

A History of Rilleta, High Priestess of Rennon

Chapter 19

Like Fire From the God

"When all else is lost, set yourself on your feet and trust in Rennon to protect you. Whatever He chooses to do, whether to protect you or to let you die in battle, you will know that it is right, and that you are fighting for Him."

-Advice said to come from the prophetess Alaria.

And the God came to her.

Rilleta felt the beginning of an enormous upswell of power, and suddenly the world around her was clad in wavering gold and red flames. She could see them burning everywhere, in the heart of the earth and the hearts of the soldiers facing her. She blinked and touched her head. She had heard of this happening, but only to Scarlet mages wavering on the edge of exhaustion.

Or on the edge of a possession by the God.

She tossed her head back eagerly, and cried out as the flame surrounded her. Abruptly she couldn't see the world anymore. She was afloat in a world of fire. Flames filled her lungs instead of air, and she breathed them as easily. She knew without knowing how she knew that there wasn't a drop of water anywhere in this world.

It was perfection.

She stretched out her arms, and then blinked as the flames fled from before her eyes and left her seeing her own world again. The soldiers before her burst apart into fragments of hot bone and falls of drifting ash.

Rilleta laughed, and turned her head to face the next soldiers who approached her. They skidded to a stop when they saw the look in her eyes, and some of them actually began to retreat.

Rilleta didn't give them the chance. She gestured, thinking she knew now what the God must feel when He looked down on the world and chose who would die, and they burned. Some of them went on burning long past the point where they should have continued, sinking to the ground and writhing in their dying agonies.

Rilleta smiled and called to her people. "Open to the God! Let Him flow through you! We shall soon turn them back!"

She wasn't sure how many Heretics were left, but pillars of fire from the left and right proved that some had heard her, at least. She laughed again as their opponents started to shriek and stumble away, and once again she walked forward with the confidence that had led her to begin this charge in the first place. *Can anything hold back the God's Chosen?*

As if in answer to that question, a flash of blue stirred in the corner of her vision. Rilleta turned her head, thinking the Princess must have summoned Azure mages to the battle, though of course she would be too cowardly to come forth herself.

No, it was not an Azure mage, or at least not a human one. A blue dragon bore down on the battle, jaws wide, wings beating so hard that Rilleta was almost sure it would fly over them before it could breathe.

No such fortune, though. The dragon seemed to cough as it passed overhead, and then a wall of water drenched them all.

Rilleta coughed as the flames went out. She called them up at once, of course, but the dragon did another pass, and quenched her thoroughly. Rilleta snarled in irritation. There was so much Azure elemental magic in the air at the moment that she didn't think she could call on Scarlet, even through the God.

She glared at the dragon, which was now hovering. *Why did Twydon ally with a dragon? I wouldn't think that she'd want to, given how many of the Light think that dragons are of the Dark.* They weren't, as she knew very well, but she didn't trust them either. Those who hung between the Dark and Light and insisted it was a proper place provoked her rage. One was of the Dark or Light, and that did not change when moving from goddess to god.

The dragon abruptly shimmered. Rilleta cheered even as she blinked, thinking that perhaps someone had managed to get the flames started again and was attacking the dragon.

Then her mouth fell open as the dragon flowed from a dragon into a delicate winged creature she could barely see at this distance. The creature hovered there a moment longer, then said in a clear, piercing voice Rilleta had no doubt everyone on the battlefield could hear as well as she could:

"Do not use such magic again. You are almost ripping holes in the elemental worlds, which is something that would endanger all lives in Orlath. We shall keep a guard, but we may not be able to prevent a sudden inferno. Take heed."

Then she flew up and out of sight.

Rilleta frowned. *I want to say that was a sylph...but surely they all died or fled long ago, didn't they? And why would an Azure dragon change into a sylph, anyway?*

She shook her head and turned back to the battle. The dragon's sudden appearance had startled Twydon's people as much as hers, but they, too, blinked and refocused their attention. Rilleta saw some of them bringing forth a large catapult, probably to fling stones or even water weapons at the Heretics.

The problem was, the catapult was made of wood.

Rilleta gestured casually, and the wood burst into flames. The catapult's handlers fled. Rilleta took a step forward, her confidence returning yet again. *Strange things can happen all they like. All the dragons in the world can turn into sylphs, for all I care. But we will win this battle.*

Things had certainly changed in the space of a few moments. Twydon's people were slipping in the mud, struggling to recover their magic, and in a few cases throwing away their weapons and running full-tilt towards the castle. Rilleta laughed and shouted encouragement to the Heretics she saw around her. She could tell them by their red robes. "We have spilled little blood so far, and our robes are in want of new dye. Shall we go forward?"

They shouted back to her with a will, and slogged through the mud towards the castle with the air of victors already. Rilleta smiled for love of them, and spread her hands, once again calling on the power of the God. She would open as wide a conduit to the Scarlet as she could, and then—

A breath of wind blew past her face. Rilleta paused, looking into the sky. Had the wind blown the clouds away at last?

No. But something was stirring in the clouds that obscured the fine blue of the sky, making them boil and seethe. Rilleta swallowed. She could almost, but not quite, feel the powerful stirrings of a human mind. But what elemental magic it was tuned to, she could not say.

"Keep advancing!" she shouted to the Heretics who had stopped on seeing her stare into the sky. "The throne is calling our names, and so, too, are the fine wines in the cellars of the castle!"

They heard her, and cheered, and pressed forward.

And then the wind came for them.

Rilleta shuddered as a sudden howling hostility filled the world. The wind bore from the clouds and shoved her face against the earth. She sucked in a lungful of mud, coughed, and scrambled up, hacking.

Then it was as if all the air was gone from her lungs.

Rilleta clawed at her throat, feeling her face turn blue, and knowing what had happened. Princess Twydon's element was wind. She must be riding the Gust, taming and turning it to her will. Or perhaps she was even out here herself, her body part of the air, laughing at Rilleta as she took all the fresh air away from her...

And then the pain was gone, and Rilleta sagged to the ground, gasping. *The God's intervention, or the Princess's mercy*, she thought as she blinked away the darkness. *And I know which one I trust to more.*

She looked around, and saw the pale faces of her Heretics. Some of them were howling like mad things and pointing towards the castle. Rilleta looked, thinking she was prepared to see anything, from another dragon to the Princess Twydon coming forth.

It was neither, but a series of soldiers. They marched carefully through the mud and wake of the rain, but they were coming nonetheless. Rilleta sighed, and spoke the word that she knew she must, cursing the luck. *We haven't lost the battle yet, but, oh my Lord, You test us as not even smiths test the blade on the anvil.*

"Retreat!"

The other Heretics took up the cry and passed it along. Rilleta stood, and looked around for shelter. They could not go very far, battered as they were, slipping in the mud, and with the wind hovering above them and the army advancing upon them.

Her gaze fixed on the ridge they had charged over, what seemed so long ago. Somehow she had shifted in the battle so that it was now to the south and west of her. And she remembered the tunnels she had seen, dark tunnels like the ones in the Plains that had sheltered the Heretics for so long.

"To the tunnels!" she shouted. They heard her, and repeated, and came staggering after her as she pressed towards them.

Rilleta kept her eyes fixed on the mud most of the way, not wanting to slip, but she did catch her foot on one obstacle and go sprawling. She spat out mud and turned, wondering if it was something useful.

It was Terissa, buried so deeply in mud that even her red robe had turned gray, almost the color of an Elle priestess's again. Rilleta might have taken that even so, had it not been soaked. Her own was scarcely dry now, but still less caked than this one.

Rilleta bowed her head for a moment, and then ran on. *Forgive me for not holding a longer mourning, my sister, my Lord. But I think that I must save my own life, and the lives of my people. When I hold the castle of Orlath and stand in the hall with the crown of Queen on my head, then I can mourn properly for Terissa.*

She slipped again, and then again, before she got to the tunnels, and was so coated with mud in the first one she pressed into that she thought she could almost go back out, lie down, and be one with the dead. The charging soldiers—well, not so much charging as picking their way carefully through the morass that this part of the Plains had suddenly become—would never notice her.

But the thought passed across her mind with lightning-swiftness, only to be recognized for what it was and rejected. *I could never do such a thing. It would be too much like sneaking away and trying to raise a rebellion afterwards, and there's no need for that. I know that we're going to win this one. Rennon told me so.*

She leaned back against the wall of the simple little den, and watched her people stagger in around her. The meager shelters wouldn't hide them for long. The soldiers could track them by sight, and their footprints in the sucking mud, and for all she knew, they might have helped to build these dens and thus know all about them.

But that didn't matter. She closed her eyes and fell into prayer, reaching out for the God, knowing He would be with her but hoping to hear an answer.

Rennon, we have done all that You asked, and more. When will come the reward? Surely You will not let Your chosen people perish here, in the rain and the mud and the harsh emptiness?

She felt a tingle of Fire move through her, and smiled, opening her eyes and fixing them on the soldiers.

It does not even matter if I do not see the end. So long as I am sure that someone will, and take the crown from Twydon and Seldon, and rule Orlath the way it was meant to be ruled.

Lusirimalata's Commentary

Such courage! Such purity of faith! These, at least, cannot be questioned, and I think that the desire to read of them once more was part of what motivated me to compile this History and add my commentaries. Rilleta had all the virtues needed to make a good Queen: steadfastness in her cause, love for her people, faith, and an eye on truth. It is such a pity that was born outside of the royal family, and Destined for something lesser.

If one can call teaching the deepest truths about blasphemy and the consequences of choosing the wrong god lesser. I do not really think one can. Rilleta was never meant to rule Orlath, but she can rule our hearts, and in so doing take us into the heart of a blasphemer and makes us learn to understand her from the inside. It is of the utmost importance in converting those who come to us broken and repentant. We must

understand what drove them to seek comfort in the embrace of another divine power, and then make them understand that true comfort can only be found in Elle.

So the Lady Teridona has made an example to me. She told me that once she wanted faith, but that she has since found it, and she has never been happier. She speaks constantly of the Goddess and what She wills. It is wonderfully refreshing to see someone who is Rivendonian, of the same kin as the Traitor Prince, yet speaks sanely and lovingly of Elle. Sometimes I think the whole country is mad and worships the strange gods that are really demons, and then someone like Teridona comes along and changes my mind.

With all that behind me, I am reluctant to turn from Rilleta's History to the Journals of Klessa. But Anassra brought a note from the Queen this morning. She wants to make sure that Rilleta's History does not take up too much time. She wants me to make sure that I also place some sections from Klessa's Journals between them.

I will do so, but only because I trust so deeply in the goodness of our Queen. Such an interest could lead to blasphemy in lesser mortals, but never in her. I know that, and yet I am still uneasy.

Such are the powers of demon gods.

The Journals of Klessa of the Nine Wonders

29 Greenborn, 106 OR

At least I know the date now. I made a point of asking before Glangon and I left the Heretics to ride to Ozue.

I am not sure what it means, that we are the only two going. Oh, of course, there are a few scouts with us, to ride ahead and look for danger. They are keen-eyed Doralissan archers, the best kind of scout to have. But there is no detachment of soldiers, no force that might be expected to beat the city into submission. Perhaps they expect Ozue to submit to whatever Queen Memoryrose says. I don't think so.

I think it has more to do with the dragon that Telemoranion gave to Glangon, the dragon I saw him stroking this morning. He whispered into the beast's frilled ear, and it lifted and streaked away to the north. That is not the direction of Ozue. It is the direction of Rivendon, but I don't think that Glangon merely sent the dragon home as a gift for his parents.

I think it far more likely that the Heretics and the others are relying on Glangon's magic and my persuasive powers. But they don't seem much concerned about what will happen if we fail.

That must mean they don't expect us to fail.

If one of us doesn't do what she is supposed to do, then the other will.

I saw the walls of Ozue again this evening. Granted, it was only a flash, a glimpse of the white stone flashing in the intense mingled light of moon and sun, but it was better than nothing.

And I am going home to destroy the Star Circle.

I do not want to think about it.

Bastard.

Glangon came to me a few moments ago, and said, with a smug tone in his voice that I distrusted at once, "It occurs to me that you have not yet received any proof of my good faith."

"I don't think that you have any," I said. "The wounds that will open again, the alliance against Rilleta, the invisible bounds I might press against at any moment—none of those is a proof of it."

"But you have made a bargain with us, and you have every right to expect some sort of return." Glangon gestured, and I blinked as the air seemed to warp and shimmer. When it cleared, I saw a horse standing there I had not seen before. It had been cloaked in illusion until now, I thought.

Bound to the saddle was Lyissa.

I glared at Glangon. He grinned. "Yes. I brought her with us when we rode from camp, but concealed. I couldn't be sure how you would react to finding out, so I put off the moment for a little while." By now, he was looking at me almost tenderly, as though he thought I might burst into tears or stamp my foot or do something else stupid. "You will probably find her not much changed, Klessa."

"I don't want her to change."

"But you want to have a chance to win her heart back, don't you?" Glangon's grin had turned into a regretful smile. For a moment, his eyes looked past me. "I made a mistake once, you know, that cost me the woman I would have loved to marry. And I want to make sure that you at least know the challenges of what you're getting into. My betrothed

was a lot like Lyissa. She had given her heart to a cause, and couldn't understand why I mocked her devotion and wanted her back."

"Lyissa knows my objections," I said. "She doesn't want to give in to them, but she knows them." I glanced at her, just a quick look, since at the moment I couldn't permit myself more. She met my eyes with a steady glare.

"But what matters most to her is the choice of her own heart," said Glangon. "Her mind might know what you mean. But her emotions don't. She'll be furious at you for not choosing to follow her." His eyes had that distant look again.

"Perhaps your betrothed was like that," I said. "But Lyissa isn't. Give me some time alone with her."

"As you will."

Glangon turned and paced away, out of earshot. I watched him until I was sure that he was going to join the scouts at their fire, and then turned and went to Lyissa. The first order was unbinding her ankles and arms.

This proved difficult when she struck out at me, flailing awkwardly after so many hours on the horse, but flailing nonetheless. Her muscles trembled with cramp. I caught her and laid her gently on the ground.

"Lyissa, Lyissa, don't you know me?" I asked, smoothing her hair back from her forehead. It was possible that she didn't recognize me; I had seen some of the Heretics staring, and suspected that the loss of the magic and my swearing to the Dark had singled me out.

"Of course I know you," she spat as I took out the gag. "But I don't understand why you're denying me the right to live as I want, Klessa."

"The same reason I always did, Lyissa."

"My gifts are nothing compared to yours," she said, and then paused. Her mouth moved in a smile that made her lips crack and bleed. "Or should I say, what your gifts used to be."

I looked at her in silence, and after a moment she flushed and lowered her eyes. I turned away from her. "Do you want something to drink? Eat? What is your most urgent need?"

"I need to relieve myself."

"Then do so."

Only silence answered me, and I turned around, to see her sitting up. Her body still shook slightly with cramp. Her gaze was fixed firmly on the ground. "I don't want to do it here," she said. "Not in the sight of the scouts."

I blinked. Such modesty was common among the villages like the one where Lyissa's mother had borne her, but it wasn't common among the Star Circle. I thought I had trained her out of that at last. "They're far enough away that I doubt they'll see."

"I need shelter!"

I gestured around me with a wide motion of my arm. Save for our horses, there wasn't shelter for miles. Of course, she could go into the shelter of the grass if she really wanted to, but the chances of her finding her way back out again weren't very good. "Do you want me to build one out of air?"

Lyissa turned her face from me. "I don't want you to be involved at all, but it seems as if you're going to be."

"Of course," I said. "Lyissa, I've helped you relieve yourself when you were sick often enough. How is this different?"

"I was never comfortable with that," she said tightly. "I never liked it. I only submitted to it because I had to. But now I have a choice, and you're just being difficult."

I had been talking to her while I ripped handfuls of meat from the large chunk of dried beef that Glangon and I had with us, but now I stopped and stared at her. "You never liked it? Then why didn't you object?"

"It seemed—the right thing to do," said Lyissa, and she still wasn't looking at me, though I knew she could feel my eyes. "The kind of thing the Star Circle did, and I was part of the Star Circle now. You told me so, again and again." Her voice had a delicate tang of bitterness near the end, like the taste of almonds.

"I never knew any of this, Lyissa."

"How could I have told you? You were a stranger, but when I knew you, you were still a stranger. You cared about things I would never have cared about, like proper training in the elements. I loved life in my village. I wish to Rennon that you had left me there, to grow up and discover my gifts on my own."

"You would have destroyed yourself, Lyissa, or someone else. Or possibly even the whole village."

"That doesn't always happen."

"Often enough." I studied her, wondering what she wanted me to say. What *could* I say? I knew that she had resented me at first, but she had seemed to take to her studies so eagerly. And they were necessary.

"But I might have been one of the lucky ones who lived out her whole life never knowing she had Mastery of four elements." Lyissa clenched her hands. "I might have discovered just Scarlet, and been happy. I might have been lucky."

"And would all your friends and neighbors have been lucky, too, when the Scarlet burst out of you and burned them alive?"

"You don't know that would have happened."

I was silent, and said nothing even as I fed her chunks of the dried beef, and gave her sips of water and helped her to relieve herself. She complained about all of this, but I didn't answer her. At last she gave up on complaining, and laid herself down on the ground, falling asleep so fast that I couldn't have said anything if I wanted to.

I studied her face: the relaxed lines of it, the stray curls of golden hair that lay across it, the faint pout that lingered around her mouth even in sleep. I had risked much for her, followed her among the Heretics even when I knew where her choice lay. I had been so sure that I could persuade her to change back, to see that she needed to return to the Star Circle and complete her training for the Mastery of Four Wonders.

And why?

It was because I wanted to save her life, of course, and the lives of others who might be caught around her. But it was also because I loved that wildness I have spoken of before, the spirit that would fling itself across lightning and wind, and burn regardless of the consequences.

I loved that in her because I thought she could learn to control it. I caught glimpses of the woman she could be, and was awed.

And now I wonder if she will ever be that woman. She is still so determined to follow her own path of denying her gifts, as if saying that she only had Scarlet magic would make it reality. She is still determined that Rennon is the god that everyone should worship, regardless of other choices.

And she still thinks that she can convince me.

I wonder if this is not a poor return on my bargain.

Lusirimonalata's Commentary

One can easily see the ingratitude of Klessa from this selection from her Journals. I do not think that I need to spend much time in speaking on it, as a matter of fact.

I would much rather speak of the strange rumors that have come to my attention. There are rumors in the northern Kingdoms, apparently, the ones that the Dark conquered long ago. They are preparing for war, say the more hysterical of the rumors.

I am not inclined to give those any credence. After all, why would they want to come forth now? Destiny is not yet ready for them, and the Dark and the Light fight only when Destiny decrees it so. And then, the Light always wins. In truth, only the stubbornness that the Dark is famed for could keep them going forward. I think that they may wake someday and realize just how stupid they have been, and come back to the Light and the worship of Elle.

But not for some time yet, of course.

The Lady Teridona does not seem concerned about the rumors, even about the ones that speak of evil in her country. "The Goddess will provide," she says, when I ask her what she thinks. "And I think the Dark would never attack before time."

Her words comfort and reassure me. Indeed, each day I admire her more and more. She is the steadiest person I have ever met, her eyes fixed on the goal of protecting me and making sure I write proper things in the History. She must be so deeply committed to the Light that it is surprising she hasn't become a priestess. But then, I think she is Destined for some high marriage. So the aura of Destiny around her seems to proclaim, at least.

Anassra seems strangely affected by her, as well. At least, the Lady has had to scold her more often lately. I am not sure what is wrong with my servant. She doesn't clean the room now as well as she was doing for a time. I am finding iridescent scraps of paper on the floor again. But I will not scold her until the History is done and presented to the Queen. Then we can return to our old lives, and I will actually have the time to scold Anassra properly, as such a slip deserves.

Now, let us turn back to the account of Rilleta's History, which I must admit is far more interesting to me. Soon, soon, the Turning comes, and I am almost as excited as if I were there to witness it, instead of writing ten years after it.

A History of Rilleta, High Priestess of Rennon

Chapter 20

End of the Battle

"If you would know despair, then fight as hard as you can for a cause, and see it cast down and burning in the mud. That will try your patience and your hope as nothing else can."

-Attributed to Queen Aneron, when she was turned away by the worldwalkers.

Come on, then!

Rilleta could not believe the impatience that filled her. Of course, in one way it made sense. Twydon's soldiers had suddenly halted, as though they were incapable of covering the last few feet of mud and grass that separated them from the caves where the Heretics sheltered. They milled around like cattle bereft of the herder, now and then whispering arguments to each other, as if to convince each other they should go forward. But none of the arguments took. They ended up locking eyes with each other, and even the Heretics, only to look away in embarrassment.

Slowly, certainty filled Rilleta's heart. *They are waiting for something. Some direction.*

But what could it be? They had seemed confident enough just a moment ago. Rilleta frowned and tapped her fingers together, ignoring the fire that licked around them. The flames would have their chance in a moment.

As she watched the soldiers mill and argue, argue and mill, confidence filled her heart again. *They know they aren't Destined to win this day. They feel the lack of a divine Hand above them, guarding and protecting them. I knew it! The Hand of Rennon can be felt even by our enemies, if only they stop persuading themselves it's the Hand of Elle for a moment.*

She fought the impulse to step forth from the cave. *None of my people would know what I was doing. They'd just be left drifting, bereft.*

Instead, she opened a conduit to the Scarlet and closed her eyes. All of the Heretics around her could "hear" the Scarlet, and though it took some effort to send messages this way, Rilleta thought it was worth it. The God was with her. Surely He would make her voice heard in their heads, however long it might take Him.

Attack. We must attack. Rennon is waiting for us to attack. That last message seemed to falter for a time, since it was more complex than the delicate network of emotional magic could usually carry, but Rilleta felt acknowledgment flowing back to her from the others after a few attempts. They knew what she meant, even if her words weren't reaching them in the form that echoed in her head. She smiled, and opened her eyes, fixing them on the soldiers in front of her. *Wait for my signal.*

She could feel their pulsing reassurance that they would certainly do so. Rilleta reached out, grasped the Scarlet firmly again, and started to take a step forward.

Fire coiled in front of her, and she jerked back. She hadn't though there were any Scarlet mages among the enemies! But then she saw it was forming into the shape of a salamander, and smiled. *It must be a messenger from the God.*

The salamander flowed into being, its skin a shifting mass of red-gold, its tail a flame that snapped back and forth in agitation. Its eyes glowed like coals as they fixed on her. Rilleta frowned and fought the impulse to step back. *I may not have accomplished things just as the God liked, but must He send such a manifestation to tell me so?*

"Rilleta of the Heretics," said the salamander's voice, just barely distinguishable from the crackling of fire. Rilleta had to listen hard to be sure she heard what the creature actually said.

"Yes, that's me," she said. "Although I prefer Rilleta of Rennon."

"You are straining the boundaries between the elements," said the salamander bluntly. "You must release some of your hold on the Scarlet."

Memories stirred in Rilleta's mind. Klessa had said much the same thing, or at least she thought the traitor had. "Are you a messenger from the Star Circle?" she asked.

"I am a messenger from the People of the Blending."

"I've never heard of you."

"Few have." The salamander's tail lashed with that admission, though, as if it galled him not to be more familiar. "You cannot call on fire so intemperately and expect there to be no consequences whatsoever."

Rilleta snorted. "I suppose that you and your people would name yourselves as guardians of the elements, then?"

"We are blended with the elements. We form our bodies and take our being from them. Hence our name."

Rilleta shook her head. "If you really care about such things, it's rather late to interfere. Besides, why attack my side for misusing the elements and not Princess Twydon's people?"

"We have stopped them," said the salamander. "For the moment, while one of our people tries to talk sense into Twydon and the others restrain the elements from bursting out all over the Plains."

Rilleta's eyes went irresistibly back to the milling soldiers. One of them held out his hand and concentrated; she thought she could feel his mind tugging at the Cycle, though she

couldn't trace his opening of the conduit. Nothing happened. The man let his hand fall, a few tears sliding down his face.

Rilleta shook her head. "Such tactics cannot stop the battle forever. We are Destined to fight them. Elle and Rennon must come to blows, and one must drive the other from Orlath forever."

"We care nothing for the wars you fight," said the salamander, though his tail lashed back and forth so hard Rilleta did not believe that true. "But we will make sure you do not tear a hole between the worlds with your elements."

"That cannot happen."

The salamander snarled at her, opening its jaws until Rilleta could see the back teeth. She drew away, unnerved.

The salamander lashed its tail like a whip and vanished.

Rilleta shook the afterimages from her eyes, and then cautiously peered out of the little cave. Twydon's soldiers had begun to call water and wind again, she saw, though she didn't know if the calling was as strong as before. She squared her shoulders and stepped out, the flames blazing through her skin. Of course, that drew the soldiers' attention at once.

"Will you fight the Chosen of Rennon?" she asked.

The soldiers didn't answer at once, but neither did they flee or cower. Rilleta watched in puzzlement as they spoke among themselves, but her fears eased when a tall woman stepped forth with drops of water falling from her fingers. *They were only choosing who would have the honor of facing me in single combat. Or perhaps they have come to surrender, seeing as they cannot fight me.*

"I have not come to fight you," the Azure mage said.

Rilleta nodded regally. "Then you plan to fall on your knees and accept Rennon as your god?"

The woman gave her an odd glance. "No," she said slowly, "of course not. I am the Captain of Princess Twydon's guards. We plan to arrest you, and bring you in on charges of treason."

Rilleta laughed and shook her head. "I should not have put it past the Princess to try something so stupid. I am her enemy, and the enemy of your King, not a criminal. I will face them in single combat, or I will war with you. I will not be arrested."

"You have no choice," said the Captain. "You know that you have committed treason against the Orlathian throne?"

"It is no crime or treason," said Rilleta, "to say that I would make a better Queen or that Rennon would make a better god for my people, when such things are true."

The Captain's eyes glittered. "You have no more chances," she said. "No leeway left. Will you surrender and come along peacefully, or must we beat you down first?"

"That you shall never do." Rilleta gestured, and called along the Scarlet at the same time. Her people yelled, and charged out of hiding.

Fire poured down from above.

Rilleta jerked her head back in shock. A gryphon circled overhead, not screaming as they usually did in battle; she had had no idea of its presence. On its back sat a mage clad in flowing robes, who poured down fire from his hands as if he didn't know that the flames were eating fellow Scarlet mages alive. Wherever Rilleta looked, the fires ate her people. And in seconds, she was the only living Heretic on the field.

"Well?"

Rilleta met the Guard Captain's eyes again and shook her head. Her being was throbbing with a reckless courage, which she could have imagined just a short time ago but never imagined needing.

"You shall not take me," she said. "That one thing, Rennon will never permit."

"You are only making this harder than it must be," said the Azure mage.

But Rilleta didn't listen to her. Her gaze was fixed on the gryphon as it settled to the ground, and in particular the Scarlet mage who now slid off its back. He walked towards them, pausing to nod to the Guard Captain. "You can take her easily enough," he said. "She doesn't have so strong a connection to the fire that it will make her dangerous."

"Who are you?" Rilleta demanded. "And why are you betraying your own kind?"

He merely looked at her blankly. "Not all Scarlet mages followed you," he said at last, as if deciding that after all her furious stare demanded an answer. "I never worshipped Rennon, always Elle. And some of my brothers and sisters remained true to their monarchs, instead of turning and marching under your banner."

"But the priestesses were burning Scarlet mages alive!"

"Yes," said the man. "With our help. Truly, did you think all of us would turn against the Goddess and the throne just because you did?"

Rilleta screamed, and flung herself forward.

The mage gestured, and cut her conduit to her magic. Rilleta sprawled in the mud, and the Azure mage bent down and wound chains around her wrists.

"We should get her back to our Queen," she heard someone say, from above the mud that choked her ears.

"King," said the Guard Captain's voice.

"Of course," said someone else, and Rilleta heard laughter. Though she had no proof, she was convinced that the laughter was at her.

Tears ran down her face as they hauled her back to her feet and began marching her to the castle. She tried to walk as steadily as she could, but she tripped constantly over concealed bodies and little hollows and hillocks she hadn't seen in time. Her tears scrubbed furiously at the mud on her cheeks, but could not remove all of it.

Her heart reached out desperately to Rennon.

My God, my God, how couldst Thou have done this?

But no answer came back.

And, somewhere, deep within her heart, she felt her faith give a little shudder and jolt.

Lusirimalata's Commentary

I cannot read these words without tears in my eyes. So it was the first time I read Rilleta's History, and so it is again now, as I read the History over and know just what will come after it, and what has resulted now, these ten years later.

Rilleta felt the first shattering of her faith in the demon god, and that means that she took her first step on the path that leads back to true redemption.

Where there is Darkness in the heart, then the Light of Elle cannot come. As I have said before, the Goddess will not intervene when a mortal has freely chosen the downward path of damnation. If Rilleta had continued following that path and condemned her soul to evil forever, to separation from the Goddess, then Elle might have wept divine tears, but She would not have interfered. Such might corrupt the mortal's choice, and make Her seem cruel, where She is nothing but mercy and goodness.

But here there is intervention. Here, Rilleta had the chance to make a choice, and she did so. And she did it not even knowing that soon enough the monarchs of the Kingdoms

would see truth and join against her. (It was not a political alliance, but their coming to recognize the truth of Elle and the glory of our Queen).

This is a mingling of truth and beauty here that makes me think them one and the same thing, as some of our philosophers have at times claimed, and that makes it possible for me to ignore the disquieting rumors that have once again risen about the Traitor Prince of Rivendon. Let the gossips in the castle wag their tongues all they like. They shall not destroy my joy, my happiness.

In such circumstances, I find myself reluctant to turn back to Klessa's Journals. But at least some good may be done: I need only give the essential parts of the "history" she records. That means that I will leap over the pages of musing and personal laments, until her arrival at Ozue. It is perhaps the only first-hand account of what happened to the city and the Star Circle that we have, and I suppose I must give it.

Though I wish the Goddess would have inspired a priestess to dream of the past and record it. Perhaps someday someone can travel to Ozue and speak with those who still remember that fateful day. Such a history would have to be better than Klessa's Journal.

The Journals of Klessa of the Nine Wonders

31 Greenborn, 106 OR

We have certainly come back to Ozue faster than we left it.

Of course, perhaps this quickness is no surprise. We do not travel encumbered by baggage-trains, and servants, and priestesses, and whining children, this time. We travel as part of a trio around which the scouts circle. I think that it would be very strange if we somehow took more time to move.

But there are different kinds of speed, and while we have made good time over the Plains, I have made no kind of progress in dealing with the emotions stirring inside me. As the walls grow closer, and I wonder if I will be able to read my handwriting again (since I am writing on the back of a galloping horse), I wonder if I want to.

Lyissa rides with her back stiff and straight, ignoring me, her gaze fixed on the city as if she were coming home. Perhaps she is. I think that Lyissa has some fondness for Ozue itself, even though she loves her village ways. I have often heard of her speak of using her gifts to benefit Ozue's people.

Was that the only use she ever found for them? Well, that and killing the people who opposed her god.

I don't know. And it bothers me that I don't know, and that when I look at her, I feel almost nothing but a waning of the interest I felt before.

It troubles me. Troubles me greatly.

I should have known that something like this would happen. Of course, in truth, I think that I could have said what would happen from the moment we rode into the city.

We found the gates open, and the people ready to welcome us. It did not look as if they had entirely ceased their celebrations yet. Many bonfires still burned, though it was day. And I saw people throwing flowers into the flames, and burning flowers on altars, and singing snatches of songs in praise of Rennon.

I think that was the first time since this all began that I have pitied the Heretics. What will they do, when they find out it was a sham, their precious faith? Will they try to continue with it, or will they yield to Princess Twydon and Queen Memoryrose?

I fear I know the answer. Blood will run in the streets again.

And then we turned a corner, and I saw what other fruits the tree of the Heresy had grown. My stomach lurched. Had we eaten more recently than dawn, I truly think I would have been sick. As it was, I only clenched my jaws and stared in grim horror at the sight we passed. That horror drove out the pity the Heretics had inspired in moments.

It was a Temple of Elle, and it was as thoroughly ruined as though an invading army had truly marched through Ozue. The lovely windows, records in stained glass of a hundred beautiful and terrible moments, lay in glittering shards on the streets. Smoke still drifted through those broken windows; I could only imagine the kind of heat that must have burned inside, to create that smoke and melt the stone in the way that showed on the outer walls. As I peered through the open door, I saw a sunburst scratched across the face of the crescent moon, and something bound to the wall by a series of knives. Though I turned my face away before I could truly see it, I am sure that it was the body of a priestess, held up by knives, rotting.

"Not so easy a sight to bear, is it?"

The soft voice turned my head. Somehow, I imagined that a Heretic had come up without either my sensing it, or Glangon. But it was only Lyissa who rode beside me, watching me with eyes that shone like fever, like the heat of the fires, like the glitter of the glass.

"Of course it's not easy," I said. "The Temple was old and beautiful, and what wrong had it done, that it should be destroyed? What had its priestesses done to the Heretics, that they should be bound to the wall with knives or burned alive?"

Lyissa tossed her hair. "The priestesses of Elle have committed crimes on us enough to warrant this punishment," she said.

"But the priestesses here weren't the ones who did it to the Heretics." I gestured to the back of the Temple as we swung past it, the street bending a little before we got to the school where the Star Circle has ever sheltered. "What is the good of punishing them for things their sisters at the Court did?"

"They should have stopped it."

I ground my teeth, and said nothing. Lyissa will not understand. I know that now. I saw it in her eyes, as she stared at the work of her brothers and sisters in hatred, and was satisfied.

Never, never, never, will I understand such blind faith in anyone or anything. If I once bore that faith in the Cycle or Lyissa, then I have been most brutally healed of it.

"Come in."

I blinked, startled at the calm response to my knock. Of course, no one had opposed my entrance into the school, but I had thought that someone might oppose my entrance into the Lord's chambers. They had defended themselves fiercely enough when the Heretics came hunting him.

Cautiously, I opened the door, expecting a ward to char me. But nothing happened. The door swung open on the Lord's pleasant, sunlit room.

"Klessa," he said, bowing to me. "I thought you would be the voice they sent to speak."

"I was not willing to answer their demands," I said quietly. "But I have no choice." Yet, the words faltered before that ancient, patient gaze. I had to look away. Somehow, his eyes reminded me of Telemoranion's, in the moment before he died, and where he should have felt pain, I did instead.

"You have a choice, Klessa," he said. "You could join us again."

I shook my head. "My magic is gone."

He drew in his breath, and I looked swiftly back. It was the only time I had ever seen him look startled. "And how did you lose it?" he asked quietly.

I sighed. "I would have struck at Rilleta if I could. That had nothing to do with the Cycle, nothing to do with serving the magic. The elements fled from me as if I had never had them." I clenched my fists, and tried to think of something, anything, other than the

echoing emptiness within me. I had almost learned to ignore the absence of my magic, especially with thoughts about Lyissa to distract me in these last days, but it came rushing back quickly enough. "There is no other reason I would have lost them, no breaking of the Code."

He paced towards me. I kept my head bowed, unable to look up and meet the censure I knew I would find in his face.

He reached out, cupping his hand around my chin. Slowly, reluctantly, I looked up.

There was no censure in his eyes, only gentle understanding. And that, of all things, made me burst into tears. I sagged into his arms as he held me close, hands smoothing over the tunic and trousers I wore.

"I suspected something was wrong when I saw you enter the room without your green robe," he said at last, when I had quieted enough to hear him. "But I could never have imagined this. Was your vengeance really that important to you?"

"It was," I said. "I went to save Lyissa, and at the end, I couldn't stand it when I realized that she would not come with me. I struck out at Rilleta."

"I knew that Lyissa was not happy here," said the Lord, letting me go and stepping back. I was glad. It was too strange, for him to stay close for that long. "But never would I have imagined that she would choose such a course of violence."

I blinked, my mouth falling open. "You knew that she didn't want to be here?"

"Of course. I must know the hearts and minds of my Masters better than anyone, to be Lord of the Star Circle."

"But then, why didn't you have me take her back to her village?"

"Because she had talents that had to be trained," said the Lord simply. "And because I am not a god, and cannot see everything. It could have been that she had the capacity for change, even though I couldn't see that anywhere in her future. I thought to give her the training she needed, enough that she wouldn't kill herself, and then ask her if she wished to remain here. If she had refused, I would have let her go."

It was so like what I would have done myself that for a moment I was left to marvel at my own wisdom. But I moved past that moment soon enough, and said, "Do you think that she has ever a chance, now, of rejoining with the Star Circle?"

"How can you ask that, Klessa? Soon, there will be no more Star Circle."

"Because the Queen of Doralissa will destroy you." I felt sick speaking the words, but how could I refuse to do so? It would have been a dishonor to the Circle and my place in it to pretend something wasn't going to happen that I knew was going to.

"No," said the Lord. "We shall agree to go where the Queen of Doralissa wishes us to go, away into hiding. I believe that we can cross the Rashars without trouble, since we have the Scarlet to warm us against the cold, and some of us can capture the Gust and ride to the other side." He smiled. "And perhaps, somewhere in the north, there is sanctuary and shelter for the Circle. Perhaps someone can keep the lore of the blended elements alive."

I took a deep breath, and ignored the pain exploding in my chest. It was a survival, even though not the survival I had hoped for. "You think the priestesses of Elle will try to forget them, then?"

"The priestesses have always hated us," he said. "They do not like the blended elements, as they interrupt their neat Circle of Four. They have even claimed that since Light and Time do not fit so well into the Circle, and we cannot seem to find or Master the element that would blend Azure and Crop, we are lying about all of it."

"But we aren't!"

"Truth means nothing to fanatics, as I think you have discovered." The Lord rose to his feet. "And I fear that many children in the future will die from not learning to control their blended elements, though not the ones where we settle. But we can give some of our lore books to the priestesses, so that they may help those with more than one element control the one from the Circle of Four."

"It will mean death," I said. "Or madness, for many."

The Lord glanced at me sadly. "Well I know it."

I lowered my eyes. The Lord has always had a keen sense of the sacrifices that one makes simply by becoming a member of the Star Circle. I should not ask him to grieve for something that we cannot help.

Even though I have seen his eyes, and I know that he grieves.

"Go back to Memoryrose, and tell her we submit," he said. "We will go into hiding, and our lore books will be given into the keeping of the priestesses of Elle, as the ones most likely to train powerful elemental mages."

"You think the priestesses of Elle will win this conflict, then?"

"I think there is no doubt." His gaze grew distant for a moment, and I knew he was seeing through the veils of Time. "They have too much strength, and already there is a cancer

growing in the breast of the one who calls herself the Heretics' leader." His eyes came back to me. "There will be no Star Circle anymore, at least not in name."

My tears began to run then, and I made no effort to stop them. "Where will you go?"

The Lord's smile glittered like frost. "North."

"To Rivendon? Arvenna?"

He shook his head. "They have proven themselves- unfriendly to us in the past, and especially just now. No, I think that our destination will more likely be Gazania or Dalzna."

"Right on the border with the Dark?"

"If the Light will not shelter the seekers after knowledge, perhaps the Dark will." His gaze sharpened on me. "Besides, I think you serve the Dark yourself, do you not?"

"I do not know if it is with my whole heart."

He only nodded, as if that were to be expected. "Come to us, when you can spare the time," he said. "I know that you will be busy for some time."

I bowed my head to his gaze. "I still have a debt," I said. "I thought it was to rescue Lyissa, and to persuade her to rejoin the Circle, but I do not think that will happen now. I wanted vengeance, though, and there is one on whom I have not taken it yet. Rilleta still lives."

"And I think the priestesses mean to spare her, as does Princess Twydon," said the Lord. "The Princess's soldiers have orders to take her alive."

"They have taken her?"

"Have taken, or will take." The Lord shook his head. "The veils of Time are shifting."

I nodded. He had once tried to explain to me just how the Eleventh Wonder worked, and I had not understood him at all. "Then I will ride and try to take her life, my Lord. She has caused enough pain to me, and to the Star Circle, and to others. If she had not led the Rennon Heresy, there would still be many people alive who now are dead, and the Princess would not have this excuse to destroy the Star Circle."

"Ah." The Lord raised his eyebrows. "I am glad to see you understand that that was the main purpose of this war."

"I think it must have been," I said. "As well as destroying the Heretics. This will end in blood, and I think it only right that Rilleta pay the price."

"Even if it is not her Destiny?"

"I don't know anything about Destiny," I said. "I don't think that we can put much faith in it. I thought I was Destined to serve the Cycle, and Rilleta thought she was Destined to win the war. Neither happened."

The Lord smiled at me. "Then you should ride," he said. "Lyissa has already bolted."

"What?"

He nodded. "She has gone to join Rilleta, and on the way she has spread warning to the people of the city. You should go after her, but you will have to deal with the Heretics first."

I swore and made for the door.

"Klessa."

Something about the way he said my name made me turn my head.

"Sometimes we all have to wait for things to be the way we want them to be," he said. "I wish that we could go on teaching youngsters to control their blended elements and their multiple elements openly, but we cannot. You wish that you could kill Rilleta and persuade Lyissa back to your side. Do not be surprised if something happens to insure that you cannot do either of those things."

"I know, my Lord," I said. "But I am going to try."

I collided with Glangon on the stairs. "Lyissa just--" he began.

"I know," I said. "I have to follow her."

He blinked at me, no doubt wondering how I knew, but caught my arm when I tried to shove past him. "You have to help us transfer the lore books and persuade the Circle first," he said.

I shook off his grip. "The Lord persuaded himself. He will come to the north. He'll give the lore books to the priestesses of Elle. But I have to catch Lyissa and kill Rilleta."

"No."

"Why not?"

"Neither of those would be in the best interests of the Dark."

"I don't care."

And then the wound on my thigh burst open.

Lusirimalata's Commentary

There is great news! News so great, that it almost distracts me from my all-important preparation of this History! It is a good thing that Lady Teridona and Anassra are here to soothe me, or I might be tempted to give up my recording of thoughts and commentaries in order to join in the general celebration.

It is simply this: The Traitor Prince of Rivendon has been captured!

It happened a long way away, and they took his dragon with him, which means that those rumors about him being near the castle were always false. When they touched the dragon, they found it was no true, living being after all, but a construct of metal animated by magic- no doubt the same dragon mentioned in these pages. Only illusion made it look silver instead of coppery.

There is a chance that the hunters might come and speak to me, since I know more of an intimate observer of the Traitor Prince than anyone else. They will want to read Klessa's Journals, and speak to me of what she was like, and read my commentaries. I am proud indeed, to be of such service to the Light!

My heart is bursting out of all bounds!

And at the height of such joy, it is only fitting that I should present to you perhaps the most joyful chapter of Rilleta's History, though it might not seem joyful at first. If Rilleta had managed to bow her head and convince herself to wait for "redemption," it would probably have proved false and shallow. But she spoke up, as she believed her God was calling her to do, and that means that she had to go into darkness.

And when one enters such darkness, death or rebirth into Light are the only things that can happen to one. And Rilleta did not choose or suffer death.

Read, with the Goddess in your heart and a song of praise on your lips!

A History of Rilleta, High Priestess of Rennon

Chapter 21

Before the King

"Speak not to me of cold hearts and colder tempers. I only love those with passion bursting through them, with blood coursing in their veins."

-Supposed response of a priestess of Rennon urged to moderateness and temperance.

Rilleta gritted her teeth and tried not to look impressed as the guards dragged her into the great hall of Orlath. It was very difficult, at least at first. Here, the old Kings and Queens looked down from their death banners, with, most gloriously, Aneron herself watching them from the head of the hall. The founder's silver eyes seemed to look steadily out of the cloth and fasten on Rilleta's own. Rilleta found it very hard to meet them, but bowing her head only gave her the consciousness of what she was looking away from.

But then the difficulty faded when she saw the throne, and, on it, King Seldon the Incompetent. That was not part of his official title, of course, but it was whispered and chuckled at everywhere the King's direct power did not reach. The people of Orlath had little respect for him, and no wonder, doddering as he was, his only glory the tattered remains of his Destiny. He had done his part in the last war, and no one begrudged him the respect he had earned from that, but it was widely the consensus that he should step aside and let someone else take the throne. Almost everyone was afraid of Princess Twydon, though, and so other candidates had been quietly sought.

Rilleta lost the last of her fear when she saw the King's watery eyes trying to focus on her, and shook back her hair, straightening her shoulders. *I will walk tall and proud.*

The guards did not drag her before the throne, at least the last few steps; she led them there. Then Rilleta stood in silence and waited for the King to speak.

He did so, after long moments of peering at her with such near-sighted eyes that Rilleta was convinced he really couldn't see her face. *They could have brought Alaria herself here and he would think she was me if they told him so,* Rilleta thought in disgust.

"Do you know the magnitude of your crime?" he asked in a cracking voice.

"No," said Rilleta.

There was an agitated murmur among the nobles of the Court, quickly hushed. No doubt they thought that would give the old King another chance to go into a lecture on morality. Rilleta was familiar enough with the danger, from the time she had lived in the Court. The King was always speaking on matters that didn't include him, such as the methods that the priestesses used to question prisoners. No one else questioned torture; why should he?

"Treason is a serious crime, my young lady," King Seldon said, his voice gathering speed. "You should know that. Turning against the throne and the King is a decision that should never be made lightly, though some make it lightly, and afterwards live with their souls in peril of rejection by Elle. It is often a matter of arguments of fools that—"

"Kindly explain to me the difference between the argument of a fool and the argument of a wise King."

There was a little murmur at that, a greater shock, a greater outrage. Rilleta smiled, the rage burning hot in her heart. *I might have an easier time of it if I moved more softly, but why should I let that matter? I know what they plan for me. And boldness has ever pleased Rennon more than softness.*

King Seldon stared at her, as if it were taking some time for his mind to catch up with his ears, and then abruptly raised his scepter and shook it sternly at her.

"You," he said, "are a heretic."

Rilleta couldn't contain the grin that spilled across her cheeks. "What makes you think so?"

"You are a traitor," he said, "not only to the laws of the Kingdom, but to Elle and all that She makes dear and beautiful. And you know the fate of traitors."

Rilleta hoped that her face didn't grow pale, that she didn't tremble. Those were permissible reactions for someone sentenced to the traitor's fate, of course, but they would conflict with her show of boldness. "I know their fate. That does not mean that I approve of it."

"What you approve or do not approve does not matter," said King Seldon. "I sentence you to a traitor's execution three days hence, by impalement—"

"Wait, Father."

Rilleta turned her head, seething. How she hated the smug bitch who had spoken those words!

The crowd of nobles parted, and the Princess Twydon glided forward, her steps soft and light. In every way she epitomized a princess, and while Rilleta could have found many in the Kingdom willing to speak against her as a woman or a future ruler, she would have found none to speak against her beauty. Her auburn curls ended just above her shoulders, and her eyes were deep and blue and shone with the fever of the sun; in many ways, it was strange that she was not a Scarlet mage. She had the temper, the looks, and the passion of one. It was that which made her such a formidable enemy to the Heretics, Rilleta thought. She understood the worshippers of Rennon in a way that few other nobles of the Court and none of the priestesses of Elle could have done.

"What is it, daughter?" King Seldon asked, with an old man's querulousness at being interrupted in his voice.

Princess Twydon nodded to her father, as much to say that she understood his impatience and was sorry for it, but her gaze fixed mostly on Rilleta. "I have hunted this woman for a long time," she said, "by Gust and by trick, by war and by openly calling for anyone who

took her to bring her in alive. It seems strange that we would have spent all that effort on the hunt, only to kill her by a method as simple as the traitor's death once we had her."

"What are you saying, Twydon?"

Rilleta flinched, half-expecting one of the storms that happened whenever someone didn't address the Princess by title, but it seemed that Twydon expected such things of her father. A little quirk of her lips might even have showed her amusement, as she stepped forward and walked in a circle around Rilleta. Rilleta couldn't turn to face the woman when Twydon went behind her, thanks to the chains on her wrists and the guards, and she spent the whole time sweating and shaking, as uneasy as if a serpent were about to bite at her unguarded heel.

"I am saying, Father," said Twydon at last, when she had finished the circle and ended up in front of Rilleta once more, "that I think there is a chance of redemption in her. One final chance at Light." She let her smile grow broader. "You never turned to the service of the Dark, did you, Rilleta?"

"No," Rilleta snapped. "Not like you."

Twydon only laughed at the insult, barely parting her lips around the breath, and then said, "Yes, Father, I think that I can reform, even tame her, given time. Let me have that time. Let me take her into the darkness and bring her back out again, reborn into Light." She never took her eyes from Rilleta's as she ran her fingers through the other woman's hair. "Can we send any soul to Elle and say that we did not make every effort necessary to save that soul?"

"I think she is committed to the Dark, my daughter," King Seldon fussed. "The way that she defies both you and me would say that, at least."

"I am never willing to let anyone else have the final say, particularly not on something as important as the fate of her soul," said Twydon. "Let me have her, Father."

There was a long pause. Rilleta could feel the currents of power stirring, though which one flowed which way, and which aligned with the King and which the Princess, she did not know.

"Very well," Seldon grumbled at last.

"Thank you, Father!" Twydon whirled up to him and kissed his cheek, then came back to Rilleta and smiled at her. "It's the holes under the Temple for you. It'll be just like coming home, won't it?"

And it was the pits, the holes under the Temple of Elle, but it was not like coming home.

They did not put her in a cell, or bind her to a table where the torturers could work on her. Rilleta had been expecting that, dreading that, and couldn't conceal a sigh of relief as they swept her past those chambers. But then they led her to a large room filled with arches and pillars, and her fear returned.

"What are you doing with me?" she whispered.

The guards didn't deign to answer, and the priestesses accompanying her never varied from their low, atonal chanting, steady and familiar as the flicker of light from the torches. They entered the room and passed among the pillars until they reached one particular arch. Rilleta dragged her feet as much as she could as they forced her towards it, but that didn't really slow her progress; the guards simply picked her up and carried her the last few feet.

Rilleta stared. The light of the torches flickered on what looked like pearl and silver, and she screamed aloud.

The guards paid no attention, simply flipping her upside-down and sticking her to the spiderweb. Rilleta gasped as she hung there, feeling the first dizzying rush of blood to her head.

"The Princess will be along soon," one of the gray-robed priestesses said, somehow managing to fit those words into a gap in the chanting. Then she turned and followed her sisters out.

Rilleta hung in the darkness, watching the torches as they faded, ears alive for the slightest scuttling sound.

Of course, one didn't have to listen very hard for these scuttling sounds. They scraped close soon enough. The Deathweaver spiders that lived here were as big as mastiffs.

Rilleta sobbed.

Then light flared in front of her, and she saw the Princess standing there, heedless of her fine gown. Rilleta's relief at seeing another human being faded when she saw the Spiders that crouched at Twydon's feet, their bodies glistening purple in the firelight.

"I think that I have seen the potential for Light and goodness in you," said Twydon, her voice low and full of music. "I will not let that potential go to waste." She gestured, and one of the Spiders trotted forward, mandibles held high. Rilleta knew that one bite could turn her inside out.

She drew breath and began to helplessly scream, but no sound was large enough to drown the scuttling of the spiders' legs, or the steady, rhythmical voice of Princess Twydon.

"All you need do is speak the name of Elle, and call out to Her in gratitude. That is all you need do. Simple, is it not? Call on the name of Elle..."

Lusirimonalata's Commentary

It has come to my attention that some explanation of the torture performed on Rilleta is necessary, so that my readers do not simply think that Princess Twydon, now our Queen, is cruel. I would have thought the explanation would be obvious, but Anassra caught a glimpse of the pages of the last chapter before I bound them into the History, and is outraged.

The answer is very simple. Of course torture can be an evil thing, and torturing someone with Deathweaver spiders is looked upon in some circles as particularly vicious. But that does not mean that torture is an unqualified evil. It is an evil when practiced by the Dark upon the Light, as so many other things are; there are few innocent things they cannot twist to an evil end. And some would argue that torture is far from being innocent in the first place, so it is easy for them to twist it.

But in the hands of the Light, and particularly of my sisters of the Temple, torture is a necessary tool. It persuades the criminal to confess when nothing else can. It breaks down the barriers that hold the mortal mind back from union with Elle and hovering in the Darkness, and returns that mind to the Light. It does not always work, and sometimes criminals die under torture without ever confessing. But it is right when used by the Light, and wrong when used by the Dark. That is the simple definition. Like most true things, it is very simple.

I hope Anassra will not accuse me again of approving of cruel things. I do not enjoy striking her, or the sullen look she often wears afterwards. My former good mood is almost gone.

And speaking of other things that should ruin my mood, we must now to turn to a selection of Klessa's Journals that the Queen was most emphatic- via notes from Anassra- that I should bind into the History. I do not want to. But that is the power of one's Queen, and in all things, save for those where she might take precedence over the Goddess, I hear my Queen and obey.

The Journals of Klessa of the Nine Wonders

31 Greenborn, 106 OR

Well.

That hurt.

I did not die, or even weaken substantially, since Glangon managed to call his serpents and perform some complicated healing ritual that he muttered the whole time about never wanting to do again. I never want to do it again, either, given the way the snakes hissed at me as they slithered over my skin, as if it were me who had had the idea of waking them in the first place.

And then I wanted to write some of my thoughts and observations down, but this was rather difficult, since Glangon took away my journals.

"There are other things that you need to be doing right now," he said, when I stared at him.

I reined in my temper, stopping the fond visions of hurling him into a wall or door with Gust magic, or dehydrating him until his skin crackled like the parchment he held. After all, I could no longer do such things, and thinking about them too long was likely to make me more frustrated. "Such as what?"

"Preparing."

"For what? You told me it wouldn't be in the best interests of the Dark to take Rilleta's life, or to go after Lyissa. What am I left with?" I spoke as calmly as I could, but in truth, the harsh feeling of emptiness I had felt had grown.

"Helping the Star Circle flee to the north, and transferring the lore books to the keeping of the priestesses of Elle, of course."

"They can do that without my help."

Glangon blinked at me. "You don't intend to go the north with them, then?"

"Of course not. I am no longer a Master of the Star Circle. There is no longer a place for me among them."

Glangon watched me warily, as though the words I had just spoken were really a pronouncement that I would spring up and kill everyone who had anything to do with the Dark. I stared back at him. "What?" I asked.

"I had thought you would go to the north," he said. "Many of our plans depend on you passing beyond the Rashars."

"Whose plans? You didn't even know that I would join the Dark until a few days ago. How could you have planned anything around me?"

Glangon shook his head and scratched absently at the side of his jaw. I had noticed him make the movement before, and wondered if perhaps an old wound pained him there. "Call it a matter of Destiny," he said. "I was sure that I understood a prophecy that had long puzzled me when you swore to serve the Dark." He cast a glance at the bandaged wound on my leg. "Of course, I see now that you are not going to be as faithful to that service as I thought you were."

I only scowled at him. "I don't intend to go with the Star Circle, because there's nothing for me to do there," I said. "I do intend to serve the Dark if I can. Tell me about this prophecy."

"I shouldn't-"

"Then how can you receive any help on it?" I snorted in disgust as he frowned at me. "Is it a part of this *Grellan Ashen* that you can't tell me, or otherwise against the oaths that you swore to the Dark?"

"No. No, it isn't."

I narrowed my eyes. "I think I know what's wrong," I said. "I saw the disease often enough among the servants of the Light. I never thought I would see it among the servants of the Dark."

"Disease?"

"A plague of self-importance," I said. "Likely as not there's no strategic value to your telling or not telling me. But if you revealed this secret you're so anxiously clutching, you couldn't lord it over me, and that would mean a loss to you."

Glangon's face turned even darker. "How dare you say such things to me, the Dark's Lord?"

"Because I don't think there's a great and deadly secret," I said, to watch him flush. "I think you just like pretending there is, and knowing that I would have to follow along in your wake as long as you kept it silent."

"Even if that is true, why should I tell you now?"

"Because something's gone wrong. It must have, or you wouldn't be so anxious about my refusal to go north."

Glangon breathed through his mouth for a long moment, as though trying to control his anger. I merely watched him. I had faced down several priestesses of Elle afflicted with this disease before, and the cure was always simple. Once the dam of self-righteousness broke, they would tell me the truth, because there was a separate cause for pride in telling. They would want me to admire their cleverness.

Glangon broke, as the others had. "There is a prophecy that speaks of the coming of someone to the Dark who previously served the Light," he said. "And when she joins the Dark, then we will know that the time is right to begin the next war."

"The last war was only five years ago."

The look he gave me then was new: stern, and yet sad. "Do you still retain the delusion that Destiny moves only to the whims of the Light?" he asked.

I must admit I flushed at that, but I answered him well enough, I think. "You have not told me any differently."

Glangon looked away. "We can move more quickly than that, as long as a prophecy or some other great fulfillment of Destiny is guiding us," he said. "But so far, there have been few signs of it. And now, here you are, swearing to the Dark. I thought this was the sign." He sighed. "But the prophecy also says the Lady who swears will be eager to go north, and fight on the front lines. You are not."

"No."

Glangon sighed again. "Then I must call back the commands to my troops, and restrain our forces until a day more favorable for the fulfillment of the Prophecy comes."

"Whatever you think is best, of course."

The sorrowful expression changed to a scowl. "You're happy to see the war-effort fail, aren't you?" he asked.

"Remember that you speak of my people, and not yours," I said, unable to keep the snap out of my voice. "Doubtless your people are eager to fight the Light, and even ready to do so. But Orlath will need time to recover from the efforts of the war with the Heretics, brief as it was. To have a Dark war hurled at it on top of everything else might not lead to such a quick recovery."

"But you should be happy that the Dark would win."

"I don't want to see the Dark crush everything."

"I wish you would go north." Wistfulness rang in Glangon's voice. "The people we have conquered are usually very happy under our rule. We don't preserve such ranks and rules as you have here, since we need everyone to resist the assault of the Light. Someone who is very talented with the elemental magic might rise as fast and far, despite peasant birth, as someone born in a palace."

"We once did that, too," I said, and gestured around the empty rooms of the school. The Masters of the Star Circle were moving; I could just barely feel them touching the

elemental magic, and getting ready to transfer the lore books. "If you had left us alone, perhaps we could have gone on giving children the proper training."

"I am sorry," said Glangon. "But this was part of the price that my allies demanded, and I for one will be glad to have the Star Circle beyond the Rashars, where they might do more productive things with their knowledge, unrestrained by the Light."

I bowed my head. Those words were so similar to the Lord's that I couldn't discount the possibility that the Star Circle would indeed find a happier fate in the northern countries. "Perhaps that will be so."

"If you will not go north with the Star Circle, what will you do?" Glangon asked.

I half-smiled at him. "I'll think of something."

I sit and write now on a stone in the midst of the Plains. Ozue is only a gleam of fallen stars far behind me.

I needed to retrieve my journals from Glangon, but that was no trouble. My pages know me, I think. There is a bond between them and me that will always draw me. And they contain much that is mine alone- records of theories about elemental magic, for example, that I would want no one else to see. I will keep them safe and private for as long as I can, or for as long as I live.

Which may not be long, given what I have done.

I waited until it was night, and the Heretics were reacting in bewilderment to hearing that they must give up the worship of Rennon and turn back to the Goddess. They had tried to protest, but a few well-placed Doralissan arrows had silenced them, as did the snuffing of the bonfires- without apparent protest from Rennon- and the caging of their leaders. I suspected that they would fight back more frantically in the morning, but for now they were subdued.

In the darkness, I clothed myself with a green robe hanging in my old chambers, and slipped my journals into a saddlebag. I would have gone to the kitchens for food if I could, but that would make my intentions too obvious. I would have had trouble slipping past the guards outside my door, if it hadn't been for the passage that led from my room to Lyissa's, and which we had used many times. I stepped out of her room and continued down the hall, a Master of the Nine Wonders to anyone who looked at me.

No one stopped me until I reached the second floor. Then a guard stepped forward and held out his spear towards me. I could just see his face in the moonlight, and thought him one of the men who had ridden with Memoryrose. She was sending in advance guards, then.

Good. In the confusion, it would take them that much longer to realize what was really going on.

"What are you doing?" he demanded of me in Doralissan.

I fished out one of my journals and held it towards him with a disgusted look. "Transferring the lore books, of course."

He blinked, but wasn't to be deterred quite that easily. "And where are you taking them?"

"To the Temple of Elle."

He saluted me and stepped out of the way.

Idiot. I did hope that some of Glangon's Darkworkers, when I meet them- if I meet them- are wittier.

I descended the steps, further and further, until I reached the front door. Then I simply walked out, into the stables, and chose the finest Doralissan mare I saw. I did take the time to fill the saddlebags with oats and grain for her.

"What are you doing?"

Another of the witty guards. I didn't turn. "Getting ready for a long ride," I said grimly. "I'm one of the first Masters chosen to cross the Rashars."

The man clucked his tongue, as if he were feeling sorry for me, and moved forward to help me saddle the horse. I inclined my head graciously to him, and then mounted and cantered out.

Still not a stir from the school. Of course, they were probably used to Masters leaving by now, and there was no reason they should think this particular one very special.

I turned the mare up the street towards a certain broken Temple, and away from the main gate. It would assuredly be watched. The trick was to give the guards something else to watch.

I encountered the guards outside the broken windows of the Temple, and nodded to them before looking inside. The Heretics crouched there, broken and defeated. They had been told, I believed, to pray to Elle in this defiled place of Her worship, and not stop until they felt She had forgiven them.

They were chained to the floor, too, which I had not anticipated. But that should be no trouble. I swung my horse towards the front door, and slid down.

Two guards confronted me at once, but I only smiled and stood so they could see my robe color in the light of the torches. "Who are you?" one of them still asked, but the other elbowed him urgently.

"A Master of the Star Circle," I said coolly, "concerned about the treatment of my fellow elemental mages."

One of the guards laughed shortly, incredulously, and shook his head. "And you think we'll let you in to see about them?"

"I think you'll not only let me in to see about them, but give me the keys to unlock their chains."

"And why would we do that?"

"Have you ever seen someone die from Enordo's Pattern?"

"What nonsense are you babbling about?" the other cut in.

"Not nonsense," I said. "Enordo's Pattern calls an element of the body out of its natural configuration." I took a step forward and lowered my voice, and they instinctively leaned in to hear me. "I favor the Azure. In this case, the Pattern calls the blood. I could make you vomit blood, O my lords. What is more, I could make you bleed from every orifice of your bodies. Eyes and ears streaming it, your mouth exploding with blood and vomit, your feces mixed with it. Or I might try the stomach, since that is another favorite of mine. Did you know that your stomachs hold acids, my lords? They do. And imagine if I called those acids, let them gnaw through your stomachs, let them run at will through your body and feast upon your other organs--"

"Stop!" the younger one shrieked, his voice breaking.

I laughed. "Will you give me the keys?"

"We can't just betray our Queen," said the other guard.

I shrugged and held my hands up, beginning to move them in Enordo's Pattern.

The younger one cried out again and tackled his partner, fighting him to the ground. The other, too stunned to resist, was unconscious in seconds. I lowered my hands and watched.

The younger one stood up, holding the keys out to me. "Here," he said nervously. "Take them."

"Why, thank you." I scooped up the keys and stepped past him, while he bent over and sobbed. I did learn some useful things in Elle's torture pits.

The Heretics stared at me as I walked over and began to unlock their chains. I kept my voice low as I spoke, casual, and tried to shield what I was doing from the guards at the window as much as possible. "When I've finished freeing all of you, you're going to run. Use your magic to defend yourselves and blast out of here. Ignore the guards who try to stop you. They'll only kill you anyway."

"They promised us fair treatment," ventured one red-robed priestess.

I laughed. "They chained you in a Temple of Elle. They're interested in your redemption or your death."

"They want us to convert?" gasped someone else.

"Oh, yes."

I saw their lips firm, their jaws jut. They knew a chance at freedom was better than simply dying.

The last lock I had keys to was turned, and I stood back. "Those with fire, melt the chains of those without. Those who are free and don't have the Scarlet, get ready to run."

Scarlet flared in the gloom as a great many Heretics turned to melt their chains. The guards turned around at the firelight, and a blast of wind magic hit them, crumpling them like dolls.

"Now," I said, and ran.

Some of them were behind me. I do not know how many, and I will probably never know what happened to the guards at the door. I leaped over them and came back to my mare without a glance.

The mare was stamping and snorting uneasily. Not a war-horse, then. I touched my heels to her sides, and she ran as if winged.

I know the wide streets of Ozue well, and I guided the mare through them. When we came to the main gate, it was still guarded, but I swirled my robe and yelled, "A Master of the Star Circle, reporting to Queen Memoryrose!" and they let me through.

Then we were out on the Plains, and galloping. I asked the mare to breast the high grass instead of taking the high road, and she did so with a will. She stands shaking beside me even now, but I think she will be well. The foam on her flanks that I earlier saw in the light of the fire has dried at last.

I have probably done something unforgivable.

I do not care.

My feelings towards Lyissa have changed, but I still want to resolve them, somehow.

And Rilleta owes me a debt. She owes me a debt of changed life, and she owes me a debt of changed heart. Lyissa was trying to master the elements, until the Heresy came along. She would have settled into it eventually, I think, without something else to occupy her time.

Rilleta has much, very much, to answer for.

Lusirimonialata's Commentary

All the Temple is aflutter! Today we are to have a visit from the Queen, for the first time since I was suddenly attacked. She will speak with the High Priestess only, I think, but that does not matter. She will still be in the Temple, and blessing everyone around her with her presence. I wish that I had more of the History complete, so that I might show it to her and receive her praise. I am sure that she would find no fault with her portrayal, since the History's purpose is to showcase the evil of the writers and not their truth.

And she is here. I must abandon my writing for now.

Oh, it was wonderful! The Queen did indeed stand with the High Priestess and watch the rest of us as if we were children, her smile fixed and glittering. But that is so excusable that I need hardly explain it at all. Of course, why would she not feel that we are children to her? She knows more of suffering and true hardship than we ever will. She is almost the only monarch of Orlath to have fought the Dark back in between the wars, and she has converted her enemies instead of killed them. It was her concern for Rilleta's soul that persuaded her to keep the Rennon High Priestess alive, and of course all know what came of that.

When the High Priestess knelt to kiss her hand, I was sure that I was going to cry for joy. So integrated in that moment were duty to Queen and duty to Goddess that I cannot help but think they provide a model for me. I will try to listen to the Ladies of my heart.

Lady Teridona enjoyed the display, too. I could feel her stillness beside me, but the stillness ceased when the Queen made such a gracious gesture to our High Priestess. Then she laughed, quietly. I glanced at her, and saw that those large blue-green eyes that so many in the Temple admire were fixed on the Queen. They glowed with fervent admiration. I thought I saw a flash of something darker behind that admiration, but of course, there would be.

I do not believe that the Lady is not Rivendonian royalty. She must be, and in line for the throne. And if she becomes Queen someday, then she will have to deal with Twydon. She might feel overshadowed by her. And that is perfectly understandable.

A mighty Queen rules Orlath. She has achieved miracles in her time. And you are about to read of one of them.

A History of Rilleta, High Priestess of Rennon

Chapter 22

Lost in the Darkness

"There have been countless instances of someone almost surrendering to the Darkness, only to be pulled back to the Light at the last minute. But you shouldn't take that as permission to behave just as you would. The Light might save you, but it might not. You should always keep that in mind."

-Advice of the Priestess Darkslayer to her apprentices, in the Dawn of Days.

"Please. I'll be good. Let me go."

Rilleta had lost count of how long she had been whimpering the words. It might have been hours, but then, she couldn't tell the hours or how they passed in this darkened tomb of a place. At least she was no longer hooked to the spiderweb, or hanging upside-down. They had helped her down and given her a cup of water to drink. The cup was the only solid thing in the darkness, other than the stone that caged her or the Deathweaver spiders that scuttled around her.

Rilleta flinched and screamed whenever one of the spiders brushed past. She knew it wasn't the best idea, that it might agitate them further, but she couldn't help herself.

What had been done to her...

It was horrible. She had watched it happen to others, and joined in singing the praises of Elle when the condemned surrendered. Yet at the same time, she had always had the serenity in her heart that this would never happen to her. She would never betray Elle. And then, when she did, she thought that she would win the war, as Rennon had reassured her she was Destined to, and would never have to endure such torments.

So far, she had not broken or betrayed her God. But Rilleta was horribly certain it was only a matter of time.

The Deathweavers turned the person they bit into a painfully messy heap of organs when they employed their deadliest bite, but they had a variety of bites that were lesser than that. They could use them on her, and they did. Rilleta lifted an arm to her face. She couldn't see it, but she knew that it was covered with scars she would bear until she died. She would limp, if they ever let her out of the darkness.

I want to see the light, and the Light, again.

Yet, at the same time, she knew what it would mean if that happened. If she emerged from the arched room again, it would be to face her execution, or to face the mocking ceremony of "redemption" and a welcome back into the ranks of Elle. And she didn't want that to happen.

But I don't want to die, in the darkness or light, either.

She whimpered, and then flinched as a spider crawled near her. Before she could stop herself, she kicked out.

There was a chitter, and a painful bite. Rilleta screamed and curled around the wound. The spider chittered at her again, and scurried away. Rilleta was convinced that it was laughing. Sometimes the damn things almost seemed intelligent.

Maybe they were.

Maybe most of the things she had believed for most of her life- such as spiders not being intelligent, or herself not being the kind of person who broke under torture- were lies.

Rilleta curled herself around her stomach as though around a wound, panting shallowly. She could feel eyes on her in the darkness. She was sure she could feel them. And if they were the eyes of spiders and not fellow human beings, what did that matter?

"Leave me alone!" she screamed.

Her voice echoed off and died in the silence. And then, most unexpectedly, there was a response.

Rilleta felt a cool wind on her skin. Then torchlight flickered and glowed, and Rilleta found herself gazing hungrily at the fire as it blazed in Princess Twydon's hand. The Princess stepped forward and placed the torch in a sconce on the wall.

"I'm sorry that we couldn't leave you the ability to work your own magic," she said in her light, cool voice, just barely glancing at Rilleta. "But you know the reason why, of course. You would only try to escape."

Rilleta didn't reply, keeping her gaze fixed on the torch. The fire was life. It kept the spiders at bay. Or perhaps it wouldn't, and the spiders just felt like circling around Twydon's skirts at a distance from the torch, but it was a helpful illusion.

She crawled forward, reaching for it, and then flinched as she happened upon the edge of her tiny island. A shallow moat was cut in the floor, surrounding her, and filled with water. The spiders could cross it easily enough on the webs strung from pillar to pillar, but Rilleta couldn't cross it, and couldn't use her Scarlet magic as long as it surrounded her. It was an Azure mage's calling, that water.

"What keeps you from giving in, Rilleta?"

Rilleta blinked and looked away from water and fire both, back to Twydon's face. Hatred stirred in her at her call, but it was less bright than it had been. This place was breaking her. Rilleta knew that, and resented it, and for a time her resentment was enough to push the hatred a little higher.

"Why do you think that I want to give in?" she asked.

"Because you have the desire of Light in your heart," said Twydon, as patiently and gently as if she really thought it was true. "If you did not, then you would have killed yourself before you were taken. You would have gone to join the Darkness, rather than give yourself up at all to the judgment of Elle."

"Yours is not the only god of Light. Rennon is part of the Light as well, and not the Dark, as your lies would have it!"

"But Elle is identical with the Light, and the Cycle, and Destiny," said Twydon, sounding faintly surprised. *Probably she didn't think that I could continue with the argument,* Rilleta thought, and rubbed at her eyes; they were still stinging from the sudden light after such long darkness. "How can you worship a god that is of the Light, if you don't worship Her?"

"It's useless trying to talk to you," said Rilleta, turning away until she could only see Twydon from a corner of her eye. "You're interested in nothing but your own view of things."

"I could say the same of you," said Twydon. "But I have not given up on you. Nor will I. Truly, my lady, you must know little of things, to think that I could ever give up trying to help you."

"You have no reason to."

"I have every reason to," said Twydon. "No soul will be lost to the Light while I reign."

"You do not yet reign. Your father sits the throne."

Twydon smiled. Rilleta shivered. The smile wasn't particularly cruel; she had seen smiles on the faces of some Dark things that were crueler. But the self-assurance behind it, combined with the words, were horrible. "That is only a matter of time. I will be Queen in time, and I want all of my subjects to be part of the Light and worship Elle."

"That is a terrible ambition."

"Why?" Twydon spread her hands, her eyes intense. Firelight shone in them as she moved her head, and once again Rilleta thought it was a pity that she was not a Scarlet mage. *Perhaps she would understand, then.* "Is it not only the ambition that all Orlathian monarchs have had, or should have had, since the time of Queen Aneron? I am only a little firmer about fulfilling all the terms of the ambition, that is all."

"Others did not use this kind of torture."

"You know better than that," said Twydon at once, voice amused. "You were a priestess of the Lady. You read the records. You know that torture has been one of our tools from the earliest of times. Torture is only evil when the Dark employs it. No, Rilleta, there is some other reason that you don't want to surrender and worship Elle. And I want to know what it is, so that I don't need to keep you here. Tell me what your ambition is, so that I may fulfill it."

"You would never listen to me."

"Speak, and we will see."

"I don't want any more Scarlet mages burned," said Rilleta. "You know that you burned some, and the priestesses burned some. Don't try to deny it!"

"Of course we did," said Twydon. "But they defied Elle, and said they worshipped Rennon. We drowned Azure mages who said they did the same, and choked Gust mages to death, and buried Crop mages alive. The punishment for that kind of treason has always fit the element."

Rilleta blinked, unnerved. "It wasn't only Scarlet mages, then?"

"No," said Twydon. "But Scarlet mages were the only ones you cared about."

That stung; it brought back memories of Klessa and others saying the same thing. Rilleta drew herself up. "I know what will happen now that you've conquered me. You'll burn Scarlet mages to death, and persuade others not to have children, and you'll kill all the Heretics."

"That depends on you."

"What?"

Twydon smoothed her hand over one of the spiders' heads. "My ancestress Aneron, though she was great in so many other ways, made several errors," she said. "One of those was not sealing herself to Scarlet, because she didn't like that element. She bound in Light instead, and while that was a wise decision, it has cost us. Most Scarlet mages don't feel the instinctive devotion to the Goddess that we want them to feel, and many other mages of other elements don't, either. We must plug the hole in the Cycle, and I am prepared to do it."

"How?" Rilleta asked breathlessly, when Twydon paused.

"There needs to be a suitably dramatic presentation, to compel the beliefs of others," said Twydon. "And I think that it will come when you convert back to the worship of Elle and announce that in front of everyone."

"Are you mad?"

"No. Are you, to think that your Heretics can go on fighting?"

"Rennon is still there—"

"And much He helped you, when you lost the battle," said Twydon. "You lost because Elle is the true embodiment of Light, Rilleta, and not Rennon. That is all the truth there is in the world. Will you go on fighting for a god who betrayed you?"

Rilleta closed her eyes and clenched her fists. "You're going to make this hard, aren't you?"

"Oh, yes."

Rilleta licked her lips. *I am not truly on the edge of a precipice, she reassured herself. I can always go back. Rennon will understand, and forgive, me. It doesn't mean that I can't speak to Twydon of ways to save Scarlet mages.*

"You would stop burning Scarlet mages?"

"Yes. And Scarlet would finally have the place in the Circle of Four it should always have had. That will mean a closer tie to the other mages, and a more instinctive devotion to the Goddess."

"What about the people with the blended elements?"

"What?"

"The mages born with Steam, and Lightning, and Metal magic." Rilleta opened her eyes, seeking out the Princess's face. *Can it be that she does not know of them? But she must.* "Will the mages of the blended elements be saved as well?"

"Come, Rilleta." Twydon's voice was soft and coaxing. "Don't tell me that you believe that nonsense? The Cycle is only four. Everyone knows that."

"But--"

"The elements are pure. Everyone knows that."

Rilleta licked her lips again. "But you would spare my life, and give sanctuary to the Scarlet mages?"

"I promise it."

"What about the surviving Heretics?"

Twydon shrugged. "Orlath needs her people, and Elle's history is full of penitent converts. I see no reason they could not convert and continue living, so long as they stayed true to their new allegiance." Rilleta heard the gentle threat in those words, and did not mistake the steel behind it.

She closed her eyes and prayed one more time to the Lord of Sunlight and Flame. No answer came back.

Forgive me, those whose lives I abandon. But truly, the Scarlet mages are the ones who have suffered most. And the Steam and Lightning and Metal mages were never committed to the God as we were. We may transfer our allegiance, and perhaps even keep some memory of worship of Rennon alive, and strike again in another, distant day.

And the Goddess is forgiving. I know that much.

She opened her eyes and said, "Very well."

"Call on the name of Elle."

Rilleta did, not truly expecting anything to happen. "Elle, Huntress, Fair One, Mother of Light, I ask that You forgive me."

And then she cried out as a deep and tender sensation of love filled her. She was held in a divine Hand, and kissed by large soft lips. She trembled with passion, with adoration. It was not enough to drive out the memory of the God's Fire, but it was more than Rennon had given her since she came here, and that was something.

"I will go and tell my father the King, then, shall I?" asked Twydon, above her repeated cries.

Lusirimonalata's Commentary

And so, Light and joy comes from the most unexpected place! Of course, I don't think that the Queen, who was our Princess then, truly offered much that was unexpected. But Rilleta thought of her as an enemy, and it is unlikely that she would have looked to her for the salvation of her soul.

Nevertheless, that was where her salvation lay. Queen Twydon has ever strewn such blessings with an open hand, and it has only been the blindness of our eyes that refuses to see, rather than because the blessing is not there to be offered. It is a lesson that we would all do well to keep in mind. How many times have I thought I didn't hear the Goddess answer me when I cried out in frustration or weariness, only because it was my ears that were closed to the answer, and not Hers to the prayer?

I have been most unexpectedly interrupted. Lady Teridona opened the door and stepped into the room without knocking. I have become used to this, since I know that she might suddenly want to read a selection from Klessa's Journals or Rilleta's History before I bind it in. I welcome her presence, since she is keen and incisive, and several times has pointed out that something I would have eliminated as blasphemy is needed in the History to point out evil.

But she came in agitated this time, and when she sat down, fixed her eyes not on the book but on me.

"Lusirimonalata," she asked abruptly, "have you ever been in love?"

I fear that I blushed. "Of course I have," I said. "I think it is an affliction that comes to us all."

"Yes. An affliction. That is exactly what it is." The Lady passed a hand through her dark hair. Then she closed her eyes as if that simple gesture had pained her. "But you are not now with the one whom you love."

"In a way, I am," I said. "The Goddess is the one I love above all others."

Teridona smiled a little. "I know the feeling. But as well as the immortal, I have also a mortal love, and I am not sure what to do about him."

"What has he done?"

"He irritated me immensely, once, by opposing that which I loved above all other things."

"The Goddess?"

Teridona's eyes opened, but fell, and she uttered a little sigh. "I am in some ways a contradiction. I love the Goddess, I adore Her, and yet at the same time, I love the Light more."

"That is not a contradiction. Elle is Light."

Teridona looked back up at me, and there was such pain in her eyes as I never want to see again. "It may not seem so, but it is a contradiction, at least in my case," she said, her voice like the sound of shaken bells. "But, be that as it may, my love opposed me, and I declared that I would leave him and serve that which I loved best. But I have spoken to him again, and again, and whirled nearer and nearer him. He has shown me evidence that makes me think I was wrong."

"About what?" I asked with rising alarm. Her words trod near to blasphemy. But I reminded myself not to leap to that conclusion. I could have mistaken the intent of her speech.

"About serving the Light."

"My Lady, are you being tempted by the Dark?"

She began to weep. "Help me, Lusirimonalata," she begged.

"My lady, you must stand firm. Think of all that you will lose if you lose your devotion to the Light. Heaven with Elle, the regard of every true human being in the world-" I trembled at the thought of it. "What is love before that?"

Teridona bowed her head, her shoulders shaking with sobs. I reached out and put a hand on her shoulder, not sure what else to do. An embrace might be the wrong thing to do. I sensed that she was very delicately balanced, poised between Elle and the Dark, and I didn't want to push her too far one way or the other.

At last, Teridona drew in a deep breath, and said, "Thank you, Lusirimonalata."

"I did nothing."

She squeezed my hand, gazing deeply into my eyes. "You set my feet on the right path. I shall never forget that."

And before I could protest again that I had done nothing, she had turned and was gone.

I sat there in silence for a moment, and then I resumed writing. But I am more confident now. I know that Teridona will choose the right course; that conviction was in her eyes. I could do nothing. It was all the Goddess.

And the Goddess intervened in Rilleta's case, but not in Klessa's, as you will see in the next Journal entry. Of course, She could not. Klessa had made her choices long hence.

The Journals of Klessa of the Nine Wonders

34 Greenborn, 106 OR

I write this in haste. Soon enough, I shall have time to write no more.

Forgive me if this skips or hurries in parts. I shall try to put everything I remember down, and there is some hope they might actually let me do so.

This morning, I caught sight of Lyissa. There was no other it could have been, even given the unlikelihood of meeting another solitary traveler on the Plains in this season of armies marching. I would have recognized the set of her back and the tumble of her blond hair anywhere.

"Lyissa!"

She jerked at the sound of my voice, and hit her horse with the reins. But she had just galloped hard- I had seen the dust of her traveling as I chased her- and I knew the poor creature couldn't run far. Besides, my mare was rested. I had only to trot after her horse, and wait until it slowed to a canter, then a trot, and then a walk. Then it stopped completely, panting, head hanging.

"Lyissa!" I called again.

She slid from the horse's back and ran into the tall grass.

Shaking my head at her persistence, I rode after her. The Doralissan mare breasted the grass with a will, as she has done since I took her from the stable, and soon enough I saw Lyissa running ahead of me, tripping over her red-dyed robe now and again. Such things were made for looking dramatic, and not for heavy running.

"I have brought no one else with me," I shouted after her. "And I let the other Heretics go before I left."

Lyissa halted. I think it was my last line about the Heretics that got her, more than the reassurance that I was alone. The burning anger in her eyes when she turned around seemed to indicate that she could have called enough fire to incinerate a whole troop. "Why would you do that?" she asked.

"You heard enough of the talk of Queen Memoryrose and the others when you were their prisoner?" I asked, as I halted a distance from her. The mare snorted and pawed the ground, wanting to run again. I stroked her mane to calm her, keeping my eyes on Lyissa.

"Yes. They deceived Rilleta. Their support was a sham." Even from here, I could hear the sound of her teeth grinding. "I am going to warn her of it."

"Do you really think you'll get there in time?" I made my voice as gentle as I could.

"What other choice have I?"

With a start, I saw tears on her cheeks. It is so easy to forget sometimes that she is young, in her early twenties, a full ten years younger than I am. I slid down from the mare, but Lyissa only turned her face away, and did not run.

"They'll cage me if I go back," she said, her voice muffled. "And you'll do the same thing."

I took a deep breath. "I'll do no such thing."

She peered at me from under her hair and sniffled. "That's what you'd say, of course."

"No, it is the truth. I won't try to cage you, and force you back into the Star Circle. I came after you only to burn the last remnants of the friendship between us." I hesitated. "Well, and because your mission is useless."

"What do you mean?" she asked, voice as sharp as lightning with her fury.

"The Lord of the Circle looked ahead," I said. "Or possibly it even happened the day that he looked past the veils of Time. Rilleta is captured, taken by Queen Twydon, or will be shortly. I suspect that it has happened by now."

Lyissa closed her eyes. "Rennon wouldn't save her?" she whispered.

"No."

"Why not?"

I hesitated again. These were secrets that the Masters of the Star Circle didn't know until they were Masters of Six Wonders at least, which Lyissa would never be...

But there would be no Masters of Six Wonders ever again, or at least I was not likely to meet with them. I could see no harm in telling her this.

"Because Orlath is Elle's," I said. "It has always been so. Have you not wondered why fewer Scarlet mages are born here than elsewhere, and fewer with the blended elements?"

"I thought we simply didn't come in for training as often," said Lyissa dully, rubbing her eyes. "But that was only more wishful thinking, I suppose- like wanting to be born a Scarlet mage." She gave me a stabbing glance.

I ignored her. "Orlath is Elle's," I repeated. "Queen Aneron did something strange to the Cycle when she swore herself to the land. She left Scarlet out, and I think that is the reason that Scarlet mages rebel so easily and so often. They are not bound to the Cycle as the rest of the elemental mages are."

"Why is that a bad thing?"

"It means that Rennon, or any other God of Flame, cannot reach through to you as He might be able to in another Kingdom," I said. "If you had held this rebellion in Ilantra, it might work. Of course, if you were in Ilantra, I don't think there would be a need for such a rebellion. That royalty does not have a record of treating their Scarlet mages poorly."

"If you suspected this, why didn't you tell me?" Lyissa demanded.

"What would I have said? You wouldn't have believed me, and neither would Rilleta. She was a fanatic, determined to have her war anyway."

"Don't speak of the Lady Rilleta like that!"

"How should I speak of her, then?"

"Respectfully. Politely."

"But I don't feel at all respectful or polite towards her."

Lyissa shook her head. "You knew that we were doomed from the beginning, and you didn't tell me," she said, returning to what she obviously thought was the most important thing.

"Where would it have fit in, with all the chanting and the prayers and the constant invocations to Rennon? And you would only have laughed at me. The only reason you're willing to believe at all is that Rennon hasn't won the war for you as He said He would."

Lyissa rubbed her eyes. "Why would a god lie?"

I shrugged. "Maybe He didn't. Maybe He gave a message that was misinterpreted, the way the prophecies of Elle can be. Or maybe Rilleta mistook what He said. Or lied about it."

"Stop saying that she would do a thing like that."

And, strange to say, that was when I think the last of the love I once felt for Lyissa died in my heart. She was admitting some things, but not others. She was still chained to the fanatic Rilleta, even as it seemed she might give up the fanatical attachment to the Scarlet and her god.

I breathed deeply, a pure breath of the smoke-free air, and turned away. "I can only tell you what I think probably happened. Rilleta might be free and sitting on the throne of Orlath now for all I know. I suppose that--"

I broke off, seeing the flash of metal overhead. For a moment, I thought that the dragon was coming back, but it wasn't so. A silver eagle, the special friend of the monarchs of Doralissa, bore towards us faster than I had thought one could fly. It circled once overhead, then dived. I put up my arm to receive it, startled.

The eagle ducked its head as much to say that it would give a bow to me, as courtesy demanded, and then turned and pulled something from its leg. It was a folded piece of parchment, bound there by string. By the time I realized this, the eagle was in the air again, and bearing back towards the west, towards Ozue.

"Someone sent you a message?" Lyissa asked.

"A message in general, I think," I murmured, seeing the seal of the Queen of Doralissa. I broke the parchment and opened it.

I shall remember those words as long as I live- which shall not be very long, of course. I can write them here now.

To all Heretics and followers of Rennon,

Know that your leader, Rilleta, was defeated utterly, and taken to the court of King Seldon. After spending a short time in the pits beneath the Temple of Elle, she found the Light again, at the hands of Princess Twydon. She has now turned back to the service of Elle. All Scarlet mages who come forward and declare themselves in allegiance to Elle will be spared. All those who claim a different element shall be spared, as long as they declare allegiance to Elle and accept treatment for their delusions. All those who resist or continue to proclaim or practice the faith of Rennon shall be killed.

Doralissa, Ilantra, and Rivendon support the Princess in her actions.

By my hand and seal, and in the name of the Goddess whom we all adore,

Memoryrose, Queen of Doralissa.

I passed the parchment in silence to Lyissa.

She read it, and then burst into tears.

Lusirimonalata's Commentary

How anyone could weep at receiving such a message, I do not know. The message spoke of the ending of war and the union of Kingdoms. How is that not cause for joy?

And the union of the Kingdoms has remained steady, despite Queen Memoryrose's oddness and the unsteady efforts of the Traitor Prince. I am sure, as long as people like the Lady Teridona reign over the Kingdoms, that they will remain in alliance, and those who attempt to turn them from the Light will be swiftly dealt with.

I must now sleep; my hand shakes, and my eyesight flickers. I have again spent too long reading Klessa's crabbed writing. Strange how she reaches out, even from beyond the stake, to try and aggravate those who study her!

Hush.

Quiet.

Lusirimonalata is sleeping. Good priestess. I see the draughts that came from "the Queen" have had their effect after all.

I look at her face, and cannot see why anyone would choose her as the compiler of this History. She seems to spend much of her time complaining about the magnitude of the task, instead of being honored by it. She fusses and writes down her private thoughts instead of sticking to history. She thinks that we'll be honored by her love for the Goddess, when it only serves to make her sound mealy-mouthed.

Hah.

Of course, I am writing down my private thoughts, too, but that is different. I am not a priestess. I don't worship Elle. I can think whatever I want in the privacy of my head, and if I put my private thoughts on paper, at least I'm not pretending that a goddess is behind me and approves of all the stray thoughts that I set down.

Time to reveal myself to Lusirimonalata, I think.

What is this?

I find myself staring again at the unfamiliar writing. But this time, it is not quite so unfamiliar as it once would have been. It is the kind of writing that I saw once before, when I was convinced the Goddess had guided my hand so that I would not have to write approval of Klessa that I was not comfortable with.

And such blasphemous words! I will not put this commentary in the book. It cannot be. It is too blasphemous.

I shall write a new commentary instead.

Lusirimalata's True Commentary

This is much better. I am sure the Goddess is with me this time; I can feel Her calm presence, filling me, controlling me, guiding my hand.

That nattering--

But no, I will not think of that.

As I was saying, that anyone could weep when such a message came to her is only more proof, as if more were needed, how much the Heretics wanted war, and wept when it was denied them. They claimed that they were peace-lovers, and wanted only to see the burned Scarlet mages treated fairly, that they fought a Goddess who did not love Her people enough.

What nonsense! The tears of a Rennon priestess at peace are proof enough of that, of course. But, in case more proof is needed, one need only think back to the hymn that the evil one who haunts me, my enemy, bound in this History. It speaks of hunting down my sisters and I like mice or other prey. How could anyone think of that and still desire peace?

No, it was a good bargain that Rilleta made. She might have thought that she made it only because she wanted the Scarlet mages who would otherwise be burned to live, but I am convinced it was more than that. She also worshipped the Goddess again, and those were not the terms of the bargain. She gave in because she had the burning desire for Light in her that our Queen foresaw. She gave in because Elle truly guided her.

And, of course, that means--

How boring.

I have knocked her on the head again, if only because it's easier than waiting for one of the trance draughts to take effect. Brewing the draught from the poison of the snakes takes some time, and I'm still a novice at it; the Prince is better at the brewing than I am. I can never be sure how long she will sleep, and how long before I must once again run away and resume my innocent guise of casual visitor to these rooms.

But when she is knocked on the head, then I can simply watch for signs of her stirring, and hit her again if she gets troublesome.

As for what she was saying about Rilleta...

What nonsense.

The woman *betrayed* her people, and didn't simply do it because she really wanted Scarlet mages to live. She always cared less about her followers who served blended elements. She may have tried to pretend otherwise, but she truly cared less about them. And she gave in to Twydon because she wanted to live.

There was no nobler reason.

There almost never is.

She wakes, again.

Goddess grant me strength...

My hands shake with fear.

The references to the Prince and the "casual visitor" to my rooms have confirmed it. The strange writer must be Teridona. I will call upon the Lady, as much as I don't like to, and ask that she confirm this guess.

In the meantime, I will bind in the first pages of the next section of Rilleta's History, and hope that Teridona won't put up much resistance when I confront her with the proof.

A History of Rilleta, High Priestess of Rennon

Chapter 23

Shifting the Cycle

"Break, fire, and bow down, earth.

The elements in the Goddess have true birth.

And to the will of Her Chosen must bow.

Shift the Cycle, turn the Cycle; do it now!"

-Ancient chant of the priestesses of Shara, referring to a now unknown ritual.

"You have chosen redemption?"

"I have."

Rilleta wondered a little at the sound of her own voice, clear and strong and faultless, and then dismissed the wonder. There was no need to gape over her new devotion to the Goddess, though some of the nobles in the Court did blink and stare as if they couldn't quite understand it. They chattered to each other when they thought no one was looking, and scowled at other times. Rilleta had heard some comments of "shifts like a Gust mage in the wind."

She didn't care. They could think what they liked. They hadn't felt the Goddess burning inside them, and how She surpassed not only Rennon but also the previous face of Her that Rilleta had known. That had been the Goddess who was the Mother of All, the gentle and distant goddess who treated mortals as Her children.

This was the Lady of White Flame, clear and shining, Mistress of Redemption.

And the difference between them was so great and so wonderful that they might almost have been different gods.

Rilleta turned from her thoughts back to Princess Twydon, who was watching her with patient, cruel, clear eyes.

"And you have chosen redemption of your own free will?" Twydon continued, in the words of the ritual that she had reassured Rilleta would be necessary.

"I have."

"And you forsake the worship of Rennon, utterly and completely?"

"I do."

"Then burn His symbol now."

Rilleta reached out, and accepted the sunburst symbol that Twydon held out to her. For a moment, she just cradled it in her palm, staring at it, and wondering that such a small thing could ever have commanded such allegiance from her. It was just a wooden sunburst, nothing like the lovely silver crescent moons of the Goddess.

She called fire. The Scarlet answered her, roaring in joy, and sprang up on the tripod that had been prepared for it.

Rilleta held out her hand.

A subtle vibration seemed to ring through the sunburst, and she hesitated, wondering what it had been.

Rennon?

No one answered her query, at least not with a voice that she recognized, but the sunburst symbol vibrated again.

Rilleta might have pulled it back in against her breast and tried to think more about what this meant, but Princess Twydon put a hand on her shoulder. Rilleta shuddered. She wondered if her own touch had ever felt like that to any of the priestesses of Rennon-strong and reassuring, yet full of possible condemnation at the same time.

"Rilleta? Will you not spill the symbol of the false God in the flames?"

Rilleta took a deep breath, and nodded. The Goddess filled her with song and white fire again, and she wondered that she had ever hesitated. She tilted her palm up and spilled the sunburst into the flames.

The flames roared and snapped once, and then there came a heavy, ringing clap of wings. Rilleta leaped back, unnerved.

The flames shifted and crowded closer together. Rilleta thought she caught a glimpse of a head in the flickering colors. Before she could convince herself it was just a trick of the light, the head shook, and moved, and then a brilliant bird colored like the fire rose above the tripod, singing in a voice wilder than any creature of the Goddess should have.

Rilleta breathed through her mouth as she stared at it. *A phoenix. What is a phoenix doing here?*

She didn't know. The phoenix was a symbol of rebirth beyond hardship, and while she had certainly come through darkness, she wouldn't have thought her rebirth a thing of hardship. But perhaps the gods had different standards.

The phoenix hung singing in the air, singing until Rilleta saw some of those who weren't Scarlet mages in the crowd step forward, their mouths agape, reaching out. Then the bird turned and shot north, towards the Rashars and what lay beyond them.

For a moment, staring after it, Rilleta had a strange fantasy. *The faith of Rennon will not die. It will only lie still for a while, smoldering like the embers, and then rise again in the foothills of the Rashars...*

She shook her head. It was a ridiculous fantasy. The god was a demon. She knew that now. And demons, without anyone to worship them, withered up and vanished. Everyone knew that.

She turned back to Princess Twydon, and waited. What she had done so far was a part of the Redemption Ceremony, if one didn't count the unexpected appearance of the phoenix. But she was not sure what would come next. Twydon had spoken of doing something called Shifting the Cycle. That could be almost anything, given Rilleta's lack of knowledge.

The Princess gazed into her eyes again, and then opened her mouth and began to sing like the phoenix. A gust of wind stirred about her.

Someone answered with a low, ringing voice from the front row of spectators. Rilleta turned, her gaze passing out over the courtyard, and saw a man clad in the blue robes of an Azure mage. He held out his hands, and water poured from his fingers to the ground. The water seemed to carry the song with it, and Rilleta found her gaze irresistibly drawn along with it...

...until another voice began to sing on the other side of the courtyard, and Rilleta found herself turning again. That man was surrounded by the golden glow of Crop magic, and green plants rose from the stones at his feet. He plucked a leaf from one and then nodded to her.

Rilleta called up a flicker of Scarlet on her palm and sang as well, or at least imitated the wordless humming of the other mages, not quite sure what else to do.

From the approving look that Twydon gave her, that was what she should do. Twydon gestured, and Rilleta stopped singing, along with the Azure and Crop mages. For a moment, there was silence, and then the Princess moved forward, arms held high.

"I reclaim the throne that has been empty since my ancestress Aneron came to this land," she said. "She had the best of intentions, but what she chose is something that no future monarch of Orlath should be bound to. I choose to reclaim the Scarlet, and bind myself to that magic as well as the other kinds of elemental magic."

A deep hum in the earth answered her. Rilleta took a step back and eyed the ground, not sure what would happen next.

The stones heaved and moved aside, and the head of a leathery creature poked up from beneath them. Rilleta stared. *A gnome?*

It seemed impossible. Only the rarest of Crop mages could control gnomes, and even those with the power to do so had vanished generations back. And Twydon wasn't even a Crop mage! But when the little creature moved, the sunlight flashed off lines of gems and metal in its skin. It had to be a gnome.

"What would you, mistress?" it asked, hunching its already hunched shoulders.

"Hold the Crop to me," said Twydon, as solemnly as if that made sense, and then turned and paced towards the Azure mage, halting and holding out her hands.

This time, the fountain in the center of the courtyard stirred, and then a sparkling head poked forth from it. The figure was female, at least vaguely. Shining, constantly falling hair tumbled down her shoulders and back into the fountain. Rilleta blinked very fast. *An undine. Will she call on salamanders and sylphs as well, I wonder?*

"What would you?" the undine asked. Rilleta noted that it omitted the Princess's title. She smiled a little, in spite of herself. Undines were said to be the most stubborn of the elementals, and the most deliberately reluctant to understand human titles and gestures of respect.

Twydon had obviously decided to ignore this. "Hold the Azure to me," she said, and then turned, gesturing with one hand. Rilleta jumped as a wind seemed to spring from the Princess's palm and caress her own cheek.

"Hear me," said Twydon, staring at her intently. "I am Gust, and you are Scarlet. Will you listen to me, and join your fate with mine?"

"I have decided that already, my lady," said Rilleta, conscious of the intense gazes on her. Was this how Queen Aneron had felt, when she betrothed Prince Sorrasonde of Doralissa, or swore the elements of the world to her? "I have made my choice for Elle, and for my service to you."

"And as for your element?"

"My lady?" was the only thing Rilleta could think to reply. Truly, no one had told her about this ceremony.

"Will Scarlet follow you?"

"I- my lady, I do not know."

"It must," said Princess Twydon, taking a step forward, eyes furiously aglow. "It must submit, or die. We will bind the mages, or we will kill and exile them."

Rilleta firmed her heart against the immediate horror. *That would make my sacrifice useless- but she didn't say she would do it. Just that it's what would happen if certain conventions weren't obeyed.* "I am prepared to say that Scarlet will follow me," she said, firming her gaze and keeping it desperately on Twydon's face. "I am willing to risk my life and my faith in the Goddess on it."

That, or something like it, must have been the right thing to say. The tightness in Twydon's face eased, and she came the last few steps forward with a relaxed and regal stride. "Then look at me, Rilleta, and speak the words I tell you," she murmured.

Rilleta fixed her gaze on the other woman's, and Twydon said, "In the name of the Cycle, I bind myself to Orlath."

"In the name of the Cycle, I bind myself to Orlath."

Twydon held up a hand, making a circle with it, and Rilleta found herself repeating the motion, as if she could not help herself. Twydon spoke more words, and she spoke after her, but coming nearer and nearer, until at last their voices blended together, speaking the words at the same time.

"The true Cycle is four elements: Crop, Gust, Azure, and Scarlet. Scarlet is the wildest of all these, and for a long time was left out of the Cycle in Orlath. But the time to yield to a Queen's personal discomfort has passed. We must instead yield to what all know is true, and bow our heads to the will of the Goddess and Destiny, which are tied inseparably to the Cycle. Fire must serve, or it must be enslaved. There is no escape, no middle ground. Will you serve?"

It took Rilleta a moment to realize that the last words had been Twydon's alone. She had instinctively known that she wasn't supposed to say them. She paused just a moment, to shake her ringing head, and then focused on Twydon and tentatively nodded.

"Say it," said Twydon, a hint of a smile playing around her lips.

"I am ready to serve, my lady."

"Then accept my blessing," said Twydon, and leaned forward, leaning her lips against Rilleta's in the gentlest of kisses.

Rilleta gasped. It was as if she had swallowed fire. The burning of the white flame inside her, even the god's Fire beneath her skin, was nothing next to this. She sagged, and was barely aware of the Princess's arms curving around her and supporting her.

Her gaze fixed on the sky.

It was filled with fire.

Curling, golden and red and orange, the lines of flame stabbed through the sky, and linked themselves to the earth. Then they reached out to the east, and Rilleta somehow found the strength to turn and follow them with her gaze. The great eastern sea accepted them, and the sight of the fire burning on the water, in harmony with it, was one of the most beautiful sights she had ever seen.

She heard the gasps of the crowd, and felt something else, too, a profound stirring and shifting within herself. She closed her eyes, the better to listen.

The stirring continued, and then abruptly Scarlet burst out of her. Rilleta opened her eyes, frantic. Twydon had no protection; she would be burned in the Scarlet-

But the Princess was laughing, her hair aflame around her but not singing, her skin blazing but not charring. She tossed her head, and the flames leapt, propelled by the wind, to the Azure mage. He filled them with water, drops dancing around and burning within the flames, and they traveled to the Crop mage. He gathered them all and stabbed them down into the earth again.

In the moments before the light flared once more and then faded, Rilleta thought she saw the gnome grasping and holding the mingled elements, and the undine leaping among the water drops, her face alive as a fox's with mischief.

They were gone, at last, but Rilleta turned and looked out over the faces in the crowd, and knew that the impact had not faded. The people who had watched it still trembled with awe. She could see some of them crouching or kneeling in the very back, and still others straining their necks as if they wanted to catch a last glimpse of the undine, or the Cycle's fires, or the gnome. They were not talking. That would have been too much.

Their gazes fixed on the Princess Twydon, and Rilleta knew something else had changed, too.

She followed their gazes, and caught her breath. It was so hard to remember that she had once hated this woman. It hurt her, physically, to imagine it. How had it happened? Why had it happened?

Twydon stood shining in her own cloak of Light. Around her, her Destiny shimmered and moved, gold touched with white, the color of the Gust. At times it flared almost as brightly as diamond, and Rilleta could see currents of other colors moving in it, currents of the elements she ruled. She had no doubt that Twydon was Queen of Scarlet, in a way that no monarch of Orlath since Aneron had been. And she had no doubt that her loyalty was gone from her. As beautiful as the burning of the Lady of White Flame was, it was high and immortal and too wild to sustain Rilleta all the time.

But here...

Here is a mortal Queen I can revere and love.

"Daughter, what are you doing?"

The trembling, querulous voice should have been enough to shatter the ceremonious moment, but, somehow, it was not. Twydon turned and met her father's eyes as King Seldon tottered up onto the stage. Rilleta looked for fear in her face, and saw none. Twydon's eyes were large, too, but accepting. She knew what had to be done, Rilleta thought, and felt a fierce and somewhat inappropriate flash of pride in the Queen.

"I have shifted the Cycle, Father," said Twydon simply. "I have bound the Scarlet to the other elements."

"How could you do such a thing, Daughter?"

"There were too many rebellions in the name of the Cycle, Father, and that is because Aneron did not control it as firmly," said Twydon casually. "Now it is tied to the four pure and true elements, and everything is as it should be."

"What about the blended elements?"

"You tread on heresy, Father," said Twydon. "The blended elements do not exist, and the Star Circle, soon if not now, will be no more."

"You will not say it is blasphemy, surely, to speak of Mist magic?" asked King Seldon, coming to a staggering stop before her. Rilleta looked on his face, eyes watering, weak and old, and could hardly contain her disgust. *How can he stand before a fair, young creature like this, and think that anyone will support him?* "Your mother's brother had it."

"He was a criminal," said Twydon calmly. "He ran away to Ilantra. I don't wish to speak of him, Father." She paused. "I wish to speak of other things."

"Such as?"

"You have the title and the crown that should be mine, Father." Twydon's face was passionate, yet tender- stern, yet gentle. Rilleta was enchanted. She had never seen such a thing, even in the statues of God or Goddess. "I must be Queen of Orlath. I am Queen of the hearts of my people." She looked out over the crowd, and a roar of support for her arose.

"You cannot take it the title and the crown from me until I am dead," said King Seldon, swaying back and forth, back and forth.

"So be it."

Twydon started to take a step forward. King Seldon's eyes widened, and he staggered away from her.

"Wait, my lady!"

Rilleta did not recognize the voice until it had already rung out. It was her own, and she was stepping forward, as though she had a right to interfere in the affairs of Kings and Queens. Rilleta almost hesitated, was almost embarrassed.

Twydon didn't seem to find it inappropriate, though. "Yes, Rilleta?" she asked. "What is it? What have you seen?"

"I will take this burden from your shoulders, my lady," she said. "It is not right that you should have to spill the blood of your father." And now her way was clear, and the Goddess sang within her in approval, and Twydon's face shone like the Light.

"I could not ask such a thing."

"You need not ask it. I offer it."

"You cannot take my life!" burred King Seldon.

But Rilleta paid him no attention. Her gaze was locked with Twydon's, and she saw approval there, and even something that might be relief.

"Do it, then."

Rilleta turned, and lifted a hand.

King Seldon might have run, but Rilleta didn't think he believed, even at the last moment, that he was really going to die. So the flames that flashed forth from her hand and consumed him did so entirely unopposed. The crowd screamed and cheered for her, under the spell of their new Queen.

For a moment, Rilleta's sight seemed to shift back.

Under the spell...

Yes, so we are, we all are. She has changed the Cycle, and she has changed us. I hated her. I still hate her. I-

And then Rilleta looked back at Twydon and her smile, and the disturbing thoughts vanished. She knelt before Twydon, her voice as clear and strong as before.

"Hail the Queen of Orlath!"

And the hails echoing hers rose towards the skies.

Lusirimonalata's Commentary

I am more puzzled than ever. I have returned from the Lady Teridona, my head full of her earnest words.

"I did not sneak into your room and write such words, Lusirimonalata. I never would. If I had such sentiments, I would express them openly, not write them down and ruin the

History that you are trying to compile." A pause. "Why were you so certain that I was the one who had done so?"

I had to lower my eyes then, and admit that her confession the other night about having a lover who was part of the Dark had influenced my suspicions.

"Lusirimonalata. Look at me." She reached up and rested a hand against my cheek, and I looked into her eyes, having no choice. "As I said, I would never betray you like that. I speak openly to those who disappoint or disgust me, as I did once to my lover." She attempted a smile, but I could see tears welling up in her eyes again at the memory. "And if I can speak so to him, why should I hold back my heart when speaking to you, or any of the other priestesses?"

I must admit to a little disappointment at that. If she feels that way about her beloved, it is likely that she will fall to the Dark, after all. But I still think she is delicately poised, and I can only watch and wait.

"I don't know if I truly suspected you or not, my lady," I had to admit. "But the writer spoke of being a casual visitor to my rooms, and—" I shook my head.

"Of course, not just anyone is allowed in there," said Teridona, and then leaned back in her chair and stared at me.

At the time I assumed she was trying to make me uncomfortable enough to leave, and I did so, hurriedly. But now, sitting in my rooms where I am more comfortable than anywhere else, it occurs to me that she might have been trying to tell me something with her gaze. Certainly her eyes are deep enough to hide many messages.

But why would she do so? As she said, she would speak directly to me if I did something that displeased her.

I do not know who the strange visitor is, and I must glance over my shoulder every few moments, wondering if the footstep behind me, or the breath of air down my neck, is the sign of my enemy.

But there is one who might help me, who will never abandon me as a guard would, or not be able to help me through dealing with her own troubles, as the Lady Teridona.

This is Elle.

My Lady, I pray Thee now. Guide me, guard me, protect me with Thine Hand! Grant me strength to know what is right. If the Lady Teridona comes to me again, let me know what to say to her. Fill my mouth with Thy Light and guide her back to Thee!

And guard me from my enemy! Mayest Thou see her when she comes, and strike her down with the pulse of Thy Lightning!

And so now I turn back to Klessa's Journals.

The Journals of Klessa of the Nine Wonders

34 Greenborn, 106 OR

I attempted to comfort Lyissa, but she would not be comforted. She turned away from me, muttering threats and blaming me for any number of things- blaming the priestesses of Elle too, I suppose. I walked away from her at last and stood staring to the south, wondering what was happening there.

Well, I knew what was happening. The message had told me. I wondered how it would affect me, though. I had not been one of the Heretics, but I had been among them.

My oaths to the Dark might protect me, but I could not be sure of that. To tell the truth, I wasn't quite sure why the wounds hadn't split open as I raced to the east. And I could not be sure what Queen Memoryrose would choose to remember of me, or what Glangon would say.

Nothing good, almost certainly.

I squared my shoulders. Azure mages were dead. Heretics were dead. Many people were dead who need never have been if Rilleta had only managed to keep her fanaticism contained. I would go forward and do what I had been promising myself I would do. I would kill her.

"Klessa?"

I looked over my shoulder. Lyissa had dried her tears, but she had not turned back to me. I thought that was just stubbornness at first.

Then I looked at the line of riders emerging from the grass, seeing the fineness of their mounts and their bows, and I understood why she had not looked at me. Any sudden move might cause the Doralissans to shoot.

They were still some distance from us, though. I knew that I could not outrun them. But there was one thing I could do, and I reacted to the idea even as it blazed through my mind. I tackled Lyissa, spilling her to the ground.

She fought back, of course, but only until she realized that I was pulling off her red robe. Then she just stared at me blankly.

"Give me this," I said, holding up a corner of her robe. "And take this." I tugged on my own green robe.

"Klessa- why?"

"There is a chance, a slight chance," I said. "The message said 'Heretics.'"

"Yes..."

"There's a chance that they might take me for the Heretic, and you for the Master of the Star Circle."

"I'm not wearing the robe of a Master of the Star Circle."

I was close enough to reach out and close my hand around her throat. I squeezed, hard. Lyissa gave a strangled squeal, and tears trickled from her eyes as she tried to focus on me.

"Put it on, Lyissa."

She did so, head bowed. I had just barely finished clothing myself in the red robe when the Doralissans came cantering towards us. The mares Lyissa and I had ridden here stirred and gave them greeting. The captain waved her hand, and one of the riders turned and cantered off, no doubt to investigate the sound.

"Who are you?" asked the captain of me, in Doralissan.

I spat at her.

"By the robes, a Rennon Heretic and a Master of the Star Circle," said the captain, undaunted by my behavior, which was slightly unusual. I knew many Doralissans who would have made more of a fuss about the rudeness. She rode her horse in a tight circle around me. "And I think I recognize your faces, my ladies." She looked directly at Lyissa. "Can you call your magic, to prove to me that you aren't a Heretic?"

Lyissa called a flame up on one palm, then a bar of metal to the other hand. Then she made them both vanish, and called a small cloud of steam and a lightning bolt that she cast into the earth.

I smiled grimly. Of course, when her life demanded it, then she would call on the other elements that chance had gifted her with.

The captain nodded, and turned to me. "And you, Heretic. We ride on the word of Queen Memoryrose, to offer redemption to those who will accept it. Will you accept it, and bend your knee to Elle?"

"Never."

I could feel Lyissa staring at me. I ignored her. It wasn't in fealty to her precious god that I did this, as she probably thought. It was in fealty to Shara and the Dark oaths, which would probably destroy me if I agreed to swear to the Light again.

Besides, I didn't feel like bending my knee to Elle.

"It is a pity that you feel that way," said the captain. "We have little else to do, then, but kill you." She held up a hand, and I saw the riders readying their arrows. I stared at them. When my death comes, I intend to meet it with my eyes open.

Even the death that comes nearer and nearer for me now...

"Wait."

I looked up, and then swallowed. One of the Doralissans who had stood guard for me in the past was riding his horse forward. He stared hard at me.

"This is Klessa," he said at last. "The traitor, who ran away when Queen Memoryrose tried to confront her. She struck down the Queen with a snake." He smiled. "I think our lady deserves more of a say in what happens to her. Tie her up, and bring her along, please," he added, looking at the captain.

"And this one?" The captain gestured at Lyissa.

"The Masters of the Star Circle have been granted passage to the north," said the guard, barely glancing at her. "Let her wander north, and join them."

I didn't look back at Lyissa as they hustled me forward and tied me to her mare's saddle. She could take my horse, and go wherever she wanted. There was no reason to look back.

I had done what I wanted to do, and saved her life.

"Wait."

This time it was Lyissa who spoke, and I cursed her. Take the freedom that I offered you and go away, stupid child.

"What?" asked the Doralissan captain, glancing back at her.

"There's something I wanted to say to the Heretic."

"Make it quick."

Lyissa walked forward and stood in front of the horse, so that I didn't have any chance of avoiding her gaze. In fact, by this time, I probably wouldn't have tried to avoid looking at her. I wanted to see the look in her eyes.

One glance, and my hope died.

There was nothing there but confusion.

Shara, does she have to ask *why* of things that have no answer? She reminds me of the students who would ask me why not everyone worshipped Elle. They didn't want to know answers founded in history or personal love of the Goddess; they wanted to know why not everyone wanted to avoid going into the Darkness.

When you are crashing against fundamental ignorance, better to give in before you break your horns on the wall.

"Why did you do that?" she asked.

We were surrounded by enemies who were unaware that I had done anything for her at all. And Doralissan minds are keen. They are trained to be as swift of thought as the elves, not to care about nothing but the land, as the Orlathian peasants are. I could feel them looking up, suddenly thinking about adjusting their thoughts of us.

I leaned close to her, and said, "What I worship, and why I do what I do, is none of your concern."

Hurt flashed across her face.

Hurt.

Why? What in the name of Elle would she have had from me, if I had given her the choice? Did she really think that there was nothing I could do, that she would make all the decisions, or that I owed her an explanation?

"Go away," I said. "I don't want anything to do with you. Master of the Star Circle," I added, glancing at the green robe.

That got her. She whirled and marched away from me, spine so straight that the Doralissan captain chuckled at me.

"It's perilous to anger a Master of the Star Circle," she said. "You're lucky that that one knew her kind don't rule anymore."

I remained silent, only sneering, as they kicked the mare into motion. I had changed what would have been the natural course of things, and won freedom and life for Lyissa.

Here's hoping to Shara that she uses it.

"Greetings, Klessa. I thought that we would meet again, somehow."

I gazed down at Queen Memoryrose, and the grand words I had planned to speak when I saw her again, condemning her for her arrogance and challenging her right to do anything to me, were gone. Hours of galloping on horseback- and bound to the saddle, no less, so not even able to steer my own course- and no food had soured my temper. "That's because you intrigue and scheme until you see schemes everywhere in the shadows," I said, not caring how she would react.

Queen Memoryrose parted her lips in a slight smile, eyes swirling as if with smoke. "Will you give us some time alone, please?" she murmured to her guards.

I noted that none of them objected, not even the ones who followed Memoryrose most closely and were probably her elite group. All of them must know what it meant when their Queen's eyes turned that color. Shara, I did, and I wasn't even Doralissan. I just didn't care.

Memoryrose did wait until the guards were out of sight to sting the mare with a lightning bolt. She squealed and jumped, and I spilled from her back onto the ground, where I hurt my head. I sighed. I still didn't care.

Memoryrose stooped and dragged me to my feet, using just one hand. She was strong when the mizan blood ran wild in her. She held my eyes, and her teeth were bared in something that was not a smile. She looked as if she would have leapt and bitten my throat out, if she could.

"I will take you to the east," she said. "You will see Queen Twydon, and I will give your punishment into her hands. But I will not use horses. Those are too slow. I will use the services of some friends instead."

She whistled into the air, and a cloud of silver eagles descended, screaming musically. The Queen nodded to them, and glanced back at me.

"Bear her to Queen Twydon," she said, and her eyes were hectic and yet almost tender, as if she liked to contemplate my torture as she didn't like to contemplate me. "And make sure that the Queen and no one else touches her. Do you understand?"

The eagles screamed in answer, and hooked their claws in me. They couldn't pick me up at first, of course, but more and more of them came, and at last they had firm holds on my shoulders, my robe, and the rope binding my hands, as well as other parts of my body. The wounds opened, and I bled. I don't think that Queen Memoryrose noticed or cared. She was too intent on my face, perhaps the only place the eagles didn't try to take hold.

"Think of me" she said, "when you are languishing in the darkness. Think how easy it could have been, if you had listened to me."

I spat in her face. Tired gesture of defiance, yes, but it worked. And she couldn't even respond, as the eagles whirled me aloft in the next moment. It could have been coincidence, but I think they sensed her rising mood and feared that she would have destroyed them as well as me, even without meaning to.

The ground spun dizzily away beneath me. I rocked in the eagles' claws as they carried me, and had to imagine every moment what it would be like to spill to the ground I could see not so far away from me. Most of it is long and boring, so I won't tell you of the horrors of that journey. Suffice it to say that the eagles took me away from the Queen of Doralissa...

..and brought me here.

Lusirimonalata's Commentary

Things have gone well. My mysterious enemy has not struck again, and I have heard no murmurs behind my back that I am not doing a good job compiling the History, as I was sure would happen when my sisters heard of my troubles. I saw many sympathetic eyes, but also heard muffled snickers. I know that many of them think I am not competent to compile this History now, after numerous interruptions, and others would like the task for themselves.

Only for the greater glory of Elle, of course.

Of course.

They must only sulk, for I am the one the Goddess chose, and I possess the strength to turn back to compiling, even after many upsets. And, of course, to resume the true commentaries on the contents of the selection of Klessa's Journals.

You may well believe Klessa's arrogance in this selection; she shows it over and over again, but this is probably one of the most egregious examples. Lyissa had fully earned her punishment. So had Klessa, but she had no right to interfere in the punishment of another. She should have accepted that she would be executed for treason, and Lyissa for heresy. Those are two distinct crimes, though they might have been combined when my sisters learned of Klessa's worship of the Goddess Shara, as they surely would have done from her journals. It is annoying and disgusting that Klessa chose to step in and 'save' Lyissa from her fate, as though she were the Goddess and capable of judging such things.

Of course, I am sure that Lyissa did not truly escape. Many Heretics died, unknown and unnamed, in the great purges that followed the redemption of the Lady Rilleta. Perhaps the Lady Lyissa fell among them, and lies somewhere now, only her bones to be unmourned. Or perhaps her ashes are still scattered and drifting on the Queen's faithful Gust.

Ah, that is a pleasant image.

I have only one more selection from Klessa's Journals to present, for obvious reasons. I hesitated for some time over whether to give it in full, but it is spare and not tremendously upsetting to someone who has been trained properly. I will give it, and let those readers who might need to weep weep, and then commit themselves to the Goddess again with a full heart.

The Journals of Klessa of the Nine Wonders

34 Greenborn, 106 OR

What more is there to tell?

Well, I can say what will befall me, and why I sit here in the darkness, having asked for and received permission to write for the last time in my journals. I can at the least say that, for anyone who might have been reading these lines and wishing me well.

Not that I can imagine there will be many of those, when the priestesses get hold of my journals.

But here you are, imaginary sympathetic listener.

The eagles bore me into the castle as the sun was setting. They brought me before Queen Twydon, who smiled at me as if she had all the time in the world to decide what to do with me, as if there had never been a war fought and many people had not died, as if there had never been a Heresy.

"Lady Klessa," she said, and her eyes smiled, too.

I looked around. I had had the impression that the Great Hall was crowded, but no, we were alone. The impression of crowding came from the death banners of the Kings and Queens on the walls. They all seemed to stare at me with shining eyes, as if forbidding me to reveal what I was about to reveal.

But I was too tired to care anymore.

I fixed my gaze on Queen Twydon. "Greetings, Master of Two Wonders," I said.

The Queen stiffened. "I am not that," she said. "I never was that, and I forbid you to call me that."

I eyed her curiously. What is this passion that they sometimes have, the Masters of more than one Wonder, for denying that one of their elements exists? First Lyissa, and now the Queen, and both of them women who had seen enough of life that I would have expected them to bow to reality. "Dust and Gust," I said quietly. "You are Master of both. You have managed to use them without arousing suspicion, or being driven mad- though I suppose that last is debatable. But you have never admitted to them."

"You will not speak of such things."

"Oh, Twydon, of course I will." So I had called her once, in the camaraderie of strange kinds that the torture pit breeds, and so I chose to call her again now. "You must have known that when you summoned me here. Why did you want me here?"

The Queen rose from her throne and paced back and forth across the Great Hall. I listened to her fast breathing, and smiled. The eagles still hovered around me. I wondered idly if the old legend that the Queen or King of Doralissa could see through their eyes was true.

"I wanted to give you a chance," said Twydon, facing me again. "You could serve Elle. You know much, much history that they want to have recorded. There would be some torture first, but that would only be for show. You would go to the Goddess the moment you had sworn your heart to Her."

And then I found something out about myself that surprised me. I blinked at nothing for a moment, then shrugged. As with the plan to change robes with Lyissa, I didn't question the intuition that flashed through me like fire.

"I could never do that," I said.

"And why not?"

"Because I am sworn to another goddess."

"Not a god?"

"No. Shara."

I know that I did not mistake the expression in Twydon's eyes then. It was fear.

"You are part of the Dark?" she asked, staring at me narrowly.

"Oh, of course I am. Queen Memoryrose was working with and accepting the presence of the Dark. Didn't she tell you that?"

One of the eagles dug its claws into my shoulder. I was fairly sure, then, that they were spies for the monarch of Doralissa. I chuckled. Let Queen Twydon know something for

the secret that Queen Memoryrose now knew about her. It was a fair trade. And I wanted to cause as much chaos among my enemies as I could before I went into darkness.

"You are lying," said Twydon, but her eyes were narrowed, and I could almost see her nose twitching. In the deepest, darkest places of the castle, where they were sure it wouldn't be heard, some of the nobles of the Court called Twydon the Sniffer. She could sniff intrigue and schemes blowing on the wind, they said.

"You know I'm not. Your heart tells you so. This is a purely political alliance. You shouldn't be surprised that your allies will make other alliances, of convenience. And, of course, you shouldn't be surprised that I would call you on your hypocrisy, Master of Two Wonders."

"You will be tortured long and long."

"I expected no less."

"Bend the knee."

"No."

"Swear to Elle."

"No."

"Why not?"

"I am sworn to Shara."

Twydon nodded slowly. "You know that, since I am Queen, my word alone will be enough to condemn you?"

"I know it." I yawned. My heart seemed to have fallen asleep with the descent of the sun. I was almost impatient for them to do whatever it was they were going to do, if it only meant that I wouldn't have to hear any more chatter. "I always knew it. Are you going to condemn me, or not?"

"You will not be so brave when we put you on the rack."

And she's right. I won't be. But I did make one request, knowing that was my right as a prisoner, and she granted it. That is why I sit writing now, in the light of a single torch, in the darkness of the pits beneath the Temple of Elle.

They granted me permission to write this last time, since my limbs will be useless after being on the rack for so long. I won't even be able to walk when they take me to the traitor's execution, probably.

And do I regret it?

No. I don't. It is most amusing, to find that I don't, when I should. I should have fallen on my knees, begging for Elle's mercy, if I truly were the disciple of the Goddess and the Light that I always saw myself as. I should at least have bowed my head and accepted the worship as a necessary evil, if I were the woman that most saw me as. I could have risen high in the Temple of Elle, even been comfortable again, with some of the same prestige that I saw in the Star Circle. Few bother the priestesses.

And I did not.

Why?

I don't know. Oaths to the Dark, to Shara, loss of my magic- who truly knows? I am amused, and I am tired, and the priestesses are coming to see what I have written. They will take my journals, and do who knows what with them. Burn them, I suppose.

But they will have existed. No one can take that from them.

No one can take that from me, as a matter of fact.

It is rather amusing to think that my enemies, terrible as they are, could not conquer *me*, a tiny victim once I lost my magic. I will scream, of course, but that doesn't mean they've won. Victory doesn't lie in not screaming; it lies in refusal to bend. I choose to scream, so that doesn't count, but I didn't choose to submit.

That works.

I suppose I ought to seal this as an official Star Circle record. So--

This thirty-fourth day of Greenborn, in the hundred and sixth year since the founding of Orlath by Queen Aneron, in the pits of the Temple of Elle, by the heart and will of Klessa, once Master of the Nine Wonders, now prisoner to Queen Twydon.

Lusirimonialata's Commentary

And thus it ends, and save for one more section of Rilleta's History and one last ending commentary, this History of the Rennon Heresy is almost done. Then it will be presented to the Queen, so that she may look through it and praise what she looks and turn against what she doesn't like, and then it will be edited one more time, and judged by a committee of priestesses for blasphemy. Then it will be placed on the shelf, so that future generations may read of the Heresy.

I have learned much from compiling the History, not least the seductive forms that evil can take. The form that Klessa wore was one oddly compelling, even as it made me shake my head and know that she couldn't be saved. I was almost tempted to pity her in this last selection from her Journals. I have heard some speak of her with admiration of her courage.

As if it were courage to choose Darkness over Light, eternal separation from Elle over eternal peace, and not just stubborn pride. Klessa knew that her side had lost, just as the Dark will ever lose before the Light. But she couldn't admit it. She suffered from the stubbornness that she accused Queen Twydon of.

Some of my sisters have questioned why I let the scene between Klessa and the Queen stand, since she makes so many accusations that must be false, but I believe that this, too, shows just how insidious evil is. Klessa speaks many plausible-sounding words, and they might even convince the reader that she is less than evil. But a more enlightened reading of the journals will show how desperate Klessa is to convince someone else of the "truth" of her words. Thus the way she speaks to the imaginary sympathetic reader at the end; thus many ruminations on subjects that have nothing at all to do with proper history.

She should be glad that she was immortalized. If it were not that she died at the stake, then I am sure she would be.

There are the strange legends that surround Klessa's death, and I had almost decided to record them, but I don't think I need to. Surely most people of Orlath know the legends, and know how false they must be. Klessa's sympathizers must speak of them. There are some who say that the woman they led out and impaled on the stake that morning was not Klessa. They say that they heard too many different variations of her last words. But the courtyard was noisy, since many came to see her impaled. And they say that they saw the stones of the courtyard through her once or twice, but that is impossible, ridiculous, and too silly even to be considered. And they say they saw the silver dragon of the Traitor Prince flying near the castle, but so what? As we have seen, he was Klessa's friend and ally—to some extent—and may have believed that he could save her. But he could not. She died, blood flowing from her pierced chest.

I must sleep now. And then I will go and bundle up the original journals that I did not use, so that they may be stored far back in the archives for anyone who wishes to look at them.

My enemy has struck again.

I went to the archives, and to the journals, where they have always been stored; save for me and those who will be checking them for blasphemy, few people have an interest in reading the original journals anymore. And they were gone. I thought at first I had simply misplaced them, but several hours of searching in the archives failed to find them.

Then I rushed back here, thinking that my enemy might have taken the copied section of Rilleta's History, or worse, the History of the Rennon Heresy itself. But no, both were still there. It seems an odd target for my enemy to choose, unless she is confident that she will eliminate any traces of my History altogether, and compile her own free from my influence. Not likely. I don't think that anyone who writes or reads of the Rennon Heresy ever again will be completely free from my pervasive influence.

Why would my enemy want the journals? What purpose would they ever serve?

I was interrupted just then. One of my sisters brought in the only things they were able to find in the archives, in place of the journals. Some are scraps of iridescent skin, whose origin I still cannot figure out.

The other is a note, in the handwriting that took over my commentaries for a time.

Do not think you have escaped. I have only claimed what rightfully should have come to me long ago.

I am sure now that it is one of my sisters, jealous that she was not considered for the position of Rennon Historian. But there is nothing she can do now. I have compiled the History, save for the last section of Rilleta's History and the last commentary.

And here they are now.

A History of Rilleta, High Priestess of Rennon

Chapter 24

Glory and Honor

"Glory and honor, all those meaningless words...little as they have meant to the Dark, still less have they meant to the Light."

-Erentis Darkrider, lecturing her troops.

"My lady!"

Rilleta looked up with a smile at the title. *I will not deny that it is pleasant to have people address me so. I would be a liar if I did. And if there is one thing I am not, it is a liar.*

"Aldonea," she said, inclining her head at the priestess hastening towards her. The girl let her eyes fall, blushing, as if she had been caught staring at a superior. Rilleta smiled

again. She was on a trial period among the priestesses of Elle, but she had hopes of being placed above them all by the time she was done, and therefore the girl's actions were only proper. "Was there something you wanted to tell me?"

"Yes—I, that is—"

"Well?" Rilleta prompted, her amusement at the girl's hesitation fading. *Perhaps this is not so well after all, if they're going to blush and snigger and stammer around me like young girls instead of women.* "Give me the message that you came to give me, and then leave."

"The execution of the traitor Klessa is being held now in the courtyard next to the Temple," said Aldonea quickly.

"Thank you," said Rilleta coldly, somewhat annoyed. How hard had that been, to speak just a few words?

Aldonea bowed her head and hastened away. Rilleta watched her go for a moment, silently fuming, and then shook her head and readjusted her thoughts.

Klessa is dying. Klessa will be dead.

A vast contentment seemed to blossom in her stomach, slow and heavy, and move up to her throat, just like a feeling of desire. Rilleta was smiling again as she took to the stairs that led up to the battlements. Soon she would see a great enemy of the Heresy, the person who had done the worst damage to them, dead.

She met others as she climbed up, including a few of the Heretics who had seen the Light and surrendered to Queen Twydon's greatness. They looked no less natural in their gray robes than they had in their red ones. They all nodded at her as if she were a sister, and Rilleta smiled at them, feeling her heart break free of her breast and lift towards the sky, fluttering its wings and singing.

We were not traitors, heretics, or blasphemers forever. We are and will be faithful to Elle and the Queen.

She stepped out onto the battlement, and for a moment blinked, the dazzle of the sun catching in her eyes. Then she shook her head, smiled, and stepped towards the edge. There had been a time when she would have thought that kind of natural blindness a sign from the sun-god.

Not that he was ever a god. I know now that he was a demon.

She looked down into the center of the courtyard, and saw the stake standing alone in the middle of it. It was surrounded by people, though; they just kept a respectful distance from it. Rilleta listened to the chatter, and saw the excited glances pass back and forth

among the watchers, and was content. Sometimes there was a fuss about this, with a family member breaking through the crowd and trying to rescue the traitor. Other times there was a general protest against the pain of the traitor's death, even claims that no one deserved it.

Not this time. This time, it was clear to everyone that Klessa deserved it. Her deeds had been spread far and wide, and everyone knew she had turned against the Queen and blasphemed the Goddess. There were even some claiming that a traitor's death was too good for her, that she should be executed in the old way: flayed alive and then thrown into the sea.

But a traitor's death was perfect. Rilleta would get to see the heart of her enemy stop beating. She was not sure that she would ever trust that Klessa was dead if she only saw her skinned and then tossed over a cliff. And the fear would haunt her dreams for the rest of her life, as silly as it seemed.

With this woman, it is never wise to assume.

With all the chatter from the crowd, it should not have been possible to hear anything else, but Rilleta did, suddenly, a high belling cry. She turned curiously, and looked over her shoulder, wondering if a dragon was making a threatening circle near the castle. They did that sometimes, just to demonstrate what they thought of as their independence from the Light.

It was a dragon, but of a color she had never seen before. Silver, it looked like. Rilleta studied it for a moment, then shrugged. It was probably just a gray dragon, a thorn dragon, struck oddly by the light.

For a moment, fear flashed through her that perhaps Telemoranion had come back and built a dragon out of silver, but...

No. The elves reassured me that he was dead, that he would never do anything like this again. He died for his crimes against his kind, just as Klessa will die for crimes against her kind. We have nothing to worry about.

She turned back to the stake, just in time to see Klessa led forth from the dungeons.

She blinked. Something was very odd about Klessa. It almost seemed, for a moment, as though Rilleta could see the stones of the courtyard through her.

Then Klessa's body firmed again, and Rilleta snorted. *I am not used to seeing her look humble, that's all. And I'm not used to seeing her dragged along. The rack did its work well. I would be surprised if she could walk, or even write again.*

Klessa did seem to lift her head as they brought her near the stake, but that could have been an illusion. Rilleta smiled more broadly. She would have liked for her enemy to

meet her eyes one last time, to see one last futile, defiant gesture, but in some ways it was even more fascinating to see her broken and staggering, unable to help herself. They had finally broken Klessa. She finally knew what folly it had been to oppose the Goddess, the Light, Destiny, and the Cycle itself.

I am glad that she lost her magic. She deserved to. She would never have made a good servant for the Cycle. She couldn't understand something as simple as the Circle of Four.

The guards brought Klessa to the stake. Drums began to play, a slow and funeral march. Rilleta leaned closer.

She did see one man standing by the stake, staring with a desperate expression, and wondered for a moment if he were Klessa's lover, if he would bolt forward and try to save her. But he did not. He only stood there and watched, hands clenched in front of him, as the guards lifted Klessa and then rammed her down, hard, on the stake.

A scream echoed through the courtyard. Rilleta flinched in spite of herself. Somehow, she had not expected it to be so loud.

The guards pressed Klessa down more firmly, their hands steady. The woman writhed and cried, her broken limbs twisting uselessly. Then she shuddered once, and blood welled over her chest as the stake emerged triumphant from her heart. Rilleta joined the wild applause and cheering. That had been a good one!

At last Klessa stopped twitching, and the guards pulled her very dead body from the stake. Rilleta started down the stairs. She wished to speak to those guards, to congratulate them.

She stopped on the stairs, though, seeing something strange in front of her. It was a woman, clad in a hooded gown not unlike that some of the Court nobles wore for riding. But she was no woman that Rilleta knew.

More, she was gazing intently at a snake in her hand, and hissing at it.

"What are you doing?"

The woman looked up at Rilleta, unabashed, and Rilleta blinked. The sense of illusion or hallucination that she had had when looking at Klessa for the first time re-emerged, but this time it was stronger. Did the woman have pointed ears, or not? Was the line of her mouth hard or stern?

And what was the strange power that beat around her?

"I came to speak to you," said the woman calmly. "I wanted to kill you, but I have been persuaded not to."

"You wanted to kill me for blasphemy or treason, I suppose," said Rilleta, relaxing. "You can rest easy. I have converted back to Elle's worship, and I intend to rise high in Her service."

"Blasphemy," said the woman. "Treason. Yes, I suppose you might say that." She tucked the snake in a pocket and took a step towards Rilleta. Rilleta resisted the urge to step backwards. The woman did indeed have a strange aura of power, but that was just a coincidence. She probably was some Court noble, or even an emissary from another Court. She was just powerful, that was all.

"You have not escaped," the woman all but breathed into Rilleta's ear. "My servant shall come for you."

"Who are you?"

"My name is in darkness and in stars," said the woman. "Look for me there."

And she vanished.

Rilleta spun around, pressing her back to the wall. Nothing was behind her. There was no snake, and no woman, on the stairs.

After a long moment, she paused and shook her head very hard. *I must have dreamed it. I probably haven't gotten enough sleep. Understandable, since I've been accepting the surrender of Heretics for the last three days.*

Her confidence returned as she went down the stairs, her steps becoming lighter and the smile touching her face again. Exhaustion would fade when she had had enough sleep. She would fight her way past it.

And then....

I am tired from the war and my redemption. It will take some time to recover.

But, in time, that will pass, and I will rise in Elle's service.

With such pleasant thoughts to accompany her, it was only a slight annoyance to emerge from the stairwell and not find the guards who had led Klessa to the stake anywhere.

Lusirimalata's Commentary

And so the History comes to an end. Rilleta ends it endearingly, by admitting to human weakness even when she does not need to. She thinks of the future that she will have in the service of Elle, which is the proper thing for a priestess of the Goddess to think about.

And a glorious service she has had! She has risen to a dizzyingly high position. She will probably be the next High Priestess. She has come a long way from her days of killing the High Priestess on the plains and pretending to laugh in the face of our beloved Queen.

I end the History here. It is ready to be presented to the Queen, with the exception of a few minor corrections. She will correct me further, and then my sisters will read it and decide if it is or is not acceptable. I fully expect them to condemn me for my personal ramblings and for including some material that they think is blasphemous. But I also fully expect to defend myself, and do it well.

This is the History of the Rennon Heresy, as it was and shall be. Of course there was more; there is much material from both Klessa's Journals and the History of Rilleta that I didn't include. There is almost enough, in fact, to make another whole book by itself...

But, no, I must not think of such ambitions. It is enough that I was chosen to compile this History of the Rennon Heresy. I will not ask for another such task, especially when this one has been so plagued by my strange enemy's blasphemy and petty jealousies.

For good or ill, this is the History of the Rennon Heresy. May it stand high in the eyes of Elle!

--Sealed by the hand of Lusirimonalata, Priestess of Elle, Temple of Elle in Queen Twydon's court, this thirty-fourth day of the month of Greenborn, in the hundredth and sixteenth year since the founding of Orlath by the glorious Queen Aneron.

Pashella's Commentary

I have sat by her bedside for a long time now, and heard nothing but ravings. I do not know why the Council assigned me this task. I don't think anything good can come out of it. Something happened to my sister Lusirimonalata, but what it was I do not think anyone can tell. I wish they would turn her over to someone who cares for snapped minds, and not expect me, who has no training, to mind her.

But, here I am, and must write down her ravings as best I can. I think I have them all now. She has lain like this since the snapping of her mind happened, and has raved of nothing else, save occasional hysterical cries for the Queen, or Lady Rilleta, or quill and paper. I can't be sure that I have them in the correct order, of course, but I think so, again from having heard them repeated so many times.

I resent this duty. The Dark has attacked, at least five years earlier than anyone expected them to attack, and we have suffered loss after loss. I should be out fighting on the front lines, or at least tending to the wounded!

But I must do this. And so I present, in case anyone should think they are of account, the ravings of the priestess who labored so strongly to compile the History of the Rennon Heresy.

Lusirimalata's Ravings

I heard a knock on the door.

A knock on the door. Such a small, simple thing to bring the end of everything.

I opened it, to find one of my sisters weeping hysterically. "They're dead!" was the first coherent thing I made out in her tears.

"What?" I wanted to shake her, but of course that would be wrong, so the only thing I could do was stand there and wait for the tears to end.

"Queen Twydon," she gasped at last. "Queen Twydon is dead."

"What? How?" I staggered back and leaned against the table.

"Dead at the hands of the Traitor Prince, they say."

"That's impossible." I was regaining my balance now, sure that this girl had just heard a rumor and gone hysterical over it, when there was no reason to do so. "They captured the Traitor Prince."

"This morning, he melted."

"What?"

"The man they thought was the Traitor Prince." The woman gulped, got a hold on herself, and went on in a voice with only a slight tone of hysteria creeping through. "He melted away, and they found another man under his semblance. That man was the one they captured. His guise as the Traitor Prince was an illusion."

An illusion.

No.

I grabbed her robe, so suddenly that my sister gasped. "And you are sure that he killed the Queen?"

"They're wailing for her death all the way from the castle," she said, and tore herself free from me. "Don't you hear them?"

I cocked an ear, and this time I did indeed hear them. I had been too involved in writing the final commentary to the History to notice.

"Who else is dead?" I asked.

"The Lady Rilleta."

I closed my eyes. I didn't stagger this time; in some Dark-thinking part of me, I had expected it. "Dead of what?"

"Snakebite."

I opened my eyes to ask her more, but she was gone, running down the hall and screaming to spread her news.

I shut the door and leaned against the wall, shaking. The Traitor Prince couldn't really have killed the Queen. That is not true. The Dark will win against the Light for a short time, but never this way, and then the Light will defeat it forever. That is the way it has always been.

Someone else knocked on the door.

Why did I open it?

But I opened it, and there stood the Lady Teridona, watching me with large blue-green eyes shining with determination. She began speaking before I could even ask her what she was doing there.

"You asked me if I was the one writing in your commentaries, Lusirimalata," she said. "I am not. But I know who did."

"Who?"

"In a moment," she said. "In the first place, I have made my decision. I have decided to join the Dark."

My grief swept away even my grief over the passing of the Queen and the Lady Rilleta for a moment. "Why, my lady?"

Her eyes narrowed, and I recoiled. Peering out of her eyes was something sharp and terrible, something that was very much of the Dark. If I had ever seen it before, then I would have suspected that she was of the Dark at once. "You were the impetus, Lusirimalata. You and your sisters. My love was right. I had only to look at the examples of the Light to see just how much better the examples of the Dark were."

"But that's not—that's not—"

Two other people stepped through the door. One was Anassra, slumped in the grip of a tall man, and whimpering in pain. The man had dark skin, and silver eyes that flashed like a cat's when he bowed mockingly.

Glangon. The Traitor Prince of Rivendon. It is strange to see someone whom you have only known through words written ten years ago suddenly alive and in front of you.

And I know, I know...

But that in its place.

I screamed and turned to flee, though where I would have gone, I don't know, since this room has no other entrances. But I saw a sight that kept me in place anyway. The walls were alive with snakes, writhing through tiny cracks and hissing at me with forked tongues.

"Why?" I asked Glangon, turning to him. "Why did you do this to me?"

"You are a liar," he said calmly. "And my love...well, I do learn my lessons, though it takes me so long I feel like an idiot at times. Klessa was not the one on whom the prophecy hung." He smiled slowly. "It was Teridona, after all. And now she has decided to join the Dark. And the Dark is attacking."

"You can't," I muttered. I'm afraid that I sounded so dazed I was almost drunk. "The Dark can't attack before-time..."

"Oh, little Light-mumbler," he said, and he sounded almost as if he pitied me, even as he laughed at me. "That is only what you believed." He shook his head. "You believed many stupid things. My love read them, and reported them to me, and we laughed at them." He paused. "And there is one other who read them, and laughed at them. And I will give her the privilege of dealing with you."

"Who?" I looked around, almost expecting to see another priestess flying out of the walls.

"Me."

I spun at the sound of the voice, clear and slightly hoarse.

Anassra lifted her head, and stood free of Glangon's hold. And as I watched her face, I saw what my sister had meant. It *was* almost like melting, to see her features slip from her face, as the illusion she must have lived under abandoned her.

Strangely, the first thing I noticed about her when the illusion was gone was not her face, but her limbs. Or perhaps that was not the strangest thing after all. They were rather unusual limbs.

Anassra lifted her "arms," and they were not arms, but living iridescent serpents, flickering their tongues at me. And when she took a step forward, I saw that her legs were serpents, as well, slithering along the floor so that she could "walk." The snakes grew seamlessly from her shoulders and waist.

As I watched, a scale fluttered off one of the serpents and to the floor. As if in a dream, I stooped and picked it up. It looked like a scrap of iridescent parchment, lying there on my palm.

"Do you know me?"

I looked up to her face.

Brown hair, streaked with gray now. Startling, direct green eyes.

"Klessa," I whispered. I am proud of myself for not screaming it.

"Yes," she said, as one of her serpent-arms coiled around her neck and watched me with shimmering golden eyes. "Really, you should have guessed the truth sooner. Who else would have as much interest in claiming the journals? Who else would take such pleasure in interfering with what you wrote?" One of her snakes hissed, and she smiled. "Who else would write in such a strange way, because my snake had to hold the quill in its mouth?"

"But—they saw you, you were executed, you—"

"Illusion is a very useful thing," drawled Glangon. "Illusion to create the guards, and the body that died. Illusion to shield me as I stood by and performed that very difficult work; I had to be closer to the stake than I would have liked. And illusion to disguise Klessa all these months as she labored as your servant, and your editor. Though I dare say," he added, grinning at Klessa, "that she liked that part."

I could only stand, and shake. "And the serpents?" I gathered enough breath to whisper at last.

"Klessa was faithful to the Dark," said Glangon quietly. "Shara sent me to her, when she was broken on the rack and still faithful. And, well, Telemoranion's serpents did prove useful after all, though it took some of the Goddess's magic to make them so useful."

"That's impossible," I said.

"Poor Lusirimonalata," said Klessa tenderly, coming near. One of the snakes lifted and stroked my cheek, and I had to stand there and tremble, not daring to flinch. "You did have some pity for me. But you annoyed me more than anything else."

"Why are you telling me all this?" I thought to ask.

"Revenge," said Klessa cheerfully. "So that you can realize how completely you have failed. Your Queen is dead. The war has begun. I survived and escaped. Rilleta is dead. She was *very* surprised to see me, I must say." She grinned. "I killed her quickly, but very painfully.

"These snakes can give all kinds of bites. Goodbye, my dear," she added, and I saw a flash of movement from the corner of my eye.

Pain! There is pain!

"I've enjoyed working with you," I thought I heard her say.

Pashella's Commentary

32 Summerburn, 119 OR

It is over.

The war is over at last, and I think that I may as well put the finishing touches on this work. It will be put on the shelf, and looked at again, no doubt, but not with as much pleasure as it should have been. Lusirimonalata is dead, passing in her sleep nearly a year ago without ever regaining her sanity, and few of the people whom this book was intended to honor remain alive.

The war is over. The Light has won, pushing the Dark back from Ilantra, Rivendon, Arvenna, Doralissa, and Orlath. Resistance was fierce, and many heroic victories were won. The Traitor Prince of Rivendon has fled with his disgraced Malkir bride, and is in hiding. We have a new King, Queen Twydon's cousin.

But the nine Kingdoms have been reduced to five. The Dark has taken Gazania, Dalzna, Amorier, and Panolth. They have established their hold on them so firmly that it will take revolution from within, combined with attacks from outside, to drive them out. There is nothing that we can do to prevent the cruel abuse the conquerors will no doubt heap on their new slaves.

And I have to wonder, is it really a victory, when four Kingdoms are gone, and the Masters of the Star Circle are nowhere to be found, perhaps having gone into hiding in the Dark, as some claim?

No. I cannot write such thoughts. They are blasphemous.

But I can think them. And perhaps...well, if no one looks at the Rennon Heresy for some time, no one will find them.

I hoped that the war would end with a complete Light victory. I am loyal to the Light. I am, and I love the Goddess.

But I am also born to Azure, to Mist, and to Metal, and together they are killing me. The Metal gift in particular seems to be driving me towards madness.

I have no choice. I must run north and seek the Star Circle. And if the price for their aid is becoming part of the Dark or worshipping this Shara...then so be it. No choice have I.

Farewell.

-By the hand of Pashella, former priestess of Elle.

Elikavra's Commentary

32 Summerborn, 344 OR

Ah, it is so appropriate that I should finish my final editing and compiling of this History on the anniversary of the day the last touch was added, more than two hundred years ago!

It is a beautiful day as I write this. The sun blazes outside, and shines down on the two little Princesses chasing each other through the courtyard. I can hear Princess Vamoranion crying to her twin, Princess Lindir, about being careful, and I smile. Princess Vamoranion is somewhat at a disadvantage; she was born only to Scarlet, while Princess Lindir was born to both Scarlet and Lightning. Of course, Princess Vamoranion does not think this is fair, and spends a great deal of time yelling that her twin should not throw lightning bolts at her.

How much things have changed! It is a good thing that our gracious King has permitted research into old methods of training, and has called on Star Circle experts from the north, or his daughter must have died from the presence of two powerfully arguing gifts in her body. But we have a Master of the Star Circle living here now—a Master of Thirteen Wonders, no less!—and he has been most careful in teaching Princess Lindir. She is in no danger now.

How things have changed! I seem to keep writing that, but it is true. Only fifteen years ago, I could not have imagined worshipping as I do now, or communing with the Dark on a friendly level. It might have been necessary, since the Dark now rules in all the Kingdoms save Doralissa and Orlath, but I can think of many Kings or Queens who would have fought to a bitter end. Our King has learned to compromise, to delicately balance, and his gracious Queen with him. They are on such good terms with the Dark that the King of Gazania is coming south himself, just to visit them, on the occasion of the birth of their son!

And here he is now! The twins have changed the focus of their cries. "Uncle Seros!" they exclaim, and run to meet him. And how he is sweeping them up in his arms and mock-growling at them! The drake he rides, instead of a horse, lowers his head, confident of attention and petting from the Princesses.

I ramble. Forgive me. I am supposed to be making my final comments, and telling you just how this new edition of the History of the Rennon Heresy came about.

It started when the King became curious about what had truly happened to his friend, Telemoranion. He started the search on his own, but ruling leaves him little time for such things. So he assigned the task to me, knowing that he could trust me. I had embraced the Goddess openly after the last battle and the breaking of Elle's domination, and he had faith in my faith.

What our King has learned must surely grieve him, but it is the truth, and we will present all of it—including the commentaries that were long ago excised as blasphemous, but kept as examples of how not to write a commentary. They should all be in it. Therefore, you, reader, will now hold in your hands the History as it should have been. I regret only that we do not have Klessa's original journals or Rilleta's original History, but they were taken long ago. I wish Klessa well, though I must wonder what she did with them.

Trumpets outside the window! I must go and look.

Oh, it is the Queen of Doralissa come riding! How fine she looks, with her elven husband behind her and her half-elven daughter cradled in her arms. I must go and greet her. I lived in Doralissa for a short time, and she was understanding of my desire to return to Orlath.

I wish I could write more coherently, but truly, what does one say from a time of such joy? Light and Dark have learned to compromise, though of course there are still small, constant brushfires of misunderstanding to put out. The Kingdoms have never seen such steady friendships between their monarchs—all the Kingdoms, with the Dark territories now recognized by the Light. Travel is permitted freely for those who cannot stand to stay either with Dark or Light. Destiny is no longer the revered thing it once was; Change and Chance and Chaos and other forces have joined it in contending for the world. The worship of Rennon and Shara and other gods has once again spread in Orlath, as I have reason to know. And we have a new little Prince to welcome; today is his naming day.

Oh, Annalithiel is singing in the courtyard now, to welcome the Queen. Hearing an elf sing is not to be missed, and I must go and hear her!

To you, reader, from a time of joy,

-By the starlit heart of Elikavra, in the Court of Orlath, once priestess of Elle, now priestess of Shara, this thirty-second day of Summerborn, in the three hundredth and forty-fourth year since the founding of Orlath by Queen Aneron.

Author's Notes

Here is the quote that I pulled the title from, George William Russell's "On Behalf of Some Irishmen not Followers of Tradition":

"No blazoned banner we unfold—
One charge alone we give to youth,
Against the sceptred myth to hold
The golden heresy of truth."