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# FORLÈNA

 EDIZIONI  
HELICON

## Chapter 1

“That’s enough! They’ve gone too far! And those damned Guelphs will see it! Insolent, presumptuous people!” exclaimed Guglielmino Degli Ubertini, his lips tense with an anger that had become irrepressible and which made every word as hard and heavy as a stone. He paced back and forth incessantly in the large and gloomy room of the bishop’s palace in the city of Arezzo. And his steps echoed restlessly and suddenly became louder, like the thoughts that are always colliding in the tormented minds of men. On the afternoon of April 10<sup>th</sup> in the year of Our Lord 1287, the faint light, everlasting companion of the short days of a newly born spring, entered the chilly room through those majestic glass windows and enveloped the severe profile of that now elderly man in his ecclesiastical clothing, where the red chasuble in gold damask fabric came to rest on the long, light-colored tunic. His gaze appeared at times darker due to his furrowed, gray eyebrows guarding two eyes as dark and sharp as pins. And then, his steps once again gave way to his voice that had become thunderous:

“Do they perhaps think they can knock us out? Drunk with pride! Have they already forgotten the Vespers

uprising that drove their beloved Charles of Anjou from the Sicilian lands? As if they didn't know that power has now slipped out of their hands!"

Duccio De' Tarlati da Pietramala and Bonconte da Montefeltro stared at him in silence. The bishop's nephew, Guglielmo Pazzo of the Pazzi del Valdarno family, stood further aside.

"Do they really have such a short memory that they only recall Tagliacozzo and Benevento?! Do they perhaps want another Montaperti?" the bishop continued shouting and slammed his righthand fist on the long dark table so hard that it trembled on its powerful lion-shaped feet, which seemed to roar in response to his voice. The amethyst that topped the gold ring on his ring finger accompanied that gesture, giving it, with its deep purple color, even more severity and strength.

"Your Most Illustrious Excellency will now understand why we felt it was urgent to see you and inform you in person of what happened," said Duccio De' Tarlati from Pietramala in a calm voice.

And he went on to say: "And most of all, you had to see with your own eyes what a mean trap they are preparing for you behind your back."

Duccio was a young man of twenty. Handsome in his bearing and facial features, he had the lively spirit that a twenty-year-old has and that the dark red velvet suit he was wearing seemed to want to hold back without succeeding.

"The name!" the bishop then said with an even sterner

tone than he had ever used.

“What did you say, Most Illustrious?!” Duccio replied to him.

The bishop came closer and stared at him.

“I want you to tell me the name of the spy who broke away from the ranks of the Guelphs to bring me such news!”

“Why, Excellency? Don’t you trust even us anymore?” Bonconte replied from behind him.

“What about it, uncle? Do you not even trust us? Is that true?” asked Guglielmo Pazzo.

“Oh, no! But just think about it: a traitor is always and for everyone an individual disliked by heaven and a danger for everyone he approaches!”

There was a moment of silence.

“Well? So, tell me his name!”

“You want his name...”.

“Yes! Because I fear him more than the one who stamped his ink on this paper! So, answer me!”

“So be it! The man who comes to save your life and the fate of all the Ghibellines of the lands of Arezzo and of all the many cities in complete friendship with it is...”.

Bonconte approached the bishop from behind him and, before Duccio De Tarlati could utter another word, he spoke:

“Maso degli Ardengheschi”.

The bishop closed his eyes, looking up.

“You can trust him, Excellency...” Duccio continued.

“Yes, uncle, I, too, believe you can,” said his nephew

firmly.

“Trust... trust...” the religious man laughed mockingly.

“Trust a traitor? Well, fate is putting us to the test!”

“And how did this letter get into your hands?” he asked, his eyelids still firmly closed.

“He delivered it to me, Excellency. I received an anonymous letter asking me to go to the old well, which is right next to the Abbey of San Fedele in Maiolo”.

“Did you go there even though a dangerous ambush could have awaited you?”

“I wasn’t alone. At a distance, five friends followed me, friends so trustworthy that I could even call them brothers.”

Guglielmino remained silent and resumed pacing the large room back and forth.

“I already know what you’re wondering: Why did he do it?”

The bishop stared at him for an instant yet did not stop his thoughtful pacing which took him from one wall of the room to the other, as if the rampant red lion had emerged from the gold of the Degli Ubertini coat of arms to tear all the enemies of the big family to pieces in a single gesture.

“I am sure that the Ardengheschi family does not put too much trust in the Guelph power and so, protecting themselves from the worst, have decided to act with a move that...”.

“You need not fear that man, I assure you!” Duccio continued, interrupting Bonconte’s story.

“Now, indeed, if only you want to, you will be able to decide the fate of our beloved town”.

Young Duccio admired the effect that his words had had on the bishop and, at the same time, glanced at the other silent guest, who was tensely watching that scene, standing, with one hand resting on the edge of the lighted fireplace.

Bonconte da Montefeltro, proud in his bearing, however, immediately took his eyes off his and turned towards the fire: The flickering orange flame hovered lively, as did the giant shadow that was projected on the walls of the room, which suddenly became almost dark.

In the silence that now housed the thoughts of the four men, it seemed as if one could hear both the memory and premonition of a new, inevitable clash between the two opposing factions. And in their minds, first, the cries of the infantrymen echoed, accompanied by the monstrous impact of the melee, and then the shaking ground under the hooves of the galloping cavalry; the neighing that rose high overhead and then the sound of the downward blows of the enormous swords, the sharp sound that the heavy blades made when they met and the more piercing sound of the air cut by the blows gone astray, mixed with the whinnying of the horses bent by the horror of death. And the shouts brought blood, and the blood flooded the battlefield every time. There, one would no longer be able to find and distinguish the Guelph or Ghibelline insignia. Shortly afterwards, everything disappeared, sucked into the unreal. Yet the

umpteenth mechanism of violence had already caught them in the gear-wheels that no one would ever have been able to stop. And so, each wooden tooth would have repositioned itself in its space and then left it and found it again, revolution after revolution, until, in an unstoppable, albeit slow, manner, it would complete its ruthless journey.

The bishop continued: "We welcomed them into our ranks when, instead, we could have wiped them out!" As he pronounced these last words, he cut through the air in front of him with the hand on which the intense purple of the amethyst reigned silent.

"Your generosity," replied Duccio De' Tarlati da Pietramala, "has had no limits, Excellency, if you think of the attacks by their militias on your castles, on your family! And yet..."

"Nevertheless, I wanted to grant them my trust! I wanted to believe that diabolical ambition of the people had not contaminated the Arezzo nobility!"

"The letter speaks clearly enough, Bishop!" Bonconte da Montefeltro suddenly said, removing his gaze for a moment from the cheerfully crackling fire. Bonconte was a thirty-seven-year-old man. The profile of his face was severe and his gaze became deep by virtue of the color of his eyes: The black of the iris stared out at his listener, instilling in him a fear no other commander possessed. And perhaps for this reason, he was considered a great leader, and the command of his troops could never have fallen from his hands, at least not until sudden death

should overtake him.

“Bonconte is right, uncle. You should listen to him!” exclaimed Guglielmo Pazzo.

He was a massive-looking man with a tough character. He loved the bishop very much, of whom he was indeed his nephew. Still, his dedication and loyalty towards him were such that it went beyond any blood bond which, moreover, had never in itself been a sure barrier to betrayal. And, after speaking, he waited for a response from his illustrious uncle, standing immobile in the dark green velvet vestment, which made his figure even more powerful in the gray evening light.

“Oh yes! No doubt, my nephew, of course!” the religious man said shortly afterwards and then went back to observing that paper in the candlelight on the table.

His eyes once again ran rapaciously over the lines that the traitor’s ink had imprinted thereon:

*“Guelph friends, now just a few hours separate us from the long-awaited moment! In two days, during Sunday mass, all of us, united in our hearts by the same insignia, will inflict on Bishop Guglielmino Degli Ubertini the fate of death that will take him away from the Ghibellines once and for all, just like the eagle that grasps the dragon in the coat of arms that we all love. And so, we will finally take back the city of Arezzo and the power we deserve. Always united till the end!”*

*Bencivenne Degli Arnolfi  
10 April A.D. 1287”*

The bishop looked up towards Bonconte, who spoke again: “Two days, bishop, only two days...”.

“Tell us, Excellency: What shall we do? The Ghibellines have long been shouting their wish to have your name to guide them. The power of the Guelphs is spreading like a bloodstain from a wound, and that wound is renewed every day, in the administration of our beloved city!”

“So it is, bishop. Thus, tell us: What must we do? Give the command, and we will be at your side!” exclaimed Duccio De’ Tarlati.

“We have been and will be again and forever!” stated Guglielmo Pazzo firmly.

The religious man clutched the letter in the fist of his right hand, where the amethyst shone in the firelight.

“Your Excellency, give us your order! And so will it be done”, said Bonconte in a firm, deep voice. Meanwhile, from the red brocade armchair, Duccio De’ Tarlati nodded and, turning his eyes first towards the bishop’s nephew and then towards the window, remained silent. Beyond the glass windows, the sky had become dark in the unsuspecting spring twilight, taking another day away to conceal it from the night.

## Chapter 2

Bonconte da Montefeltro, Duccio De' Tarlati da Pietramala, Guglielmo Pazzo De' Pazzi del Valdarno and Bishop Guglielmino Degli Ubertini now remained silent in the large, austere room of the palace, which had become dark except for the light from the fireplace and the candles on the dark table. The fire crackled, and along with it, the delicate, graceful flames swayed back and forth on their wicks, with each sway changing into the orange and red shape of a thought coming to mind and then vanishing in a single instant, shy, determined never to be seized.

“Now is the time to act!” the bishop shouted, deforming his mouth, which now, in that brown air, also became something different from itself. The thin, tense lips enveloped the dark hiding place of an old lion preparing for battle. And slowly they seemed to perceive that feline, proud and covered by his mane, getting back up on his feet once again to face anyone who dared challenge him or attack his power.

“Tell us, bishop! What are you going to do?” replied the young Duccio, in whom the impulsiveness characteristic

of that age too often overcame his demeanor. Bonconte, on the other hand, listened and observed the bishop without saying anything. In his apparent calmness, he seemed to be able to grasp every thought of that man, whose cassock habit barely kept him in check. His strong nature, in fact, re-emerged in the features of his face, in the movements of his hands, in the restless steps that tired even the mighty and majestic marble floor of the bishop's palace hall.

"Order, Most Illustrious Uncle! And so it will be done!" said Guglielmo Pazzo, rising from his red brocade chair, pounding his chest with his fist.

"Listen, then: we will call all the Ghibelline nobility to a secret consultation and then...".

He stopped for a moment.

Then, thrusting the letter towards them, he continued: "... This vile letter will be read! It will be all the Ghibellines of the lands of Arezzo and Montefeltro to decide the fate of the Guelphs!"

Bonconte, Duccio and Guglielmo nodded. Not a word, but merely a barely perceptible exchange of glances. The bishop took a piece of paper from the desk, a goose quill and the inkwell. The man's knuckled fingers grabbed the quill and dipped it into the black ink. The amethyst on his ring finger sternly followed his movements as he laid out first the letters and then the words on the paper, one next to the other, until a message had emerged from the difficult task of changing fate. Of course, anyone who had read it would have understood that only a very

serious event could be hidden between those few lines. The three men observed the prelate without saying anything the whole time. Only the crackling of the fire could be heard, which, unaware, was playing joyfully in the fireplace. And the sparks sometimes abandoned the red of the flames to hover above, light and incandescent, until they disappeared into the darkness. In the same way, every word that resounded within those high walls, which were at times to be seen painted and at other times clad in precious tapestries, should have vanished, never to be revealed, but not before having completed its mission with the force of the incandescent fire.

Guglielmino handed the letter to Bonconte and he read it out loud:

*“My most faithful,  
I ask you to meet up at midnight tomorrow night, April  
11th A.D. 1287, at the abbey of Sasso Simone in Carpegna.  
Guglielmino degli Ubertini  
Bishop of Arezzo”*

As soon as he had uttered those last words, he exclaimed:

“Your Excellency, why the Abbey of Sasso Simone? Wouldn’t it be better to choose a closer location? I think it’s quite reckless of you, for your person, to make such a long journey!”

“No, on the contrary!” snarled the bishop without even giving him time to finish the sentence.

“What is the reason for such a choice?” Duccio then said, “I agree with you, Bonconte!”

“I’m surprised you don’t understand!” the prelate chided them.

“Tell us then!” insisted the young Duccio De’ Tarlati.

“Yes, explain yourself, illustrious uncle! In this way, we will be able to carry out your orders better!” said Guglielmo Pazzo.

“The lands of Carpegna are safer than anywhere else! In fact, no one would possibly think, just as you did, that a secret consultation of the Ghibellines of Arezzo would take place on Montefeltro territory! And so, we will be your guests, Bonconte!”

“An unlikely route, bishop, no doubt unpredictable even for those who might intercept Maso Degli Ardengheschi’s move, or if, God forbid, all this is not really a trap, which, I seem to have perceived, you do not exclude at all!”

“That is the truth, Bonconte!”

“But what’s all this? You still have doubts about Maso’s sincerity and intentions?” Duccio exclaimed, approaching the other two. But they both remained silent and stared at him, a slight smile on their faces.

“And you, Bonconte? Do you no longer believe in the one who, risking his own life, tried to save ours?”

“My dear Duccio... anything can happen... and, even though a bit ago I supported you in heartening His Excellency and in persuading him to accept the truthfulness of that letter, it is necessary to be prudent... as you say, precisely to save our lives and especially that of our beloved bishop!”

“You must listen to him, Duccio! Bonconte is right! It is imperative that we make no mistakes!” said Guglielmo.

But the young descendant of the De “Tarlatti family remained silent, his mouth hanging slightly open as if he had run out of words to say forever or as if they had suddenly escaped him, leaving him speechless.

“So it is! Bonconte is right!” said Duccio, the religious one! You are still too young to understand the human soul and how easy it is for any whim of fancy to suddenly spring forth and make it change out of fear or self-interest!”

A few moments later, and the clergyman started writing again, etching the same words on other letters. Finally, after closing them, he held the sealing wax close to one of the candles and waited patiently, but with a stern frown, waiting for it to get soft and bright once again. Then, he dropped it in hot, rhythmic red drops onto the edge of the first letter. He then grabbed a ring and forcibly pressed it onto the wax. Once he had removed it, the terrible raging lion of the Ubertini appeared to everyone and now stood guard over the seal and seemed to come to life, moving its huge paws with sharp claws, ready to tear apart anyone who might oppose it along its path. And the same was done to all the letters. The clergyman divided the letters among the three to be delivered as quickly as possible.

“Now, this one...”, said Bishop Guglielmino, handing a letter to Duccio “... As you can see, this one is addressed to Count Guido Novello of the Guidi counts. We must

have his support at all costs: The strategic position of Poppi in the Casentino lands makes it a decisive town for the alliances of today and certainly also for those of the future...”.

A moment went by in silence.

“And here’s another letter that it is essential to deliver: It is addressed to Count Jacopo Bisdomini of Serravalle, the town that has always been our guardian over what happens beyond the Ghibelline lands north of the Casentino”, Bonconte, Guglielmo and the young Duccio nodded and then looked at each other, until the latter grabbed that letter, too.

“This one, on the other hand...,” and the cleric stopped. He closed his eyes, frowned, and let out a deep sigh.

“This last letter I’m giving you...”, he said, with his hand stretched out towards Bonconte, “... is the most important... It is, in fact, for Count Gòzzo Degli Adinardi of Forlèna. Without his support, nothing will be, if not possible, lasting and certain. Do you understand me?”

Guglielmo Pazzo nodded at those words that his uncle, the bishop, had pronounced in a firm voice.

“Oh yes, Excellency! The vastness of that family’s domains alone is enough to challenge my Montefeltro, with which, by good fortune, it has always been on friendly terms...” Bonconte replied.

“... And its borders face those of Poppi...”, exclaimed Duccio De’ Tarlati, lifting the letter addressed to Guido Novello Guidi and scrutinizing it as if, at that moment, he were holding the entire town he was talking about

between his fingers.

“Go, then! And both of you know you must wait until all the recipients have given you a certain response before you can return here!”

“Yes, without a doubt, bishop! It will be done as you say!”

And during that same night, they left. A hand covered by a black glove knocked at every Ghibelline palace. A creak announced the opening of the metal grill located in the centre of the heavy door. From the gloved hand, the white of the letter passed to another hand, while the sound of hooves and whinnings accompanied the figure wrapped in a black cloak that took off again, galloping away. And then, the same happened at the castles of the Ghibelline lands, and, among these, the three largest ones, where, to the sound of hooves and the insistent neighing of his steed, the messenger, wrapped in his black cloak, first heard a loud sound of chains falling rapidly and then the mighty wood of the drawbridge thunderously coming to rest on the brown ground. And so, all the letters reached the hands of their recipients.

## Chapter 3

The town of Forlèna loomed mightily on the clear blue horizon of that April day. Built on a green hillside in the early Middle Ages, the same ancient and inveterate walls still surrounded it, beautiful and solemn over the same valley that stretched out at its feet and over the lush, dense forests that covered the Casentino lands and dyed them green as far as the eye could see; these lands stretched west to the borders of the domains of Poppi to the south and Serravalle to the north, while to the east they reached as far as the border with Montefeltro. At the highest point, the castle of the family of the Degli Adinardi counts stood out, a family that had dominated the people of Forlèna for four centuries. The swallowtail battlements crowned the tower, which in turn, was surmounted by the emblems of the ancient noble family. And so, now as in centuries long gone by, the same coat of arms stood watch over the town and its inhabitants: a rampant black dragon with clawed paws and from whose jaws issued red tongues of fire that stood out vividly against the blue background. Below, under the elongated, lance-like tail, there were

two crossed swords with shiny, sharp blades. A legend told its origins to every newborn child in those lands so that they, in turn, could tell it to their children when they became adults. It was said that long, long ago, Rugèntus, an enormous creature in the shape of a lion having a red cloak with flecks of silver, whose piercing roar terrorized that miserable people freezing the blood of those who heard it, and then tore its merciless victims apart under the petrified gaze of the survivors. Until one day, the sky became lead-dark and lightning struck a majestic chestnut tree in the Casentino forests. Then, the loud flapping sound of wings was heard and a great shadow fell over the squalid houses and their inhabitants. Shortly afterwards, Forlènus appeared, the mighty black dragon born from the trunk of the huge chestnut tree in which a deep wound had thus remained forever. It set its clawed paws down on the ground, the air ringing loudly as the creature's large lanceolate tail thrashed around. It moved slowly around its feline nemesis, and the earth trembled at every step it took. In the light of day, the bark-like scales covering its body were seen, while fire spewed forth from its jaws. The fight was merciless, but the dragon finally managed to defeat the enormous lion-like creature with a tawny cloak. The joy of the people of those lands was so great that they all flocked around that very benevolent creature, which had freed them and thanked it with dances and songs. Then, in an instant, the dragon dissolved into a cloud of dust that yet retained the dragon's shape. Flapping its enormous

wings, Forlènus rose from the ground and disappeared among the trees of the forest. The enormous hole in the ancient, thick bark of the chestnut tree from which it had sprung forth led into an internal cavity of the tree, where it was said that, by remaining perfectly silent, one could hear the rustle of its immense wings.

In the celestial air of the morning of that 11<sup>th</sup> day of April 1287, the spring wind still forcefully waved the same banner of the town that had taken its name from it. And so, with each new gust, the black dragon of Forlèna reappeared, which had never fallen asleep, despite the passing of time. Menacing, severe, solemn, it was still ready to defend its people, promising merciless battle to anyone who dared challenge it.

Beyond the mighty walls, the town appeared in all its beauty, a precious stone in the center of a ring colored in vivid green by the branches of the huge trees of those boundless forests. Oaks, chestnuts, firs, holm oaks, ash and lime trees, and also elms, maples and beeches: Everything emanated strength and purity, all mixed together to generate that spark of the eternal which the rustling of the leaves kept alive. And so, as the wind blew, it carried the various scents of each of those barks up and away into the distance as the leaves rustled together in an ancient dance. And everything told about things that had happened far back in time, things of which the forest had been a silent witness: young soldiers who had gone into battle and who would never return, and others who instead, although reduced

to shadows of themselves or wounded, had been favored by fate; and then secret meetings between young lovers, the extraordinary courage of heroes, loyalty of trusted friends for whom the beautiful, strong branches had proudly served as a backdrop; but then, too, betrayals and vile ambushes that have always enveloped human life like a snake in its coils. Everything had remained imprinted in the secret circular rings of those majestic trunks.

And now, perhaps, they already knew who the two men were who, wrapped in heavy black cloaks, had hurriedly travelled the Casentino paths in the middle of the previous night, at the same time but in different directions, two black horses, one going towards Forlèna and the other towards a majestic and beautiful yet, at the same time, powerful and insidious place: the town of Poppi.

Was it another secret to be kept amongst the tallest branches of beech and fir trees? What if the wind had caught it together with the scent of leaves and wood? Wouldn't it have been more prudent to stash it safely in the bristly burr on the branches of the chestnut tree?

The forest may already know everything. Maybe it was the wind, whistling wildly that morning, that had revealed to it some unknown, new and terrible things. Meanwhile, the industrious black woodpecker, with its undaunted tapping on the bark of the old trees, was part of a longed-for voice that rose from the dark earth to the clear blue spring sky. The solemn echo of the hawk's cry

was heard, while the roe deer and fallow deer moved furtively from one trunk to another. Then the silence was no longer silence, but the life of creatures that seemed eternal, an enchantment never revealed that was still reflected in the same small stream, awakened from the sleep of the snow and proudly cut through the path and tinkled pure, and nourished and quenched the thirst of the undergrowth and then continued on downstream, where the juniper and raspberry and blueberry bushes were waiting for it. And right where the sun barely filtered through, on that April morning, a few veils of white crystals here and there were still visible, a reminder of how harsh the winter just gone by had been. Water, wind, footsteps, moved sticks, beating wings, sky: everything echoed and grew bigger covering the entire forest in a single instant, and slivery rays of light made their way through the leaves shaken by the gusts that disheveled the tallest branches. But the night belonged to the wolf. While the owl watched in silence, its howl broke down any defense, went beyond centuries-old walls, called the strength of the unknown from the darkness, made men's souls tremble with fear and managed to awaken even the black dragon which, from the blue of the dense forest made gloomy by the darkness, it seemed to open its flaming eyes as tongues of fire spewed forth, alive, from its battle-ready jaws.

## Chapter 4

In the middle of the Casentino forests, the castle of Forlèna looked imposing, proudly lifting its five towers towards the sky. The largest was located in the center of a square drawn by the four sister towers joined together by powerful masonry arms. Access to each of the five towers was via a spiral brick staircase that went up from the castle's inner courtyard. The Ghibelline swallow-tail merlons then crowned that impregnable, strong castle and concealed the wall walk that ran along the entire internal perimeter; on top of the main tower, from the wind-swept banner, the eye of the never-dormant dragon of the great Degli Adinardi family had been watching over the town, the boundless lands and the forests that surrounded it to its furthest borders for centuries. A deep moat defended the castle and, with its deep, dark waters, made it look like a jewel resting on a pedestal that no one could or dared touch. In this way, the symbol of Forlèna remained jealously guarded from the world beyond the border and from time, which inexorably takes away breath and existence. It happened that first, a creak and then a crashing, metallic noise announced

the opening of the heavy drawbridge. And on it, the hooves of the trotting horses thundered powerfully as they hit that very ancient yet still very solid wood until they faded away on the clay of the road that led to the town or on the pavement of the castle's inner courtyard. Shortly afterwards, the same sounds accompanied the thick chains which, again rotating on themselves, raised the bridge and finally closed the passageway, with a boom that each time made the surrounding land tremble and the dark water of the moat get rough, though just slightly. From the inner courtyard, the soldiers guarding the manor retreated to the armory which was on the ground floor. Next to it were the rooms that housed the servants, the cooks and the grooms, as well as the kitchens, the chapel, the cellars, the granary, and finally the stables. An ancient stone well was located on the right side of the courtyard and a bucket with which the servants drew water was hung by a thick, rough rope that was attached to the arch above. Numerous internal staircases, each drawing its own spiral, went up and met without ever touching and, when they got closer, they separated again to lead to the rooms on the main floor which followed one another along the corridors where footsteps echoed, breaking the silence. The dining room, the hall of honor and the large rooms used for ceremonies and banquets competed majestically in the decorations on their walls: motifs that were at times geometric and at times floral intertwined and coexisted, mixing their colors while waiting for the light to enter