

I senza cuore
(The Heartless Ones)

by

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THE FIFTH NIGHT OF THE NEW MOON – THE HEARTLESS

Caesarea, Palestine, August 1101

Commander Guglielmo the Cruel walked slowly along a long jetty in the port. It was late at night, and he wasn't tired. The bonfire lit on a distant tower couldn't lessen the darkness that, from a pitch-black sky, hung heavy all around him, both at sea and on land.

In the last three years, thanks to the weapons and war machines of his invention, he had made possible the conquest of the Holy City. He had carried out massacres that left piles of corpses in his wake, burned down entire villages, shed rivers of blood, and cut off countless heads. Unaided, he and his men had conquered Caesarea, where a thousand Arab merchants holed up in the Great Mosque had paid him an enormous ransom in return for their lives.

But all of this was in the past. Now it was time to leave.

He stopped, his gaze embracing his galley's broadside, mainmast, and the oars lined up along the parapets with their up-turned blades. Tomorrow it would weigh anchor and head for home. Against the black of the sky and the sea, it looked not so much like a ship as some quivering, ghostly contraption.

The conquest of Caesarea had yielded the Genoese immense spoils. The distribution had been fair and no one had been left out; Guglielmo's men had received a payment, in money and pounds of pepper, far richer than they had ever hoped.

But the most precious object of their loot had gone to him, and currently sat in the stern locker, that small room that, as commander, was his by right. Guglielmo was sure that at that very moment it was illuminating that space with its green light, similar to the color of a wave on a clear day, just before it curls in on itself and dissolves into foam.

Perhaps that was the reason he was putting off going on board. It wasn't easy being cooped up in that small space, so exposed to the glow of that hexagonal and slightly concave object. That light made him feel an anxiety whose cause he was unable to determine, and upon which he had no desire to reflect.

It was the height of summer: the night was warm, and a sort of hazy, grayish cloud was spreading across the moonless sky. The water lapped rhythmically against the poles of the jetty.

Initially, he wasn't even aware of the figure that was approaching. The man advanced cautiously, and not in straight line: perhaps he was hesitant, or it may simply have been a path that was safer and more protected by the darkness.

When Guglielmo saw that shadow come up onto the jetty, he unsheathed his sword and took a step forward, ready to fight.

But he soon discovered he was looking at an old man, bent under the weight of the years, with a bristly white beard divided into two parts of equal length and reddened eyes half concealed by thick, drooping eyelids. He wore a black skullcap on his bald cranium. One of his arms was trembling.

Guglielmo realized he had nothing to fear from him, and sheathed his sword.

"Thank you, commander," said the old man, recovering his composure.

"What do you want?"

"My name is Moises, I am a merchant."

"Jewish?"

"Yes."

"There has been no war between us."

"It is for this reason that I wish to speak to you."

"Tell me what you have to say, and do it quickly."

Guglielmo, who was absorbed in his thoughts and had sought out that nocturnal solitude, was irritated by the man's presence.

"Quickly," he repeated.

"It concerns that green hexagonal vase that you took as booty from one of the merchants trapped in the Great Mosque, a structure which was once the royal palace of our King Herod, and where you have now planted your crosses ..."

"Now it is consecrated to Christ our Lord and to the true God."

"The true God ..." muttered the old man, shaking his head.

"What is it you want, out with it and be gone."

"It is not of the true God that I wish to speak."

"Then what?"

"The green vase ..."

"Emerald ..."

“Are you sure?”

“There is nothing else like it in the world. It glows as though it were not of this world, as though angel potters had crafted it in Heaven.”

“That vase is estimated to be worth a fortune, I know. It sparkles like an emerald and its craftsmanship is perfect, agreed, it’s also beautiful, I’ll grant you, but ...”

The old man fell silent. He looked around, as though afraid someone might hear him.

“Go on!”

“It is not what you think.”

“What do you mean?”

“The Arab merchant, Ali Rahman, the richest man in Caesarea: I know him. Did he not tell you and Patriarch Daimbert that this vase was a gift from the Queen of Sheba to Solomon ...?”

“Yes, that is what he told us, and Daimbert rejoiced, because it is the same one in which Christ ate the lamb at the Last Supper, it is the holiest relic in the world ...”

“This is not so, I assure you this is not so. The Arabs lie, even more than us Jews ...”

“How do you know? Who are you to know such truths?”

“I am Moises Ben Yoshua. Remember my name, and what I am about to tell you: the green vase you have among your spoils is a copy, produced by master artisans in the service of the Caliph of Egypt, a copy, nothing more ...”

“It isn’t true, it’s not possible.”

“Believe what I tell you, commander.”

The old man made as if to touch Guglielmo’s arm, but the latter quickly withdrew.

“Why should I believe you?”

“... because I know, because my father’s father’s father knew, that the authentic vase, the one made of emerald, the Queen of Sheba’s gift to Solomon, has taken a completely different route. It certainly did not remain in Palestine for a thousand years ... just think of it ... For a thousand years.”

“What do you know?”

“I have come here to tell you.”

“Speak.”

“Well, commander, you Genoese have become quite rich, and I humbly ask you for a small sum in exchange for telling you what I know.”

“How much do you want?”

“A bezant will suffice.”

“That isn’t cheap.”

“It is for you, commander.”

“Let’s hear what it really is, and I’ll give it to you.”

“The real emerald vase took a road that leads far away from here. My brothers scattered around the ghettos of Europe, merchants like myself, have often heard talk of its passage, have tried to follow its trail, but have never been able to reach it. But they know – pay close attention to what I am about to tell you - that it first landed in the lands of the Franks, then travelled north, further and further north, passing through Brittany, Cornwall, all the way to the island of the Angles. He who bore it with him was a member of the Sanhedrin, Joseph born in Arimathea, between Jerusalem and Jaffa, from whom it passed to his sister Enige and her husband Hebron, and from them to their descendants. Then all trace of it vanished, no one truly knows where the emerald vase is anymore, but one thing is certain: people will always search for it.”

“Why?”

“For this reason: he who possesses that vase possesses dominion over the entire world.”

“Dominion is the fruit of ships and war machines.”

“You are mistaken, commander.”

“Silence ...”

“That vase is far more powerful ...”

“You’re lying, you’re making up ridiculous stories.”

“Believe me ... you are mistaken, and you have been deceived.”

“I have heard enough.”

These words were pronounced like an order. But the old man did not obey.

“... you have been tricked by that Arab merchant from the Great Mosque. Ali Rahman is astute, he could fool anyone; you are leaving here with nothing, nothing but a worthless copy ...”

The old man laughed throatily, a sound more similar to a fit of coughing.

“You are the one who is deceiving me ...”

“No, believe me ... I have told you the truth.”

Moises extended his arm toward Guglielmo, the palm of his hand cupped.

“I would like to be paid, my lord.”

Guglielmo stood motionless. That old man and his words had filled him with a sense of revulsion that had become unbearable.

“We agreed on a bezant,” said Moises, his tone of voice firmer now.

“I’ve allowed you to speak for far too long.”

“No, commander, no ...”

“And now you shall get your just reward.”

Guglielmo the Cruel pulled out his sword and for no particular reason, without animosity, guided by some obscure instinct, by a sudden, cold rage, plunged it into the belly of the old man, who dropped dead on the jetty, his skullcap falling to the ground and rolling down into the water, where it disappeared into the darkness of that moonless night.

He had carried out so many massacres during his time in the Holy Land that one more dead body made no difference to him whatsoever.

He climbed up the gangway onto the galley’s stern, where his room was located. Ducking through the hatch, he stepped inside.

He gazed at the hexagonal emerald vase, glowing in that narrow space like the last star in a firmament wiped clean. It couldn’t be a fake, the fruit of deception.

Eventually he fell asleep, without giving a second thought to the old, defenseless Jewish merchant he had killed.

For that night, at least.

Genoa, The First of March, Fifteen Years Later

Bonifacio Centurione left his palazzo in front of the Porta Sottana, arm in arm with his young wife Ermellina. It always pleased him for the people of the city to see him walking with her.

With her haughty stride, long blonde braided hair, wispy silk tunic and the fur coat that shielded her from the wind, she deflected people's attention from her husband's uncertain stride and nearly bald head, nearly concealing them completely.

Many men's eyes lingered longingly on Ermellina. Bonifacio was aware of it, and he wasn't jealous; the truth was that this attention infused him with an unspeakable form of pride.

They set off toward the port, where Bonifacio possessed numerous warehouses. Many of the ships docked along the wharves were his as well. His fleet included none of those thin-hulled galleys whose agility made them easy to maneuver in battle, but was composed of big-bellied, stocky vessels designed for loading freight and wide enough for the structures necessary for horse transport. Bonifacio had no love for war, having never taken to the sea to capture other vessels, or even fired a crossbow. All that mattered to him were the profits from trade and commerce. And what he admired about Guglielmo the Cruel were certainly not his exploits beneath the walls of Jerusalem and Caesarea, but the riches he had brought back.

The *Grifona* suddenly came into view. The galley with the Embriaci family's coat of arms towered over the others with taller mainmast and longer, more powerful hull.

"It's a beautiful ship," said Ermellina, "but we can build better ones, can't we?"

Bonifacio didn't reply. He owned an entire fleet and traded merchandise of every kind; he built and sold the crossbows that had made the Genoese invincible throughout the Mediterranean. But despite his riches, the Centurione was still unable to compete with the other families for power in the city. He had long been aware of this, but since his second marriage to the young Ermellina, he had begun to obsess over it.

"Look ..." he said to his wife, pointing to the galley's rostrum, whose tip displayed a crest in which a lion and an eagle united to form a griffon, a monstrous creature

multiplying within itself the ferocity of the two animals, the regal power of one on land and the other in the sky.

Bonifacio bowed his head and looked away, as if suddenly assailed by a vague fear.

Up to the present, the Centurione family had been an ally of the Embriaci, to which Guglielmo the Cruel, owner and commander of the *Grifona*, belonged.

Bonifacio had not followed Guglielmo on any of the expeditions to the Holy Land, but he had financed the construction of the ships and entrusted him with great quantities of merchandise. And he had allowed his younger brother, Lorenzo, to depart for the East with Guglielmo. But the Centurione had not earned nearly enough from those enterprises. When the spoils of the last campaign were distributed in Caesarea, his idealistic brother had settled for mere crumbs.

Times were changing, and the moment had come for the Centurione family to take its rightful share of power in the city, to build a tower, to have an armed retinue. Ermellina urged her husband to move quickly.

“What does Guglielmo plan to do with this new galley?” Ermellina asked.

“That’s what we’re all asking ourselves. Hasn’t he already conquered and gained enough? He held the position of consul, acquired possessions and whole cities for his family overseas, it’s time he let others have their turn ...”

“Us, for example,” said Ermellina, squeezing her husband’s arm.

“He’s a strange man, and some say he’s possessed by the Devil. He was certainly generous in donating the emerald vase to the church of San Lorenzo, almost incomprehensibly generous, but now he’s always sullen, hostile when contradicted, unsatisfied by anything he receives ... and now he’s about to depart for an unknown destination. I know that the families allied with his, the Malocello, the Spinola, the Piccamiglio, the Della Volta, have all invested in arming the *Grifona*. But I decided against it, I don’t want to have my hands tied ... I want to be free ...”

Ermellina laughed, with that high-pitched laugh that Bonifacio found so seductive. She was attracted to Guglielmo and the rumors of terrible ferocity in battle, to his monstrous coat of arms, to his thirst for adventure. But it was clear to her that her new family had nothing more to gain by remaining his ally, for it would forever remain in his shadow. And she had been to make this perfectly clear to Bonifacio, though she pretended it was his idea.

“You’re right to want to establish new alliances ...”

“With prudence, however. I don’t want to make enemies of all the friends of the Embriaci. Which is why I’ve strengthened our bonds to the Fieschi.”

“Yes, and I like the cat on their coat of arms.”

“The cat is a clever creature ...”

“And so are we,” Ermellina said confidently.

Bonifacio smiled. He was a gentle man, and as such he was easily influenced by the forceful energy of those around him.

“You just have to keep that reckless daughter of yours under control.”

“Don’t say that about her. Giannetta lost her mother and she was raised by servant women, she does not yet know the world.”

“Giannetta is out of control, admit it, she never obeys and always has a sarcastic comment for everyone. She threw a terrible tantrum when you told her about the engagement, and she continues to show hostility toward the marriage, the groom and even the groom’s father. She hasn’t participated in any of the preparations, leaving me to do everything. You cannot allow her to ruin things ...”

“Everything will go according to plan, you’ll see, it’s only a few days away.”

“It’s crucial that Giannetta marry a Fieschi: there’s no alliance more solid than one sealed by a marriage.”

“Everything will work out, you’ll see.”

“You always say, ‘You’ll see’; you weren’t firm enough with your daughter, you need to force her to obey me, whether she likes it or not.”

“She’s my daughter, I ...”

Bonifacio was about to say that he couldn’t help loving her. But he stopped, noticing that Ermellina’s face was beginning to darken. His young wife had a powerful hold over him. And the importance of a new bond with the Fieschi was far more important than any sentiment or paternal comprehension.

“And I’m your wife, and I’m telling you that only with new alliances, only with the Fieschi on our side, can we achieve what we desire, and Giannetta is not going to stop us.”

The couple continued walking in the direction of the *Grifona*.

The sun was still high in the sky, a late-winter sun that cast a tepid light on the moored ships and the docks.

Suddenly Ermellina grabbed her husband’s arm, pulling him to her.

“Look down there, look,” she said, her voice low but agitated.

“What?”

“Don’t you see her? There’s your daughter, your dearest daughter, taking a stroll among the sailors and dockworkers, oblivious to her rank, her sex, to everything, look at her, with her hair down and that look of defiance ... I don’t know how you can tolerate her.”

“She’s my daughter ...” he repeated.

“Some daughter ... she’s wild, she likes horses more than men, she has the chest of a man, she even handles a bow like man. I pity the Fieschi who ends up with her,” Ermellina shot back with a laugh.

Giannetta Centurione was walking cautiously, quickly, as though she feared something, or was looking for something. She was slender and agile, not particularly tall in stature, with brown hair and light-colored skin with many freckles clustered around her cheekbones. Her irises were light blue, surrounded by an almost hazel-colored light. She stopped first at one warehouse, then another. Finally, she appeared to find what she was looking for and stepped inside. She saw neither her father, nor her stepmother; but even if she had, she certainly would not have run to greet them.

Off the coast of Balansiya, Spain, 28 March 1116.

The first night of the new moon.

On the first night of the new moon we had been sailing for more than three weeks. That was the night that Astor Della Volta was killed on the forecastle, and when the curse that followed us through to the end of our journey began to afflict our ship, ever-present like the wake left by the keel on the surface of the sea.

The *Grifona*, that was the name of our galley, had 192 souls on board, between officials, crossbowmen, sailors, free rowers, and slaves, packed in elbow to elbow along the oar benches, around the mainmast and foremast, on the long stretch between the forecastle and stern carriage. It was the largest galley ever launched from our shipyards, and the fastest as well: indistinguishable from the sky, it skipped over the waves of a black sea thanks to a wind that was finally favorable.

The slave rowers slept one against the other on the benches to which they were chained, while the free men were scattered around every corner of the bridge, protected by the overcoats that enveloped them from head to toe. They were exhausted, having skipped many a night's rest, and now they deserved one: thanks to their exertions, we had managed to outrun the ships of the Saracen pirates from Balansiya who were chasing us. Now the wind filling our sails and the thick darkness seemed to favor our escape.

That night only a couple of sailors had been awake in the vicinity of the mainmast: the lookout up in the crow's nest and the watch officer, Astor Della Volta.

It was the rowers who found his corpse at the beginning of the dawn shift.

He lay on the forecastle deck, face looking up toward the sky, white tunic covered with blood stains, and, the part which elicited the horrified cries from the first men to approach, his chest had been gouged open. There was a gash as large as a man's hand, irregular and gaping, a deep, red hole.

As all of us gradually caught a glimpse of that butchery, we struggled to believe our eyes: something was missing, in the bottom of the crater that had once been Astor Della Volta's chest.

In that shapeless and bloody mush, there was no heart.

It must have been extracted and taken elsewhere because there was no trace of it around the body. Astor Della Volta was the youngest officer on board, a member of one of the great Genoese families, whose bloody battles dictate the balance of power in the city. Nor was he merely the youngest officer: he was also the most admired, most hated, and the best looking. Even as a corpse, his facial features hadn't lost a sort of awful perfection; his dead eyes in particular, wide open, still shone in their azure brilliance like a pair of precious gems.

No one dared touch the body until the commander arrived. Meanwhile, from a safe distance, the chaplain, Father Rubaldo, had imparted a hurried benediction. He seemed annoyed to have to interrupt his feasting on a large piece of lard, given that the torments of Lent had only recently ended.

Lanfranco Piccamiglio, the second official, knelt motionless on the forecastle, on the side opposite to where the great pool of blood had formed. He held his face in his hands, sobbing.

He was the only one, on the entire galley. He was that murdered young man's only friend.

His crying, loud and convulsive, irritated the sailors, it made the grief too palpable. You must know that, within the confines of a ship, any dead body, whether it be a slave, a sailor or an official, is a far more uncomfortable presence than on dry land, and the others on board can't wait to be rid of it, to toss it into the sea that, from the dawn of time, has swallowed up and forgotten countless souls.

The commander, whom I personally informed of what had transpired, emerged from the stern locker, went up on deck and traversed the ship at a brisk pace. He paused briefly at the stays of the foremast. The sail was still quite full; the galley, insensitive as always to the life and death of those on board, raced over the waves with the Spanish coast off to the right.

He wore a tunic of tiraz, a fabric of silk and linen brought back from the East, and which he was particularly fond of because it depicted, among other animals, the lion and the eagle that together created the fearful hybrid of the griffon.

From now on I will simply call him Guglielmo, but under the walls of Jerusalem and Caesarea he had earned an awful reputation, with the nicknames of Guglielmo “the Cruel” and Guglielmo “the Hammer.” He was a member of the Embriaci family which now, thanks to him, was the most powerful in Genoa.

Guglielmo gestured at Lanfranco to get up and move away.

He climbed down to the forecastle and inspected the corpse, coming closer to it than anyone else had had the courage to do: fearlessly he peered into that cavity in his chest.

For a time he remained in this pose, as though petrified.

I had remained on the gangway at the fore beam, and thus I couldn’t see the expression on his face. But he was rooted to the spot. Perhaps he was thinking of Astor’s father, his same age and a friend; on the *Grifona* the commander only embarked men from allied families. Perhaps he was posing himself some questions, painful even before receiving their answers.

Having finished his breakfast, Father Rubaldo Pelle now wiped his mouth on his sleeve, raised his arms to the heavens and began yelling that only a sea dragon, a monster, some spawns of the Devil, could have carried out such a heinous act, that the sea was full of monsters that rise up from the darkest depths, with teeth capable to carving open a chest and removing a heart ...

Guglielmo’s open hand shot out toward him, demanding silence. It was clear that he was reflecting. That he knew he must now grapple with a new, horrible, and utterly unforeseen situation, and that he was preparing himself mentally to do so.

He called Cosma di Martino, the leader of the *Grifona*’s small team of crossbowmen, and ordered him to take his men and inspect the ship to see if any of its dark corners concealed either a blood-soaked knife, or the heart missing from Astor’s chest.

Cosma and his men moved quickly: four of them stayed on the bridge, shifting barrels and piles of rope, scouring the narrow space between one bench of oars and another and between the benches and parapets, while the rest went below deck.

Meanwhile the corpse of Astor Della Volta, with that horrendous crater in his chest, was still lying there uncovered. Guglielmo suddenly realized that he could

no longer leave it in sight of the crew; he ordered it to be wrapped up in canvas, then secured tightly with rope. He urged the sailors to work quickly.

Just the time for a sign of the Cross and a prayer from Father Rubaldo, and for Lanfranco Piccamiglio to kneel down in tears and embrace that long, narrow bundle containing, though it was difficult to imagine now, the body of his friend who had once been so beautiful.

Guglielmo ordered Lanfranco to move away, and the corpse was thrown into the sea.

The splash that kicked up from the water's surface, now colored by a band of pinkish reflections, was greeted by the sailors with a sigh of relief.

The forecastle was quickly washed down and all that blood disappeared.

The sun had risen.

But on the *Grifona*, nothing was ever the same again.

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Shortly after, on the stern carriage, Guglielmo gathered his lieutenant, Primo Spinola, the second official Lanfranco Piccamiglio, the head crossbowmen Cosma di Martino, the treasurer Bernardo Malocello, and the chaplain Father Rubaldo Pelle.

I, too, was there, and it's time I told you why.

I wasn't a part of the commander's circle. I didn't belong to a powerful family, the ones with coats of arms, towers, armed coteries and ships. This was my first voyage, and I was very still young, little more than a boy.

I was a scribe.

My task was to keep a diary of what happened on board, which I had begun doing on small pages of parchment from the day the *Grifona* had left the port of Genoa and pointed her prow to starboard, and which I would continue to do for the duration of our voyage.

It's thanks to those pages that I can recount this tale today. And despite everything that happened, I'm grateful to the Fates for placing me on that ship, for allowing me to bid farewell to the Castle of Monte Ursino and the church of San

Michele Arcangelo that overlook my town. I confess that I've never prayed to Saint Michael, but perhaps the archangel venerated by my father and mother protected me because I'm still here, to recount the gruesome and monstrous events I witnessed.

My name is Oberto da Noli.

And that is enough about me.

Once alone with his advisors, Guglielmo immediately began to speak. And my task as scribe grew far more complicated, because he ordered me to take down the minutes of the meeting, granting me the freedom to summarize in case of prolixity or digression, or if certain topics were not of crucial importance. It was quite a responsibility.

I was extremely attentive, noting even the expressions on those who spoke. The commander's countenance was dark, giving him a menacing air. He did not seem overly distraught at the loss of the young official, for whom he clearly had no particular love. He was tense, obliged for the first time to confront the mystery of a crime quite different from those that had often occurred on his ships, the fruit of drunken brawls or arguments over money.

Guglielmo, who had led many galleys back and forth across the Mediterranean, knew how important it was to keep order on board, however it was obtained. Everyone needed to know and keep their place, and nothing must distract the crew.

Yet that lacerated chest, that empty, bloody crater deprived of its heart, was not merely distracting the people on board, it was terrorizing them. From inside the thin, canvas walls of the carriage, it seemed you could almost hear the cursing and swearing of the men on deck.

"We succeeded in leaving one evil behind us," said the commander, "we succeeded in outrunning our Saracen pursuers, though in order to do so we went off course, turning first east and then back west, and have lost precious days. Now this brutal murder brings a new evil onto the *Grifona* itself, where we didn't expect it, and from which we immediately uprooted it. We have a killer on board, a merciless killer, he is among us, on the bridge, below deck, wherever we go we risk brushing against the arm of the man who used his dagger to carry out this heinous act. We must find him, and soon."