

Lusirimonialata's Comments

I know that there will be some of my readers, tender and noble-hearted, who feel tears welling up in their eyes, and feel the desire to comfort Klessa, or at least make sure that she is not wounded. But then, most readers will know enough of the History of the Rennon Heresy to reach the necessary conclusions.

But that very tenderness and nobility of heart that is a gift from the Goddess Herself might make some question if it really was necessary to be "so harsh" in correcting Klessa. Obviously, it was the Goddess's Hand that took her magic away. And some might say that her magic was the center of her existence, the heart. Was it necessary to take her heart from her?

Of course it was. It is harsh justice, and of course most of us would wish to see mercy done if we could. But that is the reason we have torture pits and racks and many other inventions that are not beautiful, but are harshly necessary.

Klessa herself worked with the Princess Twydon, as she was then, in the torture pits. That much is history; that much of her journal we may trust. She would accept and understand the necessity for torture when someone had done something irredeemable. She simply did not have the right idea of what was considered "irredeemable," or thought it was somehow different when it happened to her.

She learned better in the end. So did all the Heretics. There is no one who can escape the Goddess's Hand.

Of course, the punishment fit the crime. What had Klessa done but think about Lyissa and kill her enemies? Those were no great and noble actions, not like the ones she undertook in the torture pits with our beautiful Queen or rising against the rule of King Seldon as Rilleta did. She deserved to suffer for the small and petty nature of her ambitions, and the way she wielded her magic to meet them.

And now we will go back and read her journal again, with our hearts full of righteous indignation, which should serve as a guide against any kind of tenderness whatsoever.

The Journals of Klessa of the Nine Wonders

26 Greenborn, 106 OR

Still in memory I can hardly face that moment. And I really would like to know why. I would like to know why it happened, why it hit me so hard, why it makes my body still burn as if with cold...

No. I don't know the why, and I think I would continue to use it as an excuse not to talk about the what. So. I will talk about the what.

I looked up, tears streaming down my face, and saw Lyissa meet my eyes with awful knowledge in her face. That much I had taught her to recognize, then, the loss of a Master's power. Somewhere deep within me I felt the dull flicker of pride.

"Klessa," she whispered.

I held out my hand and tried to call up Dust. Nothing happened. I reached out to Azure, and Scarlet, and Metal, and all the others.

Nothing. Where once a chorus of singing voices had been, a constant and subtle humming tension, there was emptiness now. I called, and only my own voice echoed back to me, in all those empty spaces.

"Klessa." Her hand was on my arm, and she was peering into my face, as if she thought that would make me feel better. "Klessa, can you hear me? Can you tell me what I'm saying?"

"You're asking stupid questions." I closed my eyes against a flash of tears that would have been more than I could bear right now. "You know what's happened, Lyissa."

"You wielded your magic in some way the Cycle decreed wrong, and that means that it has abandoned you." Lyissa's voice was quiet.

I nodded.

"But that's wonderful, Klessa, don't you see?"

I wasn't sure what I felt then, but now I know. There was another shattering and snapping of bonds there, though it wasn't the same as the kind I had felt when the Cycle broke with me. And the moment lasted only a moment, and then I said, with nearly as much fire in my voice as if it had never blown out, "What do you mean by that?"

I looked up at her to see her face shining. Lyissa reached out and ran her fingers through my hair with as much tenderness as she had ever shown, though now the gesture was decidedly different. For the first time, she touched me as a teacher would touch a student, gentling and calming me, ready to teach me some invaluable fact that I needed to know. "You can learn the secrets of Rennon now, Klessa, and perhaps in time you will find some talent for magic in His service. He has been known to hold out the Scarlet and sometimes even the other fiery elements to those who love Him."

"You think that I should choose to serve a god just because He might give me magic?" I asked in disbelief.

"And because you'll be with me." Lyissa smiled so gently that it almost denied the fierce flush in her cheeks. "That's part of the reason that you originally followed the Heretics, isn't it? I know that you didn't really hear the voice of the God in your heart, even though

you said you did. But now you have a chance to hear Him for certain, Klessa. And you have a chance to become part of my family. I told you the Heretics were my family now. Will you join us?"

And now I must record yet another thing I do not understand about that hour, for I did it without knowing the reason.

"No." I stood and brushed dust off my robes with hands that shook. The dust drifted to the ground, unresponsive now, though a few moments before it would have spun and danced at my command. I could have commanded it to rise and choke Lyissa's gape-mouthed fellow priestess, and now I could only watch it fall. "I'm sorry, Lyissa, but it would be a lie."

"You could learn the love Rennon. Not all conversions are fiery births. You already know that."

"I don't want to try." I looked up and met her eyes. I was trembling, but if I worked hard, I could pretend that was merely the force of my own heart banging in my ears.

"Klessa, you love me, don't you?"

I gazed at her steadily. Yes, her face had not changed. Her blonde curls still fell around her face, and her green eyes still shone with that dazzling mixture of beauty and pure impishness that had called me to her in the first place; I had seen those eyes and known that a child like that had to have Mastery of the elements. If anything, the flush that Rennon had put in her cheeks added more life and color to her face. I ought to be happy for her. I ought to be thrilled with wonder, drawn to her.

And still I cannot tell you why I said, "I do not love you enough to do this. I cannot do this."

"Klessa." Lyissa spoke in a hurt little voice, putting out a hand as if she would grip me and draw me into Rennon's service by force.

"Lyissa." I held her eyes, and something in my gaze or smile must have made her turn her head away and drop her hand.

"I don't understand." Her voice still sparkled with pain, like broken glass lying on the floor.

"I didn't understand your decision to join the Heretics, either." My mouth was unexpectedly dry of saliva. I coughed, and managed to work up enough spit to talk. "And I questioned you, and tried to drag you back by force. But I didn't stand around with downcast eyes and pouting lip."

Her eyes snapped back up to mine, and she said, "You are very much mistaken if you think that's all I will do." She called to the Scarlet—I still felt it even though I could now only hopelessly hunger after it—and a curl of flame appeared in her hand. "Stay with me, Klessa. I know that you can't stop me."

I let my eyes fall, let her draw me closer. And if she had handled me less like a priestess looking for a convert, she might have even made one. I shook, and she dismissed the fire and wrapped her arms around me. "It will take you some time to get used to this, Klessa, but—"

I hit her as hard as I could in the right breast with the heel of my hand, and she crumpled, gasping. I wrenched away and spun back the way I had come. I could see an odd glow of light now, and from that direction rose and fell the weird elven singing.

Lyissa's priestess friend stepped in front of me. She was shaking, too, but not from the same reasons that I was. "I cannot allow you to hurt one of Rennon's faithful and run off like that," she said, in a high, nasal voice. "Did you really think that I would? You can't do that, and—"

I wasn't as concerned about not hurting her as I was with Lyissa, and so I wasn't subtle. I'm not an expert in barehanded fighting, but I struggled with bullies in my time, and I still remember how to punch. I caught her in the nose, since she wasn't expecting it, and she reeled back, squalling. I saw the blood as I ran past and towards the light of the portal.

"Stop her!" I heard someone shouting behind me.

I wondered if they couldn't, before I ever reached Telemoranion and Glangon and the road to whatever place it was that Telemoranion wanted to take his pets to. I hiked up my robes and ran, pushing bodily through the tall grasses that a surge of the Gust could have parted just moments ago.

Just moments ago.

I still shook from the shock of losing my connection to the Cycle, and from the coldness that filled me, and I had a feeling I would stumble or lose my way in the high grasses before they found me.

Someone moved off to the side, and I saw a woman half-tangled in the gray robes of a priestess of Elle still rising and trying to strike out at me. Her hand glowed blue. She was probably an Azure mage.

"The Scarlet mages will kill you!" I shouted, and saw doubt flash across her face. "They hate the Azure."

That made her pause long enough for me to slide past. Many of the others chasing me didn't seem to see me in the grasses, and I slipped past several traps that would have caught me handily.

Then someone did step right in front of me, and I had to step back. It was Queen Memoryrose, I could see, when I had blinked the sweat and moved the hair out of my eyes. She had a grave expression on her face, but the lightning was dancing in her eyes. The mizantai are wild beyond control of wild, when once they are roused, and I didn't think it would really be less of an explosion just because the Queen was half-mizantai. Indeed, I had heard it said in some quarters that she was worse than any full human or full mizantai Queen would be, since her blood fought itself.

"You cannot leave us," she said. "I will not let you."

"Your Majesty, I cannot do anything for your side," I said. Beyond her I could see the flare of the strange light, and hear a voice that sounded different than any other elf's singing a deep song. Telemoranion, probably, and the portal might be open by now. "I have lost my magic."

"But you can't leave us," said Memoryrose. "I am sorry to lose your magic, but you know the court of the Queen—"

"What Queen?"

"Twydon."

"Your Majesty, the King—"

Memoryrose laughed aloud. "You, of all people, should know who truly rules there! King Seldon is afraid of his own shadow, and my vengeance, and has been for a long time. His daughter—now, *there* is a worthy challenger. But I need someone who knows her."

For a moment, a fierce moment, I considered it. I could still be with Lyissa, and under Memoryrose's protection I wouldn't have to become a Heretic if I didn't want to. And there was the fact that my magic—

The cold fist of reality punched me in the stomach again.

I was bereft of magic. I couldn't defend myself, if things exploded around me. And I knew that they would. Rilleta and Memoryrose were struggling too hard for them not to. And then there was Twydon. Given what I knew about her, the secret I had discovered and held over her head, she would probably make every effort to have me killed. That would be easy once she learned that I was bereft of magic.

Telemoranion and Glangon seemed willing to protect me for whatever reason. I didn't want to, but I had to claim that protection and try to remain alive in another place to pursue my vengeance.

"Get out of my way."

The Queen's face seemed to shift, tightening towards the edges. That made her look more mizan than ever. I watched her closely, and saw the smoke color begin in her eyes. She was stepping towards the wilder mood.

"You can still speak with broken limbs," she said. "So long as I do not stop your heart, I think I can—"

I couldn't have kept my eyes from flickering behind her if I wanted to, but that didn't matter. When she turned around and sent a lightning bolt arcing forward, she was aiming for the head of a human-sized opponent, and not the *cleima* cobra who slid out of the grasses and bit her on the leg.

I heard the Queen scream, and wince. I knew how painful those bites were. But just now, I was grateful for them. I nodded at the snake and ran past. I heard the swift motion of its body behind me, and then it pulled level and ahead. I followed gratefully in its path, for it somewhat parted the grasses for me, even though the blades would still swish forward and hit me in the face.

Then I was out on a patch trampled flat as a lawn, probably by the passing of that elephant and unicorn. Sunlight sang a last rebellious note from above, and I looked up to see the dragon dropping with all speed towards the portal.

The portal that was perhaps two hundred yards from me.

The portal that I had no idea how to reach in time.

I began to run, furiously. The cobra slithered beside me, not seeming bothered. Of course, it probably thought that Glangon would come back for it, or perhaps it had means of finding him again. The gate glowed with intense, odd-colored light, and then widened as the dragon's wings swept open to take it in.

Then it began to narrow.

One hundred yards.

"Klessa, stop!"

That was Rilleta's voice. I didn't dare look behind me, even to laugh at the outrage that was probably painted on her face. If I didn't hurry, I would have to stay and face the consequences of that outrage.

Then fire struck in front of me, arcing over my head, and set up a wall of flames between me and the portal.

I turned, cursing. Rilleta advanced towards me with her hand held up, flames flickering and dancing over her fingers. I could see a smile in her blue eyes, grave though her face was. The smirking bitch was back.

"Lyissa told me what happened," she said. "Klessa, can't you see that you need the God now more than ever?"

I opened my mouth to answer, but a hiss replied instead. I looked down. The *cleima* cobra had reared up between me and Rilleta, and swayed back and forth as if it would strike. Rilleta's smile faded even from her eyes as she stared at it.

"What is that?" she whispered. "Why are you in company with a creature of the Dark?"

"Because she is under the protection of the Dark."

I turned my head, and saw Glangon walk out of the grass and towards Rilleta. Well, perhaps *walked* would not be the right description. I should say that he *undulated*. He rode snakes, one foot each on a huge cobra's back, and jewelsnakes and small constrictors and other serpents adorned his body. His eyes flashed with that same eerie light I had seen once before.

"What is this?" Rilleta asked. I would have snickered if I weren't so frightened. Could she think of nothing more original to say?

"Only a claiming that you cannot understand," said Glangon. "Only the beginning of something great and wondrous, something that you will never know at all." He hissed a command, and the cobra between Rilleta and I lunged forward. She barely escaped by dancing backwards.

"Why would it try to bite me?" she asked.

"Perhaps he can smell the scent of the traitor on you," said Glangon. "The *cleima* do not like traitors."

Rilleta clenched her hands. "Rennon will strike you down if you remain here," she said. "And you must. That gate has closed by now."

"I don't think so," said Glangon, as calmly as if we really did have all the time in the world to run to Telemoranion's gate, and then he turned and looked at me. "Klessa, that gate has closed, but I can take you through. I know the place where Telemoranion went; I have visited it in dreams. But you must swear an oath to me first."

I didn't hesitate before nodding.

Glangon's eyes narrowed, but he must have known that we didn't have time just then for me to explain my non-reluctance. "You must swear that you will not be disrespectful to my Lady."

I looked around, but could see no one standing in sight. "Did you mean Queen Memoryrose? I was already almost as disrespectful to her as I could be."

"No. I mean my Goddess."

"Elle?"

Glangon clucked his tongue at me. "I already told you I serve the Dark, Klessa. Why would you think that the Goddess of Light has anything to do with me?"

I shrugged. "Hoping against hope for the familiar, I suppose. Who is she, then?"

"Enough of this!" said Rilleta, who was, I suppose, tired of being ignored. "You are not joining the Dark, Klessa. You can be useful to me even without your magic. Come back and join me."

"Her name is Shara," said Glangon. "Lady of the Stars and the Night. Even the Light worshipped Her, long ago, before they turned to the worship of Elle alone."

"The stars are Rennon's," said the angry bitch.

I ignored her as Glangon had. This worked well; I should have thought of trying it before. "I will agree to respect Her."

"Good." Glangon looked into the sky, and I followed his gaze. The sun had set, and the moon was behind a cloud, but the light of the flames still showed me the worshipful expression on his face as he murmured, "Lady of the Mysteries, lift us up."

A pure, shining note sounded in my ears. I do not know how to describe it other than that. And yet it did not sound; it suddenly came to my attention, like a song that had been behind the world all along and which I could have heard at any time, had I cared to devote enough time to listening. Like thunder, like music, like the waves of the ocean, it swept around me, and pulled my gaze, up, up, to the stars.

I blinked. It was as if the stars had put on masks they had only now taken off. They did not sparkle like the tiny points of silvery light I had known all my life; they shone now with color. I could pick out delicate sparks of red, and gold, and even blue and green. There were places that looked like holes punched in the sky, through which not light but darkness poured, and shifting, pulsing things that could have been related to the stars or been entirely distinct.

The light came down and enwrapped me. I had heard of the priestesses of Elle speaking of the Hand of the Goddess reaching down, and I thought that must be something like what was happening to me now. Nothing was more important than the stars in the sky, and the music that sounded in my ears, and that odd noise like the blowing of winds that could not be wind but must be, just wind like none I had ever heard. Darkness sheeted down from the stars, and bore me up. I could not feel the ground beneath my feet anymore.

I no longer felt anything, seeing only the light, hearing only the music.

Then both stopped, and I looked around and found myself in this new place.

Lusirimonalata's Comments

I sit and stare at the section of Klessa's Journals bound in the book of the History of the Heresy, and do not know what happened.

I had prayed to Elle about which sections of the journal to choose, and that information about Shara was not to be there. Why should I care what gods the Dark worships, and why should my readers care about their foul rituals? The account was to have stopped when Klessa met Rilleta, and then we would have gone to Rilleta's History. I would have explained the matter of Klessa's escape, and the reason I cut it from the History, in this commentary.

But, instead, I wake from the restorative draught that Anassra brought me, and found this whole section bound into the book. And I cannot remove it, since that would mean taking apart the stitches that connect it to the rest of the History pages. And that would mean admitting I could not compile the Heresy right the first time, and would require another priestess to help me, or perhaps take over the task altogether.

No. I will not do that.

I can only pray that the Goddess, who must have used my hands without my memory coming into it, knows what She is doing, and that these corrupt, Dark words will not badly influence anyone who comes into contact with them. Of course, if that reader is reading a History of the Rennon Heresy, I assume that she or he can bear the brunt of the words about Rennon, and must therefore be able to bear the brunt of words about the Dark.

Not that these words are true, of course. No servant of the Dark would save someone who was not of the Dark without a price. Without a doubt Klessa was lured into foul and horrible worship of this "Shara," if she was not simply a delusion created by the Dark to lend divine approval to their hideous sacrifices. I have seen the rest of the journals, and I know.

But it is bound now, and thank the Goddess, the next section of Rilleta's History is much more uplifting and pure and true. I present it now, without further commentary, as I am sure that any true devotee of Elle will read it with the tears streaming down her cheeks.

A History of Rilleta, High Priestess of Rennon

Chapter 13

The Moon and the Sun

"And that is all that there is for me, restless moon and fixed sun, ocean and tossing waves of grass, glowing unicorns and wheeling dragons."

-Ravings of Prince Telecoranis of Doralissa, when he returned from a journey that many suspected had led him to another world.

Rilleta hid her eyes from the intense light. She thought she could hear music in it, and that frightened her more than even the thought of losing Klessa to an enemy did. She lashed out wildly, wanting to hit something, hoping that Rennon had given her flames strength to do so.

Nothing. Her flames retreated back into her body, and then she stood in the darkness again, blinking. She tilted her head back and saw the moon burning out from behind her cloud again. The stars shone there, as well. But the sun had gone completely beneath the earth.

I suppose that is why Rennon could not give me strength enough, Rilleta thought dully. Or else my own doubt overpowered me.

But, deep inside herself, she was terribly frightened that it wasn't either of those things. She had lost her faith. She had been unworthy of the touch of the God, who did not like those who doubted His blessings. The sun had gone away for the day, and she was much less powerful in the night. She could tell herself all of that.

And it didn't work.

She knew what the power ringing around her was, since she had felt it when she first read of Rennon in the archives of the Court Temple and dared to speak His name aloud. He had come at the calling of that name, and since that day Rilleta had learned more and more of Him, until she finally found the courage to kill the woman who had tried to stop her studying and run from the Temple. She had felt this peculiar, divine energy again when she had pulled the badge of Elle from her breast and pinned the sunburst in its place.

A goddess, or god, was singing in the air around her now, and had just taken Klessa and the Rivendonian Prince away in that burst of light.

But that could not be. Rilleta knew that very well. The Dark worshipped things they *called* gods, but they were only demons dressed up under pretty names, the way the priestesses of Elle thought Rennon was. Demons, and not gods, and demons did not feel like gods. This could not be true divinity. It had to be a fake, a counterfeit of the real thing.

But her being yearned after it, as it had yearned after Rennon, as it had once yearned after Elle when she was in the height of her worship of the Goddess of Light. This was the real thing, as she knew in some small, miserable corner of her heart. This was a goddess adored, and whether it was by simple chants and fires and flowers or by bloody sacrifices at night really did not matter.

But that could not be. That was not possible. It had to be a demon.

And did that mean—

The question could not even form fully in Rilleta's mind before she flinched backwards and sobbed aloud. She didn't want to think the words, and she would never speak them. But she could control her mind much less than she could control her mouth, and it went ahead and made the words appear, blazing, before her inner eye.

Did that mean that Rennon was a demon, too? Were the priestesses of Elle speaking the truth when they denounced Him?

Rilleta shuddered and ran her fingers through her hair to still her shaking. She must do certain things. She must move. But she couldn't feel the sure touch of the God in her mind, and she knew that she would need His strength when she next confronted Memoryrose. She was not even sure that she could survive the next confrontation with the half-mizan Queen without His protection.

But He would not come to her. He was punishing her for her doubt.

Rilleta's head tilted back, her being flinching from the soft light that still seemed to pour down from the stars, and she stretched out pleading arms. She reached past the star-goddess, for the light of a divine power who had once occupied the very center of her being.

Rennon knows I am faithful to Him. He will not mind if I speak this prayer, just as a little ritual to give myself comfort.

"Elle," she whispered. "Fair One, Goddess of the Moon, look on me and comfort me." Just words she needed, words that still slid off her tongue with the tart tang of familiarity, words to discipline and set her mind in productive channels.

And then the Goddess answered her.

Lusirimonialata's Commentary

There is, of course, much more that could be said about the doubts that Rilleta had, but unfortunately the history drifts into blasphemy here, in its faithful attempt to chronicle what the Lady Rilleta truly thought and felt. We will remove these unfortunate speculations and speak instead of what it means that the Goddess answered her.

It is true that mortals condemn themselves, and Elle can only reach out after them, not rescue them if they are determined to drown or kill themselves in the Darkness. But sometimes She more actively intervenes, as we have already spoken of, and those are times of wonder and miracle.

What does it mean, though? Why does She intervene in the lives of some, and let others condemn themselves to death?

One must remember, always, that the Goddess is not mortal. She looks out over our world and sees everything that can, could, and will happen, as well as what has happened. Any mortal historian can look back and compile a history, as I am doing (though I dare say that few would be chosen with as much confidence by the Temple of Elle). But only Elle can look ahead and give my sisters prophecies, and even those often retain an element of uncertainty, because the mortal mind cannot take the truth untainted from the godly mind. Elle does Her best, but many prophecies still come through in confusing images, tattered words, and warnings that must be trusted to rather than analyzed.

Elle can see just when the decision of one person who is on the road to darkness, but would turn back when She called, would be important to the rest of the world. The saving of a mortal's soul is a beautiful and special thing, but important to the Goddess and the mortal in question as it is not to the rest of us. Elle can distinguish those who could make a difference if saved and not just left to drift into evil, and so She intervenes and rescues them.

All know what the Lady Rilleta did, and why she did it, and why we honor her name. So Elle intervened and saved her soul, so that she could accomplish those great things.

It may be personal indulgence, but when I speak to the Goddess, I can feel Her agreeing with me. I will give you a short description of Rilleta's meeting with the Goddess, and then, because it must be done, a short description of Klessa's meeting with the demon the Dark calls their "Lady of the Night." This should convince anyone who is paying any attention at all to the tenets of Dark and Light just who truly stands on the right side.

A History of Rilleta, High Priestess of Rennon

Chapter 14

In White Light

"Someone who has never felt the Hand of the Goddess cannot describe what it is like. And someone who has writhed, trapped and tormented, between two divine powers, has a better perspective on what it might be like than anyone else in the world."

-Telessra Wyren.

Rilleta cried out as light abruptly showered around her. She could not see. She could not hear anything save the sound of her own scream. It was as if the world had suddenly turned into this white cocoon with her at the center of it.

"I am here, My daughter."

Rilleta lifted her head, shaking. She had only ever known one divine power who spoke like that. Rennon did not show Himself, did not take an avatar that could be seen. He lived in her body, and her brain, and spoke to her that way.

She had not realized, until she saw Elle standing before her, how much she had missed having a goddess she could see.

Elle gazed at her kindly. She wore the guise of a mortal woman, almost normal save for the glittering robe that enwrapped Her, and Her hair. This was a strange shifting color, neither silver nor white, something like the color of the moon that still hung above. She held out a Hand, and Rilleta found her gaze focusing on the center of the Goddess's palm.

Yes. There sat a small glass globe, filled with shifting colors, red and green and blue. Rilleta had seen this drama depicted over and over again in paintings, and tapestries, and poems. She had just never thought to be in the center of it herself. The Goddess was reaching out to stop her from stumbling into the abyss that gaped at her feet, an abyss of Darkness.

No, Rilleta thought angrily. I know that I am on the edge of a greater service to Rennon, not a greater Darkness!

Elle simply smiled at her and replied to her thoughts, which was something Rilleta was used to hearing her sisters say the Goddess could do, when She was so inclined. After all, She heard prayers. "Do you not realize that Rennon is Dark, My daughter, much as the power that the Darkworker called upon? They are one and the same. He is only another demon who is out to seduce you into evil. If you had learned My lore well enough, you would know that. There is reason that all mention of Him is condemned."

"I found mention of Him, though," said Rilleta, fighting the impulse to lift her head and stare at the Goddess. She might be convinced in a moment if she did that. Better to look down, and pretend it was a façade of humility rather than a desperate attempt to protect herself.

"Yes, you did," said Elle. "But that does not make it less wrong. The writings are provided so that the priestesses can learn about the condemned knowledge and learn to battle it if it rises again. Not so that you could begin to worship a different god, and run away from Me." Deep sorrow laced Her voice.

"I found worship of Him in the plains, and the meadows, and the hills, and the jungles—wherever I went."

"Yes, of course you did," said the Goddess, with a tone in Her voice like a mother soothing a fretful child. Rilleta ground her teeth, but said nothing. What could one say to a divine mother giving a scolding? "He was very careful to guide you away from places that might have saved you and to places where the people were as corrupt as you were, once you surrendered to Him. Did you really think that He would do any less? He is My enemy, as all demons are My enemies."

"I have felt Him burn beneath my skin," said Rilleta, and she felt it again, now, her God returning to her and filling her with confidence. It felt almost as if she were about to burst into sparks before the Goddess, and that was a delightful feeling. She drew a breath and glared at Elle. "And the priestesses in the south are burning Scarlet mages to death."

"Only those who would not repent." Elle's voice was gentle, still aglitter with sorrow as the ground after a new snowfall would shine with frost. "Only those who committed crimes."

"They committed no crimes but being Scarlet mages!"

Elle shook Her glittering hair. "That is where you are wrong. You have listened to too many of the lies that your god whispered in your ear, and you have not listened to the truth of My words."

"What words?" Rilleta rose to her feet. She was confident again. Rennon had reached out to claim her; just as she had thought, He would not want His favorite child stolen by the Goddess. "Your priestesses mouth so many of them, and mean so few."

Elle's eyes went wide and sad and still, and fixed on Rilleta's face. Rilleta found that she couldn't look away. Of course, that was probably only part of the divine power that sang around Elle.

"There is Light and Destiny and the Cycle," said Elle. "And there is Darkness. The creatures who try to resist My will oppose Light and Destiny and the Cycle, and in the

end are hauled back into the service of them anyway. My service. If you resist Me, you will only end up serving Me."

"That is not true. Rennon will break the dictates of Your rule, and restore Scarlet to its honored place in the Cycle. He told me so."

"He can tell you many lies, and not one of them will have a grain of the truth that lies within My words." Elle's face was stern again. "You must learn to surrender to My words and trust My priestesses. Following your own will is leading to a disastrous civil war. Would you really destroy My temples in the villages, and turn My people away from worshipping as they wish to worship?"

"There will be time for that later," said Rilleta. "They will worship Rennon readily enough once they find out what He is."

"Ah. You will tell them He is a demon, then?"

"No. Their new, but old and natural, god."

"I cannot reason with you yet," said Elle softly. "You are not beyond My reach, and never will be, but you are not yet ready to accept the full Light. If your demon had not so tight a grasp, My daughter, how eagerly would you run and fling yourself into My arms!" She spread them wide.

In fact, the scene made it hard for Rilleta to resist doing that. This was something that almost any of her sisters back in the Temple would dream about, the Goddess paying personal attention to them, striving in Her avatar form to turn them back from falling into the abyss.

But then, they weren't her sisters anymore, and she hadn't been someone who had dreamed and prayed of this for five years.

"I have my God," she said, as she turned away, "and that is all that anyone need have."

She heard a soft sigh behind her, and when she looked over her shoulder, the Goddess's avatar had vanished.

Good. Rilleta straightened her shoulders. The god sang in her mind again, hummed under her skin with sparks and fire, and she could feel the death of her doubt, as if it had never existed. *That means that I can return to my people and never have to think about Elle speaking to me again.*

Of course, the doubts still slept in part of her mind, but the intense experience that had prompted them was already fading. The divine energy, or the counterfeit of it, from the demon that the Darkworkers had called on was gone. And Elle's divine energy would fade in time.

Rennon is my true god, and the others are demons.

Lusirimalata's Commentary

The rest is blasphemy that the tender reader does not need to read, and should not touch. She may shudder and trust me when I say that it is highly blasphemous. Much speculation on the nature of Elle, whether Elle might share the nature that She accuses Rennon of having, and so on. No need to read it at all.

And here one can see the goodness of the Goddess. Had She any need to come to Rilleta? Of course not. She does not *need* to come to any of us. She does it out of love and caring about us as Her children, not because She owes us a debt or obligation. She is truly and thoughtfully in love with us, and wants to save the souls of everyone who would go tumbling into the Darkness.

How loving is the Goddess! And in being intolerant of blasphemy against Her, how much I love Her as well!

I will pass on quickly now to the meeting of Klessa with the "Lady of the Night," as the Darkworkers laughably called She whom they referred to as a Goddess, and hope that the reader will forgive my not making a longer commentary upon Rilleta's meeting with Elle. After all, everything about it is obvious, is it not? One knows what one is supposed to think, and feel, as one reads. Elle is great, and good, and Rilleta is a small creature for doubting Her goodness.

Of course, never fear, that goodness shall not be doubted forever!

The Journals of Klessa of the Nine Wonders

26 Greenborn, 106 OR

I should perhaps correct myself. The place in which I sit and write now is perhaps not the same one as the one in which I first opened my eyes and met Her. It is subtly, but noticeably, different.

I think I met Shara in some idealized version of this world. Telemoranion can make many beautiful things, as all elves can, but this was beyond even elven beauty. She made it so with Her presence.

Now I sound like a Heretic or one of Elle's priestesses, forever babbling about the goodness of the one expression of the divine that they just happen to worship. But I have

experienced all of them now, as I don't think that many have, and I can say that Shara was the most beautiful to me.

I opened my eyes at last, when the light and the singing had ceased, and found myself standing in a forest. Beneath my feet, the soil murmured with life; I could feel the slightest stirrings of the earthworms. The very grass seemed to grow as I watched, reaching towards the sun in its luxuriance. Of course, the sunlight was softer here, turned to emerald by the leaves of the massive trees.

Such beautiful things! I think I have never seen such trees, trees that grew for the joy of life. They are still all around me, now, but they do not impress upon my mind as they did then. Perhaps it really is only familiarity, and not the absence of the Lady of the Night.

Then, their trunks shone, with gold and ivory and silvery and antique brown colors, and the slightest variation of shades in those colors echoed to my eyes like chords of varying music in the ears. Butterflies danced around me, lavender and blue and silver. I could see slanting light further on through the trees, sparkling on flowers that I longed to explore.

But, at the same time, I didn't have the feeling that this was high noon. This was spring twilight, though spring twilight of a much finer kind than I could ever have in Orlath. I looked around, half-expecting to see Telemoranion standing there and smiling at me. He couldn't but take pride in this place, if it really was his home.

Instead, I saw Her.

She sat on a smooth gray stone, not carved into the shape of a throne but bearing Her like one. When She saw me gazing at Her, She stood and came forward, Her steps light and floating, Her hands reaching out and clasping mine before I could even think to draw them away.

I didn't know what to make of Her face, though I knew at once it was divine. She looked human, even Rivendonian with Her dark skin, but so serene that it would have been easy to call Her elven. She had a few traces of angles to Her face that might have shown signs of elven heritage, but they vanished when I looked more closely for them, as though She didn't want to disconcert me. I studied Her ears beneath the fall of dark hair, but couldn't decide if their point was within human standards or not.

Her eyes were no easier to define. Deep and dark and quiet, they yet had shades of black in them, or would if I looked hard enough, in the same way that the stars had suddenly revealed their colors. I knew that they had not changed; it was my sight that had. And similarly, if I didn't see all the shades that hid in Her eyes, then it would be a fault of my sight, and not because those shades didn't hide there.

"Klessa. Welcome." Her voice, surprisingly, wasn't a song, as I have always heard Elle's described. It wasn't faultless, either. But it fit perfectly into the trees and the light around

us: a quiet murmur on the edge of hearing, a music like that of the crickets and night-birds. Not faultless, but fitting.

"Welcome." I hesitated. "You are Shara?"

"I am." She drew back, and I saw that She wore a simple tunic. Her other garment was a pair of trousers that floated so easily around Her legs that I truly wasn't sure whether they were trousers or a skirt, after a few moments of gazing. "Please. Come with Me."

I found myself following Her without question, past the gray stone and into the forest beyond. The twilight continued falling on and around us, and the murmuring of the water and the crickets and the night-birds continued. I found my heart aching, and my eyes bristled with tears. I didn't know why. I had walked through forests in my time, and paid attention to the night-sounds. In the Court of King Seldon, they have a garden made specifically to be enjoyed at night, that is so not so different from this.

Perhaps I had never paid such attention before, though.

Shara broke out of the trees in front of me, and then we stood on the bank of a large, clear, still pond. I could see stars reflected within it, though looking up, I could see no stars in the sky. That didn't seem to matter. Both the stars and the trace of brilliant golden sunset the pool reflected belonged there.

"I have something to show you," said the Goddess, and when I glanced at Her, I saw Her eyes intent on my face. "It is a picture of your possible future. I have no wish to alarm you, but I think you should know what you rush towards."

"Why are You doing this?"

She gave me an odd glance. "I just told you why."

I drew breath to rephrase the question—after all, such prophecies never come from the priestesses of Elle unless they refer to those of the royal lines, or others who might easily change the world—but She stepped forward and gestured to the pool before I could speak.

The water rippled. The sunset vanished, and the stars expanded until I thought all the pool would turn silver. Then they faded, and I found myself gazing into darkness that I knew well, was intimately familiar with.

It was the darkness of King Seldon's dungeons.

I watched as figures worked over someone bound on the center table. I could hear screams, and I knew the voice they were in. I closed my eyes tightly.

"If you will not look, the vision does no good," said the Goddess's voice near my ear.

I opened my eyes and looked again, as much as I could dare to. Of course I knew the person bound on the table, I thought, as one of the torturers moved aside and I saw her face. I didn't need the face to know, but it still hit me, hurt me. I glanced aside, and Shara said, "Do you wish to see any more?"

"No."

Shara gestured, and the vision faded. Then She turned to me and put Her hands on my shoulders. I shivered. Her grip was strange—heavier than a mortal's, but somehow, weighted by Her concern for me rather than because She wanted to grip me and keep me in place, as I somehow thought Rennon or Elle would have done.

"That is a vision of the future," She said. "I do not know if it will come to pass, not for certain. But you are hurtling towards it so fast that I think your choices will be reduced soon."

I swallowed. "And what would happen if I turned aside from the path I was on now, to prevent it?"

"I don't know," said Shara. "Chance is so at play here that I cannot simply touch Destiny, in the way that Elle's priestesses can, and tell you that that vision *will* come true, that it *is* inevitable. But I very much fear it is." She paused, Her eyes searching mine. I met that gaze, and shivered under the weight of it. I could see stars shining in Her eyes in the same way I could in the pond, like reflections and yet not like them. "There are other choices."

"What are they?"

"Stay here, and accept training as one of my priestesses. Glangon meant to offer that to you. Do not bother with the Rennon Heresy. They are already bending and breaking, since their leader is losing faith. They will pass, and the Star Circle will pass with them."

"What?" I remembered the Lord's last words to me, but I had not believed them. "Will the priestesses of Elle kill them for cooperating with the Heretics?"

Shara shook Her head. "No. I cannot see that far, but I don't think it will be that. The cause is something else." She hesitated. "I can only tell you that if you go back to the world, the vision I showed you just now will most likely come to pass."

"I can't just let the Star Circle die." What She had said about the Heretics passing made my stomach ache. "And Lyissa. She will die with the rest of the Heretics, if I don't do something."

"Do you really think you can save her?"

"Yes," I said fiercely. "Even with that vision, I think I can save her. I must return to the mortal world. Besides, how do You know that I would accept training as one of Your priestesses?"

Shara smiled, and I nearly fainted. That smile was what the smile of Elle could have been, on all the numerous statues of Her, if they only carved the compassion and gentleness they always boasted of in Her, and not the arrogance, the demand for worship. "You may think that you serve nothing in your heart, Klessa, but it may also be that you haven't met the right god. And I do think that I am the right goddess. I can feel what is in your heart, and it accords with what is in Mine. I may not always see the whole of the future, since I take into account the shifting vagaries of Chance in a way that Elle cannot, but I can guess as well as any mortal."

"I don't even know enough about what You represent."

"Stars, and the night, and the Dark, and mystery, and knowledge," said Shara, with a slight shrug of Her shoulders.

"And You oppose Elle?"

She nodded. "I do."

"I have always worshipped Elle."

"With how much of your heart?"

I looked away from Her. "There is that. But why do You oppose Elle? And why does She oppose You? It seems as though Your principles are not necessarily opposed, except for Light and Dark."

"She would have the world neat and the same, always," said Shara, and now passion burned in Her voice and shone through Her eyes. Even for a goddess, She was magnificent. "Thus the war of Light and Dark every generation. I don't want to see My people die so. I would free Chance from the bonds of Destiny, if I could, and knowledge from the pretty little cages the priestesses would keep it in. I wish that everyone in the world could have access to all knowledge."

"That would be dangerous."

"That would be free, and danger is its price."

There wasn't much that I could say to argue with that, especially since part of me agreed with Her. "Where is Glangon? And Telemoranion? Did You really bring me here only to show me this vision?"

"I will send you back to them in a moment. But the vision...I thought you should have a glimpse of your future. Telemoranion knows that something similar will happen to him. He has always known that it would end this way, ever since he first chose involvement with the matters of humans, and the Rennon Heresy in particular. I thought you should have that knowledge."

"I cannot decide if I am grateful or not."

I heard Her laugh then, and again I fought to keep from crumpling to my knees in worship. It was not a night-bird's carol. It was what a night-bird's carol would be, were it articulate.

"I shall hope that you are grateful, and leave it up to you to decide if you are or not," She murmured. "I shall let you go back to the others now. But one thing I want to do, before you go back."

"What is that?"

"Offer My blessing."

She leaned forward, and pressed Her lips against mine. I can still feel the sensation that traveled through me then, rich as sunlight, sharp as ice.

I can still feel it now, sitting and writing in a forest that is much the same but does not have exactly the same magic, with Glangon sitting beside me and waiting for me to declare allegiance to the Dark.

Lusirimonalata's Commentary

Once again, the Goddess has guided my hand and decided that something would be better left in that I would have taken out. I would have excised the vision that this demon shows Klessa from the text, as well as Shara's final 'blessing.' I am sure that most of my readers don't want to read about that.

But once again I fell into a deep trance. This time I can remember writing, though I am not sure what I was writing; and binding, though I must look at the results in order to see the binding. I bound the longer section from Klessa's journals and wrote the words of the commentary that precedes it at the Goddess's direction. If I close my eyes, I can even hear Her voice, clear if slightly hoarse, directing me on what to write and what to place where.

I have the direct attention from the Goddess that I always wanted. Elle has taken an interest in me, and not only as the compiler of a challenge to Her power. She has

intervened to make sure that I am recording it correctly, with insights that no mortal could show.

And yet...and yet...

Dissatisfaction haunts me. I read the previous commentary again, and of course the exhortation to believe in the goodness of the Goddess is fully justified. Yet, reading through it again, there is a tone, an edge, to it, that bites at me. I flinch. It seems to be blasphemy.

But there is an answer. I know there is an answer. And if I close my eyes and pray for a moment, I know it will find me.

Ah, yes, of course! There was a History that I read as an acolyte that was written the same way, with little joking asides and commentaries that trod on the edge of blasphemy. Our teacher explained it well to us. She said that the Goddess must get tired of hearing utter flattery or utter blasphemy. There is a touch of humor to Her, or She would not be a goddess of mortals, and the humor we have would have to be indicative of someone else's Hand in making us. So the Goddess sometimes takes the hands of Her worshippers and causes such commentaries to be written. That way, She may laugh at Herself without encouraging open blasphemy.

That must be what has happened here, and I am honored. Of course, I am turning to a longer section of Rilleta's History now, and will not write half-blasphemous commentaries for some time, but I am still honored to think Elle trusts me with such things.

A History of Rilleta, High Priestess of Rennon

Chapter 15

Like an Arrow to Her Destiny

"No one can resist Destiny."

-Doralissan Proverb.

"My lady! My lady!"

Rilleta nodded at the two priestesses running towards her. She knew one of them slightly, Wenna, and didn't find it hard to believe that she was so upset. Wenna was sensitive to the slightest touch of the Dark, and would probably have found the presence of the demon the Darkworker had called intolerable. "I know, Wenna. Klessa of the Nine Wonders is gone, and a Rivendonian man with her."

"Not just that, my lady." Wenna took a deep breath and plunged ahead again in a moment, so that her voice gurgled strangely. "Queen Memoryrose was attacked—no one saw who did it—but she's lying close to death, and she needs you to help, or someone to decide—the Doralissans are going mad—"

That was as far as she got, because that was how short a time Rilleta stood still. Then she interrupted, reaching out and gripping the other woman's shoulders in her hands. Wenna flinched at the flames that almost sprang from those hands, but Rilleta somehow managed to check her Scarlet impulses and speak rationally. "You are sure that Queen Memoryrose was attacked?"

"Yes. She went to meet the Darkworker Klessa as she fled—maybe the Darkworker did something to her—"

Rilleta closed her eyes. *My Lord Rennon, always You grant us some sign of Your favor, just when we think that we cannot rely on You.* "Show me to her."

Since that was just the thing Wenna had come to do, she was more than happy to show Rilleta to Memoryrose's bedside. Rilleta schooled her face into a politic expression of sorrow as she went.

"Hello Memoryrose," she said softly, as she peered around the horse who stood in the way and saw Doralissa's Queen lying on the ground.

Even Rilleta had a hard time concealing her shock and speaking rationally, at least for a moment. Memoryrose's skin had faded from the bright color of copper to an ashy-gray. She barely moved as she turned her head to look at Rilleta, and when she did, it was as slow as a snake who had been left in the cold too long. Nothing like the lightning quickness of before, Rilleta knew, and behind her shock she felt joy awaken. Memoryrose wouldn't be able to oppose what Rilleta wanted to do with the army, then.

Good.

"Rilleta? Is that you?" Memoryrose asked, and Rilleta realized that the Queen's eyes were staring blankly past her.

"Yes," said Rilleta. "It is me." She stepped past the horse and knelt beside the Queen, just so that the Doralissans who paced around and wailed wouldn't think that she had any ill will towards their monarch. She put out her hand, and Memoryrose grasped it eagerly.

"What happened?"

"I don't know," said Memoryrose. "But I think it was snakebite. I felt the agonizing pain, low on my leg—too low for it to be a sword-cut, unless my enemy was lying flat—"

Abruptly she convulsed, and screamed, thrashing so much that Rilleta had to let go of her hand. She rolled over in the thrashing, and Rilleta saw the nasty wound that was open on the back of her leg.

Rilleta swallowed hard, and told herself that this was not the time to be ill. Of course it was a nasty wound, torn half as wide again as one of Rilleta's hands, and still bleeding some strange, milky-looking liquid. But that didn't mean that Rilleta could vomit or swoon. She had to think.

"I recognize the bite," she said, and tried to keep any emotion out of her voice at all. What she wanted now was a calm steadiness. "This was done by a *cleima* cobra."

She heard the gasps and the wails around her. Such bites were often fatal, if only because the pain they caused drove the victim mad. And the cobras would usually follow their victims, biting again and again when the wounds were treated, to make sure they died in the end. Rilleta didn't think the second would be a problem, with so many Doralissan soldiers willing to guard their Queen, but the first could be.

"You may die, Memoryrose," she said, just to make sure that everyone in hearing understood.

"And I may not." The Queen sounded remarkably like anyone who had been screaming just a moment before. "The mizan blood that runs in my veins may protect me from the consequences that attend upon humans with a *cleima* bite."

Rilleta shrugged, aware the woman couldn't see her, and glad of it. "Regardless, we must make you as comfortable as possible. Is there any healer here who has treated *cleima* bites before?" she added, looking around at the crowd.

Most of the people in sight shrugged or blinked or continued on with their wailing, but two of them standing near the side were abruptly forced apart as someone dodged between them. Rilleta caught only a glimpse of long blond hair before she flung herself on her knees beside Memoryrose, but she knew the voice. "I have treated such bites in my training with the Star Circle, my lady. Please, let me do this, to make up for the harm that another Master of the Star Circle has caused you."

Rilleta smiled, and let her hand rest on Lyissa's shoulder. "You are welcome indeed to do so, my daughter. That is, if the Queen will agree to have you as attendant?" She looked inquiringly at Memoryrose, honestly unsure if the Queen would accept or not. Doralissans tended to distrust the Star Circle more in general, if only because they couldn't comprehend mages who refused to serve their own country in war.

"Let her try," said Memoryrose, and then screamed again.

Rilleta touched Lyissa's shoulder once more. "Let me know if you need any help, my daughter."

Lyissa nodded and began issuing calls for hot water and soft blankets and *lupa*, a small feathery green plant that grew on the Plains and was useful in treating animal bites. Rilleta smiled, and turned her back before anyone could see the smile. There were eyes fixed on her, of course, but they couldn't note every detail, and in a moment she would give them several large ones to think about.

She cleared her throat, and they looked at her, or at least the ones who could stop looking at Memoryrose. That last included most of the Doralissans, but Rilleta didn't mind. They could still hear, and they were duty-bound, respecters of tradition, loyal and faithful. When they saw the way things were, they would swing around; Rilleta had no doubt of it.

Memoryrose might live, and she might die. But whatever happens, she cannot trouble me for leadership of the army at the moment. If an answer comes from the Queen of Ilantra, I will meet it then. For the moment, I want to make sure that I have all the things I can definitely control firmly within my grasp.

"My ladies, my lords, we must drive ahead to the castle of Orlath with all speed. The Princess and the King will be readying to meet us, and they have the Queen of Ilantra on their side now, who will attack us from behind if she can."

There were murmurs of grief and outrage, and pale faces from the very few Ilantrons in the crowd. Rilleta met their eyes steadily. She wouldn't hurt them if they displayed enough loyalty to Rennon, but it wouldn't hurt for them to be good and scared. That made it even less likely they would try to join their fellows and hurt her, if they did have some plan.

"We must fly," she said, "and we must win the battles, as we shall do with the God's help, lest we be caught and crushed between two opposing armies."

There was a low groan, as though they didn't want to hear that, but they all fell silent and listened as Rilleta began speaking again, her voice growing in strength and confidence.

"We shall not use the dirty tricks of the Dark, hiding like traitors and then springing out when they least expect us. The days of blending with the Plains and hiding in them are over. We will stride across the Kingdom now, and wherever we go, those who live under Elle's protection will see us and run in terror of the flapping of our flags and the trumpet of our horns. We will not ambush, we will not stab from the back. We will strike from the front."

There was harsh, but honest, cheering at that, and stirring even among the Doralissans. Rilleta smiled at them. She felt as if a weight had flown away from her own shoulders. *I didn't realize how much I missed it, striding along under the Light and knowing that I was fighting under the God's protection, not just hiding and hoping no one would find us.*

"I will not yield," she said, and she heard the chanting pick up around her. They had heard and recognized the words of one of the oldest parts of the Creed, said to have been made by the prophetess Alaria in honor of someone she had once known.

"I will not yield, I will not turn.

I will not slave, I will not cower.

I will not bow, not while I burn!

High within me, the fire is in flower!

"I will not kneel, I will not whine.

I will not stop, I will not cry.

I am reaching as the fruit on the vine

Towards the God, and the sun, and the sky!

"I am reaching towards the bright flame!

I am mad with sweet star and sun's desire!

Rennon! Rennon! I will call on Thy name!

Rennon! Rennon! I will burn with Thy fire!"

By the time that that finished, even those whose faith was less than sincere were singing the words, the glory tearing them apart from within. Rilleta smiled at them and whirled on her heel, striding towards the Doralissans again.

"Will you follow me?" she asked, so that everyone could hear. "Will you fight with me? Or must you tend your Queen?"

There was a small silence, and then Galdon, a man Rilleta trusted partially because she knew how devout he was, said, "She is felled. We must take care of her and hope she recovers, of course."

"But?" Rilleta prodded.

Galdon bowed his head, his Orlathian face aflame with doubt. Rilleta knew that he had never considered Doralissa his real home, that he had always wanted to return to Orlath someday, when the worship of Rennon was well-established enough that his open piety wouldn't get him into trouble.

"But it's important that we win this war. Isn't it?" He looked at Rilleta with troubled eyes and then glanced away, as if he didn't expect her to answer him, or at least not in a way he would like. "We *must* win this war. We have to. Or the King and Princess will crush us."

Rilleta nodded. "And we want to make the future safe for our children who worship Rennon, don't we?"

"Yes. Yes, we do." With every repetition of the word, Galdon's spine was firming, and now he met her gaze directly. "We must fly to the castle with all speed, and take the King from the throne."

Rilleta smiled at him, and turned to look at the others. "Was there anything anyone wanted to say in opposition?" she asked.

No one spoke up. Some of the Doralissans were still watching her with uncertain expressions on their faces, but they knew that their Queen was sick, and perhaps dying, and in her power. Besides, the Heretics outnumbered them. Doralissans had a stubborn pride that made them deeply happy to lay down their lives for their monarchs, but they were practical enough to appreciate that there was almost nothing they could do in this situation.

Rilleta smiled at them too, and then turned and looked to the east, where she almost thought she could see the walls of the castle waiting for them.

You have chained yourself to a base, Twydon, and defensive war, she thought. You have only yourself to blame if we take the invitation seriously, and come knocking at the walls of your home.

She heard what sounded like a hoarse chuckle behind her, and turned her head. A raven sat on the ground, tilting its head back at her.

Rilleta killed it with a single blast of the Scarlet, and said casually, "Any raven that appears in the camp is to be shot at once."

Her scouts nodded, and began readying their bows.

Rilleta looked around again, trying to find reluctance, uncertainty, treason, in the eyes of her followers. Nothing. They wavered, but they looked towards her and trusted her to tell them what to do, which was good enough for a start.

"Come dawn, we move," she said. "We will run with the God, and may His blessing be on all of us!"

Lusirimonalata's Commentary

As it may be seen, there is very little that is objectionable in Rilleta's History, or at least this part of it. She rejoices in the half-human Queen of Doralissa dying, and really, can anyone blame her? Queen Memoryrose caused great fear all through her life, as the child of a mizan and a human. And Rilleta knew even then, I think, though perhaps not in the surface of her thoughts, what was Destined to happen to her. She knew that she would be a better candidate to lead the Heretics than Memoryrose, because the Queen of Doralissa might have done something unforgivable.

Of course, her thoughts about Queen Twydon are less forgivable, but Anassra has brought me, along with another vial of the restorative draught from the Queen, a parchment in her own hand, saying that she fully understands all uncomplimentary asides in the history. That problem is solved, then, and we as readers may shake our heads over the horror of Rilleta's references while recognizing that those who said them have received their proper punishment.

And now, I will present a section of Rilleta's history that I think shows her on the true road to enlightenment.

That is strange. I had the section of the history already prepared, with the words that needed to be sanded out perfectly sanded out. And I cannot find it. It is probably buried under the mounds of paper, but I have just spent two hours searching for it. It must have gotten stuck in something else.

The Goddess will understand, I am sure. I must only go back to the original and copy it out again. And this time I may copy it as I wish, without even having to put in the words that I would only sand out in the end. Or I may choose less harmful euphemisms for them, and the reader need never be bothered with them at all.

I will present another selection of Klessa's Journals, instead, in order to complete the total of pages for the day. As well, working on them will help me to ignore the screaming outside the walls. The Traitor Prince of Rivendon has been seen in the castle, they say.

What nonsense! Our Queen would know. She is his greatest enemy, the one Destined to destroy him. Besides, this is the last place that he would come, if what some rumors claim about the very last end of the Rennon History is true.

The Journals of Klessa of the Nine Wonders

27 Greenborn, 106 OR (I assume)

I remain in the world that Telemoranion and Glangon came to, or that they brought me to, or that Shara brought me to. I am unsure now whom to blame.

Or whom to thank, if someone must insist on me thanking him or Her.

And I have already changed.

"You are entirely without your magic now, are you not?" Glangon asked, as he watched me write in my journal. He had been silent and still for a long time, and I should have suspected that he would soon speak to me.

I sighed and set the journal aside for then. "Yes, I am."

"Why?"

I shook my head. "I can only conjecture. There are many twists in the Code, and the Cycle did not announce why it decided to take my abilities from me." Even now, I can feel the emptiness screaming in me, and speaking about it then was almost more than I could bear. I could hear my voice shaking, feel the fine tremors invade my body. I pushed them back in. "But I think it was because I would have lashed out and killed Rilleta if I could. And it was anger that did not come in the service of the Cycle. That, I know."

"But you've been killing mages before now. Why did the Cycle decide that was not punishable and this was?"

I shrugged. "Those were mages who had slain Azure mages. I think the Cycle saw the revenge as a service to itself, to make sure the Azure still had a place in the circle, and had not lost its children in vain. But striking out at Rilleta with my magic could not serve the Cycle."

"Not unless Telemoranion was right, and she would destroy the Azure and the Cycle if she could, dominating it with Scarlet."

I blinked and looked up at him. I had been studying my hands and wistfully watching my discarded journal until then. "He told you that as well?"

Glangon nodded.

I sighed. "I don't know why he believes in that. It cannot happen. There is no way that someone can change the world so thoroughly."

"I saw it happen."

I turned my head. Telemoranion had not emerged from the trees until then, and I wondered why. Perhaps he really did want to leave Glangon and me alone for a time, but I suspect it's because he didn't hear anything to interest him until we began speaking of his activities.

"You may believe you saw it happen," I said. "But elven ways of looking at the worlds are very different from humans'."

"Yes. We see what is there, and not what we wish was there." Telemoranion's eyes remained golden now, though his skin had turned the color of ceramic from Doralissa, and his gaze bored into me. "It is not a comforting way to see the world, ever. I sometimes wonder if the human way would be better, more comforting. But I saw what happened. I saw Queen Aneron use the power of dreaming like fire to sculpt and change my home into something that she wanted it to be. But she did not think of exiling the Scarlet, only of binding herself to other elements instead. Rilleta will think of exiling Azure."

"Why do you care?" I asked. "You can retreat to this place—wherever it is—"

"It is not precisely where," said Telemoranion. "Such words do not apply."

I shook my head, not wanting a lecture on elven metaphysics. I had read enough of those in the archives of the school, and was well-aware of what they believed, worlds strung on the neck of a beast and all the rest of it. Ridiculous. "But why are you so bound to the affairs of mortals at all? Why did you help Rilleta, if you know now that she would just overturn the Cycle?" The words somehow fell from my mouth, though really I wanted to snort with disbelief. Why would anyone bother with even *thinking* she could overturn the Cycle? Of course she couldn't. It was bound to Destiny, and the Light, and all three of them to Elle.

Of course, Rilleta was crazy.

"I became part of it thinking she was different, that she could undo the damage done the country without the need of my interference," said Telemoranion. "And that is not true. She would not undo the damage, only replace it with something worse. So. I have withdrawn now."

"Shara said something about you facing a fate that you cannot avoid, a fate that you knew about and went to meet anyway."

He did not flinch. Of course, when have I ever seen an elf flinch? "Yes. That is true."

"And are you safe from that fate now?"

"No."

"Then why aren't you fighting it?"

"I think you know the answer to that," said Telemoranion. "The Goddess showed you a vision, too, didn't She? And you're still taking action that might result in your catapulting into it."

"That's to save Lyissa, which is acceptably human." I leaned forward, studying his face, and of course pulling nothing from all those sharp, strange angles. I don't know anyone who is good at reading elven faces, or anyone who understands the elven heart, assuming they really have one. "But what about you? Why would you wish to just give up your life?"

Telemoranion smiled, and I winced. That smile made small pinpricks of blood appear on my face. I wiped them away resignedly. Without the protection of my multiple elements, I supposed that I would have to get used to such things, the normal reactions of humans when faced with elves.

"You would not understand. I met two remarkable people before this; I cannot tell you how long ago, because I have never understood how humans measure time, not really. I saw then that if I stepped into their path, I would meet this fate. And I wanted to step into their path, so I chose it."

I opened my mouth to question him further about that, but Glangon said, "Klessa, the time of your choosing is rising soon. You should choose whether you will serve the Dark, or whether I must leave you. I want to attack the Rennon Heresy and stop Rilleta, if I can. She will make things harder for Darkworkers than Twydon will, if she sits the Orlathian throne."

I turned and looked at him. He lay there and looked back at me, no different to my eyes than he had been dancing on the Plains among his snakes. If there was evil in him, it was well-hidden. "You truly serve the Dark?"

"I truly do."

"Why?"

Glangon shrugged. "I love it. And my parents were not—happy with the idea that I had a strange magical talent, or that snakes were the beasts that chose to come to me." He touched the head of the jewelsnake by his side; I was fairly sure it was Silissra. "The Dark accepts anyone, no matter what their beast, no matter what their magic. Or lack of it," he added softly, his eyes on me.

I wanted to close my eyes, or flinch, or hesitate, or look away. But I didn't. "You are saying that I could choose to serve the Dark, and that it would then give me help in rescuing Lyissa?"

"Yes, if you wish it."

"And what would it ask in return?"

"The Goddess spoke to you about becoming one of Her priestesses, as I understand it."

"Is that usual?" I asked. "For gods to come to mortals in near-mortal form and speak to them like that?"

Glangon nodded. "It is for Shara, and I have never known any other power. Elle does not do it?"

"No," I murmured, thinking of what Shara had said. Perhaps I had never given my heart in reverence to any god because I had never met a god I could give it in reverence to. There wasn't only Elle to pay attention to, after all. There was a Lady of the Night who would be more than happy to have me, from Her blessing and the way She had spoken to me.

But did I want Her?

"I have trained long to serve the Cycle," I told Glangon. "It will be strange, to suddenly change my allegiance."

Glangon's lips twitched. "We don't expect you to convert suddenly, Klessa, or Burn as the Heretics do. We want a promise. Or two, actually. One is a promise of service, and another is a promise that you won't get yourself killed while you're studying, at least not on purpose."

"I can't give the second, not when Lyissa is in danger and I might get myself killed trying to rescue her."

"Then we'll perform a simpler Binding," said Glangon. "I've been at a Binding for a woman who was dying of plague but still wished to serve the Dark; she didn't want Elle to have her soul. I think I can remember how to do it. Give me a few hours—or the equivalent of them here—to gather what I will need." He stood and bowed to me, then turned and walked into the trees.

I blinked after him, then looked at Telemoranion. "Did I just do something I will regret?"

The elf was staring into the distance. Then he swung burning eyes on me and said, "Come with me. You write down your thoughts and experiences, do you not?" He spoke as if it were a foreign and yet intriguing idea.

"Yes."

He nodded. "Then come with me, and see the creation of my toys. I want someone to remember what I do."

He walked away. After a surprised moment, I chose to follow.

Lusirimonalata's Commentary

I still cannot locate the section of Rilleta's History that I meant to present in place of these extracts from Klessa's journals. It is most vexing. I know that I did not mislay them; they were still in plain sight when I went to sleep. And I truly do not have so much paper that they should have gotten buried.

I have flipped through the manuscript of the History several times, wondering if the Goddess chose to tell me to bind them in already. No. They are gone, and, it appears, I will have to copy from the original again.

I will pray to Her, and then go and do this. I choose to hope that She will guide my pen-hand, and rid the text of all words that might be offensive or blasphemous to Her. But I will not bind any more selections from Klessa's journal in until I have copied the relevant section from Rilleta's History. The strange, evil ideas that Klessa reveals need to be heard, so that my readers can have an idea of just why the Heresy was so heretical, but Rilleta's saner ones also need to be heard.

What is also vexing is that Anassra, despite her scrupulous cleanliness and piety—she will not even let me touch her often, for fear of offending a priestess of higher station—appears to have neglected to clean under the table itself. I found several small segments of what looked like paper there. At first I thought they were scraps of the manuscript I had copied, and that a mouse had gotten hold of them and chewed them up. Then I picked them up, and realized how strange and smooth they felt, unlike our parchment. When I turned them to the light, they flashed with a rainbow iridescence. It appears they were once part of a living creature, but what kind I cannot tell.

It is an interesting puzzle to ponder as I go to copy again from Rilleta's History in the archives. I will return when I have a section that portrays her eventual flight back to sanity. Until then, my readers, farewell.

The Journals of Klessa of the Nine Wonders

27 Greenborn, 106 OR (or perhaps the 28th by now, I don't know).

Telemoranion led me past the trees, and past the stones. I don't know how else to describe it. They remained there, but grew less and less distinct as I watched, as if they had become ghosts. Or perhaps we had, though when I touched my own arm I felt as solid as ever.

"There."

I raised my head, and blinked. In front of me lay a too-perfect clearing, sculpted like a shallow bowl of green. In the center burned and boiled something like glowing fire,

though it was difficult to be sure of its color, just as it is with pure sunlight; I had to glance away from it rather than gazing for too long. I thought I could hear a low singing, though it had no source. Whether it was the fire or not, the singing seemed to settle into my bones and irritate me on a fundamental level.

"What is this?" I am afraid I was rather snappish.

"My home since the rise of Rennon and the fall of my kin," said Telemoranion. "The place where I made my toys."

I looked up in interest at that, though I kept my eyes on his face instead of the fire. I had never seen elven magic actually worked before, only its results. Few Masters are welcome into the Elfwood, unless their devotion to the Light actually outweighs their devotion to the Cycle. I don't think the elves like not being able to control the Masters who visit them.

"And here you will make more?" I asked. Whatever this fate was that he faced, surely it wouldn't prevent him from going back and aiding Rilleta. I didn't think I really believed him when he denounced her and walked away. I had heard of elves doing similar things in the old stories and reversing themselves. Their sense of loyalty seemed to be the only thing about them that wasn't immortal.

"I would like to," said Telemoranion. "But I fear that I will not have the time."

"What time wouldn't you have?" The sun has not moved here an inch since I arrived. I thought that Telemoranion had probably created this little slice of world that way. The thought of not having enough time, when one could halt its flow with a casual wave of his hand, was laughable.

"I mean that I could not raise it to the height of perfection before my enemies come through the gate."

I looked around nervously. There was no gate in sight, just the oddly misty trees and the fire. "What gate?"

"The one they will make."

I stared at him. Shara, but I had thought that when we came here, we were safe. My body protested with aches at the thought of moving again so quickly. "Your enemies can open a gate into this world?"

Telemoranion just nodded. He was watching the shifting fire with a thoughtful expression on his face, as if considering what new artistic visions he would make.

"Then why not flee? Make a place they can't reach? Open a gate of your own?"

Telemoranion stirred, though it was to make a dismissive gesture. I thought he had probably learned that from humans, too. "I don't wish to flee. I will die when I face them, and I will die here."

"But why do you want to die?"

He shrugged. "I don't want to. It is simply what will happen."

I tried to calm down my terror. Without my magic, I am defenseless, or nearly so, especially if Rilleta's people manage to corner me. And now the elf who brought me to this place wouldn't stir himself to offer any protection. "You have a Destiny to die at their hands, then?"

"Do you have a Destiny to trip down a hill when you stumble over a root?"

I glanced at him, wondering if he was joking, but his eyes were fixed on my face, and he seemed to be earnestly waiting for an answer. "It depends where the root is, and how steep the hill," I said cautiously.

Telemoranion laughed. The laugh was like Shara's, but sharper. I kept on my feet only through a heroic effort. "Then imagine that I have caught my foot in a root at the top of a very steep hill. I don't particularly want to fall, and there is no fate that is urging me to do so. It will just happen."

"You could resist somehow, surely."

"What would be the point?"

I will never understand elves.

I looked back at the fire and tried to think of something else, hoping that perhaps Glangon could call on Shara again and take us out of this world if Telemoranion refused to do it himself. "And how do you create? Do you use the fire, or just your magic, or your voice?" If I was going to die, I would like some knowledge of elven magic, and it was what he had brought me here to learn.

"Ah."

I looked at him again, and could see the joy blazing in his eyes. Telemoranion smiled at me. "There is a reason that Rilleta and her people call me the Master of Metal."

He took a step forward, his arms held out, and sang one single note. Actually, he may have spoken a word in a language I don't know. I have always had trouble distinguishing between elven language and music.

Metal flashed in the sun. I looked around, thinking that he had simply called a creature into being, or that one of the toys he had already made had come to join us. But instead, the metal seemed to be everywhere, save where I was directly looking at the moment. I saw silver, and then copper, and then the dull black of pig iron. Always flashing, always melting away again, as if the air were turning to metal when I didn't need to breathe it.

"What are you doing?" I asked, trying to keep the nervousness out of my voice.

"Do not the Masters of the Star Circle say that every element is everywhere, and that one need not have that element in great quantities, if one can simply reach out and touch it?" Telemoranion's voice flashed like gold in the corner of my vision and then melted away again.

"They say that," I said, "but the Lord and the Masters of Time and Light are the only ones who can do it, since Time and Light are everywhere."

"Then imagine I can do the same thing with Metal."

"Imagine?"

Telemoranion's voice turned almost gentle. "It will be easier than explaining to you what is truly going on."

I bit my lip and kept silent as I watched him spin back into view again, his arms held up to the trees and his voice rising and falling in a cadence I couldn't place as either music or cacophony, since it altered from moment to moment. Again and again the metal flashed, and then something grew at the center of the fire that flickered and shifted in the clearing, making me cover my eyes. Light that was not sunlight but was as hot on the skin beat and burned around me like the pulse of a heart for a moment, and then Telemoranion said, "You may uncover your eyes and look."

I did so.

Telemoranion turned towards me. For a moment, I thought he had simply turned a long swath of his hair silver, with some other metals twined through it, and I was about to ask him what the good of that was. Then the thing stirred, and lifted a head that had lain on its body a moment before, and I saw it was a serpent, a silver serpent braided with so many other colors of metal that parts of its body shone like rainbows as it crawled from Telemoranion's neck to the ground.

I stared at it, and watched as it wound its body back and forth with whiplash speed, dark eyes alive and glowing. It behaved no differently from any of Glangon's snakes, though of course it looked different. It might as well have been alive, and perhaps it was.

"I thought you said you wouldn't make any more toys?" I asked him.

"This is not a toy, not a battle-weapon," said Telemoranion. "It does not have poison in its fangs, for example. If I had more time—" and his voice rang strangely on the word, as if he thought it very odd indeed that he was subject to its constraints "—I would make it better, give it more defenses, and imbue it even more with a sense of life. As it is, I will make a present of it to Glangon, and perhaps make some more, and he may do whatever he will with them."

"You use your voice to sing them into being, then?"

"No. I dream them, and they are so."

"But the elves couldn't do anything like that," I said, settling into the pattern of an old and familiar argument. "Queen Aneron would never have been able to defeat your kin and take Orlath from them if your magic was that powerful."

"Unless Queen Aneron herself used it."

I frowned and raked my hands through my hair. "Why would I never know this? The Star Circles serve no one Kingdom, nothing but the Cycle, and our records are not biased." I paused, realizing I had spoken of myself as a Master, but decided only to write it down later and went on. "And the records speak nothing but praise of Queen Aneron."

"I told you why that was so."

"She cannot have simply altered history."

"She cannot, or you are too frightened to think that she could have?"

I only shook my head. "You just don't understand anything about the way humans think, Telemoranion."

"Perhaps, but I understand the way they act very well. And I know what will happen to me in a little while." Telemoranion glanced up. "As well as what will happen to you."

I turned, expecting to see whatever mysterious enemies would come and kill Telemoranion. Instead, I saw Glangon standing there, with a crown of flowers around his head and another in his hands. The grass at his feet was alive with snakes, and sometimes flashes of bright steel. I thought some of the snakes were holding knives in their mouths.

"You are ready for the ceremony?" Glangon asked me.

My heart began to beat very fast, and the only excuse I could come up with was, "I thought you said it would be a few hours?"

"It has been," he said. "Did you not feel the time pass?"

I shook my head slowly. I had been here only a few minutes talking with Telemoranion, I knew that. Or—well, perhaps it had been longer, as I watched him dance and saw the metal flashing from the corner of my eye. But I knew there was no way that it could have been a few hours.

"Of course, time doesn't really matter in an elven place," said Glangon, smiling at me as if that were a plausible excuse. "Now. Are you ready for the ceremony? Will you give your allegiance to the Dark?"

"To Shara," I said, grasping at the one thing I had found to truly like about the Dark so far.

Glangon nodded with no expression of surprise. "Then come with me."

Lusirimalata's Commentary

I....

This is impossible.

I returned with the newly-copied section of Rilleta's History, and found that someone had bound more pages from Klessa's Journal than I ever meant to use into the binding. This time, I am sure the Goddess did not do it. She would have used my hands, as She has done so far, and there were no odd spells of falling asleep or into a trance this time. I would have remembered it. I was copying in the archives, and every moment my mind was clear and strong.

Who did this?

Of course, I really only have one suspect, one priestess who has been in and out of the room besides myself, the only one authorized to do so. Anassra, my servant. I will call her, and if she tells me that she bound Klessa's blasphemous Journal in its place, then I will turn her over to the torturers. Interfering in sacred work is something that no priestess can hope to survive.

Amazing.

I confronted Anassra, and she admitted the truth, without prompting, without direct questioning, and certainly without torture. She stood with her hands clasped in each other, a move she often makes when questioned at all, and kept her eyes on the ground the entire time. She was so humble that I felt horrible for yelling at her, as if I were the Dark Horror that hunted Queen Aneron as a child.

She did indeed bind the section of Klessa's Journal into the book, but that was because she came back from her duties to clean up, as I had told her to do when I found the iridescent particles on the floor, and saw the pages lying there, in the place where I always leave newly-copied pages. She assumed they were meant for the History. And, in truth, who can blame her? She might have looked at them and seen they were blasphemous, but I have explained to her, over again and patiently since she is not very intelligent, that sometimes blasphemy must be preserved so we will better know what holy faith looks like. I think it more likely that she did not glance at them at all. She bound them in, thinking to spare me some of the effort of handling the thick needle and string.

It was a mistake, that is all. And I cannot unbind the pages without destroying the History, which I will not do.

So. The fault lies not with Anassra, but with whoever copied the pages of Klessa's journal and left them in a place where such a thing could happen.

I have studied the handwriting, and it is most definitely not my own. It must be another priestess, to have access to the journals, but I have never seen the hand before, among all those I am familiar with. A stranger who wants to sabotage the History, then, and probably the same one who took my copied section of Rilleta's History away. I know there were other candidates for the task, including some who felt that a priestess as young as I should not have the chance. This is probably one of them.

It is terrible to think of one of my sisters sinking to such a level, and trying to make my work, the sacred work of the Goddess, more difficult. It is like someone screaming during prayers. It is like someone proclaiming that Elle belongs to the Dark instead of the Light. There is no statement or crime disgusting enough to compare it to, in truth, and it is something that I wish need never have happened.

But it has happened, and I can only try to soften the impact of Klessa's blasphemy as much as I can. Doubtless, she was under a delusion, the same kind of delusion that made her mistake the Dark's demon for a goddess, and Telemoranion for an elf at all, Light or Dark. She believed that she saw metal flashing in the air, and that was what she wrote down. She was a liar, but not always; there is a tone of awe in her words here that I think the reader may trust. She believed that what she was seeing was true, and she faithfully recorded it.

Of course, that does not make it more true, and it does not make her tone of awe at all less blasphemous. One should have such awe only before a true miracle of Elle, or someone whom She chooses to bear such a miracle.

But so long as the reader understands that what Klessa wrote was not true—since there is no element of Metal, and Queen Aneron made history, not altered it—then we may pass on, and turn to the next section of Rilleta's History. Feel the clear, pure faith that burns

from these pages! And look, if you can, for the clues that will put her on the path back to Light and Destiny!

A History of Rilleta, High Priestess of Rennon

Chapter 16

Dawn's Light

"Never flinch in the darkness; never run.

All looks well again under light of sun."

-Orlathian Proverb.

Rilleta leaned forward, her heels claspng her dancing mare tightly, her eyes fixed on the horizon. The first sliver of golden light had just begun to ease over it, and she was still horribly excited, wanting to break forward as if she were in a race, and her competitors straining beside her.

Of course, I am in a race, and if I am not to see my people destroyed, then we must ride as hard as we can.

But somehow the element of danger faded before the element of excitement in it.

Someone called out further down the line, and someone else answered shortly. Rilleta smiled. Save for the Doralissans and the healers, including Lyissa, who were to stay behind with Queen Memoryrose, everyone was ready, and that tension made some people act stupidly, and others short with the stupidity.

But the God is almost here.

The first beam of sunlight stabbed Rilleta first in the face. Narrowing her eyes against it, she cried, "*Fanulia!*" in Doralissan, and heard it repeated along the line, before she said in Orlathian:

"Forward, now!"

Horses whinnied, whips cracked, and spurs jabbed into pair after pair of flanks. Rilleta was nearly thrown backward as her horse leaped, but she was used to that and just clung to the reins until the gallop became tolerable. Then she shook the sunlight and dust out of her eyes and looked around.

The scouts, on their light, swift horses, were racing ahead, but they wouldn't maintain the gap for long. Everyone in the army, save those who absolutely had to stay behind, was mounted on Doralissan horses, the best of the breed, in some cases crossed with unicorn blood. This first, joyous gallop would end soon, but for now they were almost equal.

Rilleta turned her head forward. They were not far from one of the many villages that dotted the Corlirin Plains, and this was one she had carefully infiltrated some time before, as she had most of those on the path to the castle. They would have extra horses waiting for them when they got there. It would mean bending their path and not taking the track that Princess Twydon expected them to take, but Rilleta thought that was all to the good, really.

We shall overcome whatever guards and wards she has placed in the way. After all, are we not Destined to conquer?

As if mocking that, a harsh croak rang out from overhead. Rilleta gestured calmly, and the raven tumbled to the ground in a puff of flame and feathers. By the time it hit, she was already far beyond it.

The mare appeared to fall further and further into her own kind of joy the more Rilleta gave her her head. She snorted and all but snapped at Vañade's horse when the scout steered him up next to Rilleta. Rilleta held her back a little and listened to the report at a canter instead of a gallop. The mare champed sulkily at the bit in answer.

"A small force ahead, my lady. I think it was put there more to guard the village than anything else."

"How big?"

"Twenty trained soldiers, perhaps. The rest of them are peasants, just-armed and looking terrified. And I think the soldiers are mercenaries."

Rilleta shook her head. *Not a good ally of the Light, are we, Twydon? Using paid soldiers instead of your own loyal nobles, for shame.* "Then leave them to me."

Vañade would have protested, once, long ago, but he had come to know the expression on her face, as had almost all her people. He bowed his head and went back to his own ride.

Rilleta took a deep breath and opened her conduit to the Scarlet as far as it would go. In seconds, flame flooded her. She rode between its two desires, as she always did, smiling in exultation. The fire wanted to warm her and obey her will, and it wanted to burn the Plains to ashes. Love and destruction.

Glory, either way.

"*Fantamo*," she whispered to the mare.

The Doralissan command worked wonders on a horse who had come from the Queen's own stable. The mare at once sprang into the devouring gallop of a horse giving it her all. She would run until Rilleta gave her the order to stop, or until she dropped from exhaustion.

Rilleta rose to her stirrups, and heard the shouting suddenly arise behind her. Her people knew what was coming. It was almost a pity the soldiers and peasants who stood in her way did not.

Shining confidence filled her. *Now, now*, she thought, as her red hair and her robes streamed behind her, *I am truly in the service of the Light*. She squinted ahead, waiting for the first sight of them.

There they were, soldiers encamped among the grasses. Some of them were keeping watch, but most were in their own bedrolls. They stared at her in shock, and dawning anger or terror, depending on whether they were mercenary or peasant. Rilleta smiled. Terror was the more rational response, and one that she would give all of them cause to feel...

Her hand rose, and paused.

Now.

Her hand came down in a sideways chopping motion, and Scarlet flooded out of her. But instead of leaping through the air as devouring flame, it lashed out and found the fire in the bodies of those who faced her. They were none of them Scarlet mages, of course, but every human lived in a world where the Scarlet existed. All Rilleta had to do was open a conduit.

Of course, once the conduit was open, those who were not born with the gift to handle it would die.

Inconvenient for them, Rilleta thought as she watched flames burst from within the bodies of her foes. Some of them had time for a single scream, others for more, but many of them died in instants, flames of white with an orange heart eating them alive. The flames sprang higher and higher, and Rilleta held out her hands and called them to her.

They leaped to her palms, forming a rainbow of diamond and garnet through the sky for a moment, and then they were all around her, jostling her like eager hounds. Rilleta laughed, careful to keep the fire on her body and away from the horse, which had no such magical protection as she did. There was a reason that she had risen to her stirrups.

Of course, the drama it adds doesn't hurt, either.

They stopped just short of the roaring ball of destruction, sometimes spluttering up with new force as the flames found some kind of liquor hidden in the soldiers' packs. Rilleta sniffed. She had a distrust of wine from her days in the Temple of Elle, where it was only drunk on ceremonious occasions, and while she drank it as a priestess of Rennon, she was just as glad it was going up in flames now, and would not be a temptation.

She leaped off the mare's back and held out her hands to the flame, her voice clear and steady and strong as she chanted.

"Here are my enemies, now fallen in fire, wedded to waste, and roasted with ruin.

Who can stand before Rennon and call Him equal? All praises to the God are due, golden with fire and afire with longing, for my victory and His!"

She heard the cheering break out behind her, but ignored it. Her gaze was fixed ahead, on the village, and the people who stared at her in terror from behind the houses. She could see at least one woman in a white robe, and knew that this village held a Temple of Elle.

Gravely, she stepped forward, and saw the peasants flinch backward. That saddened her. Of course, she had just destroyed many people, most probably including some they loved, but they could not look past that and see the greater good she had wrought, since they were blinded by the King's and Crown Princess's lies. They would have a freer, richer life under Rennon. They had only to learn to look past the destruction and trust her.

"Greetings," she said.

The priestess pushed forward, holding a great silver crescent moon in her hands. Rilleta's eyes narrowed. She did not remember the village having such a treasure before now. Where had they found it, or gotten the money to buy it?

"You cannot harm us," said the priestess of Elle, though her hands shook and her voice wobbled as well. "We are under the protection of the most gracious Goddess of Light, and the noble Princess Twydon. Go back."

"What is that?"

"A sign of the Goddess's and Twydon's favor." The priestess stopped vibrating so badly that she was in danger of dropping the crescent, at least. "You cannot harm us so long as I hold this."

"And if I rip it from your hands?" Rilleta reached out with flame, flame that she knew was hot enough to melt metal. The peasants wailed and ran, but the priestess stood her ground, even as the fire came for her, and closed her eyes. Rilleta could see her lips moving in prayer, and supposed she was commending her soul to Elle.

Poor woman. I hope that Rennon favors her, and—

Her flames touched the crescent moon.

It burst apart, and a whirling white cloud arose from it.

Rilleta opened her mouth in a silent scream. She should have recognized the weapon. She had seen it often enough in the Temple, left over from the days when the priestesses had put down the Metal Heresy. The Metal Heretics hid underground in their mines, and to get them out the priestesses harvested *agalia* spores and put them inside crescent moons that burst apart on contact with elemental magic.

Agalia spores carried plague.

Rilleta stumbled back, coughing frantically, one hand held over her mouth and nose. She could see the white spores lifting into the sun, whirling with the wind. They would descend soon, splitting apart as they came, casting a net of contamination all across the country. Her people were sure to be caught in it, and while the Scarlet mages could probably burn it out of their bodies and the Steam mages clean themselves as well, the Metal and Lightning mages would be in trouble.

In that moment, as she stood there with the plague reaching towards her people, and knowing that Twydon had probably put one of those in each village that had horses, Rilleta came close to despairing.

And then she stood straight and tall, and reached for her faith again, and found it. *Twydon will be punished in the end. All those who use such evil magic of the Dark will be punished. How can I doubt that? My God has promised me that we will win this war.*

She turned, and cast her voice to her people who waited behind. "Hear me! We will win this war. Those who fall sick must be left behind, and give their horses to the healthy ones. Horses that fall sick must be abandoned. Call upon your magic, and your faith in the God!"

She turned back to her own Doralissan mare. The horse's flanks were already heaving as she sucked in deep breaths. Rilleta almost thought she could see white spores whirling down her throat.

She turned back to the village. *So I will find another horse.*

Twydon cannot stop us. We will prevail, no matter who stands in our way.

Lusirimonialata's Commentary

I have heard one of my sisters say that we cannot but pity and wonder at the Heretics, that they ever seriously thought they would win. They must have known that they were doomed from the start, she says, and that the Goddess was not with them.

I have tried to explain to her that it was not the Goddess they thought was with them, but she does not understand.

I admit, I found it hard to understand myself when I first began to read the documents of the Heresy and realized that I wanted to write something about them, that I would be interested in preparing this History. I thought they must realize what they were doing, like those nobles of the Light who turn to Dark. They had heard all their lives of the goodness of the Goddess; they had heard all their lives the truth of the world. It seemed strange to me that anyone could possibly reject those ideals. Surely they were the property of every right-thinking person.

But some of them, of course, were raised Heretics from their births, and they believed what their parents told them. I have recounted before in these pages how nearly I was given that fate, and spared only by the grace of the Goddess and the notice of a priestess. They could not learn differently, and though damned, they were innocent in a strange way. I feel sorry for them. I regularly pray for their souls, and hope that they may be schooled in the ways of Elle in the afterworld, so that they may become part of Her Light someday.

But Rilleta, who lived as a priestess in this very Temple for years on years, had no such excuse.

Why, then, did she flee, and turn her back on the very idea of the Goddess? How could she think that she would win, if she once set her face and her fate against Elle?

This is harder to understand, but I think that it was entirely the demon Rennon's fault. He lied to her; he spoke to her through her fascination with knowledge. It is one reason that I take so much care to embed hymns and other protective pieces of scared work within these pages as I write. They guard me from the corrupting influence of Rennon and other demons like him, even as I write about them.

Of course, Rilleta could have resisted this influence. And why she did not is a question that—

The Journals of Klessa of the Nine Wonders

Sometime in the elven world

I feel—changed. Transformed. Perhaps I would feel the same if Telemoranion had plunged me in his fire—

But that in its proper place.

I followed Glangon through the woods tamely enough. I was still reeling with shock. But I gradually began to revive. I could think about what it meant that Telemoranion would die later. I had more important things to worry about right now.

"What do flowers and knives have to do with anything?" I asked.

Even though he didn't look at me, I could hear the smile in his voice. "You would like to know that, wouldn't you?"

"I always want to know. Besides, I assume that I am to find out."

"You are." He glanced back at me, his face solemn. But I could see his eyes shining, and I didn't think him as solemn as all that. "The Dark has agreed to accept you. I made the final request as I harvested the flowers, and it has heard me and so agreed."

"Was there a chance that it wouldn't accept me?"

Glangon shrugged. "Always a chance, I suppose. But in truth, your need of dedication to something makes you a good prize."

He turned around and went on before I could respond. I blinked, then stepped angrily forward. The snakes writhing between us made sure I didn't get too close, but he could hear my voice easily enough.

"Why should I have to dedicate myself to anything?"

He glanced back at me again, his face showing what looked like honest surprise. Given that smile in his eyes, though, I didn't think it was. "You always have to serve someone, Klessa. It's the way you were taught. I think if Rilleta had come to you in the right way, you would have let yourself become a Heretic."

"I would not have," I said. How could he think that? "I was already serving the Cycle—"

I stopped.

Glangon nodded. "And a loyal service you did it, to the best of your ability, until you turned against it somehow and it stripped your power from you. So now you want a new master. The Dark would find you more useful if you had your magic, but that is impossible, so it will take your intense loyalty."

I swallowed. Hard. Pride often so clogs the throat. "I will not serve the Dark without thinking about or questioning it."

"I didn't think you would," said Glangon. "But you can moan and question the orders that it gives you all you like, so long as you obey and stay loyal." He turned and walked into the woods again. A jewelsnake darted past him with a small and serrated blade in its mouth, and I began to get uneasy.

"What exactly is the ceremony used to bring someone to the Dark?"

"Two binding rituals, I said. And we won't use the deeper one."

"But what is the first?"

Glangon spun to face me, walking backwards easily. He could simply have known the country, but I think the snakes were watching for him. Perhaps he is able to see through their eyes. "You won't find out before you go through it. If I told you what it was, it would rather destroy the effect."

"I need only talk, then?" That was a relief to know. I had seen some of the rituals of Elle—though not many, because Her priestesses always prefer the real thing to the symbol—where red water was spilled in place of blood, or a song sung instead of a hunt performed. This might be the same thing.

Glangon laughed at me, and went on.

I followed, more uneasy than ever.

He halted on the edge of a shallow clearing not unlike the one that held Telemoranion's fire, and turned his head slowly from side to side. I watched him from the corner of my eye, and saw his hands clench and unclench on the crown of flowers, as though he were deciding just whether to use it. Then he nodded, and turned to me. I shuddered. Even the late sunlight flashed eerily in those silver eyes.

"Yes. This is the place."

"The place of the binding?"

"That and other things." Glangon still seemed distracted, and kept glancing about as if he were expecting someone to emerge from the woods.

"Have you invited someone else?" I spoke as wryly as I could, but the dryness in my throat somewhat sucked the impact from my voice.

"No," said Glangon. "Whatever else comes will depend on your reaction to the binding."

I swallowed, and then licked my lips. Time to get some saliva into my mouth, if I could. For all I knew, I might soon have to do a great deal of talking. "This isn't like the rituals of the Light, then."

"In what way are the rituals of the Light different?"

"They only involve things that you invite."

Glangon sniffed, or perhaps he snorted. Already I was losing the ability to distinguish, as if the airiness that had invaded the trees and stones earlier had invaded him, too. In fact, as he turned back to the clearing, I thought I saw his body waver and snap like a ghost, like a Dezeywandu elf reaching from one world to another. "The Light does that. They must have everything their own way, in order to keep the Dark as far away as they can. They must control everything, and have nothing that is out of order, nothing that might hint at the wilder realities."

"And this ritual will invoke the wilder realities, I suppose?"

Glangon smiled over his shoulder at me. "Oh, many of them." His voice was light as he laid the crown of flowers on the ground. "I would suggest that you back out now, but you need a master, don't you?"

"I wish it didn't have to be this one."

I spoke lowly, but he heard me, and laughed in delight. "That is what all of them would say if they could, I think. I have been at many binding rituals when we bring someone from the Light, and she whines for that which she has lost. But this is the Dark now. If you turn back, then you'll never know what it's like."

I narrowed my eyes. How could Glangon have known the very words that the Lord of the Star Circle had used to tempt me into continuing to study the elements, when I had wanted to give up?

Of course, he couldn't. It was merely a coincidence. But it sent a shudder up my spine even so.

"Come to me."

I looked up, startled, thinking he meant me, but saw the jewelsnake writhing over to him with the small serrated knife in its mouth instead. Glangon bent, accepted it, and then stood straight again, looking at me. "You must swear an oath to the Dark, Klessa, and it must be sincere.""

"What happens if it's not?" I asked, eyes on the knife.

Glangon laughed and lowered the blade. "Don't worry. I'm not going to use it on you—yet. But I need to know if you are willing to swear to the Dark, and be loyal."

"What name do you want me to use?" I asked, remembering the way that Lyissa hadn't wanted me to swear by Elle. For all I knew, Glangon might want me to swear in the name of Shara.

Glangon shrugged. "This is not my oathtaking. Whatever name you feel that you want to use. Some swear by Shara, and some by another god, and some by the Dark itself." His smile flashed again. "The last binding that I went to swear someone to the Dark in the name of Elle. It was quite amusing. It isn't the name that's important, Klessa, so much as the loyalty."

I closed my eyes tightly. Another way in which the Dark was different than the Light, then, other than the ruthless practicality and the preference for knives in rituals that didn't involve traitors.

"I swear to the Dark in the name of Shara," I said. "Because She's the only goddess I feel comfortable with, and because I like the Dark as She represents it."

"A good choice."

I opened my eyes, startled. Glangon sounded a good deal closer than I remembered him. In fact, he stood in front of me, smiling as he noted my expression. "You mean it," he said. "You will be true to the Dark."

"How do you know?"

"Look down, Klessa."

I looked down, and had to stifle a scream when I saw that the knife he had held before driven through my thigh. The wound looked deep; in fact, I knew it was deep, since I could just see the blade sticking out the other side of my leg by twisting back and forth.

"How could you do such a thing?" I cried, scrambling for the hilt.

Glangon snatched my hand back. "It doesn't hurt, does it? And you should have felt it go in."

I fought the urge back to reach for the hilt again and nodded instead. "Yes, I should have. So what? What does this mean?" I was having trouble choking back the hysterical screams that wanted to arise from my throat, as well.

"You felt nothing," said Glangon. "Not even the impact of flesh. It didn't hurt. And there is no blood." He let go of my hand, as if feeling that I could finally be trusted, and let me see that no blood flowed from the wound. "If you weren't loyal to the Dark, then it would have hurt."

I stared at the blade again. "Is this the way that you were bound?" I asked at last.

"Similar." Glangon didn't sound inclined to talk about it. "Now, you must swear that you won't turn on the Dark."

"I just swore that—"

"Not the same thing. That was an oath to the Dark. This is an oath that you won't turn on other Darkworkers. You might, you know, in the name of accomplishing greater good for the Dark itself. There was an enormous problem of backstabbing before this code was adopted. Swear that oath."

I eyed the snakes with the other knives.

"Not the same thing," said Glangon soothingly. "Swear."

I sighed, and swore. "I will not turn on other Darkworkers for the sake of my own personal ambition, only if I find out that they are traitors to the Dark."

"Good," said Glangon. "You knew about the treason exception without having to be told. I think you're more intelligent than the last three Bound I saw." He smoothly snatched another knife from a snake and cut through my fingers before I even knew what he was doing.

I screamed, and then stared again. The knife had gone through my fingers like mist. I still had a whole hand. I turned it over wonderingly.

"You see," said Glangon soothingly. "You meant that one, too. Best to swear to nothing that you do not mean, as the Dark has its own ways of testing your loyalty. The wounds will open, should you betray your oath, and you might bleed to death before you can do anything about it."

"The Light usually settles for executing people," I said weakly, staring at my hand.

"Yes, and they execute defiant traitors, and heretics, and martyrs," said Glangon. "We are not in the business of killing anyone who might still be useful, unless the treason has gone so far that there is no chance of reclamation. The wounds can judge that, and they will open fatally then. But otherwise, you'll probably have time to repent and get to a healer. The wounds will stop bleeding if you truly change your mind." He picked up another knife. "Now. You have to swear to the *Grellan Ashen*."

"What is that?" I asked, my eyes on the blade in his hand. Glangon noted the direction of my gaze and chuckled lowly.

"You are far too worried about the blades, Klessa," he said mockingly. "They will not harm you if you mean to swear to the Dark."

"But I can't when I don't know what to swear to."

Glangon smiled more widely. "Good. Very good. That was a test of unquestioning loyalty, you know. The knife would have hurt you if you consented to the oath without asking."

"I don't know what I'm doing," I said, my voice snapping. "I'm dancing through on luck as much as anything else."

"That is well! Luck can be a useful possession. And the invisible bounds are good, too, as they insure that you will not go too far without restraint." Glangon stepped nearer to me. "The *Grellan Ashen* is yet another tool to prevent a Darkworker from pursuing personal ambition at the risk of the Dark as a whole. The Light is ever ready to kill us—"

"That sounds like some of the things that I have heard the Light say about Darkworkers."

"Both are true." Glangon's eyes flashed for a moment. "I have been to more than enough executions of Darkworkers in my time, Klessa, including ones in the Palace of Rivendon."

I nodded.

"This oath says that you will obey the lieutenant of the Dark in a given area. So long as it is not invoked, Darkworkers can pursue their own private projects. When it is, then they are required to wait on summons from the lieutenants, and those whose territories might border or overlap each other's are required to make peace with each other, if they are having quarrels."

"How do you know when one territory begins and another ends?"

"They are assigned, and sometimes changed if one lieutenant dies or leaves or something else happens," said Glangon. "We know what they are, though no Lightworker will ever know."

"And they're the Kingdoms?" I was having a hard time keeping my eye off the blade in his hand.

"We do not recognize the Kingdoms as you know them. We have our territories all over them, and crossing borders, and placed in the wild lands where no one would ever think to look at all."

"The whole world must look different."

"It does. Will you swear?"

I took a deep breath, and then nodded.

"It is well, then." Glangon brought the knife down, and cut my throat. Or so I thought. I felt a brief prick of pain, and then the knife was again past as though Glangon had never moved it.

Glangon nodded. "It is well. You are one of the strongest Bound I have ever seen, Klessa. Now for the final test." He stepped back, and I thought he was going to pick up another knife, but he picked up the crown of flowers instead. No words can record my relief, so I will simply leave a small blank space to let you imagine whatever exclamations of relief you like:

Glangon held the flower crown level with my brow, and said, "I would crown you with this, if you are loyal to the Dark."

I nerved myself and glanced down at the knife through my leg. It hadn't started hurting, yet. "You already know I am."

"Not that way." Glangon spoke in such a stern voice that I lifted my eyes to him once more. He stared at me, capturing my gaze as though he thought I would try to flinch away. "We must know that you are with us because you want to be, and not because we are your second best choice."

"But you are," I said, too startled to be anything less than honest. In fact, had I been thinking more about it, I would probably have been too startled by their presumption to be less than honest. "I would have continued serving the Cycle if I had any choice."

"What about Elle?"

"My loyalty to Her has always been nominal." I frowned at my own words—it was one of the excuses I had used to refuse to worship Rennon—but then, I wasn't among the Heretics any more, and didn't need to offer the some sort of excuse as I had then. "I would not serve Her."

"What about in the torture pits?"

"I was there serving the Cycle."

"Were you?"

"And the Light."

"And you have no desire to go back to the Light now?"

"No, damn it!"

"Why are you swearing to the Dark?"

"Because I lost my magic, and need a master, as you so wisely pointed out." Shara, would he never put the damn crown on my head? "And because I want Lyissa back."

Glangon flipped the crown deftly over my head.

That, of all the things he'd done so far, hurt. I crumpled to my knees, trying to master a scream and not making it.

Then it was over.

I looked up shakily at Glangon from beneath the flowers. He reached out and took my hand, pulling me to my feet. I looked around and saw the snakes writhing about the clearing as before, some of them dropping their knives and looping around them as though in play. I saw no sign of anything that might have made the crown of flowers on my head ache so.

"Why did it hurt?" I asked, almost afraid he would accuse me of some lingering trace of disloyalty. But Glangon only smiled at me as if proud for asking the question.

"That was my idea."

"Why?"

"To see what you would do afterward."

"I want to kill you."

Glangon's smile flickered out, and he shook his head. "I'm afraid that you won't have the time." He paused, looking through the trees in the direction of the place where we had left Telemoranion. "They should be coming soon, and I think Telemoranion would want us there."

"Who are 'they?'" I asked, but he was already hastening away through the trees. I hesitated, then followed.

Lusirimonalata's Commentary

I am truly afraid now.

I have spent the last hours in the Healing Rooms of the Temple, while my sisters sang to the Goddess for my safety and prayed intently that I be allowed to recover, so that I might

finish this History. I have come back to myself, thanks to the prayers and the songs, but I am shaken, and shaking as I write this.

The History lies on the table. I stare at it with longing eyes, and yet with fearful ones. I know now that this is more than the Goddess speaking through me, more than a rival determined to write her own variant of the History. If it were one of the other priestesses, then she would choose materials that were different from mine, stamped with her own commentary and presence—but they would not be blasphemous. And the last section of Klessa's Journals is blasphemous in the extreme.

And yet, I cannot unbind it. I would have to destroy the History and start from the beginning. And while that might not seem such a large thing, I could never be done again by the date the Temple has agreed to present the History, which is the anniversary of our glorious Queen's ascension to the throne. It will be a struggle to finish as it is now, to present the tale of the Battle of Ornoros and the Turning, by that anniversary. Spending time in the Healing Rooms because someone I never saw hit me on the back of my head will put me back further.

I do not know what to do. I have prayed to the Goddess, and She offers no answers. Of course, in such matters the answer is always that we know what we should do already, and are avoiding the matter. The Goddess has no need to respond when we already know our duty in our hearts.

But it may take time to bring that duty to light, and time, I fear, is the one thing that I do not have.

There is someone unseen, a hidden enemy, in the Temple. And I do not know what she may have access to. I do not know how she could knock me out in the first place. I do not know why none of my sisters saw her. Anassra grew worried when I did not call for her at my usual hour and entered, to find me lying face-down in a pile of papers. That was the first time that my sisters saw anyone entering the room at all who should not have been there.

That leads to the conclusion that there is an unseen enemy, perhaps an enemy of the Dark, someone who has the magic or the power to move invisibly around our corridors and escape our notice.

But who has such power? Who, in the heart of the Goddess's holiest sanctuary in the nine Kingdoms, could do such a thing? No one of the Dark I know. The Dark is still gathering strength from its latest driving-back, and the time of Destiny and prophecy and war to come is not yet.

The Queen has come to see me, though unfortunately I was unconscious at the time and do not remember her visit. She would help allay my suspicions, I know. I have seen her speak to others consumed with fear of the Dark and revive them. She sent me the cordial; she would condescend to see me.

But how can I trouble her with something so trivial? She has not the evidence that I have, of strange Goddess-visits, of an enemy—and I know it was an enemy—who spilled me to the floor. Even the High Priestess thinks it is a rival of mine, and a close watch is being kept on them.

Must I wait until it happens again?

It seems I must. The High Priestess will not consent to my request that someone else take over the History, and she will not consent to my request for guards on my chamber, as none can be found who have the magical expertise I require. She wants to keep watching my rivals.

I suppose I must, as the Goddess will not—

A Hymn of the Rennon Heresy

We will shine across the Plains,

Like heat lightning before the rains,

And shatter them, shiver them, heedless of ruin,

Shatter them, scatter them, slaves of the moon!

We will come on them like fire,

The heart of their own secret desire,

And force them, course them, like hounds on a hare,

Drive them before us, and kill them there!

We will flash across the sky,

Like the hawk go hunting by,

And seek high, shriek high, drive them and dive,

Catch them running, and eat them alive!

We are servants of the God Rennon,

He who in the sunlight sky has shone

*For ages and days, and uncounted years;
We are the servants of His blood and His tears.
The priestesses of the Goddess Elle—
We will drive them hence, seek them and slay!
We are the hawk's claws, and the hounds' bay;
We are the Fire of the God in the Day!
We will run across the Plains,
More deadly than wildfire after no rains,
And shatter them, shiver them, drive them to ruin,
Shatter them, scatter them, slaves of the moon!*

Lusirimalata's Commentary

Only the Goddess gives me strength now.

I once again woke to throbbing pain, though this time I did not lie still so long that anyone found me. The priestesses have prayed over me, and the love of the Goddess flowed through me. I think that the pain in my head will fade, and the goose-egg left by the blow become just another reminder of my enemy.

But there are hidden enemies everywhere. No one saw anyone strange enter the room, again. My sisters are praying, but see no enemy in the Temple, and Elle is silent. Dark hangs over me like a looming threat.

Only a Heretic could have bound that hymn in the book—but all the Heretics are gone. There are certainly none in the Goddess's holiest sanctuary in the nine Kingdoms.

The Queen's guards report that our lady is feeling uneasy, that she dreams and has nightmares. Nightmares have come, too, to the High Priestess, but they fade before she awakes. The prophetesses peer into the future, and see nothing untoward, but they, too, dream and awake screaming. The Traitor Prince of Rivendon was seen last night on the walls, his eyes flashing like the moon, his laughter echoing in the winds.

I found iridescent patches of parchment under the table again today, and a note in the same handwriting that was in the hymn. It says only: *You have what was ours. I have come to claim it.*

Rennon is rising again, somehow. That is the only explanation. I will bind Rilleta's History only from now on, and pray for the Goddess to protect me until it is finished. Surely by then, we will know what is going on!

A History of Rilleta, High Priestess of Rennon

Chapter 17

The Run

"Across the Corlirin Plains I have raced in times of need, and I do not want to make the run often. There is dust, in the middle of summer when we have been without rain for weeks, and there is the heat itself, and the grass can hinder the movements of the fastest horse. But all the same, there is a grandeur and glory in the thing! I think that is the reason that every history-tale of Orlath includes a race across the Plains in it."

-Uleron Tyqeta of the Dark.

Run.

Rilleta felt the impulse burning through her being. Sometimes she was sure that she heard the God's voice speaking the word in her ear whenever she paused for a moment, even if it was to rest on the wild run. She could feel His Fire burning beneath her skin, and she knew that not long after she lay down to rest a dream would startle her awake. Or else her own restlessness would, and she would find herself stalking back and forth, staring to the east.

Run.

She knew that she couldn't press forward without at least some of her people. She needed guards to protect her, and scouts to look out for enemies, and servants to care for her food. But she wanted to run. She wished that she could be free of mortal limits, to give up everything to the glorious sensation of speed. Other times, she wished she had the gift of a Master of the Star Circle or a Gust mage, to join with her element and fly ahead on wings of fire. There were tales that that had once been possible, but they were only legends, like the tales of elemental creatures.

Run.

She ran in the middle of the dying. The spores had done their work, and some of the Heretics had the plague in their lungs. They staggered along as best as they could, inspired and whipped by her voice, coughing and choking. Then they fell, and the spores grew rapidly through their bodies, leaving white skeins that quickly fed on the flesh until one could not tell that they were human or equine anymore.

Run.

Guarded by the hand of the God, Rilleta herself did not grow sick. She grew lean through want of food, and exhaustion, and the feeling that over any hill they would see a priestess of Elle waiting with another silver crescent moon in her arms. But she did not slow down, and she did not stop running.

Run.

On one blurring morning, as she tore along on perhaps her fourth or fifth horse, which might have been gray before the dust of the road settled on her, she saw a shadow pass overhead, and something screamed, the sound resonating in her eardrums. Rilleta looked up. A gryphon circled there, its claws spread wide, its feathers furiously aglow in the sunlight.

As she watched with dazed, dust-strained eyes, it folded its wings and dived straight towards her.

Rilleta did not even think; she didn't remember until later that gryphons were part of the Light, and that perhaps she should try to bind and not kill this one, even convert it. Her hand came up, and Scarlet flew from her fingers. She was sure that it had come from Ilantra to fetch the Ilantran Queen's cousin back home.

The flames caught hold, but did not simply make the gryphon tumble with burning wings. Instead, they burned straight through, stifling its cries, and what drifted to the ground was a fine ash that might once have been bone and feather, talon and wing.

Rilleta blinked at her hand, and at the gasps from behind her. She had never been able to call fire hot enough to do such a thing. Only rarely could she call fire hot enough to affect metal or stone.

Then she shook the dizziness from her head, and smiled, despite the dust in her throat and the thirst that bit her with sharp teeth. Was it not the will of the God? She had always known that He was guarding her, watching out for her. This was just proof of it, once more, as if she needed more. He was watching, and He would send His fire to guard her when she could not summon her own.

And then Rilleta's triumph faded, and she bowed her head and rode on.

Run.

There came a moment when Rilleta jolted out of a doze, and found herself on a horse's back, even though she did not remember the last time she had mounted of her own volition. It had been footwork the last time she could remember, since most of their horses had died, and Rilleta didn't want to wait for one to be found, instead of going ahead.

She looked up, and saw the moon hanging in the sky, waning. She smiled. *Soon the Goddess's power will wane, too, and then we can finally go back to worshipping Rennon, the way we should have been all along,* she thought dizzily.

She turned her head then as someone stirred beside her, expecting to see a scout or a servant. Vañade, maybe. No, wait, he had died in the last wild ride, thrown from his horse by his violent coughing.

A figure walked along the road beneath the moon, but it wasn't anyone solid. The figure of Princess Twydon, formed of dust, studied her, but didn't seem inclined to say anything. The steps of her dusty figure mimicked the steps of the tired horse perfectly.

"What do you want?" Rilleta asked, and then winced at the sound of her own voice. Rennon knew how long it had been since she had something to drink.

The Princess only continued walking, and staring at her with those hollows that she had instead of eyes. Then, abruptly, a wind whirled through the dust of her surrogate body and scattered it.

Rilleta shook her head. *Strange. If she came seeking me, why didn't she stay and taunt me?*

And then Rilleta raised her eyes, and saw a possible answer to that question. Ahead, though still very far away, rose the walls of the castle of Orlath. Rilleta smiled, even though she felt her lips crack open and bleed from the motion. *We are almost there, and soon we will threaten the Princess's home. I am not surprised that she is worried, and trying to frighten us to take her mind off her own fear.*

Then something nearer caught her attention, though she was so tired that she had to squint and stare for long moments before she recognized what it was.

Water!

The mighty Terrana River curved past her, riding to the sea. Rilleta could feel her horse prick up her ears and snort as she scented the water, and then Rilleta was kicking her on, shouting at the top of her lungs.

The mare plunged into an awkward gallop, even though she was coughing as she went. Then she went down on her knees, and Rilleta felt the wisps of silky material brush her feet as the spores in the mare's lungs burst out through her body.

She didn't care. She tugged herself free of the stirrups and staggered on, hearing hoofbeats and footsteps coming closer behind her. "Water!" she cried. "We reached the River. We are saved."

She heard hoarse cheers, and that reassured her that she wasn't entirely alone, even as she chided herself. *I should have known better. Rennon wouldn't let me come this far only to strip me of the army that I need to make my victory permanent.*

She reached the River at last, and for a moment could only stare at the chill water. It had stars on the surface. It sang to her ears.

And to her nose. Rilleta fell to her knees and scooped up a handful of water, pausing a moment to sniff it before she began to drink. The clean smell was better than food after a long starvation.

Of course, I can live on faith and hope, the food of the God. But I cannot so easily live without water.

She tilted her head back, and poured the water down her throat. At once, the dust faded as if it had never been, or at least withered and washed away in the stream. Rilleta gasped, and shook her head, awakening from the half-dream she had still been in when Twydon woke her on the horse.

It tastes like life, she thought as she began to drink.

And drink, and drink, and drink. She stopped herself with an effort, not wanting to get sick. It was enough, after a while, to lie with her hand trailing in the water and stare at the moon and feel the cool breeze that was blowing.

Then a cloud moved across the moon, and Rilleta blinked out of her trance, turning to see who had joined her.

Her heart trembled for a moment. The numbers of Heretics stumbling to the banks of the river, leaning on horses or leading them, and sometimes supporting each other, were much smaller than she had thought they would be. Perhaps only a hundred were there altogether.

But then Rilleta straightened her shoulders, and stood tall, once again turning back to that inspiring sight of the castle of Orlath. *It shall not matter how many we are,* she thought. *The God has spoken, and we are Destined to win. That is the only thing that should matter to me.*

Of course, it is not the only thing that does. But the rest is only so much chatter that has filled my mind, about what a war-leader is and should do. Really, I should trust to Him more often.

And I should pray now.

Thinking that, she bowed her head, and began to murmur the words of one of the standard prayers. Others joined her, once they had satisfied their thirst, unless they were occupied in dragging horses away from the water so they didn't get sick. She heard some more collapse, the spores growing out of their bodies, but that didn't interrupt her prayers.

The first thing that did was the crack of thunder.

Startled, Rilleta opened her eyes. The cloud covering the moon had only been the first of a phalanx, she saw now. There were others swarming after it, coming from the sea, and lightning played across them. She heard the crack again, and then felt the first touch of rain in her hair.

Rilleta blinked, and then blinked harder as a drop of rain fell into her face. Well, of course the Plains could use the water, and it might finally quell some of that dust. She had to think of things like that, if she was to be Queen of Orlath. She would have to care for the country.

But the unease the storm had stirred in her heart remained, and she was not sure why. She began to count bolts of lightning to reassure herself, and was relieved to see that there were many. The God was with them, surely, if one of His symbols was so prominently displayed not just by humans but by the world.

The storm will water the Plains, and quell the dust, and give one less weapon to our enemies when we go to war.

Uneasiness still gnawed her heart, though, and she understood a little better when dawn came and the sun could not properly ascend, caught as He was in the mass of watery clouds. Now and then a beam broke forth, but most of the time the clouds shut it off. They stood in a gray, stony-looking chamber instead of under the open brightness of the blue sky.

But what did that matter, really? Rilleta felt her Destiny flare, and a small smile curved her lips as she gazed towards the castle.

This is the moment of my Destiny arising. I need not let myself worry. The God will take care of everything.

Lusirimalata's Commentary

This is much better. This is not blasphemous. Of course, being glad to see the moon waning is something that could be seen as blasphemous, but I am not so alive to the use

of symbols as some of my sisters who read this and suggested that it be censored. I am now having my sisters read all of the pages I put in the book, to make sure that Rennon cannot influence me without my knowing it.

And how are matters with myself?

Very well, I think. I still do not know the meaning of those iridescent scraps of paper, but that does not matter. Surely some little living creature is creeping in, and it might be excused, as long as it does not feast on the History. Such little things are as welcome to the bounty of Elle as we. Surely there are as much children of the Goddess as we are.

Surely.

And these rumors of nightmare and the Traitor Prince on the walls...really, what can we call them but rumors, and therefore false? There might be something to worry about, if we really *had* to. But I was writing in fear and haste the other day, and might have given my readers the wrong impression. I hasten to say that I have stopped listening to the rumors since, and I don't believe any of them now. There are reasonable explanations for everything.

I am sure of that.

And there is a reasonable explanation for the next bit of Klessa's Journals I shall give, though I do not like it. Anassra brought word from the Queen that our gracious lady would like the mention of Klessa's blasphemy to continue. She thinks it is important to everyone to see how the Light deals with the Dark.

And so, here it is. This is the first punishment of the traitors, and probably the worst one of all. Some of my more tender-hearted readers may feel inclined not to read, but I assure you that you will gain much in doing so. Remember, the one who dies in this chapter is concerned with the Dark, and used his gifts to serve evil, not the right-thinking Light.

The Journals of Klessa of the Nine Wonders

Sometimes in the elven world

And now, my hands shake.

I do not want to write this.

I have been sitting and staring off into the distance for some time now. I don't want to write the words that come to mind. It's not because I don't know how to write them; the words are there, the same emotions I felt when first I looked upon the thing that I now must record. But the words themselves will bring what happened back to life.

I do not want to do this.

But Glangon has spoken with me, quietly, and if he says that Telemoranion would want me to write this, then I will.

We stepped out of the trees, and saw Telemoranion standing by his fire, his gaze fixed on the people in front of him. His mysterious enemies, I thought at first, but they looked like nothing so much as the Light elves who had faced him before.

"We have come to take you back, Telemoranion," said the elfwoman in the lead. "You will not resist us forever."

"I would rather die than forget what we once were," said Telemoranion. "The truth lives on in my mind, and I will not surrender that."

"Then prepare for the end," said the elfwoman. "You know that you can't fight us, and you're not going to try, are you?" A smile that I thought cruel curved her lips. I blinked at that. Were elves of the Light not all gentleness, as much as the elves of the Dark were all evil? Why had I never seen that cruel smile before?

"No," said Telemoranion. "I have sent my toys to a safe place, save for the ones I make a gift of now." He turned to Glangon. "It may be that you shall find them again, my Prince, if you are what I think you are."

I had to interrupt at that point. It might be my last chance to speak, before whatever happened happened. "Prince?"

Glangon glanced at me, and again the sunlight flashed in his eyes, though this time I thought it was on purpose. "Didn't I mention that? I am of the royal line of Rivendon. I said that."

"But the title 'Prince' doesn't go to any cousin." I am appalled, now, thinking of the nonsense that came out of my mouth. I think I thought that if I spoke inanely enough, I might, possibly, manage to put off Telemoranion's death.

"No, it doesn't," said Glangon, and his smile widened. I had never seen anything so predatory. "I suppose that I should have mentioned that I am twin brother to the current Princess of Rivendon, and the war-leader of the Dark. Some call me the Traitor Prince. I do think that my parents are rather unhappy with me—not that they were happy with my Illusion gift and the snakes in the first place."

I stared at him, until the elfwoman interrupted me. "The humans have nothing to do with this, Telemoranion."

"One more thing," said the elf implacably. I glanced at him, and had to wince. His body gleamed metallically, as though he were bound in silver. I thought he had probably changed his skin to some brilliant color. "I made a final gift for my friends, and I must give it to them."

He gestured, and four shining serpents, their scales like rainbows seen from a distance, slid out of the grass. Glangon held out his arms, and they climbed them and twined around his body, hissing agreeably.

I shook my head. "Telemoranion, won't you come with us, and flee these elves?" I didn't look at them, not quite trusting my vulnerability to them, even though it seemed much diminished.

"No," he said. "I chose this road, and it is time that I walked to the end of it."

"But you need not," I said. "You could flee from them, couldn't you?"

"What would be the point?" he asked, and stepped forward. He said something else in Elven, but I couldn't make out what it was, since the language he spoke was different from any other I had ever heard. I could make out what sounded like the name "Alaria," though, a common Orlathian name.

The elfwoman snapped something back, and Telemoranion smiled at her mockingly. Then she said something else, and Telemoranion gave a one-word answer that also sounded remarkably like an Orlathian name. I believe it was "Pheron," though of course I can't be sure of the exact sound.

I am still too shaken by what happened next.

The elfwoman held out a hand and said something else in Elven that I didn't recognize. Then arrows flew from among the other elves—I didn't even know they had bows—trailing long ropes behind them. They transfixed Telemoranion's body, and he fell to the ground. I thought I could see the arrowheads digging into the ground beneath him, binding him in place.

I cried out and started forward, but Glangon gripped my arm. I turned to look at him, and saw that his eyes were wide. I couldn't understand the expression on his face, but then, there is so much about this that I don't understand.

"No, Klessa," he said. "You must not interfere. He chose this."

"I don't care," I said. "Lyissa chose the Heresy, too, and I wasn't willing to let her remain."

I turned towards Telemoranion, and was shocked to see him lying there, not struggling, not flinching in pain. He was out of the sunlight, and I could see that he had changed his

skin to a very pale silver, probably as a last means of contrast with his golden kin. He met my gaze and held it.

"I want to do this," he said. "I will distract them, bind them in place with disposing of me. Take the serpents, and go. They shall be useful to you someday, I think."

"How can I just leave—"

"You can, human, because it is not your place." The elfwoman stepped forward, her eyes flickering in disgust to the blade through my leg. "If we could, we would harm you as well, but there is the chance that you might be turned back to the Light, and so we shall spare your lives."

"You cannot touch us because the Dark guards us," said Glangon, raising his voice to be heard above the elven singing, which had started again. "Or did you forget that part?"

The elfwoman shook her long fall of amber-touched hair back. "Leave, human, and leave off taunting us. The Light is only merciful when you have not roused its wrath."

I looked at Telemoranion lying bound. One of the elves had drawn a long knife and now knelt above him. As I watched, she made a long incision down the center of his chest with expert hands. I had to turn my head away.

"That is mercy?" I asked.

The elfwoman turned distant amber eyes on me. "It is, compared with what we could have done to him, what his crime actually merited. We will do no worse than stake him as we would a dragon, someone who remains outside the Dark and Light and tries to have everything his own way."

"Telemoranion was not of the Dark?" I asked Glangon.

Glangon had not taken his eyes off Telemoranion. "No," he said. "I have often tried to persuade him to come with us; I know that Shara would have been happy to have him. But he would not change his mind. I think that he helped the Heretics because they were the Heretics, not because they were of the Light. There are some who say he knew their first prophetess, Alaria."

I nodded, wondering if he had been in love with her. That might explain the name he had spoken.

"He tried to remain outside Destiny, and Light and Dark, just as the dragons have for so long," said the elfwoman, her lip curling. "And he will pay the price. He will pay it, deeply and fully."

"Why is that a crime he must pay the price for?" I asked, wondering if there was some way I could get past her to Telemoranion. Then one of the elves reached into the incision and took out a handful of organs, and I had to turn my face away, even as the elfwoman's low, amused reply rang in my ears.

"Because no one can remain outside Light and Dark. He causes an imbalance, a disruption, in both the Destiny and the Cycle." She sighed. "There have been many disruptions lately. We are merely the means of setting them right."

"The echo of my disruption shall remain."

I forced myself to look at Telemoranion again, regretting more fiercely than ever throwing my magic away. If I had kept it, I might have been able to save him.

Of course, the blue eyes that sought mine wore a sheen of calm happiness that I did not understand, but I still don't know who understands the minds or hearts of elves. Perhaps not even the gods.

"The Cycle and the Destiny shall never quite dance to the tune that the priestesses would play," he said. "I remained free of Aneron's corrupting influence, and there are others who did, as well. The Masters of the Star Circle are going to fall, Klessa, but that does not mean they shall never have lived. The priestesses cannot destroy your memories, if you are under the protection of the Dark. Do not let the Light capture you. Do not let them take your memories."

I still didn't believe that could happen, but I found my eyes filling with tears and my voice speaking an oath as fervent as any I ever swore to the Dark or the Cycle. "I shall promise you that, Telemoranion."

He smiled at me, and then turned his head back towards the elfwoman. His face grew distant again, eyes losing that sheen of calmness, but losing every other emotion as well. "You should know something, my lady, something that you may not want to know but will have no choice in knowing. Perhaps, after all, you might change the path you now walk, though I do not think you will."

The elfwoman knelt beside him, and smoothed her hand over his forehead in a grotesque parody of tenderness. I found myself wondering if they had known each other, once, long ago, and then shoved the thought away. It was not something I wanted to contemplate, particularly when her face looked as calm as his, and she spoke the words she did next.

"Why would I choose a different path, Telemoranion? This is the path I love, the path I chose when the glorious Queen Aneron gave me the redemption that she did. I would not cease bringing the strayed back to the Light. I enjoy it as much as any priestess of Elle."

"But that path shall end," he said. "You shall remember killing me, and regret it someday."

She laughed at him. "You speak as would a priestess of the Goddess, as if you had certain knowledge!"

Telemoranion's smile only grew wider. It was the most human expression I ever saw on his face, though combined with the most inhuman of situations. No pain showed, despite what they were doing to his body. "I do have certain knowledge, Limorianel. Your path shall end, as shall the domination of the Light and the Goddess. This I know. I have looked into eyes that shall see it so, and helped hands that shall make it so." He took a sudden deep breath, and released it on the words, "And my little disruption shall help make it so."

His head sprawled back on the grass, and as suddenly as that, he was dead. I looked at the elves, and they were lifting the organs out of his body, to spread them carefully on the ground.

I had always heard of such things and borne them calmly. Like torture, they were what happened only to the worst of criminals, to those who fought Elle and resisted the Cycle and Destiny.

This time—perhaps it was my swearing to the Dark, and the idea that that could easily happen to me now—I turned my face away.

"Telemoranion is right," said Glangon lowly to the elves. "The day shall arrive when you regret this."

"Never," said the elfwoman—Limorianel, as I supposed her name was. "I shall never regret this, though you may."

She took a step forward.

I blinked as a shimmer of light sprang up around my body, enfolding it. Cautiously, I extended my hand, and stared at it. The aura was black, touched with silver, and it looked like an aura of Destiny.

The elfwoman halted, staring at me with eyes that I could swear held a flicker of disappointment. "So be it, then," she said. "I cannot touch you. The Dark guards you. But you shall meet your doom, at the hands of Lightworkers in the next war, or at the Hands of Elle in the next world."

"Yes," said Glangon, with laughter in his voice that I did not understand. "In the next war."

The elfwoman glared at us once more, and then turned and vanished into light. The rest of her people seemed to turn into sunbeams around her, and then they were gone.

I took a deep breath, and found I was weeping. Glangon stood there in silence and let me do it.

"He really did it to help something happen that might never come to pass?" I asked, when I could at last speak again.

"It mattered that much to him, that someone should remember what was, and that his people should be free again someday. And if he saw a way of doing it, a way that no human could have found—" Glangon shrugged. "How can we judge him for taking it? I would do it, if it could help the Dark to survive." Catching my glance, he added quickly, "But luckily my Destiny is different."

"War-leader of the Dark," I murmured, staring at him.

He smiled, and the dark shimmer sprang up around his body. "Oh, yes." His face changed suddenly. "And I think you have something to write, and then we may leave."

"You won't write his memorial? You knew him better than I."

Glangon snorted loudly. "My gift is for rhetoric, and that looks ridiculous on paper. You write it. If there ever comes a time when no one else can write, then perhaps I might do so. But not now."

And now the last words are scribed, and Glangon and I and Telemoranion's serpents and dragon must be leaving.

What will happen next, I do not know. I wish that I could feast on some of Telemoranion's certainty.

And I wish I knew what he meant, about the domination of the Light ending someday.

And I wish I could wake up in my bed back at the school, too, with all of this only being an evil dream. But I can't, and it doesn't do much good to wish.

Lusirimonialata's Commentary

We are saved! All of us, we are most beautifully saved!

After reading about Klessa's insistence on making elves into villains last night, I was angry and nauseated, and decided that I could not continue. I went outside to sit in the cool, and watch the moon rise over the sea, and pray for the welfare of our Kingdom and my sisters.

That was when I saw a tall woman walking slowly towards the Temple. I was afraid at

first, since she seemed to eat the light where she walked. I think now that was an odd fancy on my part. I have listened to too many rumors of the Dark in my time, and I was ready to see the Dark in anyone great who came towards me, or even in the sly glance of a child.

But she came to me, and smiled, and by that smile I could see that, though dark of skin in the Rivendonian manner, she was not dark of soul. "My lady, are you the priestess Lusirimalata?"

I was astonished that she had heard of me, and said so.

She shook her head and laughed, her voice low, like the murmur of the sea. "Your fame has traveled, my lady. We have heard of your admirable attempt to give the Rennon Heresy some distance and proper context." She paused, as if wondering how much she should tell me, and then said, "And we have heard of the difficulties you have suffered in doing so."

I looked down in shame, but she caught my chin and gently lifted my head again. "I am here to help you," she said quietly. "We have received word that the Traitor Prince is in the castle. I knew him as a boy, and I think that I know him still, better than many another might. I am to guard you, and keep you safe from his clutches while you write the History that so much depends on. Will that be agreeable to you?"

"That is more than agreeable, my lady," I replied in wonder. "The blessing of the Goddess be upon you for thinking such a thing!"

She ducked her head, a becoming blush staining her cheeks. "I am only doing what I must," she said. "We all have our duty and our Destiny, and this is mine. I am sure the Goddess will guard me." She looked at me earnestly. I noticed for the first time that her eyes were very large, and blue-green. "I understand that only your servant is permitted to attend you now. Will that change without trouble? Will you permit me to enter your room and handle your papers?"

"With all my heart and will!" I paused, then burst out, because I had to know, "Are you the Princess of Rivendon, my lady?"

She laughed, a laugh as wonderful as the rest of her, low and musical. "Hardly! Why would you think I am?"

"Your voice, your movement, your manner—and then you said that you had known him as a child."

She shook her head. "It is the custom of the royal family of Rivendon to surround their children with many playmates from all corners of the Kingdom. I was judged a fit playmate for the Prince, but I was born in a village in the far corner of Rivendon, and share no royal blood. I daresay the Princess would be insulted to have you think so! She

is far more beautiful and gracious than I could ever be."

"What is your name, then, my lady?"

"I am Teridona Malkir. Whether you call me 'lady' or not depends on your perception of me. I am here to guard you." She bowed from the waist. "Shall we go inside and pray?"

And so I am guarded, and approach my task in the highest reverence of mind and heart. Once again I am safe, the Goddess having made provisions for me! All has gone as well as could be wished, with the Lady Teridona—she is a lady, whatever she says—having the approbation of the High Priestess to enter my rooms, and she and Anassra getting along at once. Anassra seems in awe of her, and drops her eyes shyly whenever the Lady approaches.

And now, quite confident that no one can blame me, or sneak me up and hit me on the head with such a guard, I can return to Rilleta's History.

A History of Rilleta, High Priestess of Rennon

Chapter 18

Day of Storms

"If you think that one can begin a battle and then turn from it, you are a bigger fool than Princess Deiendra. One must always carry the battle to the end. That is the way that one defeats the Dark."

-King Felor of Rivendon, shortly before his death at the hands of Mizzeran, Dark's Lady.

Rilleta blinked the rain from her eyes again, and shook off her uneasiness. *It's just a storm. There's no reason that we have to hold back, no reason that we can't begin the battle now, and no reason to feel uneasy.*

"Terissa," she said, without looking behind her. She knew the priestess would be as anxious to be at her side as Rilleta was to have her there.

Hoofbeats sounded. The priestesses who were the most active in the Sunborn were to have the honor of this battle. "My lady." Terissa's voice sounded muffled, but Rilleta persuaded herself it was only because thunder had cracked like a whip across the sky just as the priestess had begun to speak.

"Take the right flank and lead them towards the castle. I shall advance with the center. Yulima will take the left. Be ready to fling fire at anyone you see, unless they approach with hands held out in token of weaponlessness." *And of course, if they send accomplished mages, even that will not make them weaponless.*

"My lady."

Terissa crashed away to do her bidding. Rilleta checked her nervous horse and looked around again, wondering what to do next, wishing the rain would stop.

Then she felt the Fire of the God beneath her skin again, and forced herself to bite her lip and slow her breathing. *This is the Day of Destiny, and I would not do honor to Him if I hurried it. This is the great battle between the forces of Rennon and Elle. The least I can do is wait, and allow things to advance as they will, trusting in Destiny to be my guide.*

Perhaps it was just the familiarity of the thoughts, but Rilleta felt herself settle into calm battle-thought. She was well. She could do this. She nodded to no one and nothing in particular, and then turned, wheeling her horse, making sure that Yulima would take the left.

Yes, there she was, sweeping out with one flank of the army. Rilleta nodded. They would advance in a three-pronged attack, highly visible from the walls of the castle. Let the guards see them coming and know fear.

Rilleta looked over her shoulder again as a lightning bolt struck behind her. That almost seemed the last of the storm, though. The rain was petering out. She could already hear the song of the River again, now behind them and to their right. They had crossed earlier this morning.

Confidence settled over her, as iron-strong as the clouds clamped over the sky. *Our moment has come.*

She turned forward, and lifted her voice. "Before the God sets again, we shall stain the earth red with blood!"

There came the roar of the Heretics, the mages who had fought through so much for this, to stand here at this moment and declare themselves part of the army that would end the rule of Elle in Orlath. Rilleta smiled at them, feeling her heart swell so fervently that she could barely force the next words past her lips.

"We shall stain our robes, and then we shall go in and hang the God's flame above the Orlathian throne, in place of the Goddess's crescent moon!"

There were cheers at that, but they suddenly trailed off near the end into confused cries. Rilleta looked around with a frown. Some of the Heretics were pointing upward, and she followed their gaze.

Gryphons were flying from the castle, their wings cleaving the air with steady force, their talons clenched around what looked like large rocks. Rilleta felt her heart seize for a moment, and then she nodded. She had long accepted that most of her people would not survive this final battle. All that mattered was that she take the throne from King Seldon and Princess Twydon. Then the people of Orlath would turn back to their natural worship again.

"Do not worry about them," she said. "The God is with us." She called up fire, and then sent it arcing up to meet one of the gryphons. It screamed, and the burden it held in its talons burst apart. Rilleta smiled. "You see, we will prevail because—"

More screams arose. Rilleta tilted her head back, eyes narrowed as she watched a strange, glittering mist spread out from the place where the gryphon hung, burning, still trying desperately to fly. *Would Princess Twydon employ a Mist mage? I thought that she professed not to believe in the blended elements.*

Then a beam of stray sunlight struck the mist, and Rilleta understood. *Agalia* spores. Again. Her heart clenched in anger. *Princess Twydon cares nothing for what she is doing to her land or her people.*

"Forward!" she shouted. "If the future Queen of Orlath would use such foul weapons, we shall show her what head is truly fit to wear the crown!" She dug her stirrups into her mare, and urged it forward. The center cheered weakly and followed behind her, spreading out in a pattern that Rilleta was sure must make a dramatic homage to the God above.

But still, those weak cheers...

Rilleta shook the thought out of her head, and increased the pace of her mare. If she really must lose the battle, then she would go down fighting. And she didn't think she would lose, not with the sunbeam falling on her face like the God's golden promise. She could do this, and she would.

She broke into a gallop suddenly, because some intuition—or the God in her mind—told her it was the right moment. The mare snorted, tossed her head, and was abruptly running with her tail blowing behind her like a banner. Rilleta heard the others cry out, more strongly this time, and begin to charge.

Rilleta called to the Scarlet, and filled her body with it. Ravens were flying from the castle walls to attack them, followed by more gryphons, and she let the full force of her frustration with Twydon hammer into them. *Hide, will she? Let birds and plague fight her battles for her? To Dark with that. I will show her what a real war-leader does.*

She heard caws and shrieks, but she didn't have time to try to analyze all of them. The air was full of the stink of burning feathers and burning meat. She smelled the smoke and

wanted more. Her mouth ran with drool at the thought of burning Twydon alive, and how sweet the Princess would surely smell, burning. *Let me be the one to catch and kill her. That is the only thing I ask, my Lord.*

Rilleta charged over the last ridge that separated her people from the castle—

And then the ground seemed to come to life beneath them, as soldiers and peasants jumped to their feet all around the Heretics and began hacking as if they were the Hands of Elle attacking Rennon.

Rilleta cried out in shock, and barely remembered to burn a man to death before his sword could stab through her. She clamped her legs around her mare and tried to spin her back, but already Twydon's force was all around her, and spreading out to engulf those Heretics who had followed her, as well as the other flanks.

What did she do? How did she do it?

A moment later, Rilleta caught a glimpse of the dark mouths of tunnels, and had to laugh weakly, even as she burned someone else alive for trying to kill her. *Took a lesson from us, and blended into the Plains.*

For long moments after that, the air was full of clash, the sound of sword-blade and scream mingling with the crackle of flame. Rilleta saw her Heretics fighting extremely well, acquitting themselves with flame against those who had no strong magic, and her initial panic began to subside into complacency. *We will be able to manage this battle and win, I think, without too much trouble—*

And that was when all hell broke loose, of course.

A long, ringing shriek rang down the sky. Rilleta looked up in dread, to see a whole flock of gryphons darkening the faint sunbeams. They were racing from the west, and she saw that they bore riders. The one who did not, who flew in the lead, held the royal banner of Ilantra in its claws.

The gryphons swooped on her soldiers and began to rend them apart.

They had not come to bargain for the Queen's cousin back, then. They had come in alliance with Queen Twydon.

"Back!" Rilleta shrieked. "We must go back!"

Some of the Heretics heard her, and began forcing their way towards the rear of the crowd. But most of them didn't, and it wouldn't have mattered if they had. Most of them were so entrenched in the fighting that they couldn't move, or dead.

Rilleta hardened her heart. *It still has to work out, somehow. It must. Rennon promised*

that we would win, and we will win.

She drove her heels hard into the mare's sides, and the horse whickered and plunged out of the madness. Then a sword-blade went through her chest, and she fell. Rilleta leaped lightly clear, and turned, flames flaring on her hands, ready to meet her death if she must.

Rennon, I commend my soul to You.

Lusirimonalata's Commentary

One can see in this section of Rilleta's History the harsh necessities of war, as well as those things that cannot but be regretted. The slaughter of so many of the Heretics by disease and in battle is one of those things. They could, perhaps, have been saved and been converted, and more than once I have been tempted to blame our gracious Queen for the harsh treatment she gave them.

But what else could she have done? They were coming to unseat her throne and replace our radiant Goddess with a strange God. It was right that she be so harsh. It was the only thing that she could do, in defense of the people of Orlath.

And it was in defense of the people of Orlath, whatever Rilleta might write in this section of her History, and whatever she might convince others to believe. The Queen would never do something like this unless it was in defense of the people of Orlath. Some of them might die in the plague, but some of them would live, and those who lived would be grateful to their Queen and their Goddess.

Sometimes, some must die so that more can live.

I must admit that this section made me distraught when I first read it. I had tears in my eyes, thinking of the deaths from plague and sword and flame. And I felt tears return even yesterday, as I prepared it. But the Lady Teridona touched my arm, and brought me to see things a bit differently.

"Rilleta did what she thought was right," she said. "And the ending of the battle proves that she was not right. So everything worked out as it should, didn't it? And it wasn't as if Rilleta received no reward for those parts of her that were of the Light."

That is true, and very wise. I am so glad that the Lady Teridona is here. She watches out for me with careful, generous eyes, in ways that even Anassra cannot. In fact, she has given Anassra several scoldings on the matter of taking care of me. Anassra accepts such scoldings with good grace. I have even seen a smile appear on her face at times, as though she is grateful to have someone to tell her what to do.

Because it is the Queen's wish, and because I now have strength from the Lady

Teridona's presence, I will undertake to give the next section of Klessa's Journals. May readers forgive me for the blasphemy that intertwines every word. As if anything that someone who swore so willingly to the Dark could write would not be riddled with blasphemy.

The Journals of Klessa of the Nine Wonders

Back in my own world

We have come back to Orlath. The wood we used to build our fire, the scent of the smoke, the softness of the soil beneath my feet, all proclaim the world I have known from birth. I don't know what day it is yet, since Glangon and I have yet to meet anyone who could tell us.

Well, Glangon and I, and the serpents, and the dragon. Telemoranion sent the unicorn and the elephant somewhere else, I presume for safety, but those toys came with us. The dragon is asleep behind me now, its head on its paws. Can something that is not alive really sleep? I don't know, but it is motionless, and now and then a sound like a snore drifts from its jaws.

Glangon has stood and stared off to the north for some time now. I wish I knew what he was about, but doubtless, when the time comes, he will tell me.

If he doesn't, then I will hold this blade to his throat. I am keeping the knife that I removed from my leg. It is rather sharp, might be useful in a pinch, and will make an unusual keepsake.

The wound itself is no trouble. It closed up as easily as the imaginary wounds in my fingers, and without blood.

It was dawn three hours ago, when Glangon first saw the smoke from the fires before us. I wish to Shara he had never seen them at all!

"We should go to them, Klessa," he said, rousing me from my admiration of the knife's blade in the sunlight. "They might be able to tell us where we are."

I stood. "You brought us back to a place distant from Rilleta's army, didn't you?"

"Well, yes," he said, not looking at all sorry about it. "After all, I think that you would not want to appear in the midst of them."

I inclined my head shortly, and followed him in silence towards the fires. Halfway there, though, I stopped, and narrowed my eyes. I am not as keen-sighted as a scout, but there are some things anyone can see.

"Glangon."

"You should call me 'Prince,' now that you are under my dominion," he said absently, still striding forward.

Well, perhaps he knew what they were, and had a clever plan to handle them. But I didn't think so. "Glangon, those are Heretics," I said. "The banner they're flying has the sunburst that Lyissa kissed so often."

Glangon shrugged. "I can see many wagons, and few horses. These are a small part of the army, which has remained behind for some reason. I think there's no reason not to go and meet them. We can take what we need from them, and perhaps even convert a few of them to the Dark."

"I don't think they'll convert easily." I squinted at the carts, and nodded. The flag I had seen was truly a sunburst, golden on a red field. "Shouldn't we remain at a distance for now, and approach them later?"

"No. What have the Prince of Rivendon and a newly-sworn convert to Shara to fear?"

"I just don't think—"

But he kept walking. I sighed and followed. Perhaps it was true that he knew something I didn't.

It certainly seemed so, the longer I watched him. Glangon wove between the carts with confidence, now and then pausing to stop and speak with a driver or a servant who was unloading food to hasten to the priestesses with. He seemed to know everyone's name, have for everyone a smile, and to possess an interest in the most trivial details of their lives, something I wouldn't have thought his mind set to hold. Perhaps he was the old kind of Prince after all, the one who had been more closely bound to the lives of the peasants and the life of the land than to the grand ways of the Court or nobles.

And then he stepped around one cart and dropped to a quick kneel on the ground. "Your Majesty. I trust that everything went according to plan."

"Not without a great deal of pain from the snakebite," said a voice I didn't know. At least, I thought I didn't know it. I recognized it when the speaker rose to her feet, though. I had just never heard that note of irony in her voice before. "But you have done some of what you promised. That is enough for now. I shall charge you only with future debts."

"Thank you, Your Majesty," said Glangon, his voice adopting somewhat the same ironic tone.

Queen Memoryrose met my stare, and arched her brows. "What's the matter? Did you think that I wouldn't live? Half-mizanai aren't like humans, and we aren't like fullbloods, either. The trick wouldn't have worked if I were either. It was lucky that I am as I am."

"But why endure the snakebite at all?" I asked, glancing at Glangon. "What the hell is going on?"

Memoryrose shrugged. "I suppose you could call it an alliance, though we pay each other less respect than allies should." She glanced sharply at Glangon, to show on whose shoulders the blame lay. He just looked calmly back at her, and she snorted and turned to me again. "We both want similar things, and there is no reason in the world that we should not both have what we want. Queen Twydon—"

"So Rilleta lost? And King Seldon is dead?"

"No," said Memoryrose. "But she rules the land in all but name. I see no reason not to call her by the proper title. Queen Twydon could be a dangerous enemy. I have made her my ally, instead, and in return for my running the Heretics headlong into a trap, she will leave Doralissa alone. And the bargain benefits Glangon, as well, though he has not yet kept his part of the bargain." Another sharp glance.

"I go to do just that," said Glangon soothingly. "Did you really think I wouldn't keep my word?"

"I wondered, Darkworker. I wondered."

"You are half-Darkworker yourself, if one listens to the rumors about the mizanai."

"Rumors," said Memoryrose lightly. "Promises. What are they worth? Words, breathed on the wind, and dead as soon as they are breathed."

I closed my eyes, and struggled to reorient myself. Things were distinctly different from the way they had been yesterday, or whatever night it had truly been when I fled my own world. "This was all a sham?"

"Oh, not to Rilleta and the Heretics," said Memoryrose. "They truly believed they would bring down the Princess, and that they had the support of the Doralissan throne behind them. But to everyone else, yes, it was a sham, or an intrigue. I prefer that word, since we did all run a risk of getting killed out here."

"Then whom do I serve?"

"Whomever you swore to serve, of course," said Memoryrose. "You are not under any obligation to me unless you swear an oath. Would you be interested in swearing an oath?" I opened my eyes to see her wild gaze locked on me, and that smile that could summon lightning playing on her lips.

"No," I said quietly. "I only wish to know what is happening."

Glangon stepped forward and faced me. "Queen Twydon is dangerous," he said. "Rilleta came up with a plan to replace her."

"That much I know." I shuddered a little, thinking of the Crown Princess's face as I had seen it in the torture pits. "But why not support Rilleta, instead of just pretending to support her? What do you gain by keeping Twydon on the throne that you wouldn't gain by kicking her off it?"

"Rilleta is even more dangerous," said Glangon without pause. "At least Twydon has the training to care about her Kingdom, and we know that she comes of a royal line and will be accepted by her people. Rilleta is a fanatic, who would probably sacrifice Orlath on the altar of her god if she could find a fire big enough. If we supported her and she took the throne, she would probably turn on us at once. She showed signs of becoming impatient with Queen Memoryrose already, and of not knowing her place. Better to placate Twydon and become her ally. The united thrones of Doralissa, Orlath, Ilantra, and Rivendon will destroy Rilleta, and that will seal the alliance among all of us. The Heretics serve a more useful purpose in their deaths than they ever would running about on the Plains, or—goddesses forbid it—ruling from the castle of Orlath."

"What about Lyissa?" I asked.

"Oh, the young priestess who tended me?" Queen Memoryrose asked. "She is still here. Caged." Again, that sharp glance. "Would you like to see her?"

I nodded. "I joined the Heretics for her."

"If you want to see her," said Glangon, "then I need your oath that you will not attempt to flee to the Light with her."

"Why would I do such a thing?" I asked. I will never understand him. Of course, I didn't understand their elaborate political machinations, either. A simple alliance with Twydon would seem the better course to me. "I have given up the Light now, and I will soon enough convince her to give up Rennon."

"There are—certain complications, still to come," said Glangon. "I agreed to represent the Rivendonian throne in this endeavor, and while the Ilantrans and the Orlathians destroy the Heretics, Queen Memoryrose and I must take back the city they conquered."

I was only a moment trying to figure out what he meant. But then, I am feeling slower and stupider than usual today. "You mean Ozue."

"Yes."

"And what about the Masters of the Star Circle?"

"Dangerous," said Memoryrose quietly, "far too dangerous. They will serve no country, no cause, and in the world as it will soon become, that would doom them in any case. Twydon will have allies and servants, and no one else. She will destroy her living enemies. We hope to convince the Masters of the Star Circle to flee."

"They never will," I said. "There is so much knowledge they couldn't carry with them." I winced a little, to hear myself speaking of "them" so easily, as if I had never been part of them. But present is present, and past is past, and in the present, I am not part of them. "And they'll want to stay and serve the people of Ozue."

"That is their only choice," said Glangon. "They have troubled the world long enough, and defiance must go along in secret now, or it will not long survive. Come with me, Klessa, and help persuade them to retire from their school. That is the only chance they have."

I gazed into his eyes, and saw nothing deceitful there, despite all the deceit he had practiced. Glangon truly believed that Princess Twydon was such a threat that we had to do this, in order to survive and live with her.

I remembered the implacable face of the Lord, and didn't think that I would have much success in my persuasion. But it would mean giving my old comrades a chance to live, and having a chance to heal Lyissa.

I nodded shortly. "I swore an oath to the Dark. I will ride with you."

Lusirimalata's Commentary

This is one of the sections that required heavy editing. Of course I could not allow the claim that the suppression of the Rennon Heresy was entirely political to stand! The Goddess had a part in suppressing it, and our beloved Queen did not commit the crimes that they said she did. She would never have allied with the Dark, the Light's deadliest enemy, in order to suppress a rebellion. That, she could rely on her Destiny and the natural goodness of the Goddess and the priestesses to do. There is a darker lie at work in this, and we may see some of that lie's results even to this day.

There are still people who worship Rennon, though they live in secret and in the shadows. And they worship that demon precisely because they do not trust Queen

Twidon. They think that she is the kind of Queen who would ally with her enemies like this, when exactly the opposite is true. We maintain an uneasy peace with Ilantra and Rivendon and Doralissa because they do things we do not approve of. Our Queen is a stern and noble and upright woman, who understands the limits of her office. She acts as she must when compelled by political necessity, but she would never do anything immoral.

I am glad that the Lady Teridona is here. She read the last section without cracking a smile. Indeed, her face was pale with anger when she laid the paper down.

"I have never encountered such vile lies," she said. "To blaspheme the Goddess and the honest and sincere worshippers who helped lay the rebellion to rest..."

She stalked off, fuming.

I have been soothed of late. Anassra has brought me the cordial from the Queen, always on the hour, and spoken soft words around me. She keeps the room clean, with no more iridescent scraps of paper or mysterious notes. There have been no more signs, and while I hear rumors of nightmares, I do not pay attention to them.

That means that I may pay closer attention to the History I am preparing, and in particular to the section of Rilleta's History that I turn to now, the tale of the Battle of Ororos.