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The five travellers on horseback on the rutted track to Pescara made everyone turn and stare: the woman who brought them weak ale in a roadside inn; the peasant building a hewn stone wall by the side of the road; the boy trailing home from school to work in his father's vineyard. Everyone smiled at the radiance of the couple at the front of the little cavalcade, for they were beautiful, young, and – as anyone could see – falling in love.

'But where's it all going to end, d'you think?' Freize asked Ishraq, nodding ahead to Luca and Isolde as they rode along the ruler-straight track that ran due east towards the Adriatic coast.

It was golden autumn weather and, though the deeply scored ruts in the dirt road would be impassable in winter-time, the going was good for now, the horses were strong

and they were setting a fair pace to the coast.

Freize, a square-faced young man with a ready smile, only a few years older than his master Luca, didn't wait for Ishraq's response. 'He's head over heels in love with her,' he continued, 'and if he had lived in the world and ever met a girl before, he would know to be on his guard. But he was in the monastery as a skinny child, and so he thinks her an angel descended from heaven. She's as golden-haired and beautiful as any fresco in the monastery. It'll end in tears, she'll break his heart.'

Ishraq hesitated to reply. Her dark eyes were fixed on the two figures ahead of them. 'Why assume it will be him who gets hurt? What if he breaks *her* heart?' she asked. 'For I have never seen Isolde like this with any other boy. And he will be her first love too. For all that she was raised as a lady in the castle, there were no passing knights allowed, and no troubadours came to visit singing of love. Don't think it was like a ballad, with ladies and chevaliers and roses thrown down from a barred window; she was very strictly brought up. Her father trained her up to be the lady of the castle and he expected her to rule his lands. But her brother stole everything and she was bundled into a nunnery. These days on the road are her first chance to be free in the real world – mine too. No wonder she is happy.

'And anyway, I think that it's wonderful that the first man she meets should be Luca. He's about our age, the most handsome man we've – I mean – *she's* ever met; he's kind, he's really charming, and he can't take his eyes off her. What girl *wouldn't* fall in love with him on sight?'

'There is another handsome young man she sees daily,'

Freize suggested. 'Practical, kind, good with animals, strong, willing, useful … and handsome. Most people would say handsome, I think. Some would probably say irresistible.'

Ishraq delighted in misunderstanding him, looking into his broad smiling face and taking in his blue honest eyes. 'You mean Brother Peter?' she glanced behind them at the older clerk who followed leading the donkey. 'Oh no, he's much too serious for her, and besides he doesn't even like her. He thinks the two of us will distract you from your mission.'

'Well, you do!' Freize gave up teasing Ishraq and returned to his main concern. 'Luca is commissioned by the Pope himself to understand the last days of the world. His mission is to understand the end of days. If it's to be the terrible day of judgement tomorrow or the day after – as they all seem to think – he shouldn't be spending his last moments on earth giggling with an ex-nun.'

'I think he could do nothing better,' Ishraq said stoutly. 'He's a handsome young man, finding his way in the world, and Isolde is a beautiful girl just escaped from the rule of her family and the command of men. What better way could they spend the last days of the world, than falling in love?'

'Well, you only think that because you're not a Christian, but some sort of pagan,' Freize returned roundly, pointing to her pantaloons under her sweeping cape and the sandals on her bare feet. 'And you lack all sense of how important we are. He has to report to the Pope for all the signs that the world is about to end, for all the manifestations of evil in the world. He's young, but he is a member of a most important

order. A secret order, a secret papal order.'

She nods. 'I do, so often, lack a sense of how very important men are. You do right to reproach me.'

He heard, at once, the ripple of laughter in her voice, and he could not help but delight in her staunch sense of independence. 'We *are* important,' he insisted. 'We men rule the world, and you should have more respect for me.'

'Aren't you a mere servant?' she teased.

'And you are – a what?' he demanded. 'An Arab slave? A scholar? A heretic? A servant? Nobody seems to know quite what you are. An animal like a unicorn, said to be very strange and marvellous but actually rarely seen and probably good for nothing.'

'Oh, I don't know,' she said comfortably. 'I was raised by my dark-skinned beautiful mother in a strange land to always be sure who I was – even if nobody else knew.'

'A unicorn indeed,' he said.

She smiled. 'Perhaps.'

'You certainly have the air of a young woman who knows her own mind. It's very unmaidenly.'

'But of course, I do wonder what will become of us both,' she conceded more seriously. 'We have to find Isolde's godfather's son, Count Wladislaw, and then we have to convince him to order her brother to give back her castle and lands. What if he refuses to help us? What shall we do then? However will she get home? Really, whether she's in love with Luca or not is the least of our worries.'

Ahead of them, Isolde threw back her head and laughed aloud at something Luca had whispered to her.

'Aye, she looks worried sick,' Freize remarked.

'We are happy, *inshallah*,' she said. 'She is easier in her

mind than she has been in months, ever since the death of her father. And if, as your Pope thinks, the world is going to end, then we might as well be happy today, and not worry about the future.'

The fifth member of their party, Brother Peter, brought his horse up alongside them. 'We'll be coming into the village of Piccolo as the sun sets,' he said. 'Brother Luca should not be riding with the woman. It looks . . .' He paused, searching for the right reproof . . .

'Normal?' Ishraq offered impertinently.

'Happy,' Freize agreed.

'Improper,' Brother Peter corrected them. 'At best it looks informal, and as if he were not a young man promised to the church.' He turned to Ishraq. 'Your lady should ride alongside you, both of you with your heads down and your eyes on the ground like maidens with pure minds, and you should speak only to each other, and that seldom and very quietly. Brother Luca should ride alone in prayer, or with me in thoughtful conversation. And anyway, I have our orders.'

At once, Freize slapped his hand to his forehead. 'The sealed orders!' he exclaimed wrathfully. 'Any time we are minding our own business and going quietly to somewhere, a pleasant inn ahead of us, perhaps a couple of days with nothing to do but feed up the horses and rest ourselves, out come the sealed orders and we are sent off to inquire into God knows what!'

'We are on a mission of inquiry,' Brother Peter said quietly. 'Of course we have sealed orders which I am commanded to open and read at certain times. Of course we are sent to inquire. The very point of this journey is not – what-

ever some people may think – to ride from one pleasant inn to another, meeting women; but to discover what signs there are of the end of days, of the end of the world. And I have to open these orders at sunset today, and discover where we are to go next and what we are to inspect.'

Freize put two fingers in his mouth and made an ear-piercing whistle. At once the two lead horses, obedient to his signal, stopped in their tracks. Luca and Isolde turned round and rode the few paces back to where the others were halted under the shade of some thick pine trees. The scent of the resin was as powerful as perfume in the warm evening air. The horses' hooves crunched on the fallen pine cones and their shadows were long on the pale sandy soil.

'New orders,' Freize said to his master Luca, nodding at Brother Peter, who took a cream manuscript, heavily sealed with red wax and ribbons, from the inside pocket of his jacket. To Brother Peter he turned and said curiously, 'How many more of them have you got tucked away in there?'

The older man did not trouble to answer the servant. With the little group watching he broke the seals in silence and unfolded the stiff paper. He read, and they saw him give a little sigh of disappointment.

'Not back to Rome!' Freize begged him, unable to bear the suspense for a moment longer. 'Tell me we don't have to turn round and go back to the old life!' He caught Ishraq's gleam of amusement. 'The inquiry is an arduous duty,' he corrected himself quickly. 'But I don't want to leave it incomplete. I have a sense of duty, of obligation.'

'You'd do anything rather than return to the monastery and be a kitchen lad again,' she said accurately. 'Just as I

would rather be here than serving as a lady companion in an isolated castle. At least we are free, and every day we wake up and know that anything could happen.'

'I remind you, we don't travel for our own pleasure,' Brother Peter said sternly, totally ignoring their comments. 'We are commanded to go to the fishing village of Piccolo, take a ship across the sea to Split and travel onwards to Zagreb. We are to take the pilgrim road to the chapels of St. George and St. Martin at Our Lady's church outside Zagreb.'

There was a muffled gasp from Isolde. 'Zagreb!' A quick gesture from Luca as he reached out for her – and then snatched back his hand, remembering that he might not touch her – betrayed him too.

'We travel on your road,' he said, the joy in his voice audible to everyone. 'We can stay together.'

The flash of assent from her dark blue eyes was ignored by Brother Peter who was deep in the new orders. 'We are to inquire on the way as to anything we see that is out of the ordinary,' he read. 'We are to stop and set up an inquiry if we encounter anything that indicates the work of Satan, the rise of unknown fears, the evidence of the wickedness of man, or the end of days.' He stopped reading and refolded the letter, looking at the four young people. 'And so, it seems, that since Zagreb is on the way to Budapest, and since the ladies insist that they must go to Budapest to seek Count Wladislaw, that God Himself wills that we must travel the same road as these young ladies.'

Isolde had herself well under control by the time Brother Peter raised his eyes to her. She kept her gaze down, careful not to look at Luca. 'Of course we would be grateful for

your company,' she said demurely. 'But this is a famous pilgrims' road. There will be other people who will be going the same way. We can join them. We don't need to burden you.'

The bright look in Luca's face told her that she was no burden; but Brother Peter answered before anyone else could speak. 'Certainly, I would advise that as soon as you meet with a party with ladies travelling to Budapest you should join them. We cannot be guides and guardians for you. We have to serve a great mission; and you are young women – however much you try to behave with modesty you cannot help but be distracting and misleading.'

'Saved our bacon at Vittorito,' Freize observed quietly. He nodded towards Ishraq. 'She can fight and shoot an arrow, and knows medicine too. Hard to find anyone more useful as a travelling companion. Hard to find a better comrade on a dangerous journey.'

'Clearly distracting,' Peter sternly repeated.

'As they say, they will leave us when they find a suitable party to join,' Luca ruled. His delight that he was to be with Isolde for another night, and another after that, even if it was only a few more nights, was clear to everyone, especially to her. Her dark blue eyes met his hazel ones in a long silent look.

'You don't even ask what we are to do at the sacred site?' Brother Peter demanded reproachfully. 'At the chapels? You don't even want to know that there are reports of heresy that we are to discover?'

'Yes, of course,' Luca said quickly. 'You must tell me what we are to see. I will study. I will need to think about it. I will create a full inquiry and you shall write the report and

send it to the lord of our order, for the Pope to see. We shall do our work, as commanded by our lord, by the Pope, and by God Himself.'

'And best of all, we can get a good dinner in Piccolo,' Freize remarked cheerfully, looking at the setting sun. 'And tomorrow morning will be time enough to worry about hiring a boat to sail across to Croatia.'