

**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 5.5 -

**Preparation for the
Months of the Demons**

Nightingale watched from the Mist as Garcia stood at the window of her study, fingers pressed against the frosted glass. Harry had left with the representative from Longsong Stronghold to inspect the wall—nearly complete now, by all accounts.

The princess, since then, had retired to the study and hadn't moved for several minutes. Unusual, for someone who typically burned through tasks like kindling. The pane was misted with frost, a sure sign of the coming Months of the Demons. Through it, the courtyard below was still visible—house-elves scurrying between supply wagons under glamours that made them look like particularly short labourers.

"When will you two be leaving?" Garcia asked, her voice directed at the seemingly empty room.

Nightingale stepped out of the Mist, materialising where she'd been all along—leaning against Garcia's desk with her arms folded. In the frosted windowpane, she could see Garcia's reflection. The princess's face was serious.

"Harry said we'll leave after the representative from Longsong Stronghold departs. He said travel will be quick, though he's been tight-lipped on the method."

Nightingale had seen Harry and his elves vanish and reappear at will—that sharp crack of displaced air, a body here one moment and gone the next. Though apparently they couldn't apparate to a place they hadn't visited before. Or was it teleport? Harry corrected Garcia every time she used the wrong word, and Nightingale had never quite grasped the distinction—if there even was one.

What she did grasp was that Harry's abilities defied everything she understood about magic. Garcia's expression whenever he demonstrated something new—the widened eyes, the slight parting of her lips, the way her fingers twitched as though already calculating how to put it to use—suggested the princess felt much the same. Witches had one gift. One. Perhaps it might branch into something related, but the root was always singular. Harry seemed to have no such limitation.

He'd even speculated, once, about Nightingale's own abilities—whether perceiving magic, discerning truth from lies, and vanishing into the Mist were truly separate gifts or facets of the same power. She hadn't answered him. She wasn't certain she had an answer, though his theory on how witch abilities manifested had been more considered than she'd expected from a man who spent half his time conjuring butterflies and the other half annoying Carter Lannis.

Harry seemed the mischievous, carefree type—and he was, most of the time. But there were moments when that mask slipped and something sharper surfaced beneath it. The way he spoke about magic then, measured and precise, sounded less like a prankster and more like a scholar who'd simply grown bored of lecturing. And Nightingale had not forgotten that night in the dungeon, when she'd come to free him and Anna. The casual, terrifying power he'd wielded the moment the God's Stone of Retribution was removed from his neck—that had not been the work of a carefree boy, or rather man.

"I see." Garcia's reflection shifted in the glass as she straightened. "Well, you'd better brace yourself. You know how he gets when he's being mischievous." A pause. When she spoke again, her voice had dropped—quieter, weighted with something Nightingale couldn't quite name. "I'm looking forward to meeting all your sisters."

"As long as you provide a home for every witch," Nightingale said. "A place for them to be free without risk of persecution. You'll have my eternal support."

Garcia turned from the window. Her shoulders rose and fell with a long, slow breath.

"Why couldn't we just be friends who support each other instead?"

Nightingale let the corner of her mouth curve upward—just enough to be seen, not enough to be read. She raised one brow, held it for a beat, then offered a slight bow before stepping back into the Mist.

The door opened a moment later—Barov's measured knock preceding Karl Van Bates's heavier tread. The two men entered, parchment and rolled plans tucked under their arms, and Garcia was already gesturing them towards the desk before the latch had clicked shut.

Within the Mist, Nightingale drifted from the desk to the window. Below, the courtyard bustled—wagons being unloaded, labourers hauling sacks of grain, the occasional crack of a glamoured house-elf vanishing between buildings. Behind her, Garcia's voice took on the clipped efficiency of command as she and Barov began reviewing supply figures, Karl interjecting with construction estimates.

Nightingale let the conversation fade to a murmur. Her gaze settled on the frost crawling across the glass, and her thoughts turned inward—back to the night she had first come to this castle. The night she had told Garcia why she'd stayed.

A few days ago.

Nightingale stepped through the double doors of Garcia's study as though they weren't there—because, within the Mist, they weren't. Solid oak and iron hinges meant nothing in her domain. She emerged on the other side, letting the Mist peel away from her like shed skin.

They'd already finished with classes.

She would never admit to avoiding them. Not to Garcia, not to Harry, and certainly not to herself. It had started innocently enough—Anna asking how the cement she produced actually worked, what would happen if the temperature ran much higher or much lower during calcination. Garcia had answered patiently, her eyes bright with that particular gleam she got whenever someone asked about the mechanics of things. One question led to three, three to a dozen, and before long the princess and the fire witch had been talking for two hours about something involving heat reactions and dicalcium compounds—words that slid off Nightingale's comprehension like rain off oiled leather.

Ever since that night, Garcia had been holding these classes. First just Anna. Then Nana Pine joined, her round face earnest and determined as she tried to keep pace with the older girl. Mostly they talked about science—that word Garcia used for her strange, methodical understanding of the world's workings. Natural philosophy, but stripped of the philosophy and rebuilt with numbers and formulae.

Nightingale had tried attending. Once. Perhaps twice. But the moment Anna and Garcia fell into their shared rhythm—Garcia sketching diagrams, Anna leaning forward with those pale blue eyes suddenly sharp and alive—even Nana got lost. The younger witch would sit there blinking, her quill hovering uselessly above parchment already covered in half-finished notes. Usually it was Harry who broke up their talk, appearing with tea or a sardonic comment about how some people needed to eat, as the pair could go on for hours without surfacing for air.

Right now, it looked like Harry was the one talking. He sat on the edge of Garcia's desk—a habit that made Barov twitch whenever he witnessed it—his wand balanced loosely between two fingers as he gestured with his other hand. Anna occupied the chair nearest him, Nana beside her on a cushioned stool. Garcia had pulled her own chair around to face them, legs crossed, one elbow on the armrest, chin propped against her knuckles.

"So why doesn't your wand work for the witches?" Garcia asked, just as Nightingale exited the Mist.

Nobody noticed her. Not immediately. That was one of the small pleasures of her gift—the way she could simply be somewhere without announcement, observing the room before anyone adjusted their behaviour to accommodate her presence.

She turned to Anna, who was holding Harry's wand. The dark wood sat in her slender fingers like a dead stick—no spark, no warmth, no response. Anna frowned at it as if trying to coax a stubborn ember from wet kindling.

Harry extended his hand. Anna passed the wand back without protest, and the moment it touched Harry's palm, Nightingale saw it—with the sight that lived behind her ordinary vision—a faint pulse of something alive travelling up the wood and into his fingers. Recognition. Reunion.

"Usually," Harry said, rolling the wand between his fingers with the absent ease of someone handling an extension of his own body, "a wand can be used by anyone. Even if you're completely incompatible with the thing, you can still get something out of it. A few sparks. A weak spell. Like trying to write with your off hand—messy, but functional."

He held the wand up, letting the thin afternoon light catch the grain.

"The problem is that this wand is special. Highly specialised." His mouth pulled to one side—not quite a smile, not quite a grimace. "It will never work for anyone except me. And maybe my bloodline, if I ever have one."

Garcia's eyebrows ticked upward. "What makes it so exclusive?"

"It was made by an ancestor of mine." Harry tucked the wand into a holster at his forearm—the motion quick, practised, barely visible. "It has quite the bloody history. The old rule for its allegiance was the defeat of its former owner." He scratched the back of his neck. "But I've reached a certain criterion that made it so that its allegiance is solely to me."

He smiled—the kind of smile that closed a door.

"But that got me thinking." Harry pushed off the desk and began to pace—three steps towards the window, pivot, three steps back. Nightingale had noticed he did this when his mind was working ahead of his mouth.

"What if parts from a Demonic Beast could be used as magical cores?"

Silence held the room for a beat.

"Cores," Garcia repeated, her tone measured. "You mean the interior component of the wand—the part that channels magic."

"Exactly." Harry held up a finger. "Every wand has three components: wood, core, and the craftsmanship—the myriad of runes that make the wand more than the sum of its parts. The wood needs to come from trees grown in a magically saturated place—somewhere the ambient magic's been soaking into the roots for decades, maybe centuries. The core needs to be a naturally magical substance—phoenix feather, dragon heartstring, unicorn hair. Things that are already conduits for magical energy."

He stopped pacing, turning to face Anna and Nana.

"Now, I don't know what kind of magical creatures exist here. But Demonic Beasts are clearly magically saturated—Carter's hunter described them well enough. If their bones or sinew or whatever hold ambient magic the way a dragon heartstring does back home—" He spread his hands. "—then theoretically, you could build a wand from local materials."

"And the wood?" Garcia pressed.

"That's the harder part." Harry's jaw worked for a moment. "I'd need wood from trees grown somewhere magic concentrates naturally. A leyline nexus. A sacred grove. Something." He waved vaguely towards the window. "But as we've discussed, magic here is spread thin. It doesn't pool the way it does back home."

"How goes the research on rituals that could create a leyline? Or at least catalyse one?"

Harry's reaction was immediate and unexpected. Colour rose from his collar to his jaw, and he looked away, scratching at the hinge of his jawbone with sudden interest.

"I did find some rituals in my books on how to initiate one, but there may be... better alternatives." The words came out faster than usual. He waved the question away with both hands. "Point is—leylines aside—if we could eventually solve the material problem, I think the witches could use wands. Could learn to use magic the way I do."

He declared it grinning, the flush already fading.

Nana's lips parted. Anna's expression didn't change, but her fingers curled slightly in her lap—the only sign she'd reacted at all.

"Why do you think so?" Garcia asked, uncrossing her legs and leaning forward. Nightingale noticed she didn't press on the ritual question—simply let it go, the way one stepped around a puddle without comment.

Harry resumed pacing. Three steps. Pivot. Three steps.

"Because I think the witches are actually elementals."

The word hung in the air, foreign and unanchored.

"Elementals," Garcia said. Flat. Not a question—an invitation to elaborate.

"In my world, they're—" Harry paused, searching for the right framing. "Right. So magic is vast. Broad. A wizard or witch in my reality can learn almost

anything with enough practice and talent. We're generalists. But elementals are different. They're aspects of magic made manifest in a person. Someone who can naturally wield fire without a focus—" He gestured towards Anna. "—without training, without incantation, without even understanding how. It just... is. Part of them."

Anna's pale blue eyes tracked his movement. Steady. Absorbing.

"Like Anna," Garcia said.

"Like Anna," Harry confirmed. "Or someone who can wield the aspect of healing." He turned to Nana, who flushed pink and looked at her shoes. "Naturally, instinctively, without understanding the anatomy they're repairing. An elemental doesn't learn their magic—they *are* their magic."

"And in your world," Garcia said slowly, "elementals could use wands?"

"Elementals in my world are vanishingly rare. Near-mythological." Harry stopped mid-stride, his expression sharpening. "But the few documented cases suggest that an elemental is as much a witch or wizard as anyone else. They simply channel a narrow aspect of magic without needing a focus."

Anna's lips pressed together. A tiny crease formed between her brows.

"What about Nightingale?"

Garcia asked it casually—too casually, with a slight tilt of her head towards the spot where Nightingale stood.

She hadn't announced herself. Hadn't coughed or shifted or let the Mist ripple. But Garcia's reseda-green gaze found her with the precision of an arrow, and the faintest curl touched the corner of the princess's mouth.

She knew I was here.

Nightingale let the last of the Mist dissolve. She stood near the bookcase with her arms folded, one shoulder against the carved wood. Anna dipped her head in greeting. Nana startled slightly.

Harry visibly winced.

He stood straighter, then resumed pacing—faster now, his strides longer, one hand rising to grip his jaw as he walked. Back and forth. Back and forth. The floorboards creaked with each turn.

"Nightingale's... complicated," he muttered.

"Flattering," Nightingale said.

Harry shot her a look—apologetic around the edges—before returning to his circuit. "You can perceive magic directly. You can discern truth from falsehood. You can step into the Mist—an adjacent layer of reality that renders you invisible and intangible."

He stopped. Ran both hands through his already-disordered hair, leaving it standing in new directions.

"On the surface, those look like three separate abilities. But if I'm right about the elemental theory..." He pivoted on his heel, pointing at nothing. "They might all stem from the same root. Some fundamental aspect of—" He faltered. His hand dropped. "—of revelation, maybe? Seeing what is hidden. Seeing the truth of things. Existing between states of being so that you can observe without being observed."

He shrugged. One shoulder, loose, uncommitted.

"Or maybe I'm completely wrong, and your element is voyeurism."

The book left Nightingale's hand before the thought finished forming. She'd snatched it from Garcia's desk—something heavy, leather-bound—and hurled it at his head in one fluid motion.

Harry caught it. Of course he caught it.

"Just kidding. Just kidding." He held the book up like a shield, grinning behind it.

Nightingale only glared.

Silence enveloped the room. Garcia watched Nightingale. Anna watched Harry. Nana watched everyone, her small hands clasped tight in her lap.

Nightingale coughed into her fist.

Every head turned.

She moved from the bookcase to the empty chair beside Nana—the one that had clearly been left for her, whether by design or habit—and sat. Not perched. Not leaning. She settled into it with her spine straight and her hands flat on her thighs, the way she sat when something mattered.

"There's a reason," she began, and her voice came out quieter than intended, "that I didn't accept Garcia's offer."

Garcia's expression didn't flicker. But her body stilled.

"I told you that I came here from the Witch Cooperation Association. I told you our goal is the Holy Mountain." Nightingale paused, letting the words land. "But I never explained why reaching it matters so much."

Harry lowered himself onto the desk's edge again, arms crossed. Listening.

"The Association was founded by a woman named Cara—our leader, our eldest sister. Over the years, she gathered witches from across the kingdoms. Not just those fleeing the Church's purges, though that's how most of us found her. She gave us purpose. Direction." Nightingale's thumb pressed against her thigh—a rhythmic pressure, grounding. "The Holy Mountain is said to be a place where witches can live without suffering the demonic bite."

"Demonic bite," Harry repeated. His green eyes sharpened.

Nightingale held his gaze.

"Every witch, after her first maturation—her awakening—faces a trial. It comes almost every year. The witch's magic rises to its zenith, and with it comes pain." She paused. The word *pain* was inadequate. A splinter was pain. A burn was pain. What the demonic bite delivered was—

"Unimaginable," Nightingale said simply. "The body feels as though it's being consumed from the inside. Every nerve screams. The magic swells until it threatens to burst through the flesh like water through a cracked dam. And if the witch cannot endure it—if her will breaks—she dies."

Nana Pine had gone very still. Her round face was pale, her lower lip caught between her teeth.

"Every year?" Harry's voice had dropped—no more casual drawl, no sardonic edge. Just the flat precision of someone cataloguing a threat.

"Almost. The timing varies, but yes. Annually, or near enough."

"And there's no cure? No—" Harry's hand moved unconsciously to his wand holster. "—nothing to counteract it?"

"None that we've found."

Harry's gaze slid to Anna. Then to Nana. His jaw tightened.

"What if they're put to sleep during the period?"

The question came quick—almost urgent. And the worry that threaded through it, the way his eyes flickered between the two younger witches with something raw and protective in their depths, made Nightingale's chest constrict. Not unpleasantly.

She found the corner of her mouth pulling upward—just barely. Just enough.

"Even if the witch is placed under the strongest sedative," Nightingale said, "the pain persists. It reaches beyond consciousness. They'll die in their sleep, body failing while the mind can't fight." She shook her head slowly. "The witch must be awake. She must have a strong will to pass the trial. There are no shortcuts."

The silence that followed was heavy. Garcia's fingers had curled around her armrest—knuckles pale against the dark wood. Her expression remained composed, but those green eyes burned with something. Calculation,

perhaps. Or fury. With Garcia, Nightingale had learnt, the two were often indistinguishable.

Nightingale turned in her chair to face Anna and Nana directly.

"Please." The word felt strange on her tongue—raw, unvarnished, lacking the composure she usually maintained. "Come with me to the Witch Cooperation Association. Both of you." She leaned forward, her hands pressing against her knees. "Among our kind, surrounded by sisters who understand, who can support you through the trial—your chances are better. You won't face it alone."

Nana's eyes widened. Her gaze darted to Anna, then to Garcia, then back to Nightingale.

Harry's brow furrowed deeply. He held his chin between thumb and forefinger, his mouth a thin line. Garcia's eyebrows had risen—a full arch, not the controlled micro-expression she usually permitted—but she said nothing. Did not argue. Did not protest or attempt to retain them.

A point to her. She wasn't trying to prevent them from leaving.

"Does proximity to other witches improve survival?" Garcia asked. Her tone was clinical. Detached. As though she were asking about calcination temperatures rather than mortality.

Nightingale frowned. The muscles around her eyes tightened.

"I'm not certain," she admitted. The words tasted bitter. "There are still some of us who died. Even surrounded by sisters. Even with all the support we could give."

Garcia nodded once. Processing.

Nightingale drew a breath. Let it go.

"And I think..." She hesitated. Her gaze settled on Anna—small, thin, those pale blue eyes watching her without fear, without flinching. "I think Anna might not survive the demonic bite."

The words fell like stones into still water.

Anna didn't blink. Didn't react. But beside her, Nana's hand shot out and gripped Anna's wrist—tight, white-knuckled.

"Why?" Harry's voice. Sharp now. An edge beneath the quiet.

Nightingale felt her jaw loosen, her eyes soften with something she could not mask. Regret. Deep and genuine and aching.

"Anna's magic is far larger than anything I've ever seen." She pressed her lips together before continuing. "When I observe her through the Mist—her magical signature—it's vast. Like standing at the edge of an ocean and being told to swim across. And from everything I've witnessed, everything our sisters have recorded and passed down—the bigger the pool of magic, the harsher the demonic bite."

The room was very quiet.

Harry's hand dropped from his chin. His green eyes—normally bright with mischief or calculation—had gone flat. Hard. He stepped forward, planting both hands on the back of the nearest chair.

"Those who survived the demonic bite—do they still experience it every year?"

"Yes."

"Does the pain lessen?"

Nightingale considered this. "For me... yes. My first demonic bite was the worst. Each year since, the pain has diminished. Become bearable." She paused. "But that's not universal. Some of our sisters feel the same amount of pain every time. Year after year."

Harry's eyes narrowed. He lifted his wand from its holster—not pointing it at anyone, simply holding it. His free hand made a small gesture, and his eyes began to glow. A soft gold, emanating from the irises outward, washing the green in amber. Through Nightingale's own sight, the effect was far more dramatic—magic channelled and directed, flowing behind those luminous eyes like a river of molten light. The sheer density of it made her breath catch.

"The witches whose pain doesn't lessen," Harry said, his voice oddly distant—as though part of his attention was elsewhere. "What are their abilities?"

Nightingale shifted in her seat. "There's one—Tia. Her ability is to transfer an animal's pregnancy to another, so one mother can carry twice the offspring while the other is free to conceive again sooner. She uses it to increase livestock for food."

"And her pain stays the same?"

"Every year."

Harry's glowing gaze fixed on Nightingale with an intensity that made the air between them feel thin.

"Does Tia use her ability often? Compared to you?"

Nightingale frowned. Her brows drew together as she turned the question over. "No. She doesn't get to use it much. We're always on the move—fleeing the Church, relocating, staying ahead of the Army of Judges. There's rarely time or safety to practise, and few animals available. Meanwhile, I—" She gestured vaguely at herself. "—use mine constantly. To scout. To hide. To listen."

"Right." Harry began pacing again—three steps, pivot, three steps—his wand tapping against his thigh in a staccato rhythm. The golden glow in his eyes pulsed with each step. "Is there any pattern you've noticed between how often a witch uses her magic and the severity of her demonic bite?"

Nightingale opened her mouth. Closed it.

She hadn't considered that. The connection between usage and the bite had never been something anyone in the Association discussed. They didn't get to use their magic regularly—the Church made sure of that. The constant flight, the fear of exposure, the God's Stones that littered every town and city like scattered teeth—

"Witches don't really get to use their magic," she said slowly, her frown deepening. "Not freely. Not regularly. The fear of the Church prevents it. The only ones who use their magic with any regularity are—"

"I'll stay."

Anna's voice cut through the room like a blade drawn from a sheath. Quiet. Hoarse. Absolute.

Nightingale's mouth snapped shut. Every eye turned to the fire witch.

Anna sat straight-backed in her chair, her thin hands flat on her thighs—mirroring Nightingale's posture, though Nightingale doubted she'd done it consciously. Those pale blue eyes—eyes that had been empty and hollow in the dungeon, that had slowly filled with life over these past weeks—now held something fierce. Something that burned hotter than any flame she'd conjured.

"I'll stay," Anna repeated. "And no matter what, I'll survive the demonic bite."

Beside her, Nana Pine's lower lip trembled. Her face was still pale—fear written plainly across those soft features—but she was nodding. Small, rapid nods, her chin bobbing behind Anna's shoulder.

"Me too," Nana whispered. Then louder: "Me too. I'm staying."

Nightingale felt something crack behind her ribs. Not break—crack. The way ice cracked before spring.

"Anna—"

"I'll stay." Third time. Final.

Nightingale searched those blue eyes for doubt, for bravado, for the foolish courage of youth that hadn't yet learnt what pain meant. She found none of it. What she found was the same quiet resolve that had let Anna walk towards the gallows without screaming, that had let her answer Garcia's questions in that freezing cell without anger or despair.

'She means it.'

Harry cleared his throat.

The golden glow had faded from his eyes. He stood still now—no pacing, no fidgeting. His wand hung loosely at his side, and his expression had shifted from sharp analysis to something more composed. Settled.

"I think I have a theory," he said. "About the demonic bite."

Every head turned to him.

He didn't elaborate immediately. Instead, he moved to the window, pressing one shoulder against the frame the way Nightingale had leaned against the bookcase earlier. The afternoon light caught the angles of his face—jaw, cheekbone, the faint shadow beneath his eyes that spoke of late nights and early mornings.

"Everything you've described," he began, speaking towards the glass, "sounds like magical core overload. In my world, wizards and witches have what we call a magical core—a reservoir of power that replenishes itself over time. If you use magic regularly, the core adapts. Grows. Flexes. Like a muscle." He turned from the window. "But if you don't use it—if the magic builds and builds with nowhere to go—"

He let the sentence hang.

Garcia was already leaning forward, her eyes bright. "It reaches a critical threshold."

"And the body has to vent it." Harry nodded. "Painfully. Violently. Like a pressure valve being forced open because the system's been running beyond capacity." He paused, his expression darkening. "In my world, when a young witch or wizard suppresses their magic—usually out of fear, or because they're forced to—they can become something called an obscurial. The magic turns inward. Becomes parasitic. Destroys the host."

He let that settle before raising a hand against the questions already forming on Garcia's lips.

"But I need to be careful with the comparison. Despite what I said earlier about the similarities between elementals and the witches of my world, there's something fundamentally different about your kind. Elementals aren't just people who happen to have magic—they *are* magic, in a way that wizards like me are not. So the mechanism isn't identical." He paced a short line, two steps and back, thinking aloud. "For an obscurial, the solution is simply to stop suppressing, though usually witches or wizards that reach the threshold of becoming an obscurial have something troubling them mentally, so it's not really just simply telling them to start using magic—so that example was a little moot. But for elementals—beings whose magic is woven into their very nature—I think the requirement is more demanding. Not just usage, but *regular* usage. Daily. Intensive. Pushing close to depletion and letting the core rebuild stronger each time."

Nightingale stared at him.

"You're saying the demonic bite is—"

"Excess magic forcing its way out because the witch hasn't been using enough of it." Harry spread his hands. "That's why your pain lessened, Nightingale. You use your abilities constantly. Your core overflows less each year because you're draining it regularly. But Tia—who barely gets to use hers—hits the same breaking point every single year because nothing's changed. The magic builds. The valve opens. The pain stays the same."

Silence.

Nightingale's heart thudded in her ears. She replayed every demonic bite she'd witnessed—every sister who'd survived, every sister who hadn't. The ones who died... had they been the ones with powerful magic but no opportunity to use it? The ones who lived... had they been those with weaker gifts, gifts that required less venting?

Or those who used their magic regularly.

"Anna's magic is vast," Harry continued, his gaze settling on the fire witch. "Larger than anything you've seen, you said. If she goes a full year without using it—or only using it in small bursts—the buildup would be catastrophic. But if she's using it daily—" He gestured towards the window, towards the back garden, towards the kiln and the cement works beyond. "—if she's venting that reservoir constantly, pushing her limits, draining herself and rebuilding—"

"The pressure never reaches critical," Garcia finished. Her voice was barely above a whisper, but it carried the force of absolute certainty.

Harry pointed at her. "Exactly."

Nightingale's fingers had gone cold. She pressed them against her thighs and stared at the floor between her boots, processing—reprocessing—every assumption she'd carried for years. The Association's entire philosophy was built around reaching the Holy Mountain because the demonic bite was an unavoidable curse. An inherent flaw in what they were. Something to be endured rather than understood.

But if Harry was right—

"That's just a theory," she heard herself say. The words came out too fast, too sharp. "You've known about us for weeks. The Association has studied the demonic bite for generations. You can't just—"

"I can." Harry's voice was gentle. Not condescending—gentle. And that was worse. "Because I've seen magical core overload before. In my world. In my own body." He tapped his chest with two fingers. "After the war, when I

stopped casting for months—just couldn't bring myself to touch a wand—I started getting tremors. Fever. Pain like fire in my bones. Madam Pomfrey—my school's healer—diagnosed it immediately. Told me if I didn't start using magic again, the buildup would destroy me from the inside."

He looked at Nightingale with something that might have been compassion and might have been certainty.

"I can't prove it yet. But I'd stake everything I have that regular magical use—intensive, daily, pushing the boundaries, draining the core and letting it rebuild stronger—is the key to surviving the demonic bite. Maybe even eliminating it entirely."

Nightingale's throat felt tight. She opened her mouth. Closed it.

Anna's voice came again—quiet, steady, anchoring the room like a heartbeat.

"I use my fire every morning. Every evening. Garcia asks me to melt things, to heat things, to push harder." A pause. Those pale blue eyes held Nightingale's without wavering. "I'll survive."

Nana gripped Anna's wrist tighter. "We both will."

Garcia rose from her chair. The movement was slow, deliberate—regal in that way she had of making even standing up look like a declaration of intent. She looked at Nightingale.

"Tell your sisters," Garcia said. "Tell them what Harry's proposed. Tell them that in Border Town, witches aren't merely tolerated—they're employed. Their magic isn't suppressed. It's used. Daily. With purpose."

She let that settle.

"And tell them that if Harry's theory holds—if regular use is the key—then Border Town isn't just a refuge from the Church." Garcia's chin lifted. "It's a refuge from the demonic bite."

Nightingale sat very still in her chair. The crack behind her ribs was widening—not painfully, not dangerously, but with the slow inevitability of ice giving way to something warmer beneath.

Wendy—steady, dependable Wendy, whose gift was the wind itself and who hadn't so much as stirred a breeze in months. Of Scroll, who could remember everything she'd ever read but spent her days running rather than reading. Of Leaf, whose touch made crops grow faster, withering in a camp with no fields to tend. Of Echo, who could replay any sound she'd heard but lived in silence for fear of discovery.

She thought of Cara, leading them towards a mountain that might not exist.

She thought of Anna's pale blue eyes, steady and fierce and absolutely certain.

Nightingale looked at Garcia Wimbledon—fourth princess of Greycastle, woman reborn from another world, engineer playing at royalty—and saw something she had not permitted herself to see before.

Not the fragile, desperate kind of hope that the Association clung to. Not the vague promise of a mountain somewhere beyond the wild lands. But something concrete. Something being built, stone by stone, day by day, in this frozen backwater at the edge of civilisation.

She did not speak. Not yet. There would be time for words—time to decide whether to bring her sisters here, time to test Harry's theory against generations of suffering and loss.

But time was not a luxury every sister had. There were those approaching their first demonic bite. Young women with magic locked inside them like a storm building behind a dam. Could she risk them on caution? Could she afford to wait when something this plausible—this *hopeful*—sat before her like an open door?

She sat in that chair, in that study, surrounded by a princess, a wizard, a fire witch, and a healer, and for the first time in years—

She felt hope.

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End

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