

The Vampire 1021

Chapter 1021: A Kitchen Accident (Part One)

The room at the top of Ashlynn's tower still felt like a work in progress to the young witch, but it was slowly becoming more complete. Several tapestries now hung on the walls, selected by members of her coven and Talauia as well, the finely woven views of landscapes from far-off places added a sense of warmth and vibrancy that the space had been sorely lacking when Ashlynn first brought her coven into their communal space.

At the moment, however, what Ashlynn valued the most about the changes her coven had wrought were the dozens of cooking implements that Ollie had acquired for the hearth that dominated a portion of the room's circular wall. Without them, she'd never have been able to attempt a dish like the one she was preparing for her meeting with Isabell.

"Back home, I never imagined that I'd see you looking so... domestic," Isabell said as she watched Ashlynn grinding herbs and spices in a mortar, filling the air with the scent of fresh thyme, garlic, and half a dozen scents that the silver-haired engineer was less familiar with. "I can't imagine your mother invading the kitchens, even when your father brought home a fish he'd caught."

"Mother always insisted that great fish needed great technique," Ashlynn said ruefully as she remembered the last time her father had come home with a swordfish nearly as long as he was tall. As an honorary member of Blackwell City's Linemen, the count went out at least once every few years during the warm summer months when the seas were gentle to dip a line in the water in the hopes of bringing back one of the giant fish of the deep waters.

The crew of the ship worked hard to make sure their lord brought home a decent catch, and even when his prize of the trip was notably smaller than the best catches of the trip, Ashlynn's mother always made a big fuss over it before insisting that her husband leave it in the hands of the manor's capable cooks lest he ruin their feast with his hamfisted attempts at butchery.

"Well, I don't know that I have great technique," Isabell said as she presented a pair of freshly fileted and deboned white-fish that had been swimming in the river just hours ago. "But will these do for you?" Isabell asked as she presented the filets to Ashlynn.

The two women were alone in the tower. Ashlynn had made it clear to her coven that she wanted some time with Isabell alone before they gathered to discuss what their newest member had experienced in dreams. Neither Ollie nor Virve seemed to mind the excuse to sleep in a bit longer. After days spent in

the cold outside, taking turns resting while they guarded Isabell during her trial, both of them were thankful for a warm hearth and a soft bed.

Ashlynn, on the other hand, slept for only a few hours before climbing to the top of her tower and making preparations to meet with her newest witch. The time she'd been able to spend with the older woman since her arrival in the Vale of Mists had been much less than Ashlynn would have wanted, and there was always something pressing to discuss when they did have time. Now, for at least an hour or so, she wanted to relax with a friend from the sea, and to at least share a meal before the topics became heavy and dire.

"You can cut off the tail portions that are thinner than your thumb," Ashlynn said after glancing at Isabell's work. "Drop them in the small iron pot, and I'll turn them into a soup. I'll take the thicker portions over here," she said with a smile.

"I learned how to make this dish in the Briar," Ashlynn explained as she poured a mixture of crushed herbs and spices over the thick filets of fish, covering them until you couldn't see the soft, delicate flesh of the fish through the coating of seasoning. "Jacques calls it 'blackened' even though it comes out more red than black. It's a bit spicy," she warned. "So if the fish is too thin, all you can taste are the spices. Not that he ever minded," she laughed. "I swear, his tongue must have been as leathery as his hide."

"Casquass would love it, I'm sure," Isabell said wistfully. Already, she was trying to figure out how she could send a letter home. There was so much she wanted to tell him that couldn't be said in a letter that might be intercepted and read by strangers along the way, but perhaps Marcel could make safe arrangements for her letter. After all, he'd done so for Ashlynn when she sent her letters to the guild masters.

But then, those letters had been fairly cryptic, and there were many things that Ashlynn couldn't trust to be written down. If Isabell wanted to send a letter of her own, she'd need to be careful about what she said, even though part of her just wanted to urge Casquas to gather up their children and rush to join her here in the Vale of Mists. The most she could manage would be to ask that they meet her in Lothian City, but that would be far too dangerous.

"Lassian and Issandra probably wouldn't like all the spices, though," she said with a sigh that had more to do with the worries that plagued her heart than her children's distaste of richly spiced foods.

For the moment, Blackwell City was the safest place for them. Intellectually, she could recognize that. Still, it was achingly far away, and even if she called for them now, it would take weeks for a message to

reach them and even longer for them to make the journey all the way from Blackwell City to Lothian March or the Vale of Mists.

Besides, until Owain Lothian was no longer a threat to her family, she couldn't risk bringing them out here to join her.

"If it was up to the little ones," she said, shaking her head at the memories that bubbled to the surface of her mind. "We'd gorge ourselves on mussels and rice every night, or alternate with cream fish stew."

But as much as she wanted to linger on pleasant things, some thoughts refused to be ignored, pulling her away from pleasant memories and feeding on her anxieties like a ravenous beast. When she thought about the plans Owain Lothian had for her children, the power that had suffused her body began to stretch and twist, like the limbs of a bow pulling back, ready to hurl a deadly missile at the source of her inner turmoil.

According to Jocelynn, Owain planned to press her son, Lassian, into service as his squire, keeping the young man under his thumb and dragging him off to the danger of the frontlines of the Lothian's war against the Eldritch. At the same time, he'd intended to force Issandra to give up her apprenticeship to the Shipwright's Guild in order to wed one of his loyal lackeys.

And all of this cruelty and control would be directed at her children, just so he could control the 'Engineer of Destruction' and force her to construct the engines of war that had made her famed in the Emerald Kingdom. Because to Owain, it would never be enough to allow her to design defenses and fortifications to keep his people safe.

He would accept nothing less than the ability to rain down devastation on his foes, and he would never accept a woman like Isabell 'holding out on him' when there was something more she could offer up to his ambitions.

The more she thought about it, the more the power within her seethed, coiling around the wooden handle of the knife in her hand and searching for a purpose... a way to transform her pent-up desires into something lethal that could strike at the man who threatened her children...

Chapter 1022: A Kitchen Accident (Part Two)

"There's nothing wrong with mussels and rice," Ashlynn protested gently as she stepped up beside Isabell and placed a reassuring hand on the other woman's shoulder. "Sometimes, we need the comforting and the familiar, especially when everything is changing so much, and aren't Lassian and Issandra at the age where it seems like everything around them is changing?"

"Especially Issandra," Ashlynn said as she gently released a thread of energy into Isabell's body, creating something like the taproot of a tree to siphon away the power the older woman had unconsciously gathered in her moment of turmoil. "Issandra's body is still transforming, and she's starting her apprenticeship at the same time, isn't she? It must be hard for her to be in such an unfamiliar environment among all the other apprentices at the Shipwright's guild while she's one of the only young women there..."

"You aren't being subtle, you know," Isabell said, setting down the knife on the table in front of her. As soon as she did, her eyes opened wide with shock, and she snatched her hand back from the hilt as though it were a hot pot fresh off the fire.

The simple, round, polished wood handle had transformed in her grip, molding itself to her hand until it resembled the handle of a fighting knife used by sailors who lived a rougher, more dangerous life than the one enjoyed by the upright Master Engineer that Isabell had become since leaving the war-torn Emerald Kingdom behind.

"I, I didn't realize that I could do that without even..." Without even what? Without thinking about the design she wanted, the purpose she had... Without a plan to change something to fit her desires. Without consciously choosing what she wanted to do with her power.

It was frightening to see that she could already twist the world around her to her will, and for a moment, she stood utterly still, looking at the hilt of the knife as though it had become a viper that might bite her. Not just because she'd turned a kitchen tool into a weapon, but because she hadn't even planned to do so.

All she had needed was the desire to do something, anything, to protect her children from the monster who would prey on them, and the wood in her hand responded to that desire in the only way that made sense to her.

"It's fine," Ashlynn said as she reached out to pick up the knife, using it to finish chopping a turnip before presenting the hilt of the blade to Isabell. "It's still usable, but it probably fits your hand better than

anyone else's now," she teased, hoping that making light of it would help Isabell to accept her own power rather than fearing it.

"Just go slowly," Ashlynn said. "Focus on the simple things in front of you. Learning to cook and do domestic things served more than one purpose in Big Sister Amahle's coven," she explained. "Being present in the moment is one of them. It's easy for your mind to wander when you do mundane tasks, and when your mind wanders, it's easy for your power to respond to the desires that come from errant thoughts."

"So even this is training," Isabell said, looking at the calm, confident way Ashlynn went about the simple tasks of preparing their afternoon meal in an entirely different light. "I had a teacher once who forced us to draw the same three shapes, over and over again. Triangle, circle, square. Again and again and again, and then he would come by with a ruler to measure them, and if they weren't even, straight, or round as they should be, he rapped our knuckles with the ruler and told us to try again. He said that if we couldn't even sketch a simple shape, we could never draft proper plans."

"Maybe I need to take a lesson from my children," Isabell said with a light laugh. "Make the same thing for breakfast over and over and over again until I can do it without distractions leading me astray."

"You could do it that way," Ashlynn said as she returned to her own cooking, smiling as she thought of the countless ways she'd seen Amahle, Talauia, and Jacques combining and recombining the spice she was using now, turning out a seemingly endless variety of dishes for their morning and evening communal meals.

"I don't think I could do with so little variety, though," she added. "Though, if I had to survive another summer in the heat of the Briar, I'd probably find myself begging Heila to prepare a chilled dish every night... Or Ollie, I suppose. They're both so much better with ice and snow than I am, and the heat of that place is unbearable."

"But you liked it there, in the Briar," Isabell said, reaching out hesitantly to pick up the knife again. In her hand, however, it didn't feel extraordinary. There was none of the feeling of shifting, flowing power moving through her body or connecting her to the blade. Instead, it was just a simple, ordinary knife with a handle that had been perfectly carved to fit her hand. It was as if it couldn't be more ordinary, despite the extraordinary way it had been shaped.

"It must have been nice," the silver-haired woman added, slowly chopping the vegetables as she finally gained a measure of understanding about how alone Ashlynn must have felt for most of her life. "There was no one else in the Briar but other witches, right? So, you finally had a place where you belonged."

Ever since she woke from her nap in the tower, Isabell had been thinking about how she would explain how she'd changed to Casquas or her children. What words would she use to describe the feeling of connection and kinship she felt with the mighty hemlock trees that towered over the lesser trees of the forest? How could she express the sensation of strength and flexibility that suffused every inch of her body since she'd woken?

She didn't know. Casquas might be good with flowery turns of phrase, but Isabell herself had always been far more direct. Yet the things she felt... she didn't have direct or simple words to describe them, nor did she possess an engineer's lexicon of specialized language to capture the unique nuances of the way her world had changed.

But Ashlynn surely understood. She didn't need the words with the members of the coven because she could feel them, just like she could feel the trees outside, and she knew that they also knew what it was like to hear the whistle of the wind through the branches with ears that weren't your own, or to feel the earth beneath your feet, dozens of paces deep.

They knew, because they were the same, even if they were each unique in their own ways. For Ashlynn to grow up feeling all of these things, but to have no one that she could share them with...

"The Briar will always be something like a vacation home to me," Ashlynn agreed. "It isn't 'home', the way the Vale is, or the way Blackwell used to be. It belongs to Amahle. The thorns she wraps around her sanctuary, and the dangers she keeps within, make it hard to feel perfectly relaxed there, even when none of those thorns face inward. But the people there make it a place I'll always be happy to visit," she explained.

"I learned a great deal there," Ashlynn said as she gently placed the seasoned fish into an iron cage, locking the fish in place before setting it on a rack in front of the hearth where she could rotate it as it cooked. "Cooking is one of the things I enjoyed learning. It was always nice to set aside the worries of the world to take care of something simple."

"Like this?" Isabell said as she lifted up the iron pot that was now filled with chopped vegetables and smaller pieces of fish. "Do you want it left simple with just flesh and roots? Wouldn't your mother have called that 'convent food'?" she teased.

"She would have," Ashlynn said with a laugh. "It was the one thing she always complained about when she returned from the convent. The food, according to her, was always bland and horrible. There's a bundle of herbs tied up and ready for the soup next to the mortar and pestle, and you can drop in the heads and bones to flavor the soup too."

"I'm sure Ollie and Virve will visit the kitchens before they join us," Ashlynn added. "But it won't hurt to have something warm and comforting for a snack while we talk later. For now, though," she said as she took the iron pot from Isabell and hung it over the hearth. "We should talk about your mark of the witch," she said in a more serious tone.

"It's important to understanding your power, and guiding you in your early lessons. Is it easy for you to show me?" Ashlynn asked. "Heila's is on her shoulder blade, and Virve's covers her back, so if you need help to disrobe, just let me know."

"No," Isabell said, taking a deep breath as she prepared to face this moment. She'd seen the mark on her skin as soon as she'd stripped out of her cold, damp clothes to wash up before taking a nap. After all, at that size, the mark was impossible to miss.

But seeing it was only the beginning. Just as much as the new sensations running through her body, the mark was a clear sign of how much her life had fundamentally changed in just a few short days, and now, she was about to learn what it would mean for her future.

"It's on my leg," Isabell said, bending down to gather up her skirts. "Here, take a look..."

Chapter 1023: Isabell's Mark (Part One)

Isabell needed to lift her skirts almost all the way to her hip in order to reveal the dark green mark in the shape of a tree that had formed on her hip over the course of her trial.

The base of the tree rested just above her knee on the outside of her leg. From there, the tree's trunk stretched upward, almost a third of the way up her thigh before a series of branches appeared. The 'branches' of her mark weren't very wide, less than a handbreadth across at their widest and they tapered sharply to an arrow-like point at the top of the tree, stretching two thirds of the distance from her knee to her hip.

Going the other direction, the tree seemed to possess five 'roots' that meandered downward, but one of those roots was very different from the others. Most of the roots were short and fairly stubby, though two of them were clearly longer than their two shortest peers.

But the root at the center of the tree wrapped all the way around her leg, as though it were choking off the other roots before it plunged further down her leg, only stopping when it was half way down her calf.

"I knew it would be different," Ashlynn breathed softly as she inspected the mark. "I just didn't expect it to be that different," she said as she tried to process what she was seeing. She expected the shape of her friend's tree to be different from the others in the coven, after all, both the Oak and the Cypress tree were fairly well rounded and even the Willow tree had a strong sense of duality to it.

But Isabell's mark went far beyond the sort of variations that Ashlynn had expected to see when she selected the Hemlock tree for the Master Engineer, and the things that made Isabell's mark unique were so shocking that Ashlynn's hand froze on the iron crank as she momentarily forgot to keep rotating the spiced fish by the hearth.

"Is there something wrong with it?" Isabell asked. Of all of the changes in her body, this was the one that she had the most apprehension about. She might have left the Church behind long ago, in the days of the bloody civil war of the Emerald Kingdom, but some teachings were buried too deeply to easily set aside, and the nearly instinctive horror and fear that came with seeing a mark of the witch was one of them.

More than that, the mark was a sign that she'd crossed a line that she could never come back from. Now, like Ashlynn, there was something visibly different about her that, if the Church ever saw it, would be an automatic death sentence for heresy. She could hide it, just like Ashlynn had for her entire life, but she could never scrub away the mark that proclaimed her new nature to the world.

As soon as the mark appeared on her skin, whether she learned to use her power or not, whether she did anything that could be considered a crime or not, she was a witch, and the Church would treat her as one.

"There's nothing wrong with it, necessarily," Ashlynn said as the sizzling sound of juices from the roasting fish falling onto the stones of the hearth prodded her back into action. The intensely savory aroma of garlic, thyme, and peppers filled the air, wrapping around her like a warm reminder of the days when she'd discussed the future of her coven with Amahle in the Briar.

"Could you bring me a book?" Ashlynn asked, pointing at the shelf on the opposite side of the large, circular room. "'A History of Forest Witches', has information about my predecessors and their covens, including information about their marks. I want to be certain before I say anything."

"There's nothing wrong with it," Ashlynn repeated quickly when she saw the increasingly worried look on her friend's face. "You're going to be a very skilled, very powerful witch in the future. It's just that, the way your root is twisted... I'm sure I've seen something about it, but I can't remember what."

"All right," Isabell said, crossing the room quickly to the bookshelf. When she arrived, however, she stopped and stared at the thick, leather-bound tomes in confusion. There were a few books with titles she could read: 'Plants of the Vale of Mists', 'Heraldry of Gaal', and some that looked like copies of much older tomes, like 'Pæt Cōd of Cnihtas', which, if Isabell remembered her lessons, meant 'The Codes of Knights.'

The rest of the books, however, were a complete and total mystery, covered with angular characters that bore no resemblance to the familiar letters or numbers she had learned, and they comprised a majority of the books on the shelf.

"And the Church has been calling the Eldritch 'uncultured savages' all this time," Isabell said with a bitter chuckle. "Ashlynn, this book... It's written in the Eldritch tongue, isn't it?"

"Oh! I'm sorry, yes," Ashlynn said, standing quickly and rushing across the room to retrieve the book. "It's this one," she said, selecting a thick, leather-bound tome that looked like one of the newest ones on the shelf.

"Talauia made this copy," Ashlynn said with a warm smile as she ran her finger down the spine of the thick book. "I spent hours going through it with Amahle before choosing the willow tree for Heila, and I've gone back to it every time I choose a seed for someone else. Not everyone will use the power of their tree the same way," she added as she brought the book over to the hearth and gestured for Isabell to tend the spit while she thumbed through the pages of the book.

"Heila is a very different Willow Witch from her most recent predecessor," Ashlynn explained, pausing to linger on the familiar pages about the different men and women who had borne a willow seed over the years. "In the end, all of this just represents possibilities. Things that have come before and might

come again. Whatever it says about your mark in here, it hints at possibilities, but remember, only you can decide how you'll use your power. All right?"

"I want to say, 'just tell me and get it over with, I'm a big girl now,'" Isabell said, staring at the book in a mixture of wonder and apprehension. "But I appreciate you for helping me to prepare myself for bad news."

"Still," she said as she took a deep, steadying breath. "Like I've always told my little ones, once you know something bad is going to happen, you can make plans to handle it. So, tell me, how bad is the news, and what can we do about it?"

Chapter 1024: Isabell's Mark (Part Two)

Ashlynn flipped quickly through the book until she found the section that described different manifestations of a witch's mark. While Isabell couldn't understand the strange, hooked, and angular characters that filled the book, the diagrams were all neatly labeled with brackets to measure the length and breadth of marks, the length and position of roots, and countless other details that made each mark unique.

Once again, she was taken aback by how sophisticated the Eldritch understanding of their world and the power of witchcraft must be. Far from the primitive superstitions the church claimed it to be, the book in Ashlynn's hands proved that the Eldritch people had adopted the same kind of systemic methods of learning to their use of witchcraft that Isabell had practiced to learn engineering.

"Here it is," Ashlynn said, tapping the page as she found what she'd been looking for. "'Twisted Roots and Choked Potential,'" she read as her eyes began to rapidly scan over the text. "Can I see your mark again?" Ashlynn asked after a moment, carefully inspecting the other woman's mark once she pulled up the hem of her skirt again while comparing it to the records in the book she held.

"All right, first of all, this isn't necessarily a bad thing," Ashlynn said firmly, hoping to reassure the older woman as much as she could. "There's nothing harmful about this, but it is... extreme. You should prepare yourself for some harsh limits on what you're able to do with your witchcraft."

"Ashlynn," the silver-haired engineer said with a slight shake of her head. "I'm like a pauper who has been offered a chest of gold. Even if you tell me that the chest is smaller than someone else's chest of gold, I'm not so attached to a dream as to be disappointed if I've received less than someone else might have."

"The power I have now," she said as she glanced at the knife she'd transformed, where it lay on the table. "It's still more power than I ever expected to possess. So, you don't need to cushion the blow. You can just tell me."

"You're right," Ashlynn said with a smile. "You're a 'big girl now'," she teased as she reached out to gently touch Isabell's mark. "The length of each root represents the strength of your potential in one of the five elements. Air, Earth, Fire, Water, and Wood. In your case, the long root represents your strength in the element of Wood," she explained.

"But, when a root twists to block off another root, the way yours has, it's a sign that your strength at one element has come at the expense of your power in another one," she said, pointing to a diagram in the book.

The example in the book showed the roots of a yew tree, where the root representing the element of earth had become tangled with the one representing fire, choking it out to grow thicker and stronger, becoming equal to the wood root in the drawing.

"But mine wraps all the way around," Isabell said as she began to understand why Ashlynn called her mark 'extreme.' "Does this mean that I've lost the ability to use any element but wood in my witchcraft?"

"You haven't lost it all," Ashlynn said as she pulled a small piece of string out of the pouch at her waist and began to measure the length of each root before it encountered Isabell's all-consuming wood root. "You still have some strength in the power of earth, about as much as I have in air," she said with a light laugh, hoping it would soften the blow.

"But your powers over water and air will be extremely limited," Ashlynn explained. "I think one of the things you'll need to learn early on is how to work with a partner who can add strength to compensate for your areas of weakness. Witches can pool their powers and work together on more complex rituals than they could attempt alone... For most witches, it's something they do infrequently if they ever do. But for you, it might be necessary."

"I see," Isabell said, nodding in understanding as she considered what Ashlynn had said. "What about fire?" Isabell asked when she saw Ashlynn hesitating. "Let me guess. Nothing at all?"

"Nothing at all," Ashlynn confirmed as she closed the book with a heavy thump. "But, Isabell, there's more to this than just a measure of potential," she said as her expression grew solemn. "Roots twist to choke out another root for two reasons. When a root twists outward, it's a sign that the power of the world is... rejecting you."

"It's something that's very rare, but when a witch is flawed or unworthy," Ashlynn said, choosing her words with exceptional care. "When a person demonstrates during their trial that they cannot be trusted with certain types of power, the world itself seems to intervene in their development as a witch. Such witches are said to be the Orphans of the Earth, rejected, at least in part, by the very thing that should be the source of their power."

Isabell didn't have to think hard to come up with half a dozen different reasons why someone might prove unworthy of wielding a specific power. The trial she'd taken required a certain amount of skill, knowledge, and persistence, and she believed that she'd learned what she needed to from the trial fairly smoothly.

But if someone had brute forced their way through, without accepting the lessons the trial was intended to teach, then perhaps the world would allow them to complete the trial while limiting the damage they would be capable of inflicting upon the world.

It was frightening to think that the mystical force of the world, the one that was supposed to be a neutral well of power that was uncaring about how witches used their power, would have such a mechanism. It implied a great deal more intelligence and thought lay behind the source of their power than Ashlynn had ever implied.

But at the moment, those thoughts were distractions from something else Ashlynn had said and Isabell quickly shook off those distractions to focus on the part that was the most important.

"You said that a root that twists outward is a sign that the world is rejecting the witch," Isabell said as her brows furrowed in thought. "But mine twists inward. Does that mean that I'm rejecting the world? That seems a bit pretentious, even for me," she said with a light self-deprecating chuckle.

"I wouldn't say that you're rejecting the world," Ashlynn said quickly. "But you have rejected a portion of its gifts. You have no ability to harness the power of fire because..."

"Because I refuse to unleash flames again," Isabell said as her eyes grew distant, filled with the ghosts of battles long ago, as the flames of the hearth reflected in her eyes began to resemble the flames that had consumed entire villages and towns.

"It's better this way," Isabell said, as she forced herself to turn away from her memories of the past. "You said you wanted my help to build the future, not to fight your enemies, right?" Isabell asked rhetorically. "Well, it works out this way."

"I, I suppose it does," Ashlynn said carefully as she fetched a pair of hearth mitts to pull the iron cage and its savory, aromatic fish off the rack before the hearth. The scent of it was enough to start her stomach grumbling, and she hoped that Isabell would find the dish a pleasant distraction after discussing her mark.

Part of Ashlynn wanted to press on further, correcting Isabell's misunderstanding about her power. A witch with as much strength in wood as Isabell possessed could be a devastating force for destruction if they wished to be. The elements weren't limited to just a single expression of power. Heila was proof of the fact that wood could be both regenerative and healing and potent in unleashing controlled violence.

By the same token, when Isabell rejected fire, she hadn't just rejected the ability to burn her enemies to death or to strip the land bare in a fiery inferno. She'd also rejected the flames that cooked their lunch and warmed their rooms from the winter cold. She'd walled herself off completely from a force that was more than just a weapon.

And in the process of doing so, she'd given herself more power over wood than any witch other than the Mother of Trees herself possessed... perhaps even rivaling the Mother of Thorns in her strength with wood.

At some point, Isabell would have to learn what it meant to possess that much power before something provoked her into unleashing it in the most devastating ways imaginable. But clearly, the Hemlock Witch wasn't ready to think about her potential for violence yet, and Ashlynn was reluctant to press the issue.

She only hoped that the battles to come wouldn't force her friend to confront the truth of her power before she was ready...

Chapter 1025: A Parent's Advice (Part One)

While Ashlynn wasn't entirely comfortable with Isabell's rejection of fire, there was little to be gained from pressing her concerns now. Isabell still had much to learn in order to safely harness the extraordinary strength she'd gained in the power of wood, and she had enough ability in the remaining elements to use them as a sort of wading pool where she couldn't make significant waves while she learned about the duality of each of the elements.

Hopefully, by the time Isabell was ready to step forward as a powerful witch, standing on her own two feet, she would be more open to the nuances of her gifts.

"This is, mmm, this is very good," Isabell said as she nibbled on the piping hot fish that had barely had time to cool after Ashlynn set it on a plate for her. The Hemlock Witch wasn't shy about digging in as soon as Ashlynn presented the dish, and the sounds of her smooth, methodical movements as she disassembled the tender, flaky fish into bite-sized morsels filled the air in between bites as she devoured the first filet on her plate with barely a pause.

"I thought it would have been spicier from the aroma when it was cooking," the engineer said, retrieving a folded napkin from the table to wipe away a trace of orange colored juices from her chin. "There's plenty of heat and warmth to it, but it isn't like any of the spiced fish dishes back home," she said.

"Heila doesn't like spicy things," Ashlynn said with an affectionate-looking smile. "So we asked Jacques to modify the recipe for us to use a different ground pepper that isn't as hot as the red bonnet peppers that he usually uses in a dish like this. There's enough heat to be pleasant, but not enough to leave you gulping at the tea or lemonade."

"Do you think that, one day, I could go to the Briar to meet these friends of yours?" Isabell asked. "It seems like you learned so much from them and... I'd like to at least visit. All of the places you've gone beyond the mountains, really," she added after taking another bite of fish. "I want to see the world that has been closed to us for so long."

"But more than that, I want to meet the people who helped you when none of the rest of us even knew what had happened to you," the silver-haired engineer added, setting down her knife and fork as her tone grew more solemn. "I'm sure your parents would want to thank them too."

"I'm sure that Amahle would welcome you into the Briar," Ashlynn said. "She's always intended for it to be a safe haven for witches who need one. Unless you do something to betray her trust, I can't imagine her turning you away."

"As to my parents, I still don't know about how they'll feel about my new world and the friends I've made or the person I've pledged my life to," Ashlynn said with a heavy sigh. "I think, if my parents could say anything to Amahle or Nyri, they would ask them both to take me far away from the frontier where the wars will be fought."

"Why?" Isabell asked in open-mouthed shock. "If I'd thought I'd lost one of my little ones, and then I found out they were still alive, and that there were people in the world who helped to keep them safe," she said, shuddering in mild horror at the notion of either of her children enduring what Ashlynn had.

"I don't think I'd ever let go of my children again," Isabell said. "And I'd do everything I could to thank the people who kept them safe."

Already, she was wrestling with whether or not she should leave Issandra to her apprenticeship with the Shipwrights, or if she should summon her here along with Casquas and Lassian. As much as she hated the idea of tearing her daughter away from the position she'd studied so hard to earn and fought so hard to prove she could handle, the Kingdom of Gaal wasn't likely to remain a safe place for the family of a witch.

After what she had experienced since coming to the frontier, Isabell felt increasingly certain that it had been a mistake to leave her children behind, and even though she hadn't faced anything half as tragic as what Ashlynn had endured, she still couldn't wait to be reunited with her little ones.

So when she tried to imagine the idea of sending her children far away from her in order to keep them safe... It was a little hard for her to imagine. And after everything Ashlynn's parents had done to keep their daughter close to them in a warm, loving home, she had a hard time seeing them as the sort of parents who would push their daughter away, even if it was 'for her own good.'

"If my parents were just common people, I'm sure they'd be the same," Ashlynn agreed, poking at the remnants of fish on her plate as her appetite faded away. "But they aren't just people. Father would want to send me far away because he'd realize that one day, he might have to raise an army for the next Crusade, to lead an army against me or risk the Church declaring him and everyone who is loyal to him a heretic."

"And Mother," Ashlynn said with a heavy sigh. "Hiding me away for so long must have been hard on her. She did everything she could to keep me safe. I'm sure that, when the Church brings their Holy War, she'd prefer that I was far away from it instead of facing the danger directly."

"You've always been very smart, Ashlynn," Isabell said, reaching across the table to hold Ashlynn's hands. The way Ashlynn was speaking, laying things out so methodically, reminded her for a moment of Jocelynn. Once the younger sister was able to set aside her infatuation, her mind was keen and quick, and she had the same knack that Ashlynn did for putting herself in someone else's shoes and thinking about what they would do.

"But sometimes, you let that cleverness get in the way," she added, giving the younger woman's hands a gentle squeeze. "They're your parents. They love you. They'll want to see you again, I'm sure of it. So, don't make any decisions for them until you've had a chance to speak to them, all right?"

Chapter 1026: A Parent's Advice (Part Two)

For a moment, Ashlynn didn't say anything while she carefully considered Isabell's words. She'd thought about how she would reach out to her parents once she'd taken Lothian March from Bors and Owain. She knew that as soon as she made her move, it would set off a chain of events in the Kingdom of Gaal that could put both her parents and their entire extended family in danger.

If it came down to it, she was prepared to gather up her coven to race all the way to the coast to fetch her father and bring him back to the Vale of Mists. Her mother would be harder to rescue now that she'd returned to the convent in Keating Duchy, but so long as it didn't require confronting the forces of the Holy City directly, Ashlynn was confident that she and her coven would be more than strong enough to bring her parents to safety.

Rather than a desperate rescue, however, she hoped that she could stall the Kingdom of Gaal with diplomacy long enough to reach her parents peacefully. If she could convince the Duke of Keating and the Marquis of Crew to send messengers to the Royal Capital and wait for instructions from the crown rather than getting embroiled in a losing war with the Eldritch, then she could likely drag things out for months while the forces of the Kingdom and the Church prepared for their inevitable counterattack.

She was under no illusions that she could claim Lothian March for the Vale of Mists and secure peace with new borders. The kingdom would fight to reclaim its lost lands, and the Church would rally against the 'demon invasion.' Nothing she said after claiming the Lothian throne for herself would change how their lords and masters would respond to her actions.

But she didn't need a permanent peace in order to reach her loved ones. So long as she could secure safe passage for her loved ones without bloodshed, she was certain that she could avoid the worst outcomes.

Her father might need to abdicate his throne if he wanted to join her, and she wasn't sure that he'd be willing to after everything he had gone through to secure a path of inheritance to at least be able to place a grandson on the throne, but... She had to try to convince him. Whatever happened after that, at least she would have done her part.

"Isabell," Ashlynn asked as she tried to shake off the thoughts of family before they led back to the place that they always did... Her sister Jocelynn and whether or not the two of them would ever be able to move forward from what her sister had done to her.

"There are some things you know about my father better than I do," she said. After all, much of what she had witnessed growing up beside him had come from the perspective of a child, and everything before a certain age always seemed golden-hued and perfect in her memories, even though she was certain it hadn't been.

"I wonder, if I offered my father a domain of his own to rule in the new world that we're building, do you think he would welcome it the way you have?" Ashlynn asked. "Not that you need to rule over anything," she added quickly. "But I know you want to build a better future for more than just yourself and your family. My father has always been a good, just lord for his people. So, do you think that he would enjoy the opportunity to help us build something new?"

Ashlynn expected there to be trouble with the Lothian Barons when she seized the throne of the march. Hanrahan had already come under her control, and she felt confident that Dunn would follow. But there were still many others who might resist, and some who might lose their thrones in the struggle. If that happened, she would need to name new rulers to take the place of the fallen lords, and she could think of few people who would be better at establishing a just and honorable domain than her father.

"I don't think that has an easy answer," Isabell said as she left her seat at the table to sit next to Ashlynn, where she could give the other woman a hug from the side. "Your father is proud of what he has done, but he also sees himself as a steward of Blackwell. He feels obligated to his ancestors, and he strives to leave behind something better for his descendants."

"The people of Blackwell matter to him, too," Isabell added. "You know, many guilds extend honorary membership to their local lord, but I can't think of many who would venture out to sea in order to go fishing in the deep waters with the Linemen the way your father does. Maybe he does it because it's part of being a good lord, and perhaps, out here, he would go out on hunting expeditions the way he goes fishing in Blackwell."

"But the call of the sea is in his bones," Ashlynn said with a slightly sad, nostalgic look on her face. "The Blackwells belong to the sea. We came from it and we'll return to it. We live ever beside it, because the sea is our home and the people who brave the waves are our people," she recited.

"It's like being caught in a net, isn't it?" Ashlynn realized. "He's my father, he's a lord, he's a vassal of Duke Trevarthen, a servant of the king, a man of Blackwell, a Lineman, honorary or not... He's all of those things at once, and more, and each one is a rope in a large net, holding him in place where he is."

"It's easier to run away and to start anew when you have very little to leave behind," Isabell acknowledged. "That's why I could leave the Emerald Kingdom so easily when I did. But if I'd taken the title and the lands... If I'd started to build my life there. I'd never have returned home. If I were 'Lady Isabell, Royal Engineer', it would have been all but impossible to leave."

"So, if your father doesn't leave Blackwell for you," she said as she gave Ashlynn a reassuring squeeze. "Remember, it isn't because he doesn't love you, and it isn't because he values his position or his lands more than you. It's because he'll be facing one of the hardest choices of his life, and no matter what he chooses, he'll need to tear out a piece of his heart."

"I know," Ashlynn said as she leaned into Isabell's embrace, closing her eyes and enjoying the comfort of the other woman's presence, just for a few moments. "I just hope that the King or the Church don't take that choice away from him... Because if he stays, and they reject him, the consequences will be worse for everyone."

Chapter 1027: Hemlock's Warning

For a time, both Ashlynn and Isabell said nothing, lingering in the comfort of holding and being held by a dear friend while thoughts of loved ones left behind haunted them both.

The fire in the hearth crackled and popped, filling the room atop the tower with dancing shadows and the faint smell of woodsmoke that blended with the pot of soup simmering above the flames. Outside

the window, the sky was already growing dark while the mists of the Vale settled over the forest like a blanket drawn up against the chill of the winter air.

If it weren't for the missing sounds of crashing waves and the faint, eternally present scent of salt in the air, the two women from Blackwell could almost forget that they were so far from home. Any minute now, Isabell could almost imagine Lassian bursting into the room, insisting on 'sampling' the evening's fish soup and burning his tongue in the process.

But they weren't home in Blackwell, and the place where they currently stood was no longer teetering on the brink of war; it had waded directly into one. For Ashlynn, this was a moment of respite, but her time to linger in it would soon come to an end.

Word of the Summer Villa's fall had surely reached Lothian City by now, yet the only response Marcell's spies had reported so far was a group of soldiers led by Sir Gilander who had been spotted on the road to the Summer Villa. If Bors and Owain had anything further planned, they were keeping their plans to themselves and making few moves that the Black Merchant's informants could detect.

Once Gilander returned with confirmation of the Villa's fall, however, that was certain to change, and Ashlynn needed to be ready with the next steps of her plan when the time came.

"I should ask the others to join us," Ashlynn said, pulling herself free of Isabell's comforting embrace. "You mentioned that there were things in your trial that you wanted to talk about, and it would be good if everyone could be present when you do. As much as I'd like to wait until Heila returns from Hanrahan... By the time she comes home, I may already be in Maeril."

"It's already a luxury to have this time," Isabell agreed, giving Ashlynn a last affectionate squeeze as the younger woman pulled away. "Winter campaigns and sieges are the worst when everyone is stuck in tents and fighting to keep the soldiers from going hungry or freezing to death in the snow."

"I don't intend to fight that kind of war," Ashlynn said firmly. "Once we've toppled the rulers of the march, we can turn our attention to building the kind of place where no one has to worry about going hungry or freezing to death in winter while their lords feast and revel in the misery of their subjects."

Ashlynn's determination was so fierce that it took Isabell momentarily by surprise. She hadn't expected Ashlynn to have developed such a close bond with the common people of Lothian March when she'd spent so little of her time among the people.

Then again, she'd spent time posing as a kitchen maid in the Summer Villa, and even if that hadn't been enough to shape her perception of the plight of the common folk in Lothian March, the people around her like Ollie, Sir Thane, Dame Sybyll, Zedya and countless others had likely given her a good deal of insight into the way people had suffered the abuses of their secular rulers.

"Ashlynn," Isabell said, drawing a deep breath as she tried to find a way to broach a delicate topic with the woman who was no longer just a close friend, but also the head of the coven that Isabell had joined. "I think there's something about my trial that I should share with you before the others arrive. A warning from the hemlock seed that is meant for you just as much as it was meant for me."

"A warning?" Ashlynn asked, raising an eyebrow in surprise. "Did it actually speak the words of a warning to you?"

In the records she'd read, such a thing wasn't unprecedented, but it was vanishingly rare. The last record of anyone receiving a warning or explicit message during a trial had been recorded by a Spruce Witch who had been warned to gather as many seeds and cuttings as they could to establish a 'refuge' against the coming calamity.

It was one of the few records that had been preserved successfully from the time before the Age of Ice, and without the refuges created by the ancient Mother of Trees, dozens of species of trees would have been lost forever in the Age of Ice that reshaped the entire continent. For a member of her coven to receive a warning...

"It wasn't as literal as a spoken warning," Isabell said slowly. "But it came very close to one a few times. I know that Ollie said his trial presented him with the same event over and over again so that he could learn from his mistakes and try again. Mine was like that too, but the Hemlock seed didn't just present me with a few weeks or months to see the impact of my actions... it stretched events out over hundreds of years."

"Hundreds of years?" Ashlynn said, blinking in surprise at the immensity of what Isabell was describing. "Did you experience all of that time actively? I didn't think it was possible to spend hundreds of years in a vision..."

"It wasn't like that," Isabell said as she organized her thoughts. "Maybe if it had been, I wouldn't have made so many mistakes. But I think it wanted to teach me a lesson about trying to solve problems 'once and for all.' In the trial, I was told to help a village thrive, and there were countless challenges available for me to find ways to make a difference," she said as she recalled the challenge the vision of Ashlynn had placed before her...

Chapter 1028: Isabell's Trial (Part One)

In the vision, the village was struggling with everything from failing crops to seasonal floods, sickness in the spring was common, and food spoiled frequently in the oppressively damp autumns. To an engineer like Isabell, each problem could be solved with a well-designed solution, but nature had a way of battering down whatever she built.

She solved the flooding by constructing a series of dams along the river, creating reservoirs that could also irrigate fields in the scorching summers to prevent crops from failing before they had ripened for harvest. The rainy seasons were intense, and most dams would have failed to hold back so much water, but Isabell drew heavily on the power of wood to reinforce them and prevent the flood waters from washing away what she had built.

For a time, that worked, and the village began to prosper with stable harvests and safety from floods. The health of the villagers even improved without the remnants of floods to serve as breeding grounds for sickness in the spring.

And then, in a single storm, the upper dam broke.

Isabell watched from the hillside as the dam of wood and stone that she'd reinforced with clever witchcraft for more than thirty years tore itself apart. The sound she heard would haunt her nightmares for years to come. It was a terrible, grinding roar of stone and timber surrendering to pressure that was nothing like the simple crack of breaking wood or the rumble of collapsing masonry. It was deeper, more primal, like her breaking dam had stolen the crack of lightning and the rumble of thunder from the storm clouds above.

The torrent that followed was fiercer than any natural flood could ever have been, because Isabell had worked so hard to contain it all. Every drop of water she'd captured to prevent spring floods, every reservoir she'd filled to irrigate summer fields, it all came down at once in a wall of churning destruction that devoured everything in its path.

"Nooooo!," she cried as she raced to stop it. Even in the vision, even knowing somewhere in the back of her mind that this wasn't real, her instincts as an engineer screamed at her to do something, anything to prevent the disaster from unfolding it, even as her trained mind calculated the weight of all that water and the impossibility of building anything that could withstand the force of its impact.

But she wasn't just an engineer anymore; she was a witch now. She was a witch, and she had seen the power of a witch's desires to reshape the land, so she had to try. Her heart hammered in her chest, and her hands shook as she worked, pouring every ounce of power that she could find into the middle dam. Crops all around her withered and died as she drained away every scrap of life they held in a desperate attempt to reinforce the middle dam and for a moment, she could feel the wood responding to her desperate commands.

The timber of the dam grew roots anew, weaving themselves together and digging deep into the earth as though the planks and beams had become soldiers preparing to resist the charge of mounted knights with their shields. When the torrent of water struck the dam with the force of an avalanche, the entire dam groaned and shuddered, and the earth itself shook from the force of the blow... but it held! The dam actually held!

The relief that Isabell felt, however, was tragically short-lived as the wave of water brought with it another problem. The reservoir was already filled close to the limit of the dam, but the failure of the upper dam brought so much water that the middle reservoir quickly overflowed. The sudden spill of water was far too much for the middle dam to resist as the earth churned and softened, becoming too weak to hold the dam in place, even with the roots that had just dug into the earth doing their best to cling to the suddenly sodden soil.

Isabell had done her best, but it wasn't enough. No matter how many crops she sacrificed in an offering to strengthen the dam, it would never have been enough to contain an entire reservoir emptying itself all at once.

The middle dam collapsed, then the lower one quickly followed, and Isabell found herself running down the hillside, her feet slipping in mud as the water rushed past her toward the town that had grown fat and prosperous on her engineering.

Before she'd helped to reshape the village, only a few hundred people had lived there. They were mostly simple farmers who knew how to read the river, who built their homes on high ground and accepted that some years the floods would come and they would lose part of their harvest.

It was a mixture of pride in what they had built through years of struggle and the impossibility of accumulating enough wealth to move somewhere else that kept them here, but despite the difficulty of their struggles, they found ways to make life bearable even in the temperamental river valley where they'd settled.

But by the time the dams failed, the village had grown into a town of thousands. Merchants and craftsmen had moved into the flood plain, building their shops and workshops where the old villagers would never have dared to settle because it was the best way to power the waterwheels of their mills.

Young families raised children in pretty houses with gardens that flooded only in Isabell's worst nightmares, because the dams would always hold. Everyone knew the dams would hold. The Hemlock Witch herself had built them. The Hemlock Witch had promised to keep them safe, and she'd even taught them how to harness the power of the river to saw their logs, grind their grain, and countless other things. The Hemlock Witch had turned a source of destruction into a font of prosperity.

The flood waters swept all of that away, crushing the people against buildings, the way the water turned millstones to grind wheat into flour, until there was almost nothing left of the prosperous, thriving community she had nurtured over the course of decades...

Chapter 1029: Isabell's Trial (Part Two)

Isabell stood at the edge of the devastation as the sun rose the next morning, and she couldn't move. Couldn't look away. Couldn't make herself accept what she was seeing, even though she'd seen worse during the war. During the war, she'd become all too familiar with the sight of burned and blackened bodies that were left behind when the flames died down. Now, the trial of the Hemlock tree presented her with the horror of bodies crushed and broken, swollen and bloated by the waters of the flood.

A woman's body, face down in the mud, one arm still reaching toward where her house had been. An old man lay crushed beneath timbers that Isabell herself had shaped and reinforced to support the weight of a footbridge across the river, only now the wood refused to break or snap even as it trapped him beneath the surge of water and mud, ensuring that no one could free him before the giant log claimed his life.

And then there were the children. There were always children, only now it was worse because she saw the faces of Issandra and Lassian in every girl and boy, their glassy eyes looking at her as if to ask how the mother of the town they lived in could ever betray them so badly.

The town had grown to thousands under Isabell's careful engineering and her regular use of witchcraft to help the people thrive. Now, at least a quarter of them lie dead, and some of the bodies might never be found to be placed upon the pyres that would surely blacken the skies with smoke for days. Three-quarters of the homes were gone, along with nearly every mill and workshop that brought the town its wealth.

And it was all because Isabell had done such good work. Because people had trusted her enough to build their lives on the foundation of her promises.

She forced herself to walk through it. The image of Ashlynn in the vision didn't even need to tell her to, because Isabell knew all too well that she had to confront the consequences of her actions by herself. So, just as she'd done in the Emerald Kingdom's Civil War, she made herself enter the flooded ruins of the town she'd nurtured up from a small farming community.

She made her see the merchant who'd moved his family from a neighboring territory because everyone knew the river valley was safe now, the Hemlock Witch had tamed it. She made herself count the bodies of apprentices who'd come to learn trades in the prosperous town. Made herself watch survivors dig through the mud for their loved ones with their bare hands, because there weren't enough shovels left intact to go around.

The mud sucked at her boots with every step, and Isabell found herself thinking of other mud, in other places. The mud that had formed when rain fell on towns that were still burning, mixing ash and blood and the rendered fat of the dead into a slurry that stuck to everything it touched. She'd walked through that mud too, years ago, surveying the results of her bombardments in the Emerald Kingdom.

She'd told herself then that it was war, that these things happened in war, that she was just doing her job as one of many soldiers in the prince's army. She'd told herself the screaming would stop eventually, that the nightmares would fade, that the wine would help her forget. She'd found solace in the company of knights and soldiers who drank to drown out the ghosts that haunted them and forced themselves to laugh at crude jokes because the alternative was to cry over the friends who hadn't survived to raise a cup when the fighting finally stopped.

But this, this was supposed to be different. This was supposed to be her redemption. She'd left the war behind, left the Emerald Kingdom, left the title of Engineer of Destruction in the ashes where it belonged. She was going to build things now. Help people. Make the world better instead of tearing it down.

And here she was, standing in the ruins again. Walking through devastation that she'd caused. The only difference was that this time, she'd caused it by trying to help.

A child's doll, half-buried in the silt. Isabell bent to pull it free, and her hands were shaking so badly she almost dropped it. The doll had a painted face and yarn hair, lovingly crafted by someone who'd wanted their daughter to have something beautiful. Someone who'd lived in this town because the Hemlock Witch had made it safe. Someone who was probably dead now, along with the child who'd played with this doll.

"I did this," Isabell whispered, and her voice sounded hollow even to her own ears. "I did this trying to help them."

The Engineer of Destruction strikes again, a voice in the back of her mind whispered. It doesn't matter what you try to do. You build or you burn, but the result is always the same. Devastation. Death. Disaster. You're cursed, Isabell. You destroy everything you touch. This is why you never did anything truly great in Blackwell City... because you know that if you ever really tried, everything would end in flames and ashes.

She wanted to scream at the vision, to demand that it release her, to wake up beside the bonfire in the Vale of Mists where none of this was real.

"You didn't do this," the vision of Ashlynn in the trial told her. "You helped the people to thrive, and for many years they did. You didn't destroy the dams to kill these people; the storm did that. Isn't it enough that they were able to thrive for so long and enjoy so much prosperity because of what you did?"

"Of course it's not enough," Isabell swore bitterly. "How could anything that ends like this ever be 'enough'? And don't you dare suggest that this isn't my fault," she added hotly. "An engineer accepts responsibility for the things they build, and when they fail and kill someone, it's no different than a knight swinging a sword. If an engineer can't accept responsibility for what happens after people come to depend on her work, then she has no right to call herself an engineer!"

"I did this to them," Isabell repeated as she wiped tears from her eyes. "It's my fault for being sloppy and conceited in my work. I let myself think that everything would endure because I'd gained the power of witchcraft to make things even greater and stronger than they could ordinarily be. I was arrogant, and

these people paid the price. I got caught up in what I could do and forgot to ask if that was the best solution."

"I can do better," Isabell said with determination in her voice. "I needed to be humbled," she acknowledged. "And I'm grateful for the lesson. But I cannot accept that this is enough. If this is the best I can do with the power of the Hemlock seed, then I shouldn't have it at all... I have to do better than this."

"Very well," the vision of Ashlynn said. "Then let's see what lessons you can take from this tragedy in order to prevent another one," she said as the river valley rippled and shifted, returning to the way it had been when Isabell first tried to 'help.'

"This time, it will be better," Isabell promised the sleepy farming village. "This time, I'll be careful with things and I'll remember to plan for failures... I won't build you a calamity disguised as a boon this time..."

Chapter 1030: Inviting Calamity

"Every time I tried to solve a problem, the vision moved forward in time by years or decades, showing me what would happen when people came to depend on my work," Isabell explained as she gazed into the flames of the hearth in Ashlynn's tower.

The warmth of the room and the smell of the fish soup simmering in the hearth helped to ground her in the present as she processed her memories of the visions, sifting through them to extract the nuggets of wisdom as best she could without clinging to much to pain that wasn't real, no matter how real everything had felt at the time.

The things she'd seen and done... they hadn't really happened, and as long as she reminded herself of that, she could treat them as lessons rather than nightmares that would haunt her just as much as her memories of the Emerald Kingdom's Civil War did.

"At first, I thought it was teaching me that my solutions weren't good enough, but that wasn't the lesson at all. No solution is ever good enough to last forever," Isabell said, shaking her head at the foolishness of the notion.

"Even the power of witchcraft can't create something that will survive the trials of time. That was one of the first things I had to learn," Isabell confessed. "Sometimes, I could create prosperity that lasted for twenty, thirty, even fifty years. Long enough for generations to be born never knowing the troubles of the world I'd started with, but new troubles seemed to crop up as soon as I'd solved the familiar ones."

In her second attempt at the vision, Isabell abandoned the notion of taming the mighty river with just three dams and vast reservoirs. Instead, she took a page from the Dunn's book and sent her villagers higher up the steep sides of the river valley to establish dozens of smaller hamlets.

She didn't choose locations for those hamlets at random. Instead, she sought out the sources of the streams that fed the mighty river, and when she found them, she built smaller dams that created dozens of giant ponds that were deeper than a man was tall and further across than a man could throw a stone.

It was painstaking work that took years longer to produce results, but Isabell didn't stop at establishing hamlets or creating small ponds. She still placed an upper and lower dam above the town where the most fertile soil lay, so the people could irrigate their farms and power their water wheels.

Then, she turned her attention to the threads that bound her scattered people together. Her powers of earth were weak compared to the strength of her wood magic, but they were more than enough to help her people lay down a series of roads and retaining walls that allowed them to traverse the river valley with ease.

As the hamlets grew into proper villages and the village transformed into a town, Isabell went further, terracing entire hillsides for crops, stocking the ponds with fish that thrived in the shallow waters of the ponds, and countless other things.

After fifty years of shaping the river valley, leaping forward through time five or ten years at a time as the vision of Ashlynn pulled her along, showing her the results of her plans and giving her time to take the next steps, she felt like she'd discovered the right way to help her people thrive. But she'd significantly underestimated the depth of the trial she faced.

"You've done well so far," the vision of Ashlynn said. "Would you like to see how they speak of your river valley in the lands beyond your borders?"

"Do I have a choice?" Isabell asked flatly. "You wouldn't make the offer if there wasn't anything for me to learn from it."

"True," the vision of Ashlynn said before the scenery around them twisted and changed until the two women were standing near the front of a large congregation of worshipers in a gilded temple that resembled the great temple in Lothian City.

"It's true!" a golden-robed priest cried from the pulpit. "I have been there myself, and I have seen the truth of the Sacred Valley. There are more than a hundred lakes, filled with fish as large as a housewife's best pan, and soil so fertile that a person need only walk behind a plow and scatter seeds to reap a bountiful harvest!"

"While you struggle and toil, facing famine and drought, the Hemlock Witch has stolen away the Sacred Valley that the Holy Lord of Light prepared for His chosen children," the priest shouted. "You slog along rough roads of broken stones and baked earth while they stroll upon paths paved with gold that glitter in the rays of the Holy Lord's Light."

"All of this bounty is yours by right!" the priest yelled, thumping the gilded pulpit he stood before while pointing at the crowd. "The Holy Lord of Light promises rich rewards for those who meet their struggle, and who has struggled more than you, His Chosen People who have come to this strange new land to follow His decree, seeking the Heavenly Shores in the west? But now, a witch has taken your reward and hoarded it for Her chosen people. She is denying you your birthright!"

"Can you accept that? Will you accept that?"

"No!"

"Never!"

"We have struggled! Give us what is ours!"

The crowd grew angrier and angrier every time the priest spoke, as the reverence in their hearts for the Holy Lord of Light mixed with something darker and more sinister that lurked in the hearts of men,

consuming them with righteous fury and a voracious desire to reclaim the birthright that had been stolen from them by the evil Hemlock Witch.

"Rise up with me, my brothers!" the priest shouted. "Rise up and reclaim what is yours!"

"Rise up, and reclaim what is yours!"

"Rise up..."

The words echoed again and again through Isabell's mind before the scene of the temple faded into darkness. Moments later, she and the vision of Ashlynn stood once again in her river valley, staring at the land of plenty that she had painstakingly tended for the past fifty years.

When she'd arrived, the village had been all but impoverished, plagued by floods, famine, and sickness. It had been anything but a promised land! Only decades of work had transformed it into a place that people traveled from far and wide to settle in. But now, it had somehow become a 'Sacred Valley', meant for the chosen people of the Holy Lord of Light? What complete and utter nonsense!

"How long do I have before they bring their armies and their Holy War?" Isabell asked flatly as she looked at the vision of Ashlynn. "You showed me that scene so I could do something before they arrived, didn't you? So how long do I have to prepare?"

"Even the angriest of mobs won't transform into a successful army overnight," the vision of Ashlynn told her. "It will take years before they can convince their lords that there is profit to be had in waging war, and longer still to train an army that could threaten a witch. You have some time at least, but no one ever knows for certain how long they have to make preparations."

"So long as it isn't too late," Isabell said as her silvery eyes flashed with determination. "Then I'll find a way to keep my people safe."