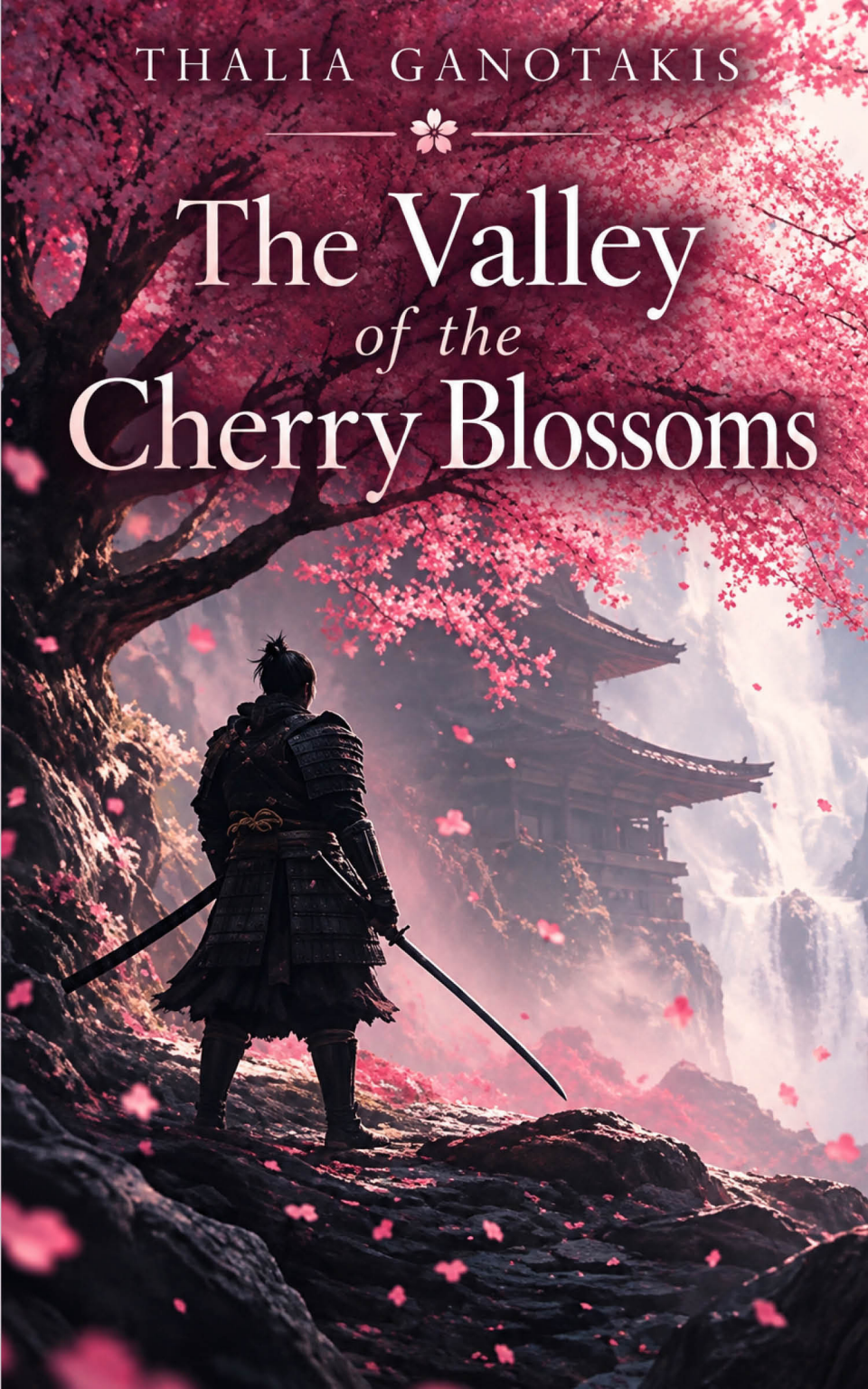
THALIA GANOTAKIS

The Valley of the Cherry Blossoms



Archaeologists converges on Kagoshima, at the southernmost frontier of Kyushu Island.

Led by Michele De Luca, the expedition aims to exhume the sunken remnants of the great Mongol fleet belonging to Kublai Khan, grandson of Genghis Khan. In 1281, during a doomed attempt to subjugate the Japanese archipelago, this massive armada was utterly shattered by a legendary typhoon off the coast of Hakata Bay.

Yet, as the team plunges into the murky depths, archaeologist Francesco Dini finds himself besieged by phantom ailments, unsettling premonitions, and vivid, haunting dreams.

The long-buried past is clawing its way back to the light. When an enigmatic artifact finally rises from the water, it awakens an ancient tension—just as the colossal Sakurajima volcano, looming a mere four kilometers from the bustling streets of Kagoshima, stirs with the threat of a cataclysmic eruption.

Journeying south toward the jagged edge of Japan, a team of Italian maritime

Thalia Ganotakis. Born in Congo in 1955, of Greek origin, she grew up between Congo and Burundi. Graduated in Belgium as Translator for Italian, French and English, she moved to Italy where she worked in Brindisi as a sworn court translator, a consular secretary and a teacher. Since 2014 she has published, a collection of illustrated fairy tales, fantasy stories, a poetry audiobook and social historical novels, often set in Africa, Italy, Greece and now Japan.

€ 16,00

Auto da fé

… Licenziando queste cronache
ho l'impressione di buttarle nel fuoco
e di liberarmene per sempre (E. Montale)

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Thalia Ganotakis

The Valley of the Cherry Blossoms

auto da fé

To you, my sweet little brother:
May the earth rest lightly upon you
among the cherry blossoms;
a warrior among men.

Japanese Proverb

AUTHOR'S NOTE

I want to do with you
what spring does with the cherry trees.
Neruda

In Japan, spring explodes in all its beauty. Awakened from their winter torpor, the cherry trees burst into bloom, releasing their delicate and intoxicating essence. Avenues and parks are carpeted with pink and white flowers, a true attraction for thousands of visitors drawn by the spectacle of *Hanami*!

The cherry blossom, or sakura, symbol of the ephemeral sacredness of life, bears witness to the eternal cycle of birth and death.

After hundreds of centuries, two souls recognize each other to resume their abruptly interrupted journey.

Thalia Ganotakis

The Valley of the Cherry Blossoms

Kubla Khan: Or, a Vision in a Dream. A Fragment

In Xanadu did Kubla Khan
A stately pleasure-dome decree:
Where Alph, the sacred river, ran
Through caverns measureless to man
Down to a sunless sea.
So twice five miles of fertile ground
With walls and towers were girdled round:
And there were gardens bright with sinuous rills,
Where blossomed many an incense-bearing tree;
And here were forests ancient as the hills,
Enfolding sunny spots of greenery.

But oh! that deep romantic chasm which slanted
Down the green hill athwart a cedarn cover!
A savage place! as holy and enchanted
As e'er beneath a waning moon was haunted
By woman wailing for her demon-lover!
And from this chasm, with ceaseless turmoil seething,
As if this earth in fast thick pants were breathing,
A mighty fountain momently was forced:

Amid whose swift half-intermitted burst
Huge fragments vaulted like rebounding hail,
Or chaffy grain beneath the thresher's flail:
And mid these dancing rocks at once and ever
It flung up momently the sacred river.
Five miles meandering with a mazy motion
Through wood and dale the sacred river ran,
Then reached the caverns measureless to man,
And sank in tumult to a lifeless ocean;
And 'mid this tumult Kubla heard from far
Ancestral voices prophesying war!

The shadow of the dome of pleasure
Floated midway on the waves;
Where was heard the mingled measure
From the fountain and the caves.
It was a miracle of rare device,
A sunny pleasure-dome with caves of ice!

A damsel with a dulcimer
In a vision once I saw:
It was an Abyssinian maid
And on her dulcimer she played,
Singing of Mount Abora.
Could I revive within me
Her symphony and song,
To such a deep delight 'twould win me,
That with music loud and long,
I would build that dome in air,
That sunny dome! those caves of ice!
And all who heard should see them there,

And all should cry, Beware! Beware!
His flashing eyes, his floating hair!
Weave a circle round him thrice,
And close your eyes with holy dread
For he on honey-dew hath fed,
And drunk the milk of Paradise.

Every man is a moon and has a side which he turns toward nobody: you have to slip around behind if you want to see it.
Mark Twain

Pisa, March 2017

Lorenza sat at her desk, staring blankly at the cold sheet of paper that confirmed her worst fears. Instead of radiating happiness, she was hollowed out by an indefinable unease. A sudden tremor took hold; suffocation washed over her, pushing her to the very brink of panic. *Of all times, why now?* she thought, numb with disbelief. *I am not ready! What am I going to do?* Trapped in a dark, agonizing corner of her mind, she processed the news relentlessly, floating in a dimension only she could inhabit. The night magnified her dread, flashing catastrophic scenarios before her eyes. It was nearly two in the morning, but she was suspended in a timeless void. She desperately sought an escape, any way to break the grip tightening around her chest. Riveted to her chair, she wished to be anywhere but, in that room, suffocated by the text staring back at her. And yet, all she had to do was wake Francesco, confide in him, and share the weight. Why not tell him? He would be overjoyed. No, she couldn't—not yet. She felt the curtain falling on her life, ending her dreams, and collapsing both time and space. She watched her husband sleep, struck by the depth of his slumber. At times, she envied his easy

aplomb. At two in the morning, she had crawled out of bed, slipping away into the study on tiptoe. Unlike her, Francesco possessed an innate serenity that few things could shatter. Perhaps it was this very quality that had drawn her to him in the early days of their relationship.

By contrast, Lorenza possessed the sensitivity of a *mimosa pudica*—its leaves curling tightly shut at the slightest touch. It was a trait she had likely inherited from her mother's depressive nature. Escaping one's own demons was no easy feat, especially when they lacked a definite shape.

It could not all end like this. Yet, the positive result left no room for doubt: she was, undeniably, pregnant.

An ambitious project indeed, one that would span at least two decades.

Francesco and Lorenza were determined to do whatever it took to be part of it. Without a second thought, they threw themselves headlong into their studies. Not only did they earn their master's degrees in East Asian Languages and Civilizations, but they also secured coveted spots on the 2017 expedition staff.

Meanwhile, Francesco qualified as a certified underwater archaeologist, while Lorenza immersed herself in the archaeological cartography of Japan, China, and Korea.

Yet now, just as their dream was finally materializing, the news hit them out of the blue.

With a decisive snap, Lorenza tore the blood test report in two. Francesco could not find out, not now, and not under any circumstances. She was certain he would call off the departure, destroying everything

they had worked for. This journey had to happen. She would tell him later, perhaps once they were cruising toward Tokyo.

I'll just act as if nothing is wrong, she thought, trying to calm her racing mind. It was hardly the first time a pregnant woman had embarked on an adventure. She would see it through to the end, honoring every commitment for as long as her body allowed. With departure just two days away, there was no room left for hesitation.

Weary of spinning the same endless thoughts, she abandoned her desk and slipped back into bed. She curled beside her partner, who slept on, utterly unaware that their world was on the brink of shattering. A few short months were all that remained. Their family's third member would arrive soon enough, but for now, they could still delay the inevitable. The morning light would surely dissolve her fears. "Everything will be fine," Lorenza thought, just before surrendering to the arms of Morpheus.

Lovers don't finally meet somewhere.
They're in each other all along.
Rumi

It was within the halls of the University of Pisa's Faculty of Archaeology that the paths of Francesco Dini and Lorenza Landi first crossed.

Both natives of the Tuscan city shared a profound passion for Egyptology and Etruscan civilization. Little did they suspect that a single lecture on the exploits of the Mongol emperor Kublai Khan would completely upend their life plans.

Seized by a sudden flash of intuition, and without fully grasping what they hoped to achieve, they set out on the road to the Orient. They went in search of Kublai Khan's legendary fleet, which had vanished into the depths of the sea in 1281 during a failed conquest of Japan.

Like a boat drifting at the mercy of the current, life opens unexpected gateways and new paths to traverse. Often, and for no apparent reason, it guides us toward unforeseen harbors, captivating, yet at times treacherous.

Who would ever suspect that our existential journey is already predestined from above by the soul itself? This might explain the many fortuitous encounters between kindred spirits, the so-called "soul clusters." Delving deeper, one might wonder whether Lorenza

and Francesco had shared a bond in a past life, what paths they had walked together, what milestones they had reached, and if something still remained unresolved in their story. Even without the memory of a shared past, revealing signs always exist. We would only need to dig a little deeper, yet we usually just live our lives without asking too many questions.

Theirs had been love at first sight, two souls suddenly recognizing one another, a bolt from the blue, as though they had found each other again after an endless separation. They had resolved to waste no time, moving into an apartment just a stone's throw from the university faculty.

Open to adventure, radiant and bold, carrying grand expectations and profound hopes, they looked forward with boundless confidence. Captivated by the great mysteries of humanity, they thirsted to unearth the buried secrets of a distant past.

Confronted with the crossroads before them, they had chosen without hesitation the path dictated by the heart.

Countless were the circumstances and coincidences that had traced their itinerary toward the Land of the Rising Sun. Everything that was to follow had been, surprisingly, willed by both. Finally, the time had come for them to take flight, answering the unfathomable call knocking at their door.

We often live under the illusion of being the sole authors of our destiny, never suspecting a deeper design beneath every event. Just as the hummingbird is oblivious to its role as a pollinator while settling upon

flowers to sip their nectar, we too move blindly through a grander plan.

Nothing is left to chance, not even what appears to be the fruit of deliberate reflection.

Lorenza and Francesco were about to discover this truth. Cooler in temperament but far bolder than her husband, Lorenza would routinely fling herself into any challenge, driven by the quiet certainty of triumph. While he was cautious and meticulous, she simply refused to weigh the cost of failure.

"You are my lifebuoy!" Lorenza would jest whenever she hit a dead end. Despite her natural vivacity and innate optimism, she was usually quick to lose her temper in harrowing situations. Yet, more often than not, she managed to find the right solution to shake off her gripping anxiety. Though both were only children, they were neither spoiled nor selfish. Having studied and worked hard, they stood ready to brave the unknown—much to the regret of their parents, who had hoped to keep them close. They had envisioned them in the very same city, perhaps as university professors, a quiet career free from major upheavals. Perhaps the parents had failed to grasp the intensity of the passion burning within the two young souls, or perhaps they had simply chosen to ignore it. Instead, life held other plans for them, still wholly to be deciphered—a brand-new puzzle with all its pieces tangled, waiting to be assembled.

Only two days remained before their departure for Tokyo, the first stop on their journey to Kagoshima, their final destination. Japan held a unique fascination

for them, partly because its historical origins remained shrouded in mystery, but even more so due to the profound contradictions that defined its spirit. How remarkably ancient Nippon traditions withstood the clash with the unsettling modernism of technological progress! Tokyo stood as the most striking testament to this dichotomy.

Spring was unfolding, heralding the dawn of a promising season.

Lorenza delighted in the opportunity to admire firsthand the legendary cherry blossom valleys of both Tokyo and Kagoshima. This was a milestone destination; one she could never bring herself to miss. Countless times she had heard of the celebrated *Hanami*—the tradition of Japanese families strolling along avenues lined with blossoming trees. Already, she could almost sense the intoxicating fragrance drifting from the delicate *sakura*.

That journey was worth experiencing, no matter the cost. Putting the pregnancy out of her mind for now, she resolved to address the issue when the time was more fitting. She would confess everything to Francesco on the flight to Tokyo, and it would all work out for the best; of that, she was now certain.

Pleased with her decision, she set about packing. It required careful planning, considering how long they would be away. There was simply so much to bring. Even with Kagoshima's mild climate, they still needed to prepare for the shifting seasons, since their stay would last nearly a year. Separating her sweaters from the lighter garments proved to be easier said than done.

She had, of course, made time to slip into the shopping mall on Via Luigi Alamanni to buy a couple of maternity outfits. Japan surely had plenty of shops, but there was no guaranteeing she would find anything quite as nice for a reasonable price. She would worry about baby clothes later, closer to her due date. For now, she felt as though she had all the time in the world.

While she was absorbed in sorting through the wardrobe, Francesco stepped aside to take stock of things, ensuring nothing was left behind. Fortunately, his diving gear was no longer a concern, having been shipped to Kagoshima a week prior. Michele De Luca had already cleared the equipment through customs, and it now sat in a harbor warehouse alongside the rest of the team's gear.

His thoughts drifted to the depths of Hakata Bay. He was eager to plunge into the deep, to begin the exploration and dive in search of the sunken fleet of Genghis Khan's famous grandson. Kublai Khan intrigued him immensely.

He would have rivaled his grandfather's renown had a typhoon not thwarted the ships launched to conquer Japan, an undertaking that would have altered the course of history.

Now, the mystery lay submerged, and history waited to unveil its long-hidden truths.

For the Italian explorers on-site, the quest had begun a decade earlier. In 2006, the first wrecks were unearthed alongside armor, pottery, weapons, and even grenades, confirming the history depicted on the ancient silk scrolls.

Grateful for the opportunity, the two young men pressed on with their preparations, eager to rejoin the other three members of the new team. They were scheduled to meet Gianna, Davide, and Mario at the airport on the day of departure.

Indice

p. 7 AUTHOR'S NOTE

THALIA GANOTAKIS

9 The Valley of the Cherry Blossoms

208 Afterword

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