

THE SONG OF JULIANA

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The priestess knelt on the petals of dead dahlias,

at the Altar of her Lady.

Her arms rested at the base

Under the runes

That told of the Fateful Day,

And she received the Revelation...

#

The altar fell away, and the temple dispersed as the vision overtook my senses. I shall never forget the smell. The air was sweeter than the candas shards I used to suckle as a child on those rare occasions when I was permitted. The smell of rot was stripped away, and the new

balmy breezes carried a myriad of aromas. Stunning also, was the feel of the air on my skin. The warmth was not exhausting like that of the day's heat, but comforting, like that of a lover's skin at night. And the breezes were gentle, not like the unbearable gusts we experience in the Dreaded Years when the land turns black with snow and ice, but pleasant chills that swirl around you and fly away as warmth embraces you again. I removed my shawl and let the breezes comb through my hair like a child's fingers. I removed my rags and sandals to stand naked in the landscape. My feet sank into the shallows of a mossy floor and the warmth touched every part of me as if I were being bathed in grace. I knew at that moment this was not of our world, but a vision from our perfect Lady who blessed me this day.

The sights also bore no hint to our world. The sky was clear of ash and smog, blue was the color of the heavens. White tufts floated high among the azure, and the once red light of the shy sun shone white and clear. The land bore no marks of scorch and sand, no evidence of death and war, not even the sickly crops of wearley or lavenbreads. Instead, and stretching out in all directions, were short stems of soft green sprouts and speckled groups of blue and yellow petals. To the east and north, in the distance, tall living trunks rose whose branches harbored hordes of lush green foliage and white blossoms. To the south, water. A vast expanse alike to our deserts, a reservoir so full you could sail for ages across it. I saw no land past it, but blue touching blue as purest waters and sky met at the edge of the world. On its face, I swear I could see full dunes of liquid life and my mouth felt ever drier at the thought of wading into the depth. I ran toward it and my feet fell from under me as I landed at the base of the altar on the dead petals of dahlias.

#

“Alessia, Alessia! Mother, High Priestess!” I coughed; my breaths were strained from yelling in the thick smog. I entered the tent of the Mother. “Alessia I—”

“Calm yourself.” The elderly face of the Mother was clothed in white lace, hiding her eyes, and leaving only the cracked skin of ancient lips. “By The Lady’s grace, what is it, my child?”

The Mother’s lady servant, waiting at her side, bowed away to let us speak. “Mother Alessia, I received a vision. A vision from The Lady.”

She was not startled, neither awed nor feared by my words. “Tell me about this vision my child.”

I told her about the land of sweet air, green life, and vast waters. She swooned and wet her lips at the description of them. “Oceans. What a glorious gift you have been given Juliana, Our Lady has started within you the Revelation of the Days of Sun and Water.”

I remember, as a child, being told about the Days of Sun and Water, which we also called the Living Years of Our Lady. I had never pictured such glorious intoxications as the vision had revealed. The stories of that ancient time gave me hope and strength when I was small and ill. As the songs and stories told, the Days of Sun and Water ended with the death of Our Lady and would cease to be until her return. One song, in particular, played through my mind:

Oh, Lady Fair, Lady Grace, Our kind and gentle Maiden,

The sun does bow to your beauty, And waters thirst for your face.

Oh, Lady Love, Lady Sweet, Our Mother strong and wise,

Nature cries in your absence, And the world falls at your feet.

Oh, the sun shall never shine so bright, And the colors lose their hue,

Until you would return to us, Upon the River Flues

Oh, Lady Fair, Lady Grace, Our kind and gentle Maiden,

Bring back to us the waters and sun, Return with heavenly haste.

The memories of singing the song with the choirs and all the sons and daughters of Our Lady brought tears to my eyes. Not just out of fondness for the memory, but out of grief. We sang that song in the Dreaded Years, and more than half of the children, whose voices I hear singing the lovely verse, sing no more, nor ever shall again.

“Mother Alessia” I bowed my head, you speak of this revelation, as though it has been given before. Have others received such visions of glory?”

“Very few, child.” She looked beyond me for a moment, her eyes displayed a flash of grief, and something else. They were almost hopeful. “It is the duty of the Mother to tend to the Children of The Lady. An impossible task if they do not understand The Lady in all her glory, in all her grace... and all her flaws.”

“Flaws? Mother Alessia! Our good and perfect Lady?”

“Child, even the purest among us have been brought to anger, or lust, or pride, and, more often than not, the greatest of us have been brought to much worse. The Lady, Our Lady, is no exception in this. The Revelation of the Days of Sun and Water will show you the wonders of The Living Years of Our Lady and give you hope with the knowledge of the Days to Come After. It will reveal to you the true heart of The Lady, so I may pass my cup to you, Young Mother.”

“No... No, Mother Alessia--“

“My time is coming soon enough—do not cry, do not be sad—I will walk in the Days to Come After with The Lady, and with Mother Hannah who walks there before me. When you have carried out your duties, you will walk with us too, in the procession of Our Lady. I will not go yet, not until you have received the full revelation.”

“And this—this is the will of The Lady?”

“Yes, child, Young Mother, and I would like no one better to succeed me than you.”

I bowed my head, Mother Alessia is the only Mother I have known, the time of Mother Hannah was long before my birth. “Mother Aless—”

“Do not mourn me yet,” She stopped me as if she knew my very thoughts. “I am not yet departing you. Even when the time comes, and you take my role, I will only be gone for a time, then we shall walk with Our Lady in the Days to Come After together.” She lifted my head with her cold wrinkled fingers. Her veil was now lifted to reveal her sunken gray eyes, full of wisdom and kindness. “Do not mourn me yet.”

I lifted myself to her, embracing her as I buried my head into her shoulder. “I love you Mother Alessia, I long already for those days when I’ll see you again.”

I heard the faintest laugh in her chest. “And I long to see what an amazing Mother you will become my child. I have watched over you for many years my Juliana, I love you with all I am.”

I smiled as I wept in her arms.

#

The next of the revelations came to me in my sleep that night. I was on my back, drifting in nothingness. Everything around me was black, except for the myriad of twinkling lights. I had never seen such peace in darkness or felt so comfortable in solitude. I watched the lights flicker and dance across the night. I allowed myself to feel my body. I was naked and warm. I felt nothing below me, nor above. My hair flowed in all directions, not being pushed, or pulled. The slightest sensation wove its way through the strands and across my scalp, messaging my head.

I tried to move, forcing my legs downward and drawing myself up with my hands. I was in water. My motions made waves and splashes and as I straightened myself, I began to sink. Water rushed over my mouth and nose. I tried to find air but there was none. The lights were gone. It was dark. Cold now. I could not breathe. I lashed around hoping and praying for something but found nothing.

I woke up, falling off my cot onto the cobble flooring. I was panting, crying, gasping for air, and clutching the ground. “Juliana!? Juliana!? What is wrong, what has happened!?” Emeran, a young man who slept in a cot near my own met me on the ground and steadied me. His hands were strong, from long days tending to fields of wearily I assumed. His hair was ravenlike, but his eyes shone pale and gold. His body was covered in tattered rags, the same most of us wear under our robes to keep out the searing heat and blistering winds.

“I—I am fine Emeran. I think I am.”

“What happened? Was it a dream?”

“Yes, a dream.” I brushed the hair from my face as he brought me to my feet.

“Let me help you to bed Juliana.”

“I will manage. Thank you.”

Emeran nodded his head kindly and we returned to our cots. I saw there was someone else sharing his tonight. Another young man, golden-haired and lovely, sleeping soundly.

Emeran lay next to him. I heard the other boy whisper. “What happened?”

“My friend had a bad dream, not to worry. Go back to sleep.”

Emeran was always kind to me, and his interactions this night were so small, with me and this man. It was something I would have overlooked or given no thought to most nights. I could not shake the feeling, this urge, something in me was just different. It was almost, a need to protect him, to watch over him.

The same feeling overtook me throughout the sleepless early morning. I would hear coughs, whispers, snores, moans, and groans. Each time I was overtaken by an instinctual drive to care for each of these people, these Children of The Lady. It was a motherly instinct I decided, preparing me for a role I would soon have to fill. That role—the role Mother Alessia would no longer hold. My eyes watered at the thought, what a great a loving mother she has been to me.

#

...Through sleepless nights and endless fears

The priestess grew in her wisdom,

With daunting dreams and blessed sights

A new Young Mother took up the rites...

#

In the next months, with each passing day, more visions were made known to me. I watched the change of the old seasons. The beauty of the summer that faded into fall and further into winter before the spring restored the land to its green greatness. I saw the growth of a sapling as it flourished into a mighty tree. I saw its branches live and die until its seeds sprouted a sprawling forest before it finally fell in a violent rain. And I saw the rain wash away rivers into valleys and valleys into canyons. Mountains grew and continents shifted. Mighty beasts arose to rule from the deep of the darkest seas. Then, revealed to me, the First Judgement.

Fire. Horrible fire released in a shockwave that destroyed the trees, the mountains, the valleys, the green, and all the beasts in every corner of the earth. The shockwave of heat came over me like a wall and I fell on my back, screaming in fear of the flames as I lay on the cobbled floors of the temple. I steadied my breath and began to cry. I was found there by Emeran, who came to worship. He helped me back to The Mother.

As I sat at her feet, she listened to the things I had seen. “The First Judgement will not be the last you see in your journey.”

“Why, Mother, must I bear witness to the atrocities? I had always heard stories of sun and water, not of fire and anguish worse than we know now.”

“The history of our world is not a kind one. There are ages of sun and water, of fire and anguish, of ice and of storms, of war and of love. This is the nature of all things. Seasons come and seasons go, just as such, we rise from the ash and are reclaimed into the dust. Life and death, Yin and Yang. The cycle has never ceased.”

The words filled me with dread, hopelessness. “Can we never be free of the ashes? Will the days of fire and anguish never leave?”

“Child,” her voice was coarse and slow “you do not yet realize why these visions should bring you peace and hope, not worry. Change your perspective, Young Mother. We will *always* be freed from the ashes. The days of fire and anguish will *always* leave. This is the knowledge and the faith you must learn, this is how we know Our Lady will deliver us; because she always has and always will.”

“The fire, it destroyed everything—”

“It cleaned the slate; the First Days and the First Judgement cleaned the slate for the emergence of the First Age of Man. The Second Judgment and First Fall of Man cleaned the slate so that we could do better. You will learn. The Days of Sun and Water, the Living Years of Our Lady, The Second Age of Man, were cleaned from the slate so that we could rise and do better again. That day will come, I have seen it, and so shall you. Get rest Young Mother. In the coming days, you will begin to see the First Age of Man, you will need your strength.”

I was afraid, dread-filled, and afraid. “Of course, Mother Alessia. Thank you for your wisdom.” I returned to my bed, Emeran and his lover slept soundly. I did not want to wake them, and I did not want to sleep. I lay awake, fearing the dreams, and dreading the visions I so looked forward to when it all began.

#

When I finally slept, I dreamed of a garden. My feet were planted in the moss, my hair smoothly fell down my backside, all the way to my ankles, but no further. The beauty of the garden was quite simple. Lush and calm. The trees swayed in a gentle breeze and the light of the sun bathed everything through the low canopies. Songbirds danced, hopping and gliding from one tree to the next, and seemed to take turns as they sang, each picking up the song where the

last left off. Many gentle beasts, small and large, grazed in the garden, all in perfect harmony. I walked among them. As I walked, I saw no end to the garden, nor did I find any flaws, or any reason to leave. Plump and colorful fruits grew on nearly every branch of every tree and bush. No threats existed, I felt no fear, and there was not a single blemish or defect. The garden was perfect in every way. I felt a strong hand on my shoulder, and turning, found a handsome man. His brown hair was damp from bathing in the river, and his wet dark skin sparkled. He spoke to me in a tongue I did not know, and I answered him. Without knowing my intention, I put my hand in his and led him deeper into the garden until we came to a clearing centered with a small tree with golden leaves and silver fruits. I picked one for him, and one for me. He spoke again, and for the first time, I felt there was a sense of fear in the garden. The fruit, I would be free of the fear... just one bite. It tasted of rot, sickly yet sweet, repulsive yet decadent, refreshing yet unsatisfying. At that very moment, I felt death and worse things.

I felt the pain of childbirth and the despair of losing a son. I felt the betrayal of being killed by a brother, and the regret of having slain my own kin. I wept as I watched my daughters raped in the street, and I cried as fire and brimstone burned my skin before I looked back to a burning home that calcified my body. I watched many wives die; I felt a husband ripped from my hand. So much of it was my own doing, so much of it, I did not deserve. There was no story, no progression, just emotion driving the knowledge and experience that imbedded itself in me now. I screamed, I cried, I wept, and moaned. Horrors and atrocities were all there were. Then came the Second Judgement.

Water. Unimaginable depths of waters rising from every basin and pouring from the sky. Lightning and thunder blinded me and deafened my ears. I was thrown by waves on the deck of a waterlogged vessel. I heard beasts whimpering and a family crying out for mercy. The sounds of

the drowning and dying were almost louder than the storm. I bore it for countless days and nights. Then light. The sky cleared. The rains stopped. I felt the sun again and, with time, the waters receded. I stepped onto the soggy earth atop a mountain that overlooked the world. I was never so thankful for life, yet never so wished for death.

I woke up. At first, I did not know where I was. The room was full of cots, but nobody in them. A dim light shown through short windows near the ceiling all around the room. This was my home. I got up and clothed myself, first in rags and then in a rusty red robe. I made my way to Mother Alessia. I did not say anything as I approached her.

“You have had a long night, Juliana.”

I did not answer. I just bobbed my head around the room, looking without focusing my sight on anything in particular.

“You’re confused, Young Mother. I remember the First Age well. Please sit.” The Mother’s maidservant brought me a chair. “You will spend the day here, to rest. We may talk when you’re ready.”

It was a couple of hours before I was ready to speak. “Mother?”

“Yes, Juliana.”

“Who am I? In the visions I mean.”

She smiled. “You take many names in your visions. Sometimes, the revelation will show you things in which you are not physically a part. You have no agency; you can do nothing but watch. Sometimes, however, you are placed in a body.”

“Like a parasite?”

“No. Not at all. You feel, see, and act in the forms and ways of Our Lady, in her many lives.”

“You mean—the fruit—I didn’t choose to eat it?”

“You did, and you didn’t. You will always regret taking that bite, Our Lady knows I still do. And you will never stop blaming yourself, but those actions were that of Our Lady; it was her greatest failure, and so her failure lives on in us as a reminder.”

“The guilt I felt, that I still feel, I—she ruined everything, caused all that misery.”

“Understand, she was tricked. She was weak and deceived. It is that mistake that pushed her to be the caring perfect Lady that she is and knowing that guilt will push you to do the same.”

“What was her name?”

“Our Lady? She has gone by many. The Lady whom we call upon from the last of her living years was named Alexis. Teresa before that. Even longer before then she was Joan, Anne, Cleopatra, Helen, and Pandora. In her first moments, with her greatest regrets, she was Eve. It is through her eyes that the revelation is given. And though she has left the living, she remains in The Mother, to guide her children through the Third Judgement.”

“The Second Judgement was a flood.”

“Yes, and it—”

“Cleansed the earth.”

Alessia was silent.

“We brought horrors into the world. It was our fault that the Second Judgement came upon us.”

“And it was our fault that the Third Judgement is upon us now. And it is our responsibility to guide humanity through it, as we have done since Our Lady imparted the first revelation. You have seen so much beauty and pain. Your body is tired. You will not receive another vision in the coming days, but the next will come.”

“Will I be able to bear it all?”

“You have been well prepared to bear it. The hardest metal must be tempered, and you now have more tempering than any living soul apart from my own. To give you hope, I can tell you this. I know the next visions well; it will restore your peace, just as they continue to restore mine every day when I think back to them.”

“What are they?”

A faint smile came over her dry lips. “All I can tell you, Young Mother, is to feel it all willingly. Do not fight it when they come. Enjoy it all.”

#

... and through her sights

She gazed upon the wonders

Of things now past

And days once lived,

Through the eyes of

Spinsters and lovers...

#

I slept soundly for the first night in what seemed such a long time. Again, I woke to an empty room. I was thankful for the quiet. Everything was so sweetly quiet. I shut my eyes to float in the emptiness. I had forgotten how I used to long for sleep. When I was young it was the only escape from the heat, the pain, the suffering we all experienced. Day in and day out the Third Judgement brought us to despair, but we would simply sleep and dream of the candas shards we might get for behaving well. Some of us never woke up and we did not blame them for remaining asleep.

We mourned those who died. We missed them, but we were happy for them. As we grew, we were numbed to the suffering. We pushed ourselves through the days. We gave up our candas shards so the next generation could find that same will to go on, that small shred of hope that had pushed us. We replaced the escape of sleep with worship and devotion to The Lady. I suppose that too is a kind of escape. I was starting to long for sleep again. I let myself fall back into it.

#

It took me some time to regain my strength. I slept much over the next few days and ate little. Emeran, who took notice of my off state, came by one night offering me a candas shard.

“Thank you.” I could not help but smile.

“Of course, I help make them occasionally, when I’m not in the fields that is. My little brother, he loves them, and when I help in the kitchen, I can snag some extra for him. I thought I might snag one for you this time.”

“That’s very kind Emeran. I didn’t know you had a brother.”

His lips curled into a smile and his cheeks dimpled. “Yeah, his name is Dorin. He was orphaned in the last of the Dreaded years. He was just a baby, nearly died himself. My mother took him in and nurtured him back to health.” His smile dipped a little, pulling at my heart. “Still, he seems lost sometimes. I worry that someday I’ll visit just to learn he gave up his fight. I use my time making candas hoping that it’ll give him that spark of light that keeps him moving.”

I looked at the shard in my hand. It was translucent, brown, and growing sticky in my hand. “It’s strange how something so small can give a child so much joy, even in all this.”

“Yeah. Theodor told me once in the temple that candas are a metaphor for our relationship with The Lady... that children learn morality and civility to earn this tiny thing that brings them joy. The same way, we grow in discipline and charity to earn the life The Lady will restore on us.”

He had such faith. His eyes opened up into a deep pool of understanding and hope as he spoke. I wonder if I was like that before all I have learned. I did not feel so faithful anymore. I was different. As a child, the candas gave me hope. As I grew, it was The Lady. Now—now I felt more hope seeing the light in Emeran’s eyes than any candas or vision from The Lady could ever give me. I wanted him to be happy and hopeful, I wanted the same for his brother, his mother, his lover—

“Theodor? Is that the man you bring with you to bed?”

Emeran blushed. “Yes. Some nights the worrying about my brother makes it hard to sleep, so Theo comes and lays beside me. It makes me feel—at peace.”

I looked at my reflection in the candas shard. “At peace. I long to see a world full of such peace.”

#

I spent the next few days in Emeran’s company. I went with him to visit his mother and brother. I joined him in making candas and indulged in a piece or two. I met Theodor. The three of us stayed awake through the night, laying on our cots, and we laughed like we had not since we were children. I enjoyed every second and—there was no suffering. Only peace. I learned what it was I had become. I was not just becoming a mother, but a sister, a brother, a friend. Alessia and the visions, they were not teaching me to bear the weight of humanity. They were teaching me to connect to the very things that make us human: joy, love, and hope. No judgment or circumstance can take those away. We create them.

#

I fell into a vision for the first time in days. I was eating a ration of lavenbread. It began feeling thick in my mouth. It was hard to chew. The taste grew sweet, like candas. Soon I was chewing a piece of fresh fruit. I found myself knowing the name, an apple. The rest of the fruit sat in my hand. The thought of the last fruit I had eaten came to mind and I dropped it. It landed on the wooden ground; a floor made of planks. I was in a cabin. Through the window, I could see trees, and I could feel a draft from the breeze through the rafters.

A knock came on the door. There was laughter on the other side, a man, and a woman. “Hygiea! Open the door, we’ve brought you a gift!”

I obliged. The man was strong and tall with a long beard, and there were two women, both brown of hair and beautiful, though one was quite shorter than me. The women rushed to me each grabbing a hand and twirling me back to the center of the room. “Hygiea, we found it!”

“Oh, found what dear friends?” The words escaped my mouth without a thought.

“The grove, silly spinster, the one we came across yesteryear and could not find again.”

“We now know the way!” The shorter woman jumped uncontrollably, making me laugh.

“Tell her Tristyn, tell her!”

“It’s true dear sister, we came across the spot while hunting for the herbs you wanted for your tonics.”

“You have the herbs then; Adeline needs them for her illness.”

“Oh, come now Hygiea! I am well enough,” The shorter woman claimed, “the tonics can wait, you were so upset to have lost the path to the grove. Let us see it now.”

I found myself worrying for Adeline and her illness.

“Oh, Charis, tell her I will be just fine!”

“You will have time for her tonics, we thought you would be so pleased. Come with us to the grove, come and enjoy it.”

Alessia’s voice rang in my ears, *enjoy it*.

I smiled. “Of course, I’ll come with you.”

We ran off into the wood, dancing, and frolicking, laughing, and singing. We stopped every couple of moments to enjoy the journey. We stopped to smell flowers and pick fruits, to

run through puddles and draw pictures in the dirt. We reached the grove and watched the golden sun set fire on the horizon above marvelous blue evergreens painted purple by the sky. We returned to the cabin and fell asleep side by side in the light of a fire under the stars. It was a perfect day.

#

I woke under the stars of a different sky. The patterns and constellations were different, the moon was full. The fire burned low. There were no trees, but distant rocks and vast sands surrounded me. There was no cabin, but fine sheets hung over sticks for a tent. My dear friends were nowhere to be seen, but beside me, sharing a woven blanket for a bed, a beautiful woman of ebony skin and ink-black hair. I loved her, immediately and immensely, the way I had loved countless men and women as lives passed through me in my earliest visions. I knew her name, Katie. She was wearing short blue shorts and a wrap around her chest. Beside her head were two thin, shiny boxes. Her forehead also shown, reflecting the moon's silver. I ran my fingers through her curly hair. All thoughts left me and that feeling of peace came over me again. The way it had laughing with Emeran and Theodor, or dancing through the woods with Charis, Tristyn, and Adeline. I strung my finger down across Katie's nose to her lips and felt the surge of energy coursing through me as my skin connected with more of her.

I jumped as one of the boxes began to shake. It was vibrating, loudly, and in pulses. It flashed with symbols and colors I did not understand. The center displayed: MOM. It stopped after a moment. Katie's head moved and she stretched her arm out into the air. "Who was it?"

"Nobody important." The words came on their own. "Go back to bed Goose."

She groaned and curled herself up again, “Not without a kiss Ducky.” She kept her eyes closed and pursed her lips. I laughed and hesitated. Enjoy it.

I laid down and met her lips with mine. I fell, as if my body had been sucked into the connection and I woke on my cot. I could still taste her lips on mine. I smiled.

#

... And so, with many joys

And through many trials

The Young Mother grew.

The old pass on

To birth the new,

And with marvelous light

And in glorious ways,

Our Last Mother leads us

To the After Days.