding and placing on a slice of the dark brown rye bread.

Sorrel Disapparated.

"You are up early," Siofre observed. A pot of tea appeared on the table in front of her.

"I have much to do today. I have some work that I need to do in my little garden today, too, so I want to start early. You have plans for today? You mentioned that you are visiting Mrs Terwilliger again."

"Aye, this afternoon after lunch. This morning, I'm paying Maisie a visit, and we'll have lunch together."

"I hope that you find Mrs Terwilliger in good health."

Siofre nodded. "I will be able to tell you this evening, if you are here."

"I planned to return to Hogsmeade as usual," Johannes replied. "But I will be interested to hear your report tomorrow afternoon. Shall I come by for you at three-thirty?"

Siofre nodded. "You had a visit to make before that...a garden to check on?"

"Yes. It will not take long. I will be here at three-thirty."

"I could go with you. I would enjoy seeing your work."

Johannes hesitated. "To be honest, I would not go there myself if I could excuse myself. It is a matter of professional pride only that I go. I find the family . . . uncongenial."

Siofre's eyebrows rose. "Really? In what way?"

"They are always . . . polite, you understand. But they are rude at the same time. They are . . . hm, hochmütig . . . haughty? Is that correct?"

"Aye, I know the type," Siofre said.

"They also treat the house-elves with less care than I would treat any creature. I found it shameful. I will accept no new work from them."

"Who are they? The Blacks? Or the Rosiers?"

Johannes shook his head as he swallowed a bite of bread and cheese. "It is the Mellifluas. They hire me last summer to replant their herb garden. I also planted a small bed of Mandragora. They will soon be ready to harvest. Tomorrow I check on their state."

"I was in school with a Melliflua. Haughty is a good word to describe them. I don't know if I've met one who wasn't. They're part of the English pureblood set. Unpleasant lot. I was surprised, actually, to discover that our Malcolm was seeing one of them. She seems all right, though."

"Professor Gamp is nothing like these people. She is one of the finest witches I know. And her family . . . she may have some less pleasant relatives, but her brother Gareth was killed in the fight against Grindelwald, and her parents seem nice. They treat their house-elves well, I believe."

Siofre shrugged. "I know Columbine slightly. She tolerates her relatives better than I could. I do not know an that speaks well of her or no. But the Gamps do seem better than the Blacks and Rosiers. Do you know," Siofre said, lowering her voice, "that in their bondage ritual, the Blacks actually . . . require *service or death* from their house-elves? And they take that literally. A house-elf becomes decrepit in any way, and they . . ." She shuddered, unable to continue.

Johannes's mouth was open, but nothing came out. Finally, after blinking several times, trying to comprehend what Siofre had told him, he said, "They should be in prison. Do you say this is legal?"

Siofre shrugged. "Apparently. The heads are placed on display in the family home."

"That is sickening."

"And they call the Muggle-borns inferiors," Siofre said in disgust. "The Blacks are among the worst of that lot. Any decent Blacks are disinherited and treated as nonentities by the rest of the family. The Gamps are not like them, although they have had the bad taste to marry the occasional Black. The Princes . . . well, perhaps one day, Lydia will tell you something of her family."

"They are pureblood? Are they like the Blacks?" Johannes couldn't imagine a sweet, humour-filled witch like Lydia coming from a family like that.

"They're pureblood, more or less, depending on what a person counts as 'pure,'" Siofre said. "But they aren't always very nice people, though they put great stock in what they consider 'proper' behaviour. Her parents did, any road. Her brother, Bertrand, wasn't quite as closed-minded." Siofre hesitated. "Lydia was always a vibrant witch, interested in everything. When she was a girl, after Hogwarts she wanted to go to the Academy of Magical Musical and Dramatic Arts in London. It was a great dream of hers . . . Her parents disapproved. It was not a proper pursuit for a lady, in their opinion."

When Siofre didn't elaborate, Johannes asked, "Did she go there anyway?"

"She tried. She moved to London. Without her parents' support, she didn't have the money to attend full-time, but she took the occasional class. She worked in the little theatre that used to be around the corner from Gringotts, but only backstage, I think. I don't know what she did, particularly, but she had hopes . . . Then she had a spot of trouble. Her parents wanted even less to do with her then, and her brother . . . the help he offered would only be temporary. He had recently married, and Carlotta was expecting their first child. There were limits to what he felt he could do. Murdoch had always had a soft spot for Lydia when they were in school. When he learned of her situation from Bertrand, he offered her marriage, and Lydia accepted."

"Trouble? What sort of trouble?" Johannes asked.

Siofre raised one eyebrow. "What kind of trouble can a young witch find herself in?"

"Ah. Ah!" Johannes nodded. "I see."

"I should not have told you about this, but . . . you seem to be a wizard of discretion. And it was a very long time ago now."

"But what happened? Is Bertrand...?"

"Bertrand is my brother's son, and their only child. Ironically, as is often the case in life, Lydia's trouble resolved itself a month after their marriage." Siofre poured herself another cup of tea and sipped it, a pensive look on her face.

"But she and Murdoch remained married?"

"Of course. And they were happy together. Lydia's dreams were never fulfilled in quite the way she had hoped, but she did have more music lessons, and she spent some time teaching piano, herself, both privately and at the academy. And she had her family." Siofre gazed out the window and sighed. "Their son was born quite a number of years after she and Murdoch married. She had difficulty carrying a child to term. It was sad for them both. They were overjoyed when Bertrand was born."

"Where is he now? You have spoken frequently of Lydia's grandson, Connor, occasionally of her granddaughter, Phoebe, but rarely of Bertrand."

"He and Sally are somewhere in Asia, I believe. Or perhaps in the South Pacific. We hear from them occasionally. They left about . . . twelve years ago. They've not been back since. Bertrand didn't hear about his father's death in time to return for the funeral." Siofre shrugged. "They were going on a two-month holiday and never returned."

"How very odd."

"Phoebe has seen them...she reported that they seemed quite well. It was in the Philippines about four years ago. She was in Japan for some specialised metal-charming training, and so she stopped there to see her parents before returning home. She spent two weeks with them, and she said they had a good time together."

"I hope you enjoy your morning with your daughter."

Siofre nodded. "What are your plans for today, other than working in your garden?"

"Fandenz and I will plant the bere your cousin sent. We plough the southern machair this morning. It is only a small plot, a few acres, but we will see how it does. If it is good, we will do a second planting later in summer, perhaps ten acres. We will see the yield on that and plan for next year...if it does well."

"Good. Martin said he would be happy to talk with you if you have any questions or run into a problem."

"He could look at the field, perhaps, when the barley grows."

"Ah, perhaps. He seldom leaves Tiree Beag."

"He will not be here for the bonfire?"

"Probably not. But there will be others from the island, and Jacob...that is his younger brother...will be here with his family. They will stay overnight, possibly through the weekend. Jacob also grows bere. If you would like, he would look at your bere field, I am sure."

"Good. Will there be many people staying through the weekend?"

"Aye. I hope that Minerva will come, also. She canna be here for the bonfire, but we are having Murdoch's birthday party on Saturday, and she said she would try to come for that. Her duties at school may not allow it. But the rest of the McGonagalls will be here. Lydia is overseeing getting the rooms ready for everyone, planning the meals, and so on."

"How many guest will there be?" Johannes asked.

"Not including the wee bairns, about forty for the bonfire, most of whom will stay overnight for the picnic and Murdoch's party on Saturday. I think some will be coming for the picnic, but not the bonfire. Lydia has a more exact count of who will be here when. I am happy not to worry about that."

"The bonfire pit is prepared, and I will finish the work on the area next week. It will be ready for the Beltane party."

"I have no concerns there, either," Siofre said. "It is still two weeks away."

Johannes nodded and pushed back from the table. He looked at his pocket watch.

"Do you have to leave...tonight, I mean?" Siofre asked. "I have detained you long enough this morning."

"I have an appointment early in the morning with Madam Puddifoot. She has expressed interest in our herbs, then I have another with Kyle Flatiron at the Three Broomsticks. I hope to interest him in our vegetables. He already has a supplier, but perhaps we can offer him some variety."

Siofre twitched a smile. "Very good. Thank you. I should be doing that."

"You are busy, I know, and I have the knowledge of the gardens and what we can supply. I will make you good deals, I hope."

"And what of your own customer base?" Siofre asked. "Don't neglect your own business. I know you have devoted yourself to the estate. You should take care of yourself, too."

"I am making a delivery to the apothecary, as well, and I have a meeting with Murdoch. I will develop more customers. Murdoch introduces me tomorrow to Madam Vivian Ballard, the chief potioner at St. Giles Clinic."

"Good lad," Siofre said with a nod of approval.

"I will see you tomorrow afternoon," Johannes said. He hesitated. "I could stay for dinner tonight. I planned to eat in Hogsmeade, but if it is not an imposition . . ."

"No imposition at all," Siofre said. "I can tell you about Mrs Terwilliger then. And I know Lydia will enjoy having your company, as well."

"It will be my pleasure, then."

"And if you are here for dinner, you might as well stay tonight, then. You could make an early start after breakfast. Unless you have a need to be in Hogsmeade tonight, of course."

Johannes smiled. "That would be practical. I have little in my flat for breakfast. I usually have black coffee and Knäckebröt...crisp bread...on Saturdays."

"Oh, now, that will not do! Had I known! Multry!" Siofre called, ringing her little silver bell. "Multry!"

The house-elf was there before Siofre had finished calling for her.

"Madam Siofre?"

"Aye, Multry, it is now your duty to provide the magister with fresh milk, bread, cheese, and whatever else he may require, before he leaves the estate on the weekends or at other times when he will be returning to his flat in Hogsmeade."

Multry smiled and nodded, but Johannes shook his head.

"Nay, that is not necessary! It truly is not..." Johannes's protests were cut off.

"It is necessary, Professor," Siofre said sternly, Multry nodding seriously in agreement. "You devote yourself to the care of our estate every day. It is not right that you return to a cold, barren flat!"

"Truly, it is not cold and barren." He looked at the witch and the house-elf, then conceded defeat with a smile. "Thank you, Madam Tyree. Thank you, Multry."

"You tells me when you leaves for Hogsmeade, and I give you what you needs," Multry said. She shook her finger at him. "If you do not, I follow you with a basket! You does what Madam Siofre says!"

Johannes inclined his head. "As you say, Multry, I must do as Madam Siofre decrees," he said, his eyes sparkling, "and do it with a smile!"

Multry grinned and nodded. "Good good!"

"The magister leaves tomorrow morning, early, right after breakfast. Provision him accordingly. That will be all for now."

Multry popped away, and Johannes turned to Siofre. "You spoil me utterly, Siofre," he said softly.

"Not at all." She stood. "And now I must be off to my daughter. I will see you this evening."

"Have a good day...and take care at the Terwilligers'. Come safe home."

"Aye, and you, Johannes."

Chapter Ten: News from Abroad

Chapter 10 of 32

A Post Owl arrives with a storm.

Features Siofre, with Lydia and Johannes.



Chapter Ten: News from Abroad

With the distant sound of Lydia at the piano downstairs, Siofre closed her journal and set down her quill, having entered her notes about the new charms she had cast on the Terwilliger house and the potion she was planning to have Murdoch brew for Gwyneth. The last thing that she wrote, though, was "J.B., tomorrow at 15.30. A date for tea with the gardener."

Aye. Tea with the gardener. Master Herbologist, Professor Johannes Birnbaum.

She looked out the window of her study and saw the magister, as she liked to refer to him, working quite a distance away from the house, but still a tall and impressive figure, his back to her. It was a warm afternoon, and he had been working hard. Johannes had shed not only his work apron, but even his waistcoat, and she could see where his braces met in a Y on his back, dark against a white shirt, its sleeves rolled up. He was waving his wand, and although Siofre did not know what he was after doing, she saw shimmering lines lay themselves down on the turf, bright and shining, subsiding to a chalky white. He looked like a conductor before an orchestra.

A tiny figure appeared suddenly beside him...Sorrel, she thought it was, from the shade of pink the house-elf was clad in...and the magister stopped what he was doing and turned to the elf, speaking to him, then getting down on one knee and examining the contents of the basket the elf offered him. Unaccountably, the sight of the tall wizard kneeling in front of the house-elf brought a lump to Siofre's throat. Johannes nodded to the elf, who Disapparated, then Johannes stood and carried the basket over to the small worktable he had set up for himself.

Siofre watched as Johannes poured tea from a flask into a mug, but then her own tea arrived, brought to her on a tray by Multry, and when next she looked out the window, Johannes was back at work, his mug of tea in one hand, his wand in the other, laying down the shimmering white lines where some new garden would be. Clouds were gathering in the west, and no doubt they would bring a hard rain with them when they arrived. Likely that was why Johannes was back at work again, taking sips of tea in between spells cast, wanting to get as much done as he could before he had to quit for the day. The bright chalky lines would survive a rain, Siofre was sure, otherwise the magister would not still be casting them. Lines, arcs, helixes, glowing brilliantly, then still bright white even after fading into the grass: the sight of them forming and fading seemed to mesmerise her.

The wind picked up, almost taking Johannes's hat, but he pulled it down further on his brow, slipped his wand into the wand pocket of his trousers, and turned toward his worktable. As he walked toward it, he took one final long swallow from his mug, draining it, then he carefully packed the basket back up, shrugged on his waistcoat, buttoned it, pulled on his dun-coloured over-robe, then packed up his gardening things in his large canvas bag. He shouldered the bag, picked up the basket, then just as a flash of lightning tore through the sky, he turned to head towards the house, thunder cracking over head.

Good that the gardener was staying for dinner, Siofre thought as she took a sip of tea. Apparating even the relatively short distance to Hogsmeade would not be wise during a thunderstorm. She could hear the door to the kitchen open and then close with a clatter. One corner of her mouth twitched upward. It was good to have Johannes in the house.

She had liked the man from their first meeting, but she wouldn't have guessed then that she might invite him to stay at the estate; even after she had hired him late that winter, it never entered her mind. He was far from family, after all. He was just a wizard contracted to do some work for them, and yet he brought a sense of steadiness and peace with him. His presence in a room always made it seem warmer, somehow, and anchored . . . But that was foolishness. It was not as though the rooms would just fly off the face of the earth without him there. They simply . . . seemed curiously empty.

The previous weekend, Lydia had commented several times about how very odd it felt not to have Johannes there, which in itself was odd, Siofre thought...despite sharing the sentiment, though not giving it voice. After all, most of the man's work took him out-of-doors; it wasn't as if he was even *in* the house very much.

She was glad that Lydia liked him. Lydia was a sort of people-person, as the expression went, and it was good to have a man about the place, another person to keep Lydia company. Siofre hoped that, now that he knew more about her past, Johannes would treat Lydia no differently than he had done. She doubted that he would. Still, it had been indiscreet of her, and Siofre chided herself for allowing herself so much comfort and freedom with the wizard, however solid and kind he might appear. As she had told Lydia all those weeks before, he was, after all, only a man.

Rain now fell in heavy drops, and thunder seemed to rumble from the hills themselves. A large Eagle Owl, desperate, it seemed, flew against the glass of the window, saving itself and swooping down before flying back up as Siofre leaned forward, wand in hand, and opened the window to the bird.

"Ach, poor thing!" She closed the window before taking the rolled parchment from the owl. "You stay here a while, then we'll find you a place to bide the storm. And for your trouble . . ." Siofre reached into her drawer and pulled out several large rabbit-flavoured owl treats and scattered them on the floor for the creature.

There were two parchments, Siofre saw now that she could take a good look at them, sent by international relay post, tied together with a bit of ribbon and a strong sticking charm. She removed the dark navy ribbon, then used her wand to release the charm. One letter for her, the other for Lydia. Her eyebrow rose. A peculiar coincidence, it was, that she should speak of her nephew the morning of the very day they received letters from him. Siofre didn't hesitate to break the seal on her letter. Lydia was still playing in the music room, the music stopping, starting, then stopping again, phrases repeated, varied, then repeated again.

Auckland, NZ

Tuesday, 14 April 1959

Dear Auntie Siofre,

Sally and I are well, and we hope that you and Mammie haven't kilt each other yet! (Sally says I must not be flippant!)

So in all seriousness, we hope you are both well. Mammie's last letter sounded cheerful, but they usually do. She says you have found a new gardener to whip the old place into shape. I hope the house-elves like him and do not find they have to chase him off, with you cursing his bollocks off sorry, Sally says that's rude with you rendering his family jewels into dull little pebbles. Is that polite enough, Auntie? Sally says I should get on with the letter, so I will.

We are making our way home. We plan to arrive on the 29th (that's this month, April), but we haven't commissioned the Portkeys yet. We have accumulated quite a lot of stuff, though, and we are sending said stuff on ahead of us, since we still have to settle things here and tie up loose ends. The trunks and cartons should arrive at Hogsmeade station by the regular evening train on the 24th. That's what they promise, anyway. I asked them to have a "notify" letter sent with the trunks, and they're supposed to notify you by owl when they arrive. That's why I'm writing early, besides letting you know we're coming home. Can you have someone pick them up for us? They have to be signed for by a witch or wizard. I gave them several names of people who can collect them. After they're accepted, maybe old Mynok or one of the other elves could get them home for us. These are the people who we said could sign: you (of course), Mammie, Minerva, Malcolm (is he still in Hogsmeade? that could be convenient), Murdoch, Maisie, Connor and Liz, Phoebe, and little Melina, though I guess she's not so little now. Didn't include Morgan and Fiona, since they probably haven't got the time to sleep, with four wee ones (did they use potions, or what?), or Dorcas, since it sounds like she still wanders about in a fog most of the time. Sorry to put you in charge, Auntie, but you always manage everything so well, and the station will charge two Galleons a day storage if they aren't picked up within twelve hours of arrival. And the station isn't open at night, so that means they have to be fetched that evening.

Do me a favour, if you read your letter first, don't tell Mammie we're coming home. I'm sending her a letter with this one, and I want to be the one to surprise her!

We can't wait to meet little Liam and don't worry, Sally's writing Connor and Liz a letter, too, so they'll have the news, and another to Phoebe and Declan. (Sally says now they have no excuse not to marry, since we'll definitely be able to make it to the wedding!) Feel free to let anyone else in the family know, if you like, or Mammie can. She'll be happy to, I'm sure. If we wrote every friend and relation to announce the news, we'd never make the first Portkey!

I hope we'll be in time for the Tyree Bealltainn bonfire! We will be doing one, won't we? It's something we've missed.

Oh, and Sally says I should say that we hope we're not putting you out, and that if we can't stay at the estate, we'll get a room in Hogsmeade, but of course we both know that's just foolishness, but Sally still insists I say it.

Looking forward to seeing you, more every day now that we're actually returning soon!

With love,

your nephew,

Bertrand

PS Hi, Aunt Siofre! I'm looking forward to seeing you, too. And if we're having the bonfire, we'll both help any way we can. Sally

Siofre smiled and set the letter down. So Bertrand and Sally were coming home. It sounded like they meant to stay, too. What they would do with themselves once they'd settled down, Siofre hadn't a clue, but she'd let them worry about that. She picked up the second sealed letter. Time to deliver Lydia's post.

The Eagle Owl had fallen asleep on the back of a chair. Siofre called Gweller and asked him to bring the owl someplace more suitable than her study, then she made her way down to the music room to find Lydia.

Siofre waited until Lydia had finished adding notation to the manuscript paper she was working on.

"Letter for you, hen."

"Oh! Who from?" Lydia scanned the staves and ran her fingers lightly over the piano keys, but without depressing them.

"Bertrand."

Lydia's attention immediately shifted from the piano to her sister-in-law. "From Bertrand! Oh, wonderful! I haven't had one from him in almost a month!" She snatched the parchment from Siofre's outstretched hand, then broke the seal impatiently.

Siofre watched as Lydia's eyes scanned the first lines of the letter. Lydia's expression changed from one of happiness to one of sheer delight.

"He's coming home! He and Sally are coming home! In less than two weeks...there's so much to do! Oh, my, and I have to tell everyone!" Her hands shook with excitement as she continued reading the letter.

Johannes stepped into the music room, dressed now in black trousers, a white shirt, black waistcoat, narrow black bow tie, and a satiny black over-robe open down the front and flowing out behind him. Siofre thought he looked quite handsome. He had brushed his hair out after his work, but had not tied it back again, and Siofre liked the way his soft, sandy hair swept his shoulders.

"It is good news?" Johannes asked, seeing Lydia's expression as she read her letter.

"Oh, it is *wonderful* news!" Lydia exclaimed. She finished reading the last lines of the second sheet of the letter, then she turned to Siofre. "They're coming home!" She grabbed Siofre in an embrace, almost hopping up and down. Siofre smiled and patted her back.

Lydia then turned to Johannes and threw her arms around him, squeezing him exuberantly. "He's coming home, Johannes! My boy, my son, he and Sally are coming home!"

Johannes smiled and returned her embrace, then put his hands on her arms and looked down into her face. "I am very happy for you. Siofre has spoken to me of your son and his long absence."

Lydia stepped back and plopped down onto the piano bench, taking in a deep breath and letting it out. "I don't know what to think! Where to begin! Oh, my, I must write

everyone. I wonder if they have written to Charles and Louisa?" She looked at her letter again. "He doesn't say. Do you think Sally wrote her sister, Siofre?"

"He didnae mention them in his letter to me. I believe he is leaving that to you, though I may be mista'en. Bertrand only mentioned that Sally was writing the childer, Connor and Phoebe."

"He may have written his cousin...he didn't tell you?" Lydia asked.

"Nay, he said aught about Charles or Louisa."

"Do you think we should invite them to the bonfire? Or to the picnic and Murdoch's party?"

Siofre's brow furrowed. "They ne'er seem sair couthy at our ceilidhs. Not their kind o' thing an' all. Indeed, I'm sure Bertrand and Sally will make time to visit them in a wee." Siofre turned to Johannes. "Lydia's nephew Charles married Sally's sister Louisa," she explained.

"Ah. Close family ties, then," Johannes observed.

"Aye, so a body would think," Siofre said drily.

"When do your son and his wife return?" Johannes asked Lydia.

"He says that he expects to arrive on the twenty-ninth, although they aren't sure about the Portkeys. They may be a day or so earlier, or perhaps a day later. Since it takes a while for correspondence to get here, even using international relay post, I don't know whether we'll know for certain until they actually arrive! Oh, I must tell Gweller...he and Bertie were always close when Bertrand was a boy...and let the other house-elves know, too. We will have to get their rooms ready for them! Oh, and we should have a party for them . . ."

"They'll be here for the May Day celebration...which is also Murdoch's birthday party. I think we can wait to have another party for a while. And you know we're having Maisie's party here in June."

"Still..."

"Let's wait and see what they would like, eh, hen?" Siofre suggested gently. "And you forget that Connor or Phoebe may wish to do something for their parents."

A smile split Lydia's face. "Oh, Liam will be so very excited! He'll be meeting his Tyree grandparents!" She looked out the window at the rain and dark skies. "I wish it weren't storming so! I would Apparate right to them now!"

"Maisie said it will clear overnight," Siofre said. "Why don't you write letters to everyone else tonight, and then in the morn, you can pop down and see Connor and Elisabeth first thing and talk about your plans with them."

"Yes, I'll get up early and go see them," Lydia agreed, adding doubtfully, "I think I'll have to write to Phoebe, though. I don't fancy trying to Apparate to Ireland and back."

"Tis a bit far," Siofre agreed. "P'raps I could go, though. I thought I might nip over to Tíree Beag this weekend, anyway. I could go there forenoon, then just skiddle across and see Phoebe. You could send a letter wi' me, an she's away, I'll leave it. Tell her to call by here when she has time during the week."

"Would you, then? Oh, that's a relief!" Lydia glanced up at Johannes. "Siofre's much better at long-distance Apparition than I am. Actually, she could Apparate to London and back several times in one day and not be in the leastwise winded! I find it hard to do a single round trip without a nice break in between. And don't ask me to Apparate far over water! I almost Splinch just thinking of it!"

Siofre chuckled. "Then dinna think on it, hen. We need you whole. Go speak with the elves. This time o' day, they're likely all in the kitchen."

Lydia bustled off, letter tightly held in her hand.

"So, and you are happy too?" Johannes asked Siofre.

"Aye, that I am. I think they plan to stay now...although I do not know if they will live here or elsewhere." Siofre gestured toward the door to the sitting room, and Johannes followed her into that room. "They're welcome, of course, but they may prefer to live in town...Glasgow, p'raps. Or even down near Connor and his family, though the wizarding neighbourhood they live in is quite small, just a cluster of cul-de-sacs, really. They might have to live in a Muggle neighbourhood if they were to move to Silloth-on-Solway, and I don't know how they'd feel about that. It can become quite complicated, I understand. The Coopers, Elisabeth's family, are Muggles, and they live there."

"Ah. It is probably good for Connor and Elisabeth to live near them, then." Johannes knew that some Muggle-borns lost touch with their Muggle families when they married into the wizarding world, which thought saddened him. "Liam can know his Muggle grandparents."

"Indeed. They are good folk."

"For English?" Johannes asked with a teasing twinkle in his eye.

Siofre chuckled good-naturedly. "Aye. For English. For anyone, actually. They are both schoolteachers. Intelligent, modest, open-minded folk with a sense of humour."

They each took a seat in the sitting room, and Siofre waved her wand to close the curtains, then flicked it at the fireplace, lighting the logs in the grate.

"We will have to look to cutting wood soon so that it will be ready in the autumn."

"Speaking of wood, do you remember an old coppice down by the cottage?" Johannes asked. At Siofre's nod, he said, "It has not been tended in a long time. It is an unsightly mess, and the woodland is suffering for it. It is sad now. Would you like the coppice to be renewed, or would you prefer it to be thinned out through singling and made into an ordinary grove of trees?"

"I do not know . . . I must consider that. However, whichever we do...or whichever you do for us...we can use some of the cut wood from there, certainly, and leave several cords for Minerva, as well. It was a very large coppice, an I remember right. It had several sections, so a different portion would be harvested every year. Would it be a lot of work to restore it?"

"Ja, actually, yes. It could be begun this year, and the entire area prepared, but if it is to be sectioned so there is always a yearly harvest . . . that would take as many years as it takes a single coppiced wood to mature. Do you remember the cycle? It was eighteen years, perhaps?"

"Nay. I do remember that some trees were on a short seven-year cycle, but others were on a much longer cycle. Thirty years? Fifty?" Siofre shook her head. "I am sorry. I don't remember."

"That is fine. I will make a survey of the trees. The types will tell me their cycles. I saw no oak, but they would have a long cycle."

"Good. That is something I would enjoy helping you with. I would like to learn more about it, and how to properly tend it."

Johannes smiled. "I would enjoy your assistance. We can take a look at it together next week. How was your visit with your daughter?"

"It was good. Dorcas came home for lunch, in fact, and she sends her regards."

"Ah, yes, how is she? She is still at the Ministry?"

"Aye, and right miserable, too. I think she should try some other type of work, though I don't know what would suit her."

"I am sorry to hear that. She seemed very bright at school, but I think the structure of the Ministry would not suit her. She is probably also not challenged."

"She also dreams too much. She gets twice the work done in half the time that it takes others, but it does not matter if she does not appear to be working the rest of the time." Siofre sighed. "I sometimes think it may have been better if Jonathan...that was her father...had married Maisie for the sake of the child, but he was a ne'er-do-well and a layabout. Probably not a good model of a wizard, and not a good husband."

"I will see if I can think of anything that might suit Dorcas better, and I will speak to Professor Flitwick, as well. He has many contacts. He may even know of something in the Ministry itself that would be better for her talents."

"Ach, thank you, Professor, but you needn't..."

"You call me 'Professor,' but do you forget why? I was her Head of House. I shall be most pleased to help her if I can, and I am certain that Professor Flitwick also feels that way, though he did not teach her."

Siofre smiled softly. "All right, then, but you already do so much for us. Thank you, Johannes."

"It is, as I said, my pleasure, Siofre. You know . . ." He hesitated before continuing. "You know you may call on me for anything. The contract is for the grounds, but beyond the grounds, beyond that time I spend, and spend gladly to make this place beautiful and productive for you, beyond that, I hope I can also be a friend to you. It would please me if it were so."

Siofre felt herself uncharacteristically fighting a warmth rising in her cheeks, but she nodded. "You have been, indeed. And tomorrow we take tea."

Johannes smiled warmly. "Aye, and it will be my reward for being diligent and checking the Melliflua mandrake garden! I look forward to it. It is an honour that you do me, Siofre."

Siofre chuckled and shook her head. "Not so. But I look forward to it, too."

The dinner bell sounded, and Siofre was surprised to look up at the mantle clock and see the time.

"Shall we?" Johannes rose and offered her his arm.

Siofre placed her hand on his wrist and stood. "I believe I know the topic of conversation for tonight," she said.

"Would that be the return of a son?" Johannes asked with a smile.

"Aye, the beloved son and his wife," Siofre replied. "I hope that Lydia stops talking long enough to enjoy her dinner!"

Johannes chuckled, and the two walked together to the family dining room, where they heard Lydia already there, chattering to one of the house-elves about new mattresses. Siofre and Johannes looked at one another and smiled.

Author's Note: Thank you to everyone who has been reviewing this little fic. It has been very encouraging, and I truly appreciate it! I am glad you're enjoying it.

Chapter Eleven: A Little Sweet on You

Chapter 11 of 32

Siofre ponders Johannes, but a conversation with Lydia shifts her perspective.

Features Siofre, Lydia, and Johannes.



Chapter Eleven: A Little Sweet on You

Siofre drew out her watch and looked at it. A little after two. Whatever Lydia might think about her Apparition skills, Siofre was feeling the effects of several long-distance Apparitions that day. She didn't make a habit of lying down during the day, though, and she wasn't about to start now. She would walk down to the lodge and double-check everything. Morgan and his family would be arriving in the morning, and all the house-elves in both households had been enlisted to shift everything from their house in Inverness to their new home there at the estate.

The lodge was large, and Siofre remembered when the Mackenzies had lived there, many years ago now. Jake Mackenzie had been a schoolfriend of her grandfather's, and he, his wife, his children, and eventually, their grandchildren, had lived in that lodge, and Jake had done all manner of work for Séaghán Tyree. Jake and Emma's daughter, Grace, had moved away when she married...an event that Siofre only remembered as a fact, though she retained no clear recollection of it herself...but Jamie, the Mackenzies' son, and his wife Sarah had stayed on for a number of years. Siofre had played with their children, Norma, Alice, and Marigold, until finally they moved away at the birth of their fourth daughter, Oona. Older than her brother Murdoch by almost six years, Siofre had missed having playmates closer to her own age, but not for long, since she soon started at Hogwarts, landing in the same House as Norma and Alice.

There would be plenty of room for the McGonagalls, with some to spare, Siofre thought as she looked into the large, partially furnished nursery. For convenience's sake,

until they were a little older, the quads would share a single bedroom, but there were six bedrooms in the house, plus the nursery, so there would be more than enough room even if the couple changed their minds and decided to have more children.

Siofre looked into each room, some of which were already furnished...or partially furnished...with things from the main house. It would be good to have some life in the place again, and good to have children running about, too.

Over the years, various Tyrees, McGonagalls, Marshes, Mackintoshes, and other relatives had stayed in the lodge, occasionally for several months at a time, but now it was to be a real home again, and Siofre felt it was almost as though the old lodge knew this and was quivering with impending life. Of all the houses on the grounds, this was the one closest to the main house, and Siofre had felt its emptiness keenly, particularly after she had returned permanently to the estate after Herbert died. It seemed sad, sitting there empty, especially at dusk, when the windows were blank and the building slowly merged with the shadows until it disappeared. Soon, though, there would be lights in those windows again, and the lodge would come alive.

Siofre left the lodge and walked around the outside of the house, admiring the gardens that Johannes had planted. He had done a lot very little time, and yet it all looked lovely. The man had a good eye. He had even planted a little kitchen garden for the lodge, though the McGonagalls could help themselves to any of the vegetables from the main gardens. It was convenient, though, to have culinary herbs and salad vegetables growing close to the kitchen. Fiona had been pleased when she had come by earlier in the week and seen the results of Johannes's efforts. She had declared him an absolute treasure, which had left Johannes blushing.

Siofre smiled. Johannes did blush rather sweetly at times, often out of modest embarrassment, but occasionally, she had elicited a blush from him herself, and although she had scolded herself for it later, it had been amusing to see how he had blushed at the touch of her fingers on his hand down at the machair, and then later to tease him just a bit, tickling his skin with her magic and to see him blush and fight a stutter. After all, Lydia was not the only witch in the world who enjoyed a little flirting.

Now, though, Siofre felt a slight twinge. She ought not play with the poor man so. He was kind and good, and she did enjoy both his company and his attention . . . but to flirt with him so as not to seem to be flirting was unfair to the man, really, although he was certainly old enough to look after himself. Still, she should not tease him that way, as sweet to see as his blushing was.

She had the impression from Malcolm that Johannes had rather fancied the Gamp witch at one time, but that he had no special lady friend, as such. Malcolm had said that the date he'd set Johannes up with a couple weeks before hadn't turned into anything, though it hadn't been a disaster. She would have to tell Malcolm to invite the witch to the bonfire, if he liked. Perhaps in a festive atmosphere, another exposure to her might draw Johannes out a bit more.

Such a handsome, intelligent, skilled, and kind wizard should not be alone as he was, Siofre thought. It was sad to imagine him leaving the Tyree estate when his work was finally completed, returning to his empty little Hogsmeade flat. But then he might have more opportunities to meet other witches, living in town rather than there in the hills with two old witches. He seemed shy, but surely there would be some discerning witch who would see him, recognise his value, and then have him win her heart . . . A man who valued family as much as Johannes obviously did deserved to have a family of his own, and not be so alone in the world as he seemed.

Siofre thought of the various unmarried witches whom she knew. Surely there would have to be a few who would enjoy meeting this handsome, gentlemanly wizard. If she were younger, she would certainly have appreciated an introduction to him, and she would have made sure that no other witches could compete with her for him.

None of her friends or acquaintances seemed likely candidates, though. Siofre wasn't certain what sort of witch would interest Johannes, although if Professor Gamp had held his attention, he obviously valued intelligence. Of her relatives . . . Lydia was too old, and besides, as much as she might pretend to flirt with him, Siofre could tell that both she and Johannes saw it as an enjoyable diversion, but neither was serious. Yet if Lydia *were* to become serious about him, and if the two did grow closer, Siofre would have nothing negative to say about it...although she did think that Johannes should marry someone young enough so that he could become a father again, and Lydia was a good thirty years beyond her childbearing time. Johannes would be a wonderful father, and he deserved children.

Of Siofre's relatives, most of the unmarried ones were either too young or too old or not at all suitable...if Siofre couldn't imagine sharing living quarters with a witch, then she certainly wouldn't wish her on a wizard as a wife...but there were two who might be acceptable. Although Maisie had her peculiarities and Malcolm had never got along very well with her, she was actually quite bright and had a strong maternal streak. Siofre thought that Malcolm had never quite outgrown his childhood jealousy of Siofre's marriage to Herbert. He had been very close to his grandmother when he was a young boy, and it had been difficult for him to see her remarry and then have a daughter.

In addition to her daughter, Siofre thought that Lachina, one of her more distant Tyree cousins, might be a good match for Johannes. Better, perhaps, than Maisie would be, although she was a fair bit younger, closer to Minerva's age. But that would mean many years for her and Johannes to have children. A large house filled with Tyree children. Birnbaum children, Siofre amended, as some might be boys. They could even live there at the estate. Lachina was from the island, but she worked at a jeweller's in Aberdeen; she would have no objection to moving . . .

Siofre could see it in her mind's eye now. Lachina could Apparate each day to her job, if she wished to continue in it, and Johannes could continue working the Tyree gardens, have his own gardens and greenhouse, and she and Johannes could still see each other daily. Perhaps he and Lachina would even stay on in the main house. It was certainly large enough. Although the number of bedrooms varied depending on how the rooms were being used, there were easily a few dozen rooms from which they could choose their bedroom. In fact, they could even have the entire North Tower, if they wished. That was the oldest part of the house, but it had been refurbished completely in the eighteen-fifties when she was a girl, and Murdoch and Lydia had always kept it well, thinking that perhaps either Connor or Phoebe might like it when they were grown and married. The tower had several rooms, and it could easily accommodate a small family.

Siofre chuckled to herself. She already had Johannes and Lachina married and surrounded by a brood of children, and they hadn't even met yet. Still, she would make sure that Lachina came to the Beltane celebration and stayed for young Murdoch's birthday party. If she and Johannes became acquainted, that was a first step. A witch would have to be completely blind not to see what a very attractive wizard Johannes was, and what a very good man.

Siofre walked back up to the house. There was still more than a half hour before Johannes would be there to fetch her...he was probably suffering at the Melliflua manor at that moment...so perhaps she could write her letter to Murdoch about the potion she wanted him to prepare for her to give to Gwyneth Terwilliger. She had found the formula for it the night before, but she had been too tired to stay up and copy it out. It wasn't a standard potion, by any means, but Siofre had remembered seeing it in one of the Tyree family books, and was glad when she'd been able to find it fairly quickly.

With the charms she had cast on the rooms in the Terwilliger home the previous afternoon, this potion would help maintain an atmosphere of peace and tranquillity. That would encourage Cadoc to behave more like his better self...which Gwyneth insisted existed. Siofre hoped, for the sake of both Gwyneth and her unborn child, that the witch was right about that. And if Gwyneth was right, then good for Cadoc, too. It would be good if Cadoc could reach his potential and truly experience and enjoy his life.

Siofre entered the house through the conservatory. Lydia was at the piano again. It sounded to Siofre as though she was working on the same piece as she had for the last few days. She walked through the conservatory, pausing a moment to sniff a few of the flowers. She didn't think that it was only her imagination that even the plants in the conservatory seemed more vibrant and colourful now that Johannes was overseeing their care. She was sure that anything in Johannes's care would flourish.

"Oh! You startled me!" Lydia exclaimed as Siofre entered the music room from the conservatory. "I didn't hear you come in. I didn't even know you were back." She nodded toward the sheet music. "I've been rather absorbed."

"I got back about an hour ago," Siofre replied. "I was out at Morgan and Fiona's, just walking through one more time before tomorrow. I saw that the house-elves have stocked the kitchen and pantry."

Lydia nodded. "I asked Multry to see to that. She is wonderful. I'm glad you brought her with you. I think Shoolie enjoys sitting in the corner of the kitchen, sipping her tea and entertaining the wee bairns."

"After close to two centuries of service, she deserves to put her feet up and 'supervise,'" Siofre said. "I have to say, I wasn't sure when we first moved back whether she and Multry would get along together in the kitchen, but Multry makes her feel valued, not extraneous, so it's worked out well."

"Yes, it has. So tell me, did you see Phoebe?"

"Aye. She received a letter from Sally yesterday. She is excited, naturally, and would like to be here on the twenty-ninth. Since we aren't certain whether they'll arrive a day early or a day late, I told her to come stay at the house for a few days. So she'll be arriving on the twenty-seventh, coming straight from work, and staying through the weekend."

"And Declan?"

"I didn't see him, but Phoebe said he'd probably not be able to come until the twenty-ninth. He has some commitments, apparently. But he'll join us later, and he'll definitely be here for the weekend."

"I'll prepare their usual rooms, then."

"I thought we could put them in the Capercaillie Suite, or one of the other suites, this time instead...with all the weekend guests to accommodate, it might make more sense."

"He always joins her through the door between their rooms, anyway," Lydia said with a laugh.

"Aye, which is why I give them adjoining rooms." Siofre sighed. "But do have the daybed made up in the dressing room. Just in case he snores."

Lydia laughed heartily at that. "Connor and Liz are waiting until they get word that they've arrived, then they and Liam will come up. I thought we could send Sorrel or Gweller with the news."

"We'll have Multry prepared to fix a nice meal when they get here. We'll be . . ." Siofre paused to count.

"Ten," Lydia said quickly. "Twelve if Morgan and Fiona join us."

"You say maths gives you rash," Siofre scoffed.

"I never claimed not to be able to add and subtract. I just hate it. It makes me feel all squirmy," Lydia said.

"We'll still be in the family dining room, then. Multry will just have the table extended a bit."

"I sent out letters this morning, but haven't heard back yet from anyone except Philomena. She was quite happy for us. She looks forward to seeing them at the bonfire."

"You invited Philomena?"

"Yes. Her husband is supposed to be in Madrid or Majorca or someplace that week, so he won't be here, but Philly is coming. She loves a good party, you know. She gets tired of all the Ministry functions, I'm sure."

"She's probably numb after all these years," Siofre said. "You don't head up a Ministry department that long without going numb...or barking mad!" She cackled.

"Speaking of rooms . . . I've put Malcolm and Gertrude in one room. I think everyone knows by now that she spends weekends with him. And all last summer, I think."

"Ask her. Or Malcolm. We should go by their wishes. There will be children there, after all. No Hogwarts students, but they still may wish to be more discreet."

"Right. And Minerva will be staying down with Morgan if she can manage to get away for the bonfire, she said in her owl. If she does come, it will be quite late."

"Dumbledore coming, too?"

"She didn't say, and I haven't heard from him."

"Well, there's room enough down at the lodge. We can let them sort it out if he shows up," Siofre said.

"Are you going to tell her about the cottage?" Lydia asked.

"Nay, this is Murdoch's weekend. It's his birthday. Bertrand and Sally's return will already draw attention from it. Besides, you know that I want to have the work done down there before I give it to her."

"Have you found a plumber yet?"

"I'm hiring Brian Mackintosh to do it. It will mean Apparating him back and forth daily until the work is done...or arranging Portkeys for the man...but he's family, more-or-less, and his pipe-charming is quite good, I understand, even if his Apparition is a bit weak. He did all the new plumbing for the Meath Tyrees, Kathleen's and Kieran's families, a few years ago, and they're happy with it."

"You said he was expensive."

"More expensive to have it done wrong," Siofre said briskly. "And 'tisn't worth the worry to hire someone we dinna know, have to watch his every move."

"Brian might give us a family discount..." Lydia began.

"The man deserves to be paid his worth. Besides, most of his work is for some manner of family. He'd starve if he gave a discount to everyone he was remotely related to," Siofre said practically. "I'll just dip into the estate's primary account, that's all. The magister is finding a market for some of our produce. That will help replenish it."

"I could give lessons again," Lydia offered, "if money is tight. They were asking about me down in Cardiff again. Not to teach at MAMA itself, but to tutor a few of their students. And I could pick up a few Galleons accompanying some of the voice students."

"If you want to do that, that would be fine, hen. I know how much you've enjoyed your association with the music academy, but don't feel you have to take students. It's hardly as though we're broke."

"I feel a bit like Shoolie some days . . . just sent to sit in the corner by the fire . . ."

"Dinna be ridiculous, Lydia. You are very valuable. You take so much off my mind...I always know that when I leave things in your hands here at the house, I needn't worry about them at all." Siofre gestured toward the piano. "What have you been working on lately?"

Lydia shrugged. "Oh, just a bit of something that I'd started years ago and then . . . just lost interest in, I suppose. I thought I might pick it up again."

"A composition, then?"

"Yes. I played something of mine for Johannes one afternoon last week...it was raining and you were at the Smethwycks' final arbitration meeting, remember? Anyway, he really enjoyed it. He said it reminded him of Mahler." Lydia blushed. "So I played him a few other pieces that I'd written years ago, and that reminded me of how much I used to enjoy composing my little bits of things. I found this unfinished piece, and Johannes said he liked it and urged me to work on it again. I think it's coming along. He's been very encouraging. This morning, he left me a flower on the piano with a note of support. He said I had a true gift. It was very sweet." She picked up a little card and fingered its corner.

"Play it for me this evening, then? I've only heard parts of it as you've been composing," Siofre said, "but it is lovely, what I've heard."

"I'd love to! It's not near finished yet," Lydia said apologetically, "but I hope to have it done before Bertie and Sally arrive. I hadn't been sure what to title it, but now I'm thinking, 'Homecoming.' It would suit it, I think."

"Aye, it..." Siofre stopped, startled by the sound of Apparition coming from the drive. "Oh, my, Johannes is here, and I'm not ready." She looked down at herself. "I wanted to freshen up."

"I'm sure that he won't mind," Lydia said. She smiled. "He'll think you look beautiful, I know he will. He's rather sweet on you, our gardener is."

"Ah, ah, nay. Nay. Nay, he is not."

"He is. More than a little. And from the blush on your own cheeks right now and the twinkle you get in your eye whenever he steps into a room, I'd say you're a bit sweet on him, too."

"Never..."

"Oh, don't fuss, Siofre dear. I'd be sweet on him, myself, if I didn't see the way he looks at you."

"Lydia!"

"Hush, he's coming." Lydia turned back to the piano and picked out a few notes, the primary melody of her new composition.

Siofre cast a quick breath-freshening charm. She was smoothing her hair as Johannes stepped into the music room.

"Ah, my ladies," Johannes said, making a short bow. "It is good to find you together, and both looking so lovely. You are playing your new composition, yes?"

Lydia paused. "Yes. Thank you for your note this morning. And the flower. They helped me find my inspiration."

Johannes nodded and smiled. "That is good. I am glad." He turned to Siofre. "You look lovely, may I say. It is a pleasure."

"Thank you." Johannes was wearing his sapphire blue robes that brought out the colour of his eyes. Siofre wished she had had time to freshen up, though the tartan robes she was wearing were fine, and she hadn't planned to change. "Shall we go?"

Johannes inclined his head. "If you are ready now, yes. We have a reservation...they said they would hold a table for us, anyway."

"Good." Siofre turned to Lydia. "We will see you later, then."

"Have fun, you two!"

Johannes offered Siofre his arm. "Shall we? I will Apparate us."

"Down to the drive, then, or I'll stay put, and your arm with me...we'd be paying a visit to St. Giles and missing our table and our tea!"

Johannes chuckled as they walked toward the door. "I do like my arm attached as it is. And I have never Splinched, and would be very happy if I were never in my life to experience that."

"Aye, I rather fancy your arm right where it is, too," Siofre replied, a twinkle in her eye. She gave his arm a little squeeze and was pleased to see the wizard's cheeks blush pink. Lydia was very silly...Johannes sweet on her, indeed! But perhaps he might be, just a little . . .

Chapter Twelve: The Primrose Room

Chapter 12 of 32

Johannes and Siofre have tea at the Primrose Room.

Features Johanne and Siofre, with Philomena Yaxley.



Chapter Twelve: The Primrose Room

Siofre smiled as she saw where they had arrived. The Clypeum was bustling with Saturday shoppers. Glasgow's wizarding district was comprised of a nest of three main streets arranged in concentric circles and joined by several narrower alleys, and she and Johannes were in its heart, a circular park right at the Clypeum's centre. A fountain splashed nearby, and a bronze statue of a bearded, long-haired wizard stood overlooking the park, holding a staff and wearing an old-style kilt wrapped around his waist with one long end drawn up and over his shoulder. The wizard also had a round shield slung over his back.

"I thought we would go to the Primrose Room," Johannes said, gesturing across the green toward the tearoom.

"That would be lovely," Siofre said. "I didn't know that they took reservations there."

"The witch I spoke with said that they would hold a table for us." He drew out his watch. "We are a little early. Would you care to walk?"

"By the fountain there are benches," Siofre said.

Johannes nodded, and the two walked over to the closest bench and sat down. "Who is the statue?"

"Kentigern," Siofre said. "Kentigern Mackintosh, not St. Kentigern. He designed the Clypeum and cast the first wards. It's older than Diagon Alley, you know. The oldest guarded magical district in a Muggle city in Britain, in fact."

"London's an old city, though. It must have always been a centre of wizarding life, just as it has of Muggle life," Johannes said.

"Aye, of course it has been. But Diagon Alley itself and the surrounding side streets were laid down and warded in sixteen sixty-seven, after the Great Fire. It actually created an opportunity for the magical community, that fire did, because until then, there were a number of small, unconnected wizarding neighbourhoods scattered throughout the city. There are still some small wizarding neighbourhoods in London, of course, and a few major institutions that never relocated to Diagon Alley, such as St. Mungo's, but Diagon Alley gave a boost to the English wizarding community when it created a warded centre for commerce and social life."

"When was the Clypeum created?"

"It was established in twelve ninety-eight. There are many more buildings now than there were when Kentigern founded it, but the three major roads are the same as they were then." She pointed at the statue. "The shield on his back represents the Clypeum itself and the protection it provides."

"There must have been magical communities in England and Scotland before that. And in Wales. Cardiff. Edinburgh. York. London. Other cities."

"Of course, but they weren't planned, and most of them were very small and gradually grew over the years, through happenstance rather than by plan. The district in York might be influential, but it's tiny and had clear boundaries and wards only from sometime in the sixteenth century. McTavish Street became the centre of the magical community in Edinburgh very gradually. It grew slowly over the years, until eventually there were no more Muggles for the entire length of the street. Many wizarding districts in Britain, especially the smallest, most scattered ones, were only warded against Muggles in sixteen ninety-two, after the Secrecy Treaty. That treaty encouraged communities to consolidate. It's quite complicated for a magical family to maintain secrecy when they're living in a community surrounded by Muggles. Much easier when you have a neighbourhood that's got protections in place, even if they aren't completely hidden and segregated from the Muggles, like McTavish Street and the Clypeum are."

"That is true, I am sure," Johannes said with a nod. He looked around. "This is a very pleasant park. The fountain is nice."

"In the summer, the children play in it."

"You are hiring Brian Mackintosh to do the plumbing at the house?" At Siofre's nod, Johannes said, "I would like to put the fountain in good working order again. There is some work I can do, but it would be a good thing if he looked at it. When we install the greenhouse, we will need irrigation, sprays, and such. I do Charmed misters, but some of the work should be done by a plumber, unless you have a house-elf who could do it."

"Have you found someone to install the greenhouse?"

Johannes hesitated.

"You have? Or you cannot find one?"

"I thought we could do the work ourselves. With the house-elves and some help from Malcolm, I think we could do it. I don't know whether Morgan or Bertrand are handy that way...or Sally and Fiona...but between us, I believe we could manage. I have found a source for the glass. Mayfield Charmed Glassworks. They can also obtain the framing for us and do some final charms on the glass after we have completed the work."

Siofre nodded in approval. "I know Caroline Mayfield. She is one of Egeria's cousins. Competent witch. And I like keeping things in the family when we can. Good work, Johannes."

Johannes smiled. "I also have a new buyer for some of our herbs and produce. Two new buyers, in fact. Kyle Flatiron and Madam Puddifoot are our first customers. With the greenhouse, we will be able to continue to supply them right through the winter. We will maintain their custom."

"Excellent. Well done. And the bere?"

"Planted and fertilised. I was conservative in the charms I cast, however. I want to see how it grows, what it needs."

"I will visit it next week. I will also show you some other areas of the grounds that you likely have not seen yet. I will be home most of the week."

"It is time now for our tea, I believe," Johannes said. He stood and extended his hand to Siofre. "Your sister-in-law told me that you like the Primrose Room."

"I do," Siofre replied. She took his hand as she stood, then slipped her arm through his. "I prefer it to any other, in fact. In general, I am not fond of going out for dinner, as some folk are, but I do enjoy taking tea in the Primrose Room. Their scones are particularly good. I must warn you, however, that I have quite an appetite today. I do not believe that a single scone will suffice."

"I am glad that I have chosen well, then," Johannes said with a smile.

They entered the busy tearoom. Johannes removed his hat and spied the witch who had promised to hold a table for them. He smiled at her, and she came over.

"Mr Birnbaum, I saved you a corner table by the window. Will that suit you?" the wait-witch asked.

"That will be lovely, thank you very much, Miss Dunn," Johannes said, remembering her name. "It is very good of you."

Miss Dunn blushed and smiled. "Not at all."

She led them over to the table and plucked a small card from it on which she had written "Reserved." Johannes held Siofre's chair for her, giving her the one with the best view of both the park and the rest of the restaurant. As he sat, the wait-witch handed them each a menu.

When the witch had described the soups they were serving that afternoon and had left, Siofre smiled at Johannes. "I see now why you were able to reserve a table," she said, a teasing sparkle in her eye.

Johannes looked at her in puzzlement.

"You're a charmer, and you do not even know it." Her smile grew as Johannes looked baffled. "She thinks you're a bonny one, laddie."

Johannes glanced over his shoulder and saw Miss Dunn across the room going over an order. She looked up at that moment and saw him. She smiled, blushed, and lowered her eyes before looking up at him again.

Johannes turned back to Siofre. "I was only polite," he said, his cheeks pink. "I did not attempt to charm her for the table."

Siofre's grinned. "You do not need to." It was quite sweet, she thought, that Johannes had no idea how very good-looking and charming he was. She was sure that he hadn't flirted with the witch, but just been himself. Her grandson Malcolm, now, he wasn't above a bit of flirting to get a good table in a restaurant, she was sure. Malcolm

had been that way from the time he could walk, she thought.

A different witch came and took their orders, and Johannes also ordered sandwiches.

"The scones smell very good, but I, too, have an appetite this afternoon," Johannes said.

"They do lovely little cakes here, too," Siofre said. "They have some that are filled with wonderful cream. They are light seeming, but rich. We can have those after."

"As you recommend!" Johannes agreed with a nod. "You had a very busy morning?"

"Aye, and the afternoon was, as well. To Tíree first, then to Ireland, then home this afternoon."

"You saw Phoebe?"

Siofre nodded. "We had lunch together. She will be coming to stay at the house a day or two before Bertrand and Sally said they might arrive. Her . . . friend, Declan Tyree, will be arriving a few days later, and they will both be staying for the weekend, as well. She is looking forward to seeing them, naturally."

"Declan Tyree?" Johannes asked curiously.

"Aye, he is a kinsman, too. Tyrees often marry Tyrees or other kin. Not close kin, of course." Siofre sighed. "I do wish those two particular Tyrees would either marry or move on and find others."

"They have been close friends for long?"

"Several years," Siofre said with a nod. "And they were close in school, too, but then later, after Hogwarts, they each were with others. Phoebe had been engaged to marry Bobby Fitzgerald, but he was killed in . . . I think it was thirty-five, quite a long time ago, now. Bobby was an Auror, and he was killed in the line of duty. She didn't see anyone seriously after that for a long time. But then she ran into Declan at Murdoch's funeral, and that rekindled their romance."

"You do not approve?"

Siofre was quiet for a moment. "I did not at first. Declan was engaged at the time...or at least the witch he was with believed they were going to marry. She was rather stunned when he broke off their relationship so suddenly two days after we buried Murdoch. So I thought that Declan did not behave as well as he should have, although it was preferable to drawing it out, I suppose. And I was uncertain whether he would not also treat Phoebe similarly if something more appealing came along. It does not appear so, however."

"She is happy now?"

"Aye, it seems so...and I do not criticise to her. Understand that. I worry. I simply . . . worry."

"I understand. What does Lydia think?"

"She wants the two to marry and brings it up every time she sees them, either of them. She doesn't fuss about it. She simply becomes . . . enthusiastic."

Johannes chuckled. "I can see this. She has great enthusiasms."

Siofre smiled. "Aye. And Phoebe and Declan treat it with good humour."

Their tea arrived, rapidly followed by their plates of various little sandwiches.

"It was good of you to leave Lydia the flower and the note this morning. I believe the note meant a lot to her."

Johannes shook his head. "Not at all. That is, I am glad that she liked it. Yesterday your story of her early years saddened me."

"That was many years ago. She has had a happy life, Johannes."

"Ja, I know that. But it touched me. She has brought me much pleasure with her music. I wished to express appreciation and to encourage her."

"It did encourage her." She took a sip of her tea. "These sandwiches were what I needed, but your company has also been very refreshing."

Johannes went slightly pink. "Thank you."

"Are you returning to Hogsmeade this evening?"

Johannes nodded. "I had thought I would. After seeing you home, of course."

"Morgan and his family are moving in tomorrow, and we will be having a big family dinner in the afternoon, all of us together. It would be nice if you were there, too."

"Ah, well, it is a family dinner. I would not wish to intrude upon such an occasion."

Siofre shook her head. "I am inviting you because it would not be an intrusion. Of course, if you prefer not to join us, I dinna wish to press you."

"If you do not think that Morgan and Fiona would prefer it to be family only..."

"They will not think of it that way. And Lydia was saying the other day how much we have become accustomed to your company."

Johannes smiled. "I am honoured to be included in a family occasion."

"I should warn you before you commit to it that the four babies will also be eating with us. They are not old enough to be said to 'dine,'" Siofre said with a smile, "but they do eat. Messily. And David likes to throw his food at Aiden, but he always misses. So it may not be such an honour."

"It is. And I like babies. I will come to dinner. Will you need help with the removal?"

Siofre shook her head. "The house-elves have that all in hand. Fiona is coordinating it, and the elves are carrying out most of it. It should go smoothly."

"And the babies while the parents are busy?"

"Shoolie will watch them in the nursery at the main house. She is good with the bairns."

"There is a nursery in the main house?" Johannes asked curiously.

"Aye, of course there is. In the west tower. It has not seen much use in recent years, but now that the quads are so nearby, it will be used more, I am sure. I will show it to you. There's also a room for lessons. I dinna know what plans Morgan and Fiona have for the bairns' education, but p'raps they'd like to use the schoolroom in the main house, at least at times."

"Sheffy! Sheffy!" A plump witch waved rather enthusiastically from across the room.

Siofre looked up. "Mrs Campbell, née Flint," she whispered to Johannes. She focussed on Mrs Campbell and raised her hand slightly. She nodded, and a smile flitted across her face. "We were in school together," she added sotto voce.

Mrs Campbell approached their table. "Oh, Sheffy! How very good to see you out! Why, I was just saying to Roberta the other day, 'Roberta,' I said, 'Roberta, we just never see our dear little Sheffy anymore. Hiding away up there in those hills of hers,' I said, 'or popping around the country, earning a bit of silver, but never popping 'round to see us anymore,' and here you are!"

"It is very nice to see you again, too, Florrie," Siofre said as the other witch took her hand in both of hers. "Florrie, I'd like to introduce Professor Johannes Birnbaum. Professor Birnbaum, this is Mrs Florence Campbell."

Johannes rose in his seat and took Florrie's offered hand, bending over it. "Mrs Campbell. Honoured to meet you."

"Pleased to meet you, too, Professor," Florrie said, smiling and squeezing his fingers. Johannes thought the number of rings she wore created a danger to anyone she shook hands with. "You must be Siofre's new garden wizard!" She looked down at Siofre. "I'd thought he was some ancient Herbology teacher. Lydia didn't say he was so..."

"We are fortunate to have Professor Birnbaum using his talents on our estate," Siofre said briskly. "He is making great strides with it."

"Quite different from Drew's grandmother," Florrie replied. She looked back at Johannes. "Have you known my husband's grandmother, Professor? Professor Zoe Campbell? She was our Herbology teacher."

"I did not have the pleasure," Johannes said.

"She wouldn't have taught you, anyway," Florrie said. "She retired back in the eighties, I think." She looked him up and down. "You likely weren't even a twinkle in your daddy's eye then."

"I did not attend Hogwarts, ma'am. I grew up in Germany."

"Really?" Florrie seemed astonished. "But Lydia said that you had been Head of Ravenclaw...there was something in the papers about that, but I don't remember what."

"I was Sorted into Ravenclaw after I began teaching at Hogwarts," Johannes said.

"What brings you here, Florrie?" Siofre asked.

"I'm meeting Philomena here. She's another one who's never out...all that silly Ministry business of hers!"

"Philomena is Head of the Department for International Magical Cooperation," Siofre said sharply. "Hardly silly business."

"But she could make more time for her cousin," Florrie said.

"I am sure she does what she can," Siofre said.

"There she is now," Florrie said, looking over at the door as the cheerful bells rang and Philomena Yaxley came in. Florrie looked at Siofre. "Would you like us to join you?"

"Ah, we are almost finished with our tea. And we have some business yet to discuss. Tyree estate business," Siofre said, plainly discouraging Florrie. "And as you have so little time with your cousin, I am sure you want to have her to yourself whilst you may."

Philomena came over. "Siofre! Good to see you...and Professor Birnbaum. No, no, don't stand. How are you enjoying your new business venture, Professor?"

"It is most satisfying," Johannes said. "There are new challenges. It is different from teaching at Hogwarts."

"I think our table is ready, Florrie," Philomena said. As Florrie turned to look toward the table the wait-witch had prepared for them, Philomena leaned close to Siofre and said, "See you soon, Siofre." She squeezed her shoulder and winked.

The two witches took their leave of Siofre and Johannes, Johannes rising respectfully.

When he had sat back down and rearranged his napkin on his lap, Siofre asked, "Would you be having a taste for some of their cream cakes now?"

"As you recommend them so highly, I have left space for them," Johannes said.

Siofre smiled, her eyes sparkling. "Good to leave room for the sweet today."

Johannes gained the attention of their wait-witch, and he requested some cream cakes and a fresh pot of Darjeeling for them both.

"Do people often call you 'Sheffy'?" Johannes asked. "I haven't heard Lydia call you that."

"Nay. They do not. Florrie has insisted on that . . . *that nickname* since we met when she was a silly first-year, and she persists in using it more than one hundred years on. I used to try to correct her, but then I realised she found it amusing to hear my protests, so I ceased providing her with amusement. She does occasionally introduce me that way, and I try a gentle correction at that time, but I do not press the point."

Johannes smiled up at the wait-witch when she set down their teapot, fresh cups, and their plate of cream cakes. "Thank you."

The wait-witch bobbed a quick curtsy. "Very welcome, sir. Would sir or ma'am like anything else?"

Johannes looked at Siofre, and after the slight movement of her head, he replied, "No, thank you very much."

Siofre reached for the pot and poured their tea into their fresh teacups.

"Thank you...*Sheffy*," Johannes said with a teasing smile.

Siofre laughed. "From you, with your accent, it sounds rather nice."

"I do believe I prefer your full name, however," Johannes said, accepting the milk pitcher. "Although until I saw the contract with your name spelled out, I thought it was 'S-h-e-e-f-f-r-a-h,' I admit. I had never heard the name before."

"It is a variation of my mother's sister's name, which was 'Siofra.'"

"I hear no difference," Johannes said.

"Her name ended with an 'a.'"

"Ah. I see. Does it have meaning?"

"Changeling.' It is a common name in my mother's family."

"Very interesting. Siofre . . ." He smiled softly. "The first year that I taught at Hogwarts, I had a Connolly in my fifth-year class. Her name was 'Siobhan.' You may imagine the giggles from the students when I read the class roll and pronounced her name 'See-oh-bahn.' I likewise mispronounced 'Sean.' Called the boy, 'Seen.' 'Aoibheann' completely baffled me. The spelling of these names is even more peculiar than most English orthography, which I confess often makes little sense to me."

"Mm. I imagine so. Lydia says that reading German and Italian is easy in part because a word is always pronounced just as it's spelt."

"She is correct. I have only a little Italian, but that is my experience of it. Minerva assisted me in recognising the Scottish and Irish names and how the different combinations of letters give different sounds, such as the 's-e' and 's-i' do. So now when I see them, I can usually read them."

"So no more embarrassing titters when you call out 'Seen,' 'See-oh-bahn,' or 'Sin-need,'" Siofre teased.

"No, although I do say that my pronunciation is not always correct. I have worked more on it since teaching, however."

"I thought your English was remarkably good," Siofre said, "with a most charming accent, but well-pronounced."

"Thank you. You flatter me," Johannes said with a slight blush.

"Not at all. I've heard English who murder their own mother tongue, so it is pleasant to listen to you speak. How did you learn it?"

"My Charms master was English, and I lived with him for almost two years, speaking only English. He lived in Oxford. Deceased now, since three years. But I studied it to read when I was a child. English, Latin, and Greek, although only a little Greek. Then I have French cousins, and I learned that to speak, as well."

"Very good," Siofre said approvingly. "I speak Scottish Gaelic and Irish, and I can make my way a bit in Welsh, and, of course, I speak English and Scots."

"I confess that sometimes when I am in Edinburgh, I hear people speaking, and I think it is English, but I cannot understand a word of it," Johannes said. "It is a very unusual dialect."

Siofre smiled. "Aye, each area has a different dialect. Even in England, they do, as you have noticed, I'm sure."

"It was a challenge for me when I first started teaching," Johannes said. "Some children seem to drop half the letters in more than half their words. But my ear developed, I think, and they learned to speak clearer if they wanted me to understand them."

"Did they laugh then, too?"

"Sometimes, but not often. And I would laugh, too. We laugh together. I liked the students . . . I did enjoy teaching, very much. I could see the children change and grow, make new discoveries and realisations. It was very satisfying in its way."

"You miss it, then?"

"Only a little. I would not mind taking an apprentice one day, when I have the . . . the capacity."

"Or if you have your own children, teaching them for the years before you send them to school."

Johannes nodded. "Perhaps."

"Connor and Elisabeth are sending Liam to Muggle school for the first five years. I will be interested to see whether that lasts."

"How old is Liam?"

"Almost six. He's been in kindergarten this year. I daresay his teacher thinks he comes from a peculiar family."

"His grandparents are Muggles, though," Johannes said.

"Aye, and that will make it easier for him to blend in, they think. He knows enough not to talk about certain things, but you know children. They can be forgetful...and quite literal. Someday, he will say something that he shouldn't, I am sure. Or have a magical accident. That could take some explaining."

"That is true," Johannes said. "You were schooled at home, I presume."

Siofre nodded. "Half the time at home at the estate and half the time on Tíree Beag with the cousins. Most of them stayed on the island for all their schooling, but I went to Hogwarts as both of my parents had, even my father, though he attended back in the nineties, when it was very rare to see any Tyree go to Hogwarts to school."

"The nineties . . . the seventeen-nineties?" Johannes asked rhetorically, doing the math.

Siofre chuckled. "Aye. It's no spring chicken you're looking at now, laddie, but my dad, he was older than my mother by a good many years...indeed, by more than four decades. He worked for the Irish wizarding patrol guard, you see, and was living in County Meath with the other Tyree cousins...he'd had a few problems with a few of the English pureblood families, so he couldn't get a job with the British Ministry law enforcement...and he met my mother when he was on duty. He was with a few others who had been sent to negotiate with some clauricorns who were living too close to a Muggle village and drawing attention to themselves. My mother was just eighteen, a country lass. My father caught sight of her and was struck by her beauty. He fell in love with her at first sight. She thought him a fine, strong wizard, gallant and well-spoken, she said, and so my father wasted no time. They married a year later, they returned here to live, and then the next year, I was born."

"It sounds very romantic."

"His mates teased him that the clauricorns had enchanted him to fall in love so to distract him from his work. But aye, 'twas romantic enough, and my mother was beautiful. I will show you her portrait in the gallery when we return to the house...if you are staying for dinner?"

"I hadn't thought I would . . . I have things in my flat in Hogsmeade, a few books, that I need to fetch. I was going to see you home and return to the flat for the night."

"We could fetch them together, then," Siofre said. "An you want to come back to the house today. Otherwise, we will see you tomorrow afternoon?"

"Ah . . . we could fetch them. It's just a few things. And you can see that my flat is quite cosy and not at all barren and empty, as you say...though it is not a castle. Simply a humble apartment."

"Just between us, sometimes at the end of a long day, I could wish for a humble apartment," Siofre said. "The castle brings many responsibilities, and not simply the care and upkeep of the house and grounds. But they are good, too, these responsibilities. Just occasionally . . . wearying. Keeping this between us."

"Of course."

"I would not want Lydia to feel a burden...she offered to go back to teaching piano again, and accompanying voice students. She hated accompanying voice students. An

she took a few private piano students because she wanted to, because she enjoyed it, that would be fine, but I don't want her to think she has to . . . to chip in, you know?"

"Indeed. I understand."

"And it's not as though I *do* find it a burden, not usually, and I certainly don't find Lydia one, but it is a lot to think about. I worry, too, about my family on Tiree, and about my responsibilities toward them, and I worry about my clients, even ones from years ago."

"You must miss your husband," Johannes said. "Someone to share it with."

Siofre nodded and shrugged. "Herbert was a sweet wizard, a very dear man, and clever, too. Wrote histories of oracles, of discoveries, of great teachers . . . didn't write about wars, though. Never liked to write about . . . violent conflicts. Intellectual heroes, though, heroes of peace and wisdom, they interested him. He was a good man. And an emotional support to me, that too."

"But not . . . practical?" Johannes asked tentatively.

Siofre smiled wryly. "You are a sharp one, Magister. Aye, not very practical. But I didn't marry him to marry a practical man."

"Many have said I am not a practical man. Professor Dumbledore has said it."

Siofre snorted a laugh. "That man . . . he is a great wizard, and don't mistake me, I respect him, but he isn't unfailingly correct. You're practical enough. You got us customers for our produce, after all. And you saw the potential to grow bere again."

Johannes blushed. He would not tell her how difficult he found that side of his work. *selling* was quite a different thing from growing plants and casting charms, or from writing and research. He knew its necessity, after all, and at least people seemed to be willing to listen to him...he also liked people, and he knew that he had good potions ingredients, or good produce, to offer them.

"I hope that the bere is good," Johannes said.

"I spoke with Young Jacob this morning. He will look at the field when he is here for Beltane."

"You know, Siofre, if you wish to talk . . . to have someone to talk to, I am not family, but I would listen and be discreet, as you wish," Johannes said.

"I have found you to be a good listener," Siofre replied. "I enjoy your company. In fact, this has been a lovely afternoon. Thank you."

"I have enjoyed it. You were right about the cream cakes. *Lecker*."

"Pardon?"

"Very delicious. Tasty," he said with a nod.

"Aye, they are gusty," Siofre said with a laugh. "Now to Hogsmeade and your humble abode?" she asked as the wait-witch brought Johannes the bill.

"Aye," Johannes echoed. "To Hogsmeade."

Chapter Thirteen: A Family Man

Chapter 13 of 32

Johannes and Siofre share a moment of closeness following their date at the Primrose Room. Lydia prods Siofre.



Chapter Thirteen: A Family Man

Siofre released Johannes's arm and looked around her. They were in a somewhat overgrown back garden of a small house. Ivy climbed the brick walls surrounding the courtyard, and a large oak tree from a neighbouring garden cast a long late afternoon shadow over the garden.

"My flat has its own entrance in the back, you see," Johannes said. "Quite private and quiet." He removed a key from his pocket, fitted it to the door, and unlocked it. He gestured for Siofre to enter first.

"You lock your door," Siofre observed as she stepped into his kitchen.

"It is common knowledge that I do not spend much time here," Johannes said. "I believe it prudent to lock it when I am not at home. Other than the landlord's Anti-Apparition wards, however, there are no wards."

"Another reason to be prudent and lock the door," Siofre said.

"This, as you see, is my little kitchen...now well-provisioned by Multry. Through here, I have a sitting room," he said, leading the way into the sitting room, "and that door leads to my bedroom. The, um, facilities are also through there. Bath and so forth."

Siofre nodded. There were a great many bookcases in the little sitting room, and each shelf had large gaps. Johannes had brought most of his books to his rooms at the Tyree estate, it seemed...which was quite sensible, Siofre thought, since he spent most of his time there. The sofa was an older one and somewhat worn, but it appeared comfortable, and Johannes had put a few colourful cushions on it. There were two matching armchairs, several lamps, and a low coffee table, as well; a cherry roll-top desk

stood against one wall.

"If you would like to have a seat," Johannes said, "I will fetch my few things before we may leave."

Siofre glanced curiously through the door to the bedroom, but saw only a made bed, its simple head and footboards also of cherry, a cherry nightstand with a lamp, and a couple more bookcases.

Rather than sit, Siofre glanced through the books that remained on the bookshelves. Many were in German, but more were in English, and they were on a wide array of subjects. Johannes had a fair amount of literature, too, which did not surprise Siofre, although she had never seen him reading any books other than ones related to his profession in some way. She wandered over to the roll-top desk, which was closed. She didn't open it, but she did reach up and pick up a hinged photograph frame that was on top of the desk.

On one side, there was an unmoving black and white Muggle photograph of a much younger-looking Johannes with a pretty, smiling witch, and a tiny sleeping baby...presumably his wife and daughter. He was standing close behind his wife, looking down at the baby, and smiling. On the other side, there was a black and white wizarding portrait photograph of a slightly older witch and wizard, perhaps his parents...Johannes resembled the wizard fairly well, although Siofre thought Johannes better looking, perhaps because he had inherited his mother's open smile and bright eyes.

Johannes came back out of the bedroom carrying a satchel and another cloth bag. He paused when he saw that Siofre had the photographs in her hands.

"Your family?" Siofre asked.

"Ja. My wife, Beate, and my daughter, Clara, and that is my father, Matthias Karl, and my mother, Rosa," Johannes said, taking the photographs and pointing to them. "After they died, one of my neighbours, a Muggle friend, gave me the picture of Beate and Clara, and a cousin had this one of my parents, and she sent it to me. The murderers did not stop at killing my family, burning my fields, and reducing my greenhouse to sand. They defaced or destroyed almost all pictures and books . . . the house they left standing, and its furniture, but my life, they erased. They took my life without killing me," Johannes said softly. "It was after that, I was hiding by a friend in Freiburg, and Professor Dumbledore came for me. He brought me to England, to Yorkshire, and he let me live in his house there. Later, he helped me to get the job at Hogwarts. I barely knew him before then."

Siofre patted his arm. "That was a tragedy. I am glad that you had friends to help you, and that Dumbledore brought you here and gave you a chance for a new life."

Johannes nodded, still looking at the photographs. "Would you like to see another photograph of Clara?"

"Aye, she was a beautiful bairn," Siofre said softly.

Johannes replaced the framed photographs on top of the desk, then he reached into an inner pocket of his outer-robe and pulled out a small hard leather case. It opened with a click.

"I carried this with me," Johannes said softly. "I had it with me that day, when I should have been there with my family. It was taken only a week before . . ."

Siofre looked at the picture of the smiling, laughing baby, and she swallowed past the lump she felt rise in her throat. How anyone could murder a baby was completely beyond her comprehension.

"And that is a little lock of her hair," Johannes said, pointing to the side opposite the photograph. There was a small, light tuft of hair closed behind glass. He handed the picture to her, almost thrusting it at her. "Excuse me . . . pardon me."

He turned quickly and went back into the bedroom, closing the door behind him. Siofre could hear the bathroom door open and close. She sighed and allowed a few tears to well up in her eyes before she wiped them away with the back of her hand. With one finger, she gently traced the curve of the child's face, then she closed the photograph case with a snap.

A few minutes later, Johannes reemerged from the bedroom, and Siofre was sitting on the sofa with a book open in her lap.

"I apologise..." Johannes began.

"Nay, do not apologise," Siofre replied, setting the book aside and standing.

"I do not look at the picture. That little one. I carry it still, but . . . It has been so many years. It should not bother me."

"Bah! If anyone tells you that, do not believe them. Your feelings change over time, your circumstances change, your life moves on, but that was your daughter. You cannot lose every drop of grief in you, not if you live to be two hundred." She handed him the closed photograph case and took his hand as she did. "Thank you for showing me." She squeezed his hand briefly, then let go.

Johannes nodded once and smiled slightly. "It was good to share it with you. You are easy for me to speak to."

"I'm glad you're returning to the house with me," Siofre said as he bent to retrieve his bags. "Your flat is cosy, certainly, but our house . . . it's as Lydia says: it feels emptier when you leave."

"It will be good for you to have Bertrand and Sally returning, then, even if it is just for a visit. And to have your grandson and his family living so close. You will feel more life with them all there with you."

Siofre nodded. "But it will not make your company any less welcome, Johannes."

"Thank you. I fear sometimes I become too comfortable there, but also that I intrude upon the privacy that I know you enjoy."

"Nonsense! You're right that I enjoy my privacy, that I am happy up there in my hills, as Florrie put it this afternoon, but you are very welcome there with us...besides, the house is large enough to accommodate far more people with ease. We each still have our privacy...it is you I worry about, and I would feel guilty about persuading you to return for the rest of the weekend if it weren't for the fact that I'm too pleased about it."

"You worry about me? And why feel guilty?" Johannes asked as he opened the outer door for Siofre.

"Well, as my oldest grandson pointed out to me, living at the Tyree castle may be comfortable for you, but it does nothing for your social life to live up in the hills with two old widows. He dared almost scold me for...how did he put it?...for *cramping your style*."

Johannes chuckled as he turned his key in the lock. "Hardly. Malcolm is intent on seeing that I have sufficient amusement in my life. He also thinks that I would be happier if I were . . . um, seeing a lady. Dating. It sounds like very much work when he speaks of it, and hardly amusing at all. Not that I am averse to that. To dating. If it were a witch with whom I enjoy spending time. But I am not in any hurry, nor am I unhappy living in your hills with you and Lydia. Malcolm's 'style' is not always the same as mine. So do not worry or feel guilt."

"You know, Johannes, you are welcome to have guests, to have friends visit. It is your home, too, and I know you would not invite someone to visit who would be unacceptable to any of us. And if you care to have a guest stay, speak with Multry. She can make whatever arrangements you may require."

"Thank you. That is most generous."

"In fact, is there anyone you would like to invite to Beltane and to Murdoch's party?" Siofre asked. "I'm sure we could find room, or even set up a bed in your sitting room."

"I . . . I had not considered it. I was uncertain whether I was included, you see. It is over a weekend."

"Ach! Shame on us both, then! I for not clearly inviting you, and you for doubting that we would include you! Of course, you *needn't* stay for it if you don't wish to, but naturally you are invited. It can get a wee bit raucous, and the bonfire goes very late, but I would . . . it would be a disappointment to me if you were not there. I was looking forward to it, you see," she said, linking her arm through his in anticipation their Apparition, "looking forward to having your company there."

"In that instance, I could not fail to attend," Johannes said with a smile and raising his free hand to pat her arm. "I will be very pleased to stay for the bonfire and the weekend. And now, shall I Apparate us?"

"Aye. You may," Siofre said. "Bring us home, Honnie."

"So, you came back together," Lydia said, sitting down in her favourite chair in the sitting room.

"As you could easily see, as the magister greeted you before going up to his rooms."

"And *together*, by Side-Along," Lydia teased.

"Mm. Sensible." Siofre picked up the Dublin edition of the *Daily Prophet*, which she hadn't found time to read earlier in the day.

"But who gave whom the Side-Along, I wonder," Lydia continued. "Could it be that our Siofre actually allowed a gentleman friend to Apparate her home?"

Siofre sighed and shook her head. "'Twas practical. I was a wee bit tired after Apparating about this morning, and I was also trying to be polite, Lydia. The man's not familiar with Tyree ways, with my ways. It would have been impolite to insist on Apparating myself...or, worse, to insist on Apparating him as though he were a child incapable of bringing himself home."

Lydia laughed. "And isn't that what you said that time when Russ Wainwright offered you a Side-Along to McTavish Street from the Clypeum? I don't think I'd ever seen any man turn as deep red as he did when you told him that you were neither a child nor an ancient witch in your dotage that you were incapable of Apparating a short distance to a place you'd been thousands of times, and he should remove his hands from your person." She laughed even harder at the memory.

"That man was annoying, in any case. Even if I were exhausted, I'd rather accept a Side-Along from almost anyone but him. I think he's had something unnatural done to his teeth. His smile is most obnoxious."

Lydia laughed. "That cannot be said of Johannes, certainly."

"Nay, not at all." Siofre turned to the pages on international news.

"Did you have a good afternoon?" Lydia asked.

"Aye, quite nice."

Lydia waited. "Is that all you have to say about it? You're gone for hours, and you can only say 'quite nice'?"

"Well, it was quite nice." Siofre set her newspaper down, resigned to having to say more than two words about her afternoon. "Florrie Campbell saw us, silly thing, and chattered on about nothing, as usual. She came within a hair of insulting the magister," Siofre said. "We avoided that, however...and Johannes was quite gentlemanly with her, as you might expect...and then Philomena arrived, took her away, saving us. Philly told me she's looking forward to the Beltane celebration."

"Good. And you and Johannes?"

"We had a very nice afternoon, as I said. We were a wee bit early, so we sat in the park a while, then we had tea at the Primrose Room, sandwiches and cakes. It was delicious, as always. Johannes said it was licker."

"He said what?" Lydia asked, blinking.

"I thought that's what he said," Siofre replied, puzzled. "He said it was tasty."

"Ah! *Lecker!* Yes." Lydia nodded, chuckling. "That's good that you both enjoyed the food, but what about the two of you?" Lydia persisted.

"He is excellent company, as you know," Siofre said. "We enjoyed it. I really don't know what you want me to say, Lydia. After we had tea, we stopped by his flat in Hogsmeade so he could fetch a few things. 'Tis a cute wee apartment he has there. I did invite him to the bonfire...he didn't realise that we expected him for it, and he thought he needed an invitation...and you know that he's staying on for dinner tomorrow with Morgan, Fiona, and the bairns."

"I'm glad you persuaded him to come back with you," Lydia said. "And I should have given him a written invitation, I suppose, just as I did for everyone else, but with him living here, it simply didn't occur to me."

"That's what I told him, that we simply presumed that he would attend. He is a member of the household, after all."

"Practically a member of the family," Lydia added with a nod.

"Well, I didn't adopt the lad, Lydia," Siofre said drily, "but I did tell him that he could never intrude upon any family occasions and he's always welcome."

"'Twasn't *adoption* I was thinking of," Lydia said with a smile. "He's a bonny one, you admit it yourself. Kind, handsome, intelligent, and you obviously are fond of him..."

"I'm quite fond of a good many people, even an you fail to notice it and I don't show it, but that does not mean that I'm interested in any of them in the way you are implying...and I shan't pretend I don't know what you're implying, as you were plain enough in your insinuations earlier this afternoon, but I do wish you wouldn't speak like that again. In fact, I'm hoping that Lachina will come and spend some extra time here next week. She'd be company for Phoebe, and I think she might enjoy Professor Birnbaum's company. They have many interests in common."

"Lachina? Dervla and Lachlann's daughter? Lachina? You . . . I . . . Lachina . . . *Lachina*? I am at a loss for words, Siofre." Lydia threw her hands into the air. "Utterly and completely at a loss for words."

"Lachina is a lovely lass!"

"Yes, yes, yes, of course she is, but really . . . *Lachina*, Siofre?"

"I am not setting them up. I would not presume, unlike Malcolm. I simply think that they might enjoy each other's company. If they do enjoy each other, and well enough, then if nature takes its course, we may be able to welcome the magister to the family in truth. If not," Siofre said with a shrug, "then not."

"Oh, Siofre," Lydia said with a sigh. "You have *no* idea, do you?"

"Ach, I am not so dim, hen, not to see that the magister has developed some affection for me...*fo*both of us, Lydia...and I canna deny that my growing affection for him has surprised me, but I'm no fool, either. You know that Johannes lost his family in Germany. It would be good for him to find a nice witch and have a new family in his new life here in Scotland. And if I happen selfishly to hope that it's a Tyree witch whom he finds to have that family with, that would certainly not be to his detriment."

Lydia shook her head and rolled her eyes dramatically. "You*don't* know what you're doing, sister dear, if you can blithely say that you'd like him with some Tyree witch, and yet be introducing him to Lachina..."

"If not Lachina, then another," Siofre said with a shrug. "There should be a number of nice, single Tyree witches at either the bonfire or Murdoch's party."

"Lachina reminds me of you when you were her age, Siofre darling. Even looks a lot like you did, apart from her hair being a tad darker red than yours was."

"Aye, darker than mine *was*, Lydia. It hasn't been that shade in a good ten years, at least. And you know why I finally accepted Herbert."

"I know."

"It gave me my last chance for another bairn, I believed, and just a few years later, I was proven right. Maisie never had a younger brother or sister. The magister deserves all that life has to offer, and all that marriage can offer, including children. Even if I *were* at all interested in him that way...and I am not saying I am...that wouldn't be possible for me and not fair to him."

"There are Tyree traditions that could accommodate that, if it were important to you both. You know that I tried to encourage Murdoch that we should take that option when I was having such trouble carrying my own child."

"And Murdoch declined and you eventually had Bertrand," Siofre said.

"And Bertie was a great blessing, but Murdoch and I had both agreed that if we didn't have a child by our tenth anniversary, that would be our gift to each other. We both wanted a child that much."

"I remember now . . . you even had two Tyree island witches you were considering asking," Siofre said reflectively. "But that wouldn't apply for us...for me, I mean. It isn't as though I have any delusion that I could enter into a relationship with a wizard...*any* wizard...and offer him the possibility of a family."

"First, from what I know of the Tyree tradition, there is no requirement that the wife be within childbearing years to make the request for the . . . the ritual, only that the couple is incapable of having a child with each other...except, obviously, when the problem is on the husband's side and not the wife's, then the witch must be fertile in order to perform the rituals with another wizard. But otherwise, the wife picks her substitute for her husband, and the child will be theirs as soon as it draws its first breath. From what I've learned from families on the island, this has worked very well for many couples for hundreds of years. If it were important to you and to him, you would both find a way, I'm sure."

Siofre took in a deep breath and let it out. "I'm not interested in having another baby at my age, through the substitute rituals or otherwise, nor am I interested in becoming involved with a wizard who would." She shook her head. "There's no point in discussing this. It's completely irrelevant."

"I don't think it is, Siofre. The witch you're setting him up with...all right, all right*introducing* him to...she's *you*. Well, not you, but as close as you could come. You're setting our Johannes up with a witch who is as like to you as any I know. If that doesn't say something, I don't know what does..."

"It says nothing, ergo, there is nothing left to be said. Now, what time did you ask Multry to serve supper this evening?"

Lydia sighed, but acquiesced. For the moment.

Author's note: If you enjoy keeping track of the various RaMverse characters, you may have noticed Philomena Flint Yaxley in the last chapter, and whom Siofre mentions in this one. She is the same Philomena Yaxley who met Minerva in her sodden-Tabby persona in *Resolving a Misunderstanding*, whom Malcolm describes as "the old harridan" who issued him the permit to import Erumpent horn, and who was with Scrimgeour during the Death Eater attack on the Ministry in *Death's Dominion*. Florrie Flint Campbell is Andrew Campbell's grandmother...Andrew was one of the boys who took the Hogwarts Express with Suzie in "The Sorting of Suzie Sefton." Florrie's husband's grandmother, Professor Campbell, is mentioned by Albus in *Resolving a Misunderstanding*. She grew up in Nova Scotia and didn't really approve of the Hogwarts House system, so always paired students from different Houses in her Herbology classes...that was how Albus met Dervilia, a Hufflepuff in his Herbology class. That's probably enough trivia for one author's note!

I hope you enjoyed the chapter. I appreciate all your reviews!

Chapter Fourteen: Pleasant Inconvenience

Chapter 14 of 32

Johannes invites Siofre to lunch. They encounter a pleasant inconvenience.



Chapter Fourteen: Pleasant Inconvenience

Johannes was up before dawn. He dressed quickly and went down to the kitchen, thinking to make himself a cup of coffee before going out to his garden, but Multry caught

him looking through the cupboards for the coffee, and she scolded him. Johannes apologised, explaining that he hadn't wanted to disturb anyone so early in the morning.

Multry tutted at that explanation, but allowed Johannes to have a seat in the kitchen and watch as she prepared his coffee. She also insisted he have breakfast, and made him an egg and cheese sandwich to eat with his coffee. As Johannes ate, Multry fixed herself a pot of tea.

"You're out earlier than usual," she observed. "Busy busy week after a busy busy weekend?"

Johannes nodded, but then realised that Multry couldn't see him. "Yes. I have much to do before the bonfire. I want the grounds to look nice when the guests arrive, and now that Madam Lydia's son and daughter-in-law are returning, I would like to have more finished for their arrival next week. And I still have to work in my own garden and in the kailyard."

"The Master Professor should leave the kailyard and the other vegetable gardens to us. You do your new work this week. Fandenz and Gweller work the herbs and vegetables. Mynok watches them. Then the Master Professor checks the house-elf work later. Yes?"

"Yes," Johannes agreed. "Please send Mynok to me so that I can tell him what I need done. And if Tastle and Gweller can assist me later today, that would be good, too. If Madam Siofre or Madam Lydia have no other tasks for them."

"Sorrel helps Madam Lydia today with preparations for Master Bertie and Madam Sally's return. Madam Siofre doesn't tell me yet what she does today."

"You will be left with a lot of work, all alone."

"No, Sorrel works hard, and Penty and Kaffrom can help, too. Shoolie watches the babies in the lodge with Lollie. Lollie is Shoolie's daughter's daughter," Multry said, sitting down at her little table. "Shoolie can teach Lollie more about babies. Lollie is a good elf."

"I am sure she is." Johannes finished his cup of coffee, and Multry immediately refilled it for him.

"Duster and Kilbeena be's very happy to help the Master Professor," Multry said.

"They are good children. I am glad to have them help."

"They help you this morning, then?"

"No, not this morning, or not until later in the morning. I will be in my garden early. It is not safe for little ones. When they are older...if I am here," Johannes corrected himself quickly. "That is, if they were older, they could help me. There are some dangerous plants. I would have to watch them closely."

"I tell them they help the Master Professor another time," Multry said with a nod.

"Thank you for breakfast, Multry."

"It is always a pleasure to serve you," Multry replied.

Johannes stepped through the pantry and out into the kitchen garden. It was a chilly morning, but he would warm up quickly enough once he began working.

A half hour later, as he crouched beside a bed of immature Mandragora, he heard the gate to his garden open and the crunch of a step on the fine gravel path. He rolled back to sit on his heels and glanced over his shoulder. When he saw who it was, he stood and brushed his hands off on his apron.

"Siofre! Good morning! You are out early."

"As are you. I was surprised to come down to breakfast and learn from Multry you had already eaten and begun work."

"I wished to spend time in my own garden today," Johannes explained, "so I needed an early start."

"You never neglect any other work. Don't feel you must rise early simply to work in your garden," Siofre replied.

"I enjoy the early morning hours."

"I do, too," Siofre said. "How are your Mandragora?"

"Doing very well. Next spring, we shall be able to harvest them . . . Of course, that will require transplanting them . . . somewhere."

"Transplant them? You could put them in the greenhouse, I suppose. They would do better wintering over in the greenhouse, I am sure."

Johannes hesitated. "It would be good of you to allow me to keep them in your greenhouse. I could remove them elsewhere. I could find another solution before then. And with a Charmed cold frame built around them, they can even winter outdoors."

"Why move them anywhere, then, except to the greenhouse, if they would do better there?" Siofre asked. "This is your garden, and it will be yours next spring, and for as long as you wish it."

"I . . ."

"Honestly, Johannes, we have no lack of land. You deprive us of nothing by using this wee parcel. You could have more, and we would only be enriched."

Johannes chuckled and shook his head slightly. "Enriched?"

"Aye. We enjoy your presence here, you know. If you keep a garden here, we will be ensured of your continued visits," Siofre said with a smile. "A bit of . . . blackmail, perhaps?"

Johannes laughed. "Nay, no blackmail required. I would visit, anyway, whenever you wished. And I will continue to look after your gardens and grounds for you for as long as you require. I would return regularly."

"Good," Siofre replied with a nod of approval. "Now, may I lend a hand here? I have to pay another visit to Gwyneth Terwilliger later this morning, but I have time until then."

"Ah . . . I would offer you to soothe the Leaping Toadstools, but I will save that pleasure for myself," Johannes said, smiling, remembering her adventures with those lively fungi.

Siofre laughed. "I could learn something from you, no doubt."

"I am placing a bit of this potion in with each mandrake root," Johannes said, gesturing toward a tub of fine granular potion that looked like black sand. "It only needs a little...a quarter teaspoon per root. It is best done manually...would you like gloves?"

Siofre shook her head. "What about their crying?"

"I have cast a . . . a sort of sleep over them. They are also very young, and even if they were to cry, it would only make you feel uncomfortable. We only clear a little earth to

one side, too, and we do not pull them. But if you would like, I could Transfigure some earplugs for you."

Siofre shook her head. "I trust the magister." She knelt beside him. "Show me how much potion."

For the next hour, the two worked together in Johannes's small garden, and when Johannes looked up at Siofre from across a bed of chamomile just as she looked up at him, he felt his breath catch and his heart beat faster. Her sparkling eyes seemed exceptionally bright that morning, and he didn't know when he had ever felt so much life streaming through a person. He would return to the Tyree estate as often as he could for as long as he was welcome . . . If he could stay, he would never leave. Siofre smiled at him, and Johannes felt a blush creep over his cheeks as he returned her smile. He felt she must be able to see it in his eyes, his pleasure in her company, his undeniable pull toward her, his immense regard for her . . .

"I should go in and change now," Siofre said, "and then I must go into Edinburgh and pay a visit to the grandson before I Apparate to Cornwall to see Madam Terwilliger."

"You are going to the apothecary?"

"Aye. There is a potion that I want Murdoch to brew for this job. 'Tis an old Tyree potion, not a standard. I haven't had an opportunity to drop it by until today."

"You could have owled it to him," Johannes said, standing. "Or I could have brought it on Saturday."

"I would trust you to bring it...and to explain that's it's not to be sold or passed on...but I'd like to speak with Murdoch in person, in any case."

"I need to go to Edinburgh today, myself. May I accompany you?"

"Aye, that you may. Where do you go?"

Johannes removed his work apron and cast a cleansing charm on his hands. "I am going to the bookshop, and then I am Apparating to the Mayfield Charmed Glassworks to speak with Madam Mayfield about the greenhouse materials, the number of square feet of glass, the support materials, the charms she will lay on the glass, the pricing, and so forth."

"I should be with you then." Siofre frowned with thought. "Can you make your visit to the bookshop after meeting with Caroline?"

"Yes, that is not a problem."

"Good, then we will go to the apothecary and then to Mayfield Glassworks, and then I can go on to Cornwall from there, and you can return to Edinburgh. I apologise for interfering with your plans."

Johannes shook his head. "I simply told Madam Mayfield that I would be there sometime this morning. I was not specific. And the bookshop has a book that I ordered. They could send it, but I enjoy bookshops. Browsing."

"I enjoy that, too," Siofre replied, "but I rarely make the time."

"You should. We could stop there before we go to Mayfield's."

Siofre shook her head. "I would like to, but I told Gwyneth I would be there to see her by eleven. I don't want to be late."

"Then afterward," Johannes suggested. "We could meet after you are finished in Cornwall. Have lunch in McTavish Street and then go to the bookshop and browse. You said you were not going to take on much work this week or next..."

"Because we need to prepare for Bertrand and Sally..."

"Lydia seems to be handling that well, and it seems there's not much more to do. And Morgan and Fiona are settled. If they need anything from the main house, Lydia is here, and the house-elves. You said to me earlier that I do not neglect my work; neither do you. We can work later this afternoon. Come to lunch with me." Johannes almost held his breath waiting for her response.

"I dinna know . . . I suppose we can discuss the plans for the bonfire and for the grandson's birthday . . ."

"Or we could discuss those things later, when we work in the afternoon. You will meet me for lunch?"

Siofre gave a little laugh. "Very well, I will meet you for lunch. Best I meet you at the bookshop, though. I believe I should be able to meet you at half past twelve, but if I am later, I do not wish to leave you sitting alone in a café."

Johannes grinned. "Good. Very good. But meet me here. We can leave from here. Twelve-thirty. I will meet you at the house at twelve-thirty."

"Aye. It's a date, then."

Johannes's face grew warm. "Aye, a date."

"Let's go meet with Caroline Egidius, then, and discuss glass."

Siofre returned from Cornwall at quarter to twelve, surprised to find that Johannes was not at the house, and Lydia told her that he was not out on the grounds, either.

"We were meeting for lunch in Edinburgh," Siofre said. "I thought we were meeting here at the house, but p'raps we are meeting in the bookshop."

"No, Johannes said he would be back at twelve-thirty," Lydia said. "You're just early."

"All right, then. I'll go make my notes. I'll be in my study."

"If I see him when he gets back, I'll tell him," Lydia said. "By the way, I'm going out to the cottage this afternoon with Multry. Sorrel will be taking care of supper...we thought something light tonight at about seven. Does that suit you?"

"Fine. You are starting on the decorating?"

"Just getting the place prepared for it. Seeing what's salvageable and cleaning away the rest. Gweller may join us at some point, although I know that Johannes wanted some help in the gardens this afternoon. I told him he could have Fandenz, if you haven't another job for him."

"That sounds fine. I'm going to have Brian start the plumbing out there next week, so bear that in mind. I think that all the existing pipes will need replacing, and we need to modernise the bathroom and put a loo in on the ground floor, as well. Don't do anything that will just need to be redone after the plumbing's in."

"Not to worry, sister, I am leaving the kitchen and bathroom for last, anyway. I'll find a good spot for the downstairs loo...perhaps off the kitchen."

Siofre went upstairs to her study. After making her notes in her journal, she paged back over the previous weeks' entries. She had done too much work for which she had deferred payment, she realised. At least the Smethwyck arbitration had been both lucrative and paid in full. The job for Gwyneth Terwilliger, however, would cost her not

only time, but money, and more than the few Galleons that she had accepted from Gwyneth. Siofre knew that Gwyneth was concerned about her husband learning that she had been spending money on something he knew nothing about, so she had told the witch that if she were successful, and if Gwyneth still felt inclined to do so at the time, then when her child entered Hogwarts, happy, healthy, and with a father who did not mistreat mother or child, she could pay the balance at that time.

Siofre recognised that she waived or lowered fees far too frequently to be a good business woman, and that she had her own obligations to her home and immediate family...in which she included more than just her children and her sister-in-law...but she could not turn a witch away whom she could help simply because the woman didn't have much money.

Johannes's plan to make more money from the estate itself seemed an excellent solution. The estate hadn't sold any produce, grain, lumber, or anything else, on a regular basis since Siofre's father had passed away. When Murdoch had been alive, he had never taken in more than a hundred Galleons a year from the sale of produce, and usually quite a bit less. No doubt, it would take a few years before they could generate a good income from the estate, but she thought that within the next five years, they could make the place quite profitable. She hoped that Johannes would continue to manage that aspect of the estate. He had said he would check on the gardens and grounds regularly, but that wasn't the same as overseeing it.

The thought of Johannes leaving the estate saddened Siofre, but life was filled with changes, with gains and losses. She knew that the magister wished to have his own bit of land with a greenhouse and establish himself as an independent Herbologist. Perhaps she could lease him a bit of the estate. There was some nice land to the south of the main house, and there had been a house there once, its foundations still standing not far from an old hill fort. It was picturesque, if a bit removed from anything, but she doubted that Johannes would mind that. He could always maintain an office of some sort in Hogsmeade or the Clypeum, somewhere like that. Of course, perhaps he had planned to move someplace else entirely, buy a piece of land in England and not stay in Scotland. Siofre couldn't imagine wanting to live in England once knowing the Highlands, but she recognised that she was biased.

At about quarter past twelve, Siofre heard a crack. Someone was Disapparating...a house-elf, she thought. Johannes would be arriving soon, but she didn't want to appear to be waiting for him, so she resisted the urge to go downstairs. It was obvious to Siofre now, although it hadn't been unnoticeable before, that Johannes had a very distinct reaction to her presence and her touch. There was something rather nice about knowing that her mere touch, even unaccompanied by any tickling of her magic, caused him to blush and feel attracted to her. He clearly enjoyed it, too. If it made him at all uncomfortable, it was not in a way to make him avoid her...quite the opposite, in fact.

She never ought to have called their lunch a date as she had. He might misconstrue the word, imbue it with more meaning than it had. A wave of remorse swept over her. She ought not to be so careless with his feelings. The dear man had had more than enough difficulty in his life without her toying with him...whether she had meant to in that moment or not.

Perhaps Malcolm had been right, and she was doing the youthful Herbologist a disservice in keeping him there at the estate, persuading him even to give up his weekends to her. She would make sure that he went to his home the coming weekend. It might not be a bad idea to encourage Malcolm to take the lad out for drinks. The following weekend, of course, was a different matter. There was the Beltane bonfire and the party the next day, and Johannes would be there as a guest, not as the estate's Herbologist gardener. There would be several single witches there, as well.

Despite...or perhaps because of...Lydia's incredulous questions about inviting Lachina to come to the estate a few days early, Siofre had asked her young kinswoman to come to visit for the week, ostensibly to keep Phoebe company and spend time with Fiona, Morgan, and the babies. Lachina had written back agreeing to come to stay at the estate, although she couldn't make it a complete holiday, and would have to spend a few hours each day at the jeweller's where she was one of three master jewellers and gem charmers. It would still give her and Johannes an opportunity to become acquainted.

Siofre put her journal away in its drawer and left her study, crossing the hall to her sitting room, from where she could see the front drive. As she gazed out the window and waited for Johannes, she reflected on her own feelings for the magister. Her feelings were not as simple as Lydia drew them. It was not merely a matter of finding the wizard handsome or enjoying his company, and her feelings for him went beyond simple affection and appreciation. More than that, she cared about his welfare. He clearly valued family, and it obviously had taken him a long time to recover from the tragic loss of his own. Siofre wanted him to have a new chance at a family. Yet she would not deny that she found Johannes more than handsome, and more than just a theoretically attractive man. She was more strongly attracted to Johannes than she had been to any man in many, many decades, and she was more than slightly fond of him.

She was falling in love for the first time since she was a girl, Siofre recognised, and if Johannes were a different sort of man with a different sort of history...and if he weren't so much younger than she, much younger even than her own son, though older than her daughter by at least a decade...then she wouldn't hesitate to draw him in and to fall in love, herself. She wanted to give him a chance to make another choice before she made one for him...for once she decided to allow Johannes to pursue her, she would catch him and she would keep him.

Until then, she would have to try to restrain herself. Reining in some of her inappropriately suggestive remarks would be a good place to begin. By the standards of the day, suggesting that they were having a date was hardly anything at all. Siofre chuckled drily to herself. Even by the standards of her own girlhood, it was hardly anything at all, but for Johannes, such remarks would surely bring him around to thinking of her as something far more than his employer, more than Malcolm's grandmother, and more than his friend. He was already sliding in that direction as it was.

There was a dull snap, and Siofre looked out the window. There was Johannes, changed from the clothes he had worn to their meeting with Caroline Egidius Mayfield that morning. He was still wearing cuffed brown trousers and smooth brown leather boots, but it looked as though he had changed his shirt and waistcoat, and he was wearing a deep green over-robe, open down the front, and a matching green hat with a creased crown and a broad brim.

Johannes strode up the drive, and Siofre turned from the window and left her study. As she walked down the flight of stairs to the entry hall, she Summoned her cloak and hat. She caught them, and the door opened below her. Johannes stepped through and immediately looked up to see her. His smile was instantaneous and warm, and Siofre returned it.

"Good afternoon, Madam Tyree," Johannes said, still smiling. "You are ready for lunch?"

"Aye, indeed, Professor."

"Then let us depart." Johannes gestured toward the still-open door behind him and bowed slightly.

"I could Apparate us this time," Siofre offered, quickly adding, "if you would like. Or we could meet there, in the small park."

"Nay." Johannes tried to suppress his smile, but he was clearly very pleased. "We do not return to McTavish Street," he explained as Siofre stepped through the door.

"We aren't? Where are we going?"

"You will soon see," Johannes replied, his eyes sparkling. He closed the door with a wave of his hand.

Siofre took his arm. "Very well, Honnie, I will trust you and let you surprise me." She smiled up at him.

A few moments later, she found herself in the back garden of the flat that Johannes rented in Hogsmeade.

"I remembered you said you were not particularly fond of eating out in restaurants," Johannes said, opening the door that led into his kitchen, "therefore, I thought I might spend my meagre culinary skills today...although I have had a little help."

Siofre stepped into the kitchen to find his table set for two, a brightly patterned tablecloth covering the plain wooden kitchen table and two new blue cushions on the wooden chair seats. Sorrel, dressed in a candy-striped set of towels, was hovering beside the cook stove, looking into a pot. He replaced the lid as they entered.

"Everything still nice nice, Master Professor!" Sorrel pronounced. "Nothing overdone...and I passes a little charm over your fish," he added in a whisper, "so's it stays bee-

yew-tee-ful."

Johannes grinned at the house-elf's whisper. "Good, thank you, Sorrel." He turned to Siofre and took her hat and cloak. "Sorrel was kind enough to agree to watch the food whilst I fetched you. I did not wish to leave it untended."

"You cooked? How lovely!" Siofre felt genuinely and deeply touched by Johannes's effort...regardless of how the meal would taste. She took a sniff. It actually smelled quite nice, although the aroma of cooked fish did predominate. "What is on the menu, other than fish?"

"You shall see," Johannes said as he held her chair for her. "I hope you will find it . . . enjoyable."

"I am already enjoying myself," Siofre replied.

"Thank you for your help, Sorrel. You may return to the house now. And thank Madam Lydia for me, as well."

Sorrel nodded, smiling, and Disapparated from the kitchen.

"May I offer you a glass of wine?" Johannes asked. "It is a dry Sylvaner."

"Yes, I would like to try it. I've never had that before."

"It is a little similar, I think, to Riesling. It is from a friend in Germany," Johannes replied, pouring the wine into one of the glasses by Siofre's place. "It will go well with our meal, I hope."

He poured himself a glass, set down the bottle, then raised his glass to Siofre. "To you and your good health."

"And to yours," Siofre said, adding, "Slàinte."

Johannes grinned. "Slàinte mhor!"

Siofre laughed. "You have been drinking with the grandson!"

Johannes shrugged and smiled. "That and 'ceilidh' are the only words I have." He put his glass down and turned to the cooker.

"What is it in German? What would you say for a general toast to the health of the drinker?"

"I would say, 'zum Wohl,'" Johannes said, lifting the lid from the pot and pouring some cream into it.

"Tsum Vohl," Siofre repeated carefully. "What is that you're stirring?"

"Our first course. Sorrel soup...of the vegetative variety, not house-elf," he said, looking over his shoulder at Siofre and smiling.

She laughed. "I have not had that. We sometimes had sorrel in salads when I was a lass."

"This is something my mother would make us," Johannes said as he ladled out the soup. "I hoped it would be a refreshing start for our meal. In summer, it is nice served cold." He placed Siofre's soup bowl in front of her, then set his own down. "Oh, I forget the rolls...these are not from me," he said standing and retrieving the rolls and butter from the counter. "Multry provided them."

"Thank you, Johannes." She took a sip of the soup. "Very nice. Tart and lovely."

"The following course is fish, asparagus, and potatoes," Johannes said.

"Then I will skip the bread, enjoy the soup, and be sure to have room for the rest of the meal. Oh, thiss good soup!"

"There is more, if you like."

"I am tempted. This soup and some rolls alone would have made a wonderful meal. I do not remember the last time that someone cooked a meal just for me...other than the house-elves, of course. Thank you."

"I hope you do not mind the setting. It is not..."

"It is very comfortable. And I like the cushions. Are they new?"

Johannes nodded as he swallowed his soup. "Found them this morning in a Muggle shop that I know. I liked the bright colour."

"Very cheerful," Siofre agreed.

"More soup?" When Siofre declined, he picked up the soup bowls. "Then the next course. It is trout with dill weed and lemon. The asparagus has a Hollandaise sauce, and there are small potatoes with butter and parsley."

Siofre smiled. "It sounds wonderful."

"You always seem to enjoy fish. I hope this preparation is to your taste."

As Siofre took her first taste of the trout, prepared to be polite if it were merely edible, she let out an involuntary sigh of pleasure. When she had swallowed and flaked off another forkful of fish, she said, "This is very good, Johannes, truly. It is more than just dill and lemon."

"There is also a little white wine, a little butter, shallots, some ground white pepper, but really, very simple. Just a home recipe. Another of my mother's dishes. I always think hers was better. But I do not cook often now."

"Save a bit for Multry and tell her how you made it. We can have her make it...if you don't mind sharing it."

"Not at all. I will write it down for her, too."

"And the sorrel soup?"

Johannes laughed. "Yes, and the sorrel soup. Sorrel laughed when I told him it was sorrel soup. He said that he should learn to make it."

"The asparagus and the potatoes are very nice, as well."

"I am glad my choices were good ones."

"Excellent. This was a wonderful surprise and a delicious meal. Much better than a restaurant," Siofre said.

"The atmosphere is not as good."

"It is not 'as good': it is better," Siofre said. She smiled and leaned back, picking up her wineglass. "I am quite comfortable in your kitchen, in your company."

Johannes smiled happily. "I am glad. How was your morning after we parted? How is Madam Terwilliger?"

"She is doing well. The charms are working as planned. Cadoc has trouble becoming drunk, anyway...or at least, trouble becoming a mean drunk. He seems to be calming in some respects, but now he is irritable because he can't drink without getting sick or passing out as soon as he crosses his home's threshold."

"That is an improvement?"

"Aye," Siofre said with a nod. "But not enough. I wish to observe him this week. I plan to follow him from his home on Wednesday morning, and then..."

"You cannot do that...what I mean is, is that not dangerous? Following that man?" Johannes corrected himself hastily.

Siofre raised an eyebrow. "Nay. If someone else tried, p'raps then. But he'll never know I'm there."

Johannes was quiet for a moment, cutting a small potato into even smaller pieces. "Should you bring someone with you?"

"If I did that, it would be more likely he'd notice us." Recognising Johannes's worry and his reluctance to say anything negative to her, Siofre reached across the table and patted his hand. "Do not worry, Honnie. When I do have a case where it might be better to have help, I can ask Malcolm. But this isn't such a case. I just want to see the wizard . . . evaluate him. I shan't be casting any charms on the man...or hexes."

"And the potion that you are having Murdoch brew?"

Siofre laughed. "I won't be slipping that into his tea. 'Twould likely only make him rather sick to his stomach...although if he hasn't destroyed his sense of taste, he'd spit it out before he swallowed it. The potion isn't for him. It's for Gwyneth, and it isn't meant to be ingested. It's to be spread about the house. I'll do the first application, to the windowsills and the floorboards whilst casting a few charms, and then leave it with her to use as she's doing the housecleaning. Rub it into the furniture as she dusts, put it in the laundry, that sort of thing. Should relax her, at the very least, and hopefully it will pacify and . . . cheer Cadoc and anyone else in the home."

"Oh, I see. And . . . and . . . I am sorry, but I am worried. You are sure it is safe? To follow Terwilliger, I mean."

"As houses, lad."

Johannes looked puzzled.

"Safe as houses...safe as can be. Dinna worry, Johannes. I'll be home for dinner and tell you and Lydia all of the dull quotidian details of the man's life."

Johannes sighed and nodded. "Very well. But do . . . do take care."

"I shall. You know that Lydia's begun the work down at Minerva's cottage?" Siofre asked, changing the subject.

"Yes. She said she is getting it ready to decorate."

"As soon as the plumbing is done, I want to finish the decorating as quickly as we can. I would like to present it to Minerva before the end of the Hogwarts school year. She seemed . . . tired on Sunday. Didn't you think she did?"

"Yes, she did. But it is a busy time of year, after Easter, before the final examinations of the year, and as the Deputy Headmistress, she has new responsibilities this year that she hasn't had before."

Siofre nodded. "I hope that she can come for the bonfire and stay for the weekend, but it will not be a surprise if she comes for only a few hours on Saturday. I was surprised that she arrived yesterday, actually. I could see that Morgan and Fiona were surprised, as well."

"It was good to see her, though, and I think she wanted to see the babies. They grow fast, as she says." Johannes quirked a smile. "I think she was surprised to become the new target for David's vegetables."

Siofre laughed. "Aye, but it was funny. We shouldn't encourage the lad to throw his food, but it is still amusing."

"I think he does not like sprouts," Johannes said. "Either that, or he has decided that they make very good missiles."

"I think he will be a Chaser," Siofre replied. "He's just refining his aim."

"Aiden never minds, either. It is funny. He just laughs." Johannes shook his head in amusement. "I was surprised to see that Morgana eats pickled gherkins. They do not seem a food for babies."

Siofre chuckled. "It was one of her first solid foods. She'd steal them from her mother's plate. She'd ignore her own steamed carrot sticks and boiled broccoli and happily gum away on a sour gherkin."

"I would prefer a gherkin to boiled broccoli, myself, but not now. I have made dessert, if you would like pudding. There is more asparagus and potato, though."

"I think the sweet would be nice. I am looking forward to seeing what you have...although biscuits and tea would be fine."

"It is not biscuits. It is, I think you call it fruit soup, but it seems not like soup to me. Rote Grütze, with fresh cream over it. I made it with mixed berries. A kind of cold pudding. It is best in summer, when the weather is warm, but I like it all the time."

"It sounds lovely." Siofre cocked her head, listening. "Is that thunder?"

There was another, louder crack of thunder.

Johannes looked up as he began to clear the table. "Hm. Yes, I suppose it was. I thought it was not supposed to rain until tonight." Rain began to beat against the kitchen windows.

"No work in the garden this afternoon," Siofre said. Another loud clap of thunder reverberated through the surrounding hills. "No Apparating back in this, either."

"Then after dessert, we can discuss the greenhouse, the bonfire, the party . . . and I have another bottle of Sylvaner." Johannes smiled. "Join me in the sitting room?"

"It is times like this when I do see the convenience of being on the Floo Network," Siofre said, but then she smiled. "This afternoon, however, I think I prefer to be inconvenienced here with you . . ."

Chapter Fifteen: Right as a Rainbow

Chapter 15 of 32

Siofre deals with daily responsibilities, and she ponders a dilemma.



Chapter Fifteen: Right as a Rainbow

"And I thought a deep teal green for the dining room," Lydia finished, picking up her coffee cup.

"That sounds fine, hen," Siofre said. She poured herself another cup of tea.

"Do you have time to go through the attics with me today sometime? Johannes said that he could help for a while after lunch."

"We can all do that together then...unless you had some other work in mind for Johannes?"

"Not particularly. I thought he might help us pick out furniture, too. His suggestions for colours were good, and he mentioned that Minerva has a fondness for tartans, so I thought that I would use some tartan fabric for accents in the sitting room and in the bedrooms, and then pick up some of the colours from those for the upholstery. I'd like to have the furniture chosen so I know what I will need to re-upholster and begin finding fabrics."

"Fine," Siofre replied with a nod.

"It should be ready by the end of May, just as you hoped...unless the plumbing takes longer than Brian said. As you suggested, I am doing nothing with the kitchen and bathroom until he has finished with that."

Siofre nodded. "And you selected an appropriate location for the downstairs loo?"

"I thought of either using part of the old atelier...just blocking off the area to the left of the door, right next to the kitchen...or perhaps that open area under the first floor landing next to the cupboard under the stair."

"I think that next to the kitchen would be better, since there would be less new pipe to put in," Siofre said.

"I thought so, too. There's a sink in the atelier, as well, so I think there must already be piping between the kitchen and the atelier."

"Good."

"You're quiet this morning," Lydia observed. "Didn't sleep well?"

"I slept fine," Siofre replied. "I simply have had nothing to say."

"I thought you would be more enthusiastic about the work on the cottage."

"I am, but there are many other things going on, as well. Bertrand and Sally's return, arranging for someone to fetch their belongings when they arrive next week, planning for the ceilidh and Murdoch's birthday party, and then there's Morag and Patrick's daughter, Cara...I told you about that situation, didn't I?"

"You just mentioned that she seemed to be becoming involved with someone unsuitable or something like that," Lydia said. "You didn't say anything else."

"She and James Murphy . . . they seem to be developing an unwise affection for each other."

"Unwise affection?"

"The way that their parents are all related to each other, the two are practically as close as a brother and sister, in terms of blood relationship. Bridie tried talking to the girl, but it didn't help. Cara doesn't see James in a sisterly way."

"It might just be a passing fancy," Lydia said. "It might be best not to make a fuss. That just might push the two together, and they might decide to run off."

"I know, and they're both too young, anyway."

"How old are they now? I don't think I even know James."

"Sixteen and seventeen. The Murphys lived in County Meath until last year when they moved back to the island...it's part of what makes it difficult for Cara and James to see each other as close relatives. They barely knew each other until recently."

"Well, they're young. It should pass."

"Perhaps . . ."

"And it's not as though it's your immediate responsibility to do anything about it...do the parents want you to cast spells on them to keep them apart and unattracted to each other?" Lydia asked.

"They haven't said. I would not do that in any case, especially as they are so young. Such a thing would have too great an effect on them." Siofre shook her head. "Nay, you're right, I needn't worry overmuch about them."

"Would you like more breakfast? You didn't eat much this morning."

"I am not very hungry. I'll have something later if I am."

"You seem, I don't know, *subdued* this morning, Siofre, and you came down later than I did. Are you feeling well?"

"I am quite well." Siofre looked out the window. "P'raps 'tis this grey weather."

"It is supposed to rain off and on all day, according to Maisie's column," Lydia said, tapping the newspaper. "You know, when you came home yesterday evening with Johannes, you seemed happy. You said you had a good time..."

"We had a lovely afternoon," Siofre said, interrupting, "though it was not as we had planned it. The storm kept us from our work."

"That wasn't a bad thing yesterday, though. In fact, since it's so wet today, why don't you and Johannes spend the morning together? It might cheer you up."

"I do not require cheering up. Johannes said that he would work outdoors when it wasn't actually raining, and otherwise, he would be in the conservatory. I have things of my own to do, as well."

"Well, at least it's a good day to work indoors, to go through the attics looking at furniture and such."

Siofre smiled at that. "Aye. That will be fun. You know, I think that most of the original furniture from the cottage is in the storeroom in the north tower. Uncle Merwyn made much of it himself. It would be nice to use at least some of it."

"I don't have much recollection of what the upstairs was like there," Lydia said, "but do you remember the Queen Anne bedroom set that used to be in one of the bedrooms that Murdoch tore out when he expanded the library? That was actually very nice. I thought that might go well in the master bedroom. I don't know where Murdoch put it, though Shoolie or Mynok might know."

"Aye, that would go well in the main bedroom. Uncle Merwyn had something rather more ornate, if I remember right. But I don't think that would be to Minerva's taste."

"You know, I'd never been on the second floor of the cottage when Merwyn was living. Was it just guest rooms?"

"Two guest rooms and a library. The books were all moved here when he died."

"Do you think we ought to have another bathroom put in up there? Or at least a loo?"

Siofre nodded. "I will ask Brian what that would add to the cost."

"There goes Johannes," Lydia said, directing Siofre's attention to the window. "He said he was going to transplant some bushes this morning if it didn't pour down rain."

Siofre watched Johannes crossing through the herb garden, though not stopping. The brim of his dark green hat dripped, and it was still misting out, but he didn't seem bothered by the wet. Some garden tools and a crate floated behind him, following him from the big shed to wherever he planned to work that morning.

Siofre continued to gaze, unfocussed, out the window even after Johannes was out of view. Their afternoon together had been lovely, as she had told Lydia, and the evening after they had returned from Hogsmeade had continued to be just as enjoyable. After supper, Lydia had played the piano, and she and Johannes had sat and read in the sitting room, the doors between the two rooms open, listening to Lydia's selection of Chopin, Liszt, and Brahms. Lydia had also played her own composition, which was still unfinished, and Siofre and Johannes had gone into the music room to hear it.

After expressing her enjoyment of the new piece to her sister-in-law, Siofre had retired for the evening, bringing her journal into her bedroom with her to record notes of the meeting with Caroline Mayfield about the greenhouse, which she'd not had time for earlier in the day. Siofre had found herself distracted, however, and after jotting down only a few essential points, she had set the journal aside, finished preparing for bed, then lain down and turned off her bedside lamp.

As she lay in bed, Siofre could just barely hear individual notes drifting up from the music room. In order not to disturb Siofre, Lydia or Johannes had likely closed all of the doors to the music room after she had left for bed. Probably Johannes.

It didn't matter what she tried to think about, Siofre's thoughts turned back to Johannes. They had spent the rainy afternoon in his sitting room, cosy and warm, a fire in the fireplace, and they had discussed business...the greenhouse, the bere, the orchards, the various outbuildings in the central part of the estate and which ones were in need of attention, how the formal gardens were shaping up, the possibility of creating an Asian-style garden, and how to revive the coppice. But whatever they talked about, it never felt like business to Siofre, though it did feel like a partnership.

Siofre loved the Tyree land, and she thought that part of the attraction that Johannes held for her was his devotion to the estate, but beyond that, despite his formality and attention to courtesy, he had an easy, relaxed manner, and warmth and kindness seemed to radiate from him. He had a good sense of humour, as well, though it was never cruel. Yet despite his gentleness and basically sweet nature, Johannes was still strong and masculine. Virile.

That afternoon in his sitting room, Johannes had wound his gramophone and they had listened to music as they shared more wine and discussed business. It had been lovely, the nicest date she had ever been on, the rain pattering outside, occasional flashes of lightning, the gramophone playing, a glass of white wine in her hand, and Johannes sitting across from her . . .

"Are you sure you're all right, Siofre?" Lydia asked, a concerned look on her face.

Siofre blinked and looked over at her sister-in-law. "Pardon?"

"You don't seem yourself this morning. Perhaps you should go back to bed. I hope you're not coming down with anything."

Siofre shook her head. "But I do think I'll spend the morning in my sitting room. More tea will help, too."

"Good. You let one of the house-elves know if you need me for anything. Have a quiet morning, and I'll have Multry fix something special for lunch." Lydia reached over and squeezed Siofre's arm. "I'm sorry if I upset you yesterday. And I'm glad you had a good time with Johannes, but I won't go on about it anymore. You do what you think's best. Don't let me complicate things more for you."

Siofre twitched a smile. "I'm just tired, hen." She patted Lydia's hand. "I've been doing a lot lately...a lot of Apparating, a lot of casting, a lot of quiet fretting. A quiet morning is all I need. You know me. I'll be right as rain by this afternoon." She looked out at the drizzle. "Although looking at this, I don't know what's so right about rain."

Lydia chuckled. "Seems a silly expression to me. When I was a girl, we used to say, 'right as nails,' remember?"

Siofre nodded. "Aye, I heard that often. And my grandfather used to say, 'right as wands.'"

"That makes more sense to me," Lydia said.

Siofre looked out the window again. The clouds were parting over one of the hills across from the house and the sun peeped out. She smiled and pointed. "Look!"

"Oh, how beautiful!" Lydia exclaimed. "That's what the expression should be: right as a rainbow! Everything will be right as a rainbow, Siofre. Right as a rainbow."

After a morning spent reading in her sitting room and not thinking about either work or the dilemma presented by Johannes, Siofre was in a brighter mood when she came down for lunch, which they took in the family dining room as usual when there were three of them there.

Lydia met her in the sitting room and greeted her with a smile. "Quimpy came by and delivered a potion from young Murdoch for you. I didn't have him disturb you, since I

think it's the one for the Terwilliger witch."

"Ach, so fast!" Siofre exclaimed with a smile. "I hadn't thought it would be ready for a few days yet."

Lydia handed her a folded note. "Murdoch's a good lad...though I suppose he's not a 'lad' any longer."

"I didn't think he would have the time," Siofre said, unfolding the note.

Tuesday, 21 April 1959

Dear Grandmother Siofre,

I brewed this last night after my apprentice left. She didn't even get a glimpse of the formula, and all that I brewed is here. I put the formula in the box with the potion bottle. It hasn't left my possession since you gave it to me! How's that for respecting the Tyree secrets?

I am looking forward to the bonfire and the party. Poppy said that she could get away from the school for the day, and she might be able to even come late to the bonfire. Let me know if there's anything I can do to help prepare. I can easily take a day or two and come to the estate early. Uncle Perrin said his birthday present to me this year is a few days off, so he'll be coming into the shop and giving me a holiday. I'd enjoy seeing Bertrand and Sally again before the hoards descend on the estate. I'd also like to see what Johannes has done with the gardens. It all sounds very ambitious. He's quite a prize for the estate, I think.

See you soon!

Love,

Murdoch

Siofre nodded as she finished the letter. "I will pop over later this afternoon to see Gwyneth and apply the potion."

"Should you..."

"'Tis important, Lydia hen," Siofre said. "Remember, there's a bairn on the way, too."

"And you'll be feeling responsible for that baby till she has grandchildren of her own."

"I'll not be around then to see that, I'm sure," Siofre said with a laugh.

"But you will, you know you will," Lydia replied. "You may not show it, but your heart is as big as the whole of the estate, bigger, and you take in everyone who comes to you. Would you like company this afternoon? I'll come with you, if you like."

"I'd appreciate it, but Gwyneth is a bit shy about it all, and with the nosy neighbour . . . I've worked a way around their wards so I just Apparate directly into the kitchen now. I daren't try it with a Side-Along."

"Into the kitchen? What if Cadoc's home?"

"Only during the day when he's away at work, which is the only time I'd visit, anyway. Don't worry about it. It will all be right as rain...as right as a rainbow!" Siofre patted her arm. "Now, where is the magister? And what is for lunch?"

Chapter Sixteen: Tea with Lydia

Chapter 16 of 32

Johannes receives unsolicited advice.



Chapter Sixteen: Tea with Lydia

Johannes laughed, seeing Kilbeena and Duster trying to Levitate an oversized, ornately carved chair out of the way so that the group could see the furniture behind it. Siofre grinned at him. She, Lydia, or Johannes could have easily moved the chair, but Siofre had told the wee elves that they could help in the attics and storage rooms that day, and she was giving them the opportunity to "help" by moving some of the furniture from one part of the room to another using simple Levitation.

Lydia pushed a stray strand of hair from her brow. "I think we've done quite well this afternoon. Once we get this furniture into the cottage, we'll be able to see what more we might need. Of course, we haven't even thought about the second floor yet. But as long as we have the main floor and the first floor well furnished, I think we don't need to worry much about the upper floor."

"We have enough furniture here to furnish several cottages," Siofre said with a nod. "I'm sure we'll sort it all out before we present it to Minerva. I'll speak with Egeria, too. She may have a few items at the house that she thinks Minerva might particularly like. And we should make sure that Minerva realises that she can change anything she wishes...and we should leave some empty spaces for her to reorganise things the way she likes or add things of her own."

Lydia looked out the narrow window. "It's raining harder again." She smiled up at Johannes. "Unless you have work you must do in the conservatory, I would appreciate your help for the rest of the afternoon. Do you mind, Siofre?" she asked, turning to her sister-in-law.

"You're in charge today, hen," Siofre said. "It's time I'm leaving, anyway."

"Do you need to go today? This weather is awful," Lydia said.

"Yes, you could stay and work with us," Johannes added.

"There's no sign of a lightning storm, and the weather may be quite fine in Cornwall. I will likely return well before dinner, though, so you two can show off what you've accomplished then." Siofre looked down at her dusty robes. "I'm going to change before I leave, I think. I'm not sure whether a charm would be sufficient to remove the mustiness."

After Siofre left, Johannes let out a long sigh. "She is to the Terwilligers' again today?"

"Yes. To apply the potion that Murdoch made up for her," Lydia said.

"Does she always become so involved, even when there may be personal danger, or is it because there is a baby coming?"

"Yes and yes," Lydia said with a smile. "Siofre does occasionally take a client where there's personal risk to herself, and if there's a baby involved, she's even more likely to put forth extra effort without regard to her own well-being. I must say, however, that I've never known her to actually do anything precipitate or foolhardy, and she's never put herself into a position where she herself has come to any actual harm. She's a canny witch, Johannes. She will take care of herself."

Johannes nodded. "It worries me that she plans to follow the man, Cadoc, tomorrow."

Lydia waved her hand dismissively. "Ah, he'll never know she's there. And she won't follow him into a building if she's not certain she can remain undetected. That's the least of my worries for her," Lydia said. "In fact, except for the fact that I'm sure that she's losing money on this case and I worry that she's overtiring herself, I am not very concerned about it. She has other things on her mind that . . . well, I can't say I'm *concerned*, precisely, but they weigh on my own mind more."

Johannes's eyebrows rose. "What things are these? Should I be concerned?"

Lydia smiled and patted his arm. "You are a sweet, sweet man, Johannes. We'll talk later, eh? Perhaps over tea. In the meanwhile, let's get some of this furniture down into the large hall and have the house-elves clean it up for us. Hmmm . . . you cannot Apparate within the house . . . I will do this with Multry. You can go down to the hall and organise things there. Between Multry and me, it shouldn't take long to move it."

Johannes agreed with a nod and made his way down to the first floor and the large, near-empty, panelled hall that was above one of the ground floor parlours and formal dining room. It was raining so hard that despite the large arched windows all along one wall, the room seemed quite dark. Johannes flicked his wand a few times, lighting candles in their sconces and those in the central chandelier. There were three large fireplaces in the room, one at each end and one in the centre of the interior wall. Each was already laid and ready, so Johannes lit a fire in the middle fireplace. When Multry and Lydia popped down with the first two items of furniture several minutes later, the cavernous room seemed almost cheerful.

Lydia dusted her hands on her floral pinny. "Multry said it would be faster if she and Gweller moved all the furniture. She is going to have Fandenz, Sorrel, and Mynok clean and polish everything." She looked around her. "I almost never come into this room. I think we're going to use it when we have Maisie's birthday party at the end of May. Siofre said something about giving a more formal party for her. Of course, if the weather's bad, we may need it for Murdoch's party, as well."

"Is that a portrait of Siofre's mother and father?" Johannes asked, pointing to a large portrait hanging over one of the end fireplaces. He thought he recognised Siofre's mother from the portrait of her that she had shown him recently.

"Yes, it is. It must have been painted several years after they were married," Lydia said, "though I'm unsure precisely when."

The two approached the portrait, and the witch smiled at them and nodded. Her husband moved his arm slightly more around her so that his hand rested on her upper arm. His eyes moved toward them, but his expression changed only slightly.

"They are not highly charmed," Johannes said. "Do they speak?"

Lydia shook her head. "We have only a few speaking portraits in the house. They are not to the family's taste, apparently. And I believe that some Tyrees actually are superstitious about having Charmed portraits done of them whilst they are living...ones done with anything more than some minor animation charms showing different poses that the subjects took during the actual painting of the portrait."

Johannes nodded in understanding. "It could be unnerving, particularly when it is a portrait of yourself," he said. "I've never had a portrait painted, only my photograph taken, and I do not mind that. It is a bit like a Muggle movie...have you ever seen a Muggle film?"

"No. I have heard of them, and Liam seems entranced by them. He begs his parents for a television set, but they have not yet succumbed. His Muggle grandparents have one and he sometimes watches it there. A film is similar, isn't it?"

"I think so. I have only seen televisions in shop windows, but I think they are only in black and white. A film can be in colour, and it is like a wizarding photograph, but much longer, and no matter how many times you see it, it never changes. It is like seeing the exact same performance of a play again and again with no variations," Johannes said.

"Like the replay feature on those expensive new Omnioculars?" Lydia asked.

"Yes, like that, but with a large audience watching with you in a theatre, and it can be hours long, not just a few minutes," Johannes said with a nod. "I have seen only a few moving films, myself. It is a strange experience."

"I think I'd like to see a film," Lydia said, her eyes alight. "That would be marvellous! Like seeing the ultimate performance of a play!"

Johannes smiled at her enthusiasm. "Perhaps we can see one together sometime, then. In Glasgow or London."

"London...unless we can convince Siofre to accompany us to the theatre, then we'd probably go to Glasgow or Edinburgh."

"You like London? You enjoy it?"

Lydia smiled and nodded.

"Then we will bring Siofre with us and you will share with us all that you love about London!" Johannes said.

"I would like that. I think we could persuade Siofre..*you* could, I'm sure," Lydia said with a smile.

"Then when things are a little more settled here, after your son and daughter-in-law are returned and you've had time with them, I will discover a film for us to see in London and we can spend a day there. Perhaps all of us."

"A family outing! Can we take the underground? That is always fun. All of the Muggles! And they are so clever with their long underground trains. I don't know how they know without magic where they've dug their tunnels," she said with a shake of her head. "Very clever!"

Johannes chuckled.

"Let's go have some tea. Since Multry's been busy, I don't know what there is to go with it...would you like to try my scones? They don't reach the heights that Multry's do, but they're not bad and it won't take long for them to bake. We can have our first cup of tea whilst we wait," Lydia said with a smile.

"You cook? I did not know that," Johannes said.

"Oh, just this and that. A few things that I enjoy doing, you know. Sometimes I help Multry with dinner or lunch...I used to help Shoolie a lot more. We used to do a lot of the meals together, especially as she got on in years, and when it was just me after Brigid passed . . . well, we would sometimes all just eat together in the kitchen, me and the house-elves. Not something my nephew Charles and his family would appreciate, I'm afraid, but practical and more enjoyable than eating on my own," Lydia said as they walked down the stairs.

"You must have been lonely here, in this great castle, all alone but for the house-elves," Johannes observed.

Lydia shook her head. "A little, very occasionally, but Siofre came by several times a week, and sometimes she and Herbert would both come for dinner or the weekend, occasionally bringing Maisie and Dorcas, too, and I got out a lot. I have a number of friends I visit or meet for tea, and sometimes I would go down and stay with Connor and Liz or they and Liam would come up here for a visit. They used to visit more often before Liam started school. I am looking forward to his summer holiday."

"And your nephew Charles?"

"He is a stuffed shirt, and his son is even worse...I hate to say that about my own flesh and blood, but Drusus is one of the most miserable souls I've ever met. It is generous to call him mean and nasty," Lydia said, shaking her head.

"Drusus Prince . . . Is his daughter Eileen Prince?" Johannes asked.

"Yes. I've only seen her a few times, though. I don't think I've seen her since she was ten or so. I feel sorry for the poor girl," Lydia said.

"I taught Eileen. She is not . . . mean and nasty, but she did seem unhappy. She was a very . . . reserved girl."

"I hope that she has some future," Lydia said with a sigh. "I heard that her father wants to marry her to Giles Black, a wizard almost as miserable as Drusus is, and a good deal older than the girl...not that that's a problem if it were her choice, but I don't think that her desires play any role...and he's her cousin, too. Again, not something that bothers me if the couple are in love...although probably it's best if first cousins don't marry...but I think it's only because her father wants her to marry a Black, even if he's not one of the more prominent ones."

"Perhaps she will find a way to make a choice for herself," Johannes said.

"Perhaps." They stepped down into the large kitchen. "Could you get the butter from the cool cupboard?" Lydia asked as she waved her wand and Summoned a couple large crocks from a high shelf. "The cream, too. And the eggs are in the cupboard above the cool cupboard. I need a couple of those."

Johannes sat down in one of the chairs at the kitchen table and watched as Lydia quickly and efficiently mixed together the ingredients, then patted the dough out and waved her wand over it to smooth it. She then used her wand to cut it into triangles, flicking her wand again to transfer the triangles to a baking sheet.

"I always like triangles, for some reason," Lydia said. She laughed. "I like eating the corners. That's the trouble with rounds. There aren't any corners!"

She chuckled at herself as she waved her wand at the oven to bring it up to the proper temperature before she popped the scones into the oven. Next, she flicked her wand at the kettle, bringing the water to a boil as she spooned tea leaves into a pot. Johannes poured the water into the teapot, and Lydia Summoned cups and saucers for them.

As the tea steeped, Lydia put everything away, cleaning up the dusting of flour and leaving out the butter, then she took the milk from the cool cupboard. Johannes poured them each a cup of tea, and Lydia sat down across from him.

"You were going to tell me about what concerns you about Siofre," Johannes said.

"It's not really a concern, you understand . . . just something I've been thinking about lately. Something I've noticed . . . but I really shouldn't say anything . . ."

"But if it is a concern," Johannes said, "I would like to know. I might be able to help."

Lydia chuckled and took a sip of tea. "Yes, yes, you could help . . . but it's not my place, you see . . . and I may be wrong about something, too. I can't be completely certain."

"Certain about what?"

"How you feel about Siofre," Lydia said succinctly, suddenly no longer hesitant.

Johannes could feel the colour rising in his cheeks. "I . . . ah, she is an impressive witch. And a fine friend, I believe."

"And your feelings for her? You seem rather fond of her, in a particular way," Lydia said. "Are you?"

"I . . . I admire her greatly," Johannes swallowed. Even his ears were warm with his blush. "She is remarkable."

"Ah. I see. You admire her," Lydia nodded. "I had thought you were more fond of her than that. Or that you were growing that fond of her."

"Of course, I am fond of her. But you needn't worry. I . . . I do treat her with the respect due her. I would not . . . If that is your concern . . . I can reassure you..."

"Anyone can see that you are a gentleman, Johannes," Lydia said with a kind smile. "I would expect nothing less from you. But I had actually hoped that you might ~~very~~ fond of our Siofre. You have seemed rather taken with her. I know there are differences between you, and you might find them very great ones, but . . ." She shrugged.

"So what is your concern?" Johannes asked.

"I worry that Siofre might like you very much, too, in the same way, but that she is going to try to encourage you to become interested in someone else, whether it seems that way to you or not."

Johannes shook his head. "I do not understand. It is confusing."

Lydia got up and used her wand to open the oven and remove the scones. They smelled wonderful.

"Have one whilst it's still hot," Lydia said. "I like just to put butter on them, but we have preserves and we may have some clotted cream in the cool cupboard."

"Butter is fine," Johannes said.

Lydia poured herself another cup of tea. "I am simply saying that if you are interested in Siofre, do not let yourself be distracted by anything else. And if she puts you off . . . well, I won't say what you should do, but I think that Tyree witches appreciate patience and polite persistence."

"I have not thought . . . that is . . . yes, she is impressive in many ways, and I do like her very much. But I was simply trying to . . . what is the expression in English . . . to test the water? To feel my way slowly. I am unsure myself . . . except that when I am with her, I feel something I cannot describe. And when I am not with her, I think of her, I remember time we spent together, I think of things to do that might please her . . ."

Lydia patted his hand. "You take your time, sweetheart. Just take things as slowly as you wish. Remember, though, that I think that Siofre is more than a little fond of you, too, whether she shows it or not. But if you decide that there's something else that's right for you, someone else, that is fine, too." She gave his hand a little squeeze then picked up another scone, pulled it apart, and put a large pat of butter between the two pieces, letting it melt.

"Please do not tell to Siofre that we talked," Johannes said.

Lydia took a bite of her scone, the melted butter running out of it and onto her fingers, and she shook her head. After she had swallowed and licked her fingers, she said, "That would rather defeat the purpose of our private little talk. Besides, you must feel free to do as you wish. I don't want you to feel pressured in any way to any particular course. And if you fall in love, whomever you may fall in love with, I hope you act in accordance with your heart. And whoever the witch is, she will be a very lucky woman. Now, how is the new hedge maze coming?"

"I thought a labyrinth, instead," Johannes said, blinking at the change in topic. "They are restful. I thought that at various points, we could have benches, and perhaps some particularly beautiful or interesting feature...a beautiful plant or bed of flowers or a statue. Siofre seemed to like that plan."

"That's a lovely idea," Lydia said.

"I thought I might vary the surface at intervals, too," Johannes said, buttering a second scone for himself. "Grass, small stones, larger stones, sand, slate, shredded bark . . . it could be an interesting sensation, walking on different surfaces."

They continued to talk about the different gardens Johannes was planning until Multry popped into the kitchen and shoed them away, telling them that she needed to prepare dinner. On their way out of the kitchen, Johannes opening the door and letting Lydia through first, she looked up at him and winked. "Don't forget, Johannes, if you're so inclined: patience and persistence!"

Chapter Seventeen: Poetry and Music

Chapter 17 of 32

An evening of poetry and music stirs the heart.



Chapter Seventeen: Poetry and Music

For the rest of the afternoon and into the evening, Johannes worked in the new large vegetable garden that he had planted below the house on the other side of the ridge past the lodge. The ground was wet from the soaking rains of the previous two days, but it was good to work, and the smell of the rich, damp earth was invigorating. He worked, concentrated on his task, his mind focussed on the seedlings and on the earth, feeling a deep sense of peace and well-being.

Finally at half-past six, Johannes returned his tools to the nearby shed, hanging his work apron on a hook there and washing his hands at the pump, and started the long walk up to the lodge, from where he could Disapparate for the main house. There were only a few open Apparition points on the grounds, and there was none near that garden, nor near the field of barley down above the sea far to the southwest of the house, and he usually had a house-elf Apparate him down to that acreage. The previous day, Siofre had Apparated them both back to the estate so that they could arrive directly in the entry hall of the house and avoid the wet walk up from the drive. Johannes didn't mind this walk, though. The hills surrounding him echoed with the distant sound of the waves on the shore and with the rushing of the waters from the streams, swollen now from the steady rains, crashing their way down to join the sea. It was a restful and yet invigorating sound.

He reached the lodge gardens, taking a cursory look at them, and saw Fiona in one of the upstairs windows. She waved at him, and he waved back, smiling. It did somehow feel that the estate was more alive now that the McGonagalls had moved into the lodge. Fiona was bubbly and sweet, with great enthusiasm, and Morgan was equally sweet, though he was easily the quietest McGonagall whom Johannes had ever met.

It would be interesting to see how the quads grew and developed. It was clear already that David was active and energetic, and slightly better coordinated than his brother Aiden, though they were identical twins. Aiden was good natured and smiley, laughing when his brother lobbed his carrots and sprouts at him. Branwen and Morgana were both more fastidious than their brothers and more coordinated than either brother, too, and more serious. It had amused Johannes to see Morgana carefully picking up one pea at a time and putting it in her mouth to eat it. Branwen did the same, though she often pinched the pea a bit too hard before it reached her mouth, and she would suck it off her fingers. When David and Aiden tried to eat their peas, the few that they were given, they grabbed with their entire hand, closing tight little fists around them and then gazing with fascination at the green pulp that squeezed out between their fingers. Siofre had been right: they were messy little eaters.

For pudding, the babies had had vanilla custard, and Johannes had volunteered to help feed them. Using little silver spoons, Minerva and Siofre had fed the boys, Lydia had fed Branwen, and he had fed Branwen's twin, allowing their parents to eat their dessert at the same time as their children.

Morgana had stared up at him with dark, serious eyes, and he felt he was being examined and his trustworthiness assessed. She already tried to hold the spoon herself, and she obviously wished to be in complete control of her meal. She would place her tiny hand on his as he brought the custard to her mouth, and when she had taken it, she would hold out her hand and push his away until she was ready for the next mouthful.

Johannes could see how it would be very helpful for the McGonagalls to have their house-elves help feed the babies, though even the house-elves did it by hand rather than using magic, in order that the children learn better how to use a spoon. In fact, Johannes could not imagine how two parents could manage four babies on their own and without any assistance. It was fortunate that Morgan worked from his home...which Fiona had done, as well, until the children were born. She hoped to begin working again, but she had set no specific time to return to her editorial duties. Since she was still breastfeeding the babies before each meal...and with four children, that took a good deal of time...Johannes didn't see how she could manage returning to her editing work until the children were weaned, even with house-elf help.

He had been curious about how she managed to breastfeed four infants, though of course he hadn't asked, but he had overheard Minerva and Fiona talking, and had learned that until about a month before, the babies had also had a wet-nurse from the island, and the babies had rotated between their mother and their nurse. There were apparently also lactation spells that had helped, although Johannes did not want to know the details. He thought that Beate had used such spells once or twice when she first began breastfeeding their daughter, but that was witches' magic, and he didn't know anything about how it worked.

After inspecting the flower beds near the lodge's front entrance, Johannes Apparated to the main drive outside the house. He cleaned his muddy boots before stepping into the entry hall, and he could hear Siofre and Lydia in the family dining room. He removed his hat and cloak, Sorrel Apparating to him with a snap and taking the garments to the cloakroom off the kitchen, where Johannes normally kept his outdoor work garments, and as he approached the dining room, the witches' voices became clearer. They were talking about Bertrand and Sally.

Johannes leaned in through the open double-doors of the dining room. "My apologies. I am late. I must change, but I shall be quick. Please, do not wait for me."

Siofre shook her head. "Nay, change after, if you must, but eat now with us."

Johannes glanced down at his worn brown work clothes, shrugged, and joined the two witches at the table. He would not make a habit of sitting down to dinner in his work clothes, but it would not disturb the order of the universe to do so occasionally, he thought. Siofre rang the little silver bell by her place, and the food appeared on the table.

"You did not have to wait for me," Johannes said as Siofre Summoned his plate and began to fill it with shepherd's pie for him, then doing the same for Lydia.

"We would not have waited long," Siofre said with a laugh. "I have too great an appetite tonight. I am glad that Multry fixed something hearty."

"Did it go well at the Terwilligers'?" Johannes asked.

"Aye, quite," Siofre replied, digging into her mashed potatoes.

"Apparently, Cadoc is already beginning to behave better," Lydia informed him as Siofre ate. "Siofre says that he's on edge, though."

Siofre took a swallow of water and nodded. "The potion should help with that. It is very soothing."

"Good. I am happy to hear this," Johannes said. "This means you will not have to follow the husband tomorrow, or?"

Siofre chuckled. "My dear Johannes, you *are* distressed by that, aren't you? But I shall still follow the man. There must be troubles in his life, things his wife does not know. It might help me to discover what they are."

Johannes nodded. "Mrs Terwilliger is a fortunate witch to have you assisting her."

"Her baby is due very soon . . . I worry that she contacted me too late," Siofre said, "but therefore I must simply work a little harder. I showed her how to apply the potion...perfectly safe for the bairn, both now and when it enters the world, and Gwyneth will show it to the girl who comes in to help clean once a week so that she can continue to apply it even after the bairn is born if she does not wish to do it herself."

The conversation moved on to other topics, and after eating, Johannes excused himself to change, saying that he would join the witches in the sitting room after he was more presentable.

"I believe you're always quite presentable, Johannes," Lydia said, "and I'm sure that Siofre agrees with me, don't you, Siofre?"

"Let the man be comfortable," Siofre said, avoiding the question. "I need to fetch my correspondence, and I will join you in a few minutes, Lydia."

Johannes and Siofre walked up the broad staircase together, Johannes mentioning that he had worked in the lower gardens that afternoon, and she exclaimed at that.

"'Tis no wonder you were delayed for dinner," Siofre said. "That is a long walk."

"I Apparated from the lodge, and it is a beautiful walk, everything glistening from the rain, the sound of the streams, the different scents...I sometimes think I could find my way about the estate by the scents alone, each area is so distinctive."

Siofre smiled at that. "Aye, that is true. But it would be convenient, even safer for you, if you could Apparate freely on the estate." They paused at the top of the stairs on the first floor. "It brings to mind something that occurred to me yesterday when we returned from your flat. I should add you to the family wards."

"It is not necessary," Johannes began.

"Nay, I should have done it many weeks ago," Siofre said, holding up her hand and brooking no dissent. "We can do it on Thursday, if that is agreeable. I would do it sooner, but tomorrow I must follow Terwilliger."

Johannes bowed slightly. "As you wish. Thank you, Siofre."

Siofre waved away his thanks. "I will see you in a few minutes."

After changing clothes, Johannes went back downstairs. He had not thought about what Lydia had said that afternoon over tea and fresh scones, but he had not forgotten it, either. It seemed to him appropriate advice, if that was what Lydia had given him, and he was already fairly certain of what course he would take, though unsure precisely how he would proceed. But as Lydia had also counselled patience, it seemed to Johannes that there was no urgency to make any specific plans, either.

In the sitting room, Lydia was sitting in her armchair, her feet up on an ottoman in front of her, and Siofre was sitting at one end of the sofa. Lydia was reading a book, and Siofre had a letter in her hand and a book next to her. Johannes sat at the other end of the couch and opened his own book on Dendromancy. He was engrossed in the chapter on wand woods when he heard Lydia say his name, and he looked up.

"You know, Johannes, I've been reading some of my favourite German poetry lately, and it's lovely, but it would be even better if read aloud...by someone whose mother tongue was German, especially. Could you possibly read a few of the poems aloud?" Lydia asked, smiling. "I would enjoy it so much. You have a beautiful voice, and it would be wonderful for me if you would."

Johannes felt embarrassed by her description of his voice, but he nodded and set aside his own book. "It would be my pleasure."

Siofre set down her letter on the table beside her, prepared to listen, as well, though she did not speak German.

"Could you begin with this one?" Lydia asked, handing him the open book.

Johannes glanced at it. Goethe. "*Ja, sicher*," he replied automatically as his eyes grazed the German words. "*Rastlose Liebe*," he began reading.

"Oh, that was beautiful!" Lydia exclaimed when he had finished.

"Aye," Siofre agreed, "though I understood not a word of it."

"Can you translate it for her, Johannes?" Lydia asked.

"It is difficult to do as I read, but I will attempt it," Johannes said with a nod.

"Restless Love," he read the title, then continued, pausing occasionally as he struggled to find an apt English word or phrase.

Into the snow, into the rain,

Against the wind,

In the vapours of the clefts,

Through misty fogs,

Onward! Onward!

Without rest and without peace.

Rather through troubles

Would I struggle

Than to bear

So many joys of life.

All the inclination

Of one heart to another,

Oh how strangely

This causes pain!

How shall I flee?

Into the woods?

All is for naught!

Crown of life,

Happiness without peace,

Love, that is you!

"I apologise that it is a rough translation," Johannes said. "It is no longer poetry, I fear. I do violence to Goethe."

"Keineswegs," Lydia contradicted him. "It was lovely."

"Rather melodramatic," Siofre said, "though I liked the first part with the foggy vapours."

"Let me choose another," Lydia said, taking the book back. "Here, this one. Try this one by Hebbel, *Ich und Du*, 'I and Thou,' first in German, then in English for Siofre. It is a short one."

Johannes dutifully read it in German and then read it again, translating it into English as he went.

We dreamed of one another,

And from the dream awakened,

We live to love each other,

And sink back into the night.

You stepped from my dream,

And I stepped out of yours,

We die when one of us

Becomes utterly lost in the other.

On a lily tremble

Two drops, pure and round,

Flowing into one and rolling

Downward to the bottom of the flower's chalice.

Johannes shrugged and handed the book to Lydia.

"Oh, thank you, Johannes! Could you read just another few?" she begged.

Johannes nodded and took the book back. This time, he chose a few short poems about nature and the seasons, and these seemed both easier to translate and more to Siofre's liking.

After he had read *"Mondnacht,"* "Moonlit Night," by Eichendorff, Siofre, knowing that Johannes would continue reading to please them until he grew hoarse, took the book from him and gave it back to Lydia. "That is enough for one night, I believe. We do not disturb the magister's evening by taxing him with this," she said. She turned and

smiled at Johannes. "It was, however, lovely to listen to, and German is a more beautiful language than I had thought it would sound. Thank you for reading to us and for translating for me."

"Yes, thank you, Johannes," Lydia said. "I really enjoyed that."

"It was my pleasure. It is never a bad thing to end an evening with some poetry."

"Or music," Siofre said. "Lydia, play us your new piece again, would you?"

Lydia hopped up happily and opened the large doors between the sitting room and the music room. "I had an idea for adding a part for violin, too," she said as she opened the piano. "As I was up in the hall labelling the furniture to be moved to the cottage, it came to me. I think Morgan would enjoy that."

"Aye, indeed he would," Siofre replied, adding to Johannes, "He plays violin...fiddle, as he calls it...and usually plays traditional pieces, folk music, you might say, but he is quite a good musician, and oft he and Lydia would play together on a Sunday afternoon, before the childer arrived. Now that they live here, he might be able to do that again."

"That would please Lydia, no doubt."

Siofre nodded, but didn't reply as Lydia set out her music and sat down at the piano.

After Lydia had played her piece, she took out some other sheet music and continued with some Liszt. Watching her through the open double doors, Johannes smiled. "She is beautiful when she plays," he said softly. "She is absorbed...is that the word?"

Siofre smiled and nodded. "Aye. And 'tis true. She seems to glow . . ."

Lydia played for another half hour, then finally, after she slipped on a few notes, she folded down the keyboard and put the music away.

"I am getting tired," she said, coming into the sitting room. "It has been a long day. I think I'm going up to bed."

"The composition for Bertrand and Sally is really turning out well," Siofre said as Lydia stepped near. "I'm sure they will enjoy it and appreciate it. I think that your happiness with their homecoming shines through the music. I'm pleased you began composing again."

Lydia bent and gave her sister-in-law a kiss on the cheek. "I'm glad you like it. And you're right, I am very happy my boy and Sally will be coming home, but we should also thank Johannes for encouraging me." She turned to Johannes. "It gave me that last bit of a nudge and the confidence to pick up my quill again." She smiled down at him, patting his shoulder. "Thank you, Johannes."

Johannes nodded, and was about to reply when Lydia surprised him by bending and kissing his cheek, too.

"You are as good a wizard as they come," Lydia said. "I am so glad that you have come into our lives." She squeezed his shoulder. "Good night, Johannes. Good night, Siofre."

After Lydia left the room, Johannes picked up his book again. "She is a sweet woman. That was kind of her."

"She is kind," Siofre agreed. "A very warm and gentle person." She picked up her book, too. "And somewhat sentimental. But she is right," she added briskly, "it is good that you came into our lives."

"I am the one who is blessed," Johannes whispered. He tentatively reached out to touch Siofre's hand. "Very blessed to have met you and had this opportunity to come to know you."

Siofre turned her head slightly to look at him. She nodded. "I am glad you feel that way, Honnie."

Johannes wished to say more, but he did not know what. He took in a breath as he stood. "I believe I will retire presently, myself. Good night, Siofre." He bent and lifted her hand to his lips, but rather than merely bowing to her in his usual manner, he kissed her hand gently, then kissed it again, lingering, his eyes closed, his lips slowly cherishing her skin. Then he straightened quickly, released her hand, and nodded. "Good night."

As he went out the door, Siofre said, "Good night, Honnie. Sleep well." She sat there a long time, her book unopened on her lap, the fire slowly dying in the fireplace, until finally she rose, extinguished the lamps, and closed the flue. The clock on the mantle chimed midnight as she left the room, closing the doors behind her.

Author's Note: The translations (which are my own) are intentionally left rough, and I have no doubt that there are many far better translations of the poems available, but these are intended to reflect the fact that Johannes is translating as he reads, so I did not polish them up. The originals are likely available somewhere on the Web, as well as some good translations, if you would care to read them.

Chapter Eighteen: Not Untouched

Chapter 18 of 32

Lydia frets; Siofre makes subtle plans to bring Johannes closer.



Siofre returned home late on Wednesday evening, barely in time to join Lydia and Johannes for supper, which they were eating in the morning room, since it had seemed that Siofre would not return until late.

"I'm glad you're back, Siofre," Lydia said as soon as Siofre sat down. "Johannes has been fretting about your lengthy absence."

"Lydia exaggerates to a degree," Johannes said. "I simply noted that you were not yet come home and it is past seven, almost seven-thirty. I...that is to say we...believed you would be back well before now. Terwilliger's work day must have ended hours ago."

Siofre's plate and silverware appeared on the table in front of her, and she helped herself to some fresh green salad, sliced cheese, cold roast beef, and mixed pickle and other condiments. Lydia passed her the bread basket and Johannes poured her a glass of cider.

"After I had finished following young Cadoc...and saw that although he did go into a pub on his way home, he only drank one ale, despite the urging of his mates at the bar...I had an errand of my own to do."

"There is vegetable soup," Johannes said. "We've eaten ours, but you should have some."

"Nay, I had a pasty after I left Cadoc," Siofre said. "This is more than sufficient."

"Do you know better what his difficulties may be?" Johannes asked.

"Aye. Somewhat." Siofre buttered a thick slice of bread and bit into it.

"What are they?" Lydia asked.

Siofre used her knife and fork to cut her roast beef, then she dipped it into some dark mustard. "He dislikes his boss...who sounds like an unreasonable man obsessed with minutia to such a degree that Cadoc is unable to accomplish anything...he is frightened of having the responsibility of fatherhood, and he's in debt to someone, a gambling debt, I believe, from what little I was able to overhear."

"Can you help him at all with any of that?" Johannes asked. "It seems that those are things beyond your control."

"P'raps," Siofre said. She quirked a small lopsided smile. "P'raps not. There may be influences I can exert, at least in a small way."

"What were your other errands?" Lydia asked curiously.

Siofre shook her head. "Nothing important. How were your days, you two?"

"I went into London and found some very charming fabric for the draperies and upholstery for the cottage, then I stopped by the Ministry and Philomena was able to get away and have lunch, then this afternoon I spent down at the cottage supervising the elves in preparing all the surfaces for new paint and varnishes and things."

"Very industrious, Lydia!" Siofre said approvingly. "I appreciate all your help with this, and I know that Minerva will, as well."

"I hope she likes it," Lydia said.

"I do not believe that she could fail to like it," Johannes said.

"And you, Johannes? Your day went well?"

"I also was productive, I believe. I checked the bere field, as I said I might, and it looks fine. I refreshed the avian ward, however. It seemed to me a little weakened. Then I spent much time working on the other gardens and completing more work on the area around the bonfire pit. Tomorrow morning, I must deliver some vegetables...radishes, lettuce, herbs, and the like...to the Three Broomsticks, so I will be out early."

Siofre nodded. "Very good. I have a meeting in the afternoon tomorrow, but I will be here most of the day if either of you needs me."

"Where is your meeting?" Lydia asked. "Here?"

"Nay. They've not been here before, and I had no wish to invite them and arrange Portkeys. 'Tis in the neighbourhood of Manchester."

"How are you getting there?"

"Apparating to Glasgow and Flooing from there," Siofre replied.

"What is the meeting about?" Johannes asked.

"A problem someone's having with the Ministry. 'Tisn't a major thing, in itself, but one of his neighbours is stirring things up."

"How so?" Lydia asked.

Siofre chewed and swallowed. "Usual thing...the neighbour has nothing better to do with his time than to stick his nose in and create a flap where there's no problem. My client...potential client...keeps a few Aethonans and several Granians. He has them in a well-warded area protected from Muggles. They simply canna be seen by Muggles...or even by witches or wizards unless they actually go onto the man's land and trespass...but he is not complying with the letter of the law by casting Disillusionment Charms on each individual horse. He has a large field in which they roam when they're not in their stable, he likes to ride them...and whenever he rides them within possible view of Muggles, he does cast Disillusionment Charms on both himself and the horse...and Disillusioning them regularly is both impractical and unnecessary. Nonetheless, the neighbour reported him to the Ministry, and he's up for a hefty fine and possibly even time in Azkaban, since there are so many of the beasts."

"So are you going to help him?" Johannes asked.

"If the facts turn out to be as they were stated to me and there's not some unknown problem, aye, I'll represent the man in front of the Wizengamot. He is complying with the spirit of the law, after all. I think I can even find an argument that he is also complying with the letter of the law if the law is read in a particular way."

"This isn't the sort of case you normally take on," Lydia observed.

"True, and 'tis hardly a matter of life or death, but it bothers me when folk mix in where they've no business and cause people such aggravation and worry...and potential harm. I also think that the MLE should have exercised more discretion and common sense and never levied charges against the man. The Ministry's becoming more heavy-handed every year, and not with regard to the things that truly matter, either, in my opinion. At any rate, I meet with the man and his wife tomorrow, and we shall see what I can do to help them."

After supper, Siofre was in her study when Lydia knocked on the open door.

"Do you have a minute?"

"Of course!" Siofre closed her journal and turned to face Lydia.

Lydia came in, closing the door behind her, and sat down in the armchair across from her sister-in-law. "Johannes was quite worried when you weren't home earlier than you were. I had to convince him that it was acceptable to sit down and eat without you."

"Of course. There are times when I am not here at dinnertime at all," Siofre said. "I do not expect everyone to starve in my absence."

"He is very concerned about your well-being," Lydia said.

"Reassure him, then, that I did not reach this age by being incapable of taking care of myself. Heavens, Lydia!" Siofre shook her head.

"Perhaps you could let us know if you think you'll be gone longer..."

"Lydia, I have always let you know when I thought I might be away overnight, and you know well enough to begin eating the evening meal without me and I'm not here. You know I cannot always predict how long something like this will take, and you knew that this was an all-day job, not just a brief meeting. I was hardly missing!"

"I know, but Johannes is unused to your sometimes erratic schedule."

"Lydia, hen, he is our gardener, not my guardian. If he worries, he must do so quietly and not have any expectations that they will be allayed, or else learn not to worry. It is not my concern."

"I don't know how you can say that! Johannes is more than our gardener."

"Aye, of course, of course. He has become a friend, and he is managing the grounds and certain aspects of the estate admirably, as well. The magister has become an invaluable employee, not to mention a vital part of our household. None of that changes the fact that if he worries, it is his own affair."

Lydia was quiet a moment. "I would have thought you would be more concerned about his feelings."

"I am not going to change my practices for him. He will either have to become used to my habits or become used to being irrationally concerned."

Lydia shook her head. "I know you are fond of Johannes. You cannot possibly be as insensitive to his feelings as you say."

"Of course not. But you reassured him. That should be sufficient for you...that and my safe return home for supper."

"But Siofre..."

"I am not discussing this subject any longer, Lydia. And if you plan to broach my own feelings for the man, do not. I have also said all I am going to on that subject."

"He cares about you."

Siofre sighed. "I know that, hen," she said softly. "And I am not untouched. You must know that. But . . . truly, there was no reason for him to worry, and as for any of his other . . . feelings . . . I simply do not wish to discuss them. I cannot change my life for this."

Lydia nodded. "Very well, Siofre, but I think you are making a mistake."

"You and I are very different, and I do not believe that I am making a mistake. Prudence will pay off in one way or another, and I do know my own mind even and I do not always share its contents with you."

"All right. Do you want to pop down to the cottage tomorrow morning and see what progress we've made?"

"Aye, that would be good. That reminds me that I also need to take the time to add Johannes to the wards so that he may Apparate freely on the grounds. The man has been walking almost everywhere."

"You are adding him to the full family wards?" Lydia asked.

"Aye. Not just to the general wards, such as for workmen...those would be insufficient to his needs, given the location of the bere field, anyway...nor only the modified wards. Admitted to the family wards, he will be able to Apparate directly into the house, as well. You see, Lydia, I do consider the man and his needs."

"When was the last time you added someone to the family wards who wasn't actually a part of it, at least by marriage?"

"Never. There hasn't been a need. But back when they were here, the Mackenzies all always had the complete freedom of the estate, too."

"But they were related in some distant way...and they lived here."

"So does the magister, even and it be for just a time."

"Still . . ."

"Do not go on about it," Siofre said briskly, avoiding further discussion of the family wards and their rituals. "Was there anything else? I was almost finished with my notes for the day."

"Will you join me downstairs after, then?"

"I thought I'd relax in my sitting room this evening and read until bedtime. You're welcome to join me, if you wish, though, hen."

Lydia shook her head. "I want to work on the violin part for my composition. I didn't have time during the day."

"I look forward to seeing the cottage tomorrow and all you've accomplished with it."

"Good night, Siofre. Sleep well." Lydia bent and kissed Siofre's cheek. "Sweet dreams."

"Aye, and you, hen."

The next morning, Johannes left early with a large crate of produce for the Three Broomsticks, and Siofre and Lydia Apparated to the cottage. Siofre was impressed by the progress.

"It is looking very nice, Lydia, quite fine, indeed," she said in approval.

"I had the house-elves begin with the decorating, but they're leaving the bathrooms and kitchen until after the plumbing is finished."

"It is amazing how much better, how much lighter everything seems already."

"You know, I was thinking of leaving some of the woodwork bare, just varnish it or something. When the old paint came off, I thought the wood itself looked quite beautiful, and I think it would be in keeping with the rest of the cottage."

"I think that's fine," Siofre replied. "That shade of teal green does look nice in the dining room. It will look well with the dark mahogany furniture we selected for the room."

"I'm looking forward to having the decorating finished so that we can move the furniture down."

"We'll need to move the furniture from the hall before the bonfire night, anyway, in case Murdoch's party needs to be indoors."

"You should have Maisie do a forecast," Lydia suggested. "It's only a little more than a week now; she should be able to be fairly accurate. She might even be able to perform some localised countermeasures if the weather does not appear ideal."

"I will do that," Siofre said. "She does enjoy doing a little weather magic now and again, and the McKenna place is a bit too small for doing much that wouldn't be noticed by Muggles."

"What did you do after you were finished following Terwilliger yesterday?" Lydia asked as they went up to the first floor to look at the bedrooms.

"I visited Tíree. I went to see Bridie."

"About those two young people?"

Siofre shook her head. "A personal matter."

"Johannes?"

"It was a personal matter," Siofre said, "though it did touch on him."

"What did she say? Did she tell you to steer clear of him?" Lydia asked with a frown. Perhaps that explained Siofre's mood the evening before.

"Nay, no such thing. It is far more complex than that, you know that. And 'twas more about myself."

"I am sorry that I'm not a better help to you, Siofre," Lydia said with a sigh.

"Ach, hen! You are! In so very many ways." Siofre reached out and rubbed Lydia's upper arm. "And I always consider any advice you give me, you know. It is just sometimes good to speak with someone outside a situation, and Bridie's been giving me advice since I was first a young married witch."

"She must have been young then, too."

"Aye, by comparison, of course. But her daughter, Maire, is still older than I am by a few years. Bridie is beginning to show her age, though. 'Tis sad to see, this aging and fading . . ." Siofre let out a sigh.

"You have been working too hard, you know, Siofre. I think you need to give yourself a holiday. Deal with that fellow and his flying horses, but don't take on anything else new for a while. You'll be busy enough here, I'm sure."

"The income..."

"You need to take some time for yourself," Lydia continued. "And Johannes is bringing in a few Galleons with his produce, and that will increase as summer comes in, I'm sure, especially with the large field he planted over the other side of the ridge. And with Morgan and Fiona here now and contributing to the general upkeep, you have less to worry about. There's always the reserve account, too. You can borrow from that and pay it back if need be. But you need a holiday."

Siofre nodded. "I may take a week or two," she agreed. "I usually take time in July to go to Tíree, but perhaps I'll do that in May this year. Or both. We shall see."

"Or you could spend the time here. There's so much to be done here, you know. You'd not fail to be busy when you like, or just relax when you prefer that. Enjoy your home. Take a ramble every day, do some hill walking. You could take the opportunity to get a new puppy to replace old Jagger...not that Jagger is replaceable, of course, but it's been since November that he's been gone...and you could take the time to train him. Then you'd have a companion for your hill walking again...or bring Johannes along with you. He seems to love these hills, too. You could show him all your favourites. But you needn't spend your holiday away."

"P'raps. Aye. We shall see." She pulled out her watch from around her neck and looked at it. "Johannes should be returned by now. I will go add him to the wards and get that done before lunch."

"Have you told him?" Lydia asked.

"I mentioned that I would add him to the family wards. He attempted to demur, but it is appropriate."

"The full family wards? Not the modified ones?"

"Aye. As I said I would. I shall join him to the clan first, then add him to the wards."

"Did you explain how ancient the wards are?"

"You mean the ritual, the oaths, and the blood-let binding him to land and family?" Siofre shook her head. "I doubt it will be a surprise to him, however. He is a Ravenclaw, after all, and hardly a child."

"Be sure you say something before you take out that copper knife, though, Sister. He may appear unflappable, but it is his manner. That may come as a shock, whether he lets on or not."

Siofre cackled. "Dinna worry about that, hen! I shan't be chasin' the dear lad about the grounds with dagger in hand!" Still laughing at the picture that evoked in her mind, Siofre Disapparated for the main house.

Chapter Nineteen: Clearing the Path

Chapter 19 of 32

Siofre begins clearing a path for Johannes.



Chapter Nineteen: Clearing the Path

Siofre climbed the stairs to the first floor, then took a dark hallway to the North Tower. She flicked her wand to open the door to the large room that encompassed the whole of the tower on that level. Sunlight filtered weakly through several narrow windows. After using her wand to draw back the heavy curtains that covered the tower room's one large leaded-glass window, Siofre looked around her.

It had been more than a year since she had been in the treasure room, as she had called it as a child. The room contained various artifacts from Tyrees past, everything from Charmed armour...some of which was pitted or dented from use...to finely wrought metal chalices, to plain black cauldrons of various sizes. Much of it was on display, either on the room's many shelves or hanging from the walls and the high ceiling. Siofre stepped over to a glass case, flicking her wand to remove the light coating of dust that covered it. Generations of wands lay arrayed in the case, each with a small card, Charmed to expand on command and reveal the details of its particular wand...who had made it, who had wielded it, what its composition was, and any idiosyncrasies of the wand or other facts of interest about it and the witch or wizard who had used it during their lifetime. She had laid Herbert McKenna's Ollivander-made elm wand there with the others, though he was not related to the Tyrees, except through marriage. She had never even performed the clan ritual with him that she was now setting about performing with Johannes. But he had fathered a Tyree witch, and he had been a good and faithful husband to her, and when he died, she had mourned him.

Stepping past a rack containing several long staffs, Siofre went to a cupboard, muttered a word, and caught a hidden drawer that popped from it. There was little in the drawer, and nothing that appeared valuable, but Siofre pulled out a long, narrow knife and drew it from its plain leather sheath. Its blade was copper, and its handle, horn. Intricate designs were carved upon the handle; the unusual blade, showing no signs of oxidation, seemed to glitter from within. One curved edge was sharp from tip to shaft, and, peculiarly, the other edge was straight and sharp from the tip to about a third a way up the blade.

Siofre slipped the knife back in its sheath and put it in her deep pocket. She would explain everything to Johannes, of course...she had planned to without Lydia's prompting. And she would give him a choice, as well. Despite what she'd said to Lydia, admitting Johannes to the modified family wards would be sufficient to enable him to pop around the estate, carrying out his duties or even just enjoying the grounds, but she wished to offer him the opportunity to be bound to the clan. It wasn't just his choice that Siofre was interested in, but in his reactions.

Despite their relatively short acquaintance, Siofre trusted the wizard, trusted him deeply, or she would never have considered the clan rites. Indeed, she had never considered bringing anyone into the Tyree clan before then. In the last few decades, she had performed the ritual several times at the request of others, usually upon an engagement or marriage, and once for an adoption, but never for someone whom she herself had chosen to bring into the clan.

When she had married Collum McGonagall all those many decades before, Bridie's mother, Moira Tyree, had brought him into the clan, but Siofre had not thought of it when she had married Herbert, and there had never been any necessity for it, either. If he had ever known of the clan rites, Herbert had never himself expressed interest in them.

Despite her trust in him, Siofre was still interested in Johannes's reaction to the suggestion...and was curious whether he would recognise the unusual nature of her offer. She did not know anything of German wizarding traditions and whether they had any concepts akin to the Tyree sense of clan. It could be a meaningless gesture to offer the young wizard. Siofre hoped it was not.

Although she was of an age and stature within the Tyree clan to admit anyone to the clan on her own authority and without seeking approval from anyone else, she had wanted to discuss it with Bridie. In addition to gaining her blessing, Siofre had also wanted Bridie's perspective on her relationship with Johannes and her feelings for him. Bridie had offered what opinion she could, but as she stated herself, she had never met the German wizard, and so could only remark upon Siofre's own feelings.

"A German, too, Siofre!" Bridie had said with a twinkle before she'd left. "I never thought I'd see you with a foreigner."

Siofre had chuckled good-naturedly. "He is foreign, aye, but somehow he is not, not to me. He is . . . at home with me. Or so I would like to believe."

"I look forward to meeting the man, then, if he is such a one as can command Siofre Tyree's heart."

"He commands his own heart," Siofre corrected her, "or so I hope."

Bridie shook her head. "A young wizard, a foreign wizard, and a stranger to you until recently . . . I do believe that he must be a remarkable man."

"Aye, that he is indeed."

"Then invite him to be joined to the clan, child, and if he does accept . . . he will be that much closer if you decide to let him further into your life and your heart."

"And you do not see it as . . . too much?"

"An it were, you would never have thought it," Bridie said.

"I mean also for him," Siofre clarified. "P'rhaps . . . perhaps I draw him in too closely. I want him to have his freedom."

"Aye. You want him to come to you freely," Bridie replied. "I know that well. And there must be choices for him in order for you to see that he comes freely. But you may clear a path for him without driving him down it...or even enticing him to follow it. Clear the path even an you allow him his choices."

Siofre nodded. "Lydia thinks it's appalling that I would think to introduce him to other witches whom he may find . . . appropriate and attractive."

"As long as you see them as choices he might happen upon, not as temptations you are placing in his path. And do not push him toward anyone else, either," Bridie cautioned.

"Aye. I have no desire to push him toward any other."

"Then don't forget the most important thing you must do," Bridie said.

"What is that?"

"Love him."

Siofre's eyebrows rose.

"Love him...I see that you do love him already, though you haven't used that word...and show him it in your actions, quietly, slowly, without any excesses. Be your ain self, Siofre hen. You dinna wish to push yourself at him or to pull him towards you, I see that, but you can still draw the man with your love. It is honest to do that, even with

reserve, even whilst allowing him other choices."

"Aye. And I had already thought . . . if I give him the time and he still seems . . . inclined toward me, I would allow him to pursue me."

Bridie laughed. "An' you would then ensnare him as only a Tyree witch can, I am sure!"

"Ach, Bridie, to you, I may still seem young, but I'm not. I'm well beyond all that. I haven't got the Tyree allure I once may have had."

Bridie shook her head, her eyes sparkling. "Try convincing yourself of that afore you try convincing another, Siofre!" she said, laughing. "If the man is 'inclined' toward you already, as you put it, then you do still have it...at least as far as he is concerned, and that's all that matters! And if you fell in love with him, you've already exercised some of that 'allure,' I'm sure. Now, I'm sure that Maire, Hamish, young Bridie, and Corrigan are waiting supper for me. You go on home to yours!"

Siofre smirked, thinking back on it. She supposed she did still have it, at least with Johannes, and as Bridie had said, that was all that mattered.

She had walked from Bridie's small cottage along the narrow lane that led to the inlet where her cousins Loran Tyree and Telor Mackenzie were standing beside their spread fishing nets, renewing the charms on them. Loran, still a young man of less than fifty, enjoyed casting the charms with great flourish and deliberately enhancing their glowing colours as they settled on the strong rope nets. Tell, by contrast, merely jabbed lightly and flicked slightly, using great economy of motion and magic, and yet Siofre could feel that the older wizard's spells took as strongly as Loran's, if not more so. But both men were smiling and exchanging a few words as they performed the routine task.

"*Oidche mhath!*" Tell greeted her as she approached.

"Aye, aye, Siofre!" Loran slipped his wand into its sheath beside his sporran and bounded toward her. "Give a hug here, cousin!"

"You smell of fish, Loran lad," Siofre said, shaking her head, but she placed both hands on the young man's upper arms and tolerated his brief embrace and his whisky kiss on her cheek.

Tell took off his cap and resettled it on his grey head, his round cheeks glowing healthy pink as he grinned at her. "Come to help with the mending and weaving, sister?"

"Aye, an' next I'll be needing to teach Bridie t' suck eggs," Siofre said with a twinkle in her eye. "Ye lads are having it well in hand!"

"It's that time, though," Loran said, "or getting near it! I'm sair drouthy after the hard day workin' with this man and his long stories. Take a wee drink with us, Siofre, do!"

"Aye, Siofre! The lad is right. 'Tis time for a wee nip. Settle yourself here and join us."

"I'm off for home and my supper," Siofre said.

"Ach, sister, those house-elves, they're havin' you spoiled, they are! An' at their beck and call you are, an' not even knowin' it!" Tell exclaimed.

"So stop and have a bit of refreshment with us," Loran said as Tell drew a round loaf of bread and a long, green bottle of whisky from his tough leather bag.

"Nay, I canna, lads."

"How not, sister?" Tell asked, pulling the cork from the bottle with a hollow pop. "Sure the wee elves will be keepin' your supper for you, an' 'tisn't yet darkenin'."

"Aye, but I'm App'rating, an' well you know it!" Siofre said, gesturing toward the bottle.

"Pish! An' *you*, our Siofre, could drink the bottle dry an' flicker off for home with nary a problem," Tell said with a dismissive wave of his weathered hand.

Siofre hesitated, and Loran sensed it and leapt. "Good on you, Cousin Siofre, to keep two hard-working wizards company for a wee!" He flourished his wand and one of the great rocks became a bench and another, a table. "A seat for you," he said with a bow.

"An' me?" Tell asked in mock aggravation, hands on his hips.

"Ach, pull up yer ain rock and make it a stool for ya," Loran said, removing his plaid despite the chill in the air, and placing it on the bench he'd created for Siofre.

"Aye, a wee one, then," Siofre said, taking the seat Loran had made for her. "Just a wee dram."

In the treasure room, Siofre smiled, remembering the two wizards and their rivalling stories, and how they had protested when, at after seven, she'd finally risen and told them to find their proper suppers, for she was off for hers.

"It's no meal this one's after," Loran said with a nod. "I can see it in her eye!"

"Aye, yer right there, lad," Tell agreed. "Else wise, she'd prefer our company an' our bottle."

"'Tisn't Lydia she's after seeing, either," Loran opined, "wonderful witch though she be...for English."

"'Tis a man. Another wizard, it is, or I'm not Telor Duncan Mackenzie!"

"And what wizard could be better company than we two here on Tiree, with our whisky, our bread, and our tales of bravery on the wild witchy seas?"

"Must be a remarkable man, t' draw our Siofre away from our board," Tell said, "for we're the finest of the finest Tiree has, and Tiree wizards are the finest t' be found!"

Siofre just shook her head and smiled, not addressing their remarks, though she did think of the remarkable man who was no doubt already sitting down to supper with Lydia. "I have my own home, lads, an' off for it I am, and for my supper! Just as ye should be off for yers an' yer witches."

"Aye, as you say, Siofre," Loran said with a warm smile. "Visit again soon!"

"Ye be both coming to the Beltane fire and the grandson's birthday, aren't ye?"

"Aye, sister," Tell said. "Indeed we will, an' we'll be roarin'! Lydia will have good beds for us, I hope."

Siofre barked a laugh. "Aye, she will! We've no desire to repair a wizard Splinched from drink too much taken!"

"But you could, Siofre, you could, even in yer sleep," Tell said, "an' yer wand in yer pocket! We'd put oursel' in yer care with not a bit o' swither 'bout it!"

Laughing, Siofre bade them goodbye, and with their answering well wishes still in her ears, she Disapparated from Tiree Beag for the Tyree estate.

Lydia would never have approved of Siofre having a drink before Apparating home...across water, at that...so Siofre had honestly mentioned only the pasty she'd eaten earlier and not the whisky and barley bread she'd shared with her cousins. Lydia had an unnatural, though common, phobia about Apparating over water, after all. No point in worrying her without cause.

Siofre hesitated before closing the hidden drawer, then she swept her fingers through it, until in the back, she found what she was looking for.

She laid the two rings on her palm. They tingled against her skin. She stared at them a moment, then made a move to replace them in the drawer, but then she put them in her pocket instead, where they nestled together. Not for Johannes yet, but if he continued in his concern for her . . . then perhaps. Perhaps then. The rings hadn't been used in many decades, near a century, at least, but Siofre could feel that their communicating and drawing charms were still strong as they ever were. Such Charmed trinkets might ease Honnie's worry for her when she was away. But not yet. Not yet, even for a remarkable man. Especially for a remarkable man.

Siofre closed the drawer, flicked her wand and drew the draperies closed, and left the tower room to find Johannes and invite him to join the Tyree clan, clearing a path before him.

Author's Note: I posted this one a bit early, hoping to recompense for the long wait for the previous chapter! The next chapter is "Of the Clan Tyree," with Siofre and Johannes.

Chapter Twenty: Of the Clan Tyree

Chapter 20 of 32

Siofre performs an ancient ritual and brings Johannes into the clan.



Chapter Twenty: Of the Clan Tyree

"So you understand," Siofre said questioningly, "I can admit you to the wards easily with no great ado. With a mere pinprick to your finger, I'd bind you to the land, add you to the wards, and free you'd be to Apparate almost anywhere within these grounds once you are already anywhere on the estate, with no other measures necessary. But if I join you to the clan first, I may then admit you to the full family wards, and you could Apparate to whatever point you wish that is encompassed by this estate, from wherever you are, whether on or off the property, and you may likewise Apparate into or out of any of the dwellings or outbuildings on the estate, unless there is a separate Anti-Apparition ward in place. Do you wish to join the Clan Tyree, Magister?"

Johannes was silent for a moment, then he looked off over the grounds, taking in the vista before him. Siofre had Apparated him to the highest hill on the estate, where the remains of an ancient tower stood behind them. From that point, he could see the whole of the estate, all but what disappeared in the low, misty cloud to the far northeast, and if he turned his eyes to the west and the south, he could see the machairs and the field of bere he had planted, and beyond that, the coast and the sea. He looked again toward the large house not much below them, the stone castle with its towers and turrets, which had become his home over the past several weeks.

He shook his head slightly, and Siofre thought for a moment that he would refuse the offer or had not understood it, but he turned to face her fully, looking down into her eyes, his lips parted as he considered her.

"To join the clan . . . That is a most great honour you offer, Madam Tyree," he said softly. "I have heard something of this clan . . . from Minerva, from Malcolm, from others. The only solely wizarding Scottish clan, with a long history, strong roots, and many secrets, the clan whose witches are foremost." He reached out with one hand, and Siofre gave him hers. He bowed over it slowly, not perfunctorily. Straightening, he said, "Aye, I will join your clan, Madam Tyree, even though I do not completely understand it."

"Have you questions about the ritual?"

"It is like an adoption, yes?"

"A bit, but you belong to the clan, and the clan to you, not to a single family, and your loyalty to the clan and its many members is very important, though not paramount to your own conscience. If a Tyree...whether they bear that name or no...comes to you for assistance, you give it, unless the assistance requested goes against your conscience."

Johannes nodded. "I can do that."

"And it is unlike a usual adoption in that you do not have a mother, or a father, and you are not a . . . you are not a dependant, you understand, nor an heir to property, only to tradition."

Johannes smiled. "I am not a child for many years, Siofre."

Siofre chuckled. "You could still be adopted as a son and heir within a family, but you are not in this ritual. The clan and the family adoptions are usually performed as separate rites."

Johannes hesitated, looking uncomfortable.

"What is it?" Siofre asked.

"You do not wish to adopt me . . ." It was not quite a question.

Siofre blinked. "Nay." She shook her head.

Johannes breathed a sigh and relaxed. "Good. I would not wish to offend you by declining."

"You will be family in a sense, of course, and you will be closer to me than to any other, as I am the one to invite you, as well as the one to perform the ritual."

Johannes nodded. "That is good."

It was Siofre's turn to relax. "Aye. Any other questions?"

"Legally, within British wizarding law, what is the . . . the status of this ritual?"

Siofre quirked a crooked grin. "It is not sanctioned, not within British borders, as it is a blood ritual that does not fall within their narrowly prescribed list of legal blood magic. The clan joining, however, does have legal status, as contradictory as that may seem. If ever you are fleeing from the British wizarding authorities...though I canna imagine such a day...you have a right to seek refuge on the isle of Tiriodh Beag; that right is respected by the British Ministry and your clan membership is recognised. This is a centuries' old practice, and only once did any British minister or English wizarding chief attempt to violate that right. I will not alarm you with the details of their fates, but the English authorities did not succeed, and our power has not diminished with the years. When you are on Tiree, you are always safe from the English...or from anyone else. You may also legally add 'Tyree' just before your own family name and sign it that way in official documents, if you wish, or add 'of Tyree' after it. There are a few additional small details...some to do with the Muggle world...but I don't think any of them are pertinent at the moment."

"But if I commit a crime...and I would not...but if I committed one, should not the conscience of the Tyrees upon the island lead them to surrender me to the British Ministry?" Johannes asked, puzzled.

Siofre laughed. "Nay. Conscience might require them to try you themselves, if they believed the charges had merit, and to mete out their own justice, but not to surrender you."

"I see . . . and are there . . . I do not know how to ask this . . . are there obligations I have? Laws of the island, or of the Tyree clan?"

"No laws but those natural to us. Do not steal from another member of the clan, do not injure another unless in defence of self or other, do not murder another human, whether magic or Muggle. Defer to the judgment of the Tyree witches' *comhairle*...the witches' council...over that of any other wizarding council, gamot, or ministry. There were once more laws of obedience to the clan grandmothers, but they have become unnecessary, obsolete," Siofre said. "Other than that, there are only principles to aspire to. To be upright and to follow your conscience, to respect elders, to first seek Tyree counsel or aid in crisis, and to lend aid to any of the clan who request it, your conscience allowing."

"Do only witches sit on the council of Tiree?" Johannes asked curiously.

"There are three councils. The witches' comhairle, which is the primary council...the highest one, if you wish to put it in those terms...then the wizards' council of five elders, which deals with wizards' matters and handles some relations with those outside the clan, generally trade, and then there is a council of twelve that consists of witches and wizards who are chosen from among those who live on Tiree by the inhabitants of the island. They need only have reached thirty years of age, and they deal with minor questions and with . . . social events, you might say. Any member of the general council can bring an issue before the witches' comhairle for deciding, and the question must be addressed by the comhairle. They canna dismiss it from consideration as they might something brought them from some other clan member without that standing."

"Does not my clan membership require some approval by a council, then?" Johannes asked.

"Nay. I have authority to join you without any approval from any other. It is not lightly done, Honnie," she added.

"You are on this, um, witches' corya?" Johannes asked, struggling to pronounce the Gaelic.

Siofre suppressed her smile. "Aye, I am on the council. Third witch of nine."

"How are they selected?"

Siofre hesitated. "It is a witches' knowledge and witches' magic, what you ask about, you understand, but it is partly upon basis of age and experience. Beyond that . . ."

Siofre shook her head.

Johannes nodded. "I understand."

"And so you are still willing to become a member of the Tyree clan?"

"Yes. Aye. As long as it does not require me to learn Scottish."

Siofre laughed at that. "Nay, no such thing! There are even some members born to the clan who do not speak it these days...Connor does not, no more than a few words, and Bertrand's Gaelic was never good."

Johannes smiled. "Good then. Do we do this now? Today?"

Siofre nodded and drew the sheathed knife from her pocket. "Much of the ritual is in Gaelic, and an ancient dialect...although there are a few sections that I will say in English for you...so you will not understand most of it. But it will bind your blood to the blood of the Clan Tyree through my blood, and your magic to the clan's magic through mine. There is a place for you to make agreement, an oath of sorts, to bind you willingly. That I will repeat in English for you."

"I am ready. What do you need of me?"

"Your left arm bared," Siofre instructed. "Just to the elbow suffices. You understand this is not a pinprick such as your Hogwarts ritual required when you became Head of Ravenclaw?"

Johannes's brow rose. "You know of that?"

Siofre cackled. "Of that little bit of magic, yes. Hogwarts is in Scotland, after all, even an we Tyrees often eschew its education. But you understand that more than a wee drop of your blood will flow?"

Johannes nodded. His arm was already bared to the elbow; he had removed his cloak and laid it upon a rock. His jacket had followed it, and then he rolled up his sleeve. He shivered slightly in the cool breeze. Siofre cast a warming charm on the air around him, and he smiled.

"You have done this before?" Johannes asked as Siofre drew the Charmed knife from its sheath and replaced the sheath in her robe pocket, putting the bare blade in her belt.

"Aye, several times, though I've not invited anyone myself before. Or I should say, I have never both performed the ritual and invited someone to join the clan. When I was a young witch, I asked that Collum McGonagall be joined to the clan, and that ritual was performed by Moira Tyree. So this is a bit different from the other rituals I've performed, since there are only we two here, and not a third, some other who made the request for the ritual and who would also participate in it, sponsoring you, so to speak."

"I see. And no witness is needed?"

"Nay. The magic and the blood provide a testament," Siofre replied. "Now, hold out your left arm to me. Become aware of the pulse of your magic flowing through your body and through your left hand and arm. You must now trust me, and do not stop me with any question. When you must do anything, I will tell you. You are ready?"

Johannes nodded. "Aye. And I trust you. Utterly." His eyes met hers, and Siofre felt his trust, and more.

Siofre quickly bared her own left arm, moving aside her cape to hang down her back and leaving both arms free, then rolling up the sleeve of her robe. She grasped his arm, placing her hand beneath his forearm so that his arm rested across hers, his hand near her elbow.

"You may take hold of me if you wish...now or when I use the blade. It may be somewhat uncomfortable...painful, actually...but do try not to flinch, or it will be worse. Remain still and just grip me harder if you need to do so."

Johannes nodded, but grasped her arm only lightly.

"One final question for you, Honnie: what is your full name? Have you any middle name?"

"Johannes Christian Maria Birnbaum."

"Maria?" Siofre asked, unable to stop herself.

"Aye. Unusual here, more common where I am from, and in my mother's family."

Siofre nodded and drew her wand. "And now to begin. You do agree freely to join the Clan Tyree, joining your magic to the clan's, your blood to ours, sharing in our strength and sharing your own?"

Johannes nodded. "I do, freely."

Siofre began to chant in Gaelic, and Johannes understood none of it, though twice, he did catch the name of Tyree, and once, his own name in full. Siofre waved her wand, moving it in a circle over their arms, and Johannes felt Siofre's magic flow over his forearm, seeming to wrap it, or encase it, then he felt an unusual sensation of tugging at his own magic, weaving it into the magic around their arms. He didn't resist, but he was somewhat alarmed by the physical reaction the intertwining of their magic was eliciting in him. The sensations of his magic flowing out and other magic joining it, then Siofre's magic working its way into his arm to flow through him, created a physical tingling that began in his arm but spread through his body, even into his groin, which interpreted the sensations as sexually arousing.

Johannes relaxed and reasoned that this was likely an expected side-effect of the ritual, at least when done between a witch and a wizard. He only hoped that the arousal would remain mild enough so that he wouldn't get a full erection...that might be noticeable and rather embarrassing. Siofre seemed wholly focussed on the spells she was casting, however, and her gaze was on their arms, now joined by a glowing shell of magic.

When the glow spread gossamer threads of light from their arms toward their bodies, Siofre pocketed her wand and drew out the long copper knife. She said a few more incomprehensible words, then, using the point of the sharp Charmed blade, she drew a long incision up her own inner arm, from wrist to elbow. The cut didn't graze any large veins, and her blood flowed gently from the incision, running over her arm and dripping onto the stony ground.

She wiped the long, curved edge of the Charmed blade through her blood, then she raised her eyes to meet Johannes's. He nodded, and she asked him a question in Gaelic, repeating it in English: "Do you, Johannes Christian Maria Birnbaum, join your blood freely with mine and with the blood of my kin, to be joined forever with our clan and to show your loyalty first to the Clan Tyree, but for the dictates of your conscience?"

"Aye, I join freely the Clan Tyree."

"And with your blood, your magic, also?"

Johannes nodded. His blood and his magic, joined to the clan and to Siofre, he thought. His first loyalty would always be to her, and then to her clan, for such were the dictates of his conscience. "Aye, my blood and my magic together."

Siofre smiled slightly and nodded. With one word, and tightening the grip of her left hand on his arm, she used the long, curved, bloodied blade to slice into the soft skin of his inner forearm. The long incision bled freely, but other than a slight initial burning sensation, Johannes found it surprisingly unpainful, and he loosened his own grip on Siofre's arm, which he had unconsciously tightened in anticipation.

Their blood seemed to swim and merge, swirling on their arms and in the air around them, joining the glowing aurora of magic surrounding their arms. Siofre chanted over the blood, describing figures in it with the point of the dagger, runes of some sort, Johannes thought. The symbols each glowed brightly for a moment before subsiding back into the shell of magic and blood, and Johannes felt each one as though it were hot candle wax against his skin, then seeping into his arm and integrating itself into his magic.

Siofre wiped the bloody blade against her arm, then replaced it in her belt. Her wand flew to her fingers. She breathed out slowly, creating a warm breeze from between her lips, as she tapped the tip of her wand once against the glowing, pulsing shell of magic. A sound rang out, like that of a clear bell, and the encasing magic fell away from their arms and dissipated. Siofre loosened her grip on Johannes's arm and flicked her wand once, casting a common healing charm, then she let go.

"There. Now you are of the Clan Tyree, Johannes. Welcome, cousin!"

Johannes smiled. "Thank you." He bowed slightly.

"And now, your first favour asked by a member of the clan to you as a member of the clan." Siofre held out her arm. "Would you heal my scratch, Honnie?"

Johannes immediately drew his wand and, holding her left hand in his, he cast a healing charm on the long, still bleeding cut, then cast a cleansing charm on her stained arm and hand. "That was all right? To clean it?"

"Aye, thank you. And you may clean your own arm, though we will need a bit more of your blood for the wards, so you may wish to wait. Just a wee drop this time, though," Siofre said. She bent and picked up something from the rock where their blood had dripped. She examined it closely, and Johannes thought that an odd expression of surprise flitted across her face.

"What is it?"

"It is the artifact from the ritual. One is always created. It drops from the blood and magic when the sleeve of magic is removed at the end there...when there was the ringing. Each is different."

"May I see it?"

Siofre handed it to him. "You may have it...though I would like the loan of it for a day or two, if I may."

Johannes nodded. "Of course."

He examined the artifact, which lay heavily in the palm of his hand. Never having seen one, he hadn't any idea what Siofre had found remarkable in it, or surprising. It was smooth and seemed made of gold, with veins of stone, blood red and deep malachite green. Impressed upon one side was an outlined figure that looked to Johannes like a cup or chalice with lines emerging from it, and the other side was smooth and rounded. He handed the artifact back to Siofre.

"Is it unusual?" Johannes asked.

"Each one is different, as I said, but this one . . . aye, it is unusual, I find." She slipped the stone into her pocket. "Come, time for the wards, then we'll go home for lunch, eh? I asked Multry for something special today. Something for you, to celebrate. She mentioned potato dumplings."

Author's Note: In the next chapter, Siofre visits wizarding Tíree Beag again, and later, Malcolm drops by. Characters will include Siofre, Johannes, Lydia, Malcolm, and Bridie.

Chapter Twenty-One: Wizard Tales

Chapter 21 of 32

Siofre pays another visit to Bridie on wizarding Tíree Beag, and later, Malcolm drops by the Tyree estate.

Chapter features Siofre, Johannes, Lydia, and a good dose of Malcolm McGonagall.



Chapter Twenty-One: Wizard Tales

"I've never seen one at all like it, but I haven't done as many clan adoptions as you have," Siofre said. "I thought you might have."

Bridie put on her glasses and examined the stone, then she took them off and held it close, examining it minutely. "It is unusual. It is rare to have a stone of more than one colour, and I've only seen two with any metal, and those were of silver and tin." She looked up sharply at Siofre. "Did you test it? Is it metal as it appears? Is it indeed gold?"

"Aye, gold. Chiefly gold."

"Quite pure, then. And the red and green stone through it . . . these are not so uncommon, but usually you only see one or the other, as you have noticed. Sometimes two. I have never seen three materials, though . . . and then the symbol."

"I know. That puzzled me almost more than the rest."

"I have only seen three like it, and all three were witches, and none had these, these extra markings," Bridie said, indicating the few lines radiating from the cup.

"It is more complex than usual, as well, I thought. The wizards I have brought into the clan, or whose artifacts I have seen, have had crossed lines, arrows, parallel lines, cross-hatches, triangles, zigzags."

Bridie nodded. "I have seen many, and they are all also of that general type." Bridie shrugged and handed back the stone. "I am more interested now to meet this wizard. He will be at young Murdoch's party?"

"Aye. I will introduce you then."

"Good."

"You have nothing else to say of it?" Siofre asked.

"What would you say?" Bridie asked in return.

Siofre looked at the stone that lay in her palm. "It must have something to do with me, as well..."

"It always does, an' you know that, too," Bridie said.

"But . . . more than usual, I think. Perhaps because I invited him into the clan as well as performing the ritual. There was no third person there, no sponsor. It was only my own blood and magic that I used . . ."

"Aye, and that is the key. Your blood, your magic, his blood, his magic. An' this says something about your relationship to the man, and his to you...the relationship that goes beyond the binding ritual, beyond the kinship ties you created. The relationship that already existed between you, and perhaps which will exist in the future."

"Is the marking mine, then? The chalice? It is a witch's symbol," Siofre said. "But I've never heard of the binder's magic influencing it in this way. The symbol should be that of the one brought into the clan."

"There are also the rays, remember." Bridie shook her head. "I am no Diviner, Siofre hen. I canna tell you what these markings may mean, not beyond what I've already said. It could be his own symbol, simply influenced by you...your presence, your magic, his feelings toward you. Or it could be that the chalice is yours and the rays are his, though that is more doubtful. I have no answer for you. But if he is a gardener, as you say, a nurturer, I see no reason to discount the chalice as his. If he has a . . . a receptive soul, an open heart, that with his nearness to you and the warmth of his feelings could have created this symbol as his own."

"Will it remain a mystery, then?"

Bridie laughed. "You do like answers, I know that. You always have, since you were a bairn. Sometimes . . . sometimes the only answers are the ones we create. You will read that aright when the time comes an' it'll tell its tale, if that's even an interest for you then."

Siofre nodded, willing to wait. "Thank you, Bridie."

"How is your arm today?" Bridie asked, reaching out one hand.

Siofre twitched her right shoulder. "A wee bit sore, but the magister...that is, Johannes...cast the healing spell on it, an' it'll be fine in a day or so." She let Bridie push up her

left sleeve and examine her arm. There was still a slight pink line reaching from near the wrist all the way up Siofre's forearm. "His seemed to heal a wee faster, but I likely have more practice with the charm."

"Aye, 'tis healing well, though. Good you did a clean cut," Bridie said with a nod of approval.

"I never have hesitated, not e'en the first time, you know that," Siofre said. "'Tis worse an it's not begun well and with determination."

"That is why Cousin Cait does not ever join any into the clan...after the first two, I decided it best she dinna. Especially for the two poor wizards who were in more pain for her hesitation than if she'd been quick and steady about it. She has a kindly heart, though."

"Johannes was steady, as well. I don't believe he e'en felt it much."

"Good, then." Bridie chuckled. "You know David Pugh...poor lad fainted the first time I tried to begin the ritual. His wife and I had to revive him, heal the wound, then start again. Saw his own blood, and down he went."

Siofre laughed. "Men are worse that way, I think, and often the most unlikely ones."

"Aye, you're right there, hen!"

Siofre drew her watch from around her neck. "I am off now. I need to go and see Lachina before I return home, but Malcolm sent an owl earlier today asking to see me, and he'll be coming for dinner. I don't know when he will arrive, but as it's Friday, it may be early. I told him to come as soon as he wished."

"He is doing well?"

"Aye, so it seems. He is still in Hogsmeade."

"And still in love."

"Aye, still in love. I don't believe that will change. This witch has caught him well."

"He is the one who introduced you to Johannes, isn't he?"

"Nay, that was Minerva, when they taught together, but they are friends, Malcolm and Johannes. Malcolm suggested that Johannes work on the estate gardens."

"I see . . . He knows you invited Johannes into the clan and performed the ritual yesterday?"

"Unless Johannes has told him, or Lydia, he does not. I have only spoken with you about it."

"So he is not coming about that."

"Nay. I am going to encourage him to take Johannes back to Hogsmeade with him this weekend, though, as long as he will be there this evening. Encourage the lad to have some fun, get away from the estate a wee, remember the world beyond it."

"Good plan, Siofre. He is young still, after all."

"Though not too young," Siofre said, though she sounded uncharacteristically hesitant.

"Nay, not too young," Bridie said with a smile. "Not with all he's done, all he's suffered. And he sounds like an old soul with a deep well of love."

"He is an excellent Herbology master. Next Saturday, I will have him give you a tour of the gardens he has planted."

Bridie chuckled. "That would be fine, hen. This excellent Herbology master may give me a tour. Tell young Malcolm that it has been too long since he has visited the island. He must come soon and visit his island cousins."

Siofre nodded. "I will."

Johannes had found Siofre in her study when he returned to the house and Sorrel told him that the mistress wished to see him.

"This is for you to keep," Siofre said, standing and reaching into her pocket. "I brought it to my cousin Lachina, who is a Lapidomancer and jeweller, and she set it in a circle of gold for you, and I put a gold chain with it. You may carry it or not, as you wish, or wear it around your neck. Collum used his as a fob for his watch. But others put them in a drawer or on a shelf." She handed him the ritual artifact, its chain flowing like water into his hand.

"Thank you, Siofre," Johannes said, unconsciously rubbing his thumb over the stone's smooth surface. "I think I shall wear it, at least for a while. It will remind me of my new clan." He smiled suddenly. "My clan. Yes, I will need to become accustomed to this." He laughed.

Siofre chuckled, herself. "Aye, that you will."

"Lydia said that Malcolm owled earlier this afternoon and that he's coming for dinner tonight."

"Aye, just after lunch. You had already gone out. The lad wished to see me about something, so..." she shrugged "...I invited him to come for dinner and stay the night. Then you two can return to Hogsmeade together in the morning."

"I have work..."

"I do not force you to leave, Honnie, but you should get out, leave the estate for the weekend. As Lydia always reminds me, there is more in life than work and responsibility. And speaking of responsibility, you must have business of your own that needs minding. But if you do stay here, you must not work."

Siofre thought that Johannes looked almost as astonished as a house-elf told to take a holiday from service, but then he nodded. "You are right, of course, but simply because I am . . . because I am busy in the gardens does not mean that I am working."

Siofre's eyebrows rose.

Johannes laughed and shook his head. "I may be working, but it is also . . . I enjoy it. It is not simply a job, you know."

"Good to hear, lad! I was wondering what our contract was for!" Siofre laughed.

"I work now for more than the contract," Johannes said softly. He looked down, then shook his head, considering his words. "I work for the land and for you, but you could burn the contract, and it would not alter my dedication to the work . . ." He raised his eyes to look into hers. "Nor my devotion to the mistress of the estate, to you," he whispered.

"Magister . . ." Her breath hitched.

Johannes turned the artifact in his hand and held it so that its chain fell free. "I will wear this now, and I will remember the Clan Tyree and the witch whose blood ran warm over my arm, whose magic entered my own, and to whom I made one pledge in words and a second in my heart, one pledge to clan and kin, and another . . . to you." He raised the stone to his lips and kissed it, then he quickly dropped the chain around his neck.

"Honnie . . ." Siofre reached out and touched the stone. "Honnie. Make no pledge to me."

Johannes took her hand and held it wrapped around the artifact. "It is done, and it could not be otherwise." Eyes closed, he bent his head and kissed her fingers before gently releasing her hand.

"You carry the stone as you wish, in whatever manner you desire," Siofre said briskly, stepping back. "Before the grandson arrives, I need to finish this petition to the Wizengamot on behalf of Butterworth and his horses."

"You will represent Mr Butterworth, then?"

Siofre nodded. "Aye. And the case will be heard in less than two weeks, on May fifth, so there is not much time to prepare. I will be busy this weekend with that."

"Bertrand and Sally will return next week, and then there is the bonfire, the guests, and then the party on Saturday. Will you have the time?"

"Aye, an I do not waste it," Siofre said, sitting down at her desk. "Therefore, I must work this weekend. But the same is not true of you, Johannes. Take time away. 'Twill be good for you."

Johannes looked doubtful, but he bowed slightly and left the room to allow Siofre to return to her work before Malcolm arrived.

Siofre let out a long, shaky breath when the door clicked shut behind her. She closed her eyes and calmed herself, trying to clear her mind to work. Johannes's warm hand around hers, his gentle lips, his quiet but unabashed declaration of devotion to her . . . she had almost forgotten herself and her own pledge to allow Johannes his freedom, and not simply for his sake, but because she only wanted him on that basis: to freely choose her and to freely bind himself to her. For no simple partnership, no common marriage, would satisfy her in this relationship. If she were to have him, she would have him wholly, completely. She would return his devotion with devotion of her own, unwavering. But not that day. Not yet.

She was just finishing the first draft of the petition to the Wizengamot, which she would submit on Monday morning, when she heard a resounding crack of a loud Apparition. Malcolm had arrived, and was either announcing his arrival noisily or had come from some distance, Siofre thought, since he was perfectly capable of Disapparating and Apparating with no more than a slight echoing click if he chose.

She quickly tidied her desk and placed her goose quill in its holder, hurrying but not rushing to leave her study. She approached the top of the stairs, and she heard Malcolm's voice in the hall, greeting Lydia, who was complaining about Malcolm's dramatic arrival.

"Bless me! That booming Apparition still has my heart pounding, Malcolm! I am going to need a cup of tea to calm myself."

"Nay, Auntie, not a cup of tea! Something a bit tastier...and stronger! I'd not mind a glass, myself," Malcolm replied. He looked up the stairs and grinned. "And Grandmother comes. She will join us, won't you, Grandmother?"

Rather than wait for her to come down the great, broad staircase, he bounded up to meet her halfway. He kissed her cheek, then as she stepped down onto the stair beside him, he put his arm around her shoulders and gave her a squeeze.

"I believe you've been a very busy witch these last days," Malcolm said, eyes sparkling, "but I had an interesting morning today, myself. And I'll tell you all about it...but where's Honnie? The man's not left for the day, has he?"

"He'll be along, I'm sure," Siofre said.

"He couldn't have failed to have heard your arrival even if he were down by the barley," Lydia added.

Indeed, they heard steps above them, coming down from the second floor where Johannes's rooms were. When he reached the first floor, Johannes smiled and trotted down more quickly to meet the others.

"Malcolm! Siofre said you would be here this evening," Johannes said, offering his hand.

Malcolm smiled and grasped Johannes's hand in his own. His smile froze on its way to his eyes, and then returned, though there was still a hint of puzzlement in his expression.

"I thought we'd have a drink in the teak lounge today," Lydia said. "I had Multry prepare some appetisers since you were coming, Malcolm."

Johannes hadn't yet seen the room which Lydia referred to, and followed the others. It was in the less-used part of the house, near the formal dining room and large parlour. The lounge was panelled in teak, as Lydia's name for it implied, and it had heavy, darker, more masculine furniture than that in the light, cheerful parlour or in the family sitting room. Large portraits of a few Tyrees hung along one wall, and tall brass sconces and three chandeliers were lit, warming the room with their candlelight, and a fire crackled cheerfully in the fireplace.

After they'd sat down and Malcolm had poured them each a glass of whisky...save Lydia, who sipped a sherry...their appetisers arrived, and Malcolm picked up three and gobbled them down.

"Laddie! Where are your manners! Egeria taught you better," Siofre scolded.

"Sorry, Grandmother." He waved his hand, and a tray of appetisers rose and floated over to Siofre. "I am famished, though that is no excuse for not offering the snacks around first."

The tray floated to each of the others, and as Johannes selected a small savoury pastry, he caught Malcolm looking at him curiously again, but then Malcolm turned to his grandmother.

"I had a very interesting commission today. Wizard wrote me in a panic yesterday. Sure he's been cursed, needs my help desperately, heard I'm the bee's knees, all that usual stuff, but he did sound more desperate than most, so I hopped on over to Cornwall bright and early this morning." Malcolm took a long swallow of whisky. "The man is in a state, pacing back and forth, hadn't slept the night before, and there wasn't a sensible word out of his mouth at first. I thought he might be a bit, you know, 'disturbed,' as they say," Malcolm said, tapping the side of his head. "His wife was making breakfast. I'd eaten already, but to be friendly and set the man at his ease, I sat down with him to a hearty breakfast of kidneys and salty porridge...actually rather nice...then told the lady of the house to have a seat and rest herself a bit. She looked about ready to pop. Must be nearing her fortieth week, easy. Thought I might be enlisted to deliver the bairn then and there, she's that close."

"Egeria will be pleased that you retain so much knowledge of midwifery," Siofre said drily.

"Well, she shouldn't have dragged me along with her all those years if she didn't want me to learn something. It was supposed to be educational, after all...even if I did enjoy my outings with you more," Malcolm said with a cheeky wink at his grandmother. "You're still my best lassie!"

Siofre shook her head and rolled her eyes.

"I know who you were seeing!" Lydia said excitedly.

"Indeed," Johannes agreed. "I believe we all do."

Malcolm gave them a crooked grin and turned to his grandmother. "So what have you been up to, Grandmother? I've never seen a man in such a swither over a few Temperance Charms placed on his threshold!"

"It wasn't only Temperance Charms I placed," Siofre replied.

"Nay, I could tell that, too. The entire house reeked of your magic...if you'll pardon the expression...and there's no magic like Siofre Tyree's. No mistaking it. I even found the wee hole you'd punched through his wards so you could Apparate into the kitchen, you sneaky old witch. But I listened to the man's tale of woe nonetheless. It was certain, he was, that some mysterious force had been following him the other day, too. Would that mighty force have been you?"

"Aye," Johannes said, "she followed Terwilliger on Wednesday, all day, from the time he left his house until he returned that evening."

Malcolm glanced over at Johannes, again seeming to look at him oddly.

"Did you tell him what the charms were?" Siofre asked.

"Nay, even before I recognised you there, I thought the man could do with a bit of temperance with a baby on the way. Thought there had to be a reason for the charms, and if he didn't know of them, the wife must have laid them, or had them cast for her, and I'd not deny a pregnant witch a sober husband."

"What did you tell him?" Lydia asked.

Malcolm smirked. "I thought I might help Grandmother along a little, so I told him quite honestly that I didn't detect a single trace of a curse on either him or his house, but that there was an unusual store of magic there. I said I'd seen it before, and suggested to him that we should have a little private talk out of earshot of his wife. I think she was a wee bit nervous then, but I had Cadoc help me clean up the breakfast dishes...I do believe he was thinking of leaving them to his wife, as if she were his house-elf or something...and we repaired to the sitting room. I made a great show of putting an Imperturbable on the room, then I sat him down for a wizard-to-wizard chat." Malcolm laughed. "I must say, I did have a bit of fun with this. Not quite sporting of me, maybe, but I told the fellow a few tall tales. Told him that it was a much hidden, highly guarded secret, and a rare occurrence, to boot, but that some wizards became magically pregnant as their wives' pregnancy progressed..."

Malcolm had to pause in his story to accommodate the others' laughter, Lydia whooping and slapping her knee, his grandmother chuckling, and even Johannes laughing and wiping tears of mirth from his eyes.

"Well, anyway, I told him that in cases of a wizard's magical pregnancy, the wizard's excess energy often transfers itself to his abode, whatever it might be, and that in the case of stone houses such as his, the magic could resonate for many years to come, but that it would also provide a special nurturing energy for his bairn as she grew. I said it was a rare honour for a wizard to be able to provide such protection for his family, but that there were some costs to be borne, such as a reduced tolerance for drink. I asked him whether he'd noticed any such side-effect, and he nodded eagerly, agreeing that in the last few weeks, he'd scarcely been able to hold his liquor. Drink taken in his home made him sick, he said, and if he came home after having more than a pint or two, he'd pass out as soon as he crossed the threshold. It was one of the things that had made him believe he was cursed."

"Oh, dear, laddie! What have you wrought! What if he tells his mates?"

"Took care of that...said that the Ministry doesn't like this to be common knowledge...made up some balderdash about that which he swallowed easily. I told him that this magic pervading the house meant that he would be a superlative father and that his daughter...or son...would be an outstanding witch or wizard who would bring him great pride. I told him that the consequences would be severe for him if he tried to ignore the magic and its nurturing imperative, then made up a few tales of woe about wizards living under bridges with trolls, only a single robe to their names, begging for Knuts, and said that's what happened to any wizard who rejected the call to abide in accordance with the pregnancy magic and nurture his child in partnership with his wife."

"And what did you say about the force he thought was following him?" Lydia asked excitedly.

"Ah, now that I told him was the result of his attempts to escape his fate, and that worse than that would follow him if he didn't become the family man his magic was calling him to be. I told him that great joy and fulfilment could come to him if he lived in harmony with his natural parental magic...though I told him there were no guarantees there, and that the outside world did exert forces upon him and his family, as well...but that if he chose to follow this rare and splendid opportunity, he could be a very happy man."

Lydia laughed. "Such stories you make up, Malcolm! And he believed you!"

"Aye, because he wanted to. I could tell he wasn't a bad sort, not really, just married a wee bit young, maybe, and a bit lacking in self-confidence. Besides, there was a kernel of truth to it all...fatherhood is a wonderful calling, I'm sure, and being a good father should be a reward in itself. Provided, of course, that the child doesn't turn out to be a miserable creature." Malcolm shrugged.

"Well, I do hope you did more good than harm with that story, lad," Siofre said.

"I think so. I told him not to let on to his wife about it all, just to tell her that all was well and that he was looking forward to being a daddy. I also told him that if there are other sources of stress in his life, he should find ways to deal with them in a practical and constructive manner. That's when he told me he hated his job and his boss but was afraid to quit because of the baby on the way. Naturally I told him not to quit until he found another job, but suggested that he begin looking for one after the baby was born. Told him to consult a Seer or Arithmancer who specialises in career advice. I gave him Gertrude's name and told him that she takes commissions for particularly worthy cases, and if he mentioned my name, she might be able to make time for him...he just got out of Hogwarts a few years ago, so he knows who she is, but he didn't take Arithmancy, so he doesn't know her at all well."

"You'd better tell your witch what tales you spun for the fellow so that she doesn't say anything that out-and-out contradicts you," Siofre said.

"I didn't give him any career advice, per se, so if she concentrates on that...or whatever Seer he might choose concentrates on his career...my little tales should remain intact."

"Well, you might want to mention the newspaper business to Gertrude. I sent Kiera with a letter to a friend of mine at the Prophet," Siofre said, "and mentioned that he might try to run into Terwilliger in a casual way and talk to him about the newspaper business."

"And this friend, he will do this?" Johannes asked curiously. "Simply . . . run into the man and discuss jobs with him?"

"Gerald Mackintosh owes me a favour or two, so he will. But not to discuss jobs. Just the business in general, and if Terwilliger sees an opportunity and tries for it, that depends upon him, and there is no obligation on Mackie to hire the man if he's not suited."

"I remember Gerald," Lydia said dreamily. "I haven't seen him in years, though. Wonder if he's still the same . . ."

"I ran into him in Diagon Alley a few months ago, Aunt Lydia, and he's still a bonny one!" Malcolm said with a grin. He added to Johannes, "You can count on Aunt Lydia to remember the good-looking men! Quite an appreciative eye, she has!"

"Oh, go on!" Lydia said. "You make me sound like some lecherous old hag!"

"Not at all, Auntie! You simply have an artist's appreciation for beauty! And if it happens to come in a masculine package, so much the better!" Malcolm teased. "I'm sure

the others are in agreement with me, too, that no one could ever mistake you for a hag, lecherous or otherwise."

Johannes, though used to Malcolm's sense of humour and his gentle...or not so gentle...teasing, did feel compelled to defend Lydia. "She is, indeed, an artist, and, if I may speak so plainly," he said with a gentlemanly nod at Lydia, "she is also quite lovely herself, and in no way hag-like."

Malcolm laughed at that, and Lydia chuckled.

"Thank you, Johannes. You are a gentleman," Lydia said with a fond smile.

"I see why you two ladies like to keep the man here," Malcolm said with a smile. "But he is quite right, too." Malcolm got up from his chair, setting down his empty glass, and went over to Lydia. He bent and kissed her cheek. "You are lovely. But," he said as he straightened and turned to the others, "Honnie should remember that it was not I who compared her to a hag, but the lady herself."

A light, clear tone rang through the house, and Siofre set down her own glass and stood. "That would be dinner. Let us not keep Multry's meal waiting...especially as the grandson is likely still famished despite the dozen tidbits he ate...such tale-telling does work up an appetite!"

Chapter Twenty-Two: Kinsmen

Chapter 22 of 32

Malcolm stays for dinner. Siofre gives Lydia some news. Malcolm has a late-night chat with Johannes.



Chapter Twenty-Two: Kinsmen

"You have to work this weekend?" Malcolm asked, setting down his fork and picking up his wine glass. "Do you really have to? I thought I'd spend the day tomorrow. I had thought we could go hill-walking together. I wanted to stretch my doggie legs a bit, too."

"Sorry, lad, I have to file the petition with the Wizengamot on Monday, and there's the hearing on the fifth, so I canna go with you." Siofre rang the small bell by her plate, and their entrees disappeared. Plates of fruit, biscuits, and cheese appeared in the centre of the table.

"Maybe Johannes would like to go with you," Lydia suggested, reaching for the cheese, "if he doesn't have something planned already."

Malcolm frowned. "I'd hoped you'd have time, Grandmother. But what do you say, Honnie? Ready for a ramble?"

"You are not seeing Gertrude this weekend?" Johannes asked.

"She has to stay at the castle this weekend, more's the pity. Promised Slughorn she'd watch his Slytherins for him over the weekend so that he can attend a wedding or a funeral or something."

Lydia laughed. "There's a big difference between a wedding and a funeral, Malcolm!"

"Not to me!" He gave a mock shudder, then laughed. "I just didn't follow whatever it was Gertrude said after she told me she was stuck up there all weekend. *But* that does mean that Sluggo owes her. She's rearranged her classes next week, and he's taking her rounds on Thursday and Sunday, so that means she will be here for the entire weekend, Friday included. Well, she said she does have to go back Friday afternoon for an hour to teach one of her NEWTs level classes, but otherwise, she's mine from Thursday evening until I deliver her to the gates on Monday morning."

"That is good," Lydia said, smiling brightly. "Minerva will be here Thursday night for a while, she said, but then she won't be able to be back until Saturday afternoon for Murdoch's party. She is still planning to be here through Sunday, though, which will be nice. I think she wanted to spend more time with the babies."

"So, what about it, Johannes?" Malcolm asked. "Up for a walk tomorrow?"

Johannes glanced at Siofre, then nodded. "Aye, that would be fine. I have no pressing business in Hogsmeade. Perhaps Lydia would like to come with us."

"No, no, that's fine!" Lydia said. "A walk like that would do me in, I'm certain...especially if Malcolm goes haring about in his Animagus form. I will meet you for a picnic in the middle of the day, if you like, though. Tell me when and where, and I'll Apparate there...or one of you could come back for me, if you wouldn't mind that."

"We'd like that, wouldn't we, Honnie," Malcolm agreed with a nod. "And you can take a bit of an amble with us after lunch."

"I would be happy to return for you, unless Malcolm has a specific destination in mind for our picnic," Johannes said.

"There's a route I like to take, it brings us up to the overlook by the southern hill fort, but I don't know whether we would make it there by lunchtime or not," Malcolm replied. "It would depend on when we left in the morning and how leisurely our pace was."

"The hill tower sounds like a lovely spot for a picnic, though," Lydia said. "The view is beautiful from there."

"All right, then, Auntie, we'll have our picnic there," Malcolm said indulgently.

"I could still come for you, if you wish, Lydia," Johannes offered.

"That would be kind of you, Johannes dear. I'll have the picnic all packed, and it'll be ready whenever you two boys are," Lydia said.

"Good...I think an early lunch, if we get up and out whilst the dew's still on the grass," Malcolm said.

"I'll be ready when you are," Lydia replied. "Now, Morgan will be here in a little while to play with me. If you'd all like to, you could join us. He practised some this morning, so I don't think he'd mind a small audience."

"It is your new piece that you are playing?" Johannes asked.

"Yes. I do hope we can have it polished by the time Bertie and Sally arrive!" Lydia said. She turned to Malcolm. "I don't think you've heard my new piece yet, Malcolm."

"The one you're dedicating to Bert and Sally?" Malcolm asked. He shook his head. "I'd like to hear it. Does it have a title yet?"

"Well . . . I've toyed with a few, but I think perhaps *Peregrine Homecoming*," Lydia said.

"That sounds appropriate...but you didn't write me a song when I came home from my wanderings," Malcolm teased.

"You are aye not her son, either," Siofre said.

"I could! If you want," Lydia said. "You always did come home, though. You just would wander about for a while then come home and leave again for a time. I wondered whether I might die never seeing my boy home again."

Malcolm smiled at her and reached across the table to pat her hand. "Not to worry, Auntie. I was only teasing you a bit. And you did say you'd help me set some of my songs down in proper musical form sometime, and that would be a wonderful gift."

"I thought I would finish some work this evening, but I think I'll simply have an early start tomorrow," Siofre said. "I would enjoy hearing the completed piece with the violin added."

"You understand, it needs a bit of polish still," Lydia said hastily. "It's finished, in that it has a beginning, middle, and ending, but there are a few points where I'm still not happy with it."

"Let's all go into the music room and have a listen," Malcolm said. "And I'd not mind some of that apple brandy you and Shoolie put up, either, Aunt Lydia. She and Shoolie are wonders when it comes to apple brandy, Honnie. Have you had any yet? You're in for a treat, then."

"Is that what the still is for down in the big shed near the rock garden?" Johannes asked. At Lydia's nod, he said, "I had wondered...it is very large."

"We make a few barrels every year...we started doing it absolutely ages ago when we were trying to think of new ways to use the apples. So many bushels seemed to go to waste. We did a lot of cider for a time...and we still keep some as cider, of course...but everyone seems to like the apple brandy. We don't do as many barrels as we once did, though. We're leaving more apples for the squirrels and deer and such, I suppose," Lydia said, shaking her head.

"Do you sell it?" Johannes asked.

Lydia laughed. "Oh, no. We always send a couple barrels to Tíree, and Egeria and Murdoch enjoy receiving a barrel every few years. When they finish one, they send it back empty, and we send them a full one. But we never sell it."

Johannes looked at Siofre. "We could sell some of it. Not in barrels, perhaps, but bottle it and sell it. We could get bottles from Mayfield Charmed Glassworks. Perhaps Madam Mayfield would also accept payment in-kind of some sort. I think we might be able to generate a nice income with it. Have you any barrels on hand now?"

"Oh, heavens, yes!" Lydia replied. "We have about thirty. I'd say that of those, at least a dozen are ready to be drunk. I do like it to age in the barrel several years. Gives it a nice flavour and it mellows nicely."

"They are large, these barrels?"

"We have two hogsheads, but most are about half that size, maybe twenty-six or twenty-seven gallons," Lydia said.

"I do not know that in litres," Johannes said, "but that seems a lot of brandy to me."

"We used to do much more," Lydia repeated, "and if you think we could sell it, if you think people would be interested, we could do more again. Sorrel helped Shoolie and me last year."

"When it comes to alcohol," Malcolm said with a laugh, "people are always interested!"

"What do you think, Siofre?" Lydia asked.

"Aye, it's a fine idea, hen. But don't decide yet whether to distill more this year until we see whether the grandson and Honnie are right and there is interest in it," Siofre said.

"Ah, you're always such a pessimist, Grandmother!"

"Nay, not at all. Simply cautious."

"The apples are not ready until late summer or autumn, anyway," Johannes said practically, "and if it must rest in the barrels for a while before drinking, too, it gives us time to adjust and to begin slowly selling it."

"You're a better businessman than you claim to be," Malcolm said.

Johannes shrugged. "It seems logical first to attempt to find ways of making a profit from the estate doing what we...they...have always done, or have done in the past, as in the case of the bere, rather than trying to find new ventures that might not be viable. Those might come later."

Lydia smiled brightly. "You are a treasure, Johannes! I always say that. Isn't he a treasure, Siofre?"

Siofre side-stepped the question and its implied imperative to praise Johannes. "It will be good to make better use of the estate's natural assets," she said. There was a muted crack of Apparition from the front hall. "That will be Morgan, no doubt. Malcolm, would you and Johannes go meet him and bring him to the music room. Dinna serve him any brandy till after he and Lydia have run through the piece a few times, though."

Lydia began to rise with the two wizards, but Siofre made a slight gesture to her. "I have something I need to tell you, hen, best now."

Lydia looked slightly puzzled, but sat down as Malcolm and Johannes left the room.

"What is it, Siofre?"

"I discovered who the neighbour is who is causing the Butterworths such vexation," Siofre said.

"Someone we know?"

Siofre nodded. "Someone we're related to, in fact," she said, generously including herself. "'Tis your nephew Drusus."

"Drusus? Well . . . I can hardly say that surprises me. He is a misery in flesh," Lydia said with a sad shake of her head.

"I wished to tell you because I must be adverse to him in these proceedings. You understand that."

"Of course. And I would expect you to do your job properly, in any case, even if Drusus weren't a nasty character."

"I also . . . let us just say that those who live in glass houses oughtn't throw stones," Siofre said. "I may take advantage of that in the case of Drusus."

Lydia's brow furrowed. "How so? He doesn't keep animals. At least none other than some he might keep for potions and such." She shuddered. "They're all in cages and glass cases, though, I'm sure."

Siofre shook her head. "I mean that he oughtn't draw attention to his neighbours' slight peccadillos when his own are much greater."

"You mean his Charms business in general," Lydia said.

"You know the reputation the man has," Siofre said. "It would not be a difficult thing for me to discover and present evidence that the man himself does more than dabble in the Dark Arts, and that these Charms commissions he accepts are most of them for nasty, Dark, or illegal purposes."

"But is that relevant to Butterworths' winged horses?"

"Believe me, hen, I can find ways of making it relevant and ensuring that his place is searched afore he has time to hide everything," Siofre said. "But the man could end up in Azkaban for it, or at least pay a hefty fine."

Lydia stared across the room. She blinked, then looked back at Siofre. "He already has that reputation. It's not a well-hid secret. There must be some on the Wizengamot with their own suspicions already."

"Aye, but with no clear cause to pursue him at this moment. I could give them cause. I dinna wish to take this tack if you would be hurt by it, though, hen. He is your brother's grandson. There are other defences I have."

"But if Drusus is doing wrong . . ." Lydia shook her head. "It isn't just a little law he is bending, either, is it, Sister? One that does none harm . . . and he'd be quite happy to see his neighbour in prison or forfeiting his horses . . . You must do as you see fit. Whatever you would do if he weren't related to me. If it really *is* Dark or nasty business he's in. If he's just making illegal, unregistered Portkeys for people to make quite innocent visits to family and friends, something of that sort . . . though I know his character well enough to know that wouldn't be all. No, you must proceed however you would even if he were just John Smith, whom we don't know from Adam. Even if it sends him to Azkaban."

"I'd almost as soon not have him sent to Azkaban," Siofre said. "His reputation would only grow after that. Nay, a fine and having his illegal Charmed objects confiscated would be better. Slow him up a bit, anyway, and not polish...or blacken...his reputation enough to steer more Dark business his way. Might have some reputable folk avoiding him, though. And if his Darker customers think he might be raided again at any time, it might keep that side of his business down for a little while. Embarrass him without making him seem more . . . attractive to his nastier clientele."

"When did you learn that it was Drusus?"

"Butterworth told me he thought it was he, but the MLE wouldn't confirm it to him. I received some of the files this morning, and although his name had been redacted...until I file my petition Monday, I canna get the full files...I am sure it is he. There is no other neighbour of Butterworth's who it could be. I thought about waiting until then to tell you, but I thought there was no point to putting off the news. I hope it hasn't ruined your evening."

"Heavens, no. I scarcely know the man, after all. It does make me sad for my family, for that side of my family, but it doesn't diminish my joy in the rest of my family, or the pleasure I'll have with Morgan this evening. He may not be my blood relative, but he's more truly my nephew than Drusus ever was, Malcolm and Murdoch, too. And all the rest of the family, as well."

In an unusual gesture, Siofre reached over and took Lydia's hand. "An' you are a sister to me, Lydia. 'Tis why I dinna wish to take a step against him without speaking with you first."

"Save Butterworth, if you can, Siofre," Lydia said. "Leave Drusus to his fate as he has made it."

"Aye, I'll save Butterworth and his horses," Siofre said with a nod. She cocked her head and smiled. "They've begun without you, I think."

Lydia grinned, hearing Malcolm with his penny whistle and Morgan on his fiddle playing a lively tune. "We'd better get in there before Malcolm completely leads him astray and we have an impromptu ceilidh on our hands! Hmm, perhaps Malcolm might wish a part...not for penny whistle, perhaps for recorder . . . There is a spot in my composition where that might fit quite well."

"Let's go ask him, then," Siofre said, pushing back from the table and standing.

Three hours later, after the three had practised *Peregrine Homecoming* a few times...Malcolm learning his part of the melody more by ear than by reading the music...and after the musical evening had become a miniature ceilidh, with even the house-elves called to tap their toes and twirl about, Kilbeena and Duster given special dispensation to stay up late and the older house-elves indulging in butterbeer, and Lydia grabbing Johannes's hand and leading him in a vigorous dance, during which the Herbologist appeared confused, but not unhappy, Siofre finally declared that she was off to bed.

"Ah, one more dance with your favourite grandson," Malcolm wheedled, Morgan guffawing in the background and tightening one of his strings up a bit.

"Eh? My favourite grandson?" Siofre looked around her. "I dinna see Murdoch here!"

Everyone laughed, and Johannes, quite warm from the drink and the dancing, put his arm through Malcolm's. "Come up with me, Malcolm. Bring the bottle, and we'll have another on our own."

"Can you get home safely?" Lydia asked Morgan anxiously.

"Aye, an I not Apparate," Morgan said. His cheeks were flushed and his eyes bright. "Nex' time, Fiona'll be here. She wanted t' sleep early, though, when she can." He blinked. "I'll walk down fine."

"We should light the path somehow," Johannes said, brow furrowed as he considered it.

"Think about that some other time, laddie!" Siofre admonished. "'Tis the weekend, an' you're not t' be workin'! I told you that already." She turned to Malcolm. "I'm aye after tellin' him not to work every day of the week. You see he has fun this weekend. Bring him home with you. Take him out. Fun, laddies, fun whilst yer young! I had little enough: you do better. Aye, and sleep well, dream sweetly."

With that pronouncement, Siofre left the music room, the house-elves all Disapparated, and Lydia accompanied Morgan through to the conservatory and the door that led to the kitchen gardens.

"All right, mate, now you and I can have a proper chat," Malcolm said, appearing suddenly much more alert and sober than he had...and more than Johannes felt. He snagged an unopened bottle of brandy with his left hand and steered Johannes toward the hallway. "We have some questions to discuss."

"Discuss?" Johannes asked. "Fragen? Ich meine, that is, what questions, why?"

"A matter of magic, my boy. Yours. And a few other things I've noticed tonight." Malcolm helped Johannes stumble up the steps. "I got ya in over your head here, I'm afraid, mate," he muttered to himself.

"I am find. I will have a glass of water to drink. We will tomorrow the hills walk." Johannes blinked at him.

"Yeah, I'm sure you're just 'find,' but it's not the drink that concerns me," Malcolm replied. "And we will the hills tomorrow walk, though I'd prefer to walk the hills tomorrow. However you prefer, though, mein Freund."

Johannes smiled at him. "Ja, mein Freund." He squeezed Malcolm. "Ein guter Freund. Der beste. 'S gibt keinen besser."

"Aye, I know, I'm the bee's knees and the cat's pyjamas," Malcolm said, guiding Johannes toward his suite.

Johannes laughed. "A cat in pyjamas. You should tell Minerva, cat's pyjamas!" He laughed again.

"I wanted you loose and lucid, not completely paralytic," Malcolm grumbled.

"Oh, aye, I am lucid, I am," Johannes said with a vigorous nod. "Just need to use the faculties and I will be, how do you say it, ready for another round. That is good, that Brandtwein."

"It is...how many glasses did you have, anyway, Honnie?" Malcolm asked as they reached the door to Johannes's sitting room.

"Hmm, four? Five? I cannot recall. You poured and Morgan poured." Johannes shrugged. "Not many. I did not pour any myself. Your brother is a generous wizard. McGonagalls are . . . das Salz der Erde. Und die Tyrees auch. But only a few glasses had I to drink."

"But you had wine with dinner, as well."

"Was that a mistake? Wine with dinner, no brandy after? Ich weiss, Wein nach Bier, ich schenk' das dir, Bier nach Wein, lass das sein! Aber 's war kein Bier. It was Lydia's lovely brandywine. Apple."

"Aye, lovely apple brandy, Johannes. Go to the 'faculties.' I'll get you some coffee and myself another drink." As Johannes disappeared in the direction of the toilet, singing softly to himself in German, Malcolm shook his head. "Maybe he's just drunk in English." He called for Multry, who seemed the house-elf least taken with drink...aside from Shoolie, and he didn't want to disturb the old house-elf.

"Aye, Little Collie, I can bring him some coffee. Coffee with a lot of cream. You'll have some, as well?"

"A cup of coffee might be pleasant right now," Malcolm said. "With a shot of the brandy in it, especially."

Multry laughed. "I'll send it up with some biscuits. It won't be long."

"Thank you, Multry. I won't be calling you again tonight," Malcolm said.

"Call if you need to, Collie. Sorrel is putting the bairns to bed. I'll be up a while longer, but call after that if there's need!"

"You're good as gold, Multry." Malcolm reached out and gave her shoulder a squeeze. "Thank you."

"Save your thanks," Multry said, but she smiled up at him before she Disapparated.

When Johannes returned to the sitting room, Malcolm had lit a fire in the fireplace and poured himself another glass of brandy. He was sitting in a wingback chair, shoes off, with his legs stretched out in front of him, warming his feet by the fire.

"All right, there, Johannes?" Malcolm thought that it looked as though Johannes had washed his face.

"Aye." Johannes picked up the bottle of brandy, looked at it, shrugged, then poured himself a small amount.

"I asked Multry to make us some coffee. It should be here in a few minutes."

"Good. She makes good coffee. The coffee at Hogwarts always tasted to me as though they thought it should be tea," Johannes said, pronouncing his English especially carefully. He made a face. "I taught my own house-elf, however, how coffee should be made and how it should taste, and I would have a strong cup before breakfast."

"Aye, Gertrude always complains about the coffee, too."

"So, for what did you wish me 'loose and lucid'?" Johannes asked. "In retrospect, it sounds not so very friendly."

"Ah, well . . ." The coffee and spice biscuits arrived, saving Malcolm from responding to the question.

Malcolm poured them each a cup, and Johannes added a liberal amount of cream to his before he passed the pitcher to Malcolm. Malcolm put a little brandy in his coffee, then added the cream and stirred.

"You seem happy here, Johannes," Malcolm said, taking a sip of the hot coffee.

"Yes, I am. It was a good decision to come here. I am grateful for your recommendation."

"I'm glad you've found it a good position for you. I have to say, though, that you seem rather . . . *different* tonight."

"Well, perhaps I had a wee too much brandy, and Lydia's dancing was quite exhausting. It brought the drink to my head."

"Mmm, I could see that, but I noticed it before. From the moment you came down the stairs . . . have you . . . have you been doing anything unusual lately? Or taken any potions?"

Johannes raised one eyebrow. "Potions?"

"Aye, potions. Or performed unusual magic?"

Johannes shook his head. "I have not taken a potion in many days, and the last was your grandmother's own Headache Potion. The magic I do, I always have done. Did you think my magic felt odd? I was a little busy today, I Apparated many times, perhaps it is merely that I was tired. The brandy did feel a bit powerful." He shrugged. "But do not worry yourself, Malcolm. I am not ill, I am sure."

"Nay, it wasn't that." Malcolm looked at him. "Your magic feels different, not tired, not weak, not . . . ill. Simply different."

Johannes shrugged again. "I cannot say why you felt that. You notice such things more than I."

"Let me tell you what more I felt, then: I felt Tyree magic in you, as clear as I felt it at Cadoc Terwilliger's house, I felt Tyree magic in you, and not just Tyree magic, but Grandmother Siofre's magic. Now tell me, Johannes, why might that be?"

Johannes returned Malcolm's unblinking gaze. "You sound disturbed by this, but do not be. It is no cause for concern. It is probably because she performed a ritual with me yesterday."

"Performed it with you? What sort of ritual? For the bere field? For the water garden? It didn't feel like your plant and earth magic."

Johannes finished his cup of coffee and set it back down in his saucer. "Properly said, perhaps, she performed it upon me, not with me." Johannes smiled. "We are kinsmen now, you and I, Malcolm."

"I don't believe it," Malcolm said flatly, leaning forward, pulling in his legs and tucking his feet under his chair. "I saw a mark on her arm, near her wrist . . . it led up her arm." He shook his head.

"She offered me to become a member of the Clan Tyree," Johannes said. "How could I refuse? It is a generous offer, an opportunity not offered to many. Siofre wished to admit me to the wards..."

"That does not require you to be a member of the clan or a member of the family," Malcolm said sharply.

"As I was about to say, she offered me a choice. She explained that if I were a member of the clan, she could grant me full entry into the family wards, and not just to the modified wards, but it was clear to me that it was not merely entry into the wards that she was offering. She has given me . . . a place, a sense of belonging, a *family*." Johannes blinked as tears welled in his eyes. "Siofre gave me a great honour, and I am humbled by her gift, but beyond that, she has helped me to find new roots."

"She hardly knows you, man!"

"No, not true. Or true, but not completely true."

"You have worked here, what? Two months? Not even that. And before that, you were just some Hogwarts teacher to her. She didn't know you any better than any other. Grandmother would not offer clan membership to a man she has known such a short time."

"What do you say with that? That I lie? I would show you my own arm, but your grandmother's skills healed it and now there's not a mark there. Wait! Here!" Johannes fumbled at the neck of his robes, trying to find the gold chain that hung beneath them.

"Nay, I don't say that you lie, Honnie," Malcolm said. "I know you aren't lying. I am sorry it sounded that way. And what I am about to say won't sound much better, but I need to know what you did to have her bring you into the clan."

Johannes pulled out the artifact from his clan adoption and held it up for Malcolm. "Here, see. Look. This is blood and magic. I am of the Clan Tyree."

Malcolm raised his hand. "I see that. I can feel the magic. You needn't prove it to me. But I still don't understand. It seems . . . you must have done something. Said something."

Johannes shook his head and leaned back. "I did nothing. We talk. We are friends. She is . . . she is a remarkable witch. That says not enough of her. She is . . . she is to me sublime. I revere her."

Malcolm's mouth opened, but he didn't say anything.

"I did nothing to her, Malcolm. I would not. *Could* not. I did not even know of this clan joining before she suggested it. I did not know such a thing was possible, nor that Siofre had some standing in the clan to do this. She invited me. What would you say if I had refused? An ungrateful wretch, I would be. Pitable and ignorant."

"Honnie . . . yes, you would have been a fool to refuse," Malcolm said slowly. "I do not understand Grandmother." He raised his eyes to meet Johannes's grey ones. "Or perhaps I do not understand you, either."

Johannes poured himself another glass of brandy. "You know that Siofre has come to trust me. You were surprised when she invited me to stay here, although it was very sensible and practical for me, and we all have benefited. I do see that this could seem a very short acquaintance to you, Malcolm, but I feel as though I have known her longer, and that I know her better than I do people whom I have known for years, and that the longer I know her . . . the longer I will wish to know her."

"Well . . . I suppose that you have had opportunity to come to know each other well, better than under other circumstances. And I'll never deny that you are trustworthy...or I hope never to have to deny it...and that it is Grandmother Siofre's best judgment to trust you as she does. There are few people of whom Gertrude ever speaks as highly as she does of you, my friend, and in the time I've known you, I've never had a reason to disagree with Trudie on that." Malcolm leaned forward and picked up his brandy snifter. "To you, kinsman. Slàinte."

Johannes touched his own glass to Malcolm's. "Slàinte mhor."

They each took a drink, then sat in silence a while, Malcolm turning his brandy snifter in his hands and looking into the deep amber liquid.

"D'you know, Grandmother Siofre only admitted me to the family wards a couple years ago?" Malcolm shrugged. "I wasn't around often . . . I suppose I didn't need it. And before Herbert died, they were often at the McKenna place . . ." He shrugged again. "We'd better get to bed if we're going to greet the dawn."

The two men stood.

"Goodnight, Malcolm."

"Night, Honnie. Schlaf gut."

"Du auch."

When the door closed behind Malcolm, Johannes stood and stared into the fireplace for several minutes, then he drank off the rest of his brandy, waved his wand to extinguish the lamps, and went to find his own bed.

Chapter Twenty-Three: Hill-Walkers' Breakfast

Chapter 23 of 32

Malcolm joins his grandmother for an early breakfast and they discuss Johannes, then he and Johannes leave for their hike.

Includes Malcolm McGonagall, Siofre Tyree, and Johannes Birnbaum.



Chapter Twenty-Three: Hill-Walkers' Breakfast

Malcolm rolled over onto his left side and groaned. He had opened the draperies on his east-facing windows before he'd gone to bed, and now he regretted it. Dawn light was shimmering gently through the many diamond panes of the windows, and he closed his eyes tightly against it. He remembered the hill-walking, though, and the glorious feeling of the cool, damp, fresh air entering his lungs, and the early morning sun making every blade, leaf, and petal stand out, bright and vibrant. Rolling over onto his back, Malcolm stretched, reaching his arms above his head and grasping the headboard as he stretched out his legs and wiggled his toes.

Throwing off the covers, he bounded from the bed and, shivering slightly as the cool air hit his naked body, he crossed the room, unlatched the window, and leaned out. Frost glittered across the grounds, and Malcolm grinned. It was a clear, magnificent morning. By the time he and Johannes left for their walk, the sun would have brought the frost to a sparkling dew. He could tell the areas where Johannes had cast strong microclimate charms, protecting the gardens from the cold night air, since they lacked the frosty sheen of the rest of the grounds.

Shivering even more from the cold breeze, Malcolm closed the window and Summoned his heavy, dark-green terrycloth robe from the wardrobe. Shoving his arms through the sleeves, he shucked on the slippers he kept in his room at the estate. He grabbed his kilt, a fresh shirt and waistcoat, and a pair of socks, and set off for a hot shower.

The shower was not as hot as he would have liked, and the pressure kept changing...he would be glad when Siofre got the pipes on this side of the house taken care of...but it refreshed him, and he whistled happily as he trotted down the stairs to the morning room, hopeful that the house-elves already had breakfast underway.

"Lydia's tune stuck in your head, eh, laddie?" Siofre asked as he bounced into the room, his dark curls still damp.

"Has it? Yeah, I guess it has! You're up early." Malcolm bent and gave his grandmother a peck on the cheek.

"Aye. I have work to finish. Breakfast's on the sideboard this morning. Multry spoils us when you're in the house," Siofre said.

Malcolm turned to look at the sideboard. Bacon, both thin-sliced smoked and fried crispy, potato scones, hard rolls, sliced cheese, grilled tomato wedges, sauteed mushrooms, bangers, soft-cooked eggs...no doubt kept at the perfect state by house-elf magic...kippers, salty porridge, fruit, and even a covered dish of kedgerree.

"How many people does Multry think she's feeding?" Malcolm asked, helping himself to the kedgerree, some grilled tomatoes, and a bowl of sauteed mushrooms. "And do you often have kedgerree for breakfast?"

"Never. Seemed a whim of hers. And when I asked, she said that Master Honnie and Little Collie would need a good breakfast for their hill-walking, especially after all they drank last night."

Malcolm opened his mouth to protest, but Siofre interrupted, holding up her hand. "I am merely reporting what Multry told me." She looked at the kedgerree on his plate. "Seems the kedgerree wasn't the odd dish I thought it was."

Malcolm shrugged. "Smelled good to me. And I've had it for breakfast before. Just never thought it would be something you'd ask for, that's all." He gestured toward her plate. "Besides, you're eating kippers and porridge. Not much difference."

Siofre shook her head but didn't contradict him.

"And is that a pot of coffee?" Malcolm asked, sniffing. He poured a cup and smiled. "Good coffee, too."

"I canna drink coffee until at least ten in the morning," Siofre said as she watched him pour cream into the cup.

"I know, that's what you've been telling me for fifty years." He took a sip of his creamy coffee. "But early in the morning after a late night, it's just the thing to clear out the cobwebs."

"So Lydia claims," Siofre said drily, watching as Malcolm squeezed lemon over his fish and rice. "But the magister prefers coffee in the mornings, so we always have a pot now. I have become used to its aroma. Or inured to it."

"Mmm, great breakfast," Malcolm said, swallowing a mouthful of kedgerree. "Really. I ought to stay the night more often."

"You're always invited, always welcome, you know that."

"I know. I know you'd wanted me to move back here when I was finished with my contract at Hogwarts, too, but you know that I wanted to be close to Gertrude and have a place of my own to have her come whenever she can get away from the school."

Siofre nodded. "And I am very glad that you are so happy, Malcolm. This summer, you and Gertrude must come and stay for a few weeks. Or a week or two, anyway. However long you wish. I would enjoy getting to know her better. The magister speaks highly of her."

"The magister . . . you know, Grandmother, about Johannes . . . I know it was a disappointment when I didn't move in here, and I know you miss having more family about, but things are changing now. Morgan and Fiona and their kids are here, Bert and Sally are coming back to Scotland, and whether they live here on the estate or not, they'll be in and out all of the time."

"Aye, 'tis good to have more family near," Siofre agreed, "and very good to have the wee bairns growing up here, too. The magister has begun a special garden for them, you know. Filled with plants they can safely put in their mouths, as wee ones are wont to do, and many surfaces, textures, and colours. He even has a tree picked out for them to have a fort in when they are older. This is a good place for them to grow up."

"Aye . . . the 'magister' does have plans for them..."

"Wonderful plans for the entire estate. Sometimes, I think he looks out across the land and sees not what is there, but what he will bring into being. Has he asked you about helping with the greenhouse?"

Malcolm shook his head. "Nay. He mentioned only that there will be one, and I helped him get acquainted with Caroline so he could order the glass from her."

"We're doing it together, building the greenhouse. Morgan's helping, although he's not very good with things like that, and I think that Lachina plans to help...she'd be good with her metal-charming and Lapidomagic talents...and I'm going to ask Loran, Tell, Maire, and Hamish from the island. I haven't asked your parents yet, but I think if we get enough people working on it, we can finish the structure in no time. Have you seen the plans? It is more than a greenhouse. Honnie's designed a work of art. Cupolas, bays, a fountain right inside the greenhouse, and all sorts of things. It will be beautiful as well as practical."

"About Johannes, Grandmother . . ."

"Aye?" Siofre pulled her small plate of fruit toward her. "What about Johannes? Was he ill last night after the apple brandy?" She frowned and started to push away from the table. "P'raps I should peek in on him, or have one of the house-elves check on him."

"Nay, nay, he wasn't ill. Just a wee bit squiffy. But he seemed fine after we had some coffee."

"Ah, very good." Siofre pulled closer to the table again. She looked at the fruit, then looked at the sideboard. "Tattie scone, Malcolm?" she asked as she Summoned one for herself.

"Um, that would be good," Malcolm said with a nod. He cut off a large knob of butter, put it on the still-warm scone, and let it melt.

"Mmm, Shoolie did these, I think," Siofre said, Summoning another fat round scone, "or it's her recipe. Multry's are more like ordinary griddle cakes. I could make a meal off of these."

"As I was saying, Grandmother, about Johannes..."

"I'm sure he'll be down soon. He's never a late sleeper."

"But, Grandmother . . ." Malcolm sighed. "As I said, I know that you've felt that the Tyree estate was a bit empty, that our family here is . . . dispersed. But you know that we're all really here for you. Whenever you need us."

"So you will help with the greenhouse. Very good," Siofre said with a nod.

"Aye, of course I will, but I'm talking about something different," Malcolm said.

"Well then, laddie, spit it out, dinna dance about it so!"

"I'm *not*, that is, I am trying to. Why on earth did you join Johannes to the clan?"

Siofre finished the last bite of her scone and looked at him. "Ah, he mentioned that, did he?" She licked a dribble of butter from her finger, then used her napkin. She picked up her teacup and took a sip.

"Aye, after I asked him about it," Malcolm replied. "I'm trying to understand it, Grandmother. But as much as I like Johannes...and I do...I don't understand why you joined a near-stranger to the clan."

"Tisn't for you to understand or to judge, Malcolm," Siofre said firmly. "But aside from whatever reason went into my inviting him to join the Tyrees, you must be able to think of some good reasons, yourself. You say you're his friend. He is no stranger to you, laddie. Why would *you* invite him?"

"I wouldn't," Malcolm began. He sighed and reached for his coffee cup. "All right, *if* I were to invite him to join the clan . . . I suppose he's quite magically talented. His talents are in areas that might help the Tyrees. If he marries one, he could pass that on to his children, I suppose."

"An' for him, though? D'you think we only bring in wizards or witches for the benefit of the clan?"

"Nay. But usually it's because they're marrying a Tyree. It's for the couple. But for Johannes . . . I suppose . . . he did say that he had a place now, a sense of belonging. He lost his family. He's felt quite rootless, I think, especially after he decided not to return to Germany right away and decided instead to see what kind of life he could have here. I suppose that if I were to invite him, it might be to give him a sense of family here. And he is a decent man."

"Aye, and that's faint praise you give the man, laddie," Siofre admonished.

Malcolm shrugged. "You might know him in ways I don't, Grandmother. Talk about different sorts of things together. He is a fine wizard, but I don't think it's fair of you to . . . to let him think he has more of a home here than he does. Once his work here's done, he still has the rest of his life to live, you know. It's fine for now that he has a sense of belonging, but don't let it become a crutch for him that keeps him from getting on with his life."

"Nay, never...though you are wrong about one thing. If ever he needs a home, the man has one here. He is of the Clan Tyree now, and he is my kin. 'Twas my blood and magic that brought him into the clan, and as long as I breathe, he is welcome here, and not as a mere guest. But you are right that Johannes mustn't neglect his own life, however he may choose for it to proceed. So encourage him to visit you in Hogsmeade and to do all the things he may have done before he came here to live with us. He must remember all the options in life, the many opportunities he may have."

"It seemed to me last night as if you'd hired a general estate manager in Honnie, not just a gardener and Herbologist. That's never anything I'd have thought him well-suited to, but it sounds as though he does have some good ideas to contribute."

"Aye, he does, and he has been doing more than planning gardens and planting vegetables and flowers. He's going to manage the coppice again, and that's not been done in twenty years, at least, he's bringing all the orchards back into good shape...some have been neglected for decades, but he's hopeful for them...and he even has plans for the bogs eventually, everything from medicinal plants to Droobleberries. He has helped with a number of projects that are not even tangentially related to the gardens, and always to our benefit. His work...and his value, both to me and to the estate...goes far beyond the four corners of his contract."

"If he stays on here, if he's here more than the matter of months you'd originally planned," Malcolm said, "you might want to have him in his own house somewhere on the grounds. There are a few other than the lodge...and then there are those wee cottages near the northern edge of the estate by the sea...he might like to have a real place of his own, or at least, if it's not *his*, at least, it's a house he's not sharing with others."

"Those wee cottages by the sea, laddie, they've not been tended since you were in school, I think, and not a soul has lived there in even longer. If there's a one of them with a roof left, I'd be surprised. Nay . . . and as for any of the other houses . . . we shall see."

Malcolm shrugged. "As you wish. I'm sure that when this living arrangement becomes cramped for him, he'll find some way of . . . accommodating it or changing his situation."

"The magister is aye welcome to have guests and to make whatever arrangements he deems appropriate for them...in consultation with Lydia and Multry, of course...and he knows this."

"Speaking of arrangements, Lydia said that Trudie and I are to have the Capercaillie Suite this weekend."

"Aye...unless you'd prefer to share your usual bedroom, but I thought that a wee bit small, and you might prefer the suite."

Malcolm quirked a grin. "So, no separate bedrooms this time."

"It seemed a pointless waste of a bed unless your witch wanted them for the sake of discretion. Have you consulted her?"

"Nay...but I will ask her, and in time for Lydia to change arrangements if for some peculiar reason Trudie wants separate bedrooms."

"I believe she plans to put Lachina in your room, an you've no objections to that."

Malcolm shook his head. "She already told me. I don't keep much here, anyway, and the elves will move all my personal things, my robe and whatever, to the suite. It's fine for her to use that room...after all, I have a *very* good reason to want the suite, instead!" He grinned.

"If ye both like it, then 'tis yours whenever you and Gertrude visit. Just tell Lydia. And if you don't mind giving up your boyhood room, you could always stay in the Capercaillie suite, e'en when Gertrude canna be here with you."

"That sounds fine. In fact, if I stay again tonight, I may just move over there right away. The plumbing's bound to be better on that side of the house."

"Brian will be working on the plumbing next week, but I dinna know an he'll be done before everyone descends on the estate. What problem did you have? Skretchin?"

"Nay, no ghoulish sounds this time. Just the pressure wasn't good and it seemed that the hot water got cold again before it reached me."

Siofre shook her head and frowned. "That should not be."

"I can see if there's anything I can do for it before I leave, if you want."

"Nay, that's fine. Honnie's not complained at all about the water in his suite, and although Lachina will be arriving in a couple days, she can use a different bathroom if that one isn't working yet. We'll cope until Brian is here."

"And Lydia?"

"She's fine. She has developed her own solution," Siofre said discretely.

"She uses a bathroom on the other side of the house when she wants a hot bath?" Malcolm asked with a grin.

"Aye." Siofre returned his grin.

"Not Honnie's?" Malcolm asked, eyebrows raised.

"Heavens, no! Where *do* you get your ideas, laddie?"

"I don't know...it just popped into my head and out of my mouth," Malcolm said. "She does seem very fond of Honnie."

"Aye, she is. He is good to her."

"I hope she doesn't become silly about him, though," Malcolm said. "Not at her age. I'm sure that Honnie would be kind about it, but it could be embarrassing for her."

Siofre raised her eyebrow. "I am older than Lydia, remember, so do not bring up her age. And she has a warm and open nature, which I am sure that Johannes appreciates. She is unlikely to embarrass herself in any way. They have become friends."

"Lydia does know how to loosen up and have a good time," Malcolm said appreciatively. "I think living with her is loosening you up, too, Grandmother. You seem more enthusiastic about the ceilidh this year than last...all these guests, a four-day party! You're becoming positively sociable."

Siofre laughed and shook her head. "Ah, well, this is an easier year for me than last, and I thought that with Murdoch's birthday on Friday, we could have a party for him on Saturday, and it seemed sensible to combine the bonfire night with his party and give the family a few days of celebration."

"You were missing Herbert last year," Malcolm said.

"I still miss him," Siofre said softly. "And Mother. Especially . . ."

"That's right, she and Murdoch shared a birthday. I remember when Murdoch was little, how he loved sharing a birthday with Grammy Bridget."

"Aye, I remember," Siofre said with a smile. "Anyway, most of the planning, I've left to Lydia and the house-elves. The case with Butterworth and his winged horses does not come at an opportune time, but I can give him a good defence, so it's a worthy use of my time."

"Don't you know someone else who can do it? Point them in the right direction and let them have at it?" Malcolm asked. "Then you could come out with us today, too...at least come on our picnic for lunch."

Siofre shook her head. "Nay, I canna. There's another factor, one I plan to take advantage of. The neighbour who reported the Butterworths' horses, it was Drusus."

"Drusus? You mean Drusus Prince, Charles's son?" He asked. When Siofre nodded, he said, "He's one miserable son-of-a-Crup. Does Lydia know?"

"Aye, I told her last night. She said not to treat him any differently than I would anyone else."

"Poor Lydia. It's hard to believe such a sweet lady came from such a nasty pureblood family."

"Lydia?" Johannes's voice came from the doorway. "Is she all right?"

Siofre smiled up at him. "Oh, aye, she is fine, Honnie. Dinna worry. 'Twas one of her relatives we were speaking of."

"Ah, good. Lydia *is* a sweet witch, as you say, Malcolm," Johannes said, picking up a plate and helping himself to rolls, thinly sliced bacon, and cheese. Siofre was already pouring his coffee for him when he pulled out a chair and took a seat at her right, across from Malcolm. "She seems to have little contact with her relatives."

"She doesn't," Malcolm said, pushing the cream pitcher toward him. "I actually think they're one reason that Bert and Sally were gone for so long, why they left in the first place. Louisa picked up her husband's family's airs."

"Ach, laddie, it's not that simple, but you are right, Sally and Louisa's relationship was strained when Sally and Bertrand left. And this hearing won't help the Tyrees and Princes become any closer."

"Hearing?" Johannes asked, confused. He broke open a roll and folded some ham and cheese into it. "What hearing?"

"The Butterworth case," Malcolm replied. "The miserable neighbour is Drusus Prince."

"Ah, Eileen's father. That is unfortunate," Johannes said with a sad shake of his head. "Poor girl."

"Aye...not that she's much better, from what I saw of her at Hogwarts."

"She is not so bad," Johannes said. "She is sad . . . withdrawn."

"That's what you saw; what I saw was a haughty girl who wouldn't speak to anyone she considered lesser than her...including *Mudbloods*..."

Siofre reached over and rapped his knuckles lightly with her teaspoon in a gesture of reproof. "That word is forbidden in this house, an' you know it."

"I wasn't *calling* anyone that, Grandmother! I was demonstrating what Prince thought of so many of her classmates. You know that I'd never call anyone that."

"It was an unnecessary use of the word, Malcolm. The words we choose to use are important; they can shape our thoughts and the thoughts of others *and* how others perceive you, as well, laddie," Siofre admonished, though gently.

"I paired Eileen with a Muggleborn in her fourth and fifth years," Johannes said, avoiding the familial squabble. "They did not become friends, but I never saw any tension between them. They both did equally well. Eileen did not attempt to sabotage her classmate's work...and I *have* seen some students try to do that, for whatever reasons they may have."

"Hmph." Malcolm shrugged. "She still isn't a pleasant girl. And I don't think she knows anything about how to have fun. You should have seen the glower on her face whenever I tried to introduce a little levity into the classes. You'd think that someone'd told her once that a smile would crack her face, and she believed them."

"You'll need more than those sandwiches, Honnie," Siofre said, changing the subject. "I think Malcolm will be leading you on quite the ramble today. Have some porridge. It will stick with you."

Johannes looked dubious, but got up from the table and ladled a spoonful of porridge into a bowl.

"Grandmother Siofre would not look askance if you added sugar," Malcolm said with a laugh. "Would you Grandmother?"

"He may eat it in whatever fashion he prefers. Or have some of that curried rice and fish you had," Siofre said with a thinly disguised expression of disgust.

Malcolm laughed. "It was good. In fact, I'm going to have some more. You should try some," Malcolm said, standing and bringing his dish back over to the sideboard.

"Nay, I am glad Multry made it for you to enjoy, though."

Malcolm sat down and ate a forkful. "Mmm-mm! Here, have some. Just try it. Then you can dislike it all you want!" He held out his fork to her. "It's got some very nice haddock in it!" he wheedled.

As Johannes looked on, smiling, Siofre took the fork and brought it to her mouth, a dubious expression on her face. She sniffed. Then she tasted it. She chewed, swallowed, and handed Malcolm his fork back.

"Well?" Malcolm asked.

"I would not choose to eat it for breakfast, but it was not entirely disgusting," Siofre said.

"Maybe it's like coffee," Malcolm said with a grin, "best after ten in the morning!"

Johannes chuckled, evidently having heard Siofre's opinion of drinking coffee first thing on waking.

"I think we should bring some of these rolls and the cheese with us," Johannes said, "and a few bananas."

"Good idea, Honnie. It will help us to last until Lydia's picnic!"

"I am ready to leave as soon as you have finished your kedgeriee," Johannes said.

"So'm I," Malcolm said. He quickly finished the last bit of his breakfast. "Ready right now."

The two wizards stood, and Malcolm bent and kissed Siofre's cheek. "Have a good day, Grandmother! Save Butterworth's bacon!"

"Do not exhaust the magister, lad!"

"Nay, he'll be fine. We'll have a grand time, right, Magister?" Malcolm asked, turning to Johannes.

"Aye," Johannes agreed with a nod. "It is a beautiful day. I hope you do not spend the entire day indoors," he added to Siofre.

Siofre smiled up at him. "I will get out for a while after lunch, I am sure."

"Come have lunch with us, Siofre," Johannes said impulsively. "You must eat. A picnic after a hard morning's work, that would be a good reward for you. Please. Bitte. We would enjoy your company."

"I dinna know . . ."

"Please join us for lunch," Johannes repeated, taking Siofre's hand lightly in his. "You can return to your work as soon as you wish, but give us the pleasure of your company for a little while."

Siofre smiled and shook her head. "All right, Honnie. I will, unless I am in the midst of something. Come find me when you're ready for lunch. I'll probably be in my study or in the library."

"Very good." He bowed and released her hand. "I will see you later today, then."

As the two wizards left the morning room, Malcolm said, "How'd you do that, man? Is it the accent? The bow? All those Continental manners? I wanted her to join us, and she just ignored me." He shook his head. "And I thought / was the charmer around here...are you muscling in? Must be that accent. Aye, the accent."

Johannes's laughter echoed back into the morning room, and Siofre grinned.

Twenty-Four: The Prince Family Past Meets the Tyree Clan

Chapter 24 of 32

Siofre, Malcolm, Johannes, and Lydia picnic, and Lydia tells Johannes more about the Prince family.



Twenty-Four: The Prince Family Past Meets the Tyree Clan

Johannes waved his wand and cast a warming charm.

"Oh, thank you, Johannes," Lydia said in appreciation, pulling her fluffy pink shawl closer around her shoulders and draping her long bright blue cloak so it covered her legs more. "It is quite a cool breeze up here...but beautiful."

"We could walk," Johannes suggested. "It might warm us up a bit." He gestured over the ridge. "We could see if we can find Malcolm and Siofre and catch up with them. They should be easy enough to see." There were only a few scrubby trees and some bushes on that side of the hill...or mountain...and on the slope facing it, so it was not difficult to spot someone else clambering around on the hillside, and even to see boats approaching the coastline. It was easy to see why this hill fort had been built.

"Oh, we could, but Malcolm jumps around so, particularly when he's in his collie form," Lydia replied.

"We don't have to catch up with them, then." Johannes stood and held out his hand.

Lydia reached up and took it, pulling herself to her feet. "Thank you. All right. I'm sure you'd prefer to be walking with Siofre, though. You could have gone with them. I wouldn't have minded."

Johannes shrugged. "I believe that Malcolm was glad to have some time with his grandmother. And I enjoy your company. I would not have wished to leave you alone, either."

"Alone with a chocolate walnut cake?" Lydia asked with a laugh. "That wouldn't have been a trial, believe me!"

"It was delicious," Johannes agreed.

Lydia drew her wand and cast a charm over their picnic area. "Saving the rest from the birds or other animals," she explained, hooking her arm through his. "We might want a little more later."

"So, Malcolm was about to tell me the name of this mountain when he became distracted by the meat pies," Johannes said. "Do you know it?"

"Yes, it's an easy one: Ben Tyree. It's the highest mountain on the estate, over three thousand feet, and it has the oldest fortification. It also is one of the bordering points of the estate. If you look to the southeast, that land is part of a Muggle conservation project."

"What do the Muggles think of this land?" Johannes asked.

"I wouldn't know, although I gather it's of no interest to them and they barely remark its existence. There are very old charms and wards protecting the estate. Except, of course, for the Summer Walkers. They've been allowed access to parts of the property for a long time, and there's a spot to the northeast of here where they traditionally camp when they pass through."

"Summer Walkers?" Johannes asked.

"Highland Travellers. Like . . . Tinkers." When Johannes looked at her blankly and shook his head, Lydia said, "They're like Scottish gypsies. Muggles sometimes have problems with them, I understand. Wizarding folk, too, I suppose." Lydia shrugged. "But the Tyrees have always welcomed them. Anyway, this mountain is Ben Tyree, and that valley to the northwest there," she said, pointing, "is Glen Tyree."

"It was always called Ben Tyree?"

"I don't think so. I think it had some other name a long time ago, but I don't remember it. If you look at some of the oldest maps of the estate, it may be there. But it's been Ben Tyree for at least seven hundred years, I think."

"The fort is old?"

"Almost two thousand years, I think. They weren't Tyrees on this land then. But there may have been some ancestors to the clan among them. Tyrees kept the fort in good shape for a long time, though, this one and a couple others, since they were very good lookout points. When there were troubles with Muggles or the English. Thankfully, those times are a long time since, as Siofre might say."

"The way that Siofre speaks, though, the troubles with the English are not so long ago. She sometimes speaks as if they might come to the gates and try to take the estate."

Lydia laughed. "It has been more than two hundred years, but her great-grandfather fought off some pureblood English wizards who thought they'd take advantage of the union between Muggle Britain and Scotland to take some Scottish wizarding lands. The Tyrees had to fight hard to keep this land from being stolen from them, and appeal to the British Ministry for Magic brought them no relief. The Ministry wasn't interested in what was right...they probably would have been just as happy if the Highland Tyree lands were taken by English wizards. The Tyree children, including Siofre's grandfather, were hidden in the castle's tunnels and then evacuated to the island until the English finally were driven off. The Tyrees also lost relatives, both Muggle and wizarding, during the Muggle battles of seventeen forty-five and forty-six. Some of them were murdered outright by British soldiers, murdered in their homes and fields, not killed on a battlefield. Siofre was raised on those stories. And it wasn't that long ago, really, not in terms of generations."

"I see . . . Do you know the English families that tried to take the estate? Which ones?"

Lydia chuckled softly. "Oh, yes. Prince. Malfoy. Rosier. Those were the main ones."

"Prince? Your family?"

"Yes. But the Tyrees welcomed me warmly when Murdoch brought me home and married me. They were more than just gracious, you understand. It was more than simple good manners...though their manners would have had them treat me civilly, in any case. And perhaps some wouldn't recognise the warmth behind their words and actions...Siofre is positively effusive compared to her father, though her mother was more open with her feelings...but they were welcoming, and far more than my own family were at the time, though Bertrand did try."

"Siofre told me that you had been in London for a while, that you were studying music?"

"Yes, music and acting. I worked in . . . well, not to put too fine a point on it, I worked playing piano wherever I could get paid to. So I played piano in a small theatre, and I played in a pub, and sometimes I played in what one might politely term a house of pleasure."

"In a, I do not know the English, in einem Bordel?"

"A brothel, yes." She looked up at him, a very slight smile on her face. "You are shocked?"

"Ah, surprised."

"That was the only entertainment I provided, you understand, Johannes. I played piano in the bar there. And I only did that a short time, when I . . . well, I needed the money. My brother sent me some a few weeks after I began working there. I believe someone told my family he'd seen me, or that I was seen there . . . anyway, I quit that job. It wasn't so bad, I suppose, although I did get a little unwanted attention occasionally. I was rather a pretty girl then."

"You still are pretty," Johannes said.

Lydia laughed. "No, not really. A bit too plump, and a bit too old, to still be pretty."

"You are pretty still. And your age, it is fine. For the figure, you are . . . comfortable, yes? Not fat. And your face, that is lovely, with a beautiful smile."

"You know, Johannes, you *are* good for a witch" Lydia said, squeezing his arm. "But back then, I was also young, and youth has its own attractions..."

"As does age, with some. With some, age only can increase them."

"That is true. But I was young, and I was pretty, and I had many, many dreams. I would work, and I would scrimp and save, and I would take classes at the Academy of Magical Musical and Dramatic Arts...that was before they separated and WADA stayed in London whilst MAMA moved to Cardiff..."

"WADA and MAMA?"

"Wizards Academy of Dramatic Arts and Magical Academy of Musical Arts. I think it's a pity they divided, but they both survived. Anyway, I took classes when I could, and I even eventually had a few private students in piano . . . I had several wonderful, exciting years, then I made a very foolish mistake, the mistake of a very naive young witch who thinks she's very worldly. I fell in love."

"Falling in love can be a very good thing."

"It can be, yes, but I fell in love with an older man who . . . he said the right things, you know. All the sweet words and phrases a girl wishes to hear from her lover. But he didn't love me, and he didn't care that I loved him, except that there were advantages to him."

"I am sorry."

"Well, I was so enamoured of this wizard, I didn't care for anything else. I thought that my entire life revolved around him and always would. That he barely noticed me in his orbit except when he wanted something, I didn't see. I was glad for what time he would spare me . . . I . . . I truly believed that it was only a matter of time before we would marry...or if not marry, then live together as husband and wife. He had already set me up in nicer rooms than the one I'd had over a pub. I thought we were quite bohemian, the two of us together . . . but we weren't really together. And I became pregnant. When I told him, I was so happy. He was shocked, but then feigned happiness. He left my rooms to purchase champagne, and he never returned. He vanished from London."

"I was alone. I didn't know what to do. I wrote my brother and told him that I had to see him. Bertrand came down to London. I told him . . . he was upset, but he wished to help me. He spoke to my parents, but they wanted nothing to do with me. He sent me a little money, but truly, it was so little, it almost made me more desperate. But his own wife was pregnant, and although we were pureblood, we never had the same standing as the Malfoys or Blacks, and Father held a tight fist around the family purse, such as it was. I knew that Bertrand had sent all that he could afford, and likely against my parents' wishes, as well."

"It is hard to imagine what you must have been enduring," Johannes said.

"That is when Murdoch came to me and proposed marriage. At first, although I was desperate, I refused him. But he had always liked me, he said, and he claimed that he believed that no other witch could ever make him a happier husband. So I married him and I fell in love with him. I believe that I did make him happy. I certainly was, even if my life was not what I had dreamed of when I was a girl. I had so wanted to be a performer, an artist . . ."

"You still are an artist," Johannes said. "Your touch is everywhere in the house. Siofre comments on it. And your music is beautiful, whether you play what you have written or something else."

"Thank you. It does bring me some happiness and satisfaction," Lydia said. "Anyway, after we married, only a few weeks, actually, I lost the child."

"I am very sorry."

"I grieved and I felt guilty. But Murdoch was very good to me, and Bridget was so kind. She became like my own mother then, but better, even if that sounds a wicked thing to say."

"No. Your own mother did not treat you as a mother should a daughter."

"But despite the circumstances under which I entered their household, and the fact that my great-grandfather would have gladly killed any Tyree and taken their lands, Bridget and Séaghán welcomed me warmly as their son's bride, and they both remained as good to me as ever, and they were glad to see their son happy with me."

"I am glad. The man, the wizard who left you, did you ever see him again?"

Lydia nodded. "He returned to London several years later with a French wife in tow. A very young, very wealthy French wife, an orphan, whose guardian was pleased to have her marry a handsome Englishman. They did have a family, but from what I learned from friends, he was not a good husband to her. I have seen him at times over the years, though I have never spoken to him. He behaved as if I were a stranger to him, and so he has remained to me. He has become quite fat, and his face has fallen apart, all blotchy red and sagging as if made of slowly melting wax. Still dresses like a popinjay, though."

"It is indiscreet of me to ask, but now I am curious about his identity."

Lydia smiled crookedly. "Well, I did whet your curiosity, so I suppose it wouldn't be fair to leave a Ravenclaw in that state of ignorance. His name is Eustacio Lockhart."

"My first years teaching, I taught a Meretricio Lockhart, a tall, blond wizard."

"That is his grandson."

"Hm." Johannes caught sight of Siofre and Malcolm on a hillside opposite them, Malcolm in his smooth collie form, sable, black, and white, racing back and forth. "What is it that they are doing?"

"Playing fetch, I believe," Lydia said.

"Malcolm plays fetch?" Johannes asked, looking amused.

Lydia laughed.

"I do not see a stick or a ball," Johannes said, watching puzzled as Malcolm raced off after nothing.

"Siofre Disillusions it."

"She Disillusions it? Why?"

"Seems more sporting, I suppose. A challenge for Malcolm. And it amuses Siofre," Lydia said with a laugh.

"I cannot imagine being an Animagus," Johannes said as they ambled down the hill, looking for a way to join the others on the hillside opposite. "It must be an unsettling experience the first time, or for the first dozen times."

"Malcolm was very keen on it," Lydia said. "He hoped he'd be something he termed 'exciting,' but I don't think he was disappointed when he found his form. He certainly enjoys it!"

"I remember. He was working with Minerva on it during that year he taught Defence...my final year at Hogwarts. He kept mentioning things like hippogriffs and dragons," Johannes said with a chuckle. "I do not believe that Minerva had much hope that he would achieve it, but he did."

"I think we all should have guessed he'd be a dog of some sort...it suits him."

"It is funny that the house-elves call him like an Animagus all of the time," Johannes remarked as he helped Lydia down a short but steep drop.

"You mean, Little Collie? They have always called him that, since he was a child. I think it is a play on his name, Malcolm, Colm, Collie. His grandfather was Collum." Lydia shrugged and put her arm through Johannes's again. "Perhaps he took his form from his nickname, at least partly."

Johannes laughed. "That is funny. Maybe they could see the collie in him."

Lydia shook her head. "I don't know. House-elves are funny creatures. You never know what they're capable of. I think they hide a lot . . . but they love us. Ours do, anyway."

"We never had house-elves," Johannes said. "I did not know any until I taught at Hogwarts."

"My Uncle Severus had one, but she was old when I was a girl. She never mated, and when she died, that was the last of the Prince house-elves. Drusus hoped that when he married Mabelle, they'd get one of the Black house-elves, but I don't think they ever did. I know he's hoping that Eileen will marry Giles Black, bring in some of the Black family fortune...or at least some of the Black social standing, even though Giles isn't the most prominent among them...but Philomena told me that there are rumours going around that Eileen's rejected Giles. There's even talk that she's seeing a Muggleborn, or a Muggle-lover, or something. Someone her father would find unsuitable, anyway."

"Good for her. I hope that she finds some happiness."

"If Drusus keeps out of her life, she might," Lydia said. "If she's as lucky as I was, she will lead such an unsuitable life, her Prince family won't want to have anything to do with her. Then maybe she'll be as happy as I have been, find a new family, have wonderful children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren . . ."

"It doesn't seem as though Eileen has quite your spirit, though, your joie de vivre. I do not know if she could defy her father's wishes and create her own life. But she might be able to find some happiness. We will both hope for that for her."

"I wish I knew her . . . other than a few times from a distance in Diagon Alley, I haven't seen her since she was, well, since shortly after she was born. I think that was the last time I saw Drusus, too, at least to speak to. It's as though all the worst Prince traits were distilled in him. A pity, too, since Louisa, his mother, she used to be nice enough. Not as likeable as Sally, but . . . well, it isn't fair to compare sisters, I think. I *am* looking forward to seeing Sally and Bertrand next week, though. I'm glad there are so many things going on right now, with preparing for the party, and now Malcolm's impromptu visit, or I'd just be a bundle of nerves, just waiting for them to arrive!"

"I look forward to meeting them both. When is the last time you saw them?" Johannes asked.

"About seven years ago. After Murdoch died. I just needed to see our boy, you know? So a couple months after the funeral, I went out to New Zealand and visited them both for a few weeks. They said then that they thought they'd be back within the next year or so . . . but they were so involved in things there. They were happy. But oh, I am very glad they're returning now!"

"Siofre is, too, I believe."

Lydia nodded. "I know. I'll be glad to have you meet more of the family, as well. Phoebe will be arriving on Monday, and Siofre has invited Lachina to come stay all week...she and Phoebe are quite close friends."

"Lachina . . . that is another cousin of Siofre's, yes?"

"Yes. One of her younger cousins...a rather distant cousin, but a Tyree. She's about Minerva's age, a couple years older, I think. She's a jeweller in Aberdeen. She does metal and gem charming, as well as jewellery design...Phoebe is also a metal charmer. But Lachina is a very talented witch, and Siofre is quite fond of her."

"I look forward to meeting them, then...and Connor and Elisabeth and their son. The only visit they have made recently, I was not here."

"Liam loves the estate. I know he would enjoy it if you would show him some of the gardens."

"He is five?"

"Six."

"I will show him the gardens he might most enjoy, and I will bring him to the quads' garden and ask him if he has any ideas for it. He might have an idea of things he would enjoy, too."

"That is kind of you."

"Not at all. I like children." Johannes gestured toward Siofre and Malcolm. "I believe Malcolm and Siofre are done with their games now." Malcolm had returned to his ordinary form, and the two were climbing over some large rocks, though it looked as though it would have been easier to go around them. Malcolm reached up a hand to help Siofre down. She looked very small and fragile to Johannes, though he knew she was strong and sturdy despite her height. "I hope that Malcolm does not allow Siofre

to fall."

"No, I'm sure he won't. And Siofre's quite agile. She scrambles about these hills in almost all weather. I do worry about her a bit more now that old Jag isn't around to go with her. I think they're coming over to meet us...why don't we find a nice place to sit and wait for them?"

Johannes removed his loden cloak, casting a charm to keep it dry, and spread it on the somewhat damp ground. He cast a warming charm as Lydia took a seat, folding her legs under her. Johannes, though, stood, watching the other two approaching, but his eyes focussed on Siofre. Lydia was right: Siofre was agile, light and lithe. To Johannes, it seemed that Siofre's feet barely touched the ground, and to him, she was the most beautiful thing within view. The most beautiful thing he had ever seen. She had removed her short peaked cap and stuffed it in the pocket of her tweedy brown and green cloak, and her hair seemed to float about her head with the wind as she sped over the rocks and through the bracken. Her tartan skirts with their many pleats were shortened to mid-calf to ease her clambering about on the hills. Siofre was beautiful, intelligent, talented, and breathtakingly alive, and at that moment, Johannes wanted to cross the green grass and grey rock between them and catch her in his arms and hold her.

"You look happy, Johannes," Lydia said, looking up at him.

Pulled from his thoughts, Johannes looked down. He blinked and nodded, then sat beside her, one foot tucked under him, resting one arm on his other raised bent knee, but still watching Siofre.

"Yes. I am. I am happy."

"And in love?" Lydia asked.

"Perilously so, but happily, and I would not change it. She has me, Lydia," Johannes said softly. "Forever. Whether she knows it or ever acknowledges it. It does not matter. I will love her and honour her and serve her with all my being for as long as we both walk this earth."

"You are a romantic, Johannes."

Johannes turned his head and looked at her, smiling slightly. "If I were not before, love for Siofre has made me one."

Chapter Twenty-Five: A Knucker's Tale

Chapter 25 of 32

Malcolm drags Johannes out for an evening of fun.



Chapter Twenty-Five: A Knucker's Tale

"Sure you're not up for a pint?" Malcolm asked. "Just a quick one at the Hog's Head."

Johannes shook his head. "It has been a long day. I wish to retire early, and I must see to putting away the supplies Multy sent with me first," he said, holding up a large covered basket.

"Eh! Everything has a first-rate freshness charm on it, I'm sure," Malcolm said. "It'll all keep just fine. Bring it along."

"I do not think so. After last night..."

"Pay no attention to what I said last night about the clan joining. Except for the last bit. I'm sure Grandmother Siofre has good reason for what she does, and you're a fine addition to the clan."

"That was not what I meant. The brandy was powerful. It was enough to drink for a week, I am thinking."

"Pish! That was last night, man! You're becoming an old woman, living up there in the hills like that! Good that I brought you into town," Malcolm said, grabbing his friend's arm and pulling him along with him. "We'll get a pint and a basket of chips...if they've changed the fat in the fryer in the last couple days, they don't do bad chips...and we'll relax after the long day. You'll sleep better for it."

Johannes shook his head, but he let go of his basket and waved his wand, Levitating it along beside them. "All right, but I would prefer the Broomsticks. I do not worry that they have not changed the cooking oil."

"Nothing wrong with that place, but the Hog's Head it is tonight." Malcolm slapped him on the shoulder. "You need some livenin' up, and the Hog's Head on a Saturday is a much more interesting place for that."

"You told me once, you do not bring Gertrude there," Johannes began to protest.

"Aye, and I do not. It's a wee bit rough in there sometimes. She's a lady...not that she couldn't handle herself, of course, but no need to expose her to it."

"I am sure she has been there before," Johannes said with a grin.

"But I've not brought her, and I will not. Fine for a lads' night out, though, eh?" Malcolm asked rhetorically as he steered them into a side street. "Besides, it's not so far from Kilderkin Lane, just a short stumble home after last call."

"A longer 'stumble' for me to Bog End, though," Johannes pointed out.

"Well, if it's more than a pint we're having tonight, just stumble on home with me, then!" He pointed to the basket. "Multry gave you enough for us both for breakfast, more than enough."

"Not more than a pint for me," Johannes said. "I have work I wish to do tomorrow. I need a clear head."

"Even when you're not at the estate, you're working! Time to relax, Honnie! Grandmother Siofre was right."

"Siofre was right? About what?" Johannes asked.

"That you need to spend time . . . with me. Out. Having fun with a kinsman," Malcolm said, hopping over a muddy puddle a few feet from the Hog's Head's door. "And fun we'll have!"

The pub was noisy and smoky, already crowded with patrons of all descriptions, including a few hulking wizards whose faces were obscured by their hoods, possibly with deep shadow charms on them for good measure. Johannes would not have wanted to run into any of them on a dark night, unawares. There were several witches there, as well, and Johannes remembered what Malcolm had said about not bringing Gertrude there. He could easily see why.

As they made their way through the pub, Malcolm stopping every few feet to greet someone he knew, Johannes spied Hagrid sitting over in a dark corner with a few other wizards.

Johannes tugged Malcolm's elbow. "Hagrid is here," he said, leaning forward to catch his ear. "Want to join him?"

Malcolm nodded, slapped someone on the back in parting, and led Johannes across to where Hagrid was playing a dice game with two of the men, one a soft-looking blond wizard in bright blue with a short, wispy beard, and the other a somewhat squat heavy-set wizard with dark skin and a bushy beard and head of hair to rival Hagrid's own. The third, a long string of a man wrapped in a dirty khaki travel cloak, his jaw shadowed with stubble only marginally shorter than the hair on his scalp, was leaning against the wall and smoking a long pipe that contained something other than tobacco...from the smell of it, likely a combination of potent herbs rather than a resinous potion, Johannes thought. Not quite as noxious as some potions he'd encountered, but not particularly healthy nor conducive to maintaining a clear head. Thick curlicues of white smoke wafted from the stranger's pipe, winding their lazy way around the heavy tankards of ale, then drifting downward more thinly in seeming caress of the yellowing bone dice scattered on the scarred and stained oak table.

As he took his seat and set his basket down beside his chair, Johannes discreetly drew his wand from his cloak pocket. As Malcolm was greeting Hagrid, who stood and gave him an enthusiastic thumping, Johannes smiled and cast a fresh air charm under the table. It wouldn't save the rest of the pub from inhaling the fumes from the wizard's smouldering pipe, but it would keep the air clear on their side of the table, at least.

"'Ere, sit 'ere nex' t' me," Hagrid said, pulling Malcolm around and sitting him down in the chair beside his broad bench. "This 'ere's me good friend, Malcolm McGonagall." Hagrid gave Malcolm another friendly pat on the shoulder. "An' this gentleman here is me friend Perfesser Birnbaum," Hagrid continued, grinning at Johannes across the smoky table.

Johannes nodded and smiled at the others.

"Perfesser, Malcolm, this 'ere is Baldy," Hagrid said, gesturing at the dark, hirsute wizard to his left, "though he ain't bald, o' course. And that's Patch Patterson." Patch, the soft blond wizard, nodded in greeting and lifted his ale to them. "An' over here is, um, me new friend!" Hagrid indicated the lean, short-haired wizard in the dark khaki cloak.

The khaki-clad wizard held onto his pipe and opened his mouth to reveal crooked, brown-stained teeth, and said, "E'enin'." His mouth immediately closed around the pipestem again.

"Didn't catch your name," Malcolm said, holding out his hand to the man, who didn't move except to fully remove his pipe from his mouth this time.

"Ye can call me 'Cam.'" Cam's dark eyes shifted, taking in Johannes's appearance and then scanning the others at the table before returning to meet Malcolm's gaze. He quite deliberately put his pipe back in his mouth without offering his hand.

Malcolm slapped the table. "All right, what're we drinking, lads? Next round's on me."

"I'll have another o' these," Hagrid said, draining his tall mug. "Jes' an ale fer me, thanks!"

"Ta, mate! Old Ogden's as a chaser, I think," Patch said, taking advantage of Malcolm's generosity with a bright grin.

"Whiffler sweet ale is my drink," Baldy said, following Hagrid's suit and draining his tankard, then wiping foam from his beard with the back of his hairy hand.

"And you?" Malcolm asked Cam.

"A single malt. Longrow." The man barely seemed to move his lips.

"Aye, then, a house ale, an Ogden's Old Firewhisky, a Whiffler sweet ale, a Longrow, and for you, Honnie?" Malcolm asked, turning to Johannes.

"Just a lager for me, thank you," Johannes said.

"Right, I'll be just a wee," Malcolm said, but as he began to stand, Aberforth came over to the table.

"Eh, Malcolm. Out again? Lady friend mus' be missin' yeh."

"I hope she is, Aberforth, but alas, your brother is keeping her busy at the castle, and she couldn't get away this weekend."

"Well, what'll it be, then?"

Malcolm repeated everyone's order, adding an ale for himself. "Plus a big plate of chips, your biggest."

"Ta, Malcolm!" Hagrid said.

"Good thing you came along when you did," Baldy said to Malcolm with a broad grin, "or Hagrid would be goin' home 'bout now, pockets empty."

Malcolm gestured at the dice. "Not going your way tonight, Hagrid?"

Hagrid shook his head sadly. "Baldy won the last o' me Knuts, wi' naught lef' even fer another beer. But there'll be other nights!"

Patch guffawed. "And if you hadn't paid up, he might've gone after your *other* nuts, too!" he joked.

The others laughed, Cam giving only a crooked smile.

"How's business? Any interestin' critters lately?" Hagrid asked, adding to his friends, "Malcolm is a curse-breaker and pest-control wizard. Yeh got yerself a bad Boggart, a biting pocketbook, or a nest o' Glumbumbles, he's yer man!" He reached for his fresh tankard of ale.

"Oh, a few," Malcolm replied. "'Tis mostly curses these days, though. A lot of unpleasant little ones, nothing very interesting, just annoying. I did deal with a nasty Knucker

recently, though; out in the Romney Marshes, he was."

"A Knucker!" Hagrid exclaimed.

"Aye, you would have liked him, I'm sure," Malcolm said with a smile, knowing of Hagrid's fondness for dragons and all their kin. "But he was more than a nuisance, and he had developed quite an appetite for the local farm animals. The Muggles were becoming alarmed about it."

"Doesn't the Ministry take care of beasts like that?" Patch asked.

Malcolm nodded, munching a long golden chip, then washing it down with a longer swallow of ale. "They do. And they'd sent out Obliviators three times in as many weeks when local Muggles caught sight of the slithery fellow. Friend of mine in the Ministry, Newt Scamander, dropped by a couple weeks ago and asked me if I could take care of it for them. He's in the Department for the Control of Magical Creatures, but they're spread a bit thin and are better with other sorts of beasts. He did come along with me, though." He smirked. "I think he just wanted to confirm I took care of the creature before they paid me."

"Yeh di'n have t' kill 'im, did yeh?" Hagrid asked, wide-eyed.

"That's what the Ministry wanted, but nay, I did not. Where's the fun or sport in that, after all?" Malcolm asked rhetorically. "I did try persuading him that he'd be better off feeding on something other than Muggle livestock, but as you know, Knuckers aren't any more reasonable than dragons...but they're not as clever, either."

"So what did you do?"

"Ah, well, after having to Apparate and Disapparate several times just to try to talk to him...even out of water, a Knucker is fast, so beware if you meet one!...I finally resorted to Plan B."

Cam snorted and relit his pipe.

"What was your Plan B?" Johannes asked.

"Well, you all know already that if there's one thing that a Knucker likes better than a horse, a cow, a pig, or even a sheep, it's a well-baked shepherd's pie, with a bottom crust generous with lard, plenty of butter in the mash, and mushrooms in the gravy!"

"Mushrooms? Hafta remember that," Hagrid said, licking his fingers, then taking more chips. Johannes Levitated a handful of chips over to himself from the other end of the platter.

"Shepherd's pie? You're joking," Patch said with a laugh.

"Not at all," Malcolm replied with a grin. "They have quite a legendary taste for meat pies. I find shepherd's pie is a particular favourite, though!"

"Yer right, there," Hagrid agreed. "They got a real weakness fer meat pies. There was a lad once, murdered a poor Knucker in 'is 'ole with a nasty, poisoned meat pie." He sniffled a bit, thinking of the poor Knucker.

"Pah," spat Cam. "An' ne'er did yeh feeda meat pie t' Knucker, I'll warrant. Ne'er been w'in a mile o' one. Nor a dragon, neither." He bit down on his pipe and gave a brown-stained grin.

"He has ridden dragons," Johannes said, "and faced even worse creatures...and men...and dealt with them all."

"You've ridden a dragon?" Patch asked, sceptical but ready for a good story if there was one in the offing.

"Aye, more than once. The first was a giantess of the Mountains of the Moon, and I rode her from Ethiopia to Egypt. She was a fine beast, though not the friendliest of reptiles."

"Dragons in Africa?" Baldy asked.

"Aye, there are a few species on that continent...rarely seen by Western wizards, though. I once encountered a drove of beautiful Dahomey Rainbow Dragons in the Altacora mountains. Their scales are like many-coloured jewels, and their silvery wings are as light as gossamer and as tough as Graphorn hide. They are a wonder to watch as they glide through the air, glittering against the deep blue sky. The Dahomey dragons are wee things, never growing more than ten or twelve feet long, even the females, but the one who flew me to the Crystal Mountain, she was kin to the SIRRUSH, with great clawed paws in front and massive talons aft. That dragoness was thirty feet from tip to tip, with a wingspan twice that, a true empress of dragons. It was a pretty thing to hold tight and not be blown from her back like a dry autumn leaf from an old oak, I'll tell you!"

"Pish! Yeh an' yer songs an' yer stories! I heard 'em afore," Cam said with a sneer. "Yeh come in here crawin' awa', tellin' yer stories or singin' yer songs, an' yeh get a drink bought fer yer thirst efter the tellin', gullible gowks scrabblin' t' buy yer ale fer yeh. Yeh and yer fables! All tales fer bairns an' wee childer, ne'er a true word to 'em. Only drink-addled fools trow such crack."

Malcolm just laughed, but despite understanding only three-quarters of what the Scottish wizard said, Johannes felt bound to reply and to stand up for his friend. Hagrid, even more put out by the wizard's tone, leapt to Malcolm's defence first, however.

"I saw Malcolm...that's *Perfesser* Malcolm t' you...ridin' Isolde, a lively Welsh Green, not yet two years ago now," Hagrid said emphatically. "An' he fought a duel wi' Perfesser Dumbledore an' come out wi' nary a scratch on his own self. Practically blew up the Headmaster, 'e did! Albus Dumbledore...great wizard, Dumbledore...*he* knows another great wizard when 'e sees one! So yeh better mind yer manners!"

Cam snickered, and Malcolm shook his head.

"My friend does exaggerate," Malcolm said. "The Headmaster beat me soundly and taught me more than one lesson that day, but Hagrid's right that Isolde was a right lively lassie."

"Eh, yeh humped a Welsh whore an' let yer big freen' watch ye, then?" Cam asked, a smirk on his face.

Malcolm put a hand on Hagrid's arm, restraining him. "I'll put those words down to the Longrow," he said softly, "but I do believe it's your last drink at this table tonight."

"Eh? What's this? What's this!" Cam said, taking his pipe from his mouth and slowly rising from his seat, dropping his wand from his sleeve. "Yeh tryin' t' kick me out o' pub? Eh? Eh? 'Tain't yer pub!"

Two dark-clad wizards at a nearby table pushed their chairs back and stood, as well.

"Not the pub, buckie," Malcolm said with a slight shake of his head, "merely our corner of it."

"*Merely our corner of it*," Cam mocked. "Yeh lay claim to this stool o' mine, too, then? This *bera* corner here! An' ma brithers', too, an yeh will it or yeh won't!" The other two men stepped up to the table. One of them flipped back his cloak revealing tartan robes as he drew his wand, and the other wizard followed suit.

Beneath the table, Johannes drew his wand. He'd not be much help in any fight, but he'd not sit idly by, either.

Malcolm held up both hands, open in a calming gesture. "I've no feud with you, friends, and I don't want to start one."

"Yeh think yer a tough man," Cam continued, "but yeh ain't no such thing. Yer a teuchter, an' yer only talent is fer tall tales an' naught else."

Hagrid, face red and dark eyes flashing, made a move to stand, but Malcolm's grip tightened, and Hagrid just bared his teeth.

"Just walk away, Cam," Malcolm advised.

"Pah! Walk away! Yeh'd like that! Let yer great oaf fren' here keep lappin' up yer tales, like he laps up crumbs at that old fool's table up there a' Hogwarts. Bet yeh did get a beatin' from th' old man...an' did yeh get a humpin' from him, too?"

With a roar, Hagrid stood and threw the table up on end, tossing it at Cam and crushing him against the wall. Patch quickly slid off his seat and crawled behind Johannes's chair, but could get no farther without being in danger of being hit by one of the hexes now being cast by Cam's two brothers.

Malcolm cast a wandless *Protego*, deflecting a hex with his right hand as he drew his own wand with his left. Baldy drew his own wand and cast a jinx at the taller of the two brothers, fusing the wizard's eyelids together; before the stocky wizard could cast another spell, however, the shortest brother hit him with a hex that knocked him to the floor, then Cam cast a *Finite*, restoring his taller brother's sight.

Johannes scarcely had time to cast one *Protego* before he had to cast another and another. His own experience with any kind of duelling was slight, and he could barely even tell what was happening. He didn't know how Malcolm could react as quickly as he was, casting quickly and efficiently, light jinxes raising boils and bruises on the two brothers, who were undeterred by the unpleasant spells and who continued to cast hexes at Malcolm and his friends.

Hagrid, in the meantime, had raised his tankard and brought it down on Cam's skull before punching him in the jaw with a hard left. The shortest Cam brother, as Johannes now thought of them, began to ignore Malcolm and to cast hexes at Hagrid, who yelped as the spells hit him but whose assault on Cam didn't cease. Even Stunners seemed to bounce off the enraged half-giant, though they did finally succeed in pushing him back into the corner and out of arm's reach of his target.

Sensing a slight opportunity, Johannes cast a spell on the remains of the table, which had been demolished in the flurry of hexes, and the wood sprang to his command, pinning Cam to the wall and bending round his arms and legs as effective shackles and manacles. He spent only a second savouring his success before a *Petrificus* brushed him, insufficient to petrify him completely, but deadening his right shoulder and arm, rendering him both useless and vulnerable. With Patch cowering behind him, the detritus of their table in front of him, and Malcolm to his left and one of the Cam brothers to his right, Johannes had nowhere to go.

A bright red spell shot from the tall Cam brother's wand, headed for Johannes's chest, and he braced himself, but Malcolm flicked his wand and cast a well-timed block, repelling the spell. The short Cam brother immediately cast a battering hex at Malcolm, who tried to block it with his empty right hand; the spell slid through the wandless *Protego* and hit Malcolm's face. Hagrid threw his heavy tankard at Malcolm's attacker, hitting the man square in the chest, causing him to double over in pain.

As blood gushed from his mouth, Malcolm finally raised his wand and cast a strong *Stupefy* at the short wizard, who crumpled to the floor; Malcolm followed this with an *Expelliarmus* at the tallest brother just as the man was trying to free Cam from his bonds. His own wand wrenched from his hand and flung across the room, the tall wizard made a grab for Cam's wand, and Johannes launched himself forward at the man.

Just as he tackled the tall wizard, Johannes was drenched in water from above, and he heard Aberforth shouting. Rolling over onto the Stunned wizard, he covered his eyes with his left arm, protecting them from the flood of water coming from the pub's ceiling, apparently at Aberforth's command.

"Get out, and bring yer friends with ye," Aberforth shouted. "All of ye. I don't care how, and I don't care who started it. Out! I don't want to call the Aurors in for the likes of ye! OUT! "

Johannes felt himself being hauled up by Hagrid, Malcolm on his other side picking up his wand for him. "Mein Korb," he said, looking around.

"What's that, Perfesser?" Hagrid asked as he bent and picked up Baldy and slung him over his shoulder. Patch had disappeared already.

Johannes blinked water from his eyes and pointed. Peculiarly, the basket was still whole, just wet. Hagrid handed him his basket.

"I said, out," Aberforth said, poking the tallest Cam brother with a table leg.

"But Cam..." The wizard gestured helplessly at his brother, who was still held fast to the wall, though slumped and unconscious.

"Hoy, Perfesser!" Aberforth called. "Perfesser Birnbaum...let this one loose before yeh go."

Malcolm cast a *Finite* on Johannes's shoulder, then Johannes took his own wand from Malcolm and waved it. The wood released Cam, who collapsed to the floor.

"C'on, Honnie," Malcolm slurred. "Le's ge' ou' o' here."

Malcolm, Johannes, and Hagrid...still carrying Baldy...stumbled across the emptying pub and out into the cool night air. They walked a few yards and then stopped, Malcolm leaning against a wall and holding a handkerchief to his mouth in an ineffective attempt to stop his bleeding, and Hagrid setting down his friend and giving him a shake.

"Baldy! Baldy! Wake up!"

"Here, allow me," Johannes said. "*Renervate*." Baldy moaned.

"Ta, Perfesser!"

"Eya, Honnie," Malcolm said. He gestured toward his mouth.

Johannes shook his head, then cast a *Coagulare*. "It is not very effective, I fear," he said, looking more closely at Malcolm's mouth. "You have loosened teeth." He stepped back. "You are a mess. We should take you to hospital."

"We'll step over to old Aggie Wayland's," Malcolm said, spitting out some blood. "She'll take care of it...good enough for tonight, anyway."

"I'm goin' t' see Baldy back t' his place," Hagrid said, hoisting his woozy friend to his feet. "Sorry 'bout everythin'. I didn't know Cam would be like that. He alway seemed a quiet one."

Malcolm shrugged, wincing slightly at a newly discovered ache. "It was fun. Always fun at the Hog's Head, right, Honnie?" He grinned to somewhat gruesome effect.

"Right," Johannes said with a shake of his head. "Now where is this Aggie?" he asked, hefting his basket in his left hand.

"On our way home, just a hop, skip, and a jump!"

"No jumping for me tonight, Malcolm," Johannes replied, taking Malcolm's elbow. "Nor hopping, nor skipping. We walk. Slowly."

Malcolm laughed.

"You should go to St. Gile's in the morning," Johannes said as they started down the road toward Kilderkin Lane. He looked over at his friend's bloody face and clothes.

"Nay," Malcolm replied. "Melina's there. I'll hop down to St. Mungo's, or over to St. Bridget's in Dublin, if I need to. Aye, St. Bridget's would be best."

Johannes nodded. Better for him, too. Best if Siofre did not learn that he'd gone out with Malcolm and they'd ended up in a brawl with some shady wizards.

They walked in silence until they got to the turning into the lane where Malcolm lived.

"So . . . what *did* you do with that Knucker?" Johannes asked.

Malcolm laughed, and Johannes began to laugh as well.

"Aye, grand fun at the Hog's Head tonight!" Malcolm said with a broad grin. "As for Mr Knucker, he is now Mr Lizard, living in a modestly furnished glass case in Newt's office at the Ministry."

Chuckling, the two wizards wove their way down the lane to wake Aggie Wayland and have their wounds tended.

Author's Note: A "Knucker" is a legendary water monster, a type of dragon in folklore. They live in knuckerholes and eat livestock. Here, Malcolm considers it "kin" to the dragon.

There are no African dragons listed in *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them*, though it is a rather slim volume, and perhaps *The Monster Book of Monsters* might list them, or they may appear on the map of dragons of the world in *Dragon Breeding for Pleasure and Profit* (I simply extrapolated from real world myths and legends to create the Dahomey Rainbow dragon and the dragon from the Mountains of the Moon.)

A few of Cam's words:

teugh: tough

teuchter: rustic Highlander, a country hick (meant here as an insult)

crawin': crowing

gowks: cuckoos when applied to birds, fools when applied to people

trow: trust

Hope you enjoyed the chapter!

Chapter Twenty-Six: An Eccentricity Shared

Chapter 26 of 32

Johannes receives a letter from Siofre. Malcolm fixes them breakfast and gives Johannes a gift, sharing an "eccentricity" with him and welcoming him to the clan.

Features Johannes Birnbaum and Malcolm McGonagall.



Chapter Twenty-Six: An Eccentricity Shared

Johannes stirred, stretching and passing one arm over his eyes, trying to wake up. There was a tremendous fluttering in the room, and a harsh caw jarred him further awake. Levering himself up with one arm, he looked around. He was in a spare bedroom at Malcolm's house. The windows had been shuttered the night before, the curtains drawn closed, and Johannes was fairly certain he had shut the door before he'd collapsed into bed. The door was open now, though, and a large black bird was perched on the footboard. Kiera. Johannes had never seen Kiera before, though he'd heard Siofre speak of her, and if Siofre hadn't sent Kiera, he could think of no other reason for a raven to be in his bedroom.

"She found you, I see," Malcolm said from the hallway. "Kiera had a letter for each of us...yours is likely the same as mine, but Grandmother was hardly to know you'd be staying the night."

Johannes sat up and looked at Malcolm, who was fully dressed already, wearing a dark green shirt and a tartan kilt, and who was now flicking his wand to draw the curtains and open the shutters.

"You should go to hospital," Johannes said. "You are frightful." Malcolm's lips were still slightly swollen, and his cheeks were bruised a fading green-yellow. Johannes imagined that the bruising was worse still beneath his beard.

"After breakfast," Malcolm agreed with a nod. "Feels fine, and the teeth are solid." He opened his mouth and pulled at his front teeth in demonstration. "Old Aggie did a good job last night."

Kiera flitted over to Johannes, who took the offered parchment from her. The bird flew up to the top of the large mirror, shifting and seeming to survey the two men.

"It is not bad news, is it?" Johannes asked.

"Nay. Good. But I'll let you read it. Breakfast in fifteen minutes in the kitchen...coffee's brewed already, so come down when you're dressed. I left you some clean clothes in the bathroom."

Johannes pushed his hair back with one hand, then carefully broke the dark blue seal on the parchment. At the top of the page was a circular seal with the words *Saorsainn gu Suthainn* above a raven, its wings spread and holding a sprig of wild thyme in one raised foot.

Dear Johannes,

I think it will please you to learn that Mrs Terwilliger's daughter, Candace Eudora, was born very early this morning. Her note was brief, but she said that her husband seemed ecstatic and thrilled to be a father. Perhaps between us, Malcolm and I have helped to bring a happy family into the world.

I hope that you had a pleasant evening. It was quiet with both you and Malcolm gone, but Lydia and I wandered through your gardens for a while, then stopped at the lodge and spent some time with Fiona and Morgan. I wished to get an early start this morning, so I did not stay long, but Lydia said that she stayed quite late...and it gave her an excuse to sleep in this morning, so I breakfasted alone. I have been quite accustomed to that, but I discovered that I have become more accustomed to your company.

I will be in London on Monday, and although I hope that I will not need to spend the entire day at the Ministry, I also have some other tasks to attend to, so if I am not at home when you arrive back, do not be concerned.

Lydia is feeling more tension with the imminent arrival of Bertrand and Sally and the approaching ceilidh, so I know that she...and I...would appreciate any help you can give her on your return, even just to spend some time with her and distract her from her worries. Set the house-elves to any work in the gardens that you are able.

Phoebe and Lachina will also be arriving Monday. I believe Phoebe will only be arriving before dinner, but Lachina will be here sometime during the afternoon. Once Lydia gets her settled in her room and she has freshened up, perhaps you could show Lachina the gardens. I know that she would enjoy seeing them.

Enjoy the remainder of the weekend. Perhaps you and Malcolm could get out this evening for a drink or a meal.

Sincerely yours,

Siofre

26 April 1959

Johannes chuckled. He did not think he would be going out with Malcolm that evening, and he did not think that he would be sharing the details of the previous evening's outing with Siofre. He was glad to have heard from Siofre, glad that she wanted to share the news of the baby's birth, and glad that she seemed to miss him, though she didn't say it in so many words.

He carefully rerolled the parchment and used a Sticking Charm to reseal it, then he reluctantly swung his legs from the bed and stood. His shoulder and right arm still seemed stiff from the night before, and he had a faint headache. Despite normally being an early riser, he felt he could easily go back to bed for another hour. The aroma of sizzling bacon and fresh coffee rising from the kitchen motivated him to remain upright, however, and he picked up his watch. Past nine-thirty already.

Kiera flew down to him with a startling caw, settling back on the footboard and looking at him first with one eye then the other.

"No, no reply. I may write her later." He looked down at the dirty clothes lying in a heap on a chair. "After I am dressed and have eaten."

The raven flew to one of the windows, and Johannes waved his wand to open it for her. She gave a few more harsh-sounding calls, then flew off. Johannes shivered as the cold air hit his body, and he closed the window again.

He sorted through his clothes to find his still-damp underpants and socks, which were the only articles of clothing, other than his boots, that he thought could be dried out and then worn after just a freshness charm or two. The rest of his clothing was not only still damp, but smelled after having been doused in ale, whisky, and then the water from the Hog's Head ceiling. They would need a thorough cleaning.

A few minutes later, Johannes was padding down the stairs, partially dressed, carrying his boots in one hand and an article of clothing in the other. He stepped into the kitchen.

"Ah, ready for breakfast?" Malcolm asked, turning toward him from the stove. "You're not dressed."

"I cannot wear this." Johannes held up the folded tartan garment.

"Of course you can. Not with those socks, though, you're right. Should have thought of that. Shirt fit all right? A bit tight through the shoulders...loosen the lacing a bit."

"It is a kilt."

Malcolm nodded. "Don't think any of my trousers would fit you, mate, but the kilt should."

"Transfiguration..."

"I'll Summon you a pair of socks and flashes. Knitted the socks myself," Malcolm said, putting down a plate and drawing his wand. "Well, with a bit of help. More than a bit, actually. But I did some of the stitches."

"I cannot wear a kilt."

"Of course you can." A pair of oaten-coloured socks and dark garters flew through the door and over Johannes's shoulder. "Here, wear these."

"We can Transfigure a pair of your trousers to fit, I think," Johannes said. "Or I should clean my own."

Malcolm shrugged. "If you want to wear the ones from yesterday, fine. But you can wear the kilt."

"I am not Scottish..."

"You're a man. Any man can wear a kilt if he likes. Besides, you're a Tyree now. Don't need to be Scottish if you're a Tyree," Malcolm said with a quick grin.

Johannes held the kilt up in front of himself and looked at it. It was the same tartan that he had often seen Siofre wearing. "It is a Tyree tartan?"

Malcolm shrugged again. "If you like. It's one of the designs they've been weaving for more than a few hundred years, anyway. Grandmother Siofre's favourite, and mine, too."

"I do not know . . ."

"You just need to have something to keep you decent on your way home, Honnie," Malcolm said. "It's not as though you're making a commitment to wearing it all of the time or something."

"I do not know if I would feel 'decent' in it," Johannes said, but he put down his boots and unfolded the long kilt. "How does it wear?"

"First, you can't put it on yet."

"Why? There is some ritual to it?" Johannes asked, puzzled.

"No, but you're wearing pants. Can't wear pants under a kilt. Wouldn't be right."

Johannes looked at him, wondering if he were joking. "You are serious?"

"Course I am. See?" Malcolm raised his own kilt and lifted his shirttail.

"Ja, ja, I see." Johannes shook his head as Malcolm dropped the kilt apron and laughed. "But I am not comfortable so."

"Do you wear pants under your robes?" Malcolm asked curiously.

"No, not when I wear only robes. But they are long."

"The kilt's long enough," Malcolm said, "and I'll loan you a sporran. You'll have to get your own, though, if you take a liking to wearing a kilt. But the kilt's yours to keep. A 'welcome to the clan' present."

Johannes looked at the kilt again. Malcolm might be having some fun with him, but Johannes also did not want to refuse the gift, and he did want to feel more a part of the Clan Tyree...even if he never wore the kilt again. He nodded. "All right. But I remove the pants after I put on the kilt. How is this worn?"

With his new kilt donned and the warm cable-knit socks on, Johannes only felt slightly self-conscious sitting down for breakfast, being careful to keep his knees together even under the table. He had wanted to pin the layers of kilt together in front, but Malcolm wouldn't hear of it, saying that it would ruin the fabric and destroy the proper drape of the kilt, and showing him instead how the pin served as a weight for the outer layer of the apron.

Malcolm set a full plate down in front of Johannes, then sat across from him and reached for a large round loaf of dark bread.

"Danke sehr," Johannes said, pouring himself a cup of coffee.

"Don't thank me. This is all from your basket. Multry must love you. Eggs, bacon, cheese, a couple loaves of good bread, butter, milk, cream...seems she thought you might starve in a day. There's even a crock of soup in there."

"Siofre is good to me. She tells Multry I must have provision when I leave each weekend, and Multry takes this very seriously. I think if I did not take the basket, Multry would chase after me with it."

"It was all in tip-top condition, too. Not an egg cracked or a drop of milk spilled. Good charms," Malcolm said, pausing to chew for a moment. "Good thing, too. I was famished this morning. Glad I got my teeth tended to last night."

"I have headache still, and my shoulder, it is a little stiff," Johannes said, "but only a little. Do you have pain anywhere?"

Malcolm shook his head, but said, "Not really. Little bit of headache, little soreness, but not bad. I took some potion this morning. You should have said something earlier...you want some Headache Potion?"

"Coffee may help," Johannes said, taking a sip of the strong brew.

Malcolm picked up his wand and flicked it. "You should take some potion. I am sorry about last night, Honn. Didn't think that it would get quite that fun. I'll have to stop by the Hog's Head this afternoon and see about the damage. I don't think Aberforth was happy with us."

"It was not your fault. It was that man, Cam. And Hagrid threw the table first," Johannes pointed out. "Of course, I could not blame him. It was bad, what Cam said, and not just about you. Hagrid does respect the Headmaster very greatly. And I do not forget my gratitude toward Dumbledore, either. I would not wish to sit by and hear such calumny spoken."

"The best fight is the one avoided," Malcolm said, catching the Headache Potion and handing it to Johannes, then pouring himself another cup of coffee. "The second best is the fight won. I'm not sure whether we won this one or not, but I don't think those lads will be talking out of turn in the Hog's Head again for a while."

"They do not seem to care what people think of them," Johannes said, carefully measuring out a spoonful of the potion. "And I think Cam likes fighting. And he did not like you."

Malcolm shrugged. "You're probably right. Aberforth knows me well enough, though. He knows I'd not start a fight, so he probably realises that Cam deliberately picked one with us. But I think we'll be welcomed back to the Hog's Head before Cam and his brothers will be."

"If you see them again, what will you do?" Johannes asked curiously.

"Ignore them. But I won't be so quick to try to avoid a fight with them next time, if there is a next time, and I'll end it much quicker."

"You did well, the Stunner and all the other spells. I could not keep up."

"You did well, yourself, Honnie! That nice shackling charm you did there! Very nice. You might teach it to me."

"It is not to be taught. It was simply . . . done."

"Ah, not a specific spell, then."

"No. Or many spells, but just, how to put it . . . condensed with my intent. I know wood and how to use it."

Malcolm nodded. "Very inventive. I liked it."

"I was pleased, as well, until I was hit by the petrifying spell immediately after. I do think I agree that the best fight is the one avoided; I shall avoid bar fights in the future."

Malcolm laughed. "Sometimes, they come to you. Or they do to me, anyway. Hope you don't avoid my company after this."

Johannes shook his head. "And you are a kinsman now. If you are in a bar fight and I find myself there, I will do what I can to help, even if it is not very much."

"You were fine, Honnie. I just regret having dragged you along with me...though not very much," he added with a grin.

"It was interesting," Johannes said, smiling.

"Make a good story someday," Malcolm said.

"I do not wish Siofre to hear of this, though," Johannes said. "At least not too soon."

"Probably a good idea...avoid a scolding or a lecture that way, certainly." He nodded toward Johannes's shoulder. "Coming to the hospital with me? Have your shoulder looked at?"

Johannes rolled his shoulder experimentally. "It will be fine, I think, although I could accompany you. I think I will finish no work today."

"Aye, a bit of company would be welcome," Malcolm said. "And I can take you out to my favourite pub in Dublin...and we won't get into any fights, I promise," he added quickly. "It's a good place. Nice couple run it and they do an excellent lunch."

"All right," Johannes agreed. "If it is a friendly place."

"Very friendly," Malcolm assured him. "Good news to hear about the new Terwilliger baby," he said, changing the subject.

"It was. I had worried about Siofre with that job, but now I will not need to."

Malcolm laughed. "No need to worry about Grandmother Siofre. She can take care of herself quite well if she must."

"This seal she uses on her letter, I don't remember the words, but do you know their meaning?"

"Mmm." Malcolm nodded, chewing and swallowing some bacon. "You mean 'saorsainn gu suthainn'? Freedom forever. Most Tyrees use that motto. I do sometimes, myself, when I use a motto at all."

"I see," Johannes said. "It is something I may use?"

"No one would stop you, but now that you're a Tyree, you may certainly use it...ask Grandmother Siofre if you wish. You can design your own seal around it...do you have one you use already? No? Well, we generally design our own, or base them on those of other family members. Minerva uses one she's altered a wee bit to suit herself, but it's from our mother's side of the family...which is fine. I don't think that Minerva has much of a sense of identification with the Tyrees, though. She does love Grandmother Siofre, I know, so I don't understand why she doesn't."

"She told me once . . . something about . . ." Johannes furrowed his brow, squinting slightly as he tried to recall the conversation. "She said that the Tyree witches have a reputation, and they rely on the reputation but do not earn it, or something of the sort."

Malcolm barked a laugh. "She should have spent more time with the Tyree cousins, if she thinks that."

"Or with your grandmother."

Malcolm shook his head and chuckled, setting down his coffee cup. "Grandmother Siofre brought Minerva to Tíree Beag a few times when she was a girl, but she didn't like it. She cried when she was a wee little lass...didn't like being left with the aunties there, apparently...so Grandmother didn't bring her back until she was a bit older, but then she claimed the island bored her."

"It surprises me. Minerva loves her home, I know, and she likes the island of Dumbledore's. Is it so much different?"

"Alike and unlike. There are almost no trees on Tíree Beag, only those that were deliberately planted in orchards or gardens. It's a bit rustic, too. But it's hilly, and it's an easy walk to the sea from anywhere on the island, and the people are kindly. She'd probably like it better now as an adult...if she could bring her books with her!"

Johannes chuckled. "I would need to bring books, too, I think, for a longer visit."

"You must have Grandmother Siofre bring you one time, then. Or I could, sometime this summer, maybe."

"Has Gertrude been?"

Malcolm shook his head, waving his wand to clear away their breakfast dishes. "I will bring her, though. Just haven't happened to yet. She'd like it, I think."

"She probably would."

"We should get to St. Bridget's now, if we're to go at all," Malcolm said, touching his face gingerly. "I think the potion's wearing off."

"Indeed. But I think it will be dinner we will eat in Dublin, and not lunch."

"True...good thing we had a hearty breakfast, then!"

"I need to return to Bog End first, find some fresh trousers and a clean cloak," Johannes said, pushing away from the table and standing.

"Nay, no need. I have a cloak you can borrow...and a waistcoat, too, that should fit."

Johannes looked down at his kilt. "We will look odd there."

"Not odd, Honnie. Perhaps a wee bit eccentric, but not odd. Great thing about the kilt: you can wear it anywhere, Muggle or wizarding, and always be appropriate," Malcolm said with a grin. "Let's be on our way!"

Note: If you'd like to see a picture of a real knuckerhole like the one that the Knucker from the last chapter lived in, visit my WordPress blog for 24 March 2011, tagged "Knuckers" and posted in the "Myth & Legend" category.

Chapter Twenty-Seven: A Garden Tour

Chapter 27 of 32

Siofre receives Johannes's reply. Lachina arrives at the estate and Johannes offers her a tour of the gardens.



Chapter Twenty-Seven: A Garden Tour

Siofre smiled as she saw her name on the envelope in Johannes's lovely, precise handwriting. She hadn't expected a response from him, since he was returning to the estate the next day; she flicked a finger and quickly slit the envelope open.

Sunday, 26 April 1959

Hogsmeade, Scotland

Dear Siofre,

I was pleased to receive your letter this morning. I apologise for the late reply. I returned to my flat late this afternoon to find Kiera awaiting me in the back garden. I had told her I might have a reply for you later, and she loyally looked for me to bring her mistress her letter.

I stayed with Malcolm last night, as it had become quite late, and after our breakfast, he took me to Dublin. I had never visited the city before, and he introduced me to the wizarding district there and to his favourite pub, where we had a belated, though satisfying, lunch. I believe that Malcolm must inherit your Apparition skill, as he Apparated us from Hogsmeade to Dublin with no stop between them, and then he returned us both to the McGonagall cliffs in the same fashion. From there, I Apparated to Hogsmeade and immediately set to writing you this letter, as Kiera seemed desirous to carry my reply to you.

It was very good news, indeed, that the Terwilligers' daughter came into the world to such a happy reception. I believe I may send my own well wishes, if there is a birth announcement in the newspaper. If the mother is the Gwyneth Bowen whom I believe I taught for a few years, I do not believe that my own felicitations would be amiss, and may be welcome after such a trying pregnancy. It is often good, I have found, to know that you are remembered even by old acquaintances. Her husband I remember only as a very silent young man who did not distinguish himself in anyway. I scarcely remember his appearance, and only his demeanor, yet now, if he is reformed from your efforts and those of Malcolm and his absurd tales I wish him well, too, and most certainly for the sake of his new daughter.

Although I breakfasted with Malcolm and had his almost constant companionship yesterday evening and again today, I found myself often thinking of the estate and of you, and as we ate our late lunch in Dublin, I wished that you were there, as well. It felt there was an empty space beside me, where you should be, and a lack that could only be filled by your presence.

I hope you forgive these familiar words, but you are much on my mind wherever I may be, and no matter the company.

I certainly will spend time with Lydia tomorrow, as you wish it, if I may ease her worries. I will also gladly escort your cousin through the gardens and tell her of our progress and our plans. If you return soon to the estate, I hope that you will join us. The gardens are yours, though you do call them mine, and the grace your presence lends would make the gardens more beautiful.

Malcolm will be returning shortly, I believe, and bringing Multry's basket of provisions, as we had left it at his house earlier today. I will invite him to join me for a supper of Multry's good soup and bread, but I do not believe he will entice me out this evening. I should prefer to remain here in my cosy flat, listen to the gramophone, and remember our own lunch and the lovely rainy afternoon we spent here.

I hope that you have had a pleasant and productive day, as I am aware you had much work planned, and I hope that your visit to the Ministry is short and to your satisfaction.

Anticipating the pleasure of your company,

I remain

yours,

Johannes Birnbaum of Tyree

Siofre's soft smile did not dim as she folded the letter and returned it to its envelope. She was not offended by Johannes's familiar words...on the contrary...and it was good to hear that he missed her as she missed him, though her own letter had been less straightforward in expressing her feelings than his had been. Nonetheless, she would not hurry to return to the estate the next day, much as she wished to see Johannes sooner rather than later. No, she would allow him some time to become acquainted with Lachina, and for her to see what a fine man Johannes was; let them have peace and space on their first meeting. If there were any warmer feelings to develop between the two, their first meeting should be unencumbered by her presence, Siofre thought, and if they did find each other agreeable, then she would know that she had not deprived Johannes of a chance at a relationship with a younger witch and an opportunity for a family and a full life. By the same token, if she gave him room, and yet his feelings for her continued to grow, she would know that he had come to her completely through his own choice and not through lack of any other possibilities.

Time to go down and speak with Lydia about arrangements for the week to come, and then an early night for her. The next day would be a busy one, and it was as she had told Johannes: she had errands other than the one to the Ministry. She would snare Drusus Prince and to do that, she would require help. Not Malcolm this time, though, however talented and inventive he might be. For this, she needed someone with an established reputation. An established *shady* reputation. But a wizard who could be enticed to cooperate with her. And she knew just the man for it: Aloysius Fletcher.

Fletcher had tried to turn over a new leaf after his last brief stint in Azkaban, more for the sake of his wife and young son than from any desire to toe the line himself. He was having a hard time of it, though, she'd heard. And hardly a surprise, given that the man's father, Maliburn Fletcher, had been a career criminal until a botched burglary escape and an irreparable Splinching cut that career short. It seemed to run in the blood, and if there were a straight path to a goal and a crooked one, then Fletcher felt compelled to take the crooked one. Aloysius would be happy to do something just a wee bit underhanded and yet not entirely illegal, if the compensation were sufficient, Siofre was sure. He might have to take a holiday for a while afterward, somewhere he couldn't be easily followed, but he'd likely not object to that.

So a visit to Aloysius would be in order, and another to the Butterworths', as well. And if there was time, she might even pay a visit on Drusus himself . . .

Johannes drew his watch again. Half past two. Siofre hadn't returned yet, but she had said not to expect her. He had arrived at seven-thirty that morning, hoping to see her before she left for the day, but she had already Disapparated for her day's work. He was rather surprised by that, since he doubted that the Ministry opened its offices for business that early, but perhaps she had an early meeting with someone beforehand.

He had spent much of the morning with Lydia, and they had Apparated to the old stone gatehouse, which hadn't been inhabited in over fifty years, though it was maintained well by the house-elves. Some of the guests that week would be staying there, and Lydia had wanted to be sure that everything was in order, since she would have less time for such things once her children and grandchildren arrived. Johannes had not done anything with the grounds around the old gatehouse, since it seemed a relatively unused part of the estate, but he thought that they could use a bit of tending before any guests arrived...although Lydia assured him that the guests weren't likely to notice if he didn't, and they were all family, anyway. Nonetheless, he had returned there after lunch and was doing some trimming and weeding, having asked both Lydia and Multry to send for him when either Lachina or Siofre arrived. He did hope that Siofre would return home in time for the garden tour.

But at two forty-five, just after Johannes had checked his watch again, Sorrel Apparated into the garden behind the old grey stone house, and announced that Madam Lachina had arrived and was getting settled into her room. Whenever the magister liked, he could return to the house and meet her.

Johannes thanked the little lilac elf...today dressed in what looked like blue-checked gingham curtains...and after he cast some cleaning charms on his boots and clothes, Johannes followed Sorrel back to the house, Apparating directly into the front entry hall.

"There he is now," Johannes heard Lydia say. He looked up to see Lydia and another witch, much younger, with dark coppery hair, coming down the stairs.

"Sorrel fetched me. If you are unsettled, I can wait," Johannes said.

Lachina choked back her laugh, but Lydia did not.

"You mean, if she is not settled yet," Lydia said, still chuckling. "Unsettled?...well, perhaps you may be a bit unsettled! Are you, Lachina?"

Lachina grinned. "Not at all. It's good to be back. I kept meaning to drop by, or even come for a weekend, and when Siofre invited me, I realised I'd not been since Christmas week."

As she reached the foyer, Lydia took Lachina's hand and smiled up at Johannes. "Lachina, I would like you to meet our resident Herbologist, Johannes Birnbaum."

"How do you do, Professor."

Johannes bowed slightly. "It is a pleasure to meet you, Madam Tyree."

"I thought we might all have tea together in a little while," Lydia said, "perhaps down in the gazebo in the formal garden."

"That would be lovely, thank you, Lydia," Johannes said.

"Wonderful," Lachina agreed.

"Would you care for a tour of some of the gardens?" Johannes asked Lachina.

"I'd love it," Lachina replied. "Won't you join us?" the petite witch asked, turning to Lydia.

"No, my dear, I have a few things to do yet, and I want to see to our tea, as well. I will meet you in the gazebo at about four?"

"We will see a few of the gardens, then, and meet you in the formal garden at four," Johannes said.

"Good...and I'll send Sorrel to ask Fiona and Morgan if either of them would like to join us," Lydia replied. "Enjoy your walk!"

Johannes turned to Lachina. "Do you have a preference for a garden to see? A special interest?"

Lachina shook her head. "Not particularly, no, although I admit that I know little of Potions and would have less appreciation of a garden devoted to plants that are solely useful in Potions than I would a flower garden. I do like general herb gardens, though, and I wouldn't mind seeing your vegetable gardens. Siofre said that you have diversified them, and that you're even selling produce in Hogsmeade now."

"Indeed. Then perhaps we may begin in the conservatory, where you will see many flowers of varied types, and then walk through the kailyard on the way to the flower gardens...perhaps go to the new rock garden near the pond. Between the rock garden and the formal garden, there are many beautiful plants to see."

Lachina smiled. "The 'kailyard'...they are making a Scot of you, then, Professor?"

"Nay, that I would not say," Johannes replied with an answering smile, "but to work for Madam Siofre is educational, certainly."

Lachina laughed. "We were surprised, many of us, that she would invite a stranger to stay at the estate, but both Lydia and Siofre have spoken highly of you and your work. Siofre has, in particular."

Johannes opened the large French doors into the conservatory and bowed slightly, indicating that Lachina should proceed him. "I am pleased that my work has been of value to them. And a stranger . . . perhaps I began as a stranger here. I am a foreign wizard, and I only first met Madam Tyree...Siofre...less than two years ago. But I have taught with Minerva McGonagall, and with Malcolm, and Malcolm and I have become friends. So . . . a stranger and yet not a stranger. And now I feel more at home here than I have anywhere in a very long time."

Lachina paused in her admiration of a plant with large, iridescent purple leaves, and looked up at Johannes with a shrewd look in her eye and a slight smile on her lips. "You must be at home here, indeed, to Apparate into the house as you do."

Johannes inclined his head. "I have been fortunate to have been joined to the clan and given the freedom of the Tyree estate."

"Yes . . . fortunate," Lachina said, nodding, her eyes unfocussed for a moment. She seemed to gather herself, then she looked back at the colourful plant, fingering a leaf. "This plant here, it is quite beautiful. I have never seen one like it. It is new to the conservatory."

Johannes nodded. "It is. I am . . . partial to a plant with beauty found elsewhere than in its flower. This is a Persian Shield. In addition to its beauty, I believe it may have undeveloped uses in potions...but I shall not be tedious and describe them."

Lachina laughed. "I am not completely incurious, Professor! It is simply that I know less of potions and find them of less interest than I might, not that they are completely boring to me! You would, however, find a better audience in my cousin Murdoch McGonagall, or even old Bridie...she does her bit of potions work still."

"I have not yet met Madam Bridie Tyree, but I have actually spoken with Murdoch of the Persian Shield, and we may collaborate in work with it or perhaps some hybrids of it."

The two continued through the conservatory, Lachina occasionally stopping to admire a plant or to ask a question about a particular specimen's origins, and then they proceeded out to the kitchen gardens, where Multry and her children were choosing herbs to enhance their evening meal. Lachina laughed to see how Duster and Kilbeena ran to Johannes, standing on his toes and reaching for his hands, then she laughed more when he bent and lifted each of them, raising the two tiny house-elves up above his head as they giggled and waved their arms.

By the time that Lachina and Johannes reached the precisely laid-out formal gardens, it was already four o'clock, and Lachina expressed disappointment that they could not linger as they walked through them to the gazebo.

"I will be most happy after our tea to walk with you through them," Johannes said, "if you wish. Or if not this afternoon, then at another time while you are here."

"I would enjoy that, thank you."

"Siofre also knows much of the plants here, and she might also wish to show you more of the gardens herself."

"Aye, she might, but I know that she will be busy this week. When she's not working, there will be other guests arriving...and Bertrand and Sally returning home, too. I don't know if she'd have time for it." She twitched a slight smile. "No doubt it was at her request that you are so courteously guiding me through the gardens, Herr Professor."

"She did mention it, but I would have been very glad to walk with you through the gardens even had she not."

"I have enjoyed it very much, and I would like to see more of them," Lachina said.

"Then later I will continue the tour. Your cousin Phoebe might also enjoy the gardens."

"I'm sure she would. I think she said she would arrive at around six. Perhaps after dinner, then, you could show us both around?"

"Aye, it would be my pleasure," Johannes replied, "and perhaps we might together entreat Siofre...and Lydia...to accompany us and leave their responsibilities for a while."

"I know we will be able to entice Lydia to join us, but Siofre . . ." Lachina shrugged. "We can try. She does seem to have a bee in her bonnet about this Butterworth business, though, and if she has work to do on that, I don't know if we will succeed."

"Bee in her bonnet?" Johannes asked. "I have heard this before, but never am sure what meaning it has. It sounds unpleasant."

"She's . . . not *obsessed*, exactly, but she's got an idea about the case . . . something that really bothers her about it, and I can tell she's not going to let go of it. Anyway, to have a bee in your bonnet just means you've got an idea in your head about something, a particular idea about it, and you think about it often."

"Ah, yes, I understand. A little like a flea in the ear, as is said in German," Johannes said, nodding in understanding.

Lachina smiled. "That sounds even more unpleasant than a bee in the bonnet!"

"It is, but I never think of the meaning like that before now," Johannes said with a laugh. "You think it is because it is the horses and Butterworth, that Siofre has this bee, and she wishes just to help them, or is it more because of Drusus Prince?"

"She told you about Prince, then . . . It may well be as much because it is Drusus Prince and his bad behaviour as it is the absurdity of the charge against Butterworth. She does not like meanness in any form, so Prince's involvement probably got her ire up."

"I hope she is able to enjoy the weekend and the parties," Johannes said, frowning slightly.

"We'll have to make sure that she does," Lachina replied. She looked up at him, a crooked smile on her face. "You know, I think that should be your task, Herr Professor...I will help, and Lydia and Phoebe, as well, but I think that you may be best suited to it. Aye, when you are not providing tours to Siofre's kin...and upon Siofre's whim, I am sure...you must look after her and see that she enjoys herself."

"I would not presume..."

Lachina laughed and took his arm as they rounded a turn in the path and approached the gazebo. "Allow me to do the presuming for you, then. Siofre's one of my favourite cousins, but she spends too much time looking after others and she needs more fun...and she can be quite fun to be around, you know, if you haven't seen that side of her yet."

"I also have observed that she works diligently, and that she cares very much for her responsibilities. I think these are positive traits in her, ones I admire, yet I believe that she should also find room in her life for . . . fun, as you put it. To relax."

Lachina nodded. "Aye, you are the person for this task, then. We will leave her to you, Herr Professor, and to your care."

A faint blush crept over Johannes's cheeks, and Lachina smiled.

Chapter Twenty-Eight: Siofre's Sober Lads

Chapter 28 of 32

Siofre heard a peculiar tale when she was out, a story of a Highlander and a foreigner who walked into a bar . . .

Featured in this chapter: Siofre Tyree, Johannes Birnbaum, Malcolm McGonagall, Lachina Tyree, Phoebe Tyree, Lydia Prince Tyree



Chapter Twenty-Eight: Siofre's Sober Lads

Early Monday evening, shortly after Siofre returned home, Malcolm arrived with Gluffy and all of the boxes, trunks, and cases that Bertrand and Sally had sent on ahead of them. Under Sorrel's direction, Gluffy and Penty, one of the house-elves from the lodge, were set to transferring everything to the North Tower, where Lydia had prepared several rooms in anticipation of her son's return to the estate. Lydia herself went up to the tower to see to it all, and she sent Malcolm into the Rose Parlour, where the others had gathered.

Malcolm was pleased to see Phoebe and Lachina, and greeted the former with an enthusiastic hug and the latter with a quick squeeze and light kiss on the cheek. "Two of my favourite cousins! My timing couldn't have been better," he exclaimed.

"You're just in time for dinner," Siofre said with a smirk. '*Quite* excellent timing, as always."

Malcolm laughed. "I'd be happy to stay, Grandmother, but I think that Gluffy had some plans to cook me supper...on Gertrude's orders."

"Pah!" Siofre said with a dismissive wave of her hand. "The elf-lad can be assured you'll eat well with us, and in turn, he'll have a good supper himself with the elves here...a nice outing for him."

"You twisted my arm," Malcolm said, grinning. "Besides, I can't desert Honnie and leave him all alone surrounded by witches on every side." He went to the side table and poured himself a Scotch.

"I do not suffer from it," Johannes said with a smile of his own.

"And I was wondering why you enjoy staying here during the week! I wonder no longer!" Malcolm answered with a laugh, the witches laughing in turn.

"Where is your friend...Gertrude?" Lachina asked. "I haven't met her yet, and I must say that I want to see the witch who has had the fortitude to take you in hand."

"You'll meet her Thursday," Malcolm replied, taking a seat on the sofa beside Phoebe. "And she is a formidable witch, I'll give you that!"

"Well, she won't go soft with you around, that's for sure," Phoebe said.

"And what about your man? Where is he tonight?" Malcolm asked.

"Declan is in Limerick...no, it's Sligo this week...doing research for his new book," Phoebe replied, "and also getting a few interviews for the *Dublin Prophet* to earn a few Sickles while he's there."

"Bout the suddenly sober Clurichauns?" Malcolm asked.

"Aye," Phoebe said. "An' they're not just sober; they're downright sombre. It's turnin' all the wine sour and skunking all the beer. So far, the whiskey's still drinkable, though... 'twon't be long afore the effect spreads to the Muggle pubs, so."

"That is a puzzle," Malcolm said, taking a swallow of whiskey. "So, Declan's going to interview the Cluries, or what?"

"Nay, just a few publicans, I gather," Phoebe replied.

"Is the effect still limited to Sligo?" Siofre asked.

"Mostly, from what I understand," Phoebe said.

"Have you ever heard of anything like this before?" Lachina asked Siofre.

"Nay, not like this," Siofre said. "Disgruntled or mischievous Clurichauns turning a household's wine or e'en causin' a distillery a wee bit o' bather, but naught like this. And they always remained cheerful and quite unsobber, themselves, and they'd help themselves to a bit o' drink afore they soured the wine or struck the beer."

"Aye, all the news I've heard says that they haven't had a drop of ale or aught else in weeks," Malcolm said.

"Speaking of sobriety, I heard an interesting piece of news today," Siofre said, sipping her whisky.

"Aye?" asked Phoebe.

"Aye, though 'twas less about sobriety and more 'bout inebriation and the danger of drink too much taken," the older witch said, suppressing a smirk.

Johannes shot Malcolm a glance, but both wizards remained quiet.

"Probably wizards on a spree," Lachina said, shaking her head, though smiling as she saw the humour in her cousin's eyes.

"Aye," Siofre said. "Sad, sad state they were in, I hear, an' not a witch nearby to hold 'em to respectability."

Phoebe, catching on that there was some joke in the offing and wanting to play along with her great-aunt, said, "Some wizards would do well t' be kept on a tether, I sometimes think, the trouble they can get themselves into."

"Aye," Siofre agreed, looking at Malcolm and Johannes. "Wouldn't you lads agree?"

"Oh, aye, Grandmother! 'Tis a sad thing when a wizard goes astray," Malcolm agreed quickly.

"Most certainly," Johannes added, "but there are occasions when a wizard may be perfectly sober and yet find himself in the middle of others who are not so."

"Aye, and then what's a wizard to do?" Malcolm asked rhetorically.

"Ach, I'm sure a pair o' wizards...ones as respectable as, say, you and Honnie," Siofre said, "would find a way out."

"So what was the story you heard, Auntie?" Phoebe asked.

"Aye, tell us! We may need to look out for such wizards and avoid them in the future," Lachina said, her cheeks twitching with suppressed mirth.

"Ach, 'twas a sad story, truly," Siofre said, shaking her head. "A pair o' wizards...one a rough Highlander, by all accounts, an' one a silent foreigner...entered a pub an' interrupted a game o' chance. The Highlander insulted one o' the pub's patrons, I hear, and then 'twas a full brulyie, wi' spells thrown and blood flowin'. Emptied out the pub, they did, 'twas such a ragin' brawl."

Malcolm laughed. "All right, Grandmother! How did you hear of this? And how did you know who it was?"

Siofre smirked. "'Twasn't difficult to know who it was when I heard who'd won it, and that there was that half-giant from Hogwarts there, too. Honestly, lad! I send you to Hogsmeade with Honnie, and that same evenin', you're draggin' the man into a rammie at the Hog's Head...for I'm sure 'twasn't Honnie who provoked the fight!"

"Grandmother, I..." Malcolm began.

"It was not Malcolm who provoked the fight," Johannes interrupted. "He wished to avoid it."

"Was it you, then?" Lachina asked Johannes incredulously.

Johannes shook his head. "Nay."

"'Twas the other man," Malcolm said, "some cocky chap who called himself 'Cam.'"

"You could not have tried very hard to avoid the fight," Siofre said, "if Aberforth had to close the pub for the night...as if the poor man hadn't enough troubles without you vexin' him more!"

"I believe that this Cam wished a fight and nothing we did would have avoided one," Johannes said.

"And besides," Malcolm added, "once Hagrid threw the table at the man, there was no leaving, and we couldn't just stand there while he fought alone, wandless, against three nasty Azkies."

"They were criminals?" Lachina asked with a combination of excited curiosity and apprehension.

"Aye, the man Cam, was, anyway, an' I'd not be surprised if his 'brothers' were not of his blood but from his time in Azkaban."

"How did you know he had been in Azkaban?" Johannes asked, some puzzlement on his face.

"His tattoos," Malcolm replied, finishing his Scotch. "You could just see them when he'd reach for his drink and his sleeve would pull up a bit. And from the look of him, I'd say he'd not been out long...that grey pallor and lean, hungry look...but he'd also not spent long there, either. Too quick for the fight and too calm before it, too. He was looking for a fight, though, Grandmother," he added, turning to Siofre, "and I did what I could to put him off it, but I don't think he wanted the night to end peacefully."

"He also seemed to dislike you," Johannes said, "and you in particular. He seemed to have known who you were, so he may have been looking for a fight, but he was especially glad, I think, to find one with you."

"And if he hadn't provoked Hagrid, we might have still managed to avoid the fight, unless Cam had cast the first hex," Malcolm said, "but he did provoke Hagrid, and so we may not have wanted a fight, but once it found us"...Malcolm shrugged..."we did have to end it, didn't we, Honnie? And walk out on our own, too."

Johannes twitched a slight smile. "Except for Baldy."

"Baldy?" Lachina asked.

"Aye." Johannes's smile grew. "Short, dark, broad fellow. Very hairy. Hagrid had to carry him out."

"So how did you hear about this, Grandmother?" Malcolm asked.

"'Twasn't from the Magister," Siofre replied, "though I'd hae liked it from him."

"I am sorry, Siofre," Johannes said quickly. "I thought to save you some concern."

Siofre chuckled. "An' yourself some, too, no doubt. But I heard it first from a Healer who said she'd had to treat some fellows for hurts received in a Hogsmeade bar fight. A few further questions to her and then to some other acquaintances o' mine, and I soon discovered the pub and the name of one of the brawlers...well known, he seems to hae made himself. It was not difficult to draw the conclusion that the 'quiet foreign gentleman' was our own gardener-in-residence, since the two of you went to Hogsmeade together that very evening."

"Well, as I said, we didn't go out looking for a fight, did we, Honnie? And as for Aberforth, I stopped by yesterday evening to see him, and I helped him to do a few repairs around the pub, so that appeased him a wee bit. Besides, Aberforth's no fan of Cam or his mates, either, though they're usually quiet enough when they come into the Hog's Head. Honnie's right: seems I bring out the mean in those lads," Malcolm said with a smirk, "though I'd never even noticed them myself till that night."

"Pah! You brought Johannes out to the Hog's Head...and much as I like Aberforth, the clientele there isn't always very reputable in the evenings, or even at other times...and then you could hae left the table and avoided the fight, but I'll warrant you never thought to get up and leave, did you, laddie?"

Malcolm shook his head. "It wasn't that simple, Grandmother...and the man needed a lesson taught him, anyway."

"Hmph. From what Healer Smethwyck and my cousin, Healer Marsh, said, two of the wizards had been taught a hard lesson, indeed, and even the third was kept overnight, though none of them would say what had happened to them. Just that they'd had an 'accident' in the Hog's Head. The rest that I learned, I had to glean from other sources."

"So, what happened?" Phoebe asked curiously.

"Ah, now that is a story, and a thirsty one," Malcolm said. He Summoned the whisky decanter and poured himself another drink. "Johannes can begin the telling."

Johannes shifted uncomfortably in his seat. "Ja, nun . . . we were in Hogsmeade. It seemed early enough still for one pint. We went to the Hog's Head, which was full on a Saturday night. I knew almost no one there, but we saw Hagrid and we joined him...he became a friend of mine when I taught at Hogwarts, you see, and he was pleased to see us both. There was some mention of gambling earlier, but the dice game that Hagrid had been playing was finished. He had lost, but not to Cam: to his own friend, Baldy. We joined them...that is, Hagrid, Baldy, a man called Patch, and this man who said he was Cam. Malcolm bought all at the table drinks, and also a large platter of chips." Johannes cleared his throat slightly. "They had changed the oil, and they were good chips. Anyway, Hagrid introduced us, and someone asked about Malcolm's work. Everyone at the table enjoyed hearing of Malcolm's recent encounter with a Knucker, all but Cam, and when we spoke of other things, of dragons and such, Cam was sceptical. And rude." Johannes shrugged. "I do not know what more to tell, though that seems incomplete."

Malcolm took up the tale from there, repeating the highlights of his stories and of Cam's more outrageous statements, culminating with the one that had pushed Hagrid over the edge. "Then the man says...and you have to know Hagrid to understand how much he admires Dumbledore...as we all do, in fact. But the man says...and pardon me, ladies, but I quote the man's own indelicate words here...he says, 'Let this great oaf here keep lappin' up yer tales, like he laps up crumbs at that old fool Dumbledore's table. I bet yeh did get a beatin' from the old man...and did yeh get a humpin' from him, too?' And that's when I couldna restrain Hagrid any longer, and he tipped up the table and began beating on Cam as Cam's brothers began to cast hexes at us all. Only poor Patch managed to drop out of sight fast enough...cowered behind Honnie here, didn't he?...and the rest of us tried to hold our own."

Malcolm's description of the rest of fight was only slightly exaggerated, Johannes found, and he did make his trick with the wood sound even more clever and dramatic than it actually was, but otherwise, it was accurate...though it seemed to take longer in the telling than the fight itself had lasted.

Just as Malcolm was crediting him with far more Healing skill than Johannes believed he had exercised, Lydia bustled in carrying a parchment in one hand and her wand in the other. Malcolm pulled on his front teeth, demonstrating how solidly they remained in his head.

"That is not to my credit, Malcolm," Johannes said. He turned to the others. "I did little. We visited Aggie Wayland that night, and then the next morning, we Apparated to St. Bridget's. They are to be credited."

"Aye, but you kept me from bleedin' half to death there in the lane," Malcolm said.

"Bleeding half to death? What is this?" Lydia asked, alarmed.

"Oh, Aunt Lydia," Malcolm replied, standing and putting his arm around her shoulders. "That is a tale...one that I am sure Grandmother Siofre would be quite happy to tell you!"

"Well, you seem fine now," Lydia said, looking up at him, slightly bewildered, "and I came to tell you that the dinner bell will be ringing soon, so if you'd like to freshen up beforehand, you ought to do that now."

Malcolm walked out of the parlour with Lydia, and Phoebe and Lachina followed. As Siofre rose to go, too, however, Johannes stood and reached for her, touching her arm lightly.

"I am sorry it was not I who told you of this. And I should have tried to keep Malcolm from the fight...but I did not know it would be a fight until it became one," Johannes said softly. "I haven't much experience with such things."

"Dinna worry, Honnie," Siofre said. "Any scolding wouldna be for you."

"Malcolm was very good. He protected me from several hexes. I might be as injured as the Cam brothers were if he had not done so."

"But you did well, too."

Johannes shook his head. "Only the way that Malcolm tells it. I am not adept. Although," he added with a small smile, "I was pleased to shackle the man Cam against the wall as I did. But otherwise . . . no."

"Nay, you did well, very well, Honnie," Siofre said. "You stood by Malcolm, and you stood by him even though you are not experienced with such things. You didn't crawl behind another and then disappear when the accounting came. You were Tyree in those moments, as truly as you could be."

"I would not have left Malcolm, naturally not," Johannes said. "But I am unfortunately of little assistance, and he was injured only because he was protecting me and had no time to shield against the hex that hit him."

"Dinna look so downcast! You did well, and Malcolm says that's so, as well. And that you're not experienced with brawls or duelling, that's not a bad thing at all. Not at all." Siofre raised one hand and placed it lightly on his shoulder. "You are . . . You encourage life, wherever you go. You nurture and protect. Not to be a fighter . . . that is a good thing for you." She slipped her hand down his chest, her palm resting over his heart. "You have a warmth in you, Honnie. Life and growth is what you're about. Dinna try to be otherwise. As you are . . . you are as you should be."

She began to withdraw her hand and to step back, but Johannes took it and held it gently in his.

"As long as I have not disappointed you," he said softly.

Siofre shook her head slightly. "Nay, not at all . . ."

"Siofre..."

"The dinner bell will ring shortly," Siofre said, withdrawing her hand from his, but then turning to stand beside him. She placed her hand on his arm. "You will escort me?"

Johannes nodded, and they stepped out through the open doors.

"And you must also tell me how your tour of the gardens was," Siofre said. "Lachina was telling me she had enjoyed it, but then Malcolm burst in, and so I never heard more."

"Ah, yes . . ." Johannes paused, adjusting to the sudden change in topic. "Lachina did seem to enjoy the gardens we were able to view before our tea...we had tea in the formal gardens, and Morgan and Fiona brought the children, too...however, she suggested that we complete our tour at a time when Phoebe might join us, perhaps this evening after dinner. We also hoped that you would join us, you and Lydia both."

"I am glad that Lachina enjoyed your tour, and I think it's a grand idea for Lydia to join you...and Malcolm, as well, if he stays...but I have a few things to finish this evening, and it has been a long day."

"We could tour tomorrow, rather, if you might accompany us then," Johannes said.

"Nay, I think not...there's much to do yet, both here for the parties and for that business with Butterworth. But you enjoy them."

"I will enjoy them less for lack of your company," Johannes said softly as they approached the dining room.

"There will be other times, Honnie," Siofre said, releasing his arm. "Now I believe I will wash my hands afore eating. You go in, though, see that the lasses are seated and comfortable when they arrive, eh?"

Johannes nodded, and Siofre turned and walked quickly away down the hall as Johannes gazed after her, a thoughtful expression on his face.

Chapter Twenty-Nine: A Bit of Joukerie-Pawkerie

Chapter 29 of 32

Lydia announces a new guest who will be arriving for the weekend, causing Siofre some pause. Siofre has her schemes, and she speaks of one of them to Johannes.

Features Siofre Tyree, Lydia Prince Tyree, Johannes Birnbaum, Malcolm McGonagall, Lachina Tyree, Phoebe Tyree.



Chapter Twenty-Nine: A Bit of Joukerie-Pawkerie

"I have some news that might interest you, Lydia hen, about one of your Prince relations," Siofre said, setting down her wineglass as the soup bowls and spoons were house-elfishly removed and replaced with the next course and the appropriate silverware.

"Really? Which one...Drusus?" Lydia guessed.

"Nay, his daughter, Eileen. She is apparently engaged to someone so unsuitable as to be beyond the pale," Siofre said with a smirk, "which, to my way of thinking, can only be a good thing."

"A Weasley," Malcolm guessed immediately. "They're always wonderful for tweakin' a pureblooded snoot."

Siofre's smirk grew. "Nay, even worse."

"A Muggle-born, then," Phoebe guessed. "One of the things I was shocked by when I went to Hogwarts," she explained to Johannes beside her, "was the bizarre prejudice against Muggle-borns. I'd heard there was such a thing, but I'd never actually encountered anyone who had such a belief, myself, and so I thought it had to be something only a few very old-fashioned and ignorant people still believed in. I was quite surprised to see that there were a lot of my contemporaries who had been raised to think that way."

"A naivete that I must say speaks well of your parents," Lydia said with an approving nod, "even if one of them is my own son!"

"So, it was a Muggle-born?" Johannes asked.

"Worse still: a Muggle!" Siofre said, some glee in her face.

"A Muggle?" Lydia asked. "How did she ever even meet one?"

Siofre shrugged one shoulder. "Not a clue, but she's set to marry him, and her father's very unhappy about it. I overheard him with her today...the man has a violent, nasty temper, and she'd be well away from him...and it sounded to me as though his antipathy toward the lad only caused Eileen to become e'en more fond of him. In any case, the last thing I heard before I had to flicker away was her saying that if he tried to interfere with the wedding, she would just run away and marry the man anyway. Sadly, I did not hear his response to that, as Drusus was coming rather close to my little corner, and since I did choose to visit unannounced and unremarked, as well, I thought it most discreet to leave before I was noticed."

"You were in his house?" Phoebe asked, looking alarmed.

"Just outside it, getting a wee keek," Siofre said. "Dinna trespass exactly . . . simply didn't announce myself, jouked beneath the window, and then left without knocking...I doubt that anyone would have stayed after hearing that man thundering on so."

"I wish you would not do such things," Johannes said with a slight grimace. "It seems risky."

Siofre shrugged. "I thought I might learn something of value...and before I arrived, I had not decided *not* to knock. I thought I would simply see what the situation was before I stepped up to the door."

"And if he had seen you?" Lachina asked curiously. "What would you have said?"

"Just that I was stopping 'round to give him friendly advance notice that he'd be formally notified by the Wizengamot that I was defending Butterworth and would be calling for his neighbourly testimony," Siofre said. "But he dinna see me...and I was Disillusioned, in any case...and no excuse was necessary."

"Was it useful?" Johannes asked. "Did you learn anything you may use?"

Siofre paused to eat a bite of fish. "Not there. Not precisely. But it has helped me decide a course to take."

"What is that?" Lydia asked.

"We'll speak of it soon, we two, later. We dinna want to spoil our dinner with too much talk of such things. I would rather hear, anyhow, what you have done today, all your preparations for the week, and how Brian has got on with the plumbing so far."

Lydia said that Brian Mackintosh had worked about three hours on the plumbing, doing what he could with charms, and the skretchin seemed to be gone, but that Gweller would fetch him again the next day, and bring more pipe and other supplies. "He'll have a lot of the work done before Thursday, but he said he won't be able to finish until next week, after the party, and then he'll get a start on the new plumbing in the orchard cottage, as well."

"Very good," Siofre said, nodding. "And the other arrangements?"

Lydia recounted her latest activities in readying rooms and seeing to food procurement and preparation, as well as naming a few others who had decided at the last minute that they were also coming to the estate's bonfire rather than the celebration held on the island.

"The northie Tyrees will all be here...Donald is over his annual bout of the raging roupies, so he and Norma will be coming with old Rory and the others. Philomena's bringing her great-nephew along with her...a boy named . . . let me think . . . something a bit outlandish, it was . . . Dill? Basil? Alfalfa? No . . . ah, yes, *Coriander*. I think she wants him to meet some witches outside of pureblood society. She said he's a good lad, well-spoken and polite, educated at Beauxbatons, so I'm trusting her," Lydia added when Siofre raised an eyebrow. "Then Minerva owled this afternoon and said that Albus will actually be able to come on Thursday night, though he probably won't be able to stay overnight." She hesitated a moment, then, after taking a fortifying swallow of wine, Lydia added, "And another old friend of yours also sent an owl today saying he'd be here."

"Who, then?" Siofre asked after waiting a moment for the old friend's name to be added to the list.

"Sorley."

"Sorley Mòr?" Siofre asked, her fork stalled halfway to her mouth.

"Yes. He's coming Thursday afternoon. I think he plans to stay on for young Murdoch's party on Saturday, as well."

Siofre chewed her fish and nodded.

"I haven't seen Sorley Mòr in a long time," Phoebe said. "Not since . . . well, I think he came to Grandfather's funeral, but other than that, I think it must be at least ten years, maybe more."

"He's oft away," Siofre said.

"But he also spends a lot of time on the island still," Lachina said. "I see him now and again when I'm there. You must, too, Siofre."

Siofre picked up her bell and rang for the next course.

"Who is Sorley Mòr?" Johannes asked.

"One of the cousins." Malcolm smirked. "He used to call on Grandmother Siofre when I was a boy. That was before Herbert, of course. Seemed a good sort to me. Used to take me out to the standing stones on the island, and he'd play and sing and teach me some of the old songs. He gave me my first penny whistle, and I still have the drum he helped me to make when I was eight."

"Oh, do you have it here?" Phoebe asked. "I haven't heard you drum in years, it seems. You could play it this week!"

Malcolm shook his head. "Nay, it's down at the Cliffs. But I could pop down and fetch it. There will be better drummers here this week than I, though."

"Still, bring it along," Lachina said. "I especially love it when all the drummers come together and play...sends shivers all over me. Yours will add one more voice to the drumming."

"All right...and maybe we can teach this new Tyree to play a wee bit of something, eh? Start him on my drum!"

"Nein. No. I am not musical. I appreciate it only," Johannes said.

"A tune or two, then...a good song," Phoebe said, "something in German, perhaps?"

Johannes blinked. "I do not sing. I do not know lyrics. Only a few. Nothing for a party."

"Then it'll be dancing we'll have you at," Lachina said, grinning at Johannes. "Some good Scottish ceilidh dancing!"

Siofre chuckled at Johannes's expression. "Dinna perturb the lad. He'll have fun enough in his own way."

"So are you of Tyree now?" Phoebe asked, reaching for a cheese biscuit.

"Aye, but only since a few days." Johannes quirked a small smile. "I am like a newborn here."

"We'll have you feeling right at home at the party, won't we, Phoebe? You'll feel like a real member of the family by the end of the weekend," Lachina said. "We'll introduce you around. Siofre will certainly see to it that you are properly introduced to everyone, I'm sure, but we'll make sure that you meet everyone...or at least, the more enjoyable folk."

"We only invite the enjoyable ones," Lydia said. She thought for a moment, her brow furrowed. "Of course, sometimes others ~~do~~ come. Can't turn away family, after all. And it is open to any Tyree, always understood to be...at least the Beltane celebration is. Not everyone's staying for the birthday party on Saturday."

"But Sorley Mòr is?" Johannes asked, examining the figs and cheese on the plate that Phoebe had passed to him.

"I think so," Lydia replied. "He's a very old friend, as well as a Tyree...a Mackintosh, actually, but Tyree clan Mackintoshes, and his mother was a Tyree, too, wasn't she, Siofre? Your father's first cousin, if I remember right."

"Aye," Siofre said.

"I look forward to seeing him," Malcolm said. "I can show him my Singing Stones."

"Where hae you put him, then?" Siofre asked.

"He'll be staying over at the old gatehouse with a few other Mackintoshes and a couple Mackenzies," Lydia replied.

Siofre nodded. "He should be most comfortable there."

Lydia twitched a smile. "I thought so."

"Which Mackenzies are you putting up in the gatehouse?" Siofre asked.

"Douglas and Alasdair."

"I know them, I believe," Johannes said, "if they are the brothers I taught a few years ago."

"Aye, that's them," Siofre said. "A bit rowdy, but basically good lads. But good to have put them in the gatehouse, Lydia."

"I thought that Sorley Mòr might be a sobering influence on them," Lydia said with a twinkle in her eye.

At that, Siofre and Malcolm both laughed loudly, and Lachina grinned.

"If you want a good influence on those two Gryffies," Malcolm said, "better to put in old Bridie and Auntie Sara."

Siofre chuckled. "They'd likely just run away, affrighted of those two old witches."

"Hamish and Fern Mackintosh will be staying in the gatehouse, as well," Lydia said. "I thought that Sorley would enjoy spending a little time with his niece and nephew."

"It's their first anniversary soon," Phoebe said. "We should do something for them, maybe on Friday?"

Siofre shrugged. "An ye like. I'll leave that to Lydia to decide. I don't want anything to interfere with young Murdoch's party on Saturday, though. It's the first one we've celebrated here in twenty years, so I want it to be special for him."

"Of course," Phoebe said with a nod. "Their anniversary isn't for another few weeks, anyway. We could do something closer to the time."

"If they're not celebrating it just by themselves," Lydia said. "See what they'd want. They may simply want to spend the day alone together . . . *celebrating*." She winked.

Phoebe smiled. "I wouldn't want to interfere with their enjoyment of their anniversary, of course!"

"By the time you and Declan marry, you'll probably not even want a honeymoon," Lydia said with a sigh. "And your first anniversary...if I ever live to see it...will not still be filled with the flush of new love and discovery. You're already past that." She sighed again.

Phoebe smiled at her grandmother and reached over and patted her arm. "No, we're not past that yet, Grandma, and I'm sure you'll see us marry...in due course...and celebrate many anniversaries with us!"

"Besides," Lachina interjected, "Fern and Hamish knew each other from childhood, and they're still as eager a young couple as I've ever seen."

Siofre chuckled. "I remember their wedding. Seemed they could scarcely wait to be off and away from the rest of us."

Malcolm grinned. "Well, Fern had been insistent that they spend the month before the wedding apart, if you get my meaning, so they were rather keen to begin their

honeymoon, Hamish especially."

The others laughed. As the desserts appeared on the table, though, there was a loud clap of thunder.

"We're getting a storm," Lachina said. "No more garden tours today, I'd say."

"I will be glad to continue them tomorrow," Johannes said. "You will be here?"

"In the afternoon. I have to go into the shop in the morning. I have a few commissions I'm working on, and I also have a large piece that I'm trying to finish in time for a show and competition in London this summer. But I'll return here straight from Aberdeen, then after lunch, we can have a nice afternoon, walking through the gardens."

"I'd love that," Phoebe said. "I do love this place, and Grandma tells me you've done a lot since you arrived...and just the little I've seen has been impressive."

"It is a beautiful place," Johannes said, "and your aunt has provided me with much guidance. I am pleased to be able to draw out some of the beauty that is already here and to add a little more where I can."

There was another bright flash of lightning followed almost immediately by a loud crack of thunder.

"I hope you don't plan to Apparate home tonight, Malcolm," Lydia said worriedly. "You might Splinch."

Malcolm shook his head. "I could have Gluffy bring me back, but we might as well stay the night."

"Excellent!" Lachina said. "Now that you're not in Aberdeen any longer, I hardly see you anymore...you might as well be off on your wanderings as at home here in Scotland."

Malcolm gave a crooked grin. "Well, Hogsmeade's as close to Aberdeen as Aberdeen is to Hogsmeade. You could always come by and see me!"

"True enough," Lachina said with a grin, "but I do miss you dropping by the shop and paying me surprise visits."

"You just miss some of the little gifts I'd bring you," Malcolm said.

"Gifts? The last I remember, I paid you a good ten Galleons for that piece of petrified wood you brought by."

"Aye, and that 'piece' was a nice-sized log, and it had some very pretty colours in it...and I challenge you to find any such prize anywhere for so little," Malcolm replied. "And I gave you a number of very nice crystals, too, and that Mackled Malaclaw shell."

"All right, you've got me there," Lachina said, laughing. "But I'm glad you'll be staying tonight."

"So am I," Lydia said. "Does everyone want to go into the music room now?" She looked around hopefully.

"Aye, that would be pleasant," Johannes said.

"Sounds good to me," Phoebe said, pushing back from the table.

"Malcolm had said something earlier about a piece you're writing for Bertrand and Sally...may we hear it?" Lachina asked.

"Of course! I am still polishing it a bit, and it's a pity that Morgan's not here, as there's a part for violin now, but you can have a listen and let me know what you think...Malcolm's joining on the recorder, too."

"I will go up to my study and finish some work," Siofre said, "but I may be down later."

"Must you, Aunt Siofre?" Phoebe asked.

"Weren't you working all day?" Malcolm added.

"She was, since very early," Johannes said.

"Then stay," Lachina urged.

"I still have things to do now, childer," Siofre said briskly. "Much of my work today will be for naught if I don't do more now...and that would be a waste."

"Come, now, leave Siofre be," Lydia said as Phoebe opened her mouth to protest. "She'll join us when she can. Let's just go into the music room now and let her get her work done."

"Come see me before you retire, Lydia, if I am not down afore then," Siofre said. "Just a thing or two to discuss with you."

~*~*~*~*~

Rain rattled against the windows as Siofre wrote in her journal, the one lamp on her desk providing the only illumination as her quill scratched away, outlining steps taken and plans laid, and including a row of figures tallying expenses. She was just subtracting those she had decided not to charge to Butterworth, as they were not strictly necessary to his defence...and some would call them excessively diligent...when she paused. There was another light rap on her door.

Siofre set her quill in its holder and raised her wand, flicking it as she swivelled her wooden desk chair to face the door. She had expected Lydia, but she guessed from the gentle tapping that this was not she.

"Honnie."

"Siofre. I thought you might come join us for a while. Phoebe is playing the piano, Lydia has pulled out a guitar, and Malcolm is playing his penny whistle and singing...not at the same time, of course. The audience is smaller than the performance, although Lachina knows many of the songs and sings along."

"Ach, Honnie, it has been a long day..."

"More reason to join us. If you do not, you will only work more and make the day longer. Surely you have finished what you must. Come down, sit with us, relax before bed. You will sleep the better for it," Johannes said.

"I still have just one or two more things I must do," Siofre said.

"In the morning, when you're fresh. Come down, join us. Sit beside me," Johannes replied.

Siofre hesitated.

"You received my letter?"

"Aye, yesterday evening. Kiera brought it straightaway."

Johannes stepped into the room and closed the door behind him, shutting off the sounds of distant song. "I hope I did not presume too much in my letter, but it was true that I missed you this weekend. It seemed you might also have become accustomed to my company, and glad to have it, too. I wished you to know that your company . . . it is what I will always seek and rather have than any other." In the warm lamplight, his blush was barely evident, but his eyes did not waver from hers.

"You did not presume too much, Honnie," Siofre said softly. She nodded. "I will come down for a while. The figures can wait, and perhaps the conversation with Lydia, as well."

"If I may ask, the conversation with Lydia, what does it concern? May I help in any way?" Johannes asked as Siofre turned and closed her large journal and then turned and faced him again.

"You may ask . . . but help, I dinna know. Perhaps, if Lydia wishes to speak about it. She may need someone to confide in." Siofre removed her glasses and set them down on a stack of books. She gestured toward the other chair, and Johannes sat. "I have decided to have Drusus Prince sent to Azkaban. It may not be my place to decide such a thing, to meddle in such a way, but . . ." She shook her head. "I do not have any prescience, but as I stood there, listening to Eileen and her father this afternoon, I thought that perhaps the only way the lass will ever find any happiness will be if she has some freedom from him now, if she can marry this Muggle lad who seems to love her, spend the first months of her married life in peace . . . p'raps she can break wholly free from Drusus, have her ain family with that nasty man nowhere nearby. I . . . I do not do this lightly, and I have many misgivings. It could be for the best, or I could be wreaking havoc on many lives. But I think that if Drusus is absent from her life for a while, Eileen might have an opportunity, at least. What she makes of it, that is up to her, though I think she'd do well not to let Drusus back into her life once he's out of it."

"And what of Drusus? I do not know how you can plan to send him to Azkaban when you have no direct say in such a thing, and yet I do believe that you could . . . you could manage it somehow. But if the man is sent to that prison, one of the worst in the wizarding world, what will that create for his life? And to decide such a thing"....Johannes shook his head..."do you know that he has committed crimes to warrant it?"

"I am certain that he has in the past, and if Drusus has changed his ways recently, then I will not find it possible to send him away. But if he still is dealing in Dark magic, as I believe, I have set things in motion for him to be exposed, my own wee bit o' joukerie-pawkerie. I have aye jaloused that Mabelle Prince's death was something other than a simple workshop accident, though whether his wife's death was merely a result of some carelessness on his part or was outright murder, I could not say; I only have suspicions. But he brings misery into lives and he willingly traffics in Dark objects used for nefarious and gruesome purposes. That is sufficient."

Johannes stood and held out his hand. "I was right. You need to come down and spend time with us. You do not want to fall asleep thinking of such things. Come, sit beside me, keep me company, and listen to Malcolm sing of drunken Glumbumbles and Hinkypunks in cranberry bogs. Then you will sleep well."

Siofre looked up at him and smiled. "You are right." She took his hand and stood. "I'll sit beside you and you'll learn the song of the drunken Glumbumble...you need not be able to sing well or remember many words, as it's meant to be remembered and sung e'en when you're more'n a wee bit stocious. It's one of Malcolm's, and complete nonsense, of course."

Johannes returned her smile. "Then precisely what you require tonight, I think."

"Lead on, Magister!"

Chapter Thirty: Coming Competition

Chapter 30 of 32

Johannes meets another Tyree, and he learns more about Sorley Mòr. Chapter features Johannes Birnbaum, Siofre Tyree, and Jacob Tyree.



Chapter Thirty: Coming Competition

Tuesday proceeded much as Monday had, Johannes leading Lachina and Phoebe on a tour of the gardens and then showing them the new bere field. Lachina had decided to stay for the garden tour that morning and go into Aberdeen in the afternoon to spend a few hours working in the shop. Malcolm joined them all for a while, but then left for the afternoon, Apparating to the McGonagall Cliffs to fetch his bodhran and to have lunch with his parents. Lachina and Phoebe were having lunch at the lodge with the McGonagalls, so they Disapparated from the bere field directly to the lodge. Johannes, however, decided to walk a while before Apparating to the main house.

He had seen Siofre only briefly at breakfast, when she ate a bowl of porridge and drank a few cups of tea before leaving for the morning. He'd had the impression that she would return at midday but would likely still need to work the entire afternoon. Johannes wished that he could lend her a hand with her work, but he knew almost nothing about British wizarding law, and he had the sense that he probably did not want to know too much about what Siofre was doing to get Drusus arrested and sent away to Azkaban. He trusted her and her judgment, and he believed that she would never manufacture evidence outright...she had said, after all, that if Drusus had changed his ways, then she would be unable to send him to prison...but he knew that even she was uneasy with the idea of meddling so thoroughly in someone else's life. Likely Siofre felt freer to do so because of the Prince connection to the Tyree family, as well as out of concern for young Eileen. It would be good for the girl if she could escape the influence of her overbearing father for at least a time, particularly now at the start of her new life as an adult witch with a fiancé and plans to marry him soon.

The best way he could help Siofre, Johannes decided, was to continue to look after things at the estate for her, and to give garden tours to her various kin when they were interested. Of course, Johannes had the distinct impression that Siofre was also trying to avoid him...not *avoid* him, precisely, but to encourage him to socialise more with the guests and less with her. After what Lydia had told him in their private chat in the kitchen a few days before, he also imagined that Siofre hoped to have him find one of her young relatives attractive enough to draw him away from her. Or perhaps she wasn't hoping for it to happen, but only wished to see it happened if it made him happy. Johannes certainly hoped that Siofre didn't wish to be rid of him, and it seemed unlikely that she did.

No doubt that Lachina was a witty and attractive witch, and much like Siofre in some ways, but she was not Siofre, and Johannes was quite certain that he would meet no

witch whose charms could cause him to cease feeling the pull toward Siofre. The force that drew him to Siofre was elemental; it was more than a mere sexual attraction or intellectual interest. It was not the sort of interest that could be easily distracted by some witty, attractive young witch...it would not be distracted at all, as far Johannes was concerned, let alone easily.

If Siofre's feelings for him did not reflect his own for her, if her affection were simply the warmth of a sister or an aunt ... then he would find a way to cope with that position in her life. But he did not believe that her feelings for him were of that sort. She did react to him as a woman interested in something more than friendship with him, and for a witch who was as reserved as she normally was, even toward those whom she loved deeply, the fact that she touched him as she did, and as often as she did, was very telling. He still felt his pulse quicken as he remembered the sensation of her hand slipping down his chest from his shoulder, coming to rest over his heart. The mere memory of it caused him almost to forget to breathe.

He would be polite and friendly toward all of Siofre's relatives and friends, witches and wizards alike, but he would return always to her. She would surely come to see that his affection for her was not some short-lived infatuation. And when she did, then he would offer to court her. She was a traditional witch in many ways, and she would respond to courtship, he thought. As for his position in the household as the "gardener," he doubted that would be an obstacle...at least, he doubted that it would matter at all to Siofre. And he would not forget that although he had not the property or station that Siofre possessed, he was an Herbology master and a respected academic. What others might think of it ... Johannes shrugged to himself. He would not concern himself with that. What others thought could hardly affect them there on the estate.

He had reached the artist's cottage, which was to be Minerva's, before he decided to Apparate to the house lest he miss lunch or keep others waiting for it. First, though, he took a quick look at the cottage gardens. They would need a bit of tending that week, guests or no guests. That afternoon might be the best time for it.

Johannes glanced up at the quaint stone-and-timber house, now with fresh curtains in the windows, and wondered what Minerva would think of her gift. It was a fine present, no doubt, but when he had taught with her, it had seemed to him that Minerva preferred to distance herself somewhat from her Tyree heritage, though he didn't understand why. She was certainly as independent and strong-willed as any Tyree witch, and she had a deep love of the Highlands and her own home. Johannes shrugged. Perhaps he was wrong, and she would welcome having a home here on the estate of Raven's Ring...Johannes had given up trying to pronounce the word for "raven" in Gaelic, though Lydia had repeated it for him a few times. To his ears, it sounded more like something a raven would croak than an actual word.

He Apparated to the drive in front of the house out of habit, and he smiled to see Siofre emerging from the opening in the hedgerow that led to the pond and the new water gardens he had created. She wasn't alone, though. A short, grey-haired wizard with a stubbly beard, wearing a kilt and white blouse, a plaid slung over his shoulder, was speaking intently to her, gesturing slightly, drawing a thread in the air, it appeared, then reaching over his head as if to grasp at some hanging fruit, but all the while, his gaze on Siofre's face. Johannes wondered whether this man were the Sorley Mackintosh whom he'd heard about. Not a very prepossessing-looking wizard, but looks could be deceiving, as he was well aware.

Siofre saw Johannes, and she smiled, nodding. The other wizard's attention was drawn to him, and a friendly smile crossed his face, making him look much younger, an open warmth in his bright blue eyes. Johannes could not help but smile more broadly in return.

"Johannes, come meet my cousin Jacob," Siofre called. As Johannes approached, Siofre said, "This is Johannes Birnbaum, our estate Herbologist."

"Aye, P'r'fess'r Birnbaum!" Jacob greeted him. "We're hearing much about you." The older man held out his hand.

Johannes shook hands, noting the man's strength and the callouses on his palm...the man did not shirk from manual labour despite being a wizard, and Johannes immediately approved of the man. "How do you do, Mr Tyree."

Jacob laughed at that. "No 'mister,' lad! And 'deed, not once there are more Tyrees around...you'll have every man turnin' his head t' see an yer wantin' him!"

"Or not," Siofre said with a cackle. "Doubt many are used to such an address."

Jacob nodded. "I be 'Young Jacob,' and me great-uncle, he's 'Big Jacob.' His gran'son, he's 'Jacob, Maire's boy.'"

"No need for you to remember any of that, though, Honnie," Siofre said, slipping her hand round his elbow as they walked up the drive to the front door. "It just helps keep the family sorted a bit when there's many named alike."

"Besides," Jacob added, "they'll likely not be usein' English, neither."

"It is like Sorley Mòr," Johannes said. "Malcolm told me that 'Mòr' just means that someone's older, or perhaps larger, than another one of the same name. I had thought it was a middle name."

The two Tyrees chuckled slightly at that, but Jacob nodded, "I'm glad yer interested in our language."

"I shall never master it, but I hope to remedy some of my ignorance of it," Johannes said, "and to learn at least some common words. It has a strength and beauty to it, though it seems sometimes impenetrable in its unfamiliarity."

Siofre gave his elbow a gentle, warm squeeze, and he looked down and smiled at her.

"Eh, does this mean that Sorley will be here this week?" Jacob asked.

"Aye," Siofre responded. "Lydia said he will arrive for the bonfire and stay through for young Murdoch's birthday."

"Hmm ... hmm." Jacob seemed to give Siofre an appraising glance, but said nothing more.

"Come," Siofre said briskly as they reached the front doors, "we must freshen up for lunch and not keep Lydia and Zoe waiting!"

"After lunch, P'r'fess'r, an you have the time, I'd like to take a look at that corn you planted."

"It would be my pleasure to show you the bere field, and you might have some advice for me. And you must call me 'Johannes' if I am to call you 'Jacob,'" Johannes added.

Perhaps Jacob could tell him more of this Sorley Mòr than Malcolm had. Even the night before when he'd asked his friend more about the man, he'd heard little of value...though he had the distinct impression that Siofre had chosen her quiet, retiring Herbert McKenna over Sorley Mòr, to Malcolm's puzzlement. Malcolm apparently thought him a fine fellow and was looking forward to seeing him.

Johannes hadn't been able to tell at all what Siofre felt for the man. She had seemed ... *not surprised* precisely that Sorley was coming that week, but she hadn't anticipated it, and despite what Lachina had said about Sorley being often on Tìree when she was there, Siofre had not said whether or not she had seen much of him recently. She didn't appear to dislike him, however...Johannes doubted that she would have laughed at Lydia's joke about him being a sobering influence on the Mackenzie boys if she disliked the wizard.

He wished he knew precisely what Siofre's relationship with Sorley Mackintosh was, and how she felt about him. Given Malcolm's affection for his grandmother, Johannes couldn't imagine him being so enthusiastic about seeing Sorley if his grandmother disliked him...at least not so openly enthusiastic right there in front of her, simply out of respect for her feelings. It could be that he didn't have much insight into his grandmother's relationship with Sorley; after all, he'd been just a boy when Siofre had married Herbert, and he'd know Sorley as a mentor, the man who had taught him the old songs and helped him make his first bodhran.

Lydia probably knew the state of affairs better. She and Siofre were close, and Siofre had spent much time at the Tyree estate both before and after her marriage to Herbert. Lydia could probably tell him something of their history. Whether she had any more insight into Siofre's current feelings for the man was another matter. She had, however, announced his attendance as though it would have some meaning for Siofre, and despite the fact that the man was a fairly close relative, and one of the older

ones, as well, he was being housed in the gatehouse rather than in the main house. Perhaps that was simply a matter of organisation; that may have been the only place with a comfortable bed for the older wizard by the time he had told Lydia he was coming. Johannes had noted that there had been no mention of a wife, either.

Johannes was looking forward to meeting this Sorley Mackintosh almost more than he was to meeting Lydia's son and daughter-in-law, though his anticipation of meeting the wizard was less pleasurable. If the wizard had once been a suitor, he might think that now that Herbert had been decently buried and mourned, he could take up his cause with Siofre again. It seemed slightly absurd on the surface to think that a man may have carried a torch for Siofre for four decades, but given his own feelings for Siofre, Johannes could easily imagine such a thing. He would certainly never fall out of love with Siofre no matter how much time passed.

Yes, he would have to learn more of Mackintosh, and something beyond him being a singer of the old songs. It would be awkward to ask Lydia any direct questions, though, and she was astute enough to know why he was asking them, and that might colour her responses to him. Jacob, though he was younger than Siofre and Lydia, likely knew more of the man, and from his laconic response to the news of Sorley's attendance at the bonfire, Johannes believed he also had some knowledge of Siofre's relationship with him. He would be one to ask a few casual questions of, perhaps as they surveyed the corn field. Johannes nodded to himself. He would be prepared for the arrival of this man.

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Johannes found Jacob a canny wizard with an excellent feel for the soil and for the bere. Jacob recommended planting peas and beans on one-third of the field every three years, rotating which portion of the field was planted each year. If the estate began farming in earnest, Jacob thought that the fields could easily be six or seven times the size of the one small experimental plot that Johannes had begun.

"Ye'll be sellin' to Muggles then, too, no doubt," Jacob said. "'Tis a bit trickier dealing with them, but if yer wanting any help, the Tiree council has good markets for fish, corn, cheese, an' wool. For a share, we'll use our connections to sell it for you."

"I would need to consult Siofre," Johannes said. "And although I do not know her long-term plans for the future of the bere field or for the estate, I believe she wishes to have the estate more self-sufficient than it has recently been."

"Aye. Though for it to be 'self-sufficient,' it will need work, an' hard work, but you seem equal to it. Get a few more Tyree families to move here, and you'll be in good shape, if they're of the farming and fishing sort and not like the McGonagalls with their printing presses and potions, or Shennachie like young Malcolm. House-elves are fine for the work, but 'tain't the same, is it? Don't know house-elves meself, but seems to me that they serve well but don't have much foresight or ... or what's it ... *enterprise*," Jacob said with a nod. "Aye, you'll get the estate in shape, laddie."

"I do not know how long I will be here, although I will be glad to continue to oversee the gardens, at least, as long as Siofre wishes."

"You dinna know ..." Jacob looked puzzled. "Siofre speaks in terms of years when she talks of the gardens, the coppices, the corn. I thought you were staying on a while."

"As long as she will have me."

"An' yer a Tyree now, I hear," Jacob said, seeming to ignore Johannes's statement, "so you'll always have ties to us, and to Siofre 'specially. You may be called 'pon e'en an you leave the estate."

"I will always return if I must leave. If I may stay, I will not leave."

"Aye, you love the land, too, I can see it. And the estate needs you. Dinna look further for work. 'Tis here for you." Jacob shrugged. "O' course, I canna tell you what to do. But the only place better than this is me ain farm, smaller though it be, but 'tis on Tiree, and the island's mine as much as our farm is, and I'd not leave Tiree. You oughtn't leave here, not when yer needed and you love it. Why seek aught else?" Jacob asked, gesturing broadly at the surrounding fields, hills, and sea. "What more could you want?"

"Nothing more than what is here," Johannes said softly. "You are right."

"See how things go with the crops," Jacob said, beginning to walk down from the field toward the skirt of the shore, where the land met the sea. "If you think you'd like more families livin' here as they once did, up north of here on the shore there, speak t' Siofre. She can let word out that there's homes to be had here. There are still some as would prefer t' live on Tyree land than live amongst Muggles, e'en over in Meath. There's only so much land on the island, yet there's aye a family wantin' t' return home to live an' raise their childer. A smidge trickier here than on the island, with that Ministry o' the English, but Siofre knows how t' deal with them, an' how to let our childer be raised up independent of them."

"Siofre attended Hogwarts," Johannes said.

"Aye, an' she learned enough of the English to be a good shield for us an' all, as did her father and grandfather before her. Her mother, too, was a Hogwarts student for some few years, I think. Lovely woman. Did you ever know Brigid? Nay? A pity. She was a beautiful, gentle woman to her dyin' day. Part English herself, somewhere. Her gran'daddy, I think."

"I believe Lydia's grandson's family lives among Muggles happily, and they live in England, as well," Johannes said, wondering what Jacob's thoughts were on that.

"Oh, aye, but Elisabeth's parents are both Muggles and live nearby," Jacob said. "'Tis only right to respect her parents and have Liam come to know them, too. Someday, the lad will return here, though, and he'll marry and have childer, himself, and they'll know and love this place and all that is Tyree. There will be a strong new generation here. Come back in fifty years...nay, stay here and watch...and you'll see. You can help to prepare for it, lad. Yer doin' fine now. We Tyree are lucky you joined us."

"Even though I am foreign?" Johannes asked with a smile and a twinkle in his eye.

Jacob laughed. "Aye, you just bring us some new ideas, an' that's not aye a bad thing. But you're Tyree now, whether you'll ever be Scottish, it doesn't matter. You're Tyree and becomin' a Highlander an' all. An' if any try to tell you aught else"...Jacob shook his head..."they be the fools, man, and better that Siofre doesn't hear it!"

Johannes laughed. "And what of this Sorley Mackintosh?" he asked. "Will he dispute whether I am truly Tyree?"

"Nay, never! Not when 'twas Siofre herself who brought you into our clan. He may sometimes be a bit contrary, Sorley Mòr might be, but he is no fool. An Siofre joined you to the clan, he'll honour it and be friendly to you on her account." Jacob quirked a grin and winked. "Even an she be not as friendly toward him as he would like."

"How so? They are well-acquainted, I have thought, and Malcolm calls him one of the cousins."

Jacob chuckled. "Oh, aye, he's a cousin, and he and his family were close to Siofre's when they were children. People thought they'd marry, I understand, but Siofre was away at that school, and Sorley was here...on the island...and they never did. I was just a bairn when Siofre's husband died...Collum McGonagall...but me brother's older, and he says that Sorley tried again then, but Siofre had a wee one, herself, me cousin Merwyn, and dinna want to marry again yet."

"Malcolm spoke as though Siofre married Herbert in preference to Sorley when she did remarry."

"Did he say that ... P'raps 'twould seem so to a boy. Aye. But I think Malcolm would have preferred her to marry Sorley, himself, rather than Herbert, if she had to marry. Malcolm was attached to his gran, and he had little in common with Herbert, and Sorley was the sort of man a lad would look up to, especially an active, adventurous lad like Malcolm. But Siofre knew what she wanted from her life."

"And she wanted Herbert."

"Mmmm ... I oughtn't say more, but ... nay, I'd never have said that she wanted Herbert. She wanted a life with Herbert, and Herbert loved her. And she got her daughter with him. P'raps 'twasn't a love match as the stories tell of, but 'twas, I think, a good life for them both."

"It was a pragmatic match?" Johannes asked, a peculiar feeling coming over him.

"Dinna think, lad, that Siofre was cold toward Herbert. She repaid his devotion with her own, and more she received from him than she would have ... than she would have from some who might be more eager but less constant. She may have sacrificed some in her marriage, but she gained from it, too."

"And this Sorley Mòr, he was more eager but less constant?"

Jacob smiled. "The bere will do well here, and yer wards and charms are good ones. There's none I'd add. But an you could show me that bird ward, I would like to learn it."

"Aye, you will learn it before you leave, then," Johannes said, accepting the change in topic, sensing that Jacob had already said more than he had thought he should, and not wanting himself to press or to seem unduly interested in sordid gossip.

"Good, cousin," Jacob replied. "An' I may teach it to me brother?"

"Of course! To anyone, but especially to any Tyree," Johannes said, still distracted by the thought that Sorley may have some thought of wooing Siofre a third time...and three times is the charm, they say. Perhaps Sorley hoped for success this time; once he courted her as a youth, then as a young man, and now as an older one. He would be more constant with age, though perhaps no less ardent. The thought of Sorley courting Siofre with passion and gallantry made Johannes go cold. He looked over at Jacob. "If there is any knowledge I may share with you, I will be happy to do so."

Jacob smiled. "Siofre did find us a good Tyree. Thank you. We might find ways to take advantage of that...you taught at Hogwarts. Could you teach some of our young witches and wizards some of the charms you taught at the school?"

"I taught only a few charms, more knowledge of different magical plants. Much memorisation and some practical work with the plants. Only the older students, the ones who took the advanced examinations, learned many charms. But yes, I can teach the children on Tyree some things, if there is anything of value that I have to teach. No doubt your children are already well taught."

"Aye, I'd not say yer wrong there, Johannes, but there's aye new things to learn, and good for us to add them. Siofre may have ideas. She's a great one for teaching when she comes to stay on Tyree, or even visiting just to take them for a day."

"I will speak with her about it, then." And, Johannes thought, he would also speak to Lydia about Sorley Mòr Mackintosh and find out whether he needed to worry about the man or not. He would not wish Siofre unhappiness, nor another marriage such as the one with Herbert, however comfortable it had been...he did not want her to take him out of some sort of pragmatism simply because he was good for the estate...and yet he would not want to lose her to this Sorley Mòr, however eager the other wizard might be. No, he would be ardent and he would be constant, and he wished to win her. If Sorley Mòr wished to court Siofre, he would find it a contest, whether he knew it or not. And Johannes was ready.

Chapter Thirty-One: Behind the Scenes with Siofre

Chapter 31 of 32

Siofre has set into motion plans that will raise up one man and improve his life—if he takes advantage of his new opportunities—and bring ruin to another, at least temporarily. Drusus Prince is a dangerous wizard, however, and Siofre worries about the success of her scheme and the risks inherent should it go wrong.

Chapter features Siofre Tyree, Rory MacCrain, and Gerald Mackintosh. Drusus Prince, Eileen, and Aloysius Fletcher (Dung's daddy) lurk off-stage.



Chapter Thirty-One: Behind the Scenes with Siofre

Siofre raised her hand slightly, gaining the attention of Rory MacCrain, the ancient publican of the Bugbear's Bannock. He shuffled over to her, his green slippers scraping over the stone floor, a broad smile on his round face, his blue eyes bright. His white hair stood out from his head like the jagged rays on a child's drawing of a star, his short beard was patchy, and the blue-striped apron he wore over his threadbare yellow robes was stained, but despite MacCrain's dishevelled appearance and the shabbiness of his pub, Siofre had always liked the old wizard.

"I'm ready for that drink now, Rory."

"Aye, I thought you might be, after that guest o' yours was gone. A bite to eat, too?"

"Nay, just a ginger wine." For medicinal purposes, Siofre thought to herself wryly.

"No firewhisky? Or I have a nice single malt, put away for special guests," MacCrain offered.

"Too early in the day for me," Siofre replied.

"Crabbie's, then," MacCrain said with a cheerful nod.

"And you'll join me in a glass."

MacCrain's grin grew impossibly broader. "Thank'ee! I'll do that." He picked up the heavy, blue, crumb-covered plate and the empty stoneware mug from the table with one hand, then pulled a somewhat soiled cloth from his pocket with the other and wiped the rag haphazardly over the surface of the table.

He hurried off and was back a few minutes later with two glasses of green wine and a plate of stovies. Siofre again demurred when Rory offered to get her a plate, too.

"Appetite off after meeting your, um, meetin'?" he asked, using a large spoon to scoop up his meat and potatoes. It smelled strongly of onions and rosemary.

Siofre shrugged slightly and took a sip of her Crabbie's. It went down warm and spicy. She felt herself relaxing. As cool and detached as she had remained during her meeting with Fletcher, the entire business racked her nerves, and there was still much room for things to go wrong. The bottom could fall out of the cauldron, and then she'd be left with a mess to clean up.

She was sure of her plan, and as sure as she could be of Fletcher, but when dealing with a wizard like Drusus Prince, it was best to remain on guard and be prepared for anything. If everything went off without a hitch, however ... Drusus would find himself neatly trapped by his own malice and greed, Butterworth could continue caring for his winged horses unmolested, and Eileen would be free to marry her beau that very weekend without her father's interference. Siofre hadn't told this to either Lydia or Johannes, but one reason she had decided to proceed so aggressively against him was that Drusus had made quite open threats against the young Muggle whom Eileen was marrying. Whether the man planned to kill the boy or merely perform some other Dark magic upon him, Siofre was chilled to the core to hear how ruthlessly Prince spoke, and to realise how ruthlessly he would act upon an innocent, defenceless Muggle. She hoped she was not too late to save the young man and to give Eileen a chance at a happy life with him. Or at least, at a life not dominated by her father. Siofre took another swallow of the ginger wine.

"Was surprised to see that it was you who was the one meetin' Fletcher," Rory continued. He spooned some stovies into his mouth and chewed, looking thoughtful. "Hadh't seen Fletcher in ... mus' be more'n a year now. Thought he might be 'away' again. He said he had business with someone and needed a corner table, or I'd have showed him the door."

Siofre twitched a crooked smile. She doubted Rory would have kicked Aloysius Fletcher out of the pub, at least not now, while the place was quiet and nearly empty, and not if the man didn't make any trouble. The publican didn't really care much where his silver came from as long as he had enough to keep the roof over his head and his stomach full. Recognising MacCrain's curiosity, but not about to satisfy it, she simply took another sip of her drink.

"Fletcher looked happy when he left," Rory said, obliquely referring to the small, heavy bag that Siofre had shoved across the table at the man before he'd Flooded from the pub.

"Aye, he was happy enough, I think," Siofre said. Not unhappy with the Galleons she'd given him, anyway, and satisfied that he, his wife, and his son would shortly be Portkeying to New Brunswick for a visit of undetermined duration. As soon as his job was done and his testimony given, he'd be getting that Portkey...leaving from Little Tيرة to avoid any Ministry Portkey regulations or records of where they were going. Siofre had sent a letter to some distant cousins in New Brunswick asking them to keep an eye on Fletcher while he was there...she had no desire to send a criminal to plague their tiny wizarding community, and she had extracted Fletcher's promise that he would behave himself there, but the man did have a knack for finding trouble and a penchant for sneaky schemes. Those qualities, of course, were precisely what had made him valuable to her.

"I hear your nephew's coming home," Rory said, realising that Siofre was not going to share with him what business she'd had with Aloysius Fletcher.

Siofre chuckled. News spread, and the return of the Tyrees from their long sojourn on the other side of the world would certainly reach the small Portree pub quickly.

"Aye, Bertrand and Sally are coming home."

"Just in time for your ceilidh." Rory smiled and nodded. "Good timing, that!"

"Indeed. And Lydia is very happy to have them home for it. One more thing to celebrate."

"Whe' they arrivin'?" he asked around another mouthful of potatoes.

"Today, possibly. Or tomorrow."

"Hadh't you best get home, then? Welcome them proper!"

Siofre laughed. "There are plenty on hand to greet them an they arrive before I return. I have a wee bit more business afore I can return home."

"Good luck with it, then," Rory said cheerfully, draining his glass. "And your business here..."

"'Twas a minor matter," Siofre said. "Not anything anyone would notice."

Rory winked at her. "A very minor matter. I canna even remember who you were meeting."

Siofre lips twitched a brief smile. "Good man, Rory." She stood and drew her own money bag from her robe pocket. She placed a few Galleons on the table to pay for the drinks and Fletcher's meal, adding a tip twice as large as what was owed. "Thanks for the Crabbie's."

"Settles the stomach nice," Rory said with a nod. "And thank you for the drink." He looked at the Galleons on the table and his smile grew. "Tell young Bertrand to stop here soon! I want to hear about all the places he's been to!"

"I will. Good day to you, Rory."

Siofre used the pub's Floo and arrived several dizzying...and rather sooty...moments later in the Leaky Cauldron, which was beginning to fill with patrons seeking an early lunch or a late breakfast, depending on their industry or indolence. Young Tom, who was serving two pretty witches foamy glasses of butterbeer, gave her a nod as she passed by, then he tapped his right cheek. Siofre wiped at her cheek.

"No, 'tother one," Tom said. Siofre rubbed her fingers over her right cheek. They came away grey. He nodded. "Now you got it."

After drawing her wand and casting a quick charm over her robes to remove any other stray ash or soot, Siofre went to the back of the pub and briskly tapped the bricks to enter Diagon Alley. She set off quickly, not pausing to look in shop windows or entertain the idea of an ice cream at Fortescue's, although as she passed, Florean raised a hand in greeting, and she nodded in reply without breaking stride.

The sign for the *Daily Prophet* looked freshly painted, as always, though it was slightly askew. Siofre restrained her impulse to set it straight with a flick of her finger, reaching out and grasping the heavy door handle instead. The door thunked gently shut behind her. Inside, it was cool, dim, and oddly silent in the reception area. Her heels tapped against the marble floor as she crossed the expansive, empty lobby. The building had a creaky elevator, but she would take the stairs.

A young witch seated unobtrusively in the far corner of the room called out sharply, "May I help you, miss?"

Siofre stopped. *Miss*? She hadn't been a "miss" in longer than this girl's life by quite a bit. She turned stiffly to face the impertinent person, though she did not approach the desk.

"Oh, sorry, thought you were someone else," the witch said. "Adverts are on three. Obits on two. If you want the Lonely Hearts, that's on two, as well. Madam Brown's desk is right behind Obits."

Siofre merely raised her eyebrow, a gesture that was not lost on the girl despite the distance and the dimness of the lobby. The sunshine that filtered through a few long windows seemed not to illuminate the room at all, except to highlight the dust motes that floated gently through the air and to cast dun-coloured blocks of light against the dark wood panelling.

"Otherwise, you need an appointment. And you have to sign your name in the book." She moved aside her glossy magazine and poked at a large record book with one finger. "Sign your name before going up."

"I have business above," Siofre said. She turned and continued toward the doors that opened to the stairway. When the girl said nothing more, Siofre didn't hesitate, though she did think she heard a gasp of indignation as the stairwell door closed behind her. The stairway was lit by a skylight above and a series of windows, one above the other, on the back wall.

Siofre walked up to the first floor. The door opened as she reached it, and through it trundled a rotund witch, whose pink and orange paisley robes clashed with her bright red hair. The scandal queen of the paper, Mrs Forsythe...she called herself "Madam," but Vivian Forsythe had had no training beyond Hogwarts that Siofre knew of, and in her opinion, "gossip columnist" hardly qualified as a profession. Nosy old bat. Siofre had been in school with her grandmother, Lavinia Prewett, who had been the same way, but Lavinia had at least made a pretence of not being as much of a busybody as she was. Vivian actually earned money with her snooping and gossip. Siofre almost laughed at the irony as she thought that perhaps she'd been even more of a snoop and busybody that day than either of the other witches could ever dream of being. However, she was *not* a gossip.

"Madam Tyree! How very good to see you! You are looking very well! I'm surprised to see you in town!"

"I do venture into London on occasion, Vivian," Siofre said drily.

"Oh, but I hear Bertrand and Sally are back! I must invite you all for dinner one night soon. Hear all about their adventures abroad...and *what*ured them away for so *long*! And what brought them back just at *this* time!" Her eyes gleamed with the prospect of hearing some potentially juicy tittle-tattle.

Siofre suppressed a grimace. "You may owl them when they return," she replied. "Good day, Vivian."

Before Vivian could say more, Siofre had slipped past her and through the door, closing it behind her. Siofre swiftly crossed the large room, ignoring the wizards and witches working at their desks, and ducking a low-flying owl that swooped in through an open transom. She reached a plain wooden door marked with a brass nameplate, "G. Mackintosh," and knocked.

The door opened to her immediately, and Siofre stepped through as a wizard rose from his desk and pocketed his wand.

"Siofre! So good to see you. Come in," the wizard invited, stepping around his large desk to shake her hand. His hair was very curly, shiny black with a light sprinkling of white through it, and his short beard was thick and well groomed. He wore an immaculate set of navy blue pinstripe robes and polished black wingtips. His sole adornment was a small gold lapel pin with his clan crest and its motto, *Touch Not the Cat Bot a Glove*. "Tea?"

"No, thank you, Mackie," Siofre said.

"I can call for some if you'd like. Or lunch?"

"Nay, I'm expected home soon, but thank you."

"I met with that young man you mentioned to me...Terwilliger. Bumped into him at his local last week. We had quite the natter, and, as you suggested, I hinted that the newspaper business was booming with possibilities, particularly for bright young wizards. He took the opening and asked whether there were jobs going at the *Prophet*. I said there was usually something, though I couldn't say with any precision what we had available now, and invited him to owl me if he were interested. I heard from him yesterday. He said he's looking for new opportunities and is interested in learning about any openings here. I have an appointment with him this afternoon."

"You'll find a place for him here, then?" Siofre asked.

"Aye, if he has any qualifications at all and hasn't any obvious disqualifications," Mackie said with a nod. "We'll give him the standard two-month probationary period. Thought we could start him sorting unaddressed post, that sort of thing. Not much of a challenge, but he'll be busy and he'll come to know the reporters and columnists that way. If he has the aptitude and interest, we might move him over to the printing end of things to apprentice there...have to be quick and adept with charms for that, and it's usually something for a slightly younger wizard fresh from school, but we'll see. Otherwise, we'll just see how he gets on and where he might fit in. I can't promise more than that."

"That's all I'd like. And if he's not suitable here ..."

"As long as he's not done anything wrong, I'll try to help him find something else."

"Good. I'd like to see the man get a good fresh start here."

"Did the baby arrive yet?" Mackie asked.

"Aye. A few days ago. A girl."

Mackie smiled. "Good to hear. I'll have to ask him about his family so I don't have to remember to pretend not to know he has a new little one. Speaking of which, Henry and Marianne are expecting another one. A Christmas baby, the midwife says it'll be...your daughter-in-law, in fact, Madam Egidius."

Siofre smiled. "Congratulations! And how many grandchildren is this now? Five?"

"Yes, this will be the fifth."

They spoke a few more minutes about family, then Siofre rose to leave. As she got to the door, she paused. "Are you doing anything this weekend, Gerald?"

Mackie shook his head. "Nothing in particular. I thought I might do some work in the garden, perhaps have Sunday brunch with Henry and Marianne, or possibly pop down to see Annie and John. But no specific plans."

"Come for young Murdoch's birthday party on Saturday, then. It's informal...a big picnic, lots of family and friends. You can stay the night if you like." Siofre was sure Lydia would find a place for Mackie...she'd be happy to see him again. And Mackie had been a widower for a few years now; it would be good if he socialised a bit more than he did. Maybe met a nice widow.

He brightened, his grey eyes crinkling at the corners. "I'd like that. Aye, all right, I'll be there...what time?"

"Oh ... eleven o'clock, noon, whenever you like. It's informal. We'll have the picnic in the afternoon, but come earlier if you like."

Siofre took the stairs back down to the ground floor, ignoring the cold stare of the witch in the lobby, and stepped out into Diagon Alley, blinking in the sunlight and stepping out of the way of a witch pushing a pram. Time to flicker home and see whether Bertrand and Sally had arrived yet, have some lunch with whatever assortment of relatives were there that noon, and see Johannes. She smiled to herself as she found a quiet corner to Disapparate from. It might be nice to spend a little time with him that afternoon while she waited for word from Fletcher. Her smile faded at the thought of Drusus Prince, but she grasped her wand and vanished with a pop.

Chapter Thirty-Two: A Clear View

Chapter 32 of 32

Siofre meets Johannes, and she brings him to see another part of the estate. They speak together of Albus and Minerva, and of Siofre's plan for Drusus Prince. Johannes resolves to be persistent.



Chapter Thirty-Two: A Clear View

Siofre Apparated to the front of the house as she often did when the weather was fine. The gardens around the drive leading up to the house were more beautiful than she remembered them ever being, particularly at the end of April. Her mother would have loved them. There were a few odd spots that seemed to be missing something, but Johannes had told her that he had plans for the front gardens that had to wait a little longer. He had wanted them to look good in time for the party, however, and had created this temporarily. If this was temporary, Siofre could hardly imagine what his planned gardens would look like...unusually, he didn't share the plans with her, but Siofre had confidence that whatever Johannes chose to do would be suitable. Not simply suitable, but beautiful.

The wizard himself opened the door. He was wearing a set of pleated green and taupe robes rather than the trousers that he usually wore when working in the gardens. He had his broad-brimmed dark green hat in his hand, and he waved it at her as he smiled. Siofre found herself smiling back and her heart beating faster at the sight of him. Could she really give him up to another witch? No ... but she would let him be free to choose another if he wished. She wanted him to come to her freely, but even more than that, she wanted him to be happy, she wanted to see him happy, even if with another.

"Good day, Magister," she said as he came down the walk toward her and she left the drive for the flagstone walk. "You are leaving?"

"Nay, Siofre, I was about to take a stroll before lunch. The ladies are above in the North Tower, and Multry shoosed me from the kitchen. I was somewhat *le trop*," He smiled.

"May I join you?"

"Aber natürlich," Johannes replied with a genial nod. "I always welcome your companionship."

Siofre placed her hand on his elbow. "Shall we stroll somewhere ... a bit away?" she suggested.

"Aye, as you wish."

"I have the place for it ..." Siofre nodded and put her other hand on his arm. "I will take you there." She saw agreement in the tilt of his head, and she tightened her grip and Disapparated with him.

Johannes blinked and looked about himself. They were on a high mountain, as high as Ben Tyree, at least; its peak was rocky and bare except of snow and ice. As on Ben Tyree, an ancient but intact hill fort stood on its highest rise. To the north were more mountains much like this one, and no dwelling to be seen. Off to the west, white-crested waves jostled with the rocky coast, where the remains of several small cottages stared bleakly toward the tumult. Below him, the mountain fell away to a valley, deep, rounded, and gentle. Johannes's Herbolgist's eyes could see the verdancy that lay waiting for spring to reach its sheltered bowl. The mountain itself had sheer drops and many falsely rolling slopes that were suddenly broken by looming granite crags, yet the harsh mountain found its feet ending gently in the bowl below, patched white with ice and snow. Winter lay long on this corner of Tyree land.

As if hearing his thoughts, Siofre said as she released his arm, "Spring reaches late here, and on this peak, the snow remains all the year long. My grandfather remembered a summer when the snow almost left Beinn Saorsa, but a patch remained in the shade of the tower."

"Saorsa, that is like saorsainn, or? It is freedom."

Siofre smiled, surprised but pleased. "Aye, Magister. It is Freedom Mountain, meant to guard the freedom of the Tyree lands. It was not always so, but was called many things before that. Knife Mountain, Beinn Sgian, in my great-great-great grandfather's day, as the jagged rocks reminded them of the *sgian dubh*. Now, though, we name it Freedom. It is the highest peak on the land, higher than Ben Tyree, and rightly should Tyree stand beneath Freedom."

"We are walking here?" Johannes asked, looking about him. He had some experience with mountains, ones even larger than this, but he had anticipated a quiet stroll, not a hike, and this without a staff or proper shoes, though Transfiguration and charms could remedy those deficits.

"Just here, on the crest of the hill, the tower, and then ... we may Apparate to another point I would show you, if you believe we have time before lunch."

"Not very long. A half hour, I think."

Siofre nodded and held her hand out to him. He smiled as he took it.

"Come around this side. This is why I brought you here," Siofre said, leading him down a rocky trace that could scarcely be called a path; down a little, back up, around, and Johannes found himself facing southward, overlooking what seemed to be all of the Tyree estate, the tower at his back.

"I see the house. It seemed a castle to me when we left it, and now it looks like a modest cottage. Yet I see all of the detail," he marvelled. "And there, the gatehouse, too, the lodge ... all of the outbuildings. Sharp and clear!"

"Aye. There is a magic about this place, about this mountain tower. When we of Tyree look out on our land, we see with sharper vision. Look there" ... Siofre pointed ... "you can see Fiona and Morgan and their bairns walking up to the main house. See them?"

"Indeed! I see even their expressions...unglaublich! Unbelievable," Johannes said, gazing over the grounds in astonishment.

"It is an acuity only granted those who are of the clan, who are of Tyree. You are of Tyree, indeed, Honnie. Remember this and you may doubt it, or if any other try to bring doubt to your mind. Remember this view and be assured." She squeezed his hand and looked up at him; then, suddenly, she dropped his hand and turned toward the tower.

She must leave the way open for him, Siofre reminded herself. Leave open the way, not lead him to her. Yet it was difficult to be with him and not reach for him, whether with her hand or with her magic.

"Come, Magister. We will mount the tower and you will see beyond the lands of our family, and you will also see, perhaps, some of our history writ in the landscape."

"Mount the tower?" Johannes asked, mystified as he turned toward the round stone edifice. He had seen no door as they had walked around it, though there was a large opening in the wall above them, perhaps man-high, but several feet above their heads, and the wall was sheer, with no steps leading to the window...or was it a doorway?

"'Tis easy on broomstick, to be sure," Siofre said, "but not impossible otherwise." She drew her wand. "I'll raise you up."

Johannes gazed up at the door, and he felt his feet leave the hard stone. Siofre Levitated him as smoothly and as comfortably as if by a lift...he even had the sensation that there was something solid beneath his feet...and when he reached the doorway and paused in his ascent, he stepped into the tower as easily as he would have stepped from a platform raised for his convenience.

He turned to look for Siofre, unsure whether he could duplicate her smooth Levitation, though he could certainly Levitate her up to him, but before he could even draw his wand, she had Apparated behind him with the slightest snap.

"Apparition is the simplest way to mount the tower, though Levitation has its charms," she said with a smile, amused at his expression as he spun around to see her. "Naturally, only one admitted to the wards may Apparate, making this quite a secure entrance when defended, if the mountain were not defence enough."

Johannes smiled. "I thought you would have me Levitate you."

"Nay, laddie. If I were to Levitate, 'twould be on my own, or by what you would call, I think, *Volatus* charm."

"*Volatus*? Fliegen? That is, fly?"

Siofre twitched a shoulder and gestured to him to follow her up the steps that wound along the interior wall of the tower. "'Tis a skill some do practise. My grandmother was talented in that way, and she taught me when I was a young lass. 'Tisn't *approved* by the British Ministry...said, fantastically enough, to be impossible, as I learned when I was at Hogwarts...but we of Tyree are happy to keep the Ministry's secret in this case!" She cackled. "Dumbledore can do it, though he learned his flying somewhere off in his travels when he was a wild young one, and I believe it's a wee bit different skill that he has."

"Dumbledore flies? Without a broom? And you too?"

"Aye. Dumbledore was out on the cliffs seeking my husband, Collum, and flew up to him as easy as if he were falling. But his movement was different from my grammie's. I asked him about it...he'd not known I was observing him, and was not pleased, I think...but he said he lived a while in the East and learned it there. I, naturally, did not share with him the lessons Grammie gave me. They are for Tyrees. Though," she added, with a slight sigh, "p'raps I ought to have shared them with Coll."

"I never know when you speak of Dumbledore whether you like or dislike him," Johannes said, a slight frown flickering across his features.

"Dumbledore is a fine man and a powerful wizard," Siofre said, "and for what it's worth, I do like him. We have known each other since we were together at Hogwarts as students, although he was a few years ahead of us...of Collum and me, that is. We don't always ... we don't always see the world the same way, but that is true of any of us." She shrugged slightly. "I also don't always approve of some things he does, but he would doubtless say the same of me. They are unimportant things, in the end. We are more alike than unlike. And I know that he is a man of conscience."

"Are you displeased that he and Minerva are together?"

Siofre was silent for a moment as she stepped out onto the windy roof and waited for Johannes to join her.

"I am neither pleased nor displeased," she said, waving her wand and conjuring a wooden bench for them. "I am pleased that Minerva is happy with him, and I am also pleased that Albus has found some happiness himself after so many years. Anything else ... what have I to criticise or advise? I have no special foresight, and I ken little o' their private lives...and that is how they prefer it. I would have no basis."

"Yet you sound as though you would criticise," Johannes said as he sat beside her on the bench.

Perhaps she should have made the bench longer, she thought, feeling the warmth of his body against hers.

Very aware of his closeness, Siofre shook her head. "No. Not *criticise*. But express concern, perhaps, if it were my place, or if Minerva spoke to me in a way to invite my comments."

"Because he is ... older?"

Siofre barked a laugh. "Older, indeed. Their age difference is greater than what most people would consider large. But no, not that precisely. It is more that Dumbledore has had a very long, very complicated life already. I think that canna fail to have some impact on their relationship, though what, I canna say. I hope they continue to be happy together and that Minerva is brought no unhappiness through their relationship...nor he, either, of course."

"You do not think that age, an age difference, should be an impediment to a relationship, then? To a marriage?" Johannes asked.

Siofre glanced up at him. "Do you?"

Johannes thought a moment. "I do not believe that alone, it should be, but sometimes it is."

"And sometimes, perhaps, laddie, it should be enough to keep two apart who are unsuited," Siofre said softly, "though I dinna find that Minerva and Dumbledore are unsuited. More that it might be perilous for her in some way."

"But if not speaking of Albus and Minerva?" Johannes asked.

"Laddie, you ask too many questions today," Siofre sighed. "I dinna like absolutes. There can be no rule of how many years separating a witch and wizard are too many. There can only be judgment case by case, and that is not a judgment, thankfully, that I must make for any."

"For any but yourself," Johannes suggested hesitantly.

Siofre was silent. Finally, she said, "Not today. Today I have other concerns."

"You had a meeting this morning," Johannes said.

"Aye. Two. Both fruitful in different ways. At least, I hope they will prove so."

"Did you see Drusus again?"

Siofre shook her head. "I had a meeting concerning him. I have set it in motion now, Honnie, and must follow through."

"To send him to Azkaban," Johannes said.

"Aye." Siofre sighed and closed her eyes. "I believe it is the right thing to do, and yet ..."

"It is a grave decision you have made. Are you thinking you should not have?"

"It would be easier for me if I didn't carry through. But I think what might happen to that young Muggle, what Drusus might do, and that steadies my resolve."

Johannes touched her arm lightly. "You may speak to me of any troubles you have, you know. Even if I cannot help, I can listen."

"Honnie ..." Siofre swallowed. She wanted to lean against him, to lean into his warmth and solidity. She wanted to tell him that, if he had been speaking of the two of them earlier, then age did not matter. She wanted to say that she would stay at the estate with him, that she would leave others to their fates and stay with him there, that he would belong to her and she to him ... But she couldn't.

She shifted slightly, straightening her back, pulling away from his warmth, though not out of it completely. "Bertrand and Sally may return this afternoon. I must ask Lydia to show me the North Tower before I return to work. I haven't seen what she has done at all."

"Ah! I am neglectful! I should have told you already that there was an owl from Sally this morning. Their Portkey brings them to Hogsmeade this evening. Lydia and Phoebe are going to meet them, and Lydia sent a message to Connor and Elisabeth, and they will arrive here later this afternoon with Liam. I believe that Merwyn and Egeria will also be here for dinner and will stay, but I do not know that."

"Then we must go back to the house now," Siofre said, standing. "I will show you the other place at another time."

"Where were we going to go?"

"Where the sheep once grazed in summer," Siofre replied. "I thought perhaps we might keep sheep again."

Johannes frowned as he stood. "I know nothing of animal husbandry. Dogs and cats, yes, but not sheep or similar."

"We can keep it in mind for the future, though," Siofre said.

"Aye, it is something to consider."

"Off home, then, Magister. I will meet you there." Siofre stepped back, then she Disapparated, leaving Johannes blinking at her sudden departure.

Johannes laughed then, and shook his head. He looked toward the castle, where he could see Siofre on the steps. She turned and waved in his direction. He doubted she could see him, but he waved back, then reached into his cloak pocket for his wand and, with a crack, joined her on the steps.

"Accompany me to lunch, Magister?" Siofre asked, looking up at him.

"Aye, naturally." He offered his arm. "And after lunch, we will visit the North Tower together, and then I will join you as you work...if, of course, you permit. It will rain this afternoon, and it is a good time to work on the greenhouse plans and the instructions for their construction."

Siofre hesitated. "I meant to work in my study..."

"You need company, Madam Siofre. You await word on your plan and its unfolding. I wait with you. We will work together in the library, you and I."

Siofre smiled at that and nodded. "Aye, it will be good not to wait alone. Very well. I will fetch my work and join you in the library."

Johannes smiled as they stepped into the house. He would be patient and constant. He would wait. And for now, there was lunch.