

The Journals of Klessa of the Nine Wonders

23 Greenborn, 106 OR

What I have done...

I am not quite sure whether to be proud, or horrified.

But at the moment I am thirsty.

Ah, that is better. I have the best wine now, and the finest bread and meat again. The Heretics have released them to me without reservation, for they truly believe that I am near the heart of their God.

How did I accomplish this?

Not without some sweat and trouble, but with more ease than I expected.

When I heard the fires begin to be lit, I spoke to my guard, Siñen, and asked if I might go to the Lord of the Star Circle. He had received his instructions to take me there, he said, and he led me down the halls in silence. I wondered for a moment at how well he knew the way, but he soon revealed it to me.

"I was outside the door of the Lord this morning," he said. "They were speaking to him, trying to persuade him to open the door."

"And he did not?" I asked, though I already knew the answer.

"No."

I nodded.

Siñen turned back to face me, and studied my face with burning eyes. "What makes you think that you will be able to persuade him, where the Lady herself could not?" he asked.

I assumed he meant Rilleta or the Queen, though I did entertain myself for a moment by imagining that he meant Elle, and then thinking of what his face would look like if I asked him that. "I am one of his own kind, a Master of the Wonders. If I tell him that the Heretics are to be trusted, he will accept that."

His eyes flickered intently over my face for a moment, and then he nodded and turned, touching the door with his palm held flat. I was impressed they had learned so quickly, and then I noticed the scorch marks on the walls and floor. Perhaps the quick learning had only come after several unfortunate attempts to open the door.

"My lord, the Lady Klessa is here to see you," he said.

I was not the Lady Klessa to my face, then, was I?

I would have to see what I could do about that.

The door opened, and the Lord nodded to me, his eyes distant and serene. "Come in, my daughter." He looked at the guard, but he needed to speak no word. The man retreated with many abject bows and apologies.

I stepped within the chamber I had only seen once, on the day that I received the Ninth Wonder. It hadn't changed since then. I turned and looked at the Lord, and was startled to see that his face looked tired.

"Have you truly come to persuade me to change sides?" he asked.

I held up a hand and summoned a swirl of Dust on my palm in answer.

The Lord smiled. What I had done told him the truth. Any Master who abandons the Code loses her gift, once she has completed the training. Dust is the most fragile of the Wonders, and someone who breaks the most frail vow will lose it. "Very well. What do you mean to do with them, then?"

"I will go among them because of Lyissa," I said. "She has joined the Heretics fully and with all her heart. I will go among them because of her, and do what I can to free her."

"Lyissa always was too enamored of the Wonders of fire," said the Lord, in that strange, careful way he has of speaking, not to mention the knowledge that he has of every student. He has not often seen Lyissa face to face, and yet he knows her. "I am not surprised she has joined them."

"And you approve what I am doing?"

"Call the Dust again."

I held up my hand and called it.

The Lord gazed into my eyes. I held his gaze, though it was hard. I know the pure and blended elements, none better, but I am not familiar with the last Two Wonders, which I lack the talent to master. And those are the Two Wonders, Light and Time, that lie near the surface of his eyes and look out through them most often.

"Yes," he said at last. "I approve."

I nodded.

"And will you serve the Heretics?" I asked, when I realized that he would be content to sit there in silence until the end of Time.

"If they are become what the priestesses of Elle have been to the people of Ozue, then we will."

I nodded. "You will help their torturers?"

"I will."

"You will grow food for people who are Heretics?"

"We will."

"You will heal the hurts of those who come to you, even if they worship Rennon?"

"We will."

"You will take part in their wars?"

The Lord smiled gently at me. "You should know better than that."

I smiled. "I had to ask everything I could think of, or they would have been suspicious. They will want you to help in their wars, you know."

"I know that," said the Lord, and he shimmered with that calm and subtle ripple that is the sign of the Light. "And what do you think will happen when they try to force us?"

I laughed. "They will be picking bits of Heretics out of the dust when three months have passed."

The Lord nodded. "They will." He paused. "One thing that I would have you do, Klessa."

He rarely called me by name. Of course, I rarely see him face to face, but still, that was no reason to disregard his calling me by name. "My Lord?"

"Keep your eyes open most carefully. I know that you speak often to paper with ink. Continue doing so." He leaned forward, and though he did not grip my hand, I almost thought that he wanted to. "When all is done, I think that your records may be very important to whoever wins."

Did he mean the journal? Of course he could know that I kept one, if he wanted to, but I had never thought that he would refer directly to it. Why should he? It would mean nothing to him.

"I will keep the journal, my lord."

"Good. That is good." He sat back and watched me for a moment, and then gestured. "Go to your room, Klessa, and be sure to set down some of the reasons that you are going among the Heretics, so that other eyes may see them. Your words may form part of the defense of the Star Circle, someday."

Unreasoning terror gripped me then. "I do not know what you mean, my lord," I faltered. "What do you see?"

He shook his head. "Go and write, Klessa."

And thus I must try and explain something to someone else that I *know* in my heart and my blood.

How to do this?

I am going among the Heretics because I love Lyissa, and will free her.

But why do that?

She is so different from me. Of course she would become enamored of the Wonders of fire, and of course she would fall innocently and passionately in love with the doctrines of the Heresy. I have heard the words that Rilleta says; I have heard the songs the crowd sings. They believe themselves, doubtless, that Rennon is fire and laughter and all things good in life, and that whatever blood they spill is justified.

The truth is not so simple. And it is not believed so widely. But when has it ever been? Humans have so little need for truth that they usually do not seek it. They fix their minds on Elle, or Rennon, or whatever name they choose to give their own doctrines, and leave them there.

In truth, there is fire and laughter in all things, and the calm and steadiness that Elle's priestesses praise in all things.

That sounds banal. I should sand the words out.

No, I will not. I will leave them there to remind me not to write something so banal the next time.

The Cycle is real. The Cycle is in all things, and no part of it is sinful, as the priestesses have long mused. Nor is Scarlet better or more powerful because they ignore it. All are there. All are real. They blend, and they move and flicker and change and dance in mortals. When one becomes aware of that, one must tread carefully, and since one must fully understand a Wonder to become its Master, those who tread most carefully are the

Masters of the Star Circle. We see all sides of the great patterned dance, not just one.

Lyissa...she is not like that. She is freedom and fun, the wind tossing in the grasses careless of the earth it speeds above. She is the lightning that dances on the sea. And if the wind blows over a house, or the lightning sets a ship on fire, what does it matter to the wind or the lightning?

Beautiful, and wild. She has the gifts to become at least a Master of Four Wonders, but she never will be.

Strange, to have the words staring at me, and yet I think I always knew that.

When I took her from her village, I was not thinking at all. There she was, a child with the talent, and we had few recruits at the time. I was on my first mission, and had found none until then. I accepted her, and took her home, and began overseeing her training.

She is gifted, and careless with the gift. She loves what she can do, but she does not understand it. Understanding may come with time, but discipline never will. She cannot become a Master. It is only natural that she chose to become a Heretic.

It is only natural that I follow her among the wolves, and sting them to death. She is her wind and lightning, and I am the snake whose scales flash in the sun. She is free in ways that I never will be, and I am intelligent in ways that she never will be. So long as I go among the Heretics for the sake of the Cycle, for the sake of someone gifted with the ability to master Wonders, then I will not break my vows.

If I swore to Rennon or Elle, then yes, I would. But I will not swear, and I will not break or bend.

I will show them fear out of the corners of their eyes, in the sunlight shining on the road, in the kittens that some of the priestesses cherish. I will show them fear in the very dust of the earth. I will destroy them, because only when they are destroyed can the balance of the elements be restored, and Lyissa be completely free of doctrines that would poison her mind forever.

If for one moment I waver, if for one moment I swear in my heart to Rennon or turn to Elle in need, then I will fail, and my gifts will vanish. It is so. It is dangerous.

I am ready to meet it, because Lyissa is worth it.

Lusirimonalata's Commentary

The journal entry continues here, but we must skip some pages and return to it only when Klessa begins to talk of the time in which she so deceitfully won the Heretics' trust. That must be seen in order to understand the utter depth of her hatred and her evil. The pages

that are missing tell more of her supposed love for Lyissa, and their corruption is so staggering they must be kept within the Temple, and read only by trained priestesses.

Yet there is more than enough evil that may be exposed to the faithful reader's eye in the pages that I have just given, and enough evil food for the stomach.

Klessa has vowed to destroy something that makes Lyissa happy. Was there ever such horror? She would do it for vows that are never adequately explained. Some maintain that the Star Circle was truly dedicated to only serving the Cycle, that anything that was not in the service of the Cycle—such as fighting a war for Rennon or Elle—would cause them to lose their powers.

That is manifestly ridiculous. The Cycle cannot be separated from Destiny or the Light. If the Masters of the Wonders truly served the Cycle, they would also serve the Light, and thus our Goddess, who is the embodiment of Light.

No, there is something far more insidious and evil going on here.

Klessa is obviously jealous of the passion and faith that Lyissa displays, or that Rilleta showed when she leaped over the fire in the celebration of a faith not the less pure for having the wrong target. One can hear the callous, cold cruelty in her words, such as the comparison of herself to a serpent. One who loved the Light and had any faith in anything at all would never speak so. Serpents are creatures of the Dark. Look to the People of the Snake, who serve the Dark. Look to dragons, who alone are born without Destiny, and think that gives them the right to resist the Cycle. All of them are bent ultimately to the will of Elle, but it takes struggle that would not be necessary if they would only give up their pride.

Klessa knows the truth about her pride, and knows she should give it up, and yet will not. She is stubborn and self-centered and full of hate. She can speak so casually of destroying people who sought earnestly for Elle, though on a path that would lead them to damnation. Better the honest wondering and wandering of the Heretics than the mind of a Klessa, who sets herself on a path leading into the Dark. She may even imagine that she can escape the control of the Goddess's Hand, and walk in silence, without being noticed.

She cannot. Elle knows Her own. Klessa never was one of Her own, as the next journal entry will show, save the tiny parts of her soul that were truly good, the sunlight and not the serpent's scales. Klessa was and is damned, and shall forever be.

The Journals of Klessa of the Nine Wonders

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It was not long after I had finished corralling my thoughts about Lyissa that Siñen came to summon me to the Burning.

I had heard the yells, the chanting, the singing, and so on, but I had largely ignored them. They didn't sound all that different from the ceremony the night before. And whatever strange worship the Heretics think their God deserves, I want no part of it.

But I had agreed to participate in it.

I stepped from the room, and to my surprise found Queen Memoryrose waiting. She bowed her head gravely, but I have known mizanoi before and I was not fooled. Her eyes looked as distant as if she were blind, staring past me into the realm of the chaos that her mother's people come from.

"Lady Klessa. I am glad that you have agreed to gaze into the fire and Burn with us."

There was nothing that I could say to that without revealing my true allegiance, so I bowed back and followed Siñen down the hall; he continued walking as if nothing about his Queen's presence was unusual, though I saw his back stiffen. The Queen of Doralissa walked beside us. I glanced at her from the corner of my eye, and saw shimmering golden motes rising from her skin.

I tightened my hands. I have fought mizanoi before, and I know what it means when they begin to shine like that. In the center of a village or the open Plains, it is bad enough; in the school, with wards and the tight discipline of Masters' minds around every corner, it might be enough to kill almost everyone.

"Your Majesty."

Those blind eyes stared past my head at the wall. "Yes?"

"Please, calm yourself."

She blinked, and a mask of the human slid over her eyes for a moment. "You would give me orders, Lady Klessa?" She didn't sound angry, just amused, but ahead of me Siñen's muscles tightened further and I saw his hand go to the hilt of his sword.

"No," I said. "Only advice. You are too wild for a place like this. Draw on the elements, and the Cycle will respond viciously."

"I don't understand you," she said, and now the fey was almost gone entirely from her voice, replaced by frustrated human. I noticed the golden motes had stopped dancing. I sighed in relief.

"The mizanoi draw on the elements, and don't care what happens," I said. "But here, we draw on the elements with full understanding of them. The two principles are too opposed for a middle ground, like Order and Chaos. Let Chaos try to carve out a corner of this realm for itself, and Order will kill it. And you. And probably most of us in the

hall."

"I have never heard of such a thing."

"Why should you have?"

"Be careful," she said. "I am still the Queen of Doralissa."

And obsessed with ceremony, of course. Those would have been the next words off her tongue, were she honest. I smiled at her. "Of course, Your Majesty. I understand. But there are many things about the Cycle that none but Masters know, and when you are in the home of the Masters, it is only wise to respect their wisdom."

She turned and swept ahead of me, every stride accented by rage. I chuckled.

"That was not wise," said Siñen, though he did not turn to look at me. If someone else had been in the corridor, he would probably have been pretending not to speak at all.

"Which do you fear for, my life or your Queen's dignity?"

He did turn to look at me then, his face flushed. "The Queen is Her Majesty," he said, "and she is not accustomed to being treated like a child or an enemy, particularly when she comes as the savior of Ozue."

I shrugged. I wanted to speak more biting words, but I knew that if I spoke enough, he might go to the Queen or to Rilleta, and they would have reason to be suspicious of me. I did not want them to try to crush my head before I could bite their heels.

Patience, patience.

We stepped into the nearest courtyard, and confronted the large bonfire that blazed there. I tilted my head back, sensing a competing light, and saw the large moon hanging almost directly overhead. I smiled, wondering if Elle looked down as the Fair One tonight, and if She was pleased with what She saw or not.

"Bring forth the flowers."

I turned my head. Two young women clad in the red robes of Rennon's priestesses carried forth armfuls of flowers, violets and daisies mostly, and cast them into the fire.

The flames leaped and danced, turning blue for a moment as the flowers opened a link to a hotter realm of the Scarlet. I watched in interest. Someone who knew at least the Scarlet well and deeply had designed this ritual, and that wisdom made the people standing around the fire sway in place, caught up by the magic even when they didn't intend to be.

I could even feel the magic reaching out to me, but it slid down my mind when I but

glanced at it. My link to the Azure throbbed with angry blue light that might have spilled through my skin. I touched it, and it calmed, though barely.

When it comes time for those who burned the Azure mages to die, then I will kill them with water if I can.

"Dance."

The word came from the same woman who had spoken of bringing flowers to the fire, but I still could not see who she was, since she stood in the shadows. The two young women came forth again, and linked arms over the fire and began to whirl. It was a torturous dance, the fire being so large, but I could see their faces blossoming slowly into ecstasy.

Magic breathed on the air around me, beat its wings and scraped its claws. I have rarely felt anything so powerful. Of course, the rituals of Elle do not call so openly on the elements, invoking them only in safely contained censers and priestesses whose gifts deal specifically with those elements. This called on the Scarlet, but also on Metal and Steam and Lightning.

I closed my eyes and tried to listen, tried to feel any hint of a divine presence behind it the way I would sometimes feel the massive touch of Elle's mind.

Nothing.

Of course, I probably didn't have faith enough.

I opened my eyes again just in time to see the two young priestesses spin about, then turn and charge the fire. They leaped over it.

Or, at least, they began their leaps over the fire. As they reached the apex, golden radiance blazed out of the flames and engulfed them. They hung there, arms spread, heads hanging back as if in the grip of some vast hand. I heard someone sob aloud, but I could not be certain if it was someone in the crowd, or one of the priestesses. It could even have been myself.

I could feel the magic that pounded and pulsed from the fire. The strength of it horrified me.

They didn't have the least idea of what they were doing, the fools.

Scarlet is the easiest to summon of all the elements, and the hardest to control. Though the priestesses of Elle are idiots to call it sin, it is dangerous. And these Heretics invoke it as blindly as they do anything else.

They had opened not just a conduit to the elemental Scarlet, but a gate. A conduit will

only let in as much fire as a human body can hold. A gate will let in more, much more. What comes through is what will. If the Heretics hadn't lit an unquellable wildfire so far, they had only luck to thank.

And, sure enough, one of the priestesses burst into flames as I watched, and became a rolling fireball. The Scarlet burned itself out on her body, and then died for lack of fuel, luckily before she could touch anything else.

The other suddenly whirled out of the flames, landing easily on her feet on the other side of the fire. She raised her arms, body shining with clear radiance as the others cheered her. She bowed, her face aglow, then retired into the shadows. Others were already lining up to leap.

"That is what you must do."

I turned at the new voice. The man standing beside me was not Siñen, but still obviously part of the Queen's retinue; he spoke Doralissan. His dark skin proclaimed him Rivendonian, though, and his silver eyes part of the royal bloodline. Probably one of the minor cousins the King of Rivendon had sent along to court Memoryrose's favor.

"Leap over the fire?" I asked.

He nodded. "And burn. If you survive the burning, then they will accept you as one of them."

His voice was very slightly mocking on the last words. I would have liked to ask him what he meant, but did not quite dare. There was no guarantee that he would be an ally, after all, even if he despised the Heretics. There is no one that I can think of who would share my goals.

"Have you survived it?" I asked.

He smiled. "I would not be standing here if I did not. Queen Memoryrose likes all those who ride with her to Burn."

I nodded and stepped forward, waiting until the woman in front of me had made her leap and escaped burning alive. Then I began to run.

I am fit enough, if I must make a point of saying so to any doubters, and that intelligence that non-Masters will never understand is a part of everything about me. As I ran, my concentration fixed equally on both body and mind, and I moved my hands in Elida's Pattern, seeking out all the connections between the four elements that have some Scarlet in them.

I would not stand back to watch any more priestesses burn alive. There was too much chance the flames would roar out of control and consume the city. And Rilleta would

probably think of that as a sacrifice to Rennon, and Memoryrose would probably dance among the ashes like a true mizan, but I had Lyissa to think of.

I reached the point where I would need to leap, and floated into the air, helped a little by the Gust.

I reached the apex of my leap, and bound the pattern in my mind to the pattern of my hands. It flew forth, weaving shining strands that no one save a person with Master training could see, binding the four elements together and out of harm's way. I would close that damn gate in a moment, too.

Then the fire boiled out of the flames and engulfed me.

I was frightened for a moment, startled. Then I remembered the strength of the Heretics' faith. Rennon or no Rennon, there was a strength of passion here that could open a gate. I would have to contend with that, the silent dictate that anyone who leaped the fire should Burn.

I opened a link to Azure, and used Anacra's Pattern to touch all the water in my body. It swelled to the surface, and the flames that would have burned me recoiled before it. But someone would have had to be very close to see that. The others would see me hanging in the air for a moment, the flames dancing lightly along my skin, seeking a way in and not finding it.

Then the faith dropped me, and I fell to the other side of the fire. I did not manage to land on my feet, and laughter echoed around me as I scrambled up. But I ignored them for the moment, having something more important to do.

Besides, I have a good ear for voices. I will remember who laughed, and punish them appropriately another day.

I turned to face the fire, seeing another priestess getting ready to run, knowing that one more could push open the gate.

Elida's Pattern again, and then Terion's, and then Amabla's. Binding the four elements, opening a link to the Azure, their opposite, and screening the gate with a wall of water.

I may have saved the world just then, but I did it with style.

The Burning did not consume any more priestesses alive after that, and some of them only stayed in the air for a few minutes. The cheering was not as wild, but I didn't care. They could have their fun without destroying the world, at least as long as a Master of the Nine Wonders was there.

"Impressive."

Startled, I turned. The Rivendonian was at my side again, squinting slightly into the air. I followed his gaze, and saw a vision of the fiery gate, caged behind the bars of water I'd woven. But he wasn't a Master, so it was probably just coincidence that he was looking in that direction.

"What's impressive?" I asked.

"You closed the gate, didn't you?"

"Who are you?" I clenched my hand and called on the Dust. Time to get some practice with my new weapon, if he insisted on talking about things he shouldn't talk about, shouldn't even be able to see.

He gave me a half-smile. "My name is Glangon, and I am of the Rivendonian royal family."

"You're not a Master."

"No," he agreed. "I have the gifts, but I don't think my father could quite stomach the idea of his son becoming a Master of the Star Circle, so I was never trained."

I must confess that for a moment I forgot Lyissa. "You should have died," I said. "The gifts will consume you if you don't understand them."

Glangon shrugged. "I don't use them often, save for one that seems to be a blending of Light and Time. That's the only one I understand well enough to be sure I can use it without destroying myself."

"There's no blending of Light and Time."

"Yes, there is."

I can hardly write the words, so hard is my hand shaking. A blending of Light and Time, a Twelfth Wonder...

If this Glangon had come to the Circle, how much more would we know?

"You are part of Queen Memoryrose's train," I said. "And yet you are not a worshipper of Rennon?"

"If I ever feel His presence, then I will be," said Glangon. "I envy the others the peace in their eyes. But I haven't felt Him yet. I am waiting until He shows Himself." He eyed me again. "You must be as well, or you would have let the Burning take you and listened to His voice."

I nodded.

Glangon continued to look thoughtfully at me. "Perhaps I am mad," he said suddenly.

"Compared to these?" I gestured to the Heretics.

At that, he laughed. "Perhaps I am mad to think of you as an ally, as of the same kind as I am," he clarified. "But I think that you have entered the Heresy for your own reasons, just as I have, and that for you there are more things to life than fire."

"What do you speak of?"

Glangon shrugged. "I won't betray you, Lady Klessa, if that is what you fear. But we might speak on the road. Queen Memoryrose does not intend to stay here long, since her mizan blood will not let her rest without engaging King Seldon in open battle. We ride, probably on the morrow. Come ride beside me if you would hear more."

Then he turned and left, just as Rilleta came up beside me and pressed my hands.

"You have survived a Burning," she said. "Rennon is in your heart, and you will learn to love Him."

I gazed into her eyes, and then smiled a little. I have always been good enough to see when I have lulled suspicion. If I can fool parents into thinking their child is only coming to the Star Circle for a short time, then I can fool a smirking bitch who thinks her god should belong to everyone.

"I am honored that you think of me in such a fashion, my lady," I said, bowing my head.

The smirking bitch then dragged me off to fine wine, and meat, and other pleasures of the evening. It was long before I could escape and come here to write these words.

I have not seen Lyissa the whole evening, save at a distance. She wears a red robe and an expression of breathless wonder.

But I am not as worried as I was. Glangon may prove to be an ally, or at least a diversion. And the Heretics trust me now. I will ride with the Queen and the smirking bitch, and be able to keep a close eye on them. Perhaps I will be able to prevent them from destroying the world, with their careless calling on the elements.

Perhaps I will even be able to kill them before they permanently hurt the Cycle or Lyissa.

A moment. Someone is knocking on my door.

Lusirimalata's Commentary

I must stop recording here. The section I have given is more than enough to show Klessa's evil, and it will have me shuddering in disgust if I record much further.

Klessa entered the Heresy not out of faith in Rennon, but plotting to betray it and further corrupt an innocent girl who through its doctrines might have found her way to true redemption. She is nothing but a creature of the Dark, consumed with spreading Darkness to others.

I must turn away from the page. My hands are shaking too badly to continue, and my stomach has begun to churn. I would not ruin the pages by vomiting on to them.

That is better. Once again, I have prayed to Elle, and my mind is clear. The Queen Twydon heard of my condition, and sent a restorative draught brewed by her own hand. Anassra has just given it to me. It will take some time to take effect, but already I feel a calmness, almost a drowsiness, in both my heart and mind.

I turn now to Rilleta, again, and hope that her History and the innocence and clarity of her faith will act as the Queen's restorative draught on the reader, purging her mind of Klessa's evil.

A History of Rilleta, High Priestess of Rennon

Chapter 6

Upon the Road

*"When the call to war doth sound,
When the war-charge shakes the ground,
When some will die forevermore,
Remember the smell which was before.
In the midst of blood, remember light;
Calm with remembered joy thy fright,
And think ahead to the end of war,
When all will be better than before."*

-Advice to young soldiers.

"We ride!"

Rilleta squinted and tried to ignore the pounding headache. She had drunk more than was good for her last night, and Rennon wouldn't heal hangovers-or other wounds, for that matter, if they were deserved. She had no right to blame anyone but herself for this, and yet she still snapped and was irritable.

Of course, almost everyone was irritable. If they weren't, they were too frantically busy to be so. The courtyard was full of the stamp of horses, the shout of orders, the loading of carts with food from the Star Circle's cellars.

Rilleta turned the horse that Queen Memoryrose had given her in a slow circle. The mare was fine, delicate, with a gray coat so pale as to be almost silver and an intelligent expression in her dark eyes. She responded to every touch of the reins as lightly as a dancer. Yet Rilleta was convinced the horse did not like her. Perhaps it was the way the mare would squint at her, and then shake her head with a snort. *She probably misses the smell of elven blood.*

As if the thought had called him up, Telemoranion appeared at her side. "My lady, my toys are ready. Do you want them upon the road with us, or should I hide them yet?"

Rilleta considered that, as best as she could through the hangover and the noise. "Bring them along," she said at last. "Those who will face the faithful of Rennon should know what they are facing."

"My lady." The Master of Metal bowed from the waist and vanished into the crowd.

Rilleta looked around again. She needed to speak with at least six people, but they would have to seek her out in the wild chaos; she didn't think she stood a chance of finding any of them.

"My lady."

Of course, when one of them did find her, it was not the one Rilleta had hoped for. She turned, nodding, to Klessa, who also rode a Doralissan horse. The mage looked as calm as if the last night had never happened, though Rilleta had seen her Burning like all the others. *Rennon could speak in her heart and she would ignore Him, the arrogant bitch.*

"You are the only one who has agreed to help us in the war," said Rilleta. "Is that correct?"

Klessa arched her brows. "It depends on what you mean. I can heal your wounded, or purify water, or even hide you from your enemies. I will not attack the priestesses of Elle with my magic, though."

"I don't understand the difference between that and other ways of doing war," said Rilleta, not even fighting the snap out of her voice this time. *Rennon damn me if I drink that much wine again.*

Klessa rolled her eyes and spoke in the tones of the intelligent to the deliberately ignorant. "The others are services to the Cycle. I can heal the wounds of those afflicted by elemental magic, restoring a balance. And the other actions only oppose the elemental magic of the priestesses. In all things, I am serving the Cycle, or restoring it, or dancing

in the patterns of it. But if I called on my magic to harm those who had never done me or the Cycle harm, I would lose my powers."

"I believe that is a convenient fiction the Star Circle establishes, to prevent themselves from having to take a side," said Rilleta, as her horse shied away from a large hound. She fought it back under control and glared at Klessa. "I have never heard of a Master of the Star Circle losing her powers when she joined the side of war."

"Of course you have not. She would then no longer be a Master of the Star Circle."

"You will use your powers as I see fit!"

Klessa smiled. "I will follow your commands if they do not involve attacking the priestesses of Elle or those who are not part of your Heretics. I have explained the difference, and the difference is reality. It is up to you to adapt to that reality."

She started to turn her horse, but Rilleta reached out and gripped the bridle. Klessa looked at her. Rilleta ground her teeth. The mage's face was not particularly insolent, yet somehow it was still the most mocking expression she had ever seen. *Why can she so effortlessly make me lose my temper?*

"You will attack the priestesses if we are in a battle and I say so," said Rilleta. "Swear to obey me, or you cannot ride with us."

"Oh, Rilleta."

Rilleta blinked. It was the first time, so far as she knew, that Klessa had spoken her name, and certainly the first time she had spoken it in such a drawling, mocking tone.

"You should know better than to threaten me," said Klessa. "Yes, I have joined you, but that is for Lyissa's sake. You have employed the threat, and I have fallen in line. Using more threats now, especially when you are trying to urge me to accomplish the impossible, is only redundant."

"What will you do if I command you to attack a priestess of Elle, then?"

"Ignore you."

"Queen Memoryrose would be interested to hear that, I am sure."

"The Queen doubtless remembers, as I am sure you have forgotten, that I am the only Master of the Nine Wonders riding with you. You need my magic too much to sacrifice it to a silly fight over authority."

Rilleta ground her teeth and let Klessa's bridle go. "I will remember that you think too much of yourself."

"That would be a hard thing to forget," said Klessa, laughter in her voice, and made a quick movement with her hands.

"What was that?"

"Anacra's Pattern," said Klessa, and turned her horse away.

Rilleta thought about going after her, and finally decided against it. She had too many other things to do. Besides, she thought Klessa's final gesture probably didn't mean anything anyway.

Later that night, constipated beyond measure and aching after a long day in the saddle, she knew it did mean something. But there was nothing she could do about it then.

The people of Ozue saw them through the gate with cheers and much throwing of flowers. The Queen nodded and smiled and was very gracious about it all. Rilleta gritted her teeth and smiled behind the teeth-gritting, nodding now and then when she thought it wouldn't split her head open.

She cheered up once they came out onto the road and saw it winding away east before them, towards the castle. There they would go, and they would topple King Seldon from his throne and place the country under the rule of Rennon. They would raze the Temple and expose the torture pits to cleansing sunlight. It was a good plan, and her mind ran comfortably in those familiar channels.

"My lady."

Rilleta looked up at the tension in Vañade's voice. She understood almost at once why he was afraid. Ravens circled high overhead, now and then dropping down as if to get a better look at a certain part of the army, and then swirling back lazily into the air again. They looked like vultures. Some of them were almost as big as vultures.

"They are only birds," said Rilleta calmly. She understood his fear, since the ravens most likely carried Crown Princess Twydon's eyes on the wind, but that was no reason to turn back. Rennon watched over them, and the Princess would see nothing coming but her own defeat.

"They might harm us, though."

Rilleta gave in to the tightness on his face. "Send a detail of archers behind and have them ready to shoot if the ravens come low enough."

Vañade nodded to her and rode towards the back of the line. Rilleta shook her head. The

Crown Princess Twydon was one of the reasons so many of the Dalznan immigrants to Orlath had joined their war, but even as they fought back against her they were still afraid of her.

Rilleta lifted her face to the cool wind and repeated to herself, "The woman is only a woman, Crown Princess though she be. She cannot stop us. Let her watch, if it makes her feel better."

Even as she gazed up at the ravens, one of them fluttered low and then fell, an arrow through its wing. She heard distant cheers, and smiled.

The flock of dark birds circled for a moment longer, then broke into the sky, flying back towards the castle. Rilleta traced their flight with her eyes. They would bring word to their mistress, and she hoped they would tell Twydon of the woman who rode at the head of the column, eyes wide and clear, her robe the only one which had been dyed in fresh blood.

She wanted Twydon to see not only her defeat, but her doom.

Lusirimonalata's Commentary

I am calm once more, and my hands have ceased to shake. While I looked upon Klessa with rage for the damnation in which she places herself, I can look upon Rilleta with pity. In so many ways she was so close to the truth, but in so many ways she failed. One must address the truth by its proper name, or one loses an essential part of it.

Rilleta called out to the skies and the heavens, but she called them by the name of Rennon and not Elle, by the name of the sun and not the moon. This may seem a small failing, but it is a large one. She cannot learn the most fundamental truths, such as names, and if she cannot learn that much, then she cannot know the larger truths that spring from them. Looking at the sunrise and the sunset, she misses the beauty in the waxing and waning moon. Looking at the beauties of passion and laughter, she misses the beauties of calmness and compassion.

I do pity her.

And because I pity her, and think the reader has the right to understand a little more about this brave if misguided woman, I will continue with her History for another chapter. Klessa's journals can wait. All know she fell out in the end; the only excitement is in seeing how.

Not so many know the full story of Rilleta, or they only know her name and not her story at all. It will be good for those who would dismiss her out of hand to see more of her.

A History of Rilleta, High Priestess of Rennon

Chapter 7

Ravens' Wings

"There are some who would argue that the Rennon Heresy was a religious war, and never see the political dimension of it. Of course, any war that has the Queen of Doralissa rising against the monarch of another Kingdom is obviously more than just a religious war, but the connections may not be so clear. It is actually very clear now that Queen Memoryrose's anger at King Seldon, and her fear of his daughter, were as much elements in the rise of the Rennon Heresy as the anger and fear of the Heretics..."

-From Almissra's Report on the Rennon Heresy.

Rilleta gazed towards the west, and watched the ravens circling over the camp, and waited for her scouts to bring her the report she knew they must.

The first to reach her was Vañade-hardly a surprise, since he was the most worried about the ravens and had been volunteering to ride ahead all day. He pulled up his blowing horse and bowed from the saddle, saying, "My lady, we have seen ravens waiting ahead. And the tracks of many Orlathian soldiers, though we saw no scouts and received no arrows."

Rilleta nodded. "And there is discouragement spreading among your troops, isn't there?"

Vañade started and looked at her. "How did you know that, my lady?"

"Rennon told me." *Besides, I can see the fear well enough in your face.* Rilleta rose gracefully to her feet. "We shall have to do something permanent to those ravens. The Princess Twydon must understand that she cannot continue spying on us and expect to receive only information."

"Should I tell the scouts to ready arrows, my lady?"

Rilleta shook her head. "This calls for Rennon's hand." *And a touch of drama,* she thought, though of course she would never speak the words aloud. There was magic in her gestures, in her words, magic that her people needed. It kept them inspired and let them remember they really could win in this war against the King of Orlath, if only they avoided discouragement.

She stepped forward, and felt her people fall silent, their eyes turning to her. They had been nervous and worried all day: shooting ravens when they appeared but unable to shoot all of them; hearing rumors from the grass but never knowing what they were; sometimes seeing a distant Orlathian scout, or perhaps just a farmer on horseback, who galloped away before they could overtake her. It was past time that they saw something

dramatic and hopeful.

Rilleta knew just what they needed.

And the sun was setting, painting the sky in such a perfect panoply of colors for the deed: deep red, and purple, and orange, just like the burning heart of Rennon's most holy Fires. Rilleta paused, facing the west, and put her hand above her own heart. She could hear the murmuring as she bowed her head. She didn't care. Let them murmur. The murmurs were almost all approving, in any case.

"Rennon, we thank You for the blessings of the day, and I go now to drive the darkness of our foes from us." She kept her voice clear, the words precisely pronounced and inflected. "Soon the moon will rise, but the stars Your watchmen will keep her at bay. Thank You, Rennon. Thank You for the gift of life, and for the watch against the darkness that You keep and always will."

By the time she reached the end of the prayer, there were people murmuring it along with her, and by the time she had finished repeating it in Doralissan, almost everyone in the camp was chanting or humming. Rilleta smiled and strode forward again, this time the center of all eyes and knowing it. It was almost perfect. She would drive the ravens forth with sheer strength.

Had it not been for her painful constipation, it would have been utterly perfect.

She turned the bend in the road which the scouts alone had passed so far, and saw the ravens. They waited, spread out across the track, unnaturally still for birds. When they saw her coming, they stirred but hardly rose into the air and soared away as they would have, did they know what was going to happen.

Rilleta stood there and gazed at the birds. They looked back, heads tilted. Their eyes burned with rich and unnatural magic.

She knew the Crown Princess Twydon of Orlath was there, and looking back at her.

"Well met, my lady," she said. "I am afraid that you are about to lose a great deal of your servants."

And then she lifted her hands and called on the pure Scarlet, falling so easily into the link that she wanted to laugh. This, too, was of Rennon: this utter union and ease with her magic. The priestesses of Elle were beyond foolish to call this joyful joining with fire a sin. In truth, Rilleta thought they spoke of it so to keep more people from realizing just how wonderful it was to be a Scarlet mage.

And to speak to a god, she thought, as she spread her fingers wide and concentrated, sending the first rush of Scarlet out through them. I can feel Rennon now as I can hardly feel Him at any other time, breathing in my mind, speaking with my voice.

He certainly spoke as the fire left her in a rush and boiled over the birds, consuming them in ravening flames. Rilleta heard herself laughing as if mad with the destruction, which had never happened before. The ravens screamed and cawed and died; the stink of burning feathers filled the air.

But to Rilleta's nose, it had become a smell that was almost sweet.

More laughter, and another firestorm, and the road was clear of birds. Rilleta tilted her head back and smiled to see the few ravens who remained fleeing to the east as fast as they could go.

"Fly back to your mistress, little carrion-eaters," she muttered. "What can she do to stop me?"

"Much."

Rilleta started, and turned to face the-well, the patch of air that the voice seemed to have come from. In seconds, it swirled, and the dust of the road collected in the air, forming a figure which might have been a woman if Rilleta was feeling generous enough to assign it a gender. She looked at Rilleta with eyes as bright as the glitter of dust on armor, and Rilleta shifted, suddenly uncomfortable. She had faced Crown Princess Twydon before, but never in this form, where all her madness seemed distilled.

"Nothing," said Rilleta. "You do not have the favor of the gods. Elle would not let you remain in power if you did not defend Her priestesses incidentally."

"I think I know more about the mind of Elle than you know about the mind of Rennon," said the Gust mage calmly. "You will not succeed, Rilleta, and you must know this. Why do you persist in trying?"

"You are burning my kind."

"You are the one who spoke of them having special privileges in the first place," said Twydon. "I am only restoring the balance that would fall out of place if you actually did win the war."

"I did not come to debate philosophy with you, Twydon. You will lose when we march into the castle and feed you to your own beasts, if not before."

"Perhaps," said the Princess. "But you must come ahead, first, and that will be more difficult than you imagine."

"What are you doing?"

Rilleta started and looked behind her. There sat Klessa, on the Doralissan horse still.

Rilleta was shocked to think she had missed the sound of hoofbeats approaching, but then, the Princess's presence was rather overwhelming.

"Speaking to my enemy," she said. "Go away."

The Master of the Nine Wonders shook her head. At least that direct gaze was fixed on the Princess in the swirl of dust, and not on Rilleta herself, the priestess noted. Then she felt irritated with herself for feeling relieved.

"Who are you?" said Twydon's voice.

Klessa smiled. "You don't remember me, Your Highness? I'm hurt. I did help you very well in the torture pits beneath the Temple, after all."

Rilleta fought back bile. *I was a fool to trust this woman. She's probably thinking of the best way to slip away unnoticed and ride to Twydon's side.*

"Klessa."

"Yes."

"Klessa of the Nine Wonders."

"Yes." Klessa gave a mocking little bow. The horse danced beneath her, but didn't shy. Rilleta found herself wondering if Klessa had taught the horse that little trick just in order to make herself look better.

"You have joined with traitors," said Twydon, "and when the rebellion fails, as you must know it will, you will die with them."

Klessa shook her head. "I've joined them, but for my own reasons, which I wouldn't expect you to understand." She turned from Twydon to Rilleta. "I felt you call on the Scarlet. Far too much. Did you mean to open a gate to the elemental plane and burn us all to death?"

Rilleta stiffened. Klessa had no right to speak such words to her. More, Klessa had no right to make her look ridiculous in front of the Crown Princess of Orlath, who would find some way to parlay this into an advantage; Rilleta just knew it. "I was calling to my god."

"You would have opened a gate, and not a conduit," said Klessa. "I don't like keeping a constant watch on the Cycle when I could have more profitable employment in other things. Stop it."

"Scarlet is my element."

"Do you love it?"

"Of course!"

Klessa guided her horse close, until Rilleta had to bend her head back to meet the mage's eyes. Klessa then leaned close, just to emphasize the fact that, mounted, she loomed over Rilleta.

"Then don't misuse it," she said, and turned and galloped the horse back towards the army.

Rilleta stood there, breathing deeply. She did manage to control the urge to send a flare of fire after Klessa and consume her, but only barely.

"That is your mage?"

Rilleta turned and stared at the Princess in the dust. "Yes," she said shortly.

"How impressive." The dust-figure appeared to stretch its arms. "You'll forgive me if I'm not very impressed at all. It only contributes to my certainty that we will defeat you, when you come against us."

Then the dust collapsed again, and the presence of the Crown Princess was gone.

Rilleta stood still, breathing quietly. She finally glanced over her shoulder, and saw no one there, watching. Good. The others would see only that the road was clear of ravens, and they could go forward with all faith that their High Priestess had driven them away.

They wouldn't have seen the confrontations with Klessa or Twydon, and they wouldn't understand Rilleta's urge to kill Klessa.

Careful. Careful. I must restrain my hands from violence, if only for the moment.

She was eating-reluctantly, knowing the pain that must result when she tried to relieve herself-when loud cries went up from one side of the camp. Frowning, Rilleta put down her meal and stood to see what was coming. Had Twydon mustered her army to counterattack them at last?

But then the mingled last light of sun and moon flashed on metal, and she smiled and hurried forward. Telemoranion had kept his word, and brought his toys to meet them. The faithful of Elle would cower before the Heretics on the battlefield soon enough.

Rilleta found a place easily enough in the people who had crowded around to watch-there was a time when being High Priestess was a definite advantage-and watched as the first

beast lumbered forward.

It could have been a living elephant, for all that Rilleta knew; she had never been to the jungles of southern Rivendon and never seen one. But Telemoranion apparently knew what they looked like, and had made one of glittering, shining metal, copper and bronze and silver and steel blending into each other as effortlessly as a gryphon's fur and feathers did. The giant creature lumbered among her people, waving a nose as great as the python that Rilleta had seen once, when a traveling menagerie had come to her home village. People shrank from its steps, but the beast didn't crush any of them. Of course, it couldn't. Rilleta knew that Telemoranion, though highly strange for an elf given his love of metal, would have the same amount of control over his toys that a true elf did over the beasts of their forests. He wouldn't make something that would run out of control and randomly crush his allies.

For a moment, she remembered the way his face sometimes looked, caught in the sunlight when he was thinking of something else, and she doubted.

Then she shook her head. *Telemoranion had every opportunity to leave, abandon, or betray us, if that was truly what he wanted to do. He would have done it before now, did he want to.*

The metallic elephant turned back, and then Rilleta caught sight of the next of Telemoranion's toys, coming across the Plains. It did not lumber like the elephant, though, but trotted, delicate and light-stepping for all its size. It was a unicorn, perhaps half the size of the elephant and made mostly of silver.

Rilleta sighed. She didn't think silver was a good choice for a weapon in battle, but Telemoranion had only smiled at her when she complained of it. *We will see how well it works.*

The unicorn circled the camp, bowing its horn now and then to let the Heretics get a good look at it, and then Telemoranion's next toy showed up and stole all its thunder. The sunlight flashed on coppery wings, and a dragon appeared overhead. Its scales were almost too bright to look at, even in the dimming light of the sun, but Rilleta saw enough to know it was almost as big a thorn dragon, probably sixty feet long from head to tail. And yet it twisted and spun and rolled through the air as gracefully as the real thing. Rilleta wondered what was holding it up.

Elven magic, of course.

A movement on the ground caught her attention, and she turned her head. Klessa was standing among the Heretics, her head tilted back and an awed expression on her face. For once, she didn't look different at all from the others. That was probably because she hadn't known about any of this beforehand.

Rilleta smiled, feeling almost kindly towards the Master of the Nine Wonders at that moment. *I could learn to like her, could she tame her arrogance.*

Lusirimalata's Commentary

Of course, some would scold Rilleta for her joy in these vicious agents of destruction that would prolong the war. But one must also remember that Rilleta, at the time, did not know the truth behind the Heresy's rise, and thought of it as a simple, natural religion of the people, persecuted and hounded for no good reason.

In that light, it is natural to think of harm to the enemy and smile. I know that many of my sisters did the same during the Heresy's period of strength, and Elle heard many prayers chanted, not only for victory for our soldiers but also for the deaths of those who opposed us.

To wish the destruction of the enemy is a normal, natural human desire, but the way of bringing it about is to go to war openly, as Rilleta and the Heretics did, and flaunt their weapons. As Rilleta herself said, better to let the enemy know what you are doing. Better to flourish the sword in their faces than to stab them in the back.

Klessa, instead, planned to stab them in the back. She did not like the Heretics, but she hid her hatred and plotted instead, sliding through the grass like a snake. Rilleta at least hated Queen Twydon and confessed her hatred, and our glorious Queen did the same thing with the Heretics.

Compare the tale of the noble fighter to the tale of the snake, and see who comes off the worse!

The Journals of Klessa of the Nine Wonders

23 Greenborn, Late Evening

It has been a *most* productive day-so productive, that I can only record the barest details of it, because otherwise I would fill pages, and still be writing when the next best opportunity arose to strike at my enemies.

Granted, the appearance of the elven battle machines startled me at first. I had not realized that they had an elf who could do such things with them. I will have to seek him or her out, and see how serious the opposition will be.

But, first, since the Lord of the Star Circle asked me to, a record of what I did today, perhaps the only notes that might survive of the Star Circle's vast archives-though I cannot believe that.

I did not ride alone for long. Soon Glangon came up beside me, deserting from Queen Memoryrose's train without apparent trouble. I wonder how close he is to them, and how many qualms he would have about betraying them as well as the Heretics if it came to that.

But I don't think it will come to that, and if it does, he will probably not be concerned. I don't think that I shall fight this battle with an ally.

Glangon nodded to me and spoke out of the corner of his mouth, voice low but not ridiculously so. I approved of that. We don't want to look as if we're plotting, which whispers will lead many to suspect, even more than open discussion of betrayal. "My Lady Klessa, why is it that you hate the Heretics?"

"They have someone I love in their possession," I said. I raised my eyes until I saw Lyissa, dressed in a red robe and riding one of the fine Doralissan horses near the front of the line. One of the priestesses was speaking with her, doubtless continuing her instruction in the faith of Rennon. "I will not be happy until she is free and I have restored her to her right mind."

"How fanatical is she?"

"Very."

Glangon sighed. "I have lost a sister to the Heresy. I don't know if you can bring her back, my lady."

I just looked at him. What difference did low chances for success make to me? I must try, or Lyissa would suffer a dreadful fate. She must be free to choose. The Heresy filling her mind with poison is not freedom.

I told that to Glangon, and he heard me out, nodding solemnly all the while. Then he said, "But what if she doesn't want to be rescued?"

I shrugged. "It matters little."

He smiled. "Good. I am glad you know what you must do as well as what you desire. And is she the only reason you are here? I would think there are easier ways to rescue her than riding with the Heresy."

"They do not respect the delicate patterns of the elements, as you saw last night. I must right that."

"Surely another mage of the Star Circle would have come with you if that was so."

I nodded my head. "Too, they have insulted me, and done things I find objectionable. I

will destroy them for that."

Glangon bowed his head. "I would not like to be your enemy, lady."

I studied him thoughtfully. "Would I like to be yours?"

Glangon grinned at me. "It matters how deeply you are frightened of the Twelfth Wonder, and of my rather strange friends."

"The Twelfth Wonder." I could not let something like that pass by. "What is it? I have never heard of such a thing."

Glangon held up a hand. I watched it expectantly, expecting to see him move it in a rudimentary pattern. The best students we find for the Star Circle have almost found out some of the more elementary magic themselves.

But instead, I felt his mind moving, reaching out in a direction I didn't know, that it had never occurred me to take. It was as if someone had suddenly pointed out that, as well as backwards, forwards, or any of the directions I was used to, I could sink into the earth. Shining light encircled Glangon's hand for a moment. Then it bent and warped, and I saw him holding a piece of fruit. It was bright green in rind, and when he peeled off a bit of the skin, the flesh showed white inside.

"You can summon things to you?" I had heard of Summoners, rare though they were.

"Not exactly," said Glangon, with a small smile, and held out his hand to me. "Smell the fruit."

I sniffed, not sure what I expected. Perhaps something rotting, or perhaps it would not smell differently from any ordinary fruit.

Instead, I smelled nothing more than sweat or dust.

I looked at him, and Glangon laughed and tossed the fruit to me. I fumbled from the surprise, and it fell in the dust. My horse stepped on it a moment later. I glanced back, expecting to see it smashed into a pulp on the ground.

It was gone as if it had never been.

I looked back at Glangon. "It was never there at all, was it?" I asked.

Glangon shook his head. "Illusion is what I call it, though I suppose it must have a different name somewhere else, in the lore of whatever mages might have had this gift before me. I can create pictures, but not real things. If I concentrate, I can create sounds, but that's much harder."

"A useful gift."

"I mostly used it to mask my friends, once I found out that my parents didn't like them."

"Your friends." I looked about, half-expecting to see birds flapping along the road. Perhaps it was all the ravens of Princess Twydon I had seen of late. They were her eyes, and they accompanied her everywhere in person. I would not put it past Glangon, as a strange mage, to have like companions.

"One of them only has accompanied me, and she is here."

I turned back in time to see Glangon extract what seemed to be empty air from his pocket. Again I felt his mind move and shrug in that strange direction, and then I saw the bright green shape coiled around his wrist.

I let out a soft breath of wonder, which I am afraid I truly could not help. He held a jewelsnake, small serpent of the Plains, whose bite holds enough poison to kill a hundred humans. As I watched, the snake uncoiled-bright as that dragon circling over the camp right now-and flicked her tongue at me.

"You might hold her, if you like," said Glangon, and extended his hand to me.

I am perhaps the only human who has played with a jewelsnake before and lived. But the one I came upon before was heavy and sluggish with the cold, and heavy with food as well. This was a lively, dancing jewelsnake, who darted all over my hands in the heat of the sun. I was delighted with her.

"Her name?"

"Silissra."

I gave her gently back to Glangon. He cradled Silissra to his face, and then chuckled. "She says that you smell better than the inside of my pocket, at least."

I watched them for a moment. The way that Silissra almost danced with Glangon, the way he moved in just the right way to let her get to a certain part of his body moments before she did it, spoke of telepathic communication. "You are of royal blood," I said, "and Silissra is your companion?"

Glangon nodded at me.

"Of course your parents did not approve," I murmured, thinking of the few Rivendonians I had met and how superstitious they were. "Snakes are of the Dark."

Glangon nodded again.

"Are you of the Dark?"

"I certainly find it more attractive than Rennon or Elle," he said blandly. "So, my lady, now that I have revealed my great secret to you, will you tell me yours? How do you plan to deal with the Heresy?"

I looked ahead, searching with my eyes until I found one of the Heretics who had slain the Azure mages. I truly wanted to kill them with water, but the other weapon was less noticeable, especially right now, when I was still working on getting them to trust me.

"Watch that woman in the blue skirt," I said, and reached out.

We haven't had much rain lately, and the road is thick with dust, which we've been stirring up all day. That part of the day, it was particularly thick. A Dust mage would have had a fine time. But these were all Scarlet mages, and since the Dust is an element that has no part in the Scarlet-it is the mingling of Crop and Gust-they were choking and coughing.

I moved my hands in Telbor's Second Pattern, which asks expression and indulgence from an element that is not one's own. Usually one uses it with the Gust or the Crop, and sometimes with the Azure, the three elements that naturally occur in great amounts in our world. The Dust rarely abounds enough. But now it did, and it heard me, and was so flattered to be asked that it granted me my request with no hesitation.

The Dust rose and settled on the woman in question, filtering delicately, imperceptibly, into her lungs and nose. She coughed and choked, and I paused the flow for a moment, then pressed it forward again. She soon fell from her horse, and the others, thinking she had fainted, paused to pick her up and then continue the journey.

As she hung unconscious over the horse's back, I continued pouring Dust into her. Soon enough, she couldn't breathe. Her eyes opened then, and she would have cried out, but the Dust piled into her mouth and filled it, covering and stilling her tongue. The saliva she summoned was no match for the power of the Dust, particularly when the Azure had been outraged by her actions against its children and showed no particular inclination to help her. She died, and the others didn't notice. They simply rode along, talking.

I bespoke my thanks, and the Dust poured of the woman's body and back onto the ground. It would be some time before the Heretics noticed, if they did.

I turned to Glangon, only to find him staring at me with narrowed eyes.

"You are a powerful ally," he said. "I will remember that you could kill me as easily, if you chose."

"If you don't anger me, I shall have no reason to kill you," I replied.

"Most would not think anger a fit reason to kill someone."

I shrugged. "Most people are not Masters of the Star Circle." I looked ahead, seeking out Lyissa with my eyes. "Or those determined to free them."

Lusirimalata's Commentary

I have prayed all night, and fasted all day, and still I am no nearer to understanding Klessa's evil.

Of course, could I understand it, I might be walking down the dark path to becoming the thing which she is, and the Goddess would never permit me to leave Her Hand in such a way.

It is for the best that I do not understand.

Of course, that makes it very hard for me to comment on this section of Klessa's journals. She has committed an evil act with no justification, and yet she writes of it as if she expected whoever read the journal to approve and even applaud. How could she do such a thing?

For that, there is no answer.

I find myself reluctant to begin the commentary on the next section of this History, even though it belongs to Rilleta. I am not sure why. Ever since Anassra bade me farewell and left for the night, I have been staring at the candle flickering in front of me, fascinated by the dance of its light. The ink has almost dried from its exposure to the air. I find that my hands do not rise and scatter sand across the page, though it might be necessary. My mind seems to wander in mazes, returning to my thoughts of earlier, and wondering if it is so impossible to understand Klessa after all. Perhaps after all I might seek and meet her in those mazes of the mind, at least when I am in this mood.

But I shake myself free from the trance and go on to my commentary. I know that nothing is as important as the Goddess's work, and though She might understand mortal weakness and failure, She is not so accepting of laziness or other sins that might easily be prevented.

So. To the next section of Rilleta's History.

A History of Rilleta, High Priestess of Rennon

Chapter 8

First Battle

"The clashes of armies in battle have ever haunted the imagination of the Kingdoms. Save for the legendary founding of Orlath by Queen Aneron, there is no subject studied or tackled so extensively in song and history-tale."

-The Stranger from the Isles.

The news did not catch her unprepared.

"My lady!"

Rilleta sat straight and proud on her horse. She found that she had anticipated almost everything, even the expression on Vañade's face as he whipped his horse back towards her. She had anticipated this, and that meant she knew just how the battle would go. She had a right to expect some surprises, but not many.

"There is an army waiting for us!" said the scout, pulling his horse up so sharply that it snorted and danced in protest. "They bear the sigil of King Seldon, and they say that they forbid us to go forward."

Rilleta nodded. "They are mostly folk of southern Orlath, are they not?"

"Yes, my lady."

Rilleta nodded again. "The Heresy is too strong in the north for them to be sure they would find faithful of Elle only, did they draw from there." She turned her head slowly forward, aware that eyes were following every movement, and determined to make it as dramatic and inspiring for them as she possibly could. Her eyes fixed on the track as if the army were marching down it already, she asked, "Tell me, do they have priestesses of Elle with them?"

"A great many."

Rilleta nodded. "Then we shall meet them in battle." She turned to face the ranks behind her and called words she had been waiting to speak for a very long time. "Forward, the Sunborn!"

Priestesses clad in red robes rode out from between the others, not glancing to right or left. To the others, they would seem utterly fixed on Rilleta and the upcoming battle. Rilleta knew better, since she could feel their minds reaching out, lashing into the Scarlet and Metal, into Steam and Lightning.

They were ready, all the most powerful fire mages of the Kingdom.

She turned forward and evaded Vañade's impressed gaze-the spell would be most effective if she didn't break it by looking at him-as she called, "Sunborn, form a wedge

around me."

They did, and so she rode forward protected by her own elite guards, just like the cadre that would form about the High Priestess. Rilleta had no doubt that the High Priestess of Elle was here. It wasn't like her to send forth her underlings without some kind of guidance, and Rilleta knew that she had no highly trained subordinates at the moment. Rilleta had been the highest-ranking of those, before she felt the God call to her and fled.

She had killed the other, an Azure mage, on the way.

They came up over the hill, and saw King Seldon's army waiting for them, banners that bore the leopard sigil flapping in the breeze. Rilleta regarded them calmly. She knew who would win here, and in a way, fighting this battle was like dancing through the formalities at a boring dinner. In some ways, it wasn't worth it, but it had to be done to get to the desired end.

Between them and the army a cadre of priestesses in the gray robes of Elle stood, waiting, and midmost among them was a tall woman with blond hair and direct blue eyes.

"My lady."

Rilleta inclined her head. The High Priestess had always been polite, and trained her subordinates to be polite, and Rilleta would not do less than the same. "My lady. How stand you in the favor of your Goddess?"

"Very high." The High Priestess smiled with only her mouth. Her eyes were hard, and trained as if on the future. Rilleta smiled as she realized the other woman thought she also knew the outcome of the battle. *This should be interesting.* "And how you, in the favor of your God?"

"I am His favorite child."

"Being the child of a demon is not something I would boast of," said the High Priestess of Elle.

Rilleta laughed. "Rennon is not a demon, and someday, when you feel the force of His fire in your own heart, you will know that."

"Is that a threat?"

"Of conversion, perhaps. I have no doubt that when we have won and stripped you of the power to suppress the faith of Rennon, the religion will once again take hold in the hearts of those who have denied Him."

The High Priestess slowly shook her head. "You are the ones who will lose, Rilleta. Thus it is ordained."

Rilleta sighed. "Shall we begin, then?"

"We shall."

Rilleta nodded and turned to her Sunborn. "For Rennon's Hand and the future of Orlath!" she cried, and turned back again, hurling her horse forward with a touch of her heels to its sides. The horse snorted and plunged forward willingly.

In a moment, she was surrounded by blasts of water and wind, and the earth shook beneath the hooves of her mount as Azure, Gust, and Crop mages attacked. But Rilleta laughed, and reached out for her Scarlet with confidence.

Fire was more powerful than all of them.

Flames sprang up around her, feeding on the Gust, driving back the Azure, and overwhelming the fragile force of the Crop magic before it could build. Rilleta slipped from her horse's back and took the battle to the cowering priestesses of Elle, her hands shining crimson.

In a while, they shone crimson with blood as well. Rilleta liked to burn open wounds just enough that they bled, which suited Rennon as well. She only cauterized a wound when she truly felt like it, or when she saw the tiny glimmer of response to the fire that meant this woman could learn to worship the God, if she only heard of Him. The priestesses, unused to battle, fell back in disorder, and Rilleta laughed aloud and pursued them.

Then the arrows began to sing.

Rilleta saw one of her Sunborn go down with a bolt through her throat, and murderous anger filled her. She lit the next arrows that came towards them on fire, and Steam mages raised a curtain to shield them. But it wouldn't last long, and Rilleta knew it. The part of the Sunborn in the battle, at least as advance guard, was almost over.

"Now!" she cried, the agreed-on signal for Vañade and the others to come forward.

They charged, the screams of the horses nearly as bloodthirsty as the cries of their riders. Rilleta thought that was permissible. After all, Rennon was a god of the passions, and how better to serve Him than by killing like this?

She whirled aside as a horse charged past her, and so caught only a glimpse of brown hair and direct eyes. That was enough to worry her, though. Klessa was joining in the battle, after she had said that she would not?

Or perhaps she was going back to her true allegiance, her allegiance to the priestesses of Elle that Rilleta had suspected yesterday.

Murderous anger consumed the last kindling of her temper. Rilleta sprang onto her horse and kicked it again, sending it through the steam and the water after Klessa.

She caught a glimpse of a moving shape, and then an Azure mage reared before her and tried to quench her flames. Rilleta waved a hand impatiently, and flames gutted that woman's body. But her darting eyes uncovered no sign of Klessa for a long moment, and by the time she caught sight of the Master of the Nine Wonders again, the gryphons had come into the battle, and Rilleta had other things to worry about.

The gryphons hurtled down, riding the Gust, their beaks open in screams of rage. It was possible to light their wings on fire, but only if one was quick; gryphons were the swiftest of all creatures of the air. They rolled and looped, their massive wings carrying them with a lightness that one seeing them on the ground would never suspect, and they had a nasty habit of binding to their prey: diving, locking talons on horse and rider, and rolling over and over. A Scarlet mage calling fire so close would burn her allies as well as herself.

Rilleta braced herself as a white gryphon bore down on her, ignoring the nervous whickering of her horse. Yes, the mare wanted to run, but Rilleta couldn't let her. Horses were the natural prey of gryphons, but so were humans, if it came down to that; gryphons were simply too much a part of the Light to eat humans, most of the time. Rilleta lifted hands flaring with Scarlet and sent forth a blast of fire, hoping to warn the gryphon before it could reach her.

It came on, of course, and Rilleta had to admit to a certain grudging admiration. Gryphons were warriors, and loved courage and honor. They would never flinch from an opponent, even one as formidable as the High Priestess of Rennon.

The white gryphon's talons extended towards her, and it looked as if it would scoop her out of her saddle like an eagle taking a fish from the water.

Rilleta blasted it with Scarlet, right in the face.

The gryphon reeled back and fell to the ground, screaming. Rilleta thought it had meant to land on its talons and paws, but, blinded by the Scarlet and its pain, it couldn't do so. It rolled instead, and filled the air with flames and smoke. Rilleta saw it blunder into two of her own priestesses, and winced.

But those are the fortunes of war.

And she was still more worried about Klessa.

She turned to see the Master of the Nine Wonders raise her hands, her eyes unfocused. Her arms began to move in a dance so precise that Rilleta thought it would hypnotize her if she looked for long. She looked away, blinking, and watched for effects of Klessa's magic, whatever it was.

She couldn't see them, but she did see a sight that made her sigh in relief. Coming towards them across the Plains, Telemoranion's metallic elephant lumbered and shook the earth. Soon it would be with them, and then the priestesses of Elle would not find their victory so easy.

And then something flashing, metallic, off to the east caught her eye, and Rilleta turned her head. Had Telemoranion told his dragon to circle around and come in from that way? It seemed strange that he would have done so, but anything was possible. The mind of an elf was not like the mind of a human.

The shape flickered and then resolved itself-not into a dragon, but into a herd of silvery-pale horses who bore riders that shone like gold on their backs. Rilleta swallowed. The elves had come forth from the Elfwood, then. King Seldon must have called on their help. They held themselves bound to the monarchy of Orlath, because Queen Aneron had freed them from slavery to the Dark long ago, and they would fight the Heretics as coolly as only elves could.

Rilleta watched as the horses, trotting as easily in empty air as mortal horses on solid ground, rose above her and then curved back down. They would attack from above, then, as the gryphons did.

And then, as she watched, something attacked the elves from above.

The metal dragon curved in, tail lashing, hollow belly aglow with light of a violently strange color, like the hue that Rilleta sometimes saw when she squeezed her eyes too tightly shut. Its head twisted, and then it breathed, the light rushing from its parted jaws like fire.

The elves screamed.

Rilleta winced, fighting the urge to cover her ears; this, too, needed to be witnessed, so that those who fought Rennon in after times could hear how their predecessors had died. The elves screamed. And screamed. And then several of their horses ran out the other side of the light, and Rilleta had a look at the remains of the riders.

They were skeletons. As Rilleta watched, they frayed into cloth, into ashes, into less than ashes. They flew away into the wind, and then the horses tossed their heads like wild things and ran back south and east, towards the Elfwood.

"What was that?"

Rilleta turned her head, somehow not surprised to see Klessa standing next to her, and not inclined to question what the Master of the Nine Wonders was doing there. "I don't know," she said. "Elven magic, of course. But I don't know just what Telemoranion did, or why."

Klessa nodded. "At least it didn't call on the elements."

"And you despise us for doing so, I suppose?" asked Rilleta.

"When you have no understanding of what you are doing, yes," said Klessa, sharpness invading her voice. "You don't have that understanding, and the elements are angry about being ignored."

"How can they be angry?" asked Rilleta, trying to conceive of the Scarlet being angry in and of itself, instead of consuming its foes at the direction of a priestess or the God. It was an odd concept, not one she could wrap her mind around. "They are being used."

"Used. Not understood."

"And how do you think we should understand them?"

Klessa glared at her. "You won't take the training of a Master of the Nine Wonders, and you wouldn't believe me if I told you it would be best not to use your elemental magic until you understood your element." She turned and walked away into the stirring chaos of the battle.

Rilleta opened her mouth to say something, and then the steam and dust cleared as if the God's Hand had drawn aside a curtain, and she saw the High Priestess of Elle standing before her.

Rilleta felt a surge of strength push through her irritation and exhaustion. There was a reason that all the assassins she had sent after the High Priestess had failed, and a reason that all the High Priestess's attempts to kill her had been as futile. It was because they were Destined to face each other, here and now. Rilleta could feel her Destiny sing around her at the thought.

"Greetings in the name of the Goddess," said the other woman.

"Greetings, in the name of the God." Rilleta held out her hands, and called on the Scarlet. In seconds flames that did not burn her own cloth, or skin, or hair, wreathed her. "Do you really think that you can win against me?"

"The Goddess does not only reward those who win," said the High Priestess simply, and closed her eyes. Rilleta could see her lips move, but could not hear the words of her prayer in the middle of all the screaming sound.

It hardly mattered.

She knew what the woman would be saying-a prayer for a blessing from Elle on a stubborn enemy.

How foolish.

Rilleta had already spoken all the prayers to Rennon that she might have. Should she die at the moment, the God would know what was in her heart. She smiled, and released her fire.

It caught the High Priestess just as she called on her own magic, and for a moment she was framed by a shifting corona of colors as the two elements fought for dominance. Rilleta watched, heart in her throat, wondering if she was going to see her gamble fail after all.

But no, it worked, and the High Priestess fell apart in a rush of ash and bone and blood.

Rilleta lifted her head with a cry that seemed to travel all across the battlefield, carried along by the impulse of Destiny. The Orlathians fighting her people faltered, and some of the priestesses of Elle hugged themselves as if they were suddenly cold. Rilleta smiled at them. *Any who want to warm themselves by the fire of the God will be welcome.*

She faced the army behind her and called aloud, "Rejoice, my children, for we have won!"

The elephant had not even reached the battle yet, she saw, and the unicorn behind it was still trotting to catch up. The dragon wheeled high overhead, sunlight flashing off its belly scales.

They had won.

Sweet triumph swelled in her, and Rilleta opened her mouth and sang to join in its song.

Lusirimonalata's Commentary

The woman caused war.

This cannot be denied.

She murdered the High Priestess of Elle.

This also cannot be denied.

It is what she did later that makes her so honored, so sung, among my sisters, and the decision she made praised from west to east. I must ask the reader to have patience, and not give up in disgust, because she might have made a few mistakes along the path to true enlightenment and union with the Light.

She was a fanatic.

That, also, cannot be denied.

A History of Rilleta, High Priestess of Rennon

Chapter 9

Clashing with Masters

"Never meet a dragon in battle in the air; the only way is to stake it, and hope to Elle that the stakes hold."

-Kinessa, Master of the Element of War.

Rilleta smiled. "I didn't see that part of it, Vañade. I was busy with my own troubles, if you will remember. What did happen after the gryphon almost snapped you in two?" Obviously it hadn't truly snapped him in two, or he would be dead, but there was a long scratch on one arm.

"She twisted to the side, and bit, and I thought that was the end of me," said the scout, proudly displaying his wound. "Then my horse lashed out with one hoof, and I think the beast was so surprised at an animal fighting back just like a man that she lost her mental balance. Her head came below the level of my sword, and I stabbed her through the eye. That was the end of that."

Rilleta smiled, and patted him on the shoulder, then stood to go to another campfire and hear another story. The road was dotted with a star-spray of such fires, all burning in honor to Rennon; Rilleta could hear snatches of song and war-chant from every direction.

One snatch caressed her ears as she passed a fire, and she turned to listen, since it was one of her favorites.

*"They have shattered, and before the fire
They run, seeking to rest or retire.
But we cannot gratify, though a sincere desire,
That wish of the coward and slave!
We will run them down, and nothing will save
They who dared challenge Rennon!
He will have their hearts, their souls for His own!"*

Rilleta smiled and turned to look towards the prisoners' corral. It was certainly true that Rennon was already finding converts among them. The red-robed priestesses led out new penitent after new penitent to find her way back to sanity and passion on the path she had

lost.

Rilleta was aware, of course, that some of those conversions were expedient ones. Some of the women would think to convert to the worship of Rennon only until they got back to a Temple, and then ask for forgiveness and become Elle's worshippers once again. But she was not worried. Once they saw and truly understood the way the Heretics lived, those expedient conversions would become real ones.

And it didn't hurt that she had killed the High Priestess, either. Now some of those priestesses had a shaken faith, and asked their Goddess in prayers why She hadn't protected Her most faithful servant, and received nothing but silence in answer. It wasn't calculated to inspire confidence.

She would have them, soon enough. And so would He.

Rilleta turned, and stopped. Klessa stood in front of her, stare as direct as ever.

The Master of the Nine Wonders looked terrible, though. Her ribs stood through her skin, as though she had suddenly dropped weight. Her eyes were sunken, with dark circles under them, and she swayed back and forth, needing food and a blanket to lie down on. Rilleta stared at her in silence, wondering what had happened.

"Do you know what you and your army did out there?" asked Klessa, her voice dusty with exhaustion.

"Won a battle."

"Tore at the elemental planes," said Klessa. "The priestesses of Elle don't do so. Their training, their discipline, teaches them how to approach the Cycle in such a way that they aren't almost constantly ripping gates open. But you-your people and you yourself, you rip as if nothing were ever going to exist again, as if you would be glad to call down fire and burn the world to ashes."

"That's not true."

"Yes, it is."

"We wouldn't be glad to see the world destroyed."

Klessa laughed shortly. "Then stop ripping at the elemental planes the way you do. I can show you how to approach the Scarlet as a living thing, instead of the dumb toy you now treat it as. Will you accept that training, and not use your gift again until I can show how you to understand it?"

"Of course not. The God is the protector of the Scarlet, and of me. He will make sure that I don't destroy the world."

Klessa narrowed her eyes. "I will not say that I have not felt your God's presence, but even more, I feel your use of the Scarlet fraying the borders between the worlds. The Scarlet will burst forth soon, perhaps in the middle of battle while you and your people use your gifts with no thought of the consequences."

"The God will protect us. Trusting in anything else would mean not trusting to His will." Rilleta lifted her head. She was absolutely sure of this. Had she not felt Rennon exulting, laughing, in her, as she called on the Scarlet? Why would He have done such a thing if she was close to destroying the world? "I won't accept your training, and I will make sure that none of my priestesses do, either."

Klessa breathed, shortly, through her nostrils.

"You look terrible," said Rilleta. "Come, have something to eat, and rest on the blankets I will provide with my own hands. You did something to help us in the battle today, and I am not ungrateful."

"I was fighting to keep the worlds from being ripped open," said Klessa. "It was a mad dance of patterns. That is why I am so tired."

"Do you think that you can ever yield to Rennon, and accept His presence in your heart?" Rilleta asked wistfully, ignoring the woman's statement. Rennon wouldn't let the world be destroyed, ever. Klessa was mistaken, seeing everything through the cage of her Master's training.

Klessa bowed her head. Her breath came in short puffs. Then she said, "I think that I could. Perhaps, when and if I call on the fire and feel Him within it, then I will know that He is there."

Encouraged, Rilleta reached out and pressed her hand, which felt hot as if with fever. "I will be happy to tell you anything about the doctrines of Rennon that you want to know."

Klessa nodded, once. "Then tell me why you burned the Azure mages in Ozue."

Rilleta blinked. "Of all the questions you could ask, I thought you would have understood that one," she said. "You know the relationships between the elements so well. Scarlet and Azure are opposites, deadly ones. I had to kill the Azure mages, or they would have tried to kill me and my people."

"You have no proof of that."

Rilleta sighed. "What proof do I need? You saw the way they were fighting against us." That was a lie, of course. She didn't know that Klessa had seen any such thing. But the woman must have at least heard of the incident to be mentioning it now, and Rilleta was determined not to let her go away with a false idea of it.

Klessa stared into the darkness, her chest heaving. Rilleta wondered what she was seeing, but when she turned, following the direction of her gaze, she had to wonder no longer. There stood Lyissa, chattering and laughing to a woman still clad in gray, but who gazed on Lyissa with such fervor that Rilleta thought they would have a conversion soon.

"You cannot confine her," said Rilleta, "or change her chosen course. But you must join her, if you could find Rennon in your heart."

"You don't think that she will ever come back to Mastery, then?"

"I have never seen anyone take as easily to the doctrines of Rennon who was not raised with them, so no, I don't think so."

Klessa bowed her head. For a moment, Rilleta felt a strange, surging power travel through her body, as if she were on the edge of a tidal wave. Uneasily, she called on the Scarlet, and waited.

Then Klessa lifted her head, her face clear of the struggle that had consumed it just moments before. "I think I shall have to consider your advice a little more, before I make any decision," she said, and then turned and walked back towards one of the fires before Rilleta could stop her.

Rilleta sighed. *We each come to Rennon in our own time, of course.*

And some just take longer than others.

Lusirimonalata's Commentary

It has happened again.

I opened my eyes and found my hand covered with ink, the well knocked over so that it was a miracle of the Goddess no ink spilled on the already-written words. The candle still flickered and flamed in front of me. For a moment, I flushed hot with shame, sure that I had somehow fallen asleep, and that Elle would punish me for that, as is Her right.

Then my gaze fell on the words I had written in between the two sections of Rilleta's History, and I caught my breath. I am sure that I do not remember those words. I am sure that I did not write them.

Yet, there they are.

The Goddess has spoken through me, and altered my handwriting such that it no longer looks like mine. I can admire that. She distances me from things that might be uncomfortable for me to write, so that I can admire Her wisdom and yet not have to tread

down the path of blasphemy.

Tracing the dry words with a finger, I wondered for a moment if a Goddess could commit blasphemy. Calling Rilleta's faith "fanaticism" is something that I would never do, and would think blasphemy in another.

But it is a ridiculous thought. Of course the Goddess cannot blaspheme. And of course there are truths beyond the mortal, truths that I often have some difficulty in recognizing.

I will accept these words as such, and turn to the next section of Klessa's journals. This section will require less handling than many others, as Klessa feels doubt in her dark heart in this one. Who knows but that a wavering reader might find that example of doubt inspiring, and become one of the Goddess's faithful again simply because she knows the other end of the path?

The Journals of Klessa of the Nine Wonders

25 Greenborn, 106 OR

"Reality is cruel and hard."

I think my mother said that. Or my aunt. Someone who raised me, at least. Perhaps it was even the merchant who traveled part of the way across the Rashar Mountains with us, and seemed so taciturn I thought he was mute. It's a wise saying.

Well, if it's so wise, and I can't remember who said it, it was probably a piece of the wisdom that comes to me, sometimes, in the dark watches of the night. I might as well claim it as my own.

I thought of it as I stood in the darkness and watched Lyissa speaking to another of Elle's priestesses, who, it seemed, was going to take the red and become a priestess of Rennon. There was such fire and passion in her movements. It pained me to remember that I'd never seen that when she worked at Master training in the Circle. Perhaps I had made a mistake, after all, and snatched her away from the life she was meant for. If I'd left her in the village, perhaps she would have found her way to Rennon and never had to choose between allegiances at all, or make anyone else unhappy.

But then she called Scarlet on one hand and a bar of Metal into the other, and part of my resolve firmed.

No. I can't change the past, and regret is useless. Lyissa can call more than one element. She needs, and needed, training. I should have brought her to the Masters' School.

The Heretics should not have come along and removed her.

But I had more than one problem to consider now. Not only Lyissa's faith to the Star

Circle was in doubt, but now, my own as well. Rilleta had tempted me to think that perhaps it would be better to become one of Rennon's faithful, even if I lost all my gifts, than have to worry and think constantly about a fate for the world no one else even seemed concerned about.

I wanted to talk to Lyissa.

I waited until she was finally finished nattering away to the prating priestess in front of her, and then stepped up and caught her arm as she turned towards one of the campfires.

"Lyissa, might we converse?"

She smiled brightly on seeing me, no shadow in that smile. Her hair was almost entirely blonde again, recovered from her failed attempt to use the Dust magic, and sparkled like wonder itself in the firelight. My heart ached to look at her.

"Of course, Klessa. My tongue and my heart at your service, for tonight and however many nights after that it takes you to come to Rennon."

I smiled at her and drew her a little further away. Let her think she could convert me, then. At least it would give us a good "excuse" to talk together, as if we needed the excuse.

"There's something I've been worried about," I said. "Something Rilleta assures me is true, and yet I still have trouble believing."

"Poor Klessa," said Lyissa, with a little laugh. "If you cannot believe the High Priestess of Rennon, do you think my poor words will suffice to convince you? She has much more experience than I do."

But you have more power over me, I thought, though of course I was not about to tell her that. "You have an eloquence in you I have never heard you express," I said. "Why is that?"

Lyissa ducked her head, a blush coloring her cheeks. "I don't think that I found a true place in the Star Circle," she said. "I don't think I ever found a true place until I came among the Heretics." She turned in a wide circle, gently disengaging her arm from mine so that she could spread her hands and encompass everything in sight. "They are my home, my family."

"What about me?" I tried, Elle knows I tried, but I could not keep the jealousy out of my voice.

Her face softened, and she turned back to me. "Of course, Klessa. Of course. You play a large part in my life, and always have."

"But now?"

"We would share so much more if you could only admit Rennon to your heart," she said earnestly. "Don't you see how easy it is? You yourself have Burned; you have felt the presence of the fire in your voice and humming along your veins! Wouldn't it be easy to give in to that?"

"Lyissa..." How to explain it isn't that simple? How to explain that someone born with allegiance to more than one element will always have a more complicated dance with the Cycle?

As my Lyissa should have, but she does not know it.

"You've known the gifts of Rennon," Lyissa pressed. "I've seen you. You don't just care for the world as if it were a pet to be tended, Klessa, not like the Lord. You really and truly care about it, and you use your gifts as if you would soothe everyone around you, or bring them to love the world as much as you do."

Ah, little Lyissa. Seeing in my vainglory such compassion! How blind you are!

But, of course, that blindness is one of the things I love about her.

"I can't just abandon everything that I am," I said. "I know it's easier for you, because you didn't complete your training. But I did, and I would lose the ability to make everyone care about the world if I joined you. Don't you see that? My magic would go. What good would I be then?"

"Oh, Klessa." There was a vibration in Lyissa's voice I'd never heard before. I can still see the look in her eyes as she raised a hand to my cheek. "You would still be so much good. You could still do so much good. You would be one of the most powerful of the Heretics ever, since you fling yourself into all things you love heart and soul. And we would be together. Is that not enough?"

I closed my eyes.

How long has it been since I first came to realize that I cared deeply about Lyissa, that something besides the magic mattered to me? I don't know. I cannot say. Perhaps it began between us the day that I looked into her eyes in that village I took her from, or the day that I realized just how wild and careless she is, something that cannot be allowed in an elemental Master. It was something that I encouraged anyway, for the sake of love of the wild.

I, as she says, have felt the fire. I have Burned. I have felt the desire to yield to the elements and let them rip open gates between the worlds, come what may.

But I have never yielded to it.

Lyissa has.

"Klessa," she said. Her hands were both on my cheeks now, but they dropped to my shoulders, as if she were unsure how long she should continue to touch me that way. "I miss you. I didn't join the Heresy to run from you, but because it is my true home. And I would welcome you as more than mentor into my true home, and more than guest. I would welcome you as friend. Please, drop those false barriers of control you keep about your heart, and that worship of Elle that has never been more than a mask to you, and come with me. Rennon loves the Cycle and would never designate any part of it as immoral. This is where you belong."

And perhaps, if she hadn't said that second to last sentence, I would have yielded. But my mind was full of the screams of Azure mages.

"What about the Azure?" I asked, opening my eyes and gazing into her face. I was slightly startled to see how close it was, and how flushed her cheeks were, as if with wine or fire.

Lyissa ducked her head. "What about it?"

"I can call it. Does that make me unwelcome in Rennon's fold?"

"Of course not. The love for fire matters first."

"And most Azure mages do not love fire," I muttered, thinking it over.

"Of course not! They oppose it. They cannot call on it. But you." Lyissa slid her fingers through my hair. "You can. You will be welcome among us all, Klessa, and I know that I do not speak only for myself, though perhaps most for myself. Please, join with us." I shook my head. "How could I, Lyissa? At least right away," I added, seeing some of the life fade from her eyes. "I might try to fit in, but I couldn't, not knowing that some of the elements I can touch are anathema to these Heretics."

"They would learn to accept you, Klessa. And they would have an easier time once your gifts were gone."

I have absolutely no idea why that squeezed my chest like that. She had paid attention in the basic lessons, after all; she would have known that a Master who swears allegiance to some cause other than the Cycle loses her powers. But I had somehow persuaded myself that she would care more about that, at least for me if not for herself, than she would about my joining the Heretics.

Of course she would not, and I was a fool for thinking that she might. In seconds, the crushing pain was past, and I straightened and faced her with a small smile. Lyissa cowered a little at that. She knew what that smile meant, or had meant, in the past. Nothing good.

"I don't think that you really understand me, Lyissa," I said. "I serve the Cycle, and no lesser master. I could not serve Rennon without losing my magic."

She paused as if not knowing the comeback for that, and then said, "And you can't serve the Cycle without losing me!"

That stung more than I would have liked to admit. I was still opening my mouth to respond when Lyissa hurried on. "And why would you want to turn back to the service of the Cycle, anyway? Do you think it would have you? You didn't warn the people of Ozue that the Queen was entering, or that the Heretics were coming, and thus you have blood on your hands if we have blood on ours! Haven't you already chosen your side?"

"I don't know," I said, thinking of the near-fall I had had earlier, when Rilleta spoke so persuasively. I might have tipped over the edge into faith in Rennon, and thus lost my powers. I had felt the elements of water, in particular, stirring as if they would leave me. "You have." Lyissa's voice was steady and calm again. "You have, Klessa, and I think that you know it. All of this is just so much abstraction, so much hiding from your true desires."

"Why would I want to hide from them?" I snapped. "Such is tantamount to cowardice, and I have never been a coward in my life. You know that, Lyissa." I met her eyes and held them, daring her to deny it. She could remember well enough incidents of my bravery.

Her cheeks flushed, and she looked away. "I know that you aren't a coward, Klessa," she said softly. "But there are times when one does—things that one cannot help, because one is overwhelmed by the thoughts and feelings of the moment. And then, later, it becomes difficult to face them." Lyissa looked at me, and this time her eyes were wide and open, without hidden secrets shining in them. I could see the reflections of the fires, and that was all. "I think that you've become a Heretic, in all but word, and you simply cannot bring yourself to make the declaration yet. Your mind is hiding it from you for your own good, because you are not yet ready to face it."

"You know I don't accept those ideas, Lyissa." Those are the ideas of Elle's priestesses in Her Temples. They are not the ideas of the Masters of the Star Circle, and could never be. We serve the interstices and balances of the Cycle, the places where elements cross and blend. We cannot hide from ourselves.

"They may be the truth, Klessa, even though you can't accept them." Lyissa's eyes softened as she looked at me. "In truth, I think that you need some more time, and that's all," she said, and came up to me, putting her hand on my shoulder. I found myself relaxing as I often do when she makes that gesture, and she smiled into my eyes.

"Rennon doesn't demand that you turn to Him immediately. Fiery rebirth is common among His servants, but it doesn't happen to everyone. You should take your time and do whatever you need to do, think whatever you need to think, in order to become His convert."

"You are that certain the Heretics will win, aren't you?" I asked, recognizing the source of some of the faith in her eyes for the first time. "You think that I'll have time to accept Rennon because there will be all the time in the world once you take Orlath."

Lyissa nodded. "Yes, Klessa. We only have fifteen years or so before the Dark rises, perhaps twenty-five if our luck holds. The Light should not war against itself while there is Dark in the world to fight. We are taking this war to the King only because there is no other choice." Passion and utter conviction shone in her eyes as she spoke those words. I closed my eyes, feeling slightly sick, but her voice chased me into the darkness. "We must secure the country quickly, and then brace ourselves for the coming of the Dark. By

the time it is chased back again, then Rennon will be the great God of Orlath, and I think His worship will be taking root in the other Kingdoms as well."

I opened my eyes again and looked into her face. How could I tell her that I would rather the Dark win Orlath and all the other Kingdoms than see her go down in a burst of flames? How could I tell her that I thought Glangon would rule the Kingdom better than any of the Heretics, or Queen Memoryrose?

"Good night, Klessa," she said then. "I really must sleep. I've been awake all today, and then up most of the evening speaking to those priestesses who saw the truth of the flames." She concealed a yawn and smiled at me. "Sleep well under stars."

She started to turn away. I couldn't let it end like that, and I reached out and gathered her in my arms. She turned back, resting her cheek against my shoulder, and whispered into my ear, "You will follow me into the flames, Klessa. Only give it time."

And she is right. That is the hell of things. She is right. I am not yet convinced that she is lost to me forever. But if I become convinced of it, then I will follow her into the faith of Rennon, and sacrifice even my magic that I so love, rather than lose her.

Well. That was...*interesting*.

I wandered away from the fires where I left Lyissa, no clear direction in mind. I merely wanted to be in the darkness by myself, and make it look that way, so that if someone came upon me, I would be justified in snapping at her.

Of course, I did want someone to come looking for me, so that I could snap, but I wasn't looking for someone to snap at, just making myself a convenient target.

I heard a low music from ahead of me, and looked up in curiosity. The moon was out, and, only a few nights past the full, she gleamed down on the flattened space of grass ahead of me. I could clearly see that someone was there, though I didn't recognize the dancing figure for certain until he turned his face towards me.

Glangon.

He spun and leaped as delicately as if he were a gazelle, now and then stopping and smiling down at something on the ground. Then he began another leaping pattern. I drew closer, wondering if he had lied to me about worshipping Rennon after all. This certainly looked as wild and primitive as the rites that I had seen the Heretics conduct.

I stopped when I realized that the pounded earth at Glangon's feet was alive with snakes. They writhed over each other, now and then gleaming in the light of the moon and revealing the scale colors of half a dozen of the deadliest kinds. I was sure that I saw Silissra for a moment before she vanished back into the writhing tangle.

The low music started up again, and I realized what it was this time. No ordinary music after all, but the constant hiss of snakes, low and regular. I had to fight to keep from starting back, from flinching in utter fear. I have never been particularly afraid of snakes, but then, I have never sought out a conclave of the poison-killers either.

I was about to turn back, thinking that Glangon must meet his friends here in the center of the Plains so as not to be shunned by all the Heretics, when he turned and saw me. I am still not sure if it was accidental or not. He came down out of a leap and faced me with no sign of surprise; on the other hand, the movement did not look planned.

"Klessa." He tossed back his head, and the moon's light flashed on his eyes in the most eerie manner, as if he were a cat or wolf. I had heard that the eyes of the royalty of

Rivendon did that sometimes, but never actually seen it done. "I am glad that you have come to visit me. Might I introduce you to my friends?"

"I can see them quite well enough from here," I said warily, watching as a great shape, at least eight feet long, reared out of the pile and flickered a forked tongue in my direction. I knew what that was: *cleima*, the jungle cobra who sometimes wandered the Plains as well. I knew it only because I had tried to treat two patients dying of a *cleima* bite, and failed each time. Each time, it was partially because the snake had followed its victim, and injected another dose of poison when it seemed as though my magic was making progress.

"But they want to meet you."

I shook my head. My heart sang loudly in my ears. This frightened me in a way that all Rilleta's fanaticism does not. She is wrong, but I know that she is not plotting the overthrow of the Light when I look at her. Indeed, I don't think that she hates the Light at all, if what Lyissa said is true. This...

This was of the Dark.

"I can see them well enough from here," I repeated.

"Are you afraid?"

"Of *course* I'm afraid."

Glangon clucked his tongue. "Such a pity. And I heard you tell Lyissa that you aren't a coward, after all."

I clenched my hands. "I am not."

"Then come and play, Klessa."

I drew in my breath with a sigh, and stepped forward. At once a small shape shot forward and climbed my robe. I saw it was Silissra, and smiled a little at her, stroking her head. She flicked her tongue at me and coiled about my wrist.

"She likes you," said Glangon, in a tempting voice. "They all like you. Come and dance, Klessa," he added, hissing the syllables of my name.

I went. Elle help me, better judgment help me—no, the Cycle help me, since I called on both of those things and they failed me. I went.

I stepped among the snakes, and felt the rasp of scaled bodies against my ankles. For a moment, blunt heads nudged at me, and I had to suppress a shiver of disgust. It probably wouldn't help to step on them, and I was sure that I would if I couldn't keep my eyes on Glangon and the patterns of the dance in my head.

Glangon writhed forward, leaping again only after a moment. Now I could clearly see that he dragged his feet on the ground when they were in contact with it, scuffing up more and more dust. It clung to his skin, already unwashed, but he didn't seem to mind at all. Another leap, and then two snakes, two *cleima*, reared, their heads perfectly placed to catch his feet as he came down.

I winced, expecting him to crush the snakes, or the cobras to bite him, or both of those things to happen at once. But he landed as lightly as if he were made of down, and then held out his arms, hissing softly under his breath. The cobras supported him into the air, and smaller snakes climbed their bodies onto Glangon without pausing. He danced there, gravely, on the heads of snakes, cradled and surrounded by snakes. I could hear them all hissing, solemn and joyful as a cat purring.

I knew I could never manage such a thing. I had not the kinship with the serpent that he did. But I held out my arms, and two other jewelsnakes climbed my robes and coiled

around my wrists. They swayed back and forth the while, then rose before my eyes and swayed. It was an effort to keep my eyes from following their movements. I have never believed the legends that say snakes enchant their prey with such movements, but in that moment I was ready to accept it.

I carried on my body three small serpents—none of them was the length of the palm of my hand, and Silissra, the longest, was almost as long as both of the other two—whose bites were enough to kill me in less than three seconds, painfully, if they all decided to bite at once.

A cold exultation ran through me. It was most similar to the feeling I had had when I used Dust to kill the Scarlet mage, but I had never felt anything entirely like it before. In that moment, I was companion and lover of Death.

And I adored it.

I raised my hands, and the jewelsnakes shone as the moonlight fell upon them. I think that I may have even joined in the hissing, as well, though of that I am less certain.

And now I sit here, writing in my journal, as if none of it ever happened. The only sign that it did was the jewelsnake sunning itself in the early rays of the dawn striking my pack. And even that would be gone, if the snake had slipped away from me.

I know that what I met out there was of the purest Dark. It was not that it was evil; I have met, once before, a manifestation of the Dark that I do not believe was evil. But it was as unrestrained as the stupid Heretic mages in the height of their wildness. More, even, as it was unbound from the rules they impose on themselves. That kind of magic obeys no rules at all.

And from the glance that Glangon gave me before he called his snakes away and danced into the Plains with them, I think he knew that.

What is happening to me? I almost gave in to Rilleta's and Lyissa's pleas and became a worshipper of Rennon. I know I did, because I felt my powers trembling, on the verge of fleeing. And then I went and danced with the Dark, and listened to the last sentences that Glangon spoke as the jewelsnakes untwined from me.

"Watch yourself carefully, Klessa. You think you know what you want, but you don't know the first thing about it. And in your rush not to prove yourself a coward, you may find that you have lost the path to your true desire."

It sounds exactly like the kind of babble the priestesses of Elle make up on a regular basis, and yet I cannot stop thinking about it. Is it possible that I joined the Heretics because I felt my true faith calling to me, not because I wanted to win Lyissa back? Is it possible that I danced with Glangon last night out of sincere desire not to be proven a coward, but waked something else within me, something that will not go back to sleep? Oh, of course all that is *possible*.

But I do not think that I shall know it until true proof appears before me. And even then, it will have to drag me by the neck across the Plains before I give up any plans to win Lyissa back. And if the Dark wants me, it will have to come and get me, just like any god or goddess that wants my worship.

I will speak all the words that they want me to, but I will not cease fighting until I can fight no longer. And I think that I have another killing to make. Another of the Scarlet mages who slew the Azure ones is camped very close to me, and had the dawn watch. He should be stumbling back to bed anytime now.

The jewelsnake did not seem to mind at all as I picked it up and carried it over to the mage's bedroll, but I have a feeling it will mind, very much indeed, when the Scarlet mage falls on top of it. Probably enough to bite.

I shall enjoy the show.

Lusirimonialata's Commentary

She was so close, and yet was so far.

She could not see that the answer to all her doubts and questions lay within reach, and with just a little stretching, she could have gained the sweetest fruit she could ever desire. Elle could have laid all her doubts to rest. If she would have just stretched, just reached a little, and thought more about her worship of Elle, she would have seen the Goddess waiting for her with Hands outstretched.

But she could not see. And in some ways, I am glad. It was her Destiny not to see. It was right that she not do so, so that she could provide an example for all the others who might have wavered on the path to the comfort of Elle.

She is an example, and that is all she is. Sometimes I have the idea that she is really more, a living woman just like the rest of us. And then I remember that she is gone, and that these words are all that is left of her. How strange, that she has so vivid a voice she can leap off the page and stride about my brain.

Very strange, the words that come from me now. I feel almost as if the Goddess were pouring out Her chalice, which is said to feed poets, upon me.

But now I must turn to a dark part of the History of Rilleta, and I ask my readers to recite a prayer and read along with me, preparing to forgive me. In some time you will see why I needed to include this. There is no other choice, not if one is to understand what happened later, when Rilleta made her fateful decision.

The slander it includes against our glorious Queen can, I hope, serve its purpose now, and the reader can understand my intent, so that she forgives my methods.

A History of Rilleta, High Priestess of Rennon

Chapter 10

In the Darkness

"You are so sure that you're different, aren't you, that none of you are like me? That isn't true, you know. There is evil hiding in your souls, too, if you call the power I serve evil. It will eat you alive as easily as it ate me, if you yield to it. And never believe that you cannot yield to it. Of course you can. That is the reason it is known as evil."

-Last words of Arrenze the Defier before his execution, the Dark's Lord who came closest to conquering all the Kingdoms.

Rilleta opened her eyes when the voice spoke to her. She was not truly surprised. She had been waiting for this visit since the defeat of the King's army.

Ha. The King's.

Of course they would call it that, because no one dares admit what they know to be the truth.

"I thought I would find you here."

Rilleta turned her head and nodded calmly to the figure made out of dust that stood before her. This time, it was more defined; Rilleta thought the Crown Princess had had more time to send her mind and power over the Gust magic through whatever channels controlled it. She had long dark hair that even had a hint of the Princess's true auburn in

it, and deep, calm hollows filled with shifting dust for eyes. Wind poured and purred all around her, and Rilleta drew slightly back from its touch. The Gust had no part in the Scarlet, but it could push the flames across the Plains and cause destruction with them that their wielder never intended. Rilleta hated the Gust most, next only to the Azure.

"I was awaiting you," she said.

Another, less experienced opponent would not have noticed the check in Twydon's movements, the odd little pause and tilt of the dust-head. But Rilleta had fought the evil woman the length and breadth of Orlath, in form after form, shifting and shining in the dust, and she knew the language of this substitute body nearly as well as the language of Twydon's real one. The Princess was startled.

Rilleta smiled.

Perhaps a little nervous?

"I am honored that you find me worth your time," said Twydon, recovering her balance and going on again almost as precisely as before. That was one thing Rilleta had always admired about her enemy, her poise; it almost never slipped, and that was why she valued breaking it so much. "I would have thought you had much else to keep you busy, leading the Heretics and fighting with the Queen."

Rilleta felt the smile drop from her face. It was involuntary, but she couldn't have prevented it.

"You have a spy in my camp," she said. "I thought only the Dark did that?"

Twydon only smiled at her, instead of being infuriated at the comparison to the Dark, as she should have been. "I need no spy to see what is obvious, painted on your faces whenever you are together. She thinks that she should rule Orlath, for Elle knows what reason, and you think you should, to make it safe for your priceless Heretics. Tell me, do you think that winning the battle with me would solve all your problems? There is still a Doralissan Queen and her fanatically loyal people to deal with."

"This doesn't concern you," said Rilleta.

"Oh, but it does. I would like to know the fate of my people, if you really insist on taking their leader and their faith away from them."

"Rennon is the proper goal of their faith, and not Elle."

Twydon laughed, soft and low. "Oh, Rilleta, come now. You have been in the Temple of Elle. You've read the historical records they don't show to anyone else. You know how shaky information about the beginning of the Heresy is, and you know just how much there is *not* about a tradition of Rennon worship leading back hundreds of years. Why do you persist in thinking that our people will simply embrace the worship of the sun-god as if nothing had ever been different?"

"It is more natural to them," said Rilleta, feeling her head begin to buzz. *Rennon cast me into flames if I speak to her again. She always does this to me, always. Always tricks and taunts me, until I can't be sure I'm seeing straight even out of the corner of my eye.* "He is the god of passions and fire and laughter—"

"And Elle is the goddess of restraint and calmness and acceptance of Destiny. How is that less natural?"

The buzz cleared from Rilleta's head, and she smiled at Twydon. "She is too restrained. Your priestesses remind me of the Masters of the Star Circle, always nattering on and on about what could happen, instead of dealing with what is."

"We can at least agree that the Masters are a nuisance. Speaking of which, I am surprised that one of them is riding in your train."

"She said that she would come along."

"And you think that you can honestly trust her to embrace your faith?" Twydon shook her head. "I know Klessa. Slippery as a snake, and she bites like one, too, when you're least expecting it."

"I am prepared for it."

Twydon only smiled, which made Rilleta furious all over again. She was quiet, though, knowing that anything she said about Klessa would only work to the Princess's advantage. Rilleta did not know Klessa, and Twydon had the benefit of prior acquaintance.

In the torture pits.

Rilleta shuddered. If she could not reform Klessa, make her accept the faith of Rennon or at least use her magic for the Heretics in battle, the woman would have to die. She knew that. She hadn't quite made the emotional commitment yet, but the intellectual one was complete. Klessa was bitter and sly, and she would bite them all if she could.

"We are united in our distrust of her," said Twydon. "Why can we not be united in other things, as well?"

Rilleta looked up swiftly. "If you hope to win me back, Princess, you will have to give up the idea. I am committed to Rennon so deeply that I could not go back to Elle even if I wanted to."

"You do have an exaggerated idea of your own importance," said Twydon, her voice a drawl. "I wasn't worried about you, but rather about our people. You do know that not everyone worships Rennon?"

"They will come to accept Him."

"And how long will that take? Probably a generation at least, and the next war with the Dark is rising before then." Twydon bowed her head, so that her dust-hair fell across one eye, and studied Rilleta through that mask, as if that might make her actions more understandable. "I think that you should know enough history to realize just how disastrous Orlathian civil wars can be, when we bear the greatest brunt of the defense for the Light, and the most powerful Destinies. The Brotherstrife after Queen Aneron died, for example. And then the war with the Dark came along in the middle of it. Do you want to go through that time again? I would suggest, if you think that you do, going into one of the small towns along your path—assuming you do not burn them out—and finding an old woman who remembers something of that time. The tales should be bitter enough to purge your taste for bloodshed."

"I remember the history," said Rilleta through stiff lips. "I was a priestess of Elle and studied at the Temple, remember?"

"Then why don't you act as if you remember it?"

"I know that we shall triumph before then. It is my Destiny to lead. Rennon has promised me no less."

"Elle is one with Destiny," said Twydon. "You cannot have Destiny without serving Her, and She will bring you to the end that She desires."

"You know nothing of the true realities of the world, Twydon."

The Princess laughed. "You think that you will rule Orlath without opposition in five years, then?"

"Less."

Twydon's eyes rose and moved behind her. Then the Princess smiled and vanished. Rilleta looked behind her.

Queen Memoryrose stood there, eyes filled with a strange smoke-like color. Rilleta shuddered. She knew what that meant. The Queen was balanced between rage and chaos, between human and mizan.

"Your Majesty—" she began.

"No, no," said Queen Memoryrose. "I think that I know what you mean, and I think I know why you mean it. And now, thanks to the woman I started this war to fight, I think I see what you desire."

"Your Majesty—"

Her smoke-colored eyes turned the color of diamonds, and Rilleta had to look away. She knew what was coming next, since the woman had a mizan's spirit looking out of her eyes now, and she knew how much she would hate it.

"You worship your Rennon, and you establish Him as the next deity of the Kingdoms," said Memoryrose. "I do not care about that. I have never cared. But you *must* take Queen Twydon from her throne, and I *must* rule in her place. That is the way it must be, so that Doralissa is not in danger from her madness."

Rilleta thought of correcting her on the matter of the Crown Princess's title, and quickly decided it wasn't worth it. Those dangerous eyes said it wasn't worth it, and so did the whole posture of the Queen as she stalked closer.

"I am going to make you say it," said Queen Memoryrose.

"My lady—"

Memoryrose was suddenly in front of her. There was no way that she could move that fast, but there she was, hovering in front of Rilleta. The priestess lowered her eyes and was quiet. She knew what that meant. The mizan blood was uppermost now, and there was always the chance that the Queen's human half wouldn't come back to stop it before it did something—rash. The mizanoi moved like the spirits of lightning that they were. Queen Memoryrose couldn't do it, not unless she was so mizan in spirit that her human blood didn't matter.

"Whom do you worship?" Memoryrose hissed.

"Rennon."

"And who still rules in Orlath?"

The words lay like ash on Rilleta's tongue. She didn't want to say them. She thought saying them only made an unfortunate fact, an accident of history, more like a matter of Destiny, in the way that the priestesses of Elle claimed it was. "Elle. The Goddess Elle."

"And who do most people of Orlath still worship?"

This was a new twist. Rilleta looked at her defiantly. "You can't make me say that. You don't know what the Orlathian people hold in their hearts."

"Who has a temple in every Orlathian village? Whom do they call to in times of peace and trouble? Who has always been the goddess of the royal family?"

"Elle. The Goddess Elle."

Memoryrose nodded. "And who is going to win this war?"

That made Rilleta jerk her head up. "That is a thing undecided. I do not think that even the priestesses of Elle can see—"

Memoryrose smiled, and the smile seemed to leap into Rilleta's body and stab down to the roots of her muscles. Rilleta jerked and twitched on the Plains, wondering if the lightning would go to her heart and stop it this time, while Memoryrose stood and watched her calmly. Rilleta almost wished that she would die this time, if it were not for her people and her God. At least it would spare her the constant humiliation.

At last, it stopped, and Memoryrose came and knelt beside her.

"Rilleta," she said. "Sweet Rilleta."

Rilleta breathed hard, and didn't answer her.

"You must understand me. You must understand that I have deeper motives in this war than you do." Memoryrose caressed her forehead for a moment. "And while you might think that you have all the right in the world to lead Orlath, I am not fighting merely to replace a madwoman with a fanatic." She bowed her head and kissed Rilleta's forehead. "Your proper place is the Temple, and not the throne."

Then she stood and strode into the darkness.

Rilleta closed her eyes. *The only thing that would be worse now is if someone in the camp were secretly serving the Dark.*

Lusirimonialata's Commentary

This part of the History startles me whenever I read it. It is always such a shock to remember that the Heretics were not united in their leadership, that divisions and treachery ran deep among them.

Of course, I should know better. They only looked united from the outside, as this History proves. They could not know anything like the comradeship or sisterhood of our priestesses, of course, being so divided and torn.

I am so glad that I was born into the gifts of Elle, and taken under Her roof while there was still hope for me.

I have not seen my parents in many years. It is strange, how suddenly I thought of that. I do not know if they still live in Ozue, or if they were Cleansed, or if they joined in the Heresy and fell with it. How very strange. This History is rearing strange memories in my mind, and it seems the Goddess is content to let me rear the buildings and look to Her for guidance. Perhaps those who read this History of the Rennon Heresy should know the commentator, as well as the principal actors in it, well.

But there is not much that I can tell those with a craving for information. There is little of me that is not in Elle, and for that I am grateful. I can too easily remember what my childhood was like, and I shudder. If not for my intense and instinctive love of the Goddess, the Heretics would have recruited me in a heartbeat. I accepted the possibility of blended elements and people mastering more than one element as a child, because I saw what seemed indisputable proof, and how much do we think to question our eyes when we are children?

Thankfully, I have now learned to question everything but the Goddess, and thus arrived at a more mature and rational mind.

And a more mature and rational mind is what I shall need to confront this next section of Klessa's journals. I have removed as much as I could, and given the pages to Anassra to carry away, lest they lie about and I be tempted to insert them after all. There is a deadly fascination in these pages, though I know that no one must ever see them but me. How I wish there was not corruption as well, so that I could put them in, and future students of

history could learn what the mind of one who opposes the Goddess on the most fundamental levels is like!

Or what an elven mind is like, come to that.

The Journals of Klessa of the Nine Wonders

25 Greenborn, 106 OR

Oh, my, they are afraid of me now.

Best to revise that. I would not say that they are afraid of me. Instead, they think there is some mysterious danger stalking the Heretics, and they think that Rilleta may be the next victim. At that, I must laugh. I wouldn't kill her with Dust, or by placing a snake in her bedroll and enjoying the screams as it bit her.

I am saving something much more special for her.

But I did slay two more of those who killed the Azure mages with Dust, and killed one who might have seen the Dust pouring from one of the bodies by thinning his blood down to nothing. (Yes, it *can* be done, though it requires a Master's control of the Azure). We are riding towards the castle of Orlath, and they know that they are dying, and that these deaths are not just the results of heat—some intuition in them speaks that—but they don't know what truly causes them, and they can't do anything about it.

Is it not wonderful?

I had a chance to talk to Lyissa today—a brief conversation, as she cantered by on a Doralissan horse, with a smile on her lips. She bowed her head to me, and then pulled up enough so that we could hear each other over the clap of hoofs, the rattle of wheels, and the screams of those who had found my latest victim.

"Don't you love the heat, Klessa?" she asked, tilting her head back and drawing the hot air and dust into her lungs.

I shrugged. "I have never cared one way or the other for the heat at this time of year. My robes keep me cool enough. But in the high summer, I like to spend my time in the cool parts of the Library, reading."

Lyissa gave me a reproachful glance. "You can't win me back to the Star Circle by talking about it, Klessa."

I blinked. Once. I had answered her question without a thought of winning her back, though of course it made my heart ache to see her riding in blood-dyed robes with that dreamy smile on her face when she should have been studying the books in the library with that expression.

But how could I let a challenge like this pass?

"You know what I think, Lyissa," I said. "You need to learn how to control your magic. You have all the Scarlet elements. You need the training."

"The essence of the Scarlet is wildness," said Lyissa.

"Yes, if one serves it. But no one who is a Master does. One serves the entire Cycle, and just because you don't wield the Azure is no reason that you can't learn its mysteries."

Lyissa recoiled. I stared at her. She had never shown that violent a reaction before to learning about the elements that she couldn't wield.

Or has she, and I simply never noticed?

"I hate the Azure," said Lyissa violently. "I am one with the Scarlet, and I don't want to learn water's mysteries. I never wanted to. And if you cared for me at all, you would stop speaking of this."

"You must not care for me, then, I suppose."

"What?"

Good. I had flung the knife back at her. "Since I am one with all my magic, and that includes the Azure. You must not care for me. Do you see me as an Azure mage, or even just a creature of water?"

Lyissa looked away from me. "It's hard, Klessa. So hard. It's hard even to realize that I have more than one element, sometimes. I wish that I had been born with the Scarlet, and to Rennon-worshipping parents."

"You weren't, Lyissa. You have to accept that you can wield Metal and Steam and Lightning, too."

"Perhaps if I desire it hard enough..."

I wheeled my horse in front of hers, and Lyissa started from her trance of staring at her hands and looked up at me.

"Listen to me, Lyissa," I said, keeping my voice as low and soothing as possible. "You cannot change the magic you were born with. No one can. The only thing you can do is live up to it, and get training for it, or refuse to use your gifts at all."

"Why do you look so worried, Klessa? Do you think that I might find some way out of the traps I was born in?" Lyissa smiled at me, her eyes once again shining with the reflection of fire. "I think the Masters underestimate the value of the human will, in subordinating it to the Cycle. We must serve other people with our gifts, if we must have them."

"The way that you are?"

She flushed, knowing from the bite in my tone that I didn't mean it as a compliment.

"What do you mean?"

"You serve Rennon, do you not?"

"That is different."

"Of course it is, Lyissa. That is the defense of every little girl when someone points out the faults of her parents."

"I am *not* a little girl."

"You would deny reality for the sake of your own wishes. And you could end up destroying yourself or even opening a gate to the elemental worlds because of it. That seems childish to me."

Lusirimalata's Commentary

Here I must interrupt. These are some of the pages that Anassra took away, and of all of them they are the ones I am least sorry to lose. They tell only more and more of Klessa's mistaken perceptions of Lyissa, and their arguments. Lyissa was right, of course, as she was in almost everything; she had sincere faith, like Rilleta, though it fastened on the wrong object. Each person is only born with one element, and to one element. All else is delusion and lies, and just as we finally understand that our Scarlet brothers and sisters have a place in the Cycle, we finally understand that the Masters of the Star Circle maintained their comfortable position through sleight of hand and cunning arguments and stories of their powers. Klessa carries the lie even into these journals, though to be fair she might have believed in it so sincerely that she told it as the truth.

Let all readers understand once and for all:

This was a lie, one of the sort that could corrupt our children's minds still, if the Masters of the Star Circle had been allowed to persist in their deception.

There is no one who now believes that anyone can control more than one element, or that anyone is born to a "blended" element. The elements are distinct and pure in themselves, and cannot blend.

Of course, one hears the occasional odd story, such as someone who simply bursts into flame or becomes a desiccated husk, and there are always those who have a naturally heretical turn of mind and would be willing to believe that these are the results of people who are trying to control more than one element, or a blended one, without proper training. But some people will believe anything. We need not deal with this, other than repeating the truth and offering to show them that truth if they disbelieve us.

There is heretical, however, and then there is evil. Those who believe in the old ideas but merely insist on them in loud voices are the first, and they can be corrected by the gentle Hand of Elle, or the torture pit if necessary.

Klessa was evil, and there is no cure for that.

The Journals of Klessa of the Nine Wonders

25 Greenborn, 106 OR

I turned my head as hoofbeats sounded behind me, and someone spoke to her horse in urgent tones. It wasn't anything to do with me, though, just some woman flying towards the head of the army, bent over the neck of her mount. I watched in idle curiosity. It seemed as if she were going to report to Rilleta.

Perhaps it meant trouble.

Elle, I hoped so.

"My lady. I wish to speak with you. Will you come with me?"

Startled, I turned my head, wondering why I hadn't heard the hoofbeats, wondering if the Heretics had caught on so quickly to the slow march of death among them. But the person walking beside me, gazing gravely up at me, was not mounted. He was not a Heretic. He wasn't even human.

I took in the deep blue skin, eyes, and hair, and wasn't entirely certain what to say. The pointed ears and the depthless calm of his expression were the only things marking him as what he was in that moment, an elf. He could have been any one of a hundred kinds of fey otherwise. Of course, the great elves can look like that.

But that was only true of elves before the time of Queen Aneron.

He gestured, a long sweeping gesture, with one hand. "My lady, please. We don't have much time to talk."

"Why not?" I asked, finding my voice again. My tongue suddenly felt as dry as if I had begun to choke on Dust myself.

He frowned at me. "If you can ask that, you must not know what I would speak to you about."

I shook my head.

"My name is Telemoranion. I have formed the machines that now march in the Lady Rilleta's train." Odd, for him to say *formed* instead of *made*, but not all that surprising, if one knew what I did about elven magic. "But I have learned recently that the Heretics intend only to replace the worship of Elle with the worship of Rennon, which is distressing. I wish to do something else. Will you come with me?"

"I can't imagine an elf admitting to needing a mortal's help," I said.

"I am not like most of my kind," he said, even as he changed skin, eyes, and hair to gold, into the semblance of an elf of Light. "And I do not need your help if you will not give it. I wish only to talk."

I gazed into his eyes, but there was no answer there for me. Where a mortal would have spoken those last words in a tone of wounded pride, Telemoranion just spoke them, and stared at me when I didn't respond. He was serious. He wouldn't try to take my help if I didn't want to offer it.

"Very well." I slid down from my mare and led her towards the edge of the track as if she had something in her hoof. The deception was probably unnecessary; no one was looking towards me at the moment. But I did it anyway.

Yes, you might call it love of deception. What of it?

Telemoranion walked beside me, but in silence. He stood by the mare for a long moment before he began to speak, and even then gazed out across the Plains, not looking at me.

"Since Rilleta fled the Temple of Elle, I thought it was possible that she wanted to end the Goddess's domination in Orlath forever."

"I think she does."

"She does, and doesn't," said Telemoranion. "She would just replace the elements they favor with Scarlet, perhaps even trying to destroy the Azure."

I shook my head, wondering just how much elves knew of mortal magic. I had often heard elves of the Light speaking on Destiny, Elle, and the Cycle, but they tended only to echo human thoughts on the matter, though in more beautiful voices. "She can't destroy the Azure. Even if she killed all the Azure mages alive now, there would still be children born with the talent for water, and in a generation she would be facing the same sort of rebellion the priestesses of Elle are now. Trying to kill any element in the Cycle will fail."

"Are you so sure of that?"

I suppose an ominous chill should have run up my spine when he spoke the words. Perhaps one even did. But I know my Master's training, and I know that every element of the Cycle seeks servants in the world, seeks expression. This is the reason there are people born with all of them, though the Wonders of Time and Light are still not fully understood and usually born only in Masters. One cannot simply not strip any element in the Cycle of servants. It will always find its way back through.

I told Telemoranion that.

He listened, stared at me, and said, "Why do you think the priestesses of Elle are trying to ignore Scarlet?"

"In the mistaken belief that it will go away. Of course it won't. It will just raise this kind of rebellion."

"And do you think the Scarlet mages could strike back at the Azure mages the same way?"

"They could, but they would fail likewise." I was getting tired of this. Aren't elves intelligent?

"But if there was a way of changing the fundamental nature of the Cycle, so that the elements they didn't like were no longer born among the people of Orlath..."

"It would be frightening, yes," I said. "But there is no such way."

"You are wrong."

I watched as he turned and paced away from me. It was the most human gesture I had ever seen an elf make, and I wondered just how long Telemoranion had been among mortals. I knew that humans went at least a little mad after spending time in the Elfwood. Perhaps an elf could do the same thing, though it take longer.

"I lived when Queen Aneron crossed the mountains," said Telemoranion. "I saw what she made of my home, what it was before she came."

"It was a wild, Dark country, where your kindred swooped over the ground and hunted humans. Wasn't it?"

"Not only that. But she changed the past with the power of her magic, made everyone forget."

I shook my head. "That is not possible."

"Why not?"

"She would have had to be a Master of Time for that to be possible, and the records of our Circle list all the Masters ever born, whether or not they were trained. She is not among them."

Telemoranion smiled, a little. "There are other kinds of magic. There is elven magic, and divine magic, and Aneron carried both and transformed my country. No one remembers what happened. She shut out certain elements of the Cycle from dominance, though she could not keep them from being born among her people. That is the reason the Scarlet mages feel so neglected; Aneron did not like the Scarlet, as she could not control it, and did not include it in her original sealing to the land. If Rilleta gains power and reverses that sealing, she might just be able to make this a country where no one is born with a talent for Azure. She will not simply ignore it, but destroy it."

"What you are saying sounds fantastic." I knew the history of Queen Aneron's crossing of the Rashars as well as any other Master- one must have a fine sense of history, to answer the demands the Cycle places upon one- and I had never heard of anything like this.

"I do not know why. It is the truth."

"Someone cannot change the past." That was a well-established fact of the Mastery of Time.

Telemoranion said something in a language that might have been Elven, though sweeter and wilder than any Elven I have ever heard. He paused, then, and shook his head.

"Forgive me. I forget that for you, perception and reality are not the same. Aneron did not change the events of the past, but she changed the memories of those who saw them. That is the difference."

"That is not possible."

"It is."

I stared into his eyes and sighed. No, it was not possible, but I wouldn't convince him of that, and I would only waste my time trying. "And you think that Rilleta can do the same thing? Gain power and then change the past so that no one even remembers the Azure?"

"Yes."

"And what do you want me to do about it?"

"I wanted to tell you."

I ground my teeth. That is the exasperating part of talking to elves. They don't have the same priorities as humans. I have met several who were unaware that conversations ever needed to have a conclusion. Neither their lives nor their memories are the same as ours,

and there are some who take up talking again on the same subject days or years or centuries apart, as if they had never paused.

"Thank you for telling me," I said. "But, in truth, I don't think it will come to that. I will kill Rilleta before it comes to that."

"I don't think you can. The force of her god is with her. Or, at least, the force of her faith." Telemoranion smiled as he said that, though I was not sure why. It wasn't very funny.

"It's a danger, but not one I'm worried about," I said shortly, and turned away. If there are going to be allies among the Heretics who might help me, must they speak in sly hints and enigmatic riddles?

Lusirimalata's Commentary

Sly hints and enigmatic riddles would be better than this open blasphemy.

I apologize to my readers who might expect a calm, cool, collected priestess, perhaps watching the antics of blasphemers with a slight smile. But I cannot wear that mask now. Klessa irritates me beyond measure. She plans to kill a good and holy woman because of a personal grudge. She does not serve another god, or another cause, for all her whining about the Cycle. She serves only herself.

How can that not be evil?

At times like these I must sit back, and close my eyes, and remind myself that these are only words on a page. They cannot hurt me. They cannot harm me. They are the records of a History that I am preparing for future generations, and those who read them might wonder and laugh at Klessa's blasphemy, but they would never follow her down the dark path.

I have nothing to worry about.

Yet, simply to soothe my mind and to insure the purity of my readers, I feel that I must inject here another prayer to the Goddess, one that my mother often recited over and over when we walked beneath the Fair One's full orb.

*She is the Mother of oceans and of flowers,
And She is with you in triumph and quiet hours.
If you cannot hear Elle, hear none but yourself,
Close your eyes, and put your heart on the shelf.
Fall deep, deep, within the darkness of soul,
And find Her there, waiting to make you whole.
If you cannot hear Elle, hear none but yourself,
Close your eyes, and put your heart on the shelf.
She is always waiting, despite each wild antic.
But She is patient and loving, not frantic.
If you cannot hear Elle, hear none but yourself,
Close your eyes, and put your heart on the shelf.
She knows we would not ever drift far from Her,
Though dark thoughts of evil and Dark might stir.
If you cannot hear Elle, hear none but yourself,
Close your eyes, and put your heart on the shelf.
She is waiting there, in the trees and the moon.
She is waiting for you to come back to Her soon.
If you cannot hear Elle, hear none but yourself,*

*Close your eyes, and put your heart on the shelf.
And when you are in the Goddess's warm embrace,
Then you will never need seek another place.
If you cannot hear Elle, hear none but yourself,
Close your eyes, and put your heart on the shelf.*

There. The verses have soothed me, brought back memories of childhood, and, I hoped, soothed my readers. May their minds, untainted by Klessa's blasphemy, again seek the path of truth!

And I am glad to say that there are indeed paths of truth that wind out from this place. We rise here from the darkest hours of Klessa's soul to some of the brightest hours of Rilleta's, at least before the end. May you feel the joy that I did when I first read these pages, though it is to be hoped that your tears will not likewise smudge the ink!

A History of Rilleta, High Priestess of Rennon

Chapter 11

Wild and Fair

*"How wild she is, wild and fair,
With the storm in her eyes and the stars in her hair!
How wild she is, wild and sweet,
As she dances in the lightning on flickering feet."*

-Lament of a bard in love with a mizan.

Rilleta clenched her hands on the reins until they bit into her hands and her mount stepped, shaking her head. Then Rilleta realized what she was doing and eased up on her clutch. *No need to punish an innocent horse for something she had nothing to do with.* "You are certain?" she asked, in the quietest voice she could. The scout was upset enough herself; she didn't need to hear Rilleta's voice screaming and causing a commotion.

"Yes, my lady."

Rilleta sighed. "Then we have no choice. I will speak with Queen Memoryrose and— anyone else who might need to know." In truth, she would have liked to speak with the Queen of Ilantra, whose nonsense this was, but she couldn't reach her, and the Queen of Doralissa would have to know.

The scout's relief was palpable. She bowed to Rilleta, and then said, "Yes, my lady.

Thank you, my lady," and turned her horse towards the back of the line again.

Rilleta looked down blankly at her knuckles, and repeated the scout's words slowly aloud to herself, as if that would make it more real. "Ilantra has declared for Elle, and is moving east to join the war against the Heretics."

If the Ilantran army actually got that far into Orlath, they could easily strike at her back. The Ilantran capital city, Mirior, lay almost directly northwest of the castle of Orlath, on the same line that Rilleta's army would shortly swing into following. And if they were riding gryphons or unicorns, they could overtake her even more quickly than she expected.

"Ah, Rennon," she murmured, closing her eyes. "Why would the Ilantran Queen do something like this? She has no love for King Seldon, and Queen Memoryrose assured me that we could depend on her."

At once the answer filled her, burning like the heat that always shone just beneath her skin. The god's voice spoke calmly in her mental ear. *Queen Memoryrose is apt to mistake any cautious willingness to help as a sign that someone else shares her grudge*

against King Seldon. And it is far more likely that the Ilantran Queen, terrified of Twydon as anyone sane would be, only considered it until Twydon approached her with a better offer. In the end, the only ones you can really trust are Heretics, and not those with political motives.

Rilleta nodded, and opened her eyes, resolve shimmering in her like sunlight on water. She would tell Memoryrose the truth, and she didn't care if the Doralissan soldiers left them. Those who were true worshippers of Rennon would stay. In fact, it might make a good test, to announce that she was abandoning Memoryrose and see how many of the Doralissans stayed.

She turned her head—

And Queen Memoryrose was there, riding beside her on that shining horse, smiling very faintly as Rilleta's eyes met hers.

Rilleta could feel herself flush, and then turn pale. She lowered her eyes and said nothing, letting the Queen begin the conversation. It was always best to, when her eyes had that look in them. They weren't smoky, so the mizan blood wasn't actually rising again, but she did look poised halfway between human and chaos-fey. It wasn't a picture conducive to trust, either in the Queen herself or her sanity.

"You were thinking of leaving me, weren't you? You were thinking that you could turn away from this alliance, anytime you want to, and I would nod and ride back to my own Kingdom?"

Rilleta thought about saying something different, about protesting, but she knew that Memoryrose would only respond with scorn. And besides, hadn't that been what she thought? She nodded.

"That's not the way it will be, Rilleta. I do not like King Seldon, and I want him dead."

"Your Majesty, I know that."

"It does not matter by whose hand he falls," said the Queen. "But he must die, he and his daughter both. And then I must sit on the throne, to make sure that Orlath will not threaten Doralissa." Rilleta knew the woman was looking at her, though she didn't dare look up and actually meet her eyes. "You would be a threat to Doralissa if you sat that throne, which is another reason you cannot sit it."

Rilleta looked up in shock. That objection had never come up before. "Your Majesty, I would not make war on Doralissa if you helped us win this war."

Memoryrose only smiled. "I know you," she said, voice trailing away almost to a breeze.

"I know the way you look when you're smiling to yourself in unguarded moments, and I've heard you give the orders to your people to burn Azure mages. You attack and kill those who are threats, and we would be threats to you, wouldn't we? Just as the Azure is, we are something you cannot control. You don't understand Doralissa, any more than you do the mysteries of water, and you would attack us and kill us."

"Never."

"Oh, I think the answer is yes." Memoryrose nodded, as if she had just scored a point in some imaginary conversation with herself. "And that means that I will oppose you on the throne of Orlath with all my power, as greatly as I ever opposed King Seldon or Queen Twydon."

Again Rilleta thought about correcting her on the title, and decided against it. "Your Majesty, what are we to do about Ilantra?"

Memoryrose smiled slightly. "That is something you should let me worry about. I know a few tricks that might work."

"A few tricks? Not fair and honorable war?"

"Did they deal with us fairly and honorably? They pretended to be on our side, and then abandoned us." Memoryrose shook her head. "Besides, I don't know that you can ever call war by those adjectives."

Before Rilleta could draw breath to argue, she was gone, pounding along the line towards her own retinue and calling out in the dialect of southern Doralissa, which was so mixed with Elven that Rilleta couldn't follow it. She bit her lip and turned to look back towards the north and the west, along the trail thick with stirred dust.

If Ilantra comes down on our backs, it will break us. I know it will. My people are confident that we will win, because Rennon is with us, and ultimately with everyone who is true and just and opposes Elle. But they thought the Queen of Ilantra was that way, because we told them she was, and now she has turned against us. What will we do if they come down on us? What will we do if they win?

Rilleta closed her eyes, and again sought answers in the heat shimmering behind her skin. But this time, Rennon did not speak in such a clear voice. She could feel Him there, confident of victory, but silent. But she needed reassurance at the moment, and she opened her eyes and looked about for it.

Her gaze fell on the dust next to the road. Most of it was drifting in the air, of course, and the horses' hooves scuffed new patterns every few moments. But for a moment, there was a pattern there that looked too neat to have been created accidentally, and too wonderful to be the work of even a master mortal artist. Rilleta's gaze fastened on it, and clung.

One part of the pattern was a symbol of the sunburst, the symbol that Rennon's Heretics often used among themselves. But the other part was the crescent moon, the symbol of Elle. It had been a long time since Rilleta had seen them in such close alignment, unless the Heretics were trampling a flag of the priestesses. In fact, she thought the only time she had ever seen them aligned quite like that was when she had torn the badge of Elle from her breast and fastened the sunburst symbol of her true God proudly in its place. What did that mean, to see them lying so close now?

Then the horses' hooves scuffed again, and dust flew up and across the symbols, and Rilleta knew they would be gone when she glanced back, either trampled into nothingness or *made* into nothingness by the very gods who had drawn them. She knew what they meant, however, if she was honest with herself. It took only a few moments of struggling to come up with it.

I have a choice. I always did, of course, because I know Rennon accepts those who love Him, and I know that Elle is always ready to welcome anyone back who turns from the path of evil on her own. But now...I have a choice, Rennon or Elle, and both gods are speaking to me.

Her hands clenched on the reins, and once again the mare tossed her head and snorted in pain. Rilleta forced herself to let go and think about it.

Could I still choose Elle? Is that what those symbols mean?

She was still thinking about it when she heard a clap of wings. Tilting her head back, she saw a flickering, dark creature rise over the army. For a moment it hovered, and then it drifted towards the north. In moments it flew so fast that Rilleta's eyes watered as she tried to follow it.

It blurred and was gone, then, but Rilleta had a hollow feeling in her chest. She had just started to turn her horse when Queen Memoryrose appeared beside her, wild and fair, eyes shining and mouth curved in a very faint smile.

"Things will fall back into place," she said. "Queen Twydon has her own methods of persuasion, but I have mine, and I think Her Majesty of Ilantra will find mine more—well, persuasive."

"What have you done?"

"Ah, Rilleta, such shock on your face! And why? I have her cousin riding in my train. I have merely sent back a reminder of that."

"And what will you do to her cousin if she does not join us again?"

"But of course!"

Rilleta closed her eyes tightly. *The priestesses of Elle never do such things, or even threaten them, but for blasphemy or treason.*

I suppose this could be treason against Rennon.

But...

Lusirimalata's Commentary

How wondrous are the ways of the Goddess! How She will shine a light into the darkest life, and guide the most twisted and rambling path back to Her at last!

The symbol in the dust could have no other author but the Goddess, It was a symbol that would mean nothing to anyone but Rilleta, or at least not as much to anyone but her. Elle saw that she was determined to fling herself into darkness, and reached out a compassionate Hand.

I am almost envious that I have never strayed from the path myself. Though I love Elle and have rejoiced in Her companionship all my life, how joyful must it be to turn back from the Dark through Her direct intervention! How it must shake the heart and reforge the soul! How it must make one into a weapon of the Goddess!

I have seen the result of such conversions, of course; some of the sisters who sing and pray with me in the Temple to this day were once in such deadly danger. I have heard their tales, and seen the shine of Light returned in their eyes. One I knew before she came to Elle, and I can compare my memories of what she was to my sight of what she is, and know just how the Goddess can bless a life.

But I do not know it firsthand.

Of course, I shall be grateful for that, and pray to the Goddess in thanks that She received me when she did. Often those turned back in time speak with envy of my own position, and say they wish they had known the Light and the truth from earliest childhood.

Perhaps it is the lot of mortals to envy each other, and always think the thing we have not experienced is better.

There is wailing in the Temple again. It seems that now the Traitor Prince of Rivendon has been seen in Orlath, running wild through villages, the silver dragon that heralds his coming flying above him. Of course, one must discount such rumors, much like the rumors about him slaying the Queen of Ilantra, until they are proven. There are no silver dragons, to my knowledge. These are probably exaggerated tales of a gray, or thorn, dragon.

The wailing is making it hard to work, however. I will shut myself in this room, and permit entrance to no one save Anassra, who should bring me another restorative draught

from the Queen soon. The last one worked such wonders that I sent Anassra to petition Her Majesty for another, and she graciously agreed to send me one.

I find that I look forward to it. My eyesight seems to waver with the candle now. I fear that I may lose it very soon, though I have barely seen my second decade. Too many years of toiling over papers, and squinting at small letters. Klessa's handwriting, in particular, is too damnably crabbed.

And thus, I think I shall not present another section of her journals for now. I shall turn back to Rilleta and show the beginning of Elle's tender Hand hovering over her. I feel the Goddess rise in me when I proclaim this decision in prayer, and I am sure that She agrees with me.

A History of Rilleta, High Priestess of Rennon

Chapter 12

Wondering and Dreaming

"It is true that there is no last chance from the gods, that the last chance must come in one's own heart and never anywhere else. But too often mortals decide against Elle, and condemn themselves to everlasting darkness. It is not Her hand; it is not Her will. But they choose, and what can She do but grieve and weep their choice?"

-Almona of the Ilantran Temple.

"No, see, you hold it like this..."

Rilleta stood and watched the newly red-robed priestess bend over the sunburst symbol. Lyissa, standing above her, nodded and smiled proudly. Rilleta had to close her eyes before the force and brilliance of that smile.

I do not want to ask her to do this. God knows that I don't. But what choice do any of us have?

"Lyissa," she said.

The young woman turned and saw her. Rilleta felt a little embarrassed by the strength of the smile that flashed across her face, and the way that Lyissa hurried towards her and would have cast herself down at her feet if Rilleta hadn't stopped her. *Rennon, what is wrong with me? Usually, I can accept a little hero-worship as my due. But today, I do not want it.*

"Lyissa, would you be willing to do something for me?" she asked.

"Of course, my lady. Anything."

Rilleta flushed at the heat in her gaze. Well, perhaps there was some hero-worship that crossed the boundaries, after all. "I would like you to speak with Klessa."

Lyissa's smile flickered. Rilleta was almost sure she had expected anything but that. Sun, she had been expecting to say anything but that before the words emerged from her mouth. She had come here convinced that she wouldn't ask Lyissa's help in this way, that she would just propose—

"My lady, can't you speak to her yourself?"

Rilleta jerked her eyes up, restored by the defiance. *I think I am at my best when an enemy is challenging me.* "She would not speak to me. She would to you. She would listen to the message you bear, and she would not laugh."

"And what is the message that I am to bear, my lady?" Lyissa's voice was more respectful, now, but it had still a smoldering tone of resentment in it that Rilleta didn't

like. She would have to be more careful how she spoke to the young woman from now on. It seemed that Lyissa and Klessa had had an argument, or perhaps a slender thread of loyalty still bound Lyissa to the Star Circle.

"I want to ask her if she would cooperate with me in a move to unseat Queen Memoryrose."

Rilleta found the blank look Lyissa gave her actually reassuring. The girl had no idea of what political moves scrambled and slid behind the united surface. That was good. It meant she was more likely to bear the message without asking the meaning of it.

"My lady, do you mean to make yourself the Queen of Doralissa?"

And those words restored Rilleta's ease completely. *She has this delicate naïveté that is more precious than all the sunlight in a day.* "No. But Queen Memoryrose would sit on the Orlathian throne if she could, and I mean to keep that from happening. She would prevent the common people from worshipping Rennon as so many of them secretly long to do."

The fire glowed in Lyissa's eyes and cheeks again. "I understand, my lady. I will bear the message."

"Thank you."

Rilleta turned away as Lyissa left, relieved that it had gone so well, and reassuring herself it wasn't cowardly to send the younger woman with a message. If she hadn't asked Klessa indirectly, she would have had to approach her directly, and the Master of the Nine Wonders would never have listened to her.

No, this was better.

Rilleta clenched her hands, and bowed her head, trying to reassure herself that her gaze was focused on the setting sun, and not the moon that hung not so far away. The chanting of the sunset prayers to Rennon helped settle her, and soon she was able to join in again, her voice rising and falling as strongly as before.

I will never again serve Elle. I have put Her behind me, and the service that I abhorred. I have chosen the God of my heart, and never again will I serve any other.

"You wanted to see me?"

Rilleta turned, losing her place in the prayer. Of course, that was probably at least partially Klessa's intention. "I wanted to speak to you, yes, but later, not when I am in the middle of praying to my God," she said fiercely.

Klessa laughed, and caused some of the other priestesses to look at her sternly. "You sent a message by coward's post," she said. "I thought that I should at least return it with some courage."

Rilleta forced her boiling anger back behind the walls. They had no time for this now, especially as Queen Memoryrose had already sent the message about her cousin to the Queen of Ilantra. "How much do you know of the politics behind the rebellion?"

"Enough to know that you are a hypocrite, who would only replace Elle's rule with something as foul."

Rilleta held her temper, and Klessa's gaze. It was possible to get used to the woman's directness, as long as one didn't look too far away from her for too long. "We want to achieve noble goals, and for that we need your help. Queen Memoryrose is planning something that—"

"*Silde!*"

The cry turned Rilleta around. She didn't know the language, but she knew the voice. It was the Master of Metal's, and he was staring to the south, almost as calmly as though he had never given that odd cry.

Rilleta followed his gaze, and cursed when she saw a golden, glittering troop of elves walking towards them. It was hard to fight elves in the best of times, and her people hadn't prepared this time. They would be overwhelmed by the elves' beauty and goodness, perhaps even charmed into agreeing with them. "We must finish this conversation later, Klessa."

"Yes."

There was such an odd tone in her voice that Rilleta looked at her uncertainly. Klessa ignored her, her eyes fixed on the approaching Light elves as if they had done her some personal harm. She said something softly under her breath that Rilleta didn't catch, and then took a step forward. Rilleta thought she added an extra flutter to her movements, so that her green robes breezed around her more than necessary.

One of the elves turned her head and saw Klessa. She said something in one of the bell-like voices that always made Rilleta's eyes fill with tears, and then turned and trotted towards them. Of course, it was an elven trot, and thus more like the light, airy pace of a butterfly. It could only be called walking at all in the same kind sense that would let one compare a horse's gallop to a unicorn's.

"You would speak with us?" asked the elf, in the elegantly accented Orlathian that Rilleta had always wanted to imitate and never could. In fact, this elfwoman was everything she had ever wanted to be and never could: a being of liquid gold, sunlight hair tumbling behind her delicately pointed ears, amber eyes kindly fixed on Klessa's face as if she really still hoped to redeem her.

Klessa's voice sounded like a donkey's bray next to the voice of the elf, and that as well as the words she said snapped Rilleta out of her dreamy mood. "Yes, I would. If you use elven magic here, know I am prepared to defend the Cycle."

Rilleta stared at the woman, then looked back at the elf. She still wore the same kind and pleasant expression as before.

"You cannot stop us," she said.

"I can."

"If you serve the Light, you should not wish to stop us."

"I serve the Cycle." Klessa clenched her hands in front of her, and Rilleta thought she saw a flicker of blue play around her fingers, as though the madwoman were calling on Azure. She drew back in revulsion, but Klessa gave her not a glance. "And not the Light, and not the Dark, and not anything else that you might want me to serve so that you could do what you came to do more easily."

"Master of the Nine Wonders. You are a Master of the Star Circle?"

"I am."

The elfwoman nodded. "Then you could never understand." Her voice was birdsong in a dream, and Rilleta wanted to fall down and worship her. Only Rennon's heat under her skin kept her from doing it. "We have come to deal with one of our renegade kin, an elf of the Dark who should long ago have been banished to Dezeywandu, not you. We will do nothing that harms the Cycle."

"I can feel you tugging and pulling on all the elements," said Klessa calmly. "There are too many people here. Leave, or diminish your number until only one remains. Then you won't pull on the Cycle as much."

"What are you talking about?" Rilleta asked.

"Something you wouldn't understand," said Klessa, and moved her hands in one of those odd patterns in front of her. Rilleta could feel a shifting and surging in the Cycle, in the Destiny, and thought a hand plucked on the conduit that bound her to the Scarlet for a moment. She twanged like a bowstring, and then Klessa lowered her hands again and shook her head at the elfwoman. "Go."

The elfwoman stared at them with open shock on her face. Whatever that was, she hadn't expected it, Rilleta thought, and felt queasy again. *The elves are the highest Light. Does this mean, if Klessa turns against them, that she turns against the Light?*

"Klessa," she said, voice low and tight.

At the same moment, the elfwoman said, the lines of her face tugged tight, "My kind are not evil. We are perfectly within our rights to come and claim Telemoranion. He would serve the Dark if he could. He did not take in the redemption that the glorious Queen Aneron offered."

"Of course I did not."

Rilleta started badly. Telemoranion stood beside them now, and he was looking at the elfwoman with a more enigmatic expression than anything Rilleta had ever seen one of the elves of the Light achieve. *I should have known he is Dark. He is so different, and he can change his skin color...*

Why did I not know?

"All of you have forgotten how it was," said Telemoranion quietly. "Even those I might have hoped would remember, or always know. And I created my toys because I thought they might redress the balance. I see now that they will not." He turned his head to the sky, and Rilleta followed his gaze, seeing there the dragon circling, the light flashing from its coppery wings. "My kin will not help me; they want only to reclaim me. And the Heretics would be no better than the priestesses." He shook his head. "I suppose I should know better than to trust humans. I only knew two of them that were ever worth anything." The tiredness in his voice was weighty, and, Rilleta thought, very human.

"Are you abandoning us?" she asked.

He gave her a blank look. "I am departing." And then he turned and walked away while she was still trying to think of something to say. Her mind was as blank as his face as she watched the dragon wheel after him, and then heard the trotting as the elephant and unicorn followed.

For no real reason, she turned and looked up at the moon again, ignoring even the confused elves standing next to her.

Would this have happened, had I stayed in the Temple of Elle?

Lusirimonalata's Commentary

And thus the Goddess works in our souls!

It is not up to Her to save us by clasping Her Hand over our hearts, though of course She sometimes chooses that method. Some of the ways that She intervened in the lives of other Rennon Heretics are cases in point. But She can show Her symbols as well, and

hope that those who are lost will find the path home by following the light of Her moon, or listening to the murmur of Her ocean.

Beautiful, and wild, and holy, and honored!

I must put down the quill for now. My hands are shaking, and my eyesight is burning, though that may be excess of tears. Luckily, the next section of Klessa's Journals is cut and excised, and I need only bind that in place and then lie down to sleep. Anassra promised me that she would take care of bringing in new sand and ink and cutting new pens for the morning.

I would curl up on my cot and sleep, but the wailing outside has not ceased yet. It may not cease for hours. I suppose that is cause for some celebration, as it shows my sisters are vigilant against the Traitor Prince, but still, it makes for hard sleeping hours. I will close my eyes and pray until it stops, then.

For the night, farewell.

The Journals of Klessa of the Nine Wonders

26 Greenborn, 106 OR

My hands are shaking so that I may hardly clutch the quill, and my whole being burns as if with cold. Of course, there is no element of cold, and so I cannot touch it...

No, no, I forgot. Ironic, when I am waiting this journal in an attempt to remember. It would be best to forget what happened, but how can I forget it? It has happened, and it will define the rest of my life.

Best to begin, perhaps. But let me lie the quill aside and then begin again when I am rested.

Ah, Elle, how can I speak so? I know that I will never be rested enough. There is a reason that my whole being burns, and why the others look towards me with regret and pity and indifference.

Best to speak now.

I watched as Telemoranion walked away, and knew that I had to follow him. He might be able to explain why his kin had come after him, if anyone could. I had never heard of the Light elves hunting one of their own kind, no matter how far estranged from them. Even the Dark elves of Dezeywandu were shut in their prison and then left alone. There was not this hunting, this warfare, this anger that I could see burning in the sullen amber eyes of the elfwoman facing me.

I sometimes wonder at no one else seeing through elves. Of course, when I was at the Court of King Seldon, only I and one other there were not enchanted by their every movement. I believe it has to do with being born to more than one element. Elves are welcome in the Star Circle, or have been, but I have never seen a Master show one shred the reverence to them that nobles in the Court did.

And, of course, that is no surprise, given that elves tug so strongly on the Cycle. They can use Destiny, and that is so twined with the Cycle that it pulls the elements out of alignment. The very enthrallment they practice on most humans pulls on those elements. I suppose with Masters, it balances out among all the magic they can command.

Why am I writing this? This is simple information that any beginning student or Master would know.

Because I want to put off writing what really happened, of course.

Naughty Klessa. Write what really happened, the heart of the evening.

I turned away from the elves, since my pattern had helped to break their enthrallment of everyone in sight, and hurried after Telemoranion. He walked in a straight line, making no attempt to disguise his course. Of course, I don't think it really occurred to him that anyone might follow. Elves don't have the same concerns as humans, and I am beginning to believe that Telemoranion doesn't have the same concerns even as any of them. What he revealed about himself...

But that in its proper place. I suppose in some part of my mind, I want to exhaust myself, and so I won't have to write this tonight.

No such luck. I am apparently going to have to dedicate myself to a new duty.

I walked beside Telemoranion soon enough, and said, "What do the elves want with you?"

"To drag me back to the Elfwood," said Telemoranion. "I suppose they think that if they can keep me among them long enough, I might accept this 'redemption' that Queen Aneron offered."

"Why didn't you?"

He didn't answer, and a moment later I heard footsteps behind us, which I thought might explain it. I turned, expecting to see—well, almost anyone, really. Ever since Lyissa had come to me earlier, with a message that filled me with scorn for Rilleta and aching yearning to see that worshipful look quit Lyissa's eyes, I had expected anything.

But it was Glangon who stood there, eyeing me as if he were not quite sure he would be welcome.

"Why are you here?" I asked.

"Why are you?" he countered.

"I followed him."

"I am also following him."

That got us absolutely nowhere. I clenched my hands in frustration, and thought about sucking his body dry of water. But that would probably be raising a hand against whatever power he served, and not serving the Cycle.

"You are of the Dark, aren't you?" I asked.

He smiled mockingly at me. "As much as you are of the Light."

I would have answered, but Telemoranion said, "My kin are coming."

I turned my head and saw the elves drifting, aglimmer with subtle golden flame, across the grasses towards us.

"And what will they do?" I asked.

"Take me, and probably kill the both of you," said Telemoranion calmly enough, not deigning to look at either of us. Of course, I had seen many people who had the same problem looking at any human when elves were present. "They won't like the fact that you tried to stop them, and they won't like the fact that you are of the Dark." Some trick of his voice made it perfectly clear whom he was referring to with each title, though he didn't turn his head to look at either one of us.

Of course, we knew who we were, as well. That helped.

"I don't want to slay elves," I said. "It would reflect badly on the Star Circle. But is there anything we can do but stand here and wait for them?" I had seen a few escaped criminals captured by elves and brought into the torture pits beneath the Temple of Elle. They were the worst of all, somehow, with their gazes fixed on nothing and their hands and feet

slowly flapping back and forth, as if stirred by wind that I could not feel. They always spoke the same words in clear, pleading voices, asking to go back to the Elfwood and feel the touch of elven hands again.

"Oh, yes," said Telemoranion. "But I would not go with just the two of you at my side."

He gestured to the side, and I turned, seeing the great metallic elephant very close to us.

"I must create a path back to my home for my toys, and it will take some time."

"How much time?"

"An hour."

I hesitated and glanced at Glangon. "Do you think that you can hold the elves off that long? I doubt that you care about killing elves of the Light."

Glangon rolled his eyes at me. "Why should I care about holding off elves of the Light, either? I followed Telemoranion to speak with him, but I have no intention of following him to his home."

"Why do you stay with the Heretics?"

"Because it affords me a way to strike at them, and be close to the center of power if they do achieve it, as they seem to think they will do," said Glangon calmly.

"You disguise yourself as minor Rivendonian royalty in Memoryrose's train, don't you?"

"What of it?"

"Did you know there is division between Rilleta and Memoryrose? I think that you might not be around to see the victory you want so much, nor influence it, if you really stay with Memoryrose. And your trying to integrate yourself into Rilleta's people wouldn't work. I think you'd be even worse at feigning worship of Rennon than I am."

He smiled slightly at that, as if I had paid him a compliment. I suppose in some strange way, I had. "I hadn't known that." He stared at Telemoranion for a moment, then shrugged his shoulders. "There are snakes wherever I go, and there is Dark everywhere, among all the worlds," he said. "I will find a way to serve my friends and my lords and ladies wherever I am."

"Then you will hold off the elves of the Light for an hour?"

"What will you be doing?"

"Something I should have done long since," I said grimly. "Lyissa will never give up the worship of Rennon, not willingly. I have to take her to a place where I can force the training she needs down her throat, so that she doesn't simply rip herself and the world to shreds with her magic. I'm at an end of reason. And this world of Telemoranion's might be the place."

Glangon nodded slowly, his silver eyes intense. "But you will owe me a favor for doing this for you."

"Of course."

He turned and held up his arms without waiting for further talk, emitting a hiss that I couldn't have imitated with a lifetime's practice. Of course, I suppose he doesn't have to practice; it comes naturally to him. The grasses writhed and danced at his feet, and snakes flowed out of them. I saw the flash of jewelsnake scales on his arm, and the huge shapes of the *cleima* cobras near his ankles. They reared up in front of the elves, and for a moment I saw the elves halt.

Then one of them near the back of the group began to sing. I grimaced and began to run, knowing that elven singing could sometimes send humans crumpling to their knees in the sheer beauty of it. I didn't think Telemoranion would be affected, and there was hope that

Glangon's unusual element would guard him just as my multiple elements did, but I couldn't know that for sure.

I had to find Lyissa.

I darted through red-robed priestesses and more ordinary Heretics, most of whom stared after me. I knew I was drawing attention, and I couldn't help it. Suddenly, as though a prophecy were about to come true, my heart had begun to sing in my ears. I knew of course it couldn't be anything so important, since the last war with the Dark had ended only five years ago and it is always the wars with the Dark that see the great prophecies come true, but the feeling was still there.

Why did I not listen to it?

I slipped through another cluster of red robes, and suddenly saw Lyissa ahead of me. She blinked at me, and then let the hand of the priestess she was holding slip out of hers. Her eyes were fixed on mine, and in them was all the old intensity. I think she knew, at that moment, even before I spoke the words.

"Lyissa, come with me."

"No."

"You must." I tried to soften my voice, but she stood there before me with eyes as hard as a bar of Metal and a face cruelly etched with lines I hadn't noticed before. My voice sharpened in response. "You know that you're acting against all the dictates of the Star Circle by staying here?"

"I don't care about that anymore."

"Do you care about the world suffering damage from your uncontrolled use of the elements you were born with?"

For a moment, she wavered, and I thought her eyes might have dropped towards the ground and I would have won. But she looked back up and repeated what she thought was the truth, squawking like a parrot. "Rennon wouldn't ever let that happen. Any use of the elements is safe. He would never let that happen."

Lyissa, my Lyissa. If I were to open your skull, would I say a brain that once feasted on the truths of magic, or would I see a red robe stitched with the sunburst symbol?

"He might," I said. "I've felt it almost happen often enough, just from the Heretics using their elements. Come with me, Lyissa, and I promise that I won't mention this ever again."

As soon as her back stiffened and her eyes glowed at me, I realized I had said something wrong. But I still don't really know what it was. She hadn't gotten angry at me before.

Why now?

"You think you have the right to tell me what to do?" she asked.

"Yes."

She gaped at me, and so did the priestess who stood beside her. "How dare you?" the woman began to splutter, or some variation on it, but Lyissa interrupted her and charged into the gap.

"How dare you?" Of course. Those seem to be the first words out of the mouth of any human in these situations. "You aren't my mother, and you aren't my leader. You aren't the Lady Rilleta. You cannot give me an order and expect me to obey."

"I thought I was your friend and mentor, Lyissa."

"You forced me into the magic. I never wanted it."

"That part wasn't a choice." I was aware that time was running away. Perhaps Telemoranion had opened his portal and gone through. It might take him less time than he thought, and I doubted he would wait for me. Yet at the same time, the words flowed from my mouth. "It would have come out whether you wanted it or not, unless somehow you managed to use only Scarlet and not the others. And even then, it could have destroyed you at any time. That's what the elements do when they're ignored. For Elle's sake, Lyissa! Stop hiding your eyes behind your hand and pretending that the things you don't want to see will go away!"

"Don't swear by Elle." She raised her hand, and I felt her pull strongly on the Scarlet, so strongly that a gate might have opened there. I moved my hands in Selion's Pattern and sent some of the energy to the Metal, which wasn't very strong in this part of the world, but she drew more and more.

"Lyissa, damn it!"

"Swear by Rennon."

"How can you be so stubborn? You are a Master of Four Wonders, and you have to learn how to *master* them, not ignore them because you were prefer to be a Scarlet mage—"

"I *am* a Scarlet mage."

"You aren't," I said, and I don't think that I could have stopped myself if someone held a sword to my throat. "You're a spoiled little girl."

She threw the Scarlet at me.

I called up another Pattern and stopped it. And Lyissa stood there in the wake of it, eyes full of a hectic glitter.

"I am going to stay with Rilleta and the Heresy," she said. "And you can't stop me."

Fire might have filled my own mind then. I am not sure. I am not sure what happened, why it happened, what I was thinking...

No; only those last two are true. I know what happened, and perhaps I should concentrate on telling that to whoever might be listening, and not why, since I do not know the why. I turned to the north, where I had last seen Rilleta, and called to the Azure with everything in my power. I would thin her blood. I would dehydrate her and make her fall into a withered husk.

I felt the shiver in myself, quickly growing into ripping pain, into burning cold. I sank to my knees, and then...

And then my connections to the Cycle vanished.