



## THE GREAT DEVIL

Giovanni delle Bande Nere, the last captain of fortune

Artillery blasts drown out the clatter of armor and the soldier's attacking screams. Giovanni fears neither war nor death: he is a Medici, in his veins runs noble blood, proud and pugnacious, and every day he faces the enemy at the head of the fiercest mercenary army in Italy, the Bande Nere.

The battlefield is gray, cold, enshrouded in fog, but his men would gladly follow him to Hell. Among these is Niccolò, a young man they call the Snaker because of his unsettling habit of keeping three or four snakes wrapped around his arm – he uses them to know the future. So the other soldiers keep their distance, but soon the Captain will come to trust him. And Niccolò could always be found by his side, in the middle of the fight. Always.

The author tells us the story of a friendship and gives us a glimpse of the Sixteenth century, one of the most turbulent moments in Italian history, when everything was changing and everyone betrayed everyone. And he does so through a character who is a personification of his times, that Great Devil willing to do anything to dominate the destinies of men. And continue fighting.

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## 1

*Cocullo, Sunday May 16<sup>th</sup>, 1509*

Niccolò Durante pushed his way through the crowd in the meandering alleyways of the town. Wrapped around his arm was an Aesculapian snake at least a meter long. He'd managed to flush it out with a stick at the last moment, outside, a few steps away from the town walls at the edge of the woods and the main road, the one leading down to the valley.

All around him the crowd was beginning to sing devotional chants. Finally he reached the small piazza where the snake-men waited with their terracotta vases. The boy immediately spotted his father among them.

“This year I got the last one again!” said Niccolò breathlessly. “He looked like he was sitting there waiting for me.”

With these words he bent quickly and let his father move away the perforated wooden top with his finger. Inside the vase, the scales of the tangled beasts shone. They suddenly stirred, as they perceived the light. Niccolò carefully untangled the snake from his arm and let it slip slowly into the mouth of the jar.

“It’s not a four-lined one, but it’s still the last before the saint goes by,” he said, glowing.

The man smiled and touched his son’s head. Then he looked up to the sky and squinted. “It’s almost noon. Hurry,

run to your mother or you'll miss the beginning of the ceremony."

The snake harvest had begun, as it did every year, when the snow began to melt. But the small festival in honor of Mary, held a few days earlier, marked the beginning of the search in earnest. Niccolò had combed the foot of Mount Luparo and of Mount Mezzo along with his father and the other snake-men, searching every slope from the Palancaro to the Forca d'Oro, and distinguishing himself for the number of beasts he had captured. Niccolò's fate seemed to be determined. He felt the thought open wide inside him: one day he would take his father's place, becoming himself a snake-man of Cocullo.

He reached the chapel of Saint Dominic, making his way through the crowd that was already beginning to sing the opening chant. Around him were devout men, women with their eyes damp with emotion. And the sick showing their wounds. They asked the saint to heal them from the poisonous sting of a spider, or the infected bite of a rabid dog. They asked that he who was chosen by God would shake their bodies, so that their blood would reject the disease. Meanwhile the procession went forward. Niccolò wove his way through the people taking advantage of any opening, trying to reach the church.

Finally he managed to get in, but he still couldn't find his mother in the crowd. In the meantime the faithful crowded around the bell. They pulled the cord with their teeth, making it ring: this would protect them from diseases of the mouth. Or they collected the stones on the floor of the cave that opened behind the saint's niche, to scatter them on the fields or around the houses, for good harvests and to fend off disease and famine. If melted in water and drunk, that blessed earth would heal the fever.

Niccolò kept looking for his mother, while the function was celebrated in the chapel. He decided to stop in a corner, letting the faithful's rapture envelop him more than the ceremony. That was, to him, the strangest spectacle, almost magical: men really not too inclined to crying, on the day of the feast broke into tears. Or they smiled and exchanged friendly slaps on the shoulders, while on any ordinary day they would disembowel a passer-by with their pitchfork if by chance he were to walk along the border of a field without asking permission. Finally the departure song was taken up. Niccolò shook himself, immediately looking for the exit. He found himself again fighting against a barrier of people who were now, as custom required, walking backwards. This was also part of the ceremony: at the end of the function the faithful were to leave the church while keeping their faces turned toward the saint. This, added to the crowd waiting outside the chapel, created a mob in which he found himself forced to a standstill. People were shouldering and insulting one another. Some children began to cry, begging their mothers to take them out of there. But the people inside pushed against the people outside, so that every step ahead was followed by a step back. All this, waiting for a passage to open for the snake-men.

Niccolò Durante caught sight of his mother. "Ma!" he yelled, squeezed in the crowd. She neither heard nor saw him. Then, all of a sudden something began to move near him. There were groups of people who managed to slip out, though with some effort. Taking advantage of his slight figure, Niccolò began to weave into the mass, squeezing against the bellies of the multitude that gave no sign of taking its eyes off the statue of the saint.

He managed to reach the open air just in time to witness the arrival of the snake-men, at whose approach the crowd began singing with renewed vigor. Niccolò's face emerged from behind the people forced to the sides of the narrow plaza.

He was one of the few who wasn't singing, but he was smiling just the same. Among those town heroes he saw his father. The boy thought it often, without saying a word, and he thought the same just then, squeezed in the crowd: surely a glorious future awaited him. He kept it to himself, but that feeling overcame him completely. Sometimes he played a game with himself: he imagined himself as a grownup. If he had told anyone, he would surely have blushed, but the image he had of himself was very similar to what came to his mind when he listened to stories about Umbrone Niccolò. He imagined himself wearing silver armor, his gaze valorous. After centuries, once again a chosen one of the goddess Angizia had come. He felt it strongly, inside, especially at night, when his father taught him the secrets of the herbs. The preparation of antidotes and poisons was an art handed down in the family for generations, though now the unguents had to be sold under the counter, keeping an eye out for the men of the church who considered those practices an art inspired by the devil. So, among the inhabitants of Cocullo and the neighboring towns there was the secret agreement not to reveal whence came certain medicinal oils, oils that could regenerate the skin after hard day of work under the blasts of the north wind. Similarly, if a priest were to ask them where to find such and such a scented powder that dissolved in hot water was good for stomach burn, no one would utter Durante's name. In those first nine years of his life, Niccolò had witnessed the preparation of all sorts of healing pastes and mixtures. He knew the names of the plants to use to bring on sleep, or as curative compresses. He could put together the correct amount of herbs and roots to fend off a cough or dysentery.

Niccolò Durante knew poisons.

He was at his happiest when his father called him down to the cellar. Under there, at the back of the room, there was a small secret niche that could be accessed by moving a wooden

cover. This was how the boy entered his world, to which he felt he had been destined by the goddess herself. His father, too, had studied here, just like his father's father, and so on, going back in time. In the niche there were shelves weighed down by containers that were as much as two centuries old. On each was marked the type of plant or root. On the small workbench there were, instead, bowls, mortars, powders. And blades of various sizes. If the father was asked for a certain infusion, Niccolò went downstairs with him and watched by candlelight all through the process. His father illustrated the reactions and when the mixture should sit. Together with all this, Niccolò would listen over and over to the legends concerning the goddess of his land. In particular, there was a passage he had now learned by heart and that often he murmured when he was alone: "Angizia was the first to discover the bad herbs. She handled poisons as if she were their master and pulled the moon out of the sky. She harnessed the rivers with a cry, and she could call all the forests down off the mountains."

The boy's task was to learn the medicinal arts, to then be able to hand them down to his children one day. But if at first Niccolò descended to the niche full of euphoria, at the end of the preparation of such and such an unguent and of the same old stories that made him dream, he began to yawn. This because his father wanted to keep him longer. But they were no longer talking of philters and mixtures, but of reading and writing, that's what! Sometimes they stayed in the small room for many a long hour. When Niccolò showed signs of tiring, his father immediately urged him on, "If you don't learn to read and write, it will be impossible for you to master the book of potions when one day it becomes yours."

It was the family treasure. As far as they knew, no other recipe book so detailed and so ancient existed anywhere. Some pages were barely legible because the ink had been deformed

by dampness, so much so that they had to be retraced, if not recopied on fresh paper.

This was the most important part of the task he had been given: keeping the book and passing it on to worthy hands when the time came, hands that would in turn be able to hand down the blood bond with which the family was tied to the goddess. Then, at the end of every reading, his father admonished Niccolò with these words: “Knowing to read and write will be useful in any case. But don’t show it off. People might wonder how come the son of a carpenter knows his way around paper rather than helping the family with the sweat from his brow.”

His mother never asked anything. The two returned upstairs, and she was there. Usually they found her busy cooking near the fire. The woman’s behavior also contributed to Niccolò’s impression he was the new chosen one: she didn’t speak of herbs, she simply profited from them if need be. The only thing she said when they came out of the cellar was, “Oh, there you are,” without adding anything more. What happened in the hidden room was Niccolò and his father’s business. The woman saw the boy come home, his pannier full of roots and leaves of all kinds. She watched as he slipped downstairs, where he hid his stash in a corner, waiting to discover with his father if they were the right herbs, the one’s he’d been asked for, which would then be cleaned and safely stored in containers, ready for use.

Niccolò Durante had just seen his father step into the church. Now he was looking at the people adoringly and thought of the day when his turn would come to plunge into that crowd like a captain. From the chapel the chants came louder. Then the crowd really moved, shifting people like a wave. The statue of Saint Dominic appeared on the threshold, born aloft by four men. And covered in an enormous tangle of glittering snakes.

Flanking the statue, two girls carried on their heads the baskets containing the five blessed breads. The cheering crowd set off. Niccolò tried to keep in line so as not to be swallowed up by the rear of the procession, where he would no longer be able to watch the ceremony. Meanwhile the faithful held out their hands, trying to touch the snakes, which, seeing how many they were, often fell on the ground, beginning to slither between people's feet, making some women and young children nervous.

Even thus, one day Saint Dominic had taken hold of those lands, building churches and spreading the new faith. But, as Niccolò looked at the simulacrum carried on the shoulders of the men, he wondered who those people were praising: the saint, or the goddess Angizia?

The procession wound through the main roads of the town. Around it, the market stalls were already under siege, as were the corners devoted to fun and games. When the statue returned to the small plaza from which it had started so that the faithful could dedicate themselves to food and wine in abundance, Niccolò was already there, waiting, a bludgeon in hand. Tradition was that after the procession, the snake-men freed Saint Dominic of all the snakes. At that point the animals were set free on the cobblestoned plaza, where they were sacrificed in mass by clubbing them.

*Villa di Castello, Sunday May 16<sup>th</sup>, 1509*

The Moorish slave girl entered the room. Moving like a shadow she skirted along the walls and reached the small bedside table. She changed the water pitcher. Took the dirty handkerchiefs and put other, clean and well-folded ones in their place. For a moment she lingered to watch the sick woman's face. But immediately she heard the voice of the boy sitting in the armchair on the other side of the bed, "Mora Bona, I'm hungry."

The woman started, even though she knew perfectly well that the woman's son was sitting there. For days now he'd been sitting next to the sickbed, spending most of the afternoon in the room. The slave nodded. "I'll get something ready." And she tried to smile. Then she left the room with the same silence with which she had appeared moments before.

But silence did not envelope only the sick woman's room: for days now it had taken over every hallway and every room. The twenty-four servants exchanged words in barely audible whispers. They did so even when they were downstairs in the kitchens, or outdoors in the stables. Even the five horses and the four mules belonging to the household seemed to be limiting their whinnying and their pawing, respectful of the sickness that was consuming the woman.

The boy thought she was dozing. He looked at her profile, stretched, tense. In the half darkness of the room, he listened to her breathing, short, broken, like small puffs. Her chest didn't even seem to move. He feared the fever had gone up again and was about to get up to go wet some more rags. But all of a sudden the woman shuddered and opened her eyes, looking at the ceiling.

“Come on, talk to me,” she said.

The boy had counted. This was the sixth day she’d called him. She made him sit there, with a precise task: telling her the story of the family.

The first time he had seen it as a strange request, and was scared: possibly his mother was truly nearing the end and was delirious, devoured by disease. But then she had explained herself, in her own fashion, in the times regulated by the fever and her coughing, which often led to convulsions.

“At my death they will say everything and the contrary of everything about the woman I was during my life. You, Giovanni, are my last son, and certainly my most beloved. In you my same blood flows, fire-red. But look at this flesh. See how brief life is, and how fleeting it is— no hesitation, no reprieve. Death comes and without asking, takes everything. All that’s left is memory. All that’s left is a name.”

The boy had spent many a night in the great hall, listening with burning eyes to the origins of his blood, told in his mother’s voice. Now that she was taken by sickness, Giovanni was assigned this peculiar chore, which was worth more than any written will: repeating history, before her.

Every time he had to refer facts and names, as if he were driving in a nail, nailing it in with great blows.

“We descend from Muzio Attendolo,” the boy murmured. “Before him, there are only stories of small landlords devoted to farming.”

At the beginning, dizziness overtook him. The year-span was immense, that character from the remote past came back to the present through words: his mother’s great-great-grandfather. Giovanni could see him clearly in his mind. But this was the minor effort. At the dawn of the times told, Muzio Attendolo was nearly his age. Giovanni told his story and at the same time gave him his same features. So once again he began the narration of the family story. At times his gaze was lost and

all of a sudden he was no longer there, at his mother's deathbed, but somewhere else: in Cotignola, at the end of the 14<sup>th</sup> century. There were Muzio and his twenty brothers, the Attendoli, a family of rich landowners in constant war with the Pasolini, the neighboring family.

“One day Muzio was minding his own business, hoeing the fields. All of a sudden he heard a drum roll. It was a squad of soldiers at the service of a mercenary captain, they were combing the countryside in search of people to enlist. Upon seeing the young man, the men halted. They asked Muzio to leave his hoe to join their army. They spoke of the cities they would ransack, of loot, of women to share among soldiers... Muzio looked at them. He looked at the hoe he held in his hand. He was standing near an apple tree. Thus he replied: “I will throw my hoe. If it falls, I'll stay. If it gets stuck in the tree, I'll leave with you.” And he threw the instrument, which got stuck in the tree. When night fell, Muzio went into the family stable and stole a horse, joining the soldiers of fortune. He was thirteen.”

Giovanni retraced the steps of his ancestor. But every time, as he recounted the anecdote, a peculiar dismay overtook him: what would have happened if the hoe hadn't been caught in the branches of the tree? The boy saw his family issue out of pure chance. All that happened later sprang from a peasant's tool. If Muzio hadn't gone with the soldiers on that far away day, all that surrounded Giovanni might not have been. Including himself, now repeating his mother's words.

“He began from the lowest rung of the ladder, as an errand boy. Later on he joined up with another mercenary captain who hired only Italians. Muzio was inexperienced, but he managed to get himself noticed for his quarrelsome nature. One day, during the division of some booty, he got into a fight with his companions. The captain in person was forced to intervene, but the youngster wouldn't heed him either. The

man addressed him thus, 'Indeed, you attempt to force (in Italian, *sforzare*) me, too? So be it, from now on we shall call you Sforza!'. ”

The woman smiled weakly upon hearing her house's name.

Giovanni paused, just a moment. Then he resumed his tale.

“Throughout his lifetime he served four kings and as many popes, covering himself with glory. He stole friends' wives and daughters, bringing twelve descendants into the world, of which ten were illegitimate. 'From hoe to power,' as you often said, Mother. His brides became nobler and richer, and thanks to them he obtained lands aplenty.”

The woman coughed. Then murmured the words her son knew very well. A small maxim she sometimes pronounced when retracing those accomplishments, “To reach the throne...”

Seeing her struggle for breath, Giovanni finished for her, “To reach the throne, making love is just as important as making war.”

The woman nodded feebly, satisfied. The boy went on, but his face hardened. Because the end of the Sforzas' forefather had been sudden and unexpected.

“One day Muzio was in the midst of a battle at the mouth of the river Pescara. The wind pushed water from the sea up the river, swelling it frightfully. But they needed to pass. To set the example and encourage his men, he shook his horse and waded in, the first to cross. Once he reached the other side, he beckoned for his troops to follow, but the soldiers still stood still. So he had to repeat the feat, proving to the fighters that there was nothing to fear. He retraced his steps. During this second crossing, he encountered a page boy who had bravely responded to the command and was about to drown. Because of the waves, he lost his balance and pulled on the reins. The

horse swerved, unsaddling him. Muzio fell into the water, weighed down by his armor. He immediately disappeared. The soldiers barely saw a glove emerge above the water for a moment. His body was never found.”

The Moorish slave girl returned. She carried a tray.

“Mora Bona, leave it there,” said the boy. Suddenly he had lost his appetite.

The servant set the tray on the table on the other side of the bed. Then she stopped, as if awaiting another request, which didn’t come. So she left the room once again.

Giovanni rose, took a cloth and wet a corner of it in the water. He bent over his mother and passed the cloth over her parched lips. The woman thanked him silently, a smile briefly lighting her face. “Go on,” she whispered. The boy returned to his armchair and resumed speaking.

“Of Muzio’s twelve children, Francesco was the first born and became the ruler of Milan. Thirty were his descendants, nine of which illegitimate. The first, Galeazzo, inherited the duchy. He was your father.”

According to what Giovanni had gathered from the many stories he had heard, his grandfather Galeazzo had had a fleeting love affair with *donna* Lucrezia, wife of Count Landriani. From this encounter Caterina had been born. The boy had always had a hard time coping with the idea that his mother was a bastard.

“The Sforza family took you in and schooled you, you took part in court life. But no one could imagine that your nature would be in such contrast with the palace rituals that have always been destined to women.”

This was the point in the story when Giovanni let himself go to the call of his blood. As he told it, he witnessed the birth of the legendary Tiger of Forli.

“I imagine you, barely a girl, wed to your first husband and already orphaned of your father. And behold your life, akin

to that of great warriors: intrigue, conspiracy, vendetta, cunning, battles. Until your imprisonment...”

With the passing of minutes, Giovanni’s heart was overcome by a single desire: to become a man and similar to her. Only when he came to the telling of those adventurous facts did the boy truly grasp the meaning of those meetings: the handing over of the courage and pride of an ancient memory. Which now, according to the most woeful circumstances, he would have to carry on.