

THE LORELEI SIGNAL

The Golden Serpent

Written by Julian Jonescu / Artwork by Holly Eddy



Arisa left the Hills of the Serpent behind her, and rode back into the village as soon as the Sun began to set. She wasn't afraid of the hills; she despised them. She hated them for all the pain they had brought her. But she wasn't afraid of them. And today she was going to prove it.

By the time she reached the village center, everyone had already gathered around the high-priest. Arisa dismounted and pushed her way toward to front of the crowd. The high-priest was about to start talking.

What kind of stories will he feed us today? Arisa wondered. She had no doubt he'd ask everyone to act as cowards again. She squeezed her fist on her bow. *Not this time. Not again.*

The high-priest raised his right hand, palm opened up toward the sky.

"The Gods shall protect us as we rise, and the Gods shall guard us in our sleep, for it is the seventh day of the seventh summer that came upon us. On this day of torment we must pray and ask for forgiveness from our Gods." He paused, slowly brought his palms together and continued to mumble under his breath.

Arisa glanced at the people around her. Their eyes were full of fear and their heads bowed. She scoffed and pulled one arrow from her quiver.

"People of Alanya," the priest continued, leaning forward against the podium, "you must hide your young ones, lock your cattle and barricade your barns, for between today and the fourteenth day the Serpent will return to claim its prey—"

Arisa shot her arrow into the sky, and the people around her pulled sideways. The arrow fell a few feet from the high-priest's podium, and a murmur crept through the crowd.

"And we shall fight the serpent!" Arisa shouted.

The people parted ways, making a path between Arisa and the high-priest. The old man stared at her with fiery eyes and she looked back, unmoving.

She waited a few moments, then walked forward, darting her eyes from one side to the other. People looked away as she passed by. She knew no one here had the guts to support a rebel, but she didn't care.

Arisa thrust her finger towards the high-priest. "Why can't we fight back? Are we all cowards?"

The high-priest waddled around the podium, his face livid. She knew it wasn't going to be easy—the high-priest was a tough man, and his icy stare made that very clear.

"It's not our place to fight," the high-priest said, in a loud voice.

"Why not?" Arisa raised her chin and struck a pose. "Tell me, why not?"

Before the priest could answer, Arisa saw movement in the crowd. She didn't have to look; she knew too well what was coming.

Her mother ran toward her and grabbed her by the arm. "Stop it, you are embarrassing everyone!"

"Mother, let go! I want to know why not? I *deserve* to know!"

The old priest arched his eyebrows and stepped closer to Arisa. "Because that's the way of the world, maiden. The man hunts the deer and the serpent hunts the man. It is not up to us to judge how the world works! The serpent is sent by the gods, and the gods choose its prey—"

Arisa shook her head. "I don't believe it. Why must we let one of ours go every seven summers? Just because that's the way things are?"

A tremor crept through Arisa's body as words were coming out of her mouth. Defying the high-priest wasn't something that happened every day, especially not in front of the whole village. She saw the frustration in the old man's trembling hands. She smiled; she had struck a chord.

"You can't fight because you cannot kill the Golden Serpent, you fool. You think you are the first one? Many have tried before you and many have died, over and over again. What good does it do if ten people die trying to kill the serpent every time? Isn't it wiser to let the serpent take its prey?"

Arisa straightened her back. She was expecting a logical approach, but as her father used to say 'unlike courage and risk, logic seldom forges a hero.'

"That's because they didn't believe in it," she said, raising her voice. "And because a thousand had failed, does that mean no one would ever succeed? What is the harm in trying to kill the Serpent? What is the harm in trying to fight for our people?"

Arisa's mother sighed and the crowd moved back, but Arisa saw a spark in their eyes. *Was it hope?*

The high-priest put his arm around her mother's shoulders. "The harm is the one you cast upon your parents, foolish fledgling. You will not make it alive, and you will leave your parents and siblings behind you, mourning your loss!"

"Arisa," her mother said, her voice catching. "Listen to me, listen to the priest. You are young; you have your whole life ahead of you. Don't ruin everything with a stupid—"

"Stupid?" Arisa shouted and threw her arms in the air. "Is it stupid to defend your village and our people? Is it stupid to try to bring peace and end the massacres? Sacrifice is not stupid, mother."

Arisa turned toward the crowd, pulled her sword out of its sheath, and raised it above her head. "Is it wrong to fight for freedom?" The crowd responded with a cheer and the high priest grunted.

Without giving him a chance to talk she opened her arms wide towards the people. "Those who are with me, are those who will never be forgotten. Those who stand behind and hide, have no right to complain about their life, for it is them who have chosen to live a life of fear. Meet me tomorrow at the old barn and together we will find a way to kill the beast."

There was a short pause of total silence. After the pause, the crowd exploded in a cheer screaming as one.

"May the Gods help us!" Arisa shouted.

The people's faces were loaded with hope and their eyes with anger. Arisa's looked at her mother, hoping for a sign of approval, but the woman was on her knees, her face in her hands.

~ * ~

The night came fast that evening. The darkness lumbered over the village and wrapped it in its cloak. The only sounds breaking the silence were the sharp hoots of the guardian owls and the distant howling of the wolf packs.

Arisa sat on a bearskin, by the fireplace. She ruffled the logs with an iron poker and the fire grew stronger. She picked up her bow and began tightening its string.

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The door opened. Her mother came in, dropped a basket of logs on the floor, and sat on a chair, panting.

Arisa felt her mother's eyes poking in her neck. "What?" She turned her head.

"Why are you doing this?" Her mother covered her mouth. "I'll be alone—"

"What if the serpent comes to get me? Would you live with that fear all your life?"

Her mother sighed loudly. She got up and walked to a dark-wood cabinet on the other side of the room. She unlocked it with the key around her neck and took out a narrow wooden box. She put it on the table and opened it. "Come here," she said and wiped a tear off her cheek.

Arisa approached the table, curious about what her mother wanted to show her. Inside the box was one arrow, whittled from red wood and finished with a black iron tip, sharp as a blade.

"What is it?"

"It was your father's," Her mother picked the arrow and caressed it with her finger. "The last arrow he made. He wanted your brother Brody to have it, but—"

She gently put the arrow in Arisa's hands. It was light as a leaf and the tip was sharper than any arrow Arisa had ever seen.

"He put his soul in it, your father."

"I can feel it," Arisa whispered and closed her eyes.

She tried to remember her father's face, but it was harder than she thought. Seven years had passed and his image had faded away.

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"Take it," the mother said and looked at her daughter with watery eyes. "That's the best I can do."

Arisa hugged her tight and sobbed on her shoulder. "I love you, mom. I would never abandon you. Never."

~ * ~

The next morning, Arisa rode to the old barn at the top of the Elders' Peak. The village cemetery was a few yards before the barn, built on a slanted plateau, so she stopped on the way to say a prayer.

She had two roses with her, one for each of her grandparent's graves. Next to the two graves were two others, modest and simple—just a stone at the head and a few flowers. *Just as they would've liked it,* Arisa thought, breathing heavily. She touched her brother's and father's graves with her palm and said a prayer.

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She heard rattling behind her so she looked back. Talo. She knew he would come. There was no way he was going to let his sword rest on such a day.

Arisa cleaned her eyes with her sleeve and smiled.

"We'll get the Serpent," Talo said with a nod. "No one will have to lose their family ever again. Not like this."

She took a deep breath and followed him toward the barn. "Who came?"

"A lot of people," Talo said. "They truly believed in what you said." He paused and gave her a warm look. "I believed."

Arisa felt her cheeks getting red. She had been waiting for a long time for someone to believe in her. She was happy Talo was among those who did. From the corner of her eye, she studied his chiseled face. *Such intensity, such power.*

Once they reached the barn's gate, Talo motioned her ahead. Arisa walked inside and her eyes instantly watered, but she held back. The barn was almost full of people. Everyone brought whatever they had- swords, shovels, spears, axes and cleavers.

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One of the elders stepped forward. "We shall never be forgotten. Dead or alive."

Arisa's heart jolted. Her father would've been so proud.

A fire was already burning in the center of the barn, and some people were warming up meat skewers. Talo sat by the fire and Arisa joined him. The others tightened the circle around them, staring at Arisa with wide eyes.

"So," asked one of the young boys there, "what do we do? How do we kill it?"

Arisa had thought about it the entire night. She wasn't sure the plan would work, but the looks in the men and women's eyes were loaded with hope. *It must work, she thought. It's either this or death.*

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"We only have five days until the seventh day of the seventh month of summer. Five days to get ready and then seven days to kill the beast."

"Yeah!" Talo shouted.

Arisa glanced at him for a brief moment. She had to find a way to tame him. His warrior blood will be good in battle, but she knew a straight fight against the serpent would be futile.

"We need to be cunning—" she touched Talo's arm, "strong, but cunning at first." She paused, allowing the thought to sink in. "We'll trap the serpent. Like a fish."

Surprised eyes stared back at her.

"With a net," she added.

"I'm lost," Talo said.

Arisa shuffled in her spot. She only had one shot to make her plan sound sane.

"We know the beast descends from the Hills of the Serpent at night and crawls into the village for its prey. If we cast a net around the village, it would give us a hint as to when the serpent is coming."

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"But other animals would disturb it too, wouldn't they?" asked a woman.

"Not really, animals are scared during the week of the serpent. They know. The forests are deserted and all animals flee to higher grounds."

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Arisa drank a few mouths of water from her leather waterskin and watched the people around her process what she just said.

"I understand the idea," Talo said in an unconvincing tone. "The only problem is—we have to find a net that's big enough."

"We'll use Kalista's thread," Arisa said.

"That old witch?" the elder said with a scoff. "Why would she help us?"

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"She lost her son to the serpent years ago. She'll help us. She makes a special thread, the strongest thread in the land. She even sends it to the king's court and the army uses it to make ropes."

A woman broke forward from the crowd. "We can't possibly knit a giant net."

"That's true," Arisa said. "This is what we do: we tie the thread to a tree, extend it through the woods all around the village, like a belt. We hang the thread by the tree branches and guard it. Whoever sees the thread pulled, signals the others."

Talo threw his arms in the air. "That's brilliant! We can use bells along the thread as a signal."

"Exactly," Arisa said, happy to see Talo embracing the plan.

"But that still doesn't answer one question," Talo said looking sideways at Arisa. "It's all good to know where the serpent is, but how do we kill it? It's a strong creature, covered in sharp scales made of hard gold. His fangs are said to break through a tree, and the touch of its tail is more powerful than the strongest sword."

Arisa had asked herself the same thing. What others have done in the past was to attack the beast straight up. They all had perished, much like her father and uncles. Following the same plan would be certain suicide. This beast had to be defeated with cunning. "It's a vain creature, isn't it?"

"The serpent?"

"Yes," Arisa answered. "It rules through fear."

Talo shrugged. "So?"

Arisa smashed her fist in her palm. "This means it will not steer away from a challenge. It will not hesitate to follow the one who taunts it. So, we taunt it, and bring it into a trap."

"What are you thinking?" Talo asked.

"We attract the beast to the old wooden bridge over the river at the west. The bridge is broken, rotten to the core, barely standing. It can hold a young warrior, even a few running over it, but it can't stand a huge serpent made out of gold. The bridge goes over a deep canyon—Lorgan's Gorge—and down below run the raging waters of the Black River."

Talo's smile widened and his eyes sparkled. "So we draw the serpent on the bridge, and watch the beast fall into the abyss."

"His body will shatter," Arisa said, her fist in the air. "The waters and rocks will smash it to pieces!"

Talo jumped to his feet and drew his sword. "Death to the serpent!"

"Death to the serpent," answered the crowd.

~ * ~

Arisa spent the next two days working with the others on the net. They set camp in the center of the village, trying to avoid the looks of the villagers. The ones who preferred not to join them were mostly hiding away, and those who walked by looked away, save for the high-priest who watched them from the temple's tower with a dark eye.

As dawn approached on the third night, a convoy appeared from the forest, led by a knight wearing a silver armor and a red cape. The village wasn't used to visits from the kingscourt, much so one led by Sir Canaan, the first knight.

The convoy stopped and the knight dismounted.

Arisa jumped on her feet and Talo followed her.

Most of the villagers knelt on one knee, their heads bowed in respect. Not Arisa. She held her head high and arms crossed.

"Greetings," the knight said, staring directly at her.

He walked slowly with a typical nobleman grace and removed his leather gloves. "Maiden—"

"Arisa," she answered and Sir Canaan acknowledged with a nod.

"It has come to the court's attention," Sir Canaan said, "that you are leading a battle against a Golden Serpent. Is that true?"

Arisa bit her inner cheek and threw a glance towards the temple. The high-priest must've sent word to the king's court. She wasn't sure if it was a good thing or a bad thing, but she was betting on bad.

Before she could answer Talo stepped next to her. "Since when does the court care about a small village?" he said in a coarse voice.

Sir Canaan smiled. "I feel a seed of resentment—"

"What does the king's court ever do for us?" Talo exploded. "What else other than sending their collectors and taking our men to war?"

Canaan lifted his hands. "Well, if you'd let me speak, perhaps we can all understand why I'm here."

The knight then turned his eyes towards Arisa. "It is not often one encounters a beautiful maiden wielding a sword and a bow."

Arisa felt a tickle in her stomach, and not a pleasant one. "And you do not wish to find your sword against mine, Sir Canaan."

"Ha-ha, I would not think of it," the knight said. "But the fact of the matter is, I am here to help you."

After years of disappointment, Arisa had learned not to count on the court for anything, but she looked behind Sir Canaan and saw he was followed by mounted soldiers wielding spears and bows. There were more soldiers there than all the villagers she had gathered. Seeing their number gave her hope, but the strange glimmer in the knight's eyes gave her an eerie sensation. On the other hand, she knew there was no way to send the king's convoy back. Not without repercussions.

"Fine," she said. "Tell me."

Sir Canaan joined his hands behind his back. "You see, there's this legend of the Golden Serpent, a story, if you will, that's been passed around and made its way to the courts."

"It's not a story," Talo protested. "It's the truth. Many of us lost our loved ones to the Serpent!"

"So be it," Canaan answered with a toothy smile. "Needless to say, these stories, make their way to the courts every so often and—"

"You ignore them," Talo interjected.

"Ignore, ignore...such a strong word." Canaan snickered, "We do not ignore them; we simply have more important things on our hands. The borders of the kingdom, the dragons from the North. There are things the King's court does that you cannot possibly comprehend."

Talo moved forward, but Arisa grabbed his hand and pulled him back. She threw him an icy look, and he backed down.

"But every year," Sir Canaan continued, "we choose one village worthy to receive our undivided help."

The knight paused, smiling as if he was waiting for applause. Arisa withheld a groan.

She looked at him through slit eyes. "Sir Canaan, are you here to help us, or are you here to talk about helping us?"

Canaan let a laugh out. "Fair point, maiden Arisa. I say let's not waste any more time and kill ourselves a serpent."

Arisa took a deep breath and motioned her hand toward the group of people working on the net. "Join us, we will share our plan."

As the knight walked by them in his pompous way, Talo whispered in her ear. "I don't trust him."

"Me either," Arisa whispered back. "But we need help."

~ * ~

For ten nights they stood watch—up in the trees, or hidden in bushes and shallow trenches dug in the ground. They had braided Kalista's thread and ran it around the village, hanging it in the trees. The mounted king's guard soldiers were spread throughout the forest, watching the thread, waiting for a move.

Arisa was up in her favorite tree—an oak so thick, four people could barely hug it, its branches so dense not even a ray of sun or a drop of rain could pass through. Perched on a branch, she watched over the forest, waiting for the moment, her hand clenched on the sword. The moon was half-way down, its ivory light brightening up the sky.

In the last hours of the night, she saw movement and heard clamor in the trees. The forest twitched as if it was alive; it trembled and sighed like a hunted animal and a shiver swept through the trees. Far in the distance a flaming arrow shot up into the sky.

"It's here!" Arisa shouted and rushed down.

She mounted her horse in one jump and the steed darted through the trees like a spear.

Arisa knew exactly where to go—the arrow flew from the valley of the poppy flowers, at the base of the mountain. She lowered her head, her face in the horse's mane, keeping her legs tight around the animal's body.

Closer to the valley, she heard a growl, a deafening roar that shook her body to the core. An ice chill went over her back. *The Serpent*. She clenched her teeth and kicked the horse to go faster.

As the steed jumped between two trees into an open glade, Arisa thrust her sword up in the air. The king's guard soldiers and the other villagers were arriving from the woods, gathering together in the glade. Talo was already there and Sir Canaan appeared shortly.

Arisa stopped and listened. Another scream came from the forest. A gut wrenching death scream—a shriek so primitive, the horses backed up in fear.

She jumped off her horse and ran forward.

"Leave the horses," she screamed.

Talo jumped off his and joined her at the front. Sir Canaan came besides them, waving his sword.

The ground shook and the trees in front of them started to curl and crack, falling sideways like a defeated army.

A yellow head, bigger than a bear, broke out above the trees. Two fangs flanked its split tongue, under his eyes of fire. The golden serpent rose up, twice as high as the highest tree, twisting its head in the air.

Arisa was numb, a thick knot clogged in her throat. The Serpent was huge, much bigger than she had ever imagined.

"Archers!" Canaan screamed and a wall of burning arrows whizzed over their heads.

The arrows hit the golden snake and ricocheted leaving the body untouched. The beast shook its head and shrieked again toward the sky, its scream echoing throughout the

valleys.

Talo shouted and lifted his sword up in the air. He ran forward, twirling the weapon over his head.

"No!" Arisa yelled.

She took a step forward, but Canaan grabbed her hand and pulled her back. "Stop, we must draw the beast to the bridge!"

"Talo!"

Canaan held her back. "You'll die, and this will all be for nothing."

Arisa looked after Talo. *That foolish boy!*

Talo ran below the snake's head, his sword up high, screaming his lungs out. "Come on! This is for my uncle, you beast!"

The snake's head descended like lightning, its voracious mouth wide open, tongue swinging in the air. When it was just a foot above Talo, the young warrior jumped sideways and spun his sword. The sharp blade hit the snake's tongue and cut it in half. The split half flew away and the snake let out a demonic squeal.

Talo turned around and ran, but the snake lowered its head again, this time faster and angrier, its red eyes spinning in his head.

"Talooooo!" Arisa screamed, but it was too late.

The snake's mouth fell over Talo's body. Arisa saw him push his sword deep into the beast's throat with his last breath as the fanged mouth closed over him and swallowed him whole.

"Noooo," Arisa yelled and squeezed her sword.

"Stop," Canaan shouted, "we must run to the bridge, it's the only way."

The creature rose again and moved forward, waiving its enormous body out of the forest.

"Archers!"

Another curtain of arrows flew toward the snake, with no damage.

"Everyone, run to the bridge," Arisa screamed and leaped toward the trees.

She ran as fast as she could, cutting between branches, her heart pounding like a war drum.

She didn't look back—she didn't have to. Talo was gone. She wanted to cry but there was no time. Was it over before it even started? She wanted to scream but she *had* to run. She had to get to that bridge. The terrifying roars of the beast followed her closely, making her hair stand on ends.

When the forest cleared, the old wooden bridge wasn't far away. She stopped mid-way and turned around. The others followed her, running out of the woods, eyes filled with fear and faces white as clouds.

Canaan emerged from the trees as well, wielding his sword and shield.

"This way," Arisa shouted.

She turned to run toward the bridge, but she noticed movement far on the right field. She stopped to look and saw an army—a battalion of soldiers gathered around two catapults.

"What is this?" Arisa said.

Canaan stopped by her and looked at the army.

The ground shook and the trees moved. Another gnarl came from the forest. Arisa glanced at Canaan. The knight raised his right arm and signaled one of the soldiers by the catapults. She looked at him with arched brows.

"You are trying to capture the snake, aren't you?"

Canaan threw her an angry gaze. "Listen, maiden, you don't let a Golden Serpent run away. You capture it; you kill it and melt it into riches."

Arisa's stomach squeezed in a ball and her hand trembled uncontrollably.

"You used us," she said, panting. "Talo died out there."

Sir Canaan scoffed. "It's war, and in war people die. What matters is who lives and who wins."

Without another word, he ran toward the army, shouting orders. "Prepare the catapults and light the fires!"

Arisa remained frozen, her body trembling. She took one arrow from her quiver—the red-wood arrow with the black iron tip.

The trees parted, and the golden snake's head appeared between them, roaring like a beast.

"Light them up!" Sir Canaan screamed from a distance, and the soldiers set fire to a pile of hay bales.

Arisa looked at them, then back at the snake. She understood their plan; they wanted to draw the serpent to their fire, away from the bridge.

She squeezed the arrow, kissed its tip, and put it in her bow.

"This is for you, Papa. For you and for Brody."

She pulled the string and aimed the arrow toward the serpent's head.

Wait, wait. The beast's head was twirling through the air. *Wait for the right moment,* her father's voice resonated in her ears.

The serpent suddenly stopped moving, ready to attack. Arisa realized the beast noticed the fire burning in the distance. *The right moment.*

She released the bowstring. The arrow buzzed through the air and hit the creature in its right eye. The eye popped like a porcelain plate, and the Golden Serpent screamed.

She dropped the bow and ran toward the bridge. The half-blinded beast dove after her.

Arisa stepped on the bridge and saw the others waving on the other side, screaming. She felt a breath of hot air blowing in her back; she peered over her shoulder. The ravenous mouth was biting the air behind her.

She jumped forward—once, twice—the giant mouth closing and opening by her back, the sliced tongue touching her hair.

She finally leaped forward, rolled on the ground and spun around.

The Golden Serpent was on the bridge, its mutilated face ready to pass on the other side, mouth wide open.

A giant iron claw fell from the sky, trailing a rope behind it. The claw pierced the serpent's tail and stuck in it, holding the beast in place.

Arisa saw Canaan's army running forward toward the bridge. The iron claw came from the catapults and it trapped the serpent on the bridge. The beast fought to escape its grip; it spun its head ready to bite off the rope, but another wall of arrows struck it like a hammer.

Arisa lifted her sword and smashed into the bridge's base. The steel vibrated in her hand and stuck in the wood. She pulled the sword up and hit again. The rotten wood chipped under her sword and started to crack. She hit again, and again, smashing the rotten structure with all her strength.

With one loud blast, the bridge's side suddenly splintered. The support beams bent with a bang, ruptured, and started to shatter. The entire structure collapsed downward, under the weight of the beast, and with one final crack the bridge cleaved in half and opened up like a gate to a bottomless pit. The serpent fell into the void, but remained anchored by the iron claw stuck in its scales.

Sir Canaan and the soldiers grabbed the rope and started to pull back. The Serpent twirled in the air, reaching up.

Arisa weighted her sword in her hand, leaned on her left foot and threw it toward the serpent's tail. The weapon spun in the air and hit the rope with its edge, making yellow sparks on the snake's scales. The rope snapped and the Serpent fell into the canyon, roaring like a demon.

It plunged into the abyss, prey to the unforgiving grip of the raging river. Its body smashed against rocks and boulders, shattering in pieces. The angry waters pulled the beast toward the underground caverns, continuing to crush it against rocks, like a hungry mouth devouring its victim.

Before Arisa could take two breaths, the mountain swallowed the contorted body of the serpent. It vanished completely, sucked inside the mountain core, as if the beast had never existed.

Arisa unclenched her fists and exhaled. She looked up.

On the other side of the canyon, Sir Canaan was staring at her with a look of disbelief.

"We did it," a man whispered behind Arisa.

"We did it!" the others screamed.

Sir Canaan walked at the edge of the canyon and looked at Arisa with fire in his eyes. He pointed his finger at her, and she knew they would meet again soon.

But she didn't care. The beast was gone. That's all that mattered.

Arisa closed her eyes and fell to her knees. *I have avenged them. Now Papa and Brody can finally sleep in peace.*

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Iulian Ionescu was born and raised in Bucharest, Romania, where he earned his Bachelor's in Finance. He moved to the US during 2001, and became a CPA. He's an aspiring sci/fi and fantasy writer and lives in New Jersey with his wife and son.

He blogs at www.fantasyscroll.com and www.iulianionescu.com.