

# All Shall Be Well

Sylvia Suhr

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A Novel Inspired by Julian of Norwich

Written in the spirit of Bryce

Courtenay

By Sylvia Suhr

## Author's Note

I have always believed that the best stories come from the worst of times. The human spirit, stripped bare by suffering, reveals its most honest self when love is all that remains. Julian of Norwich, a woman who lived through the horror of the Black Death, understood this better than most. She wrote that 'All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well'—words that sound almost impossible when the world is breaking. And yet, she believed them with all her heart.

This novel is not her story, but it is shaped by her courage. I wanted to take her quiet theology and place it in the hands of ordinary people—a scarred boy, a thief with a sharp tongue, a dying anchoress—and ask:

what does it mean to live those words  
when everything is falling apart? That  
is what this book is about.

If, by the last page, you find yourself  
believing, even for a moment, that love  
is stronger than fear—then Julian has  
spoken to you, too.

# Introduction

England, 1349. The plague devours cities and villages, leaving fear in its wake. Faith crumbles, families shatter, and hope feels like a foolish dream. But amidst the darkness, a few souls still believe in love—ordinary people making small, stubborn choices to care for one another.

This is Thomas's story, a scarred boy who loses everything, and Juliana's story, a woman walled into stone who whispers of a love that never leaves. It is also the story of anyone who has ever looked at suffering and asked, 'Where is God?' And, maybe, it is a story about finding Him in the only place He's ever been—right here, in love that refuses to give up.

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## Chapter 1: Ashes and Orphans

The smell of death clung to Norwich like wet wool. It slid through streets, seeped under doors, wrapped itself around every breath. The bells of St. Andrew's tolled again, another burial, another body burned. Thomas Aelfric counted the strikes without meaning to, like he always did now. Seven tolls. Seven dead this morning, and it wasn't yet noon.

He sat on the cold stone step of his family's house, knees drawn to his chest. The door was barred from the inside, but that didn't matter. Nobody would be opening it again. His father had been the first to fall, taken with fever and black swellings in his neck, then his mother, her hands trembling too much to hold the bread she baked for the last time. His baby sister, Alice, had coughed herself into silence two

days ago. The house was quiet now, too quiet, except for the flies tapping against the shutters.

Thomas should have cried. He used to cry easily when he burned his hand on the bread oven last year. When Alice dropped his only wooden soldier and snapped its arm. Now there were no tears left. Only a hollow ache in his chest and an odd thought that circled in his head, over and over: *If God cared, He wouldn't let this happen.*

He pressed his burned hand, now a shiny, scarred mess of puckered skin, against his knees and stared at the street. The plague cart creaked past, two men with rags tied over their faces shouting, "Bring out your dead!" as if anyone had the strength to answer. The bodies were stacked like firewood, their grey limbs jutting at awkward angles. He didn't look for his family among them. He didn't need to. He knew they were still inside, slumped where they'd fallen.



A dog darted from an alley, ribs sharp under its matted fur, sniffing at the cart before one of the men swung a stick at it. The dog yelped and bolted. Thomas wished he had the dog's speed, its freedom to run away from this cursed city. But where would he run? Everyone said the plague was everywhere.

A voice startled him. "You going to sit there until they toss you on the cart too?"

Thomas looked up. A girl about his age, maybe a year older, stood on the step across from him. Her dress was too big, cinched with rope at the waist, and her brown hair hung in greasy clumps. But her eyes were bright, quick, the kind of eyes that didn't stay still. She chewed on a piece of dried apple, watching him like he was a curious animal.

"What do you care?" he muttered.

She shrugged. "I don't. But if you're going to die, at least die with your belly full. Plenty of bread in the baker's on the corner. No one's alive to eat it."

He narrowed his eyes. "That's stealing."

She snorted. "So? They're dead. You want to starve for their good name?"

He said nothing. She bit off another chunk of apple and sat down beside him uninvited.

"I'm Elena," she said, mouth full. "What's your name?"

"Thomas."

"Well, Thomas, you can sit here with the flies, or you can come with me. Your choice." She stood, wiping her hands on her dress, already turning to leave.

Thomas looked back at the barred door, at the silence behind it. His

family wasn't coming back. The flies buzzed louder, like they agreed with the girl.

He stood slowly. "Fine. But I'm not stealing."

Elena grinned, a quick flash of teeth. "Then you can watch while I do."

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The bakery smelled of burnt crust and sour yeast. The door had been left open, swinging in the breeze, and the shelves were bare except for a few loaves hard as stone. Elena darted behind the counter, rummaging through baskets, stuffing bread into a sack.

Thomas stood by the door, shifting from foot to foot. "What if they catch us?"

"Who?" Elena said, muffled by a mouthful of crust. "The rats?"

He wanted to be angry, but his stomach growled too loudly for anger. She tossed him a loaf. He caught it clumsily, the bread rough and dry in his hands.

“Eat,” she said. “God won’t smite you for staying alive.”

Thomas bit into it. It tasted like ashes and salt, but it filled the hollow in his belly.

When they left, they didn’t go back to his house. Thomas didn’t even look at it. He followed Elena instead, through narrow alleys littered with rags and refuse, past houses marked with red crosses where no one answered knocks. The city felt dead, like a carcass picked clean.

“Where are we going?” he asked finally.

“Out,” she said. “Away from this place. The plague can’t follow us forever.”

Thomas doubted that. But he kept walking.

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That night, they camped under a broken cart on the edge of the city walls. Elena slept quickly, curled under her sack of stolen bread. Thomas lay awake, staring at the stars poking through clouds.

His mother used to say God lived among the stars. He tried to pray the way she taught him, but no words came. All he could think was: *If You're there, You're cruel.*

He pressed his scarred hand to his chest and turned his face into the dirt. For the first time since his family died, he almost cried again. But not quite.



## Chapter 2: The Black Road

The road out of Norwich was a scar of churned mud, streaked with wheel ruts and hoofprints. The plague had emptied it of traders and farmers, leaving only the desperate, thin figures dragging carts, clutching bundles of what little they owned. Some walked with their heads down, not looking at anyone. Others stared with wild, hollow eyes, as if daring Death to come for them next.

Thomas trudged behind Elena, the dry loaf from the bakery wrapped in a rag at his side. His feet were blistered already, soft from weeks indoors, and every stone on the road seemed to find them. Elena moved like a cat, light-footed, weaving around puddles and wagons.

“Where are we even going?” Thomas asked.

“Does it matter?” she shot back without turning. “Anywhere but here.”

Thomas frowned. “What if the plague’s worse out there?”

Elena shrugged. “Then we keep walking.”

Her confidence irritated him, but he didn’t argue. She was right, he couldn’t stay in Norwich. The walls reeked of death, of memories too heavy to carry. Every corner held his mother’s laugh, his father’s scolding voice, Alice’s little hands tugging at his sleeve. Better to leave them behind, even if the road ahead led nowhere.

A cart creaked past them, pulled by a grey donkey with ribs sharp as knives. A man slumped on the seat, face hidden under his hood. The cart stank—Thomas glimpsed two small bundles in the back, shrouded in linen.



Children, probably. The man didn't look at them, didn't speak. He just kept driving, the donkey's hooves splashing mud.

Elena didn't flinch. Thomas swallowed hard and looked away.

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By midday, the sun burned through the clouds, sticky and hot. Elena stopped by a ditch and dropped onto the grass.

"We'll rest here," she said.

Thomas sat beside her, stretching his sore legs. They ate in silence, tearing pieces from the stale bread. It scraped Thomas's throat, but hunger dulled his complaints. A few birds chirped in the hedgerows, oblivious to human misery.

"Do you think God sent this plague?" Thomas asked suddenly, the question spilling out before he could stop it.

Elena raised an eyebrow. “God? Hah. If He did, He’s got a sick sense of humour.”

“My mother said He loves us,”  
Thomas muttered.

Elena snorted. “Maybe He loved your mother. He doesn’t love me.”

Something in her tone, hard but brittle, made Thomas glance at her. She kept her eyes on the bread, tearing it into tiny crumbs.

“What about your family?” he asked.

Her jaw tightened. “Dead. All of them.” She tossed the crumbs into the ditch and stood. “Come on. Sitting won’t make us safer.”

Thomas didn’t ask again.

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The further they walked, the emptier the countryside became. Fields of barley lay unharvested, stalks bending

in the breeze. Doors of cottages swung open, chickens pecking at spilled grain. Sometimes they passed entire villages where every house stood silent, windows boarded, doors painted with crude red crosses.

Thomas couldn't stop looking. Every doorway felt like a mouth about to speak. He imagined faces peeking out, whispering. *Leave before it catches you too.*

When they came to one such village, Elena darted ahead. "Wait here," she said.

"What are you doing?"

"Checking for food?" She grinned, but it was sharp-edged, more defiance than joy. "Don't follow. You'll just slow me down."

Thomas stayed by the road, watching her slip into a half-collapsed barn. Crows wheeled above the roofs, cawing. He felt his stomach twist—not

from hunger, but from unease. What if someone was alive in there? What if they thought she was a thief?

Minutes crawled past. Then Elena reappeared, holding a sack.

“Turnips,” she said, grinning. “Half-rotten, but better than nothing.”

Before Thomas could reply, a shout split the air.

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A man stumbled from a doorway, filthy and wild-eyed. His clothes hung off his thin frame, and he waved a stick like a sword.

“Thieves!” he croaked. His voice cracked, but his rage burned bright. “Get out!”

Elena froze. Thomas’s heart thudded. The man lunged, swinging his stick at Elena’s sack. She dodged, but the stick caught her arm, making her cry out.

“Stop!” Thomas shouted, stepping forward without thinking.

The man turned on him, eyes fever-bright. “You bring death! You carry it with you!”

Thomas backed away, hands raised. The man swung again, but his legs buckled, and he collapsed into the mud, coughing violently. Blood spattered his lips.

Plague. The word screamed in Thomas’s head. He stumbled back, pulling Elena with him.

“Run!” she hissed.

They bolted down the road, not stopping until the village was a smear in the distance.

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When they finally collapsed under a hedgerow, both panting, Elena clutched her arm where the stick had struck.

“You all right?” Thomas asked, still breathless.

“It’s just a bruise,” she said, wincing. “He didn’t hit me hard.”

Thomas sat back, trying to steady his pounding heart. The man’s words echoed in his ears. *You bring death.*

For the first time, he wondered if it was true—not just for the man, but for everyone. What if no one could escape it? What if running only carried the plague further?

He glanced at Elena. Her face was pale, her usual quick grin gone. She caught him looking.

“Don’t go soft on me,” she said. “If you want to live, you keep moving. You stop, you die.”

Thomas nodded, but the hollow ache in his chest widened. He wanted to believe her, wanted to believe that

running meant living. But he wasn't sure anymore.

The sun dipped toward the horizon, painting the fields gold. They sat in silence, two small figures on a road that felt endless.





## **Chapter 3: A Kindness Amidst Rot**

The village smelled worse than Norwich. At least in the city, the stink blended into a single sour haze; here, every cottage carried its own sharp scent, rotting grain, spoiled meat, and the sweet-sick odour of unwashed bodies left too long in the summer heat.

Elena wrinkled her nose. “We should keep moving,” she muttered.

Thomas hesitated. His feet throbbed, and his stomach gnawed at itself. The village looked deserted, but smoke curled from a chimney at the far end of the lane. “Maybe someone has food.”

“Or maybe they have the plague,” Elena snapped. “Don’t be stupid.”

But Thomas’s gaze stayed fixed on that thin trail of smoke. Something

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about it felt different—steady, calm, not desperate like the half-abandoned fires they’d passed before.

“I’m going to look,” he said.

Elena swore under her breath. “Fine. But if you die, don’t expect me to bury you.”

They crept along the lane, past shuttered cottages. Chickens scratched listlessly in the dirt, pecking at weeds. No one came out to shout, no one moved behind the windows. It was as if the whole place had stopped breathing.

When they reached the house with the smoking chimney, Thomas knocked. No answer. He was about to turn away when the door creaked open.

A man stood there, tall and thin, his face hidden behind a cloth mask tied at the back of his head. His robe was black, simple, and patched at the elbows. His hands were bare, clean,

though his sleeves were stained. He studied them in silence for a long moment.

“We’re not sick,” Thomas said quickly. “We just need... we’re hungry.”

The man nodded once, stepping aside. “Come in.”

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The room smelled of herbs—sage and something bitter Thomas didn’t recognise. A pot bubbled on the hearth, filling the air with a sharp tang. Bundles of dried leaves hung from the beams, swaying slightly in the draft.

The man removed his mask, revealing a lined, tired face with kind eyes. He gestured to a bench. “Sit. You look half-starved.”

Elena stayed by the door, arms crossed. “We won’t stay long.”

“As you wish,” the man said, unbothered. He ladled thin broth into two wooden bowls and handed them to Thomas and Elena. The broth was watery, more herbs than meat, but Thomas nearly groaned with relief as the warmth slid down his throat.

The man watched them eat without speaking. His calmness made Thomas uneasy. Everyone else they’d met on the road had been frantic, angry, or terrified. This man seemed... still, like a rock in the middle of a rushing river.

When the bowls were empty, Thomas set his down carefully. “Why are you here? Everyone else ran.”

The man smiled faintly. “Someone must stay.”

“Why?” Thomas blurted. “The plague doesn’t care. You’ll die like the rest.”

“Perhaps,” the man said. “But I would rather die helping than live running.”

Elena snorted. “That’s stupid.”

“Maybe.” He didn’t argue. He simply stood, crossing to the hearth to stir the pot.

Thomas frowned. “Why help if it doesn’t change anything?”

The man turned back to him, and his gaze, though tired, was steady.

“Because love matters most when nothing else does.”

The words settled into the air like dust. Thomas shifted, uncomfortable. He wanted to scoff like Elena, to laugh at the foolishness. But something in the man’s voice, quiet, certain, stopped him.

“Are you a priest?” Thomas asked finally.

The man nodded. “Father Matthew. And you?”

“Thomas.”

“Thomas,” Father Matthew repeated gently, as if testing the name. “You’re welcome to stay tonight if you wish. I can’t promise comfort, but you’ll be safe.”

Elena’s eyes flashed. “No. We’re leaving.”

Thomas looked at her, then at Father Matthew. The thought of a roof, even for one night, tugged at him. But Elena’s glare dared him to argue.

“Thank you,” Thomas said, standing reluctantly. “But... we should go.”

Father Matthew inclined his head. “Then take this.” He handed Thomas a small cloth bundle. “Bread and herbs. They may help if you fall ill.”

Thomas accepted it awkwardly. “Why give it to us?”

“Because you need it,” Father Matthew said simply.

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Back on the road, Elena walked fast, as if distance could shake the man's words from her ears. Thomas hurried to keep up.

"He's mad," Elena muttered. "Staying there to die for strangers."

Thomas glanced at her. "Maybe he's... brave."

She shot him a look. "Brave? Or just stupid?"

Thomas didn't answer. But as they trudged down the road, he kept hearing Father Matthew's quiet voice: *Love matters most when nothing else does.*

The words didn't make sense. Not yet. But for the first time since his family died, something inside Thomas felt less empty.





## Chapter 4: The Betrayal of Bread

The next three days blurred into hunger and dust. The cloth bundle Father Matthew had given them was almost gone—the herbs smelled sharp and bitter, and the bread had gone tough, but it kept them walking.

The road wound through fields gone wild, the barley bending heavy and unharvested. A few farmers worked in the distance, their faces covered, backs bent, refusing to look at travellers.

Elena pushed ahead as always, moving fast, as if speed alone could outpace the plague. Thomas lagged behind, his feet raw inside his cracked boots.

By sunset, they reached a stream. Elena dropped onto the bank with a groan, gulping water from cupped hands. Thomas joined her, kneeling to

drink. The coolness washed some of the weariness from his bones.

When they finished, Elena leaned back, eyeing the bundle in Thomas's pack. "How much bread's left?"

"Half a loaf," Thomas said. "If we're careful, two more days."

Elena's mouth tightened. "Two days won't get us far."

Thomas shrugged. "It's all we've got."

She didn't answer, staring at the stream instead. Her silence made Thomas uneasy.

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That night, they slept under a hedgerow. The stars were sharp against the dark sky, cold and distant. Thomas curled around his pack, keeping the bundle close to his chest. The air smelled of grass and river mud, almost clean after the stench of villages.

He was half-asleep when he felt movement. A soft shuffle. A hand tugging at his pack.

Thomas's eyes flew open. Elena crouched over him, her fingers already inside the pack.

"What are you doing?" he hissed.

She froze, then straightened, clutching the bundle. "We need food. You'll just waste it."

"It's for both of us," Thomas said, scrambling to his feet. "Give it back."

Elena's jaw tightened. "You don't understand. You're too soft. You'll share until we're starving."

"That's what people do," Thomas shot back. "We share."

Her eyes flashed. "Not if it kills us."

She turned, bolting into the dark.

Thomas ran after her, but she was quicker, darting between trees, her silhouette vanishing into shadows. His legs burned, his breath rasped, but he didn't stop until he tripped on a root and fell hard into the dirt.

By the time he staggered up, Elena was gone.

He stood alone in the night, his chest heaving, staring into the darkness where she'd disappeared.

For a long time, he didn't move. The stars blinked overhead, indifferent.

Finally, Thomas sank to his knees. The ache in his chest felt worse than hunger, worse than the loss of the bread. He had trusted her more than he wanted to admit, and she'd left him like everyone else.

He stayed there until his legs went numb, whispering into the empty night, "Why does everyone leave?"

No one answered. Only the wind  
through the grass.

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By morning, Thomas's anger had  
cooled into something heavier,  
resignation. He splashed water on his  
face in the stream, his reflection pale  
and hollow-eyed.

"Fine," he muttered to himself. "I'll  
keep walking. Alone."

He slung his empty pack over his  
shoulder and set off. Each step felt  
heavier without the weight of bread.  
But anger pushed him forward. He told  
himself he didn't need Elena, didn't  
need anyone.

Yet every time he looked at the road  
ahead, he couldn't stop seeing her face,  
defiant, desperate, and afraid.

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That evening, he found a field with  
rows of shrivelled turnips. His stomach

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cramped with hunger, and he clawed one from the dirt, biting into it raw. The bitterness made him gag, but he forced it down.

As the sun sank, painting the sky blood-red, Thomas sat alone among the turnips, knees pulled to his chest.

Father Matthew's words whispered in his head, uninvited: *Love matters most when nothing else does.*

Thomas laughed bitterly under his breath. "Love's useless if no one gives it back."

The laughter died quickly, leaving only silence.

## Chapter 5: The Wall of Silence

The next two days blurred into hunger and aching feet. Thomas followed the road because it was easier than deciding where else to go. He barely noticed the fields and cottages anymore, only the dull throb in his legs and the hollow gnawing in his belly.

By the third morning, the turnips were gone. His stomach twisted so sharply it made him dizzy. He stumbled more than walked, leaning on a stick he'd found by the roadside.

Late that afternoon, he saw smoke curling from a distant cluster of cottages. His heart kicked. Maybe food. Maybe people.

As he drew closer, he slowed. The village was quiet, too quiet. Doors hung half-open, windows shuttered.

The smell of ash lingered, faint but fresh.

Thomas crept down the lane, every step cautious. He expected shouts or the bark of dogs, but the silence pressed heavily. Then he saw her.

An old woman sat on a low stone wall, bent-backed, hands folded in her lap. She watched him approach with rheumy eyes.

“Don’t get too close, boy,” she croaked. “You carry it with you.”

Thomas stopped. “I’m not sick.”

The woman gave a thin, bitter smile. “None of us are, until we are.”

He swallowed, his throat dry. “Is there food here?”

“Not for you.” She spat weakly into the dirt. “Best keep walking. No one wants strangers now.”



Thomas hesitated. "Is anyone... still alive?"

The woman snorted. "Some. Hiding in their houses, waiting for God to choose them." She squinted at him. "But if you're looking for help, there's only one fool left who'd give it."

Thomas's head lifted. "Who?"

She jerked her chin toward the far end of the lane. "The mad, holy woman. Locked herself in a stone cell years ago. Says she talks to God."

Thomas blinked. "Locked in a cell? Why?"

"She wanted it." The old woman's voice dripped scorn. "Prays for the world, she says. Waste of a good life, if you ask me."

The woman turned her face away, signalling the conversation was over.

Thomas stared down the lane. A stone cell. A holy woman who talked to God.

His first thought was disbelief. Who would choose to live like that?

But then another thought came, quiet but insistent: *Maybe she has food.*

And deeper still, something he didn't want to admit: *Maybe she has answers.*

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The cell stood at the edge of the village, built into the side of a small chapel. It was little more than a stone box, barely larger than a shed, with one narrow window covered by iron bars. A tiny wooden door sat at the back, bolted shut from the outside.

Thomas approached cautiously. The place felt different, quiet, but not like the silence of death. This silence felt... like waiting.

He peered through the bars. The cell was dim, lit only by a single candle. A woman sat cross-legged on a pallet of straw, her back straight despite her age. Her hair, streaked with silver, framed a face lined but peaceful. She looked toward the light, not at him, as if she'd been expecting him before he arrived.

Thomas cleared his throat. "Are you... the holy woman?"

Her head turned. Her eyes met his through the bars, and for a moment, he forgot to breathe. They were not sharp like Elena's or tired like Father Matthew's. They were steady, soft, as if she could see past his torn clothes and hollow cheeks to something deeper.

"Yes," she said simply. Her voice was warm, quiet, but it filled the space. "You look hungry."

Thomas hesitated. "I am."

“Then wait.” She turned, reaching for something out of sight.

A moment later, she slid a small wooden bowl through a gap in the bars. Inside was a chunk of coarse bread and a piece of cheese, surprisingly fresh.

Thomas stared at it. “Why give this to me? You don’t even know me.”

She smiled faintly. “Because you need it.”

The words echoed Father Matthew’s, and something twisted in Thomas’s chest.

He sat on the ground, eating slowly, his eyes flicking to her every few moments. She sat silently, hands folded, as if she had all the time in the world.

When he finished, he wiped his mouth. “The old woman said you talk to God. Is that true?”

“I listen,” she said. “He does most of the talking.”

Thomas frowned. “And He actually... answers you?”

“Yes.” Her gaze didn’t waver.

Thomas scoffed, though not as confidently as he wanted to. “Then ask Him why He’s killing everyone.”

The woman didn’t flinch. “He isn’t.”

Thomas stared. “You think the plague isn’t His doing?”

“I think,” she said softly, “that death comes because the world is broken. But love, His love, never leaves us, even when we break.”

Thomas opened his mouth to argue, but the words caught. Something in her calmness made anger feel childish, useless.

Finally, he muttered, “That’s stupid.”

“Maybe,” she said, smiling. “But eat more tomorrow, and we can argue then.”

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For the first time in weeks, Thomas felt a flicker of something he didn't recognise right away. It wasn't trust, not yet. But it was something close.

He stayed by the wall until the stars appeared, the silence between them oddly comforting.

## **Chapter 6: The Woman in the Wall**

The next morning, Thomas returned to the stone cell before the sun was fully up. He hadn't planned to, at least, that's what he told himself as he walked the lane. But his feet carried him there, anyway, drawn by something he couldn't name.

Juliana sat exactly as she had the night before, cross-legged on her pallet, her hands folded loosely in her lap. The candle burned low beside her, casting soft light across her face. She looked up as he approached, as if she'd been waiting.

"You came back," she said.

Thomas shrugged. "You said you had food."

Her mouth twitched in a smile. “Ah, so it wasn’t for my sparkling conversation?”

Thomas didn’t answer, but a reluctant grin tugged at his lips before he could stop it.

Juliana slid another bowl through the bars, more bread, this time with a handful of dried berries. Thomas sat on the dirt and ate, slower this time, stealing glances at her.

She watched him with that same patient calm, as if she had nothing else to do in the world but sit there and be present. It made Thomas uneasy. People usually fidgeted, complained, shouted, or cried. This woman simply... existed, as if she were enough as she was.

When he finished, he wiped his hands on his tunic. “Why are you in there?”

“Because I asked to be,” Juliana said.



Thomas frowned. “But... why? You can’t go anywhere. You can’t even... live.”

Juliana tilted her head slightly. “Do you think living is only walking about, eating, sleeping, and waiting to die?”

Thomas opened his mouth, then closed it again. “Well... isn’t it?”

Her smile was small, warm, but didn’t feel like mockery. “No, Thomas. Living is loving. And I can love from here.”

Thomas stared at her, baffled. “How? You’re stuck in a wall.”

“I pray. I listen. People come to me when they’re afraid. Sometimes I give bread, sometimes I give only words. But everything I have, this life, this body, even this small cell, can be used for love. And that is enough.”

Thomas felt heat creep into his neck.  
“That’s... stupid. Love doesn’t stop  
people from dying.”

“No,” Juliana said gently. “But it  
changes how we live while we’re still  
here.”

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For a while, Thomas said nothing. The  
words felt heavy, sticking in his head  
like burrs. He wanted to tell her she  
was wrong, that love was useless when  
everything you loved could be taken.  
But he couldn’t. Not yet.

Finally, he asked, “Aren’t you  
scared?”

“Sometimes,” Juliana admitted. “But  
fear is a shadow. Love is stronger.”

Thomas shook his head. “You sound  
like Father Matthew.”

Her eyebrows lifted slightly. “Ah.  
You’ve met him?”

Thomas nodded. “He’s going to die, staying with sick people.”

“Maybe,” Juliana said softly. “But if he dies giving love, his life will still be full. Isn’t that better than living only to save yourself?”

Thomas didn’t answer. He thought of Elena running into the dark with his bread. He thought of his mother, who had given her last crust to Alice before she died. His chest ached.

Juliana watched him quietly, letting the silence stretch. Finally, she said, “Would you like to help me tomorrow?”

Thomas blinked. “Help you?”

“There’s an old woman in the village who is sick but too afraid to leave her bed. She needs someone to bring her water and sweep her floor.”

Thomas frowned. “Why me?”

“Because you are here,” Juliana said simply. “And because you are stronger than you think.”

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That night, Thomas lay on the hard ground near the chapel, staring at the stars. His stomach felt full for the first time in days, but something else churned inside him, something unfamiliar.

He didn't know why he'd agreed to stay. He told himself it was the food. But a voice in the back of his mind whispered a different reason.

Maybe, just maybe, he wanted to believe Juliana was right.

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## Chapter 7: The Hazelnut Story

The morning air was cool and damp, carrying the scent of wet grass and wood smoke. Thomas sat cross-legged outside the barred window of Juliana's cell, chewing on the bread she had given him.

"You said I had to help today," he said, his mouth full. "But the old woman doesn't even know me. What if she doesn't want me there?"

Juliana smiled faintly, sitting as still as ever. "Most people who are suffering don't care who brings the kindness. They only care that someone does."

Thomas scowled at the bread. "Kindness doesn't change anything."

Juliana tilted her head, studying him. "Would you like to hear a story, Thomas?"

He shrugged. "If it's short."

She smiled as if that answer amused her. "It is very short."

She reached for something on the floor of her cell, lifting a small brown nut between her fingers. Its shell was cracked, wrinkled, but intact.

"One morning, when I first came to live here, I sat with a prayer in my heart: *Why does God bother with us at all, when we are so small, so broken?* And as I prayed, I saw a vision, not with my eyes, but in my heart. I saw something tiny, no bigger than this hazelnut, resting in my palm. And I knew it was the whole of creation, every star, every bird, every person, held together by God."

Thomas frowned. "In a nut?"

Juliana's smile widened. "Yes. It looked fragile, like it might crumble at any moment. But God told me three things: He made it, He loves it, and He

keeps it. Not because it is great or strong, but because He loves it simply for being what it is.”

She rolled the nut in her fingers thoughtfully. “That is how He loves us, Thomas. Not because we are powerful or good, but because we are His. Always. Even now.”

Thomas stared at the nut, then at her calm, unshaken face. “That’s... stupid. People are dying everywhere. If He loves us so much, He should stop it.”

Juliana didn’t flinch. “Do you stop loving someone when they are sick? Or when they hurt you?”

Thomas’s chest tightened. He thought of his mother holding Alice’s hand even as she coughed blood, whispering lullabies until her own voice failed.

He dropped his gaze. “That’s different.”

“Not so different,” Juliana said gently. She set the hazelnut down beside her candle. “We think God’s love must work like ours, giving when things are good, taking away when things are bad. But His love is the ground we stand on. Even when we fall, it holds us.”

Thomas shifted uncomfortably, pulling at a loose thread on his sleeve. “If that’s true, why doesn’t He say it Himself? Why doesn’t He show us?”

Juliana’s eyes softened. “Maybe He does. But we are too busy shouting at Him to hear.”

---

The silence stretched, filled only by birdsong and the soft rustle of leaves. Thomas wanted to argue, but the words wouldn’t come. Something about the way she spoke, quiet, certain, made shouting feel childish.



Finally, Juliana said, “Will you help the old woman now?”

Thomas hesitated. His first instinct was to say no, to turn away like he always had. But her words lingered. *Maybe He does show us, but we don't listen.*

“Fine,” he muttered. “But only because you keep feeding me.”

Juliana smiled, her eyes crinkling. “That is reason enough to begin.”

---

The old woman's house sat near the edge of the village, its roof sagging, the door hanging crooked. Thomas pushed it open cautiously.

The air inside smelled of damp straw and sickness. A hunched figure lay on a narrow bed; grey hair tangled across the pillow. She opened her eyes at the sound, startled.

“Who are you?” her voice rasped.

“I’m Thomas,” he said awkwardly.  
“Juliana said you... needed water.”

The woman blinked, confusion softening into relief. “Ah. The holy woman sends you, does she? Then I suppose I can trust you.”

Thomas fetched a jug from the hearth, filling a cup and holding it out. Her hands trembled too much to lift it, so he held it to her lips, letting her drink slowly.

When she finished, she sighed, sinking back into the bed. “Thank you, boy. No one else comes anymore.”

Thomas shifted, embarrassed. “It’s nothing.”

The woman’s thin fingers caught his sleeve. “It’s not nothing. Don’t think kindness is ever nothing.”

Thomas didn’t know what to say. He stayed long enough to sweep the dirt

from her floor and straighten her blanket before slipping out.

---

As he walked back toward Juliana's cell, he felt... strange. Lighter, somehow, though his stomach still growled and his feet still hurt.

He tried to shake it off, muttering under his breath, "It doesn't change anything."

But for the first time, the words felt less certain.



## Chapter 8: The Question of Pain

Thomas sat on the ground outside the barred window, arms wrapped around his knees, glaring at the dirt. Juliana sat cross-legged inside her cell as always, candlelight soft against her lined face. She had been watching him quietly for a while now, her hands folded, saying nothing.

Finally, Thomas broke the silence.

“Why?” he said, his voice low but tight. “Why does God let this happen? Why does He just sit and watch?”

Juliana tilted her head slightly.

“You’re angry.”

“Of course I’m angry!” Thomas snapped, lifting his head. His face was flushed, his eyes bright with tears he hadn’t meant to let show. “My father worked every day, he prayed every

night, and he died choking on his own blood. My mother gave her last piece of bread to my sister, and she still died. Alice... she was just a baby. And He let it happen. If He's supposed to love us, why didn't He stop it?"

The words poured out now, harsh and ragged. "What's the point of praying to someone who doesn't care? He could fix it, He's God, isn't He? So, either He doesn't care, or He likes watching us suffer. Which is it?"

Juliana didn't flinch. She didn't rush to answer, either. She sat quietly for a long time, letting his words hang in the air until the sharpness in them dulled just a little.

Then she said softly, "Do you think your mother loved Alice less because she couldn't stop her dying?"

Thomas blinked. "What? That's, no, of course not."

“She couldn’t stop the sickness,” Juliana said gently. “But she held Alice’s hand. She gave her bread. She stayed with her until the end. Was that love useless?”

Thomas stared at the ground, his jaw tight. “It didn’t save her.”

“No,” Juliana agreed. “But it was still love. And love is never wasted. Not even when it doesn’t save us from pain.”

Thomas’s throat tightened. “But if God is so strong, He *could* save us. Why doesn’t He?”

Juliana was quiet again, her gaze soft but steady. When she spoke, her voice was lower, almost a whisper.

“God never promised we wouldn’t break, Thomas. But He promised He would never stop holding us, even when we break. Even when we feel lost, even when we think He’s far

away, His love is still under us, like the ground we walk on.”

Thomas clenched his fists. “That’s just words.”

Juliana’s smile was small, sad, but warm. “Yes. Until you feel it. Then you’ll understand it isn’t just words.”

Thomas shook his head, frustrated. “You talk like you *know* Him.”

“I know His love,” Juliana said simply. “Even in pain. Especially in pain.”

---

The silence stretched. Thomas wanted to argue, to shout at her again, but the anger drained, leaving something heavier, grief, raw and aching.

He pressed his scarred hand to his chest, feeling the raised, twisted skin through his tunic.

Quietly, almost to himself, he said, “It doesn’t feel like He’s holding us.”



Juliana's voice was barely above a whisper. "Sometimes it doesn't. Sometimes it feels like falling forever. But even then, He is the hands we fall into."

---

Thomas didn't answer. He sat there until the candle burned low; his gaze fixed on the dirt.

When he finally rose to leave, Juliana didn't call after him or tell him to come back tomorrow. She simply said, "Rest, Thomas. Love will wait for you."

He didn't look back as he walked into the night. But her words followed him, soft as the evening breeze.



## Chapter 9: A Lesson in Love

The old woman's house smelled of sickness and damp straw again, but this time Thomas didn't wrinkle his nose. He set the bucket of water on the floor and crouched beside her bed.

"You need to drink," he said.

The woman's eyelids fluttered open. Her breath rattled in her chest. "Ah... It's you again."

Thomas held the cup to her lips. Her hands shook too much to hold it, so he steadied it for her, tilting it slowly so she wouldn't choke. She drank greedily, drops running down her chin.

"Better," she sighed when the cup was empty. "You're a good boy."

Thomas looked away, embarrassed. "I'm just bringing water."

The woman smiled weakly. “That’s more than anyone else has done.”

---

He swept the floor after that, pushing the dust and dirt out the door. Then he cleaned her hearth, piling a few sticks of wood to keep her warm through the night. His back ached by the end of it, but he didn’t stop until everything was tidy.

When he finished, the woman was asleep, her breathing softer than before. Thomas watched her for a moment, unsure why he felt... lighter.

It wasn’t like the work had changed anything. She was still sick, still frail. But something about her soft sigh of relief, the way her hand had rested briefly on his arm, stayed with him.

---

When Thomas returned to Juliana’s cell that evening, she didn’t ask what

he had done. She only looked at him, her hands folded, waiting.

“She’s still sick,” Thomas said finally, sitting cross-legged in the dirt.

“Yes,” Juliana said quietly.

“It didn’t fix anything.”

Juliana tilted her head slightly. “And yet you stayed with her.”

Thomas frowned. “You told me to.”

“I asked,” Juliana corrected gently. “But you stayed because something in you wanted to.”

Thomas opened his mouth to deny it, but the words caught. He thought of the old woman’s smile, the way her breathing had eased.

“It still doesn’t matter,” he muttered. “She’s going to die.”

Juliana’s smile was small, soft. “And yet she will die knowing someone

cared. That matters, Thomas. Even for a moment, it matters.”

Thomas looked down at his hands, picking at the dirt under his nails. “It doesn’t feel like enough.”

“It never feels like enough,” Juliana said. “But love is never wasted. Even the smallest kindness changes the world a little.”

---

They sat in silence for a while. The evening light turned golden, spilling across Juliana’s face through the bars.

Finally, Thomas said, almost grudgingly, “She smiled when I left.”

Juliana’s eyes softened. “Then you gave her more than water, Thomas.”

For a long moment, he didn’t speak. But something inside his chest, tight and heavy for weeks, shifted just a little, like a stone rolling off soft soil.

---

That night, as Thomas lay under the stars near the chapel, he thought of Father Matthew's words again: *Love matters most when nothing else does.*

And for the first time, he wondered if they might be true.





## Chapter 10: Elena Returns

The sun was low, turning the village lane to streaks of gold and shadow, when Thomas heard footsteps behind him. Quick, uneven footsteps.

He turned.

Elena stood there, thinner than before, her face pale under streaks of dirt. Her hair, once wild and tangled, hung limp. Her sharp eyes were dulled now, darting nervously as if she expected him to run.

“Thomas,” she said, her voice hoarse.

Thomas froze. A dozen feelings rose at once: anger, hurt, relief, but anger burned hottest.

“You came back,” he said flatly.

Elena shifted, hugging her arms to her chest. “I... I had to.”

Thomas frowned. “Why? Run out of bread to steal?”

She winced. “I’m sorry.”

The words hit harder than he expected. Elena never apologised, not for anything.

He folded his arms. “You left me to starve.”

“I know.” She looked at the ground. “I was scared. I thought I’d die if I didn’t keep moving. I wasn’t thinking. I just...” She trailed off, her voice cracking.

Thomas wanted to stay angry. He wanted to remind her of every step he’d taken alone, every empty night he’d spent cursing her name. But her shoulders were trembling now, and when she lifted her face, he saw something he hadn’t expected: shame.

“Please,” she whispered. “I don’t have anywhere else to go.”

---

Juliana's words echoed in Thomas's mind: *Love is never wasted. Even the smallest kindness changes the world a little.*

But anger tugged at him, pulling the other way.

"Why should I help you?" he said bitterly. "You didn't care about me."

Elena swallowed hard. "I know. But I... I care now."

Thomas stared at her, his hands tightening at his sides. He thought of the old woman's smile, the way kindness had warmed something in his chest. But this was different. This was Elena, who had betrayed him.

"Juliana wouldn't let you sleep outside," he said finally.

Elena blinked. "Juliana?"

“The woman in the wall,” Thomas muttered. “She says love matters even when people don’t deserve it.”

Elena gave a shaky laugh. “She sounds mad.”

“Yeah,” Thomas said, but his voice softened. “She probably is.”

---

He sighed, rubbing his forehead.  
“Come on. I’ll take you to her. She’ll feed you.”

Elena’s eyes widened. “You mean it?”

Thomas hesitated, then nodded. “Yeah. But you’re not stealing from her. Or from me. Not again.”

Elena nodded quickly. “I won’t. I promise.”

As they walked toward the chapel, Thomas glanced at her. She looked smaller than he remembered, her steps slower, her shoulders hunched.

Something shifted in his chest, not quite trust, not yet, but the first stirrings of something close.

---

Juliana was waiting in her cell when they arrived, as calm as ever. She looked at Elena, her eyes kind but steady.

“This is my friend,” Thomas said awkwardly. “She... she’s hungry.”

Juliana nodded, sliding a piece of bread through the bars without hesitation. Elena took it slowly, as if she didn’t believe it was real.

“Thank you,” Elena whispered.

Juliana smiled. “You are welcome.” She looked at Thomas then, her eyes soft. “That was kind.”

Thomas felt the heat rise in his cheeks. “It’s just bread.”

Juliana shook her head. “No. It’s more than that.”

Thomas didn’t answer, but as Elena ate quietly beside him, something eased in his chest, the anger slipping away just a little.

---

That night, as they lay under the stars near the chapel, Elena whispered, “You didn’t have to forgive me.”

Thomas stared at the sky. “I didn’t.”

“Why did you?”

Thomas thought of Juliana’s hazelnut, of Father Matthew’s quiet smile, of the old woman’s whispered *thank you*.

Finally, he said, “Because someone has to start caring. Even if it doesn’t change anything.”

Elena was silent for a long time. Then she said softly, “I’ll try, too.”

And for the first time since the plague began, Thomas felt something close to hope.





## Chapter 11: The Village Burns

The smoke rose long before they reached the village. Thick, black, twisting into the evening sky.

Thomas smelled it first, burning wood, acrid and sharp, and then heard the distant shouting. Angry voices. Screams.

Elena stopped on the road, her eyes wide. “We should turn back.”

Thomas stared at the smoke. His stomach tightened. “There might be people trapped.”

“Or raiders,” Elena shot back. “If we go in there, we could die.”

Thomas hesitated. The instinct to run tugged at him hard. But Juliana’s voice whispered in his mind: *Love is never*

*wasted. Even the smallest kindness  
changes the world a little.*

He clenched his fists. "I'm going."

Elena grabbed his arm. "You're mad!"

"Maybe," Thomas said, pulling free.  
"You can stay here if you want."

She cursed under her breath but  
followed anyway.

---

The village was in chaos. Flames  
climbed the thatched roofs, sending  
sparks into the dusk. Raiders, rough  
men with scarves over their faces,  
shoved terrified villagers into the mud,  
grabbing sacks of grain and  
overturning barrels.

Thomas pressed against a wall, heart  
hammering. He spotted a woman  
dragging a crying child away from a  
burning house, her face streaked with  
soot.

Then he heard it, a thin, desperate scream from inside the house.

A child. Still trapped.

Thomas's feet moved before his mind caught up.

"Thomas!" Elena hissed, grabbing his sleeve. "Don't—"

But he was already running.

---

The door was half-collapsed, flames licking at the beams. Smoke stung his eyes as he pushed inside. The heat hit like a wall, making him cough hard.

"Where are you?" he shouted, his voice hoarse.

A small cry answered from the corner, a little boy curled under a table, his face streaked with ash.

Thomas stumbled toward him, coughing, and grabbed his arm. “Come on!”

The boy clung to him, sobbing. Thomas pulled him out from under the table just as a beam cracked and crashed to the floor, sending sparks everywhere.

His lungs burned. The heat pressed against him, making every step harder. But he pushed forward, clutching the boy tight, and stumbled back into the open air.

---

Elena rushed to him, grabbing the boy’s other arm. “You’re insane,” she said, but her voice shook.

Thomas coughed, his throat raw. “Help me get him out of here.”

They pulled the boy toward the edge of the village, where other villagers huddled, wide-eyed. A woman ran

forward, crying out, “That’s my son!”  
She snatched the boy from Thomas,  
hugging him tight, tears streaking her  
dirty face.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

Thomas nodded, too breathless to  
speak.

---

By the time the raiders finally fled,  
leaving the village in ruins, Thomas sat  
slumped against a tree, coughing from  
the smoke. Elena dropped beside him,  
handing him a waterskin.

“You could’ve died,” she said, her  
voice tight.

“I didn’t,” Thomas rasped.

Elena looked at him for a long  
moment, then sighed. “You do believe  
all that rubbish she says, don’t you?  
Juliana. About love mattering.”

Thomas leaned his head back against the tree, staring at the darkening sky. “I don’t know if I believe it,” he admitted. “But... it felt right.”

Elena was quiet. Then, after a long pause, she said softly, “Maybe it is.”

---

That night, as they walked back toward the chapel, Thomas thought of the boy’s small arms wrapped around his neck, of the woman’s tearful *thank you*.

For the first time, he understood what Juliana had meant. Love didn’t stop the pain. But it changed *something*.

And for now, that was enough.

## Chapter 12: The Cost of Love

Thomas woke the next morning with a tightness in his chest. At first, he thought it was just the smoke from the fire, but by midday, his body ached, his head pounded, and his skin burned hot under the summer sun.

Elena noticed before he said anything. “You’re sick,” she said sharply, stepping back as if distance could protect her.

Thomas shook his head. “It’s just smoke.”

But he knew it wasn’t. Deep down, he recognised the signs, the same fevered flush his father had, the same dry cough that had wracked his mother.

By evening, he could barely stand. Juliana’s calm face watched from the cell window as Elena half-carried him to the chapel.

“Lay him there,” Juliana said, gesturing to the patch of grass outside her window. “He needs rest.”

Elena hesitated. “If he’s caught it—”

Juliana’s voice stayed steady. “Then he needs love all the more.”

Elena looked torn, fear flickering in her eyes, but she lowered Thomas to the ground and stepped back. “I can’t stay,” she whispered. “If I get sick too—”

Thomas coughed, his voice hoarse. “Go, then.”

Elena bit her lip, looking at him as if she wanted to argue, but finally she turned and walked quickly away.

---

Juliana waited until Elena was gone before speaking.

“Thomas,” she said gently.



He turned his head toward her, sweat beading on his forehead. “I don’t... want to die.”

“You may not,” Juliana said calmly. “And even if you do, you will not be alone.”

Thomas let out a bitter laugh that turned into a cough. “I saved that boy, and now I’m dying for it. That’s what love gets you.”

Juliana didn’t flinch. “Sometimes love costs us everything. But it gives more than it takes.”

Thomas glared weakly at her. “That’s easy for you to say. You’re not dying.”

Juliana’s smile was soft, almost sad. “I have been dying every day in this cell, Thomas. My body is failing, slowly. Pain comes for me, too. But love makes even pain holy.”

Thomas closed his eyes, too tired to argue. “Holy,” he muttered. “You talk like suffering’s a gift.”

“It isn’t a gift,” Juliana said softly. “It’s a wound. But sometimes, through the wound, love seeps in deeper than before.”

---

That night, the fever burned higher. Thomas tossed and turned on the grass, sweat soaking his tunic. He muttered in his sleep, thrashing at memories that clawed through his mind, his father’s face as the sickness took him, his mother’s soft lullaby, Alice’s tiny, lifeless hands.

Juliana stayed awake, her hands folded, whispering prayers quietly into the night.

Once, Thomas opened his eyes briefly and saw her watching him. “Why... are you still here?” he croaked.

Juliana's voice was steady, full of quiet certainty. "Because love stays, even when we are too weak to feel it."

Thomas wanted to laugh, but the sound came out as a sob. He closed his eyes again, the fever dragging him back into darkness.

---

By dawn, the fever had worsened. His breath rasped in his chest, and his mind drifted in and out of delirium. He thought he felt hands cradling his head, but when he opened his eyes, no one was there, only Juliana's soft voice, whispering prayers.

And then, sometime in the haze of that long day, Thomas dreamed.

---

He stood in a warm, golden light. The air felt soft, like sunlight through linen, and the sharp ache in his chest was gone.

A woman stood before him, her face gentle and familiar, his mother. She smiled the way she had before the sickness, her hands reaching out.

“Thomas,” she said, her voice like a lullaby.

He stumbled toward her, his throat tight. “I’m sorry, Mother. I couldn’t save you. I couldn’t save anyone.”

She cupped his face in her hands, her touch warm. “Oh, my sweet boy. You were never meant to save us. You were only meant to love.”

Tears burned his eyes. “But it hurts.”

His mother nodded, pressing his forehead to hers. “Yes, it hurts. But all shall be well, my darling. All shall be well.”

The words wrapped around him like a blanket, soft and certain. He closed his eyes, breathing them in.

---

When he woke, the fever had broken.  
His body still ached, but the burning  
heat had passed. Juliana's face hovered  
at the window, her smile calm, as if  
she had known all along.

"You're still here," Thomas  
whispered.

Juliana nodded. "Of course."

He stared at her for a long moment.  
His voice was rough, but soft. "I felt...  
held."

Juliana's smile deepened, her eyes  
warm. "That's all I ever meant,  
Thomas. That's all He ever means."



## Chapter 13: Visions of the Womb

Thomas sat cross-legged on the grass outside Juliana's cell, still weak but no longer feverish. The morning sun painted soft gold across the chapel wall. He held a cup of watered wine that Juliana had passed through the bars, sipping slowly.

"You dreamed," Juliana said gently. Not a question, just quiet certainty.

Thomas looked up, startled. "How do you know?"

She smiled faintly. "Fever dreams leave a certain look on the face. What did you see?"

Thomas hesitated. He hadn't told anyone yet, not even Elena, who had returned the night before, sitting awkwardly at a distance while he slept.

But something in Juliana's steady gaze made the words rise unbidden.

"I saw my mother," he said softly.  
"She... she wasn't sick. She smiled like she used to, before the plague. She touched my face and said..." His throat tightened. "She said. *All shall be well.*"

Juliana's smile deepened, her eyes warm. "Ah. Then you were given a gift."

Thomas frowned. "A dream isn't a gift. It wasn't real."

Juliana tilted her head. "What if it was real, in a different way? Not just in the body, but in the heart."

Thomas looked down at his scarred hands. "It felt... safe. Like she was holding me, even though I knew she wasn't really there."

Juliana nodded, her voice soft. "Yes. Love can hold us even when the one



who gives it is gone. That is how God's love is, too."

Thomas's brow furrowed. "You talk like you know how God feels."

Juliana's expression softened further, almost tender. "I know how a mother feels. And I know He loves us as a mother loves her child."

Thomas blinked. "A *mother*? But... He's God."

Juliana chuckled quietly. "And who made mothers? Do you think He does not love as deeply as the best of them?"

Thomas frowned, trying to understand. "But a mother carries you. Feeds you. Holds you when you're scared."

"Yes," Juliana said simply. "So does He. Every breath we take, every heartbeat, is His gift. And when we fall, when we are hurt, His love surrounds us like a womb, warm,

constant, keeping us safe until we are ready to live again.”

Thomas stared at her, his chest tightening. “Then why does it hurt so much?”

Juliana’s voice was quiet but firm. “Because we are still being born, Thomas. And birth is always painful.”

---

The words sank into the silence between them, heavy but not sharp. Thomas stared at the ground, turning them over in his mind.

Finally, he whispered, “Do you really think all shall be well? Even after all this?”

Juliana’s eyes softened, full of the same quiet certainty she always carried. “Yes. Not because everything is well now, but because His love is deeper than all the brokenness we see. One day, Thomas, when all things are

gathered back into His hands, we will understand. And it will be well. Truly well.”

Thomas wanted to believe her. He wasn’t sure he did. But for the first time, the idea didn’t feel impossible.

---

That night, as Thomas lay under the stars, Elena curled up asleep beside him, he thought of his mother’s dream-voice and Juliana’s words.

*We are still being born.*

The thought was strange, almost too big to hold. But it made the night feel a little warmer.



## Chapter 14: All Shall Be Well

The morning after his fever broke, Thomas woke to the sound of children crying. The village, still scarred from the raiders' attack, had grown restless, whispers of more sickness spreading, of hunger creeping closer as stores dwindled.

Thomas sat up slowly, his body still aching but stronger than the day before. Elena knelt nearby, sharing a crust of bread with two thin children who had wandered close to the chapel. Her usual sharpness was gone; her face softened as she handed them the larger half.

Thomas watched for a long moment, something warm stirring in his chest. She caught his eye, shrugging awkwardly. "Don't look at me like that. It's just bread."

Thomas smiled faintly. “Juliana would say it’s more than that.”

Elena rolled her eyes, but she didn’t argue.

---

When the children had gone, Thomas made his way to Juliana’s cell. She sat as always, her hands folded, her calm presence filling the air like quiet music.

“You look stronger,” she said.

Thomas nodded. “I feel stronger.”

They sat in silence for a while, the soft breeze carrying the smell of damp earth. Finally, Thomas spoke.

“I’ve been thinking about what you said,” he admitted. “About love being stronger than fear. About all things being... well.” He frowned slightly. “I don’t know if I believe it. But... I want to.”

Juliana's smile warmed her whole face. "That is enough for now."

Thomas sat back, pulling his knees to his chest. "It still feels... strange. To think love matters more than surviving."

Juliana nodded. "It feels strange because the world tells us survival is everything. But love is what makes survival worth anything at all."

Thomas thought of the little boy he had carried from the burning house, of the old woman's grateful sigh as he gave her water, of his mother's hands in his dream. His chest tightened, but not painfully this time.

"I want to do more," he said, surprising himself with the words. "Not just sit here waiting for the plague to stop. I want to... help."

Juliana's eyes softened. "Then help. Some families need water. Some

children need food. There is always something small you can do.”

Thomas looked at his hands, scarred and rough. “It doesn’t feel like enough.”

“It never will,” Juliana said gently. “But each act of love is a seed. And one day, when all is gathered into God’s hands, every seed will bloom.”

---

That afternoon, Thomas began walking the village lanes, carrying buckets of water and helping repair broken doors. Elena followed reluctantly at first, grumbling, but soon she was holding nails and handing out scraps of food.

A little girl hugged Thomas’s arm after he fixed her family’s gate. A tired man pressed his forehead to Thomas’s shoulder, whispering, “Bless you, boy.”



Each smile, each whispered *thank you*, left Thomas's chest feeling lighter, his steps surer.

---

That evening, Thomas sat outside Juliana's cell again, the sun setting behind the chapel. "You were right," he said quietly.

Juliana tilted her head. "About what?"

Thomas looked down at his scarred hands, turning them over slowly. "Love doesn't fix everything. But it changes something. Even me."

Juliana's smile was soft, almost motherly. "Yes, Thomas. And that is how the world is healed, one heart at a time."

Thomas hesitated, then whispered, "Do you really think... all shall be well?"

Juliana nodded, her voice calm and certain. "All shall be well, and all shall

be well, and all manner of thing shall  
be well.”

For the first time, Thomas didn't feel  
the need to argue. For the first time, he  
wanted to believe her.

## Chapter 15: A New Calling

The days passed quickly after that. Thomas found himself moving through the village from sunrise to sunset, carrying water, gathering firewood, and helping repair broken walls. Elena worked beside him, her quick hands and sharp tongue slowly softening as she laughed more often, even with the children who clung to her skirts.

The villagers began to look at Thomas differently. At first, they had eyed him warily, as they did every stranger. But now, people smiled when they saw him, calling his name when he passed. The baker's widow pressed a warm loaf into his hands one morning, whispering, "For all you're doing, lad."

Thomas felt something swell in his chest, pride, but not the sharp, boastful kind. Something gentler, fuller.

At night, he sat by Juliana's cell,  
telling her everything.

"I helped mend a roof today," he said  
one evening, his hands still sore from  
hammering. "And a boy gave me a  
ribbon from his sister's hair as thanks."  
He pulled the bright scrap of cloth  
from his pocket, almost shyly.

Juliana's smile crinkled her eyes. "A  
treasure worth more than gold, I'd  
say."

Thomas smiled back, tucking it  
carefully away.

---

One afternoon, Father Matthew  
returned to the village, his face thin  
and tired, his robes stained. When he  
saw Thomas hauling water to a sick  
family, he stopped, leaning on his  
staff.

"You've changed," Father Matthew  
said quietly.

Thomas shrugged, embarrassed.  
“Juliana says love matters most when nothing else does.”

Father Matthew’s eyes warmed, and he gave a soft laugh. “She’s been saying that since I first met her. Good to see someone finally listening.”

Thomas hesitated, then asked, “Do you think it’s enough? Helping people, even if we can’t save them?”

Father Matthew looked toward the house Thomas had just left, where a woman lay coughing but smiling faintly as her child drank the water Thomas had brought.

“Yes,” the priest said. “It’s enough.”

---

That night, Thomas sat cross-legged outside Juliana’s window, staring at the stars. The evening air was cool, and Elena lay curled nearby, already asleep.

Juliana watched him quietly. “You look thoughtful.”

Thomas nodded slowly. “I keep thinking... when the plague ends, what then? Everyone’s waiting for things to go back to how they were. But I don’t want to just... go back.”

Juliana tilted her head. “What do you want, Thomas?”

He looked down at his scarred hands, rubbing the rough skin of his burned palm. “I want to help. Not just here, not just now. People will always need someone. Maybe... maybe that’s what I’m meant to do.”

Juliana’s smile was soft, almost motherly. “Then you’ve found your calling.”

Thomas shifted. “But I’m just a boy. What can I really do?”

Juliana’s voice was quiet but firm. “You’ve already done it, Thomas.

Each bucket of water, each smile you give, each hand you hold, that is God's work in the world. Never think it's too small."

Thomas looked up at her, something stirring deep in his chest, stronger than before. "Then I'll do it," he said, his voice steady. "I'll keep helping. Even when it's hard. Even when it hurts."

Juliana nodded, her eyes bright in the candlelight. "Then you will be a healer, Thomas. Not just of bodies, but of hearts."

---

As he lay down that night, staring at the stars, Thomas felt the words settle deep inside him like roots. For the first time since the plague began, his life felt... not whole, but *right*.

And for the first time, he looked at the dark sky and whispered, almost like a prayer, "All shall be well."





## Chapter 16: Elena's Redemption

The rain came hard that morning, turning the village lanes into rivers of mud. Thomas hauled buckets of water to a family whose roof leaked so badly that it dripped into their only bed. Elena followed, muttering complaints, though her hands worked quickly to patch the roof with scraps of wood and straw.

“Why do people live like this?” she grumbled, pressing a broken tile into place. “The plague’s bad enough without everything else falling apart.”

Thomas balanced the bucket on his hip. “That’s why we help.”

Elena shot him a sharp look. “You’re starting to sound like her.”

“Who?”

“Juliana,” Elena said with a sigh.  
“Love this, love that. It’s ridiculous.”

Thomas smiled faintly. “You’re still here helping, aren’t you?”

Elena didn’t answer, but her cheeks flushed, and she turned back to the roof.

---

By mid-afternoon, the rain hadn’t stopped. The chapel bell rang once, sharp and urgent, Juliana’s signal for trouble.

Thomas dropped his bucket and ran toward the sound. Elena was close behind.

At the edge of the village, a group of terrified villagers huddled near the small stone church, pointing at its sagging roof. A section of it had collapsed inward under the weight of the rain, leaving a gaping hole.

“They were praying inside when it caved,” a man shouted. “Three are still trapped!”

Thomas’s stomach tightened. He moved without thinking, sprinting toward the broken wall.

“Thomas, wait!” Elena grabbed his arm, but he pulled free.

The air inside the church was thick with dust and damp plaster. He could hear crying, thin, frightened voices. Two women and a young boy crouched under a half-collapsed beam, too afraid to move.

Thomas stepped over the debris carefully. “Hold on, I’ll get you out.”

The boy sobbed, clutching his mother. “The roof’s going to fall again!”

Thomas glanced up at the cracked beams. He didn’t know how long they’d hold.

“Elena!” he shouted.

She was at the doorway, her face pale.  
“I can’t—”

“You can,” Thomas said firmly. “Help me with the beam.”

Elena froze, eyes darting between him and the frightened villagers. For a moment, Thomas thought she’d run. Then her jaw tightened.

“Fine,” she snapped, stepping forward. “But if we die, it’s your fault.”

---

Together, they shoved at the heavy beam. It groaned but didn’t budge. Dust rained down, stinging Thomas’s eyes.

“Again,” he said through clenched teeth.

Elena gritted her teeth and pushed harder. With a final heave, the beam shifted just enough for the trapped villagers to crawl out.

“Go!” Thomas shouted. “Run!”

The women scrambled toward the doorway, pulling the boy with them.

Thomas turned to follow, but another beam above cracked sharply.

“Elena, move!” he yelled.

She darted back toward the door, but then she stopped. A small cry came from deeper inside the church—a sound almost lost in the rain.

“A baby!” Elena gasped. “There’s still a baby!”

Thomas spun toward the sound, but Elena was already moving. She darted through the falling dust, vanishing behind a pile of rubble.

“Elena!” Thomas shouted, coughing as another beam groaned overhead.

A moment later, she reappeared, cradling a tiny bundle against her

chest. Her eyes were wide, terrified, but fierce.

“Go!” Thomas yelled.

She didn’t argue. She bolted for the doorway, clutching the baby tight.

As soon as she crossed the threshold, the roof gave way with a deafening crack. Thomas threw himself toward the doorway, feeling the rush of air as the beams crashed behind him. He tumbled into the mud outside, coughing hard.

---

Elena knelt nearby, holding the baby close. The infant let out a thin wail, alive and well. Elena stared down at it, her face streaked with mud and rain, her usual sharp grin gone.

“You did it,” Thomas said, breathless.

Elena looked up, her eyes bright with something Thomas had never seen in

her before, pride, but softer, almost like wonder.

“I couldn’t leave it,” she whispered.

Thomas smiled, placing a hand on her shoulder. “That’s love, Elena. That’s what she’s been talking about all along.”

Elena let out a shaky laugh. “Maybe she’s not mad after all.”

---

Later, after the villagers had taken the rescued family inside to dry, Thomas and Elena sat in the rain outside the chapel.

“You could’ve died,” Thomas said quietly.

Elena hugged her knees, staring at the mud. “I didn’t. And even if I had...” She hesitated, then looked at him with a half-smile. “I think it would’ve been worth it.”

Thomas felt warmth spread through his chest despite the cold rain.

“Juliana will be proud,” he said.

Elena snorted. “I don’t care what Juliana thinks.” But her smile lingered longer than usual.

---

That evening, when Thomas told Juliana what had happened, she only nodded, her smile soft and certain.

“See, Thomas,” she said, her voice quiet. “Love is contagious. It spreads faster than fear.”

Thomas sat back, letting the words settle in. For once, he didn’t argue.



## **Chapter 17: Juliana's Final Revelation**

Juliana's candle burned lower each day. Thomas noticed it first in the way her hands trembled slightly when she passed him food, and how she sometimes paused mid-sentence to catch her breath. But her eyes stayed bright, calm as ever.

One evening, after Elena had gone to help mend another roof, Thomas sat cross-legged outside the cell, watching Juliana carefully.

"You're getting weaker," he said quietly.

Juliana smiled, as if it were nothing. "This body was never meant to last forever, Thomas."

Thomas frowned, his chest tightening. "Don't talk like that."

“It’s the truth,” she said gently. “And truth is nothing to fear.”

Thomas looked at his hands, curling them into fists. “You’re not afraid to die?”

Juliana shook her head. “No. Death is just another birth. Painful, yes, but it leads to something better.”

Thomas looked up sharply. “How can you be so sure?”

Juliana studied him for a long moment, then said softly, “Do you want to know why I chose this life, Thomas? Why I locked myself in this cell?”

Thomas nodded.

Juliana’s voice softened, her words deliberate, as if each one mattered deeply.

“When I was young, I prayed to see the truth of God’s love, no matter how it changed me. And He showed me something so strange, so wild, I almost

didn't believe it. He showed me that even sin, even suffering, even the worst of our brokenness, are not stronger than His love."

Thomas blinked. "How can that be? Sin ruins everything. Suffering destroys people."

Juliana smiled faintly, her eyes bright in the candlelight. "Yes. But God uses even those ruins. Sin teaches us how much we need love. Suffering cracks us open so love can seep deeper. Nothing is wasted, Thomas. Nothing is beyond His healing."

Thomas's chest ached. "Even this plague? Even all these people dying?"

"Even that," Juliana said firmly. "Because His love is not defeated by death. It gathers everything, our pain, our mistakes, our tears and makes it whole again. One day, when all is made right, we will look back and see that every wound led us closer to love. And we will say, *All shall be well, and*

*all shall be well, and all manner of  
thing shall be well.”*

---

Thomas stared at her, unable to speak. The words were too big, too impossible. But something in her tone, soft but unwavering, made him want to believe.

Finally, he whispered, “I want to see that. I want to believe it.”

Juliana’s smile softened. “Then keep loving, Thomas. Every act of love brings that day closer.”

He swallowed hard, his throat tight. “And when you’re gone?”

Juliana’s eyes glistened, but her voice stayed steady. “Then you will carry it for me.”

---

That night, as Thomas lay under the stars, he felt her words echo through

his chest. *Nothing is wasted. Even suffering leads to love.*

For the first time, the thought of death didn't feel like a pit opening under his feet. It felt like... a doorway.

And in the darkness, he whispered the words back to himself, steady and sure:

“All shall be well.”



## Chapter 18: The Passing of the Anchorite

The candle in Juliana's cell burned lower each day, its flame thin and wavering, as if mirroring her own strength. By the fourth morning, Thomas could see the change clearly: her skin looked almost translucent, her breaths slower, her voice softer.

He sat outside her window, knees drawn to his chest. Elena stood a few paces back, quiet for once, her arms folded tightly as if holding herself together.

Juliana smiled when she saw them. "Ah. My faithful visitors."

Thomas swallowed hard. "You're worse today."

Juliana's smile didn't falter. "This body has done its work. Now it's time to rest."

Thomas shook his head, his voice cracking. “No. You can’t leave. Not yet.”

“I’m not leaving,” Juliana said gently. “I’m only going home.”

---

For a while, they sat in silence, the only sounds the soft rustle of wind through the chapel’s eaves. Finally, Juliana reached slowly toward the candle beside her, picking up the small hazelnut she kept by it.

“Thomas,” she said, holding it carefully in her thin fingers. “Do you remember what I told you about this?”

Thomas nodded, his throat tight. “That it’s everything... all of creation. Held by God.”

Juliana’s smile warmed her pale face. “Yes. And I want you to keep it now. So that you never forget even when the



world feels small and broken, His love holds it, holds *you* still.”

She slid the hazelnut through the bars. Thomas took it carefully, as if it were made of glass. The shell felt warm from her hand, smooth against his scarred palm.

“I can’t...” His voice shook. “I can’t do this without you.”

Juliana’s gaze softened. “Oh, Thomas. You already are. Every act of love you’ve given, every hand you’ve held, you are already His hands in this world. Keep doing that, and you will never be without me. Or Him.”

Thomas’s eyes burned. “I don’t want you to go.”

Juliana’s voice was calm, almost like a lullaby. “Love doesn’t end when the body fails. It only grows bigger. You will feel it, even when you can’t see me.”

---

The sun dipped lower, casting golden light through the bars. Juliana leaned back against her straw pallet, her breaths slowing.

“Thomas,” she whispered, her eyes half-closed.

“Yes?” he said quickly, leaning closer.

Her lips curved in a faint smile. “All shall be well, my dear boy. All shall be well.”

Thomas clutched the hazelnut in his hand, tears slipping silently down his cheeks.

Juliana’s last breath was soft, like a sigh. Her head tilted gently to one side, her face peaceful, her hands folded as if in prayer.

---

Elena moved closer, kneeling beside Thomas, her usual sharpness gone. “She’s... gone?”

Thomas nodded, staring at the still figure inside the cell. His voice was quiet but steady. “No. She’s not gone. Not really.”

He looked down at the hazelnut, holding it tightly. For the first time since the plague had begun, the weight in his chest felt lighter, as if Juliana’s peace had poured into him like sunlight.

---

That night, Thomas sat under the stars, the hazelnut cupped in his hands. He whispered the words she had given him, letting them fill the quiet air.

“All shall be well. All shall be well. And all manner of thing shall be well.”

For the first time, he believed it.



## Chapter 19: The Gift of the Hazelnut

The village felt different after Juliana's passing, not quieter, not sadder, but somehow lighter, as if her peace lingered in the air. People still coughed, roofs still leaked, food still ran short, but the fear that had once hung over everything seemed thinner.

Thomas carried the hazelnut in his pocket everywhere, its smooth shell warm against his palm. When he felt doubt creeping in, he would hold it tight, remembering her words: *He made it, He loves it, He keeps it.*

---

One morning, as he hauled water to a sick family, a little girl watched him from the doorway, her eyes wide.

"Why do you help everyone?" she asked, her voice shy.

Thomas knelt to her level, pulling the hazelnut from his pocket. He placed it gently in her small hand.

“Because we’re all like this,” he said. “Small. Breakable. But God holds us anyway. Even when things are bad.”

The girl stared at the nut, her brow furrowed. “Even when people die?”

Thomas nodded, his voice soft but certain. “Even then. Love doesn’t stop, not even then.”

The girl held the hazelnut to her chest, as if it were a treasure.

---

That afternoon, Thomas gave the same answer to an old man who asked why he bothered helping when the plague would just take more lives.

“Because love matters most when nothing else does,” Thomas said simply, the same way Juliana had once said it to him.

The man stared at him for a long moment, then took his hand, squeezing it with surprising strength. “Then maybe there’s still hope after all.”

---

Elena watched him from a distance, arms crossed. That evening, as they sat near the chapel, she nudged him with her shoulder.

“You’ve changed,” she said.

Thomas smiled faintly. “We both have.”

Elena snorted, but her voice softened. “Do you really think this will make a difference? Helping, smiling, telling people all that... ‘all shall be well’ nonsense?”

Thomas looked at the hazelnut resting in his palm, the last gift Juliana had given him. He thought of her calm face, her certainty even in pain.

“Yes,” he said firmly. “It already has.”

Elena stared at him for a long moment, then leaned back against the chapel wall, letting out a quiet laugh. “You’re impossible.”

Thomas smiled. “Juliana was impossible too. But she was right.”

---

That night, Thomas sat under the stars, the hazelnut warm in his hands. The sky stretched wide and endless, but for the first time, he didn’t feel small in a hopeless way. He felt... held.

He whispered into the cool night air, the words steady and sure now, no longer just hope but conviction:

“All shall be well. All shall be well.  
And all manner of thing shall be well.”

And somehow, he knew Juliana was smiling.



## Chapter 20: The Road Ahead

The years passed. The plague came and went in waves, leaving scars on the land and on the hearts of those who survived. Fields grew green again, children's laughter returned to village lanes, but the memory of loss never fully faded.

Thomas grew taller, his boyish roundness replaced by lean muscle from long days of walking and work. His scarred hand never smoothed, but he no longer hid it. It had become a mark of who he was and who he had chosen to be.

Elena travelled with him still, though she complained often about sore feet and bad roads. Her sharp tongue hadn't dulled, but she laughed more now, and the way she handed out bread to hungry children without grumbling showed how much she had changed too.

They walked from village to village, carrying little more than a pack of bandages, dried herbs, and simple tools for healing. But Thomas carried something more important than supplies.

---

One spring morning, in a small village nestled among rolling hills, Thomas knelt beside a child who lay coughing in bed. The boy's mother hovered nearby, her eyes red from crying.

Thomas held the boy's hand, speaking softly. "The fever will pass. You're stronger than you think."

The boy's frightened eyes darted to Thomas's scarred hand. "Are you... scared?"

Thomas smiled faintly, holding up the hazelnut he still carried, polished smooth now from years in his pocket. "I used to be. But someone once told me something I never forgot."

The boy blinked. “What?”

Thomas placed the hazelnut in the child’s palm, closing the boy’s small fingers around it. “That we’re all like this, small, sometimes broken, but held in love that never lets go. Even when it feels like everything’s falling apart, all shall be well.”

The boy stared at him, uncertain but calmer. His breathing eased just a little. His mother touched Thomas’s arm, her eyes brimming. “Bless you,” she whispered.

Thomas nodded, standing slowly. “It’s not me. It’s love. That’s all.”

---

Later that evening, Thomas and Elena sat by the road outside the village, the sun dipping behind the hills.

“You said that like you meant it,” Elena said, watching him.

Thomas smiled, leaning back against his pack. "I do mean it."

Elena raised an eyebrow. "You really think it's true? After everything?"

Thomas looked at the fading sky, the stars beginning to pierce the dusk. "I know it is. Not because life's perfect. But because love's stronger than everything else."

Elena studied him for a long moment, then smiled crookedly. "Juliana would be proud."

Thomas looked at the hazelnut resting in his hand, warm in the last light of day. "She already is," he said softly.

---

As night fell, Thomas and Elena set off down the road again, their footsteps quiet against the dirt. The stars stretched wide above them, and though the world was still broken, Thomas

walked with his head high, his heart  
steady.

Because now he knew, deep in his  
bones, deeper than fear, that Juliana  
had been right all along.

All shall be well.

And all shall be well.

And all manner of things shall be well.



