

**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 5.1 -

**Preparation for the
Months of the Demons**

Garcia settled into her 'throne'—the intricate, lavish chair perched atop its raised dais—and immediately felt the familiar ache radiating across her shoulders and down her spine.

She pressed her fingers into the tender spots where her shoulders met her neck, kneading the tension that had become her constant companion. *'If only they had bras in this medieval setting,'* she thought with a rueful sigh, her mind already turning over the mechanics of proper undergarments. Proper support structures with adjustable straps, perhaps even different cup sizes to accommodate various body types. It would make an excellent side project, and if she could work out the mass production... well, that might prove quite profitable. Half the women in the kingdom would thank her for it.

'Plus, how hard could it be? Corsets already exist. Partner with a seamstress, refine the design, scale up production.'

The weight of anticipation settled over her as heavily as her physical discomfort.

She was waiting for the first batch of stonemasons she planned to interview, having posted her notice on the city hall bulletin board three days prior. According to Barov, the parchment had caused quite the stir—whispered conversations in the marketplace about the generous salary of one gold royal per month. That sum exceeded even the wages of stronghold cavalry or professional hunters, occupations where one's life hung in the balance with every dawn.

She'd deliberately sweetened the arrangement further, promising that recruits with rich experience who performed excellently might find themselves granted an official position—a Minister for Public Works, a role she intended to establish within the city hall's growing bureaucracy.

Garcia's expression darkened as she remembered precisely why she needed someone with building experience, and she felt her jaw clench with the memory of her own spectacular miscalculation.

In her supreme confidence, Garcia had assumed that after solving the cement problem—no small feat in itself—building a city wall would prove effortless. The chemistry had been solved, the materials were available, and surely the rest would follow naturally. However, when she'd actually begun the work, rolling up her sleeves and diving into practical application, she'd discovered with crushing humiliation that she was utterly, embarrassingly ignorant in civil engineering.

The questions had piled up like stones in her chest: How deep and wide should the foundation be dug to ensure stability in this particular soil? How did one solve the inevitable unevenness of the ground without proper surveying equipment? Most daunting of all, how could she ensure a six-hundred-metre wall remained straight and true after construction, rather than wandering about the landscape like a drunken serpent?

The memory of her failure burned. Back when the city government had been constructing the main road, Garcia had observed a group of young surveyors

measuring with remarkable precision, wielding strange tools and rulers—theodolites and levelling instruments, she remembered from her engineering days. Those miraculous devices could measure angles and gradients with mathematical certainty. But here? Here, there was hardly anything resembling such sophisticated equipment to be found.

The irony wasn't lost on her. As a mechanical engineer with a hard-earned degree, she and the civil engineers from her previous life had shared late nights and impossible calculations, bonding over their mutual struggles. Now she desperately needed their expertise, and they were a universe away.

Worse still, none of the local bricklayers she'd initially recruited had ever participated in anything approaching a major engineering project. Their hands, calloused from years of shaping small, uneven stones into cottage walls and garden paths, trembled when faced with the sheer scale of her plans. Their capabilities, whilst admirable for domestic work, weren't even comparable to her own limited understanding of large-scale construction.

The initial progress had been quick, at least—under the cover of darkness, with the help of Harry's house-elves. The little creatures worked tirelessly, their magic easily moving dirt with unnatural speed, tossing aside clods of damp soil that smelled rich and loamy in the cool night air.

They'd managed to dig a trench within hours, though Garcia's stomach knotted every time she eyed its uneven depth. Without proper measuring tools, they'd had to eyeball everything, and the result wound drunkenly across the landscape like some great earthworm's trail. From a distance, the trench's meandering path was painfully obvious—a jagged scar across the otherwise orderly fields.

She'd insisted on temporary wooden walls around the trench, hammered together from rough-cut timber. Partly to prevent accidents—the thought of some poor farmer tumbling into the darkness made her wince—but mostly to shield the house-elves from prying eyes.

Their tiny forms flickered in the torchlight as they worked, their large eyes gleaming like coins in the shadows. Garcia chewed her lip, wondering if the mason she planned to hire would be open-minded enough to accept such unconventional assistance.

That was why Harry and Nightingale lingered nearby, with Anna present as well. Garcia was banking on the fact that few townsfolk had actually seen their faces during the capture and trial—and those who had might not recognise them out of context. If someone did? Harry could Oblivate them.

Nightingale stood watch, arms folded beneath her chest. She was there to discern truth from lies—though of course, her skills were useless against someone bearing a God's Stone of Retribution. Not that they needed to worry about such luxuries here; those stones were expensive, the kind only wealthy merchants and nobles could afford.

Garcia's fingers drummed against the armrest of her throne. The rhythmic tap-tap-tap matched her racing thoughts. Harry was there in case he needed to Oblivate anyone who reacted violently or lied about tolerating magical labourers, but the idea made her stomach clench.

She shivered despite the afternoon warmth, recalling Harry's offhand explanation during one of their late-night conversations—his voice casual, detached, as if describing how to brew tea rather than rewrite human memory. 'Obliviation,' he'd called it, a skill he'd apparently honed whilst evading what remained of his world's government after the war's aftermath.

Her gaze flicked to the floating screen balanced on her lap—the system interface's glow a stark contrast to the rough-hewn timber surrounding her.

A notification blinked cheerfully up at her:

'Start of your industrial revolution!'

Introduce modern technology into Border Town before the start of the Months of the Demons.

Progress: 3/3 — Reward: 10 Gacha Pulls, Bonus: ???

The corners of her mouth twitched. According to the mystifying mechanics governing these 'quests', missions were triggered based on her actions. This particular one had apparently activated the moment she'd sketched her first steam engine design—back when all this was just theoretical madness scribbled with a stick into dusty earth.

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Four weeks ago...

Garcia settled into her study chair, the worn leather creaking softly beneath her weight as she shifted to find the perfect position. The floating Wikipedia interface materialised before her with a thought, its ethereal glow casting subtle shadows across her face in the gathering dusk. Afternoon light filtered through the castle's diamond-paned windows, painting golden rectangles across the stone floor and illuminating dust motes that danced in the still air. She pulled up the article on Newcomen atmospheric engines—the simplest design that could serve their immediate needs—and felt the familiar thrill of engineering challenges awakening in her chest.

Her mechanical engineering instincts kicked in with the force of muscle memory, years of technical training from her previous life flooding back as she began sketching rough diagrams on parchment. The scratch of her fountain pen—a gift from Harry, who'd explained he was sick of using quills in the wizarding world and had bought plenty with extra nibs—against the paper created a rhythmic whisper that seemed to echo the rapid-fire calculations racing through her mind.

'Right,' she thought, her pen moving swiftly across the page in bold, confident strokes. The familiar weight of the writing instrument felt reassuring in her fingers, grounding her whilst her mind soared through possibilities. *'Two engines. One for hauling ore carts, one for pumping water. Start simple, iterate later.'*

"Anna," Garcia called, looking up from her calculations with eyes bright with barely contained excitement. The young witch sat nearby on a simple wooden chair. The firelight caught the subtle improvements in Anna's appearance—her cheeks no longer quite so hollow, her posture straighter. However, she still possessed that careful, deliberate way of holding herself that spoke of someone who had learnt not to take up too much space.

"Tomorrow morning, we begin something extraordinary," Garcia continued, her voice carrying the weight of conviction. "But first, I need to know—what's the highest temperature you've reached?"

Anna's voice emerged soft as silk. "I've managed to melt the silver like you asked. But I feel I could go hotter than that."

Garcia felt a surge of satisfaction course through her veins, her mind already calculating the implications. "According to the wiki—" she turned to the floating screen, the trio of magical beings already accustomed to the princess appearing to gaze into empty space, studying something visible only to her—"pure silver melts at nine hundred and sixty-one point eight degrees Celsius. And you said you can increase the temperature beyond that?"

Anna sat straight in her chair, both hands primly placed on her lap. Her form already showed marked improvement from her previous malnourished state—the sharp angles of starvation softening, colour returning to skin that had been corpse-pale. The red dress Garcia had provided now fitted her better, no longer hanging like a shroud on a skeletal frame. She nodded simply.

Garcia's lips curved into a satisfied smile. "Perfect. Cast iron melts at around eleven hundred and fifty degrees Celsius. Can you push that high?"

Anna nodded again.

Harry and Nightingale occupied the window frame with the casual grace of those accustomed to being comfortable in any environment. Harry's sharp green eyes tracked Garcia's movements with obvious interest, whilst Nightingale's violet gaze held that characteristic mixture of curiosity and amusement. The afternoon light from the window created a perfect backdrop for them both, highlighting Harry's perpetually untidy black hair and the golden cascade of Nightingale's blonde locks.

"You're building something mechanical, aren't you?" Harry observed, pushing his glasses up his nose in a gesture that had become endearingly familiar. "I saw similar diagrams in the encyclopaedias from my trunk."

"Steam engines," she confirmed, spreading her sketches across the desk with deliberate ceremony. The parchments rustled against each other, creating a soft whisper that seemed to emphasise the significance of the moment. "The principle is beautifully simple—heat water to create steam, use the pressure to move pistons. But the execution..." She tapped her pen against her lips.

"That's where you both come in."

The taste of possibility was sharp on her tongue, metallic and electric, as she pulled up another Wikipedia article. This one focussed on precision casting techniques, and the references linked to PDFs on sand-casting methods that made her pulse quicken with anticipation. The knowledge settled into her mind like memories she'd always possessed, each piece of information slotting into place with satisfying clicks of comprehension.

"Harry, your transfiguration—it's not permanent, correct?" Garcia asked. She leant back in her chair, the leather creaking softly as she studied his face for any nuance of expression that might reveal additional possibilities.

"Afraid not," Harry admitted, running a hand through his unruly hair. The gesture left several strands sticking up at even more impossible angles, which somehow only made him look more charmingly dishevelled. "Lasts a few hours at most for complex shapes. Simple forms might hold for a day. Maybe longer if I push my magic, but it might also just become brittle if I brute-force it."

"But long enough to create casting moulds?" Garcia pressed, her voice rising slightly with excitement as the solution crystallised before her. She could feel her heart hammering against her ribs as the elegance of the approach became clear. "If you could transfigure precise forms from my specifications—cylinders, pistons, valve assemblies—we could use them as patterns. Press them into casting sand, remove them, and Anna melts iron directly into the cavities."

"Oooh—never thought you could use it that way," Harry admitted, his green eyes widening with genuine surprise and growing appreciation. His expression transformed from puzzlement to comprehension to excitement in the space of heartbeats, the emotions playing across his features like weather patterns across a clear sky.

Harry straightened with sudden energy, understanding dawning on his face like sunrise breaking over mountains. "The transfiguration doesn't need to last—just long enough to make the impression."

"We'll need several components. First, the cylinder—that's the heart of it. About sixty centimetres in diameter for the mine engine, perhaps forty-five for the pump. The tolerances will be crude by modern standards, but hemp packing and leather seals can compensate."

She sketched rapidly, her hand moving with practised efficiency across the parchment. Each line and curve recalled Wikipedia articles on early steam engine design, revealing crucial details about pre-industrial workarounds for

precision manufacturing. The knowledge felt both foreign and familiar, like remembering a half-forgotten dream that suddenly snapped into crystal clarity.

"Centimetres?" Anna asked from beside her, and Garcia witnessed everyone's eyes turn towards her as she visibly winced at the question. The realisation hit her like a physical blow, and her expression shifted to one of serious concentration as the implications became clear.

Garcia stared at the blank parchment before her, the white surface suddenly seeming vast and daunting. She tapped her fountain pen against her lips with increasing frequency. The metal nib made tiny clicking sounds that seemed to echo the rapid-fire thoughts racing through her mind. A fundamental problem had just occurred to her—one that made her want to laugh at its elegant simplicity even as it threatened to derail everything.

The realisation was like discovering she'd been trying to build a bridge without first ensuring both sides of the river existed. How could she create precision machinery when they couldn't even agree on what constituted a basic unit of measurement?

"Harry," she called out, her voice carrying a note of urgency that immediately drew his attention from where he had been practising transfiguration. Green sparks still danced around his fingertips from whatever spell he'd been attempting. "We need to establish our own measurement standard."

"Come again?" Harry looked up with a puzzled expression, pushing his glasses up his nose again. The gesture had become so habitual that Garcia wondered if he even realised he was doing it.

"Think about it," Garcia said. "I know metric measurements from my country—metres, centimetres, millimetres. You know imperial from yours—inches, feet. This world uses... what? Spans, cubits, some lord's foot from three centuries ago?" She gestured dismissively, her hand cutting through the air with frustrated energy. "None of that matters."

Anna tilted her head with careful attention, whilst Nightingale simply stared with an expression of beautiful confusion that somehow managed to make her look even more striking in the afternoon light.

"For a steam engine, what truly matters isn't the absolute size—it's the proportions," Garcia continued, pulling out a fresh sheet of parchment with renewed purpose. The paper crackled softly under her fingers, and she could smell the faint mustiness of the castle's paper stores. "The ratio between cylinder diameter and stroke length. The relationship between the piston rod thickness and the force it needs to transmit." She began sketching preliminary diagrams, her pen moving with confident strokes. "We're going to create our own standard, and as long as everything scales properly, the engine will work."

She trailed off, her mind suddenly racing down a new avenue of possibility as she looked at Harry with growing interest. The solution was elegant in its simplicity, and she could feel excitement building in her chest like pressure in a steam boiler. "Say, Harry, do you remember your height? Doctors usually use metric, right?"

Harry straightened unconsciously, his posture shifting from casual to attentive as he processed the question. "Oh, I'm six foot three." He frowned with the particular expression of someone trying to retrieve half-remembered information, his green eyes growing distant as he searched his memory. "The Healers at St Mungo's had it in both measurements after they started modernising..."

"Lucky!" Garcia's eyes lit up with excitement, making her appear almost incandescent in the gathering dusk. She could feel her pulse quickening as the solution crystallised before her with mathematical precision. "That's one hundred ninety point five centimetres. Is it possible for house-elves to conjure something to your exact height and later subdivide it equally into one thousand nine hundred and five equal parts?"

Harry's eyes widened with understanding, the comprehension hitting him like a physical force. "Bloody brilliant. That would give us—"

"Exact millimetres—or at least our best approximation of them," Garcia finished, her voice carrying the satisfaction of a problem elegantly solved. "Each division would be precisely one millimetre. Ten of those make a centimetre, one hundred make a decimetre, one thousand make a metre."

"Poddey!" Garcia called out, her voice ringing through the stone chambers with authority and excitement.

The head house-elf appeared with the distinctive sharp crack of Apparition, the sound echoing off the stone walls like a whip-snap. He bowed so low that his long nose nearly touched the floor, his tennis ball-sized eyes bright with the eager anticipation of useful service. "Your Highness be calling for Poddey?"

"I need you to create a metal rod exactly as tall as Harry," she instructed, pointing to where Harry stood with newfound purpose. "Can you make it from iron? And ensure it's perfectly straight?"

Poddey's ears perked up with visible delight, and his entire diminutive form practically vibrated with professional pride. "Oh yes, Your Highness! Poddey be making most perfect of straight rods!" The elf's eyes shone with the particular joy that came from being asked to demonstrate his considerable skills.

Within moments, accompanied by another sharp crack of magic that made Garcia's ears ring slightly, Poddey had conjured a gleaming iron rod. The metal caught the firelight and threw it back in rippling patterns that danced across the stone walls. Garcia carefully held it against the wall beside Harry, who stood straight, her fingers detecting the smooth coolness of perfectly

wrought metal as she verified it matched his height exactly. The rod was flawlessly straight, without the slightest deviation or imperfection.

"Now," Garcia said, her voice taking on the tone of someone conducting a delicate experiment, each word measured and precise. She could feel the weight of the moment settling around them like a held breath. "Can you divide this into one thousand nine hundred and five equal pieces?"

The house-elf frowned at that request, his large ears drooping slightly as he concentrated with visible effort. His tennis ball eyes grew even larger as he focused his considerable magical abilities on the complex mathematical challenge. "This being hard, but—" The elf's entire face scrunched with concentration, his ears drooping lower, then he snapped his fingers with decisive authority.

The rod transformed before their eyes, thousands of tiny marks appearing along its length with mathematical precision. Each division was so small it was barely visible to the naked eye, yet Garcia could sense the perfect regularity of the spacing through some indefinable intuition.

"Excellent work, Poddey," Garcia beamed at the house-elf, who immediately puffed up with pride so visible it seemed to make him grow several inches taller. His chest swelled with the particular satisfaction that came from a job well done. "This is a proof of concept for now. We'll do this again next time, but with Anna, so we can make it permanent. We're not accidentally burning down my palace anytime soon," Garcia joked.

The evening air seemed charged with possibility now, crackling with the same energy that preceded thunderstorms. Garcia could taste success on her tongue, metallic and sharp, mixed with the smoky sweetness of ambitious dreams finally taking concrete form.

"Right, what's next?" she asked, turning to face her assembled team with eyes bright with purpose and possibility.

The night stretched ahead of them, long and full of potential, marking their first concrete step into what would become the Industrial Revolution. Outside the castle windows, stars began to appear in the darkening sky, as if the universe itself were watching the birth of a new age. The fire crackled softly in its grate, casting dancing shadows that seemed to move in rhythm with their collective excitement, whilst the scent of opportunity hung in the air as tangible as woodsmoke.

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A two weeks ago...

Garcia stood by the kiln, waiting for the first batch of cement—well, the calcined limestone that would become cement once mixed with gypsum. Having completed the first experimental run, she found herself caught between anticipation and a gnawing uncertainty that twisted in her stomach.

The brick structure loomed before her, a testament to careful planning and meticulous design. Built specifically for cement production, it measured about fifteen metres long and four metres wide, with proportions calculated to maximise heat retention whilst allowing proper airflow. The front door had been crafted wide enough to accommodate the transport of raw materials and the steady stream of workers moving in and out.

She'd insisted on that detail herself, knowing that efficiency would be paramount once production began in earnest. The back door, however, told a different story entirely—narrow, discreet, sized for only one person. It served as Anna's secret entrance.

'The house-elves truly are wondrous creatures,' Garcia mused, her admiration genuine despite the surreal nature of the thought. Even now, weeks after their first appearance, she still found herself occasionally blinking in disbelief at their existence. Yet their craftsmanship was undeniable, their loyalty to Harry absolute.

To ensure security, the elves had also constructed an obscuring wall surrounding half of the kiln installation. Guards stood stationed at both entrance and exit—all Carter's men, handpicked for their reliability. Garcia harboured no doubts about their loyalty, particularly now that everyone in their inner circle knew about the elves, Harry, and Anna. The vetting process had been thorough, overseen by both Nightingale and Harry with their respective talents for reading people.

Two potential security risks had been identified as spies reporting to her second and third brothers—a discovery that had been both validating and deeply unsettling. They had been dealt with discreetly.

The cement production process itself was straightforward to explain, if not to execute. First, limestone was crushed into powder, then mixed with clay or iron powder—though they weren't using iron powder, as it was difficult to produce in quantity. The mixture, combined with water to form a paste, could be processed using either wet or dry methods. After the calcination step and mixing with gypsum, the cement would be ready for use.

'If only we had access to volcanic ash and seawater,' Garcia thought wistfully. 'Then we could produce self-repairing Roman cement.'

But the key challenge wasn't the process—it was the calcination temperature.

Garcia couldn't remember the specific temperature required. Without the necessary tools—an infrared thermometer or a thermocouple temperature gun—measuring temperature precisely was nearly impossible. She only knew that cement's calcination temperature was similar to silver's melting point, and that the calcination process itself was tricky.

Given the era's undeveloped technology, maintaining a blast furnace's temperature was a huge challenge. The standard open furnace resulted in great heat loss and struggled to maintain temperatures above one thousand two hundred degrees Celsius. A reverberation furnace required an inner

chamber capable of sustaining higher temperatures, but she didn't know how to create the necessary refractory bricks.

The traditional blast furnace used for iron smelting was even worse. Whilst the temperature might suffice, the narrow furnace cavity meant they couldn't produce enough cement before the Months of Demons arrived.

With this in mind, Garcia had designed a kiln that needed no heating—because it relied on Anna instead.

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Garcia's gaze shifted to the kiln, her fingers twitching with impatience. She couldn't wait for the temperature to drop; she needed to see the results now. Wrapping a damp towel around her head, she grabbed a shovel and marched towards the back door.

The moment she stepped inside, hot air assaulted her lungs, and the skin on her hands burned as if she'd dipped them into a furnace. *'Shit, this was a mistake.'* But before she could retreat, a cool, transparent barrier enveloped her head, and her body was suddenly shielded from the oppressive heat. She turned to see Harry standing beside her, a bubble-head charm on his own head.

"Hey, don't just rush in," he chided lightly, though his tone carried a note of genuine concern. "You already know about the bubble-head charm; the other is just a flame-freezing charm, something that was popular during the witch-burning era." He gestured to the barrier around her. "Bit of an ironic twist, don't you think?"

Garcia ignored his comment, focusing instead on the task at hand. She scooped a shovelful of the grey material and examined it closely. "Is this what you want?" Anna asked, her pale blue eyes fixed on the powder.

"Looks like it," Garcia replied, flattening the material between her fingers. "I wouldn't know for sure until we use it, but it's promising." She glanced at Anna, a small smile tugging at her lips. "What's the use of this? To build houses and bridges, to repair roads. There are too many uses for it. If it

succeeds, people won't have to worry about the cold or the rain and snow damaging their homes." She reached out, gently patting Anna on the head. "It's all thanks to you."

Anna lowered her gaze, her breathing hitching slightly. Garcia wasn't sure if it was her imagination, but the girl seemed to stand a little taller after that.

The next morning, Garcia returned to the kiln, her heart pounding with anticipation. Carter and Anna followed close behind, whilst Harry trailed a few steps back, his wand subtly at the ready. Nightingale was likely nearby, though her presence was as elusive as ever.

When Garcia opened the door, she was greeted by the sight of solid cement.

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Back to the present...

However, Garcia herself knew that she could not always depend on Anna to do these tasks. Even with Harry's bubble-head charm protecting her lungs, allowing Anna to calcify limestone daily would still risk the dreaded silicosis that claimed so many miners.

Magicals should not be utilized as the sole driving force to make everything better, but instead as the catalyst for the development of civilisation—a spark to ignite human ingenuity, not a crutch to replace it entirely.

The distinction mattered more than most would understand. '*Sustainable development requires sustainable methods*,' she reminded herself, the engineer in her calculating long-term variables that her royal predecessors had never bothered to consider.

She was certain that even if the wall wasn't finished, if she just asked Harry, he and the house-elves could probably defend the town from the demonic beasts single-handedly.

But her subjects would not value their land, their lifestyle, their livelihood, if they weren't part of its development. The psychology was fundamental, almost mathematical in its certainty. If they had no stake in this small piece of desolate land—no sweat equity, no personal investment in its transformation—why would they defend it when crisis came? Why would they help it develop beyond mere survival, make it amazing rather than simply adequate? People who contributed nothing to their own prosperity would abandon it the moment hardship arrived, leaving Garcia with empty walls and bitter regrets.

Later on, using the magicals as the catalyst, she would create jobs which would replace Anna and Harry, freeing them up for further development. This would help enrich her subjects' standard of living, and if she planned it properly, money would cycle freely back to her coffers, which she would invest in more industry, forming a virtuous circle.

She had asked Harry to open a bank, which could make his investments legitimate and benefit both of them, but he would probably work on that after the Months of the Demons.

At least the system's missions counted each type of steam machine as different modern technology. She wasn't claiming the gacha prize yet, as there was still the bonus to consider. She thought that if she introduced more than three modern technologies before the start of the Months of the Demons, she would gain extra pulls, and there were two more things she thought she could add.

Barov suddenly entered, walking purposefully towards Princess Garcia and informing her that there was only one applicant for now.

"Bring him in." Garcia made a pretence of being composed and nodded.

Karl Van Bate's hands clenched into fists as the knight escorted him into the sunlit courtyard, the gravel crunching beneath his boots. His stomach churned with frustration—this wasn't how he'd planned matters at all.

He'd intended to request a private audience first, to carefully lay out his reasoning about the inadvisability of major construction projects during the wet season. More importantly, he'd dreamt of gently guiding Her Highness towards seeing witches differently, through patience and persuasive arguments. But rumours painted the princess as mercurial—what if his well-meant counsel only provoked her infamous temper?

The memory of Anna's thin body at the gallows flashed behind his eyes, and he swallowed hard. That moment had shattered something fundamental in him. Perhaps the cracks had begun forming years earlier when he'd fled Graycastle, but he'd been too preoccupied—no, too cowardly—to acknowledge them. Throwing himself into teaching, into those bright young faces eager for knowledge, had been his way of plastering over the rot at the core of the world.

'The world hadn't changed,' he thought bitterly, fingering the frayed edge of his sleeve. *'Not until the rope snapped her neck. And then the cracks didn't just remain—they split wide open.'*

Anna hadn't been remarkable amongst his thirty-odd pupils—quiet, plain, the sort of girl who might blend into the classroom walls. But her mind... ah, her mind had been extraordinary. He could still see her, perched on that three-legged stool in his makeshift schoolhouse, pale eyes fixed unblinkingly on the slate as he explained the origins of ecclesiastical script. She'd absorbed knowledge like parched earth drinking rain, whether it was letters or the tedious doctrinal shifts of the Holy Church through the ages.

And her kindness—that, more than anything, haunted him. The image of her brushing Old Man Lowell's stubborn ewe in the afternoon light, fingers moving through the coarse wool with such tenderness. She'd hummed as she worked,

some tuneless lullaby, and when the animal butted its head against her shoulder, she'd laughed—a sound like wind chimes.

That girl couldn't have been evil. Whatever the Church claimed, whatever the magistrate had declared before lighting the pyres, that gentle child brushing sheep couldn't have been damned.

"The Devil's temptress? Unclean?" Karl's nails bit into his palms. What filthy hypocrisy. If Anna's quiet curiosity marked her for death, then the Graycastle officials who'd swapped building materials for profit—whose greed had buried thirty masons screaming under rubble—were walking archdemons. Yet those well-fed bureaucrats still strutted through gilded halls whilst Anna's body had hung limply, swaying against the gallows-field wind.

His flight from Graycastle, the years building this fragile sanctuary of literacy in Border Town—none of it had scrubbed that injustice clean. And now, cruellest of jokes, here came Nana Pine with tear-swollen eyes, whispering her terrified question: "Will I hang like Anna?"

The memory of Nana's usual exuberance—tangled in wildflowers, crowing with delight at some insect battle—made his throat tighten. That vibrant, irreverent child deserved to chase grasshoppers until she was grey, not choke at the end of a noose. So he'd come, knowing full well this gamble might cost him everything.

Knees hitting the throneroom's floor, Karl bowed so low his forehead nearly brushed the smooth textured stone. The hesitation wasn't feigned—his pulse hammered in his ears loud enough to drown thought. Then he lifted his face... and the breath left his lungs in a rush.

That slight frame. Those lake-pale eyes.

He was hallucinating. He must be. Blinking furiously didn't banish her—Anna stood beside the princess, flesh and blood, watching him with an expression

that mirrored his own shock. A half-strangled noise escaped him before he could stop it.

"...Anna?" The name tore from him like a prayer.

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'What a staggering coincidence!' Of all the craftsmen in Border Town, she'd somehow managed to entice Anna's neighbour? The odds were astronomical—either divine providence or the universe playing some cosmic joke. Garcia's mind raced as she studied Karl Van Bates' reaction. The way his entire body had frozen upon seeing Anna, the instant recognition in his eyes—this wasn't a casual acquaintance. They knew each other well. Her pulse quickened with possibilities.

She turned sharply towards Carter Lannis, whose broad frame stood rigid by the door. Their gazes locked, and the knight needed no verbal command—he moved with military precision, barring the exit before Karl could even consider fleeing. The metallic click of the lock echoed ominously in the sudden silence. "Professor... Karl?" Anna's voice was barely above a whisper, but the title sent Garcia's eyebrows shooting upwards. *'Professor? Since when did stonemasons hold academic titles?'*

Harry shifted subtly behind Anna, his wiry frame tensing like a coiled spring.

"It's you indeed, Anna. I, I..." Karl's voice cracked under the weight of emotion. Tears spilt freely down his weathered cheeks now, carving paths through years of stone dust embedded in his skin. "Sorry, I'm so sorry..." The words became a mantra, interspersed with shuddering breaths. "I'm so glad... What a blessing..."

Garcia watched, fascinated, as the proud craftsman dissolved before them. His shoulders shook with pent-up grief and relief. Anna remained motionless, but her pale blue eyes—usually so empty—flickered with something dangerously close to hope.

When Karl finally regained composure, the transformation was remarkable. He rose with newfound dignity, wiping his face with calloused hands before executing a perfect bow. "I'm sincerely apologetic, Your Highness. I have forgotten my manners."

"What's the matter? Aren't you a stonemason?" Garcia probed, leaning forwards.

"I used to be." Karl's reply came as swiftly as a blade. What followed was an explanation that unravelled piece by piece—his exile from Graycastle, his free school, the heartbreaking discovery of Nana Pine's awakening. Throughout his tale, Anna stood silent as a ghost, though Garcia noticed how her fingers twisted anxiously in the folds of her borrowed dress whenever Nana's name was mentioned.

'A new witch. What spectacular news!' Garcia's mind whirled with possibilities. *'Though Pine... why does that name itch at my memory?'* A quick consultation with Barov confirmed her suspicion—the Pines were minor nobility, which complicated matters considerably.

"You could bring her to see me," Garcia declared after careful consideration. She chose her words with surgical precision, watching how Karl's posture straightened at the promise of protection. "But I can't remove her from the Pines' household unless they pose a threat."

She hesitated then, weighing honesty against political expediency. The truth won out. "My reasons for protecting Anna aren't what you assume." Her eyes locked onto Karl's. "I need witches—their abilities are tools, not curses. Power itself is neutral; it's the wielder who determines its morality."

The atmosphere shifted palpably. Karl's shoulders relaxed fractionally, whilst behind Anna, Harry's lips quirked in something resembling approval.

"Now," Garcia clapped her hands, pivoting with practised grace, "let's discuss your qualifications. Have you worked on Graycastle's city walls?"

The sudden shift to practical matters seemed to startle Karl, but he recovered admirably. "Yes!" His nod was vigorous, the tension bleeding from his frame as professional pride took over. "I was part of the reconstruction team after the eastern section collapsed. Supervised the foundation work and—" He caught himself, apparently realising he was about to launch into technical details.

"Excellent." Garcia's smile was all sharp edges and gleaming ambition. "I'm commissioning defensive walls along the Redwater River and North Slope Mountain. Consider yourself appointed chief mason." The pronouncement hung in the air—part reward, part test. "You'll oversee the entire project, coordinate with my... specialists, and ensure we complete construction before winter."

Karl blinked, processing the rapid turn of events. From desperate supplicant to chief mason in the span of a conversation. "Your Highness, I... thank you. I won't fail you, but—"

"See that you don't," Garcia replied, though her tone carried more warmth than threat. "Barov will handle the contract details. One gold royal per month, as posted, with the possibility of a permanent ministerial position if you perform well."

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END

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