



LUCA DI FULVIO

THE

Girl

WHO

REACHED
FOR
THE STARS

In the territory of Adria

They'd disembarked at a rickety pier. The coxswain had pointed an arm towards the northeast, saying: "Venice." Then, as the sailors hurried away, anxious to glean their share of the spoils before their fellow crewmen, he'd pointed again to the northeast and shouted: "Path. Two miles. Locanda dell'Orso." And then he smacked himself twice on the head. "Yellow cap! Jews!"

Yitzak and Yeoudith stood still, watching the shallop disappear into the fog. Now they were alone in a world. Yitzak extended his arm towards the northeast and said, mocking the coxswain's voice, "City, Venice."

The girl laughed, but she looked all around, bewildered.

"*Ribbonò shel olàm*, the Lord of the World shelters us in the shadow of his wings," Yitzak reassured her. "Don't worry."

Yeoudith pointed her own arm towards the northeast and repeated, "Locanda dell'Orso. Food."

Yitzak smiled at her, with a shamefaced expression. "I'm sorry, dear one. We're not going to the Locanda dell'Orso."

"But ...why?"

"The captain probably didn't think those three trunkloads of rocks were amusing. I made him concentrate on those trunks, thinking there was treasure he could seize. That way he wouldn't want to slit our throats. Do you understand?"

"No ..." Yeoudith's voice was thin, stifling a sob, as she saw her father's face through a scrim of tears.

Yitzak embraced her. "Dear child, they might decide to come back, disembark, look for us at the Locanda dell'Orso and make us pay. And we don't want to let a stinking band of Macedonians get the better of us, do we?"

Yeoudith shook her head, finally weeping. "No ..."

"Good. And that's why we should go where they won't be looking for us."

"But where?"

"Far from Venice."

"But -"

"And in a few days we'll come back. As itineraries go, yes, it's a bit twisted, but much healthier, don't you think?"

Yeoudith nodded, pressing her face against her father's shoulder. She sniffled.

"Are you getting snot on my cloak?"

Yeoudith jumped away from him. "Father! That's disgusting! You should have had a boy, a son!"

"Did you smear me with nosedrip or not?"

"Of course not!"

"No?"

"No!"

"Must I look and make sure?"

"Father!" A timid smile appeared on Yeoudith's frightened face.

"Come here," said Yitzak.

"No ..." But slowly she did draw near, swaying slightly, hands clasped behind her back.

Yitzak drew something out of his velvet bag, then passed it to his daughter. "You heard him, didn't you?" He gave himself two taps on the head. "Yellow cap. Jews." Then, with a kind of solemnity he pulled one onto his own head and waited for his daughter to do the same. "From this moment on, we're officially European Jews," he said. "And from now on my name is Isaac da Negrofonte and yours is Giuditta."

"Giuditta ...?"

"A beautiful name."

"Yes ..."

"And you are beautiful, too, even with that ridiculous object on your head."

Giuditta blushed.

"Ah, no, eh! Please! Don't, don't do those girlish things, I can't bear it," said Isaac.

Giuditta looked at her father, trying to see if he were joking.

"I'm not joking."

Giuditta blushed again. "I'm sorry, I'm not doing it on purpose," she said.

Isaac muttered something, almost a grunt, and raised his eyes to the heavens. Then he pointed to a narrow muddy path that led westwards. "This has to go someplace." But first he left footprints on the path that led to the Locanda dell'Orso and then came back, walking on the grassy verge. "They'll be drunk and they'll be angry. They won't even notice. But it's always best to do everything the right way, remember that."

"Where did you learn these things, father?" Giuditta asked.

"Some things, you don't need to learn," said Isaac, embarrassed. He turned westward, being careful not to walk on the muddy path. "Stay right behind me. We'll walk in the reeds for a while so that we don't leave any ..."

He heard a thud, a watery splash, and a stifled cry.

Isaac turned back.

Giuditta had stepped off the path and now her whole left leg was soaked.

"Ah! What a nuisance you are!" Isaac scolded. He grabbed her and hoisted her onto solid ground. Then, sensing he'd hurt her feelings, he gestured clumsily and muttered, "I was only ... joking."

"Really? I'm sorry, was I supposed to laugh?" Giuditta said coldly. "Can we go on now?"

Isaac stared at her, his breath swelling inside him, but he restrained himself and walked on. But he'd only taken a few steps before he stopped. He turned towards his daughter, snorting like a bull. Now it was his own face that was deeply flushed. "Oh, all right!" he barked. "I wasn't joking! Happy now?"

Giuditta looked at him in silence. She was trying to be proud, but her father could read the fear in her eyes.

Isaac thought that she looked amazingly like her mother. And he thought what a shame it was that Giuditta had never known her.

"I'm sorry. I don't know how to behave with a daughter. I should have raised you myself, but I didn't. That's just the way it was. But now can we put it to rest?"

Giuditta lifted one eyebrow.

"Would that be a yes or a no?"

Giuditta shrugged. "Yes."

"Good," growled Isaac, feeling guilty. He turned away and started to walk again. "And mind where you put your feet," he said sharply. "I mean –" he corrected himself, biting his lips because of the rude tone he'd used, "try to keep up with me." He took a deep breath. "I mean ... if you can ... Here, do you understand me or not?"

No answer from Giuditta.

Isaac turned to her. "Do you understand?"

"Yes."

They walked on in silence for a good mile. Then the path widened into an equally muddy road. The sun was at the horizon now, pale and veiled in mist.

During that whole mile Giuditta hadn't stopped thinking for a single instant about a question that haunted her. A question that she'd already asked many times in her own head, from the time she was a little girl.

"Father ..."

"What?"

She couldn't count how many times she'd wanted to ask him, but she'd always been afraid. Afraid of asking. Afraid of the answer. Afraid of losing the little that she had.

"Father ..."

"Speak up, what is it?" asked Isaac impatiently.

Giuditta gazed all around her. She looked at the unfamiliar world that was offering them a new life. She looked at her father's shoulders. He'd brought her with him. He hadn't gone off alone.

Giuditta took a deep breath. She could feel her heart beating in her throat. "Father, I have to ask you a question," she said suddenly in a little, trembling voice, with her eyes shut. And she went on, quickly, before yielding to the hammering of her fear, before Isaac could turn around: "Are you angry with me because I killed my mother? That's why I grew up with Nonna and never got to see you, isn't it?"

Isaac was about to turn and look at her but the question chilled him. He slumped, as if from a huge and unexpected blow. He couldn't turn around. He felt a great lump in his stomach.

“Keep moving,” he managed to say, but he couldn’t bring himself to look at her. “It’s getting dark, and ... hurry, we have to walk.” He went on a few steps, and then began to speak in his rasping voice. Without looking at his daughter who was following him, her head bent. “Your mother died in childbirth. You didn’t kill her. There’s an enormous difference, and I hope you can understand that — feel it inside yourself. I never thought you — I wasn’t there because ... well, I was leading a kind of life that — the life I’ve told you about. Or some parts of it. And your nonna, your mother’s mother, she took care of you — not because I didn’t want to see you but because I trusted her ... and you ... you ...” Isaac stopped. He still couldn’t make himself turn and look at her. He heard Giuditta draw in one sharp breath. And only in that moment did he manage to see his daughter, whom he’d always thought of as independent, for what she was: a child who’d grown up believing that her father hated her. “How could I have been so stupid ...” he said softly. He took a small step forward, then cried “I don’t know!” almost shouting it, and came to a sudden halt.

Giuditta had kept on walking, and, so that she wouldn’t stumble against her father, she stretched out one hand and rested it against his back. But feeling him stiffen, she jerked it away as if it burned, murmuring “Sorry.”

“No,” said Isaac.

They stood there, not moving. Isaac incapable of turning. Giuditta with the hand that had touched her father still upraised in mid-air.

“I’ve told you that my father was a doctor ...” Isaac began, knowing that this story was going to awaken a sorrow that he didn’t want to confront. “He was skilled, the best doctor on the island of Negroponte. The personal physician to the *bailo*, the Venetian governor. I myself never saw that world ... I was born in 1470, when the Turks occupied the island and drove the Venetians out. They didn’t kill my father. They let him keep on being a doctor, but he had to stay inland, where only poor folk, shepherds, lived. And he adapted to that life, dying there, storing up rage and nostalgia for the life he’d had before. He was the proudest, most haughty, demanding, stubborn man who ever lived ...” Isaac paused. “Does that remind you of anyone you know?” He smiled sadly, thinking of himself.

Giuditta touched her father’s back, timidly. “No,” she said.

Isaac felt a twinge of emotion in his breast. And a sensation of warmth, where Giuditta’s hand had touched him. “For years he made us live in a filthy hut, my mother and me, and my three brothers, and two goats that gave us milk. The people he treated had no means of paying him. But every evening he spoke of nothing but Venice, the gold and the high civilization, the brocades and rare spices. He taught us to speak Venetian, too, the bastard. He pulled teeth, he delivered babies and lambs, he could castrate cattle, and chop off a Christian’s infected limb. A barber, in short.

He, the great doctor to the bailo of Venice. And he took me with him ... because, he said, I was the only one of his sons who wasn’t afraid of blood. And then, out of spite, that bastard would tell people, ‘This son of mine has no fear of blood because he doesn’t have a heart.’ And do you know why he said that? Because he’d found out that I was surviving any way I could, hanging around the port to get food, even if I had to steal it, for my

mother who was growing weaker and weaker. But he ... would never compromise. Not he, not the noble doctor to the bailo of Venice ... not that bastard ...”

Giuditta drew closer to him and clasped him from behind, resting her head against his thin back.

Isaac tightened his lips, frowning, trying to hold back the tears of rage he felt surging behind his eyes. “Then one day I left. I’d invented the saint’s legend, and the Qalonimus. And I met your mother. She’d been cast out of her house by a father like my own. Perhaps that’s why I understood her, why I knew the way she felt. And one year later, she was ready to give birth to our first child ... you. But something went wrong. The midwife ...”

Isaac bent over in pain. “Oh, Lord of the World, help me to bear it!”

Giuditta crouched beside him, not letting go.

“How could an innocent newborn babe possibly kill her own mother?” Isaac said in a voice raw with emotion. “Not even if she wanted to. Whatever put that into your head, my daughter? But I ... I couldn’t help her ... even though I thought I’d learned everything the great bastard, the bailo’s famous doctor could teach me ... yes, I killed her. If anybody killed her, I, I’m the one!” Isaac straightened and found the strength to turn towards his daughter. He held her face between his hands. “I told myself that I couldn’t stay at home because of the difficult life I led ...” He gave her a melancholy smile. “I told you that same lie just a little while ago ...” He drew Giuditta to him. He couldn’t bear to look into her eyes for long. “I couldn’t stay with you because I felt such guilt towards you, for having deprived you of your mother.”

They clung to each other in silence.

“Father –”

“Hush, child ... there’s nothing to say.”

They stayed clasped in their embrace. Isaac with his pain and the guilt he had just now been able to admit for the first time. Giuditta with her father, who was so different from how she’d always believed him to be. True, he was a charlatan and a cheat. But he didn’t blame her for her mother’s death.

“Father,” said Giuditta again, after a long time.

“Hush ... you don’t need to say a thing.”

“But father, I do.”

“Then say it.”

“These mosquitoes are eating me alive.”

Isaac pulled away. “You look like your mother, but your mind works like mine,” he said, with a rich laugh. Then, hugging her again, “Come, it’s time to go on. We’re behaving like two females.”

“I am a female.”

“Ah, so you are!” Isaac laughed again, pulling Giuditta’s cap down to her eyes. “Mind where you put your feet, troublesome creature.”

The sun had just gone down when they came to an inn whose chimney was pouring out thick smoke. The front wall bore the fading likeness of an eel daubed in red paint. It looked more like a shabby sea monster. The door was shut.