

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 5.3 -

Preparation for the Months of the Demons

The fire in the hearth crackled and spat, throwing amber light across the study walls. Above the mantle, a mounted stag's head watched the room with glass eyes, its antlers casting forked shadows that crawled across the ceiling like grasping fingers.

Barov stood before the dark red writing desk, a sheaf of parchment balanced in the crook of his arm, and tried very hard to ignore the chaos unfolding behind him.

A soft pop sounded. Then another. Then the unmistakable groan of wood expanding—joints cracking, panels stretching—as something no larger than a jewellery box swelled into a bookcase that reached from floor to ceiling. The house-elf, Poddey, directed the thing into position against the far wall with one spindly finger, the massive frame gliding across stone as if it weighed nothing at all.

"Left a touch, Poddey," Potter said, lifting another miniature case from the yawning trunk. "That one's got Mum's collection. Natural philosophy, chemistry, mathematics—the Muggle stuff. Keep it separate from the restricted section, yeah?"

"Poddey is knowing, Master Harry. Poddey is not being born yesterday."

Barov cleared his throat and fixed his gaze on the princess.

Garcia Wimbledon sat in the high-backed chair behind the desk, ankles crossed beneath it, her dark grey hair spilling over one shoulder. She'd pushed the usual mountain of unsigned executive orders to one side and spread a rough map of Border Town across the surface, weighting its corners with inkwells and a half-eaten apple.

"You were explaining the founding," she said, without looking up. Her finger traced the line of the Redwater River where it bent south. "Duke Ryan's original outpost."

"Yes, Your Highness." Barov gathered himself. Behind him, another bookcase cracked into full size with a sound like a ship's hull splitting. He did not flinch. He refused to flinch. "The Duke initially established a watchtower at the northern pass—nothing more than a signal post to warn Longsong Stronghold of demonic beast incursions. That was some twenty-eight years ago."

"And then they found the mine."

"Precisely. Prospectors clearing timber along North Slope Mountain struck an iron vein first. Then copper. Then silver ore, mixed in with the rock. The Duke recognised the value immediately. Within two years he'd relocated enough labourers to justify permanent settlement."

Garcia tapped the map where North Slope Mine was marked. "Relocated. A polite word for it."

Behind Barov, a bookshelf settled with a final groan. He caught the faintest whiff of old leather and parchment—not the rough hide-and-linen of local bookbinders, but something richer, something that smelled of a world he could not name.

"The Duke employed whoever would come," Barov continued, keeping his voice level, his cadence measured. "Refugees from the eastern farmlands.

Vagrants. Convicted petty criminals offered commuted sentences in exchange for five years' labour. Not slaves, technically."

"And the monopoly?"

"Longsong Stronghold controlled all trade. The ore left by barge and returned as grain. No currency ever changed hands in Border Town. The Duke's appointed regulators—minor nobles, rotated annually—oversaw the exchange rate. One shipment of raw ore for roughly half its weight in wheat or bread." He paused. "The rate never favoured Border Town."

Another soft pop from behind him. Potter held the latest miniature case up to the light from the tall window and squinted at a tiny label affixed to its side.

"Restricted section—curses, counter-curses, blood magic, and rituals. Probably shouldn't put that one where just anyone can reach it."

"Top shelf, Master Harry?"

"Top shelf. And ward it, would you?"

"But Master Harry Potter, sir, there be no leyline."

"We'll just have to renew it daily."

"Yes, Master Harry Potter, sir!"

Barov refused to turn around. He kept his eyes on the princess, watching the way her gaze moved across the map with practised precision—something at odds with the indulgent young woman who'd arrived in Border Town four months ago caring for nothing beyond her own pleasures.

"The town's tax revenue," Garcia said. "Walk me through it."

"Negligible, Your Highness. With half the population employed directly at the mine, and the mine's output entirely consumed by the barter arrangement, the remaining industries—blacksmith, pub, textile—generated perhaps forty gold royals annually in local taxation. The previous lord did not even bother

collecting it personally. He appointed a clerk and stayed in Longsong Stronghold."

"The previous lord being the noble rotated in from the east."

"Correct. Lord Damos, two years ago. Lord Ferrin before him. Lord Greypool before that. None stayed longer than the bare minimum."

Garcia leaned back in her chair. The firelight caught the green of her eyes—or was it blue? Barov had served the royal family long enough to know the Wimbledon colouring, that peculiar dark grey hair, those shifting irises. Yet Garcia's gaze held something the other Wimbledon children's never had. Something watchful and calculating and, underneath it all, faintly amused, as though she were perpetually in on a joke no one else could hear.

"So the Duke built this town as a mining colony," she said. "Fed it just enough to keep the workers alive. Extracted wealth and sent it east. No reinvestment, no growth, no infrastructure beyond what the mine required."

"That is... an accurate summary, Your Highness."

"And nobody questioned this arrangement."

"The arrangement benefited the Duke and his investors. The town's residents had food and shelter, which was more than many refugees could claim. Questioning it would have meant questioning the Duke himself."

"Which nobody did."

"Not while he controlled the grain supply."

A sharp crack echoed through the study—louder this time. Barov's shoulders twitched despite himself. He glanced sideways and caught a glimpse of Potter wrestling with a bookcase that had expanded at an odd angle, one shelf jutting out like a broken limb. Poddey clicked his fingers, and the wood straightened with a wet snap.

"Apologies," Potter called, not sounding apologetic in the slightest. "When we left our reality, we may have packed in haste, and some shrinking charms weren't applied properly."

Garcia didn't look up from the map, waving it away as though it were a typical day in the life of a royal princess. "The annual value of the ore output, Barov. You calculated it last week."

"No more than one thousand gold royals, Your Highness. And that accounts for the full range—iron, copper, and silver ore combined. Measured against Longsong Stronghold's total revenue, it is—"

"A pittance."

"Depending on the year, about a twentieth to a thirtieth of Longsong Stronghold's annual income."

"Same thing. But a pittance, the nobles won't surrender voluntarily."

"No." He straightened the parchment in his arms. "Even a passive income of modest value is an income they need not work for. They would sooner fight than relinquish it."

Garcia nodded slowly. Her finger moved along the map, tracing the route from the mine to the river docks. "I intend to recover this trade line, Barov. Currency-based exchange. Fair market pricing. We can purchase the grain upstream."

"Your Highness, that will provoke the Duke's shareholders directly."

"Yes."

"They will petition the Duke."

"Let them."

"The Duke may respond with force."

"He may." She looked up at him then. Those eyes—green in this light, unmistakably, polished and hard as gem-cut stone. "But they won't be moving till the end of the Months of Demons."

Barov held her gaze for a moment, then dropped his eyes to the parchment. Twenty years in politics had taught him when to press and when to concede. This was a concession. Not because he agreed—he wasn't certain he did—but because arguing further would accomplish nothing.

He shifted his weight from one foot to the other. His shoes pinched; the cold seeped through the stone floor despite the fire's best efforts.

"Your Highness, the recent expenditures—craftsmen's wages, manual labourers, construction materials—have placed considerable strain on the treasury. If we continue at this rate, we will not last until next spring."

"I'm aware."

"The wall construction alone has consumed—"

"I said I'm aware, Barov."

He pressed his lips together. Behind him, Poddey hummed a tuneless melody whilst floating another expanded bookcase into position. The study was transforming around them. What had been a functional but sparse office now resembled something between a lord's private library and—and what? Barov had no frame of reference. The books that filled these shelves bore titles in scripts he couldn't read—Latin, the wizard had called it—stamped with crests he didn't recognise. Some had covers that shimmered. One, he was fairly certain, had growled at him when he walked past.

"I am paying from my personal funds," Garcia said. "And I have additional resources now."

She meant Potter's wealth. Barov understood that much. Three million silver coins and thirteen million gold—numbers so vast they ceased to feel real, like counting the stars and expecting the sum to mean something.

He knew the wealth was genuine. He'd seen the silverware Potter produced—each piece flawless, without tool marks or casting seams, worth more per ounce than anything the silversmiths of Longsong Stronghold could produce in a decade. He'd held the gold coins in his own hands, felt their weight, bitten one when no one was watching. Real gold. Pure gold. Stamped with symbols from a world that shouldn't exist.

But numbers on a ledger were one thing. Liquidity was another. Foreign coin could not purchase bread at the market—though gold, in the end, was gold regardless of whose face it bore.

"The treasury bills we discussed," Garcia said, as if reading his thoughts. "I want a draft proposal by week's end. A fiscal injection backed by Potter's reserves, with fair terms. We are partnering with Harry Potter, not robbing him."

"Your Highness—"

"You can make the interest minimal for now—say half a per cent," Harry offered from across the room, not looking up from the bookcase he was arranging. "Once your territory's economy stabilises, we can renegotiate."

Too generous by half. But then, the wizard had done little to warrant suspicion beyond the simple fact that, by the Church's standards, he should have been hanged and buried deep in the earth. And a great deal of Border Town's recent progress would not have been possible without him—or without the witch, Anna.

"I will prepare the draft," Barov said.

Garcia returned her attention to the map. Barov stood in silence, watching her mark notations along the riverbank in a quick, angular hand. Garcia's penmanship had changed, he noticed—not for the first time. The looping, careless script of three months ago had been replaced by something compact and efficient.

'When did it begin?'

The question surfaced unbidden, as it had a dozen times in the past weeks. Barov let it sit. He turned it over in his mind the way a jeweller turned a suspect stone, examining each facet.

The obvious answer was possession. A demon wearing the princess's skin—her body present, her soul consumed, something else piloting the flesh. He'd considered it seriously during those first bewildering days after the trial postponement. The Church taught that demons could inhabit mortal vessels, that they craved positions of influence, that the signs were subtle: personality shifts, new knowledge, uncharacteristic behaviour. Garcia Wimbleton had exhibited all three.

But the theory collapsed under its own weight. If a demon possessed the capability to infiltrate a royal bloodline, why choose the Fourth Princess? Why the most politically insignificant of King Wimbleton's children, exiled to a frontier mining colony that barely qualified as civilisation? A demon with ambition would target the King himself. Or the First Prince. Or the Pope, if spiritual authority was the prize. Selecting Garcia Wimbleton for possession was like choosing to rob the poorest house on the street when the treasury stood unguarded next door.

And there was the matter of the locket.

Barov's gaze drifted to Garcia's collar, where the thin chain disappeared beneath the fabric of her blouse. The God's Stone of Retribution. She wore it daily, removed it only for bathing—hanging the locket at the entrance of her quarters. Barov had handled one once, years ago, during his tenure in the capital. No demon could tolerate that contact. The Church's own doctrine was unambiguous on the point. Any entity of the Devil's design would collapse in the presence of divine retribution.

Garcia wore it like jewellery.

The second theory—witch control—held even less water. The witch Anna had been shackled with a God's Stone choker when the change occurred. So had

Potter. Both prisoners were sealed, powerless, and locked in separate cells beneath the keep. And the change in the princess had begun before that visit.

Barov remembered the moment precisely. The gallows. The crowd. The autumn wind pulling at pennants and hair alike. Garcia had stood on the raised platform, execution order in hand, and something in her face had shifted. Not gradually. Not like dawn breaking over hills. More like a door slamming shut and a different door opening, all at once, between one heartbeat and the next. She'd looked at the prisoners—the thin girl with her wrists raw from rope, the dark-haired boy with his jaw set and his green eyes burning—and whatever Garcia Wimbledon had been before that moment, she stopped being it.

She'd seized the order. Dismissed the court.

The nobles had been furious. Carter Lannis had been appalled. And Barov, standing three paces behind the throne, had felt something he hadn't experienced in twenty years of political service: genuine surprise.

Since then, the changes had only accelerated. The Garcia Wimbledon who'd arrived in Border Town four months prior had been, to put it charitably, a liability. Reckless, petulant, indifferent to governance, hostile to advice. She'd insulted the local nobility within a fortnight, alienated the Church's representatives within a month, and displayed not the faintest interest in the administrative machinery that kept the town functioning. The dozen civilian staff Barov had brought from the capital had filled every vacancy her behaviour created, and still there weren't enough hours in the day.

That Garcia was gone.

The woman sitting behind this desk—marking maps, demanding financial reports, deploying terminology Barov had never encountered in thirty years of treasury work—bore the same face, the same voice, the same unsettling Wimbledon eyes. But the resemblance ended at the surface. This Garcia planned. She calculated. She moved with the deliberate patience of someone constructing a mechanism, each decision a gear fitted precisely into place,

and she did it with a confidence that Barov found simultaneously reassuring and deeply, profoundly unnerving.

Because confidence without cause was madness. And Garcia's confidence had no cause that Barov could identify.

She intended to defend Border Town against the Months of the Demons. Every lord, every noble, every administrator appointed to this post in the town's twenty-eight-year history had done the same thing when winter approached: evacuated. Loaded the population onto barges and marched them east to Longsong Stronghold, where they sheltered behind proper walls until spring. It was not cowardice. It was arithmetic. Border Town had no fortifications capable of resisting a sustained demonic assault. The garrison numbered fewer than two hundred. The civilian population was untrained, poorly fed, and half of them would bolt at the first sighting of a mixed-species beast. Staying was suicide.

Garcia intended to stay.

More than that—she intended to build walls thick enough to hold. Walls made from cement, a substance Barov had never encountered in any text, any lecture, any whispered rumour from the capital's guild halls. His family retained an alchemist—a competent one, trained at Redwater Academy, capable of producing flashfire powder and acid solutions and the dozen other mundane substances that constituted the standard repertoire. Were it not for the oath—the secret-keeper's binding, which sealed knowledge behind walls no will could breach—he would have already written to inquire. Yet deep down he knew that such a discovery would have been something of note, an achievement that would have travelled across the kingdom and beyond its borders.

And yet the stuff worked. Barov had watched Karl Van Bates press bricks together with a trowel-full of the grey paste and return the next morning to find them fused as if they'd grown from the same stone. He'd watched the house-elves—those impossible, bat-eared creatures—lay foundations in the dark at a speed that made his eyes water. He'd watched Anna pour heat into

the kiln until the limestone wept and ran like tallow, and he'd watched Garcia stand inside that kiln wearing some invisible protection Potter had provided, examining the substance with the focused attention of a scholar at her instruments.

None of this should have been possible. Not the cement. Not the house-elves. Not the wizard's conjured furniture or the witch's controlled flames. Not the steam engine Garcia had sketched—Barov had seen the diagrams, understood none of them, and recognised nonetheless that they represented something new. Something that had never existed in this world.

And certainly not the princess who orchestrated it all.

Pop.

Barov startled. A fresh bookcase—the seventh; he'd been counting despite himself—expanded into being against the wall to his left. This one was narrower than the others, with glass-fronted doors and brass fittings that gleamed like they'd been polished that morning. The books inside were uniform in size, bound in matching dark green leather, their spines lettered in gold.

Potter stepped back to inspect it, head tilted, arms folded. "Potions references. Alphabetical by ingredient, cross-indexed by effect. That one's Mum's pride and joy—she organised it herself."

"Master Harry's mother is being very particular about her potions library," Poddey confirmed, straightening a volume that had tilted during expansion. "Very particular indeed."

"She was," Potter said quietly. The casual humour left his voice for half a breath. Then it returned, quick as a blink. "Right. That's the lot. Restricted section's warded, general reference is accessible, potions library is—Poddey, is that locked?"

"Poddey is locking it, Master Harry."

"Good. Your Highness—" Potter turned to Garcia with a loose, easy bow that managed to be both respectful and faintly mocking. "Your study now has more books than the Royal Library at Graycastle. Probably. I've never been, but I'm making assumptions."

Garcia glanced up from the map. Her mouth curved. "How very generous of you."

"Don't thank me. Thank Mum. She's the one who spent fifteen years cataloguing everything in the Potter library. Dad just shoved books onto shelves and hoped for the best."

"Sounds familiar."

"Touché, my princess, touché. I do have more books, especially from the Blacks, but I'd need to double-check everything first before making them available."

Garcia raised an eyebrow—flat, unreadable. Barov suspected the expression was deliberate; it seemed designed to make the person on the receiving end explain themselves further, whether or not explanation was necessary.

"Oh yeah, different world," Potter said, rubbing the back of his neck. "It's from the French—er, I mean—it was just me acknowledging your quick wit, Your Highness."

Potter grinned. Barov watched the exchange—the ease of it, the shared shorthand, the way Garcia spoke to the wizard as though he were an equal rather than a subject—and filed it away alongside every other observation he'd accumulated these past weeks.

He thought about what Tyre had told him, when he'd pressed the attendant for details. Discreetly, of course. A private conversation in the corridor, voices low. He'd asked whether the princess's... private habits had changed. Whether she'd become distant, cold, mechanical in her intimacies—signs the Church associated with demonic replacement.

Tyre had coloured to the roots of her hair and told him, in no uncertain terms, that Her Highness's appetites remained entirely intact. More than intact. Different, perhaps—gentler in some ways, Tyre had admitted, with an expression Barov chose not to interpret—but unmistakably present. Unmistakably human.

So. Not a demon. Not witch-controlled. Not a puppet, not a shell, not an impostor wearing stolen skin.

Garcia Wimbledon, Fourth Princess of Graycastle, had simply... changed. Or had she merely revealed her true self after the spotlight had left her?

And Barov, who had spent twenty years navigating the treacherous currents of royal politics, who had served three finance ministers and outlived two of them, who prided himself on reading men and women the way other people read books—Barov could not explain it. Could not categorise it. Could not file it neatly into the framework of motivations and machinations that had governed his entire professional life.

The princess was building walls that shouldn't stand, with materials that shouldn't exist, defended by people who shouldn't be possible, in service of a plan that shouldn't work.

And yet the walls were rising.

He stared at the back of Garcia's dark grey head as she bent over the map, her pen—one of those fine instruments the wizard had lent her—scratching notations in that sharp, foreign hand. The fire popped. A log settled. Through the tall window behind her, the town spread out towards the Impassable Mountain Range, its peaks white with early snow, and beyond them the Wild Places where no king's writ had ever run.

What else was the Princess concealing?

Barov straightened the parchment in his arms, adjusted his white robes, and found—to his own considerable surprise—that the question did not frighten him.

It interested him.

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