

**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 4.3 -

**Understanding
and the Start of a New Dawn**

A gentle chiming—increasingly insistent—pulled Harry from sleep.

For a confused moment, Harry couldn't remember where he was—the unfamiliar ceiling, the smell of old straw and earthen walls so different from Grimmauld Place's elegant decay.

His vision was swimming into focus on the rough-hewn wooden rafters—the beams uneven and darkened with age, stretching across the small hut like the ribs of some great beast. Dust motes danced in the thin morning light filtering through gaps in the thatch. He turned his head with a groan, the straw-filled mattress rustling beneath him, and saw the bed had shrunk back to its original cramped dimensions, the expansion charm's magic having dissipated overnight.

With a wave of his hand, he muttered "Quietus," silencing the charm with a flick of his wrist.

Last night's conversation lingered in his mind—their release from the dungeon, Garcia's unexpected offer of employment, that calculating glint in

her reseda-green eyes as she'd laid out terms. Nightingale had unfortunately turned her down, vanishing into invisibility shortly after. They'd talked for hours after that, voices low in the dim candlelight of Anna's hut. Anna had sat cross-legged on the bed, her bony knees poking through the threadbare nightdress Garcia had provided, tracing idle patterns on the blanket as she spoke.

Her voice hadn't quavered—just that same quiet acceptance, as if recounting the weather. Harry had watched her slender fingers pluck at a loose thread, the way she'd pause sometimes to breathe through what might have been anger or grief, but never quite took shape.

They'd spoken of Karl van Bates—former member of the Masons' guild who now offered free reading and writing classes for anyone of all ages. Anna had mentioned how she'd miss the lessons. Talked about being confined to castle grounds now, though Harry had joked darkly that at least these prison walls had better furnishings.

What unsettled him most was her resilience—not the performative kind that cracked under pressure, but something deeper. That eerie calm of someone who'd already made peace with the pyre and found herself unexpectedly still breathing. She spoke of her near-execution the way others might discuss a cancelled appointment. Not even an ounce of anger for the father who betrayed her.

Now, in the pale dawn, the space where Anna had slept was empty. Remembering that he'd agreed to give Her Highness a wake-up call this morning—Garcia had insisted on an early start for their planning session—Harry pushed himself upright with a groan. His back protested the night spent on medieval bedding, joints cracking as he stretched.

The previous evening replayed in his mind: Garcia, followed by her personal maid Tyre, had shown them to their accommodations—this cottage within the castle grounds, spare but functional, with clean bed linens and basic furniture.

She'd apologised for the less-than-royal lodgings, explaining that the proper guest quarters had been 'heavily vetoed' by both Barov and Carter Lannis.

"They're still adjusting to the idea of employing witches and wizards," Garcia had said with a wry smile, though her eyes had flashed with irritation. "Give them time. I'll work on convincing them to let you sleep in the palace proper." Then, just as she'd turned to leave, she'd added over her shoulder with deliberate casualness, "Oh, and Harry? Tomorrow morning—just pop directly into my chambers to wake me. Early start, remember?"

Movement by the window caught his eye, pulling him from the memory. Nightingale sat on the narrow sill, her golden hair catching the wan morning light, her violet eyes distant and unfocused as she stared out at something only she could see.

"Good morning," Harry said, his voice still rough with sleep, the words scraping against his throat like sandpaper. A yawn escaped him mid-sentence, jaw cracking audibly, and he stretched his arms overhead until his shoulders popped with satisfying clicks that echoed in the small cottage. The crisp morning air bit at his exposed skin, making him shiver despite the weak sunlight filtering through the diamond-paned windows.

He ran a hand through his perpetually untidy hair, fingers catching on the familiar tangles. "Merlin's pants, I would kill for some good old English tea right now," he muttered. "Why didn't I think to bring some? I brought almost everything but the kitchen sink, and I bloody well didn't think to bring proper tea. Excellent work, Mr Potter. Ten points to Gryffindor."

"Do you really believe in Her Highness?" Nightingale asked from the windowsill—interrupting Harry's mutterings—her voice carrying a note of uncertainty that made Harry pause mid-movement.

She was still wearing her outfit from the night she'd tried to save them both: the black halter-neck top with its high collar and short pleated skirt spoke of

practicality and freedom of movement, whilst the white sleeveless vest with its gold clasps down the front and the matching detached arm sleeves trimmed in gold suggested some noble lineage. Her long legs, mostly bare between the hem of her skirt and the black thigh-high stockings banded with gold, disappeared into practical boots suited for outdoor trekking.

"I believe that she's probably from my reality," Harry said, thinking back on that night in the palace dungeons, the memory sharp and clear in his mind. The four of them had sat around a table Harry conjured.

Garcia Wimbledon had identified his Rolex—later revealing that she'd probably died whilst being overworked, waking up in the body of the princess with all of her and the princess's memories intact.

"Maybe a different time or maybe even a totally different version of my reality, but yes, I do believe in her, and she wants to bring this one to the modern age," Harry shrugged as he approached Nightingale, his bare feet silent on the cold stone floor. Finally, he could see what she was looking at through the wavy glass. Anna stood just outside the cottage, already practising her magic, her slight form moving with deliberate grace in the early morning light.

"People from our time do have more tolerant views; you yourself verified the truth in her words with your ability." Harry leaned against the window frame, the wood cool against his shoulder, crossing his arms as he faced Nightingale, giving her a smirk.

"Didn't you say your kind lives in isolation from regular people?" Nightingale countered, her violet eyes sharp and questioning as they met his.

"Yeah, it's a bit complicated," Harry said, rubbing the back of his head awkwardly, his fingers catching in the messy strands. The familiar gesture brought a flush of embarrassment to his cheeks. "It's been centuries since the last witch burning in our society. We've just grown to become isola—"

Then, suddenly, brightness flared outside the window—a brilliant orange-gold light that made both of them squint and stumble backwards. The heat of it pressed against the glass like a living thing, illuminating Nightingale's face in stark relief: her skin pale as porcelain, her eyes wide with alarm, the violet irises catching the firelight like amethysts. Both turned towards the source, watching as Anna's body became engulfed in flames that danced and writhed around her like living serpents.

Both Harry and Nightingale rushed outside, their feet pounding against the cottage's worn wooden floor before hitting the dew-dampened grass.

The fire around Anna died away like a retreating tide, revealing her standing in the pale sunlight. Her clothes had burnt away completely, leaving her naked, but there was no shame or distress in her posture. Instead, she stood with quiet dignity, her pale blue eyes calm as still water, seemingly unbothered by her exposure. The morning light caught the gentle curves of her slender form, her skin unmarked by the flames that had consumed her garments. She looked like something from a classical painting—one of those Renaissance depictions of saints or martyrs, serene in their trial by fire.

With a wave of his hand, a blanket materialised in Harry's grip as he approached Anna, holding it up to block his view of anything below her neck. "Right, come on then," Harry sighed. "At least cover up. I'll grab you some proper clothes, and I'll put an Impervious Charm on them—just remind me to reapply it every hour or two, yeah? Can't have you accidentally burning through your wardrobe every time your magic flares."

Muttering "Tempus" under his breath, he watched the glowing numbers appear in the air: quarter to the hour he was supposed to wake Garcia. Bloody hell.

"Inside, quickly," he said, ushering Anna back into the cottage whilst carefully keeping his eyes averted.

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"Those wards kept trained soldiers at bay despite multiple reasons for them to investigate. They created a... barrier, for lack of a better term. A space where the normal rules didn't apply." Garcia leaned forward, her voice dropping but somehow becoming sharper. "Tell me—was that the limit of what such magic can do? Or can wards be made stronger? Larger?"

Harry's mind flickered back through the morning's cascading disasters, each memory producing its own unique flavour of mortification.

First, there'd been the Apparition incident—'*Merlin, don't think about that*'—materialising directly into Her Highness's chambers at precisely the wrong bloody moment. The image was seared into his retinas with the permanence of a particularly vicious branding curse: Garcia, flushed and gasping, her foot in her personal maid's mouth—Tyre sucking at her toes—that split-second of absolute horrified eye contact before his brain had short-circuited and he'd panic-Apparated in and out like some sort of demented rubber ball.

He'd stood outside that door for what felt like hours, face burning hot enough to melt steel. Nightingale appeared beside him, chuckling at his flushed face—she probably peeked in as well.

Flushing his mind of that particular incident—he wasn't a virgin; nights with Pansy, Tori, and Luna could attest to that—but he still had his British sensibilities.

He'd instead fled straight back to the cottage, dragging Nightingale along via side-along Apparition—partly to put some distance between himself and Garcia's morning romp, partly as petty revenge for her endless amusement at his expense.

Nightingale's sharp gasp as the Apparition squeezed them through that unnatural space—her violet eyes were wide with disorientation when they landed, her hair dishevelled from the journey. Harry couldn't suppress a grin at the way her usually composed features twisted in discomfort. "Like being shoved through a small hole, innit?" he taunted, rubbing his own arm where phantom pressure still tingled.

Her retaliatory punch landed with satisfying force—just enough to bruise, not break skin. "You insufferable bastard," she hissed, shaking out her skirts with more violence than strictly necessary. In the doorway, Anna blinked owlishly at them, her thin fingers worrying the frayed hem of her sleeve.

The cottage's damp stone walls muffled her quiet exhale as she glanced between Nightingale's glare and Harry's unrepentant smirk, her pale lips parting slightly before closing again.

Harry ignored her as he approached Anna to observe her control training. Ever since that day when he'd first moved in—startling Anna as he apparated behind the house—he'd easily spotted the danger signs. But Anna, at the last minute, had turned the corner, her face surprised as fire ignited between them.

She tried fleeing first, but Harry stopped her, showing her his magic discreetly—

"Ha—"

"Har—"

"Harry?"

Blinking, Harry shook himself. "Oh, sorry, I was out of it for a second," he apologised, rubbing the back of his neck where tension gathered."

Before Anna could respond, Barov's dry cough cut through the palace garden's air. The assistant minister stood stiffly by the doorway, his white robes stark against the gloom. "Your Highness," he interrupted with a shallow bow, the scent of ink and parchment clinging to him. "I must take my leave—I still need to complete what you've asked."

Garcia waved a lazy hand, the silver rings on her fingers catching the firelight. "Ah, yes, thank you, Barov." Her voice carried that particular lilt she used for court formalities. "Could you tell Carter that if he has already found at least one with experience hunting demonic beasts, send them to me immediately? I'll interview them in batches."

The older man's beard twitched as he suppressed a sigh. "Yes, Your Highness." With another bow that made his joints creak audibly, Barov retreated.

"You were asking about wards, right?" Harry suddenly interjected, his voice cutting through the morning air with renewed focus. "There are a lot of things I can do with wards, but sadly, I've already experimented on this." He paused, running his fingers through his perpetually untidy hair. "Whilst there's ambient magic in the air, it's not dense enough, and there's no magical leyline running beneath this place. We would need a ward stone to power any meaningful protective enchantments."

"But didn't you cast some wards back in the castle dungeons?" Garcia asked.

"Ah—yes, before that, umm..." Harry hesitated, glancing meaningfully at Tyre, whose warm amber eyes watched them with quiet curiosity. "But we're still missing a friend," he said discreetly, gesturing subtly towards the empty space beside him on the bench.

"Yes, certainly, Tyre, why don't you sit down with us and grab yourself a plate of breakfast as well?" Garcia's voice took on that warm tone.

"But, Your Highness—" Tyre's melodious voice carried notes of genuine concern, her professional instincts clearly warring with her mistress's casual invitation.

Garcia reached out without hesitation, her fingers wrapping around Tyre's slender wrist with gentle but insistent pressure. The physical contact seemed to startle the maid, whose fair cheeks flushed a delicate pink as she was guided down onto the bench beside her mistress.

"Someone is joining us," Garcia explained, her voice taking on that theatrical quality Harry was learning to recognise when she was about to spring a surprise. "Do not panic at her sudden appearance, and I ask you not to tell anyone about her existence."

The colour in Tyre's cheeks deepened to a lovely rose as Garcia's attention focused entirely on her, the princess's graceful hands already reaching for a clean plate. The gentle scrape of ceramic against ceramic filled the air as Garcia began selecting various items from the morning spread—warm pastries, fresh fruit, and what appeared to be a local jam.

Harry found himself watching Tyre's face carefully. Her warm amber eyes had gone wide, darting between Garcia's face and the plate being prepared for her.

"Y—yes, Your Highness," Tyre managed to reply, her voice barely above a whisper, trembling slightly with emotion that seemed part gratitude, part bewilderment.

"Okay, Nightingale, you may come out now," Garcia said, her voice carrying across the garden with quiet authority.

Without the slightest pause or dramatic flourish, Nightingale materialised beside Harry as if she had been sitting there all along, her golden hair catching the morning light like spun sunbeams.

"Back to our previous discussion," Harry began, as he conjured multiple glasses filled with water for everyone. Tyre flinched so violently at the sudden magic that her knee bumped the table, making the cutlery rattle. "The previous ward was anchored to me, my own magical core supplying the needed magic to fuel it."

Harry gave Tyre an apologetic smile.

Garcia's fingers tapped rhythmically against her chin. "Okay, so first I have several questions." Her eyes narrowed in that particular way that made Harry suspect she was mentally cataloguing his every word. "You said there's ambient magic surrounding us. Is it possible to make that denser? Second," she continued, tearing off a piece of bread with precise movements, "regarding ward stones—how long before you can make one, and how far could the ward reach?"

He scratched at his jaw where stubble was beginning to prickle, uncomfortably aware of his academic shortcomings. "To be honest, I don't really know," he admitted. "I have several libraries' worth of books on magical theories in my trunk, though. I could probably find a solution with some help."

"I'm more of a hands-on learner. Practical magic's my speciality." To demonstrate, he flicked his wrist with exaggerated nonchalance. The used dishes clinked together as if nudged by invisible hands, stacking themselves with military precision. The citrusy scent of cleaning magic briefly overpowered the floral garden aromas.

"And combat magic," Harry added wryly, rolling his shoulders in a shrug that didn't quite hide the tension there. His fingers twitched toward his wand out of

habit—but it was for nought as he already absorbed it after combining all of the Deathly Hollows. "Though demonstrating that here would be..." His gaze flicked to Tyre's wide amber eyes, to Garcia's expectant posture, and he exhaled sharply through his nose. "Ill-advised."

He could feel the weight of Garcia's assessing stare, the way Nightingale's posture shifted infinitesimally, attuned to potential threats. The distant chirping of birds seemed suddenly very loud. "For now," Harry continued, "if you've got specific needs, I can either manage them or research solutions. Magic's flexible like that." He tugged at his collar, fabric rustling softly.

A sudden thought struck him, cutting through his rambling like a knife. The memory surfaced of wide eyes and incessant chatter, of socks hidden in draughty cupboards. "Oh, right!" Harry snapped his fingers, the sound sharper than intended in the garden's tranquillity. "Nearly forgot—let me introduce you to Poddey!"

The space beside him distorted briefly, air shimmering like heat haze over asphalt—the familiar ripple of magic bending reality that always made Harry's chest tighten with recognition. Then, with a soft pop that sent a few stray leaves skittering across the table and made Tyre flinch backwards with a startled gasp, appeared a diminutive figure barely reaching Harry's elbow.

The house elf stood with shoulders squared in obvious pride, enormous tennis-ball eyes. Poddey wore an immaculate uniform of deep emerald green, the fabric crisp and well-tailored to his slight frame. Golden threads embroidered the Potter family crest across his narrow chest—a gryffin rampant that seemed to shimmer in the dappled sunlight filtering through the garden's canopy. His ears, still comically oversized, were pristine and well-groomed, and his bare feet were clean rather than the usual grimy state Harry remembered from some of the house-elves he'd met.

"Again, this is Poddey—he's the head house-elf of the Potter household," Harry explained, gesturing towards the diminutive figure with an open palm. His voice carried a warmth that hadn't been there moments before, the tone one might use when introducing a cherished family member rather than a servant.

He turned to the little creature, noting how Poddey's enormous eyes seemed to glitter with barely contained excitement. The house-elf's entire frame practically vibrated with anticipation, ears twitching at the edges. "How many are you in charge of?"

"We be forty-six strong, Master Harry Potter, sir!" the little house-elf replied, his voice pitched high with barely suppressed glee. The words tumbled over each other in his enthusiasm, and he bounced slightly on the balls of his feet, clean toes curling against the garden's stone pathway. "Do we be getting jobs, Master Harry Potter, sir?" The hope in those tennis-ball eyes was so profound it made Harry's chest ache with something uncomfortably close to guilt.

"Hopefully soon, but for now, how are the stasis charms holding?" Harry asked gently.

"Them charms be holding strong, Master Harry Potter, sir," Poddey replied, his tone shifting to something more professional, though excitement still threaded through his words like golden wire. His small hands clasped behind his back in a posture that spoke of military precision despite his diminutive stature.

Harry glanced towards the cottage Garcia had provided as lodgings, noting its weathered stone walls and the way ivy crept up one side. The structure looked sound enough, but he could already picture the improvements Poddey's team could make. "Okay, for now you can fix up that cottage over there—we'll need three beds in it as well," Harry said, looking meaningfully at Nightingale as he spoke.

"Yes, Master Harry Potter, sir!" the house-elf replied, his voice ringing with purpose. The air around him began to shimmer again, magic gathering like morning mist, before he vanished with another soft pop that scattered more leaves across the garden table.

Harry turned back to Garcia, noting how her eyes had widened slightly during the exchange. "As you can see, I've brought forty-six of my house's house-elves along," Harry explained, his tone carefully casual despite the magnitude of what he was revealing. "They're basically a bonded magical race that needs my magic to survive. In exchange, they can do a remarkable lot—construction, cooking, cleaning, even some forms of combat magic if pressed."

"The only problem would be how the locals would perceive them," Garcia murmured, her fingers tapping thoughtfully against the wooden table.

"Yes, that would be a problem," Harry agreed, rubbing his chin where rough stubble scratched against his fingers, reminding him he should probably shave soon. "If it's just maintenance and cleaning, they could be very discreet—maybe only appearing at night, keeping out of sight. Then we could slowly introduce them to trusted members of your retinue?" His voice lifted slightly at the end, turning it into a question rather than a demand.

"So that's what I can contribute for now," he continued, resting his elbow on the table, face cradled in his hand. "If we solve the ward stone or magical leyline issue—aside from wards—I have a lot more to offer. Magical plants and creatures, for instance."

He hesitated, then added, "And yes, the piles of gold I'm currently not using." A wry grin tugged at his mouth. "That's the main reason I volunteered that information. But I'm not giving it out for free, mind you." His tone turned serious, humour fading. "I need help with something—or rather, *someone* I'm looking for."

Garcia exhaled slowly, her breath misting faintly in the cooling air. "That's actually a lot of things that could be helpful," she admitted, her voice quieter now, almost introspective.

Bang!

Both of them jerked upright, Harry's heart hammering against his ribs as the palace's double doors leading to the garden flew open with enough force to make the ancient hinges groan in protest. He felt Nightingale's presence vanish beside him like smoke in the wind.

Carter Lannis strode in first, his boots thudding against the stone path with the deliberate rhythm of a man delivering urgent news. The sound reverberated through Harry's bones, each step echoing in the sudden silence. Behind him loomed a tall, intimidating figure—dark-haired, bearded, with sun-tanned skin weathered by years outdoors like old leather. A jagged scar carved a brutal path from forehead to cheekbone, twisting his expression into something perpetually grim, and flanking him were two local guards whose nervous energy was palpable even from across the room.

Carter worked quickly, his voice crisp with military efficiency as he reported, "These two men are part of the town patrol. Every year, they are responsible for lighting the beacon. The hunter here said he had crossed paths with the demons. He returned with the head of a demonic beast, which he said he cut off with his own two hands."

The three of them bowed simultaneously, their movements sharp and practised. Harry watched Garcia's face carefully, noting the subtle shift in her expression as she slipped fully into her royal persona.

Garcia nodded, gesturing for them to stand up with a fluid wave of her hand. The gesture was graceful, practised, every inch the princess. "Rise," she commanded, her voice carrying that particular tone of authority that seemed to

come so naturally to her now. The first person stepped forward to speak, and Harry could practically taste the man's nervousness in the air.

"Honour... respected princess... Your Highness." The first guard who spoke was so nervous he was practically vibrating, his words tumbling over each other in his haste. Sweat beaded on his forehead despite the cool evening air, and his hands shook where they hung at his sides. "Brian and I are... are the people, uh... when it begins to snow, we... we'll go to the North Slope Mine area..."

"To the Beacon Tower," the guard continued, his voice growing stronger as he found his rhythm. "There it is, the first possible... it is the first place where you can see the demons, and if they are crossing over in great numbers... we'll conceal ourselves in the Misty Forest... and light the beacon in the tower... We retreat up the road and board the boat, which we prepared beforehand... then we leave."

"Since you both were together, let your partner answer," Garcia said, and Harry caught the subtle movement as she covered her face briefly. He could read the disapproval in her posture, the slight tension around her eyes. "What are the demonic beasts like? Can they be killed?"

The second guard—Brian, presumably—stepped forward. He was marginally less nervous than his companion, though Harry could still see the way his jaw worked as he gathered his courage.

"Your Highness, I believe so," Brian said, his voice steady despite the gravity of his words. "They used to be ordinary animals in the forest, but because of the evil miasma, they became manic and ferocious; however, they can still be killed."

He paused, licking his lips nervously. "During every past Month of the Demons, Longsong Stronghold would send cavalry to cleanse the remnants of

the demon monsters along the land from Longsong Stronghold to Border Town."

'*So there's a corrupting source,*' Harry thought, thinking what would happen if people inhaled it.

"How long are the Months of the Demons?" Garcia asked, and Harry could hear the subtle note of calculation in her voice. She was already thinking tactically, he realised—planning, strategising.

"Generally two to three months... it depends on the sun," Brian replied.

"The sun?" Garcia's voice carried a note of genuine puzzlement that Harry shared.

"Yes," the guard explained, his confidence growing as he spoke of familiar things. "Your Highness came to this town not too long ago, so you do not know. In this Border Town, once the snow begins to fall, it does not stop until the sun shines again, and then the snow goes away."

Harry felt his eyebrows climb toward his hairline.

"So the snow indicates the end of the Months of the Demons?" Garcia asked, and Harry could hear her working through the implications.

"It is exactly like this," Brian confirmed with a firm nod. "The longest Months of the Demons I have experienced were two years ago, which lasted for nearly four months, and many people starved."

"Why shouldn't the grain reserves in Longsong Stronghold be large enough to support the town for more than one month?" Garcia pressed, and Harry could hear the sharp edge creeping into her voice.

Brian's face darkened with anger, the emotion transforming his weathered features into something harder, more bitter. "They had had enough. But Reynolds, the Municipal Administrative Governor responsible for managing such matters, declared that the amount of ore and minerals mined was only enough to buy food for three months, and that for the fourth month we would have to deliver a new shipment of ore."

His voice grew heated, years of resentment bleeding through. "But the Months of the Demons had not ended, and we couldn't leave the fortress."

"So that is what happened... I understand," Garcia said quietly.

Harry watched her process this revelation, noting the subtle shift in her posture as she absorbed the implications. If Longsong Stronghold treated the people who lived on the frontier with this kind of cold calculation, like assets to be managed rather than lives to be protected, it was no wonder the frontiersmen might be willing to consider alternatives. At the moment, it seemed that whoever controlled Longsong Stronghold lacked both vision and basic human decency.

Garcia beckoned the third man forward, the hunter whose presence dominated the room despite his deferential posture. Harry found himself unconsciously straightening as she mentally filed away the name of the Municipal Administrative Governor for future consideration.

The hunter was an imposing figure—standing well over one hundred and eighty centimetres, his shoulders broad, every line of his body spoke of violence survived and strength earned through hardship. Despite his intimidating presence, he approached with the careful respect of a man who understood exactly where he stood in the hierarchy.

"You said you killed the beast?" Garcia asked, her voice steady despite the hunter's imposing presence.

"Yes, Your Highness." The hunter's voice was low and hoarse, roughened by years of shouting across wilderness and breathing in smoke from countless campfires. "A demonic boar and a demonic wolf."

"Species?" Garcia repeated, genuine curiosity colouring her tone. "What do you mean?"

"This is the name of the demonic beast, Your Highness," the hunter explained, his scarred hands gesturing as he spoke. "The fiercer the animal was before, the more difficult it is to deal with the variation after. The transformation emphasises the animal's advantages. The demonic boar's back fur becomes extremely tough; even within fifty metres, it is difficult to hurt it with a crossbow. The demonic wolf becomes more cunning, and it runs faster."

"To kill it, you need to set up traps in advance," the hunter continued.

"Stronger animals become even stronger, and faster animals become even faster," Garcia summarised with a nod. "But they are still animals."

"Yes, they are," the hunter agreed, then paused. Harry noticed the way the man's throat worked as he swallowed hard, preparing himself for whatever came next. "But they aren't the most terrible kind of enemy. The worst ones are the demonic hybrids."

"They are the devil incarnate," the hunter continued, his voice dropping to barely above a whisper. Harry had to strain to hear him, the man's obvious terror lending weight to every word. "Only hell is able to create such a horrible monster. I have seen a demonic hybrid. It had not only the strong limbs of a beast, but on its back there was a pair of huge wings, allowing it to fly short distances. And it always knew where I was." The hunter's eyes grew distant, lost in the memory. "No matter how much I tried to hide, it could always detect me."

"It was not hunting its prey, Your Highness," the hunter said, his voice hollow with remembered terror. "It was just teasing it."

The casual cruelty of that statement hit Harry like a physical blow. He'd faced creatures driven by hunger, by instinct, even by magic—but something that enjoyed the hunt, that drew out suffering for its own amusement? That spoke of an intelligence that was fundamentally twisted. Harry remembered reading about manticores in the Care of Magical Creatures class, remembering that they were sentient and cruel creatures that loved playing with their prey.

The hunter lifted his clothing with steady hands, revealing a large scar that extended from his abdomen to his chest—a jagged line of pale tissue that spoke of claws and near-death. Harry's stomach clenched as he took in the extent of the damage.

"Before I lost consciousness, I fell into the Redwater River," the hunter explained matter-of-factly. "I was lucky to survive."

"Such a monster actually exists," Garcia said quietly, and Harry could hear the wheels turning in her mind even as she processed this new threat. Her voice carried a note of fascination alongside the obvious concern—the engineer's mind already working on solutions. "Demonic hybrids are very rare, right?"

The question hung in the air like a sword, and Harry found himself holding his breath as they waited for the answer that might determine just how much danger they were all really in.

"There are not many, Your Highness," the hunter replied, his weathered voice carrying the weight of too many winters spent watching the forests. "During every Month of the Demons, there'll only be two to three demonic hybrids, otherwise Longsong Stronghold would be unable to defend itself."

"Well, you are very observant," Garcia noted, her voice carrying that particular tone of approval that made Harry think of a teacher praising a particularly

astute student. She gestured with one pale hand, the movement graceful yet commanding. "Stand up. What's your name? You don't look like you are from my Kingdom of Graycastle."

"Half of my lineage hails from the Mojin Clan, and the townspeople call me Iron Axe," he replied standing up, inclining his head with a respect that seemed genuine rather than servile.

Garcia clapped her hands together, the sound sharp and decisive in the stone chamber. Harry felt a flutter of anticipation in his chest—he was beginning to recognise that particular gesture as Garcia's way of concluding successful negotiations. "Thank you, Mr Iron Axe. Carter, give each of these men ten silver royals, and then they may go."

"Thank you very much for the reward, Your Highness," the three hunters chorused, their voices overlapping in grateful unison. Harry caught the flash of genuine surprise and pleasure in their weathered faces—clearly this level of generosity was unexpected from royal quarters.

The sound of boots on stone echoed through the chamber as Carter led the men away, their relieved murmurs fading into the corridors beyond. Harry found himself studying Garcia's profile, noting the way she seemed to be turning something over in her mind, her fingers drumming silently against her thigh in a rhythm that spoke of wheels turning behind those striking eyes.

When Carter returned, his heavy footsteps announcing his presence long before he appeared in the doorway, his broad face was creased with confusion. "Your Highness, why did you ask them these questions? Do you want to stay here?" His voice carried a note of barely suppressed alarm, as if the very idea was tantamount to suicide.

Garcia didn't express any opinion immediately, but instead turned that calculating gaze on her Chief Knight. "What do you think?"

"This matter is out of the question, Your Highness!" Carter's voice boomed off the stone walls. "The hunter's account proves it—demonic boars require shots within thirty metres. Only elite soldiers have that precision, and we'd be fighting alongside untrained town guards with no defensive walls." His hands gestured sharply. "The casualties would be catastrophic. Our defeat, assured."

"Plus, there are too many demonic beasts, and we have no strong walls," Carter continued, his voice growing more strained with each word. "We could only stand with the local guards to stop them. I'm afraid that the casualties would outstrip the accomplishment, and our defeat would be assured."

"If I could give you a city wall, do you think it would be possible to defend Border Town?" Garcia asked, her voice carrying a note of something that made the hair on the back of Harry's neck stand up—not fear, but *possibility*.

The question hung in the air like a challenge. Garcia suddenly turned her attention to Anna, who had been so quiet Harry had almost forgotten she was there. Now Garcia's gaze fixed on her with laser-like intensity.

"If I give you a wall between North Slope Mountain and the Redwater River," Garcia said, her tone deadly serious as she addressed Carter but her eyes remained locked on Anna's pale blue gaze, "could you defend Border Town?"

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END

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