

**Release that Witch...
and Wizard?!**

Disclaimer: All characters here are at least 18. Hogwarts starts later, so by the time Harry arrives, he's 19. Cheng Yen (陈嫣) was in her mid-20s before waking up in the 21-year-old body of Garcia Wimbledon. Witches gain their first awakening upon adulthood, at 18 years of age.

Story Starts

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Chapter 5.4 -

**Preparation for the
Months of the Demons**

The dock groaned beneath Petrov's boots like a wounded animal.

He pulled his wool coat tighter and grimaced at the river mist that clung to everything—his hair, his collar, the insides of his nostrils. The cold was the worst part. Not honest winter cold, the kind that turned breath to crystals and made a man feel alive, but the damp, creeping variety that seeped through wool and linen and settled into the marrow of one's bones. Border Town cold. The sort that made a man question every decision that had brought him to this wretched place.

"This place hasn't improved," he muttered, stepping around a plank so green with moss it looked more like a garden path than a dock. The wood protested beneath his weight with a sound like cracking knuckles.

His assistant, a thin young man called Eldon who had been assigned to him three weeks prior and had yet to demonstrate a single useful quality beyond adequate penmanship, hurried to drape a second layer across his shoulders.

"Careful, sir—the boards are slick."

"I can see that."

"How long has it been since your last visit, Mr Ambassador?"

Petrov sniffed. The air tasted of rotten timber and fish guts. "Over a year. Fourteen months, if we're being precise. The Lord Duke rotates his representatives each season. Different eyes, different reports—that's the theory. In practice, it means no one builds a proper relationship with whoever's running this pit."

Eldon nodded with the vigour of someone who understood nothing but wished desperately to appear otherwise. "And the last time you were here—"

"Summer. The weather was merely unpleasant rather than actively hostile. There were furs worth inspecting, at least. Decent pelts from the Misty Forest trappers." He paused on the dock, letting his gaze sweep the shoreline. "And ore. There was always ore."

The memory sharpened something in his chest. Not nostalgia—Petrov didn't waste sentiment on Border Town—but professional irritation. The iron, copper, and silver from North Slope Mountain represented the entire economic justification for this settlement's existence, and by extension, for his journey here. Two days on a single-mast freighter with no kitchen, eating dried venison that had the texture and flavour of boiled leather. Two days of his life he would never recover—and he would still have to make the journey home.

"Sir." Eldon's voice pitched upward. "The storage yard."

Petrov followed his assistant's outstretched finger towards the clearing beside the dock where, during every previous visit by every previous ambassador, neatly stacked crates of raw ore had stood waiting for collection. The space was empty. Not partially empty, not depleted, not awaiting a final shipment—empty. Bare earth and a few wooden pallets bleaching in the weak autumn light.

He studied the vacancy for a long moment. Then he turned away.

"We should pay our respects to Her Highness."

"But sir—the ore. Shouldn't we—"

"Her Highness first."

Eldon shifted his weight from foot to foot. "Perhaps we ought to wait for their welcome party? It's customary for the lord's household to send someone when an ambassador's vessel is spotted upriver. We should have been noticed at least an hour ago."

Petrov was far from certain that any welcome party would materialise. The Fourth Princess of Graycastle had a reputation that preceded her like the smell of smoke preceded a fire, and none of it suggested a woman who observed diplomatic courtesies with particular enthusiasm. He sighed—a sound that came from somewhere deep in his ribcage—and started walking.

"The stables are this way."

"Sir, I really think we should—"

"Eldon."

The assistant fell into step behind him, mercifully silent.

Petrov's boots squelched against the flagstones that lined the riverside path. The town hadn't changed since his last visit. The same low buildings of grey stone and weathered timber. The same hunched figures moving through narrow streets with the purposeful misery of people who had long since abandoned hope of living anywhere better. The same—

"Sir! Look there—on the river."

Petrov turned. Three vessels were making their way upstream towards the dock, their sails fat with the eastern wind. Single-mast boats, heavy in the water, riding low enough that their cargo holds were clearly packed to capacity. The banner on the lead vessel bore a green leaf crossed with a scimitar.

Willow Town.

He kept his expression neutral. Years of training at his father's dinner table, where every twitch of a nostril could be catalogued and weaponised, had given Petrov a face that revealed precisely what he chose to reveal. But beneath that practised stillness, something cold moved through his gut.

Three boats. Not one. Three, loaded with cargo, making the long journey upriver from Willow Town—which meant someone had placed orders substantial enough to justify the voyage. The transportation costs alone between the two settlements would eat into a significant margin. The waterway stretched nearly four times as far as the route from Longsong Stronghold, with rapids near Fallen Dragon Ridge that required experienced pilots and added both time and risk.

Which meant whoever was buying from Willow Town was paying enough to make those costs irrelevant.

Petrov had spent the journey here rehearsing his pitch. The numbers were clean, the logic sound. He would persuade his father—and through his father, the other five noble families who shared the Duke's consortium—to acquire Border Town's ore at thirty per cent below market price. A significant discount, yes, but one that still represented a dramatic improvement over the current arrangement, where the Stronghold exchanged grain for raw materials at rates so punishing they bordered on theft.

The problem, as always, was consensus. The Honeysuckle family alone could not set terms. All six families had to agree, and getting six noble houses to agree on the colour of the sky required the better part of a season and enough wine to drown a small army.

And then there was the Duke himself. He would claim ownership of the ore outright—the mines sat on land he himself had developed, after all. Convincing a man to negotiate for something he believed was already his would be a nightmare wrapped in protocol.

But three boats from Willow Town changed the arithmetic entirely. If the Princess had already established trade relationships downstream, the Duke's

claim of ownership became harder to enforce without looking like a tyrant seizing goods from a member of the royal family.

Even if the Princess wasn't the King's favourite, the Duke still couldn't simply send men to force his will upon her.

'This complicates things.'

Yet the discount he'd planned might still hold. Willow Town would charge at least forty to fifty per cent below market to offset their transportation overhead. Fallen Dragon Ridge and Redwater City would gouge even deeper. At thirty per cent, the Stronghold remained the most profitable trading partner by a comfortable margin, with the added advantage of proximity.

The leverage had shifted. Not catastrophically—not yet—but the ground beneath his feet felt less solid than it had when he'd stepped off the boat.

'If I can convince Father quickly enough, before the downstream trade becomes entrenched—'

"Good afternoon."

The voice cut across his calculations like a blade through parchment. It carried an accent Petrov couldn't immediately place—the vowels were rounded in a manner that suggested educated speech, perhaps from across the Blackwater, but with an inflexion that belonged to no region he'd visited. Foreign, yet polished. The sort of voice that made one think of university halls and old money.

Petrov looked up.

A young man was approaching from the direction of the town centre, moving with the unhurried stride of someone who owned the ground he walked on—or at the very least believed he did. He was roughly Petrov's age, perhaps a year younger, tall and narrow through the shoulders in a way that suggested wiriness rather than frailty. Black hair sat in deliberate disarray atop his head,

and green eyes—startlingly vivid, the colour of new spring leaves—regarded Petrov from behind some sort of eyewear.

His clothing arrested Petrov's attention almost as much as his face. A long overcoat of black fabric fell to mid-calf, its interior lining visible where the front panels parted: a deep, rich green that caught the grey light and seemed to generate its own warmth. Beneath it, a white shirt of impossibly fine weave, buttoned to the collar with what Petrov suspected was actual silver. Black trousers of a cut and tailoring he had never encountered—no visible seams at the front, the fabric falling in clean lines to heavy black footwear that gleamed with a finish no cobbler in the Stronghold could achieve.

The entire ensemble whispered money. Not the loud, ostentatious display favoured by newly wealthy merchants who draped themselves in gold chains and dyed furs, but the quiet, absolute confidence of someone for whom expense was not a consideration worth acknowledging.

Flanking him, half a step behind and to the right, walked a broad-shouldered figure in plate armour. Petrov recognised the chin beard before the face—Carter Lannis, the Princess's Chief Knight. The man's expression sat somewhere between resignation and constipation.

"Welcome to Border Town, Mr Ambassador." The dark-haired man offered a slight inclination of his head—formal enough to satisfy protocol, casual enough to suggest he found protocol faintly amusing. "Her Highness sends her regards and has asked me to escort you to the castle. I trust your journey was not too disagreeable?"

Petrov opened his mouth. Carter Lannis spoke first.

"You might show a bit more gravity," the knight growled, his jaw tight beneath that unfortunate beard. "This is the official ambassador from Longsong Stronghold, not some trader wandering in off the—"

"I'm being perfectly respectful, Carter." The young man didn't look at the knight. His green eyes remained fixed on Petrov, bright with what might have

been amusement. "I welcomed him, I mentioned Her Highness, I enquired about his journey. What more would you have me do? Genuflect?"

Carter's nostrils flared. But he said nothing further—merely adjusted the sword at his hip with the practised motion of a man who had considered drawing it many times and decided against it on each occasion.

"Harry James Potter-Black." The young man extended a hand in a gesture Petrov didn't recognise—palm flat, fingers together, offered horizontally rather than with the wrist turned upward as was customary. "A pleasure, Mr Ambassador."

Petrov clasped the offered hand. The grip was firm, dry, and brief. He studied the face before him—the sharp jaw, the faint scar partially hidden beneath the fringe of black hair, the strange eyewear.

"Petrov Hull. Of the Honeysuckle family." He released the hand and manufactured a polite smile. "I don't believe we've met, Mr Potter-Black. Are you recently arrived in Border Town?"

"Relatively."

Petrov waited for elaboration. None came. Potter-Black simply stood there, hands loose at his sides, that faint half-smile resting on his mouth like a cat on a windowsill—comfortable, unmoving, watching.

The ambassador's mind worked quickly. He catalogued what he'd observed: the knight's exasperation, which bore the worn-in quality of long familiarity rather than fresh annoyance. The way Carter had bristled at the man's informality but had not—crucially—overruled him or pulled rank. The deference was subtle, almost unconscious, visible only in the half-step Carter maintained behind Potter-Black's shoulder rather than beside it.

This man held some form of authority. Not military. Not administrative—his manner lacked the officious precision of a bureaucrat. Something else. Something personal.

'Another one of Her Highness's paramours?'

The thought arrived with the clinical detachment of political assessment rather than moral judgement. Garcia Wimbledon's appetites were discussed in every salon from the capital to the southern border. The Fourth Princess collected lovers the way other royals collected hunting dogs—openly, without shame, and with a preference for specimens that were pleasing to the eye. If she'd acquired a foreign-born companion with expensive taste in clothing, well. It would be entirely consistent with her reputation.

Though the quality of the wardrobe gave him pause. Paramours were kept, which implied dependency. This man dressed like someone who kept himself.

"Sir," Eldon breathed at his elbow, "the Willow Town cargo—"

Petrov followed his assistant's gaze. The lead vessel from Willow Town had reached the dock, and stevedores were already hauling crates onto the planks. Even from this distance, the volume was substantial—sacks that bore the shape and heft of grain, wooden boxes stacked three high, barrels that could contain salted meat or cheese or both. The second vessel was manoeuvring into position behind the first, moorings thrown and secured.

Potter-Black's head turned. Those green eyes tracked the line of Petrov's attention with the precision of a hawk sighting movement in tall grass. For a moment, the young man simply observed the unloading. Then he clapped his hands together—a single, sharp report that made Eldon flinch.

"Right then. Shall we? Her Highness is expecting you, and I'd rather not keep her waiting." He gestured towards the town with an open palm. "This way, gentlemen."

They fell into step—Petrov and Eldon side by side, Potter-Black half a pace ahead, Carter Lannis bringing up the rear with the heavy tread of a man in full armour who wished he were anywhere else.

"You'll have noticed the supplies coming in," Potter-Black said, his tone conversational, as though discussing the weather rather than trade logistics.

He nodded towards the dock without breaking stride. "Her Highness has been purchasing provisions from several towns downstream. Grain, preserved foodstuffs, building materials—everything needed to sustain the population through winter."

"Purchasing?" Petrov kept his voice level.

"From her own funds." Potter-Black glanced back over his shoulder, one eyebrow raised above the rim of his eyewear. "The Months of the Demons will be upon us within weeks, Mr Ambassador. The previous arrangement—ore for grain at the Stronghold's rates—left the town short every winter. Her Highness decided that her subjects deserved better than watching their children starve whilst crates of iron disappeared downriver at a fraction of their worth."

The words were delivered without heat, without accusation. Just facts, laid out in that crisp foreign accent like cards on a table. Yet each one landed with the weight of a small stone dropped into still water.

'Her own funds.'

Petrov's frown fought its way past his training before he could suppress it. He smoothed it away, but not before Potter-Black's green eyes caught the expression and held it for a beat too long.

Garcia Wimbledon, spending personal wealth on commoners' provisions. Garcia Wimbledon, who by every credible account had arrived in Border Town four months ago with the enthusiasm of a cat thrown into a river—who had, according to the last ambassador's report, shown no interest in governance, no aptitude for administration, and no inclination whatsoever towards self-sacrifice.

'Her own funds.'

He didn't believe it. He had built his career on reading people, and the Garcia Wimbledon described in every dispatch, every rumour, every whispered corridor conversation in Longsong Stronghold, was not a woman who emptied her purse for miners and labourers. She was the princess who had bedded

half the officer corps at Coldwind Ridge—if the rumours were to be believed—who had allegedly broken a serving girl's wrist for spilling wine, who treated Border Town as a punishment to be endured rather than a territory to be governed.

People did not simply transform. Not like this.

Something else was at work. A political calculation he hadn't yet identified, or a deception designed specifically for visiting ambassadors—set the stage, stock the shelves, parade the charitable spending, and negotiate from a position of manufactured virtue.

He glanced at the cargo still being unloaded at the dock. The grain sacks were real enough. The boats were real. Whatever the Princess's motivations, the supplies existed, which meant gold had changed hands, which meant—

'Which means she has gold to spend. Where did it come from?'

Border Town's entire annual output barely exceeded a thousand gold royals. The Princess's personal allowance from the crown would be modest—the King was not known for generosity towards his least-favoured child. And yet here were three boats from Willow Town, laden with provisions that would cost—Petrov ran the figures in his head—at minimum four hundred royals, likely more.

Potter-Black walked ahead of him, that expensive coat swaying with each step, and Petrov studied the green-lined back of it with narrowed eyes.

'The changed attitude did not make sense... unless.'

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Petrov stepped through the doorway and into a dining hall far grander than he remembered. The long rectangular table of dark oak dominated the centre, its surface polished to a sheen that caught the firelight from twin hearths flanking the room. At the far end, two young women sat side by side—one in a dress

the colour of crushed garnets, the other in forest green. They leaned into each other, whispering, their plates already half-filled.

At the near end, Princess Garcia Wimbledon waited. Her hands were clasped on the table before her, fingers laced with a deliberate precision that reminded Petrov of a merchant who already knew the final price. Her dark grey hair, almost black in the firelight, fell in waves past her shoulders. She wore no crown, no circlet—just a high-collared charcoal dress that made the green of her eyes burn brighter.

Those eyes lifted as Petrov crossed the threshold. But they didn't land on him.

Garcia's gaze found Potter, who'd walked in just behind the ambassador, and something passed between them—amusement, perhaps, or some private jest. Her brows rose. One corner of her mouth twitched.

Potter shrugged, a loose roll of his shoulders that said everything and nothing, and walked the length of the table without a word. He dropped into the chair beside the woman in green, said something that made both women snort, and the three of them fell into conversation as though the rest of the room had ceased to exist.

"Mr Hull." Garcia's voice drew Petrov's attention back. She gestured to the chairs nearest her. "Please, sit. Your assistant as well."

Petrov offered his most practised bow and took the offered seat. Eldon settled beside him, rigid as a fence post.

"Sir Lannis." Garcia glanced over her shoulder at the Chief Knight, who had taken up position behind her chair, arms folded across his broad chest.

"There's room enough. Eat."

"I'll stand, Your Highness."

"You'll eat."

"I'll stand and eat, Your Highness."

Garcia's lip curled, but she let it pass.

As though summoned by some invisible signal, the dining room doors swung wide. Maids filed through in pairs, pushing carts laden with silver-domed platters. The first dome came off to reveal a whole roasted suckling pig, its skin crackling and golden, an apple wedged between its jaws. The second revealed a duck—no, two ducks—glazed in something dark and sweet that filled the room with the scent of honey and clove. Then came bread: thick brown loaves still steaming from the oven, butter in ceramic pots, and behind those, a tureen of vegetable soup, a wheel of hard cheese, a plate of smoked river trout arranged in overlapping fans, and bowls of stewed root vegetables glistening with fat.

Petrov clenched his jaw shut.

Two days on the river. Two days of salt-cured beef strips and wheat cakes that crumbled like sand. His stomach contracted so hard it bordered on pain, and saliva pooled beneath his tongue with an urgency that threatened his dignity.

He served himself with measured movements—a slice of pork, a portion of duck, bread, cheese—and picked up his knife and fork. The first bite of pork dissolved against his palate, the fat rendering to silk, and he had to close his eyes briefly to keep from making a sound.

Across the table, Garcia ate differently. Her maid—the same woman Petrov had glimpsed during his last visit, dark-haired, quiet, with an economy of movement that spoke of long practice—stood at the princess's elbow. She drew each cut of meat onto a separate plate and sliced it into long, even strips with surgical precision. Garcia picked up the strips with a pair of smooth wooden sticks, polished to a pale gold, and brought each piece to her mouth without a single wasted motion.

The sticks. Watching them now, he wasn't so certain. Garcia wielded them with the fluency of someone who'd used nothing else for years. Each morsel reached her lips cleanly. No grease on her fingers. No effort visible in her wrist.

At the far end, Potter and the two women ate with proper knives and forks—competently, though without the ingrained elegance of noble training. The woman in red held her fork in her left hand throughout, a commoner's habit that no tutor would have tolerated. But both Potter and the woman in green ate with practised ease and proper etiquette.

Their conversation never stopped. Petrov strained to catch words, but they spoke low and fast, and something about their speech slipped past his ear like water through fingers.

He gave up and focused on his plate.

Several minutes passed in relative quiet. The fire crackled. Silver clinked against porcelain. Carter Lannis accepted a plate from a maid and ate standing, one-handed, his other arm never straying far from the sword at his hip.

"So then, Mr Hull." Garcia set her sticks down and dabbed her lips with a cloth. "What brings Longsong Stronghold's latest ambassador to my table?"

Petrov swallowed his mouthful and straightened. "Your Highness, I come bearing the Stronghold's regards, as per the seasonal arrangement. Today was scheduled for the ore delivery." He paused, choosing his phrasing. "Yet I noticed the dockyard storage was empty."

Garcia picked up a strip of duck, chewed, swallowed. Took her time.

"The North Slope Mine collapsed five weeks ago," she said. "The tunnel shoring gave way. We lost three men in the initial fall, and the gravel blockage extends deep enough that clearing it will take months. We won't resume production until after the Months of the Demons at the earliest."

Petrov felt his fork pause mid-air. He lowered it. "A collapse. That's... most unfortunate, Your Highness."

"Quite."

"And the ore mined before the collapse? Surely there was stockpiled material from the preceding weeks."

Garcia tilted her head. The firelight caught the sharp angle of her jaw. "Gone. Sold upstream. Willow Town, Fallen Dragon Ridge—they were happy to pay market price in gold royals." She lifted her cup and drank. "You'll forgive me, Mr Hull, but I had mouths to feed. The last time Border Town relied solely on Longsong Stronghold's generosity during winter..."

She didn't finish the sentence. She didn't need to.

Petrov's shoulders tightened. The memory surfaced unbidden: the reports that had filtered back to the Stronghold after that particular Month of the Demons. Bodies stacked behind the church because the ground was too frozen to dig graves. Children with bellies swollen from hunger, not food. Municipal Administrative Governor Reynolds, warm and well-fed in his quarters, rationing grain to the populace with the generosity of a man squeezing blood from a turnip.

And Reynolds had walked away untouched. Because he'd married the Duke's second daughter. Because that was how things worked.

Petrov's knife scraped against the plate, and he set it down.

"I... understand your reasoning, Your Highness."

"Do you." Not a question.

"The Stronghold's failure in that regard was..." He searched for a word that wouldn't damn his own faction. "Regrettable. It won't be repeated."

"It won't," Garcia agreed. "Because I've already spent what remained in my coffers to secure provisions from the downstream towns. Grain, salted meat, root stores. Enough to see my people through winter without depending on anyone's goodwill."

Her coffers. Petrov turned the phrase over. The Fourth Princess's personal wealth was a matter of some speculation in the Stronghold. The general

assumption was that she'd arrived in Border Town with barely enough to maintain her household for a season. Yet she spoke of purchasing months' worth of provisions for an entire settlement. Either the ore sales had been more lucrative than Petrov calculated, or the princess had access to funds no one in the Stronghold knew about.

He thought of Potter-Black. The man's tailored coat. The casual wealth that radiated from him like heat from a forge.

He didn't voice the doubt.

"When the mine reopens," Petrov pressed, "the Stronghold would welcome the opportunity to resume trade. On improved terms." He set his fork down properly, aligning it with his knife. "I'm prepared to offer thirty per cent below market price for ore and gemstones alike. That's substantially better than anything Willow Town can offer once you factor in their transport costs."

Garcia's sticks hovered over a strip of pork. She regarded him with those green eyes, and for a moment Petrov felt very much like a mouse being examined by something patient and feline.

"Thirty per cent." She placed the sticks down. "A generous figure, Mr Hull. Can you guarantee it?"

"I—"

"Can the six families guarantee it? Duke Ryan? The Elks? The Wolves?" She listed the names with the precision of someone who'd studied them. "Because we both know you weren't sent here to negotiate. You were sent to collect."

The words landed like a slap. Petrov's jaw tightened. She wasn't wrong—that was the worst of it. He was a mouthpiece. Every ambassador before him had been a mouthpiece. The Duke rotated them deliberately to prevent anyone from building an independent relationship with Border Town's lord.

"I would need to return and secure agreement," he admitted. "But I'm confident—"

"Are you?"

He wasn't. The honesty of it sat like a stone in his chest.

"Even so," Petrov rallied, forcing steadiness into his voice, "the practical reality favours the Stronghold. Willow Town is distant. Fallen Dragon Ridge more so. During the Months of the Demons, the river routes become treacherous. Longsong Stronghold remains the closest, safest trading partner—and more than that, Your Highness, it offers shelter."

The word left his mouth before he could catch it. Shelter. As though Border Town were a child that needed minding. As though the Princess couldn't survive without crawling back to the Stronghold's walls.

He heard it for what it was—a threat dressed in courtesy—and his stomach dropped.

At the far end of the table, the conversation between Potter and the two women had gone quiet. Petrov felt eyes on him from that direction but didn't turn.

Garcia stared at him. The silence stretched. Behind her, Carter Lannis shifted his weight, the leather of his sword belt creaking.

Then Garcia laughed.

Not a polite titter. Not the controlled, musical laugh of a noblewoman navigating a social function. A full, genuine bark of laughter that cracked through the dining hall and bounced off the stone walls. Her head tipped back. Her shoulders shook. The maid beside her blinked, and even Carter's eyebrows climbed his forehead.

Every head in the room turned.

Potter raised his cup from the far end. "Something funny, Your Highness?"

"Mr Hull just offered me shelter," Garcia managed, pressing a hand to her sternum as the laughter subsided to a grin. "From the Months of the Demons."

"Ah." Potter's mouth curved. "How generous."

Garcia turned back to Petrov, whose face had gone the colour of old brick. She wiped a knuckle beneath her eye.

"Mr Hull. I appreciate your candour more than you know." She leaned forward, and the amusement drained from her expression like water from a cracked vessel. What remained was something harder. "I won't be evacuating to Longsong Stronghold. Not this winter. Not any winter. Border Town is where I stay."

Petrov opened his mouth. Closed it. Opened it again.

"Your Highness, with respect—the demonic beasts—"

"Will crash against a wall and break."

"A... wall."

"A stone wall. Four men high. Two men thick. Connecting North Slope Mountain to the Redwater River." Garcia recited the dimensions as casually as she might describe a garden fence. "It's nearly complete."

Petrov's thoughts stalled like a cart with a broken axle. He searched her face for the telltale signs of fabrication—the micro-flicker of the eyes, the subtle tension at the jaw—and found nothing. She spoke with the flat certainty of someone describing the colour of the sky.

But the mathematics refused to cooperate with her claim. A wall of those dimensions, spanning that distance, in stone? The masons alone would number in the hundreds. The quarrying, the cutting, the transport of material, the mortar, the curing time—months of work even in summer, with a full workforce and ideal conditions. Garcia had been in Border Town for barely four months. The territory's population was a fraction of what such a project demanded.

And no one had mentioned it. Petrov ran through the list of nobles who'd returned to the Stronghold ahead of the Months of the Demons—the minor

lords, the merchants, the administrative officials who'd served under the previous governor. Not one had spoken of a construction project on this scale. Some had groused about the princess's odd behaviour. Others had mentioned new labourers being hired. But a wall? A fortification that would rival the outer defences of a proper city?

Nothing.

Which meant either every returning noble had somehow missed a massive construction effort happening in plain sight—or it hadn't been there when they left.

"Your Highness," Petrov said slowly, "I would very much like to see this wall."

"Of course."

"And upon my return to the Stronghold, I will personally advocate for the thirty per cent discount. You have my word."

Garcia held his gaze for a long moment. Then she glanced past him, down the length of the table, and nodded.

"Harry."

Potter looked up from his plate. A strip of pork dangled from his fork.

"Mr Hull would like a tour of our wall."

Potter bit the pork off the fork, chewed twice, and swallowed. "Right. After pudding?"

"After pudding," Garcia confirmed. She turned back to Petrov with something that might have been warmth, or might have been the satisfaction of a woman who'd gotten exactly what she wanted. "Mr Potter-Black will serve as your guide, Mr Hull. He knows the fortifications rather intimately." A beat. "In the meantime—the kitchen tells me the dessert is quite good. Apparently stale bread has its uses."

She picked up her sticks and returned to her meal.

Petrov reached for his wine and drank deeply. His mind was already racing ahead—calculating what he would tell his father, how he would frame the thirty per cent offer, whether the other families would see opportunity or capitulation.

But beneath all of that, a single question gnawed at him like a rat at rope.

'This isn't how I pictured the princess...'

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End

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