

Praise for Giovanni De Feo's

THE SECRET MARKET OF THE DEAD

“Delightfully atmospheric and deftly plotted.”

—Lacy Baugher Milas, *Paste* magazine

“An enchanting fable of family, ambition, and dreams both magical and real. A delightful read.”

—Claire North, author of
The First Fifteen Lives of Harry August and *Ithaca*

“A swirling fever dream of cursed festivals and talking cats, many-eyed cloaks and midnight saints, shapeshifting hammers and impossible fates—*The Secret Market of the Dead* is a phantasmagoria that will have you teetering on a tightrope between worlds.”

—GennaRose Nethercott, author of *Thistlefoot* and
Fifty Beasts to Break Your Heart

“Atmospheric, spooky, and thoughtful, *The Secret Market of the Dead* is both an exciting tale and an original and beautifully wrought coming-of-age story. It was a pure delight to read, and I recommend it highly.”

—Delia Sherman, author of *Changeling* and
The Evil Wizard Smallbone

“I loved this book. *The Secret Market of the Dead* is an enthralling story about folktales, urban legends, and myths, that in the end became a myth of its own. I couldn't put it down.”

—Genevieve Cogman, author of
The Invisible Library and *Elusive*

“Take a wrong turn in Luceria and you may become lost in the Night, an intoxicating realm of fanged fairy tale overflowing with poetry and menace. Alas, I am Night’s latest victim . . . and I don’t even want to be rescued.”

—Frances Hardinge, author of *Fly by Night* and
The Forest of a Thousand Eyes

“De Feo crafts a sumptuous folkloric excursion into the depths of human creativity. . . . The worldbuilding is lush and extraordinary, and a welter of motives and schemes keep the pages flying. It’s a feast for the imagination.”

—*Publishers Weekly*, starred review

“A historical fantasy as much about facing the creatures of the night as it is about defying the power structures that rule the day. . . . A delight of storytelling . . . and also a poignant commentary on patriarchy and the gains and losses of being the one to defy a system.”

—Jessica Peng, *BookPage*

“The vibes are strong with this one.”

—Daniel Roman, *Winter Is Coming*

THE
SECRET
MARKET
OF THE
DEAD

A Novel

GIOVANNI DE FEO

SAGA  PRESS

LONDON NEW YORK TORONTO
AMSTERDAM/ANTWERP NEW DELHI SYDNEY/MELBOURNE



1230 AVENUE OF THE AMERICAS, NEW YORK, NEW YORK 10020

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First Saga Press trade paperback edition July 2026

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Interior design by Lewelin Polanco

Manufactured in the United States of America

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data has been applied for.

ISBN 978-1-6680-7736-8

ISBN 978-1-6680-7737-5 (pbk)

ISBN 978-1-6680-7738-2 (ebook)



Scan here to get book recommendations, exclusive offers, and more delivered to your inbox.

This book is dedicated to Elvira and Lillino.

Theirs were the first stories I've ever listened to.

THE
SECRET
MARKET
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DEAD

In the old church of Saint Francis, in Luceria, there is a statue of a young woman. Not many guides know about it, but if you ask the priest, he will lead you to a subterranean chapel under the main altar. The steps are slippery, the neon light defective, but the statue is well worth the trouble. It depicts a girl of about fifteen, life-size, with arms raised overhead, gripping a hammer. Her countenance, a fierce expression of will and defiance, is not easily forgotten. More striking are her cloak, woven from eyes, and complexion, black as ink. But when you ask the priest which saint she is, he will avert his eyes. For the young woman is no saint of the Day.

She is a Nocturnal.

In those days, it was understood that every town had a patron saint. Luceria's saints, though, were of a peculiar kind. Their statues, adorned with the usual halo and candles, always had something off about them, something twisted: a touch of the Night.

The Lucerini still worshipped the saints you can spot on any calendar, such as Saint Anthony or Saint Agatha. But their town was also home to seven Major Ones, seven Night Saints represented with the same statues and holy cards as their counterparts in the Day but after dawn, became someone else entirely.

For those seven were Nocturnals. Ogres, fairy queens, ghosts—you can find these aplenty in Naples. But Nocturnals belong only to Luceria and its woods, have resided in this land right at the heel of Italy's boot since long before it was

finally made into one country. Before the Spanish reyes and before Napoleon, before Emperor Frederick of Hohenstaufen and his Muslim subjects, before the arrival of German hordes, before the Roman conquest of the Daunians, Nocturnals lived in the Night that is just on the other side of Luceria.

Sensing there is a tale to be told, you invite the priest for a glass of wine in Piazza Tribunali. He smiles thinly at your invitation and says he will tell you the story of the statue, but only if you promise not to believe a word of it. You think it must be your precarious understanding of Italian that makes you miss the joke, but the priest seems deadly serious. You mustn't believe a word, he says again, or repeat this story to a living soul, ever. And yet he seems eager to tell it himself.

You can't help but ask why you mustn't tell her story. In response, he stares at you with the same look he usually reserves for catechism students faltering over the Apostles' Creed. His hands shoot up.

She is a Nocturnal, he says. A story made flesh. They live on their telling and feast on belief. If you believe in them, they can come back. Kings and warriors, smiths and sailors, Wyrms, and Wicca, and Garaudi, and Mazapegul, and Nuriae, Gale Riders and Pales, the whole lot, Minors and Majors, all the dead. And that's why you mustn't believe a word of it.

So you listen to the rest of the story and when it is finished your head is ringing. Maybe it is the three glasses of wine, maybe it isn't, but you shake hands with the priest, go back to your hotel, and when you arrive there, lay your head on your pillow. Just for a minute, you think, as you fall into a dark stupor, one so deep you cannot climb out of it.

You try to resist, for it is only seven o'clock, and if you sleep now, you will wake up in the middle of the night, here in Luceria, where the Night was born. But you can't resist, and so fall asleep, like a body slipping into dark waters.

And this is the dream you dream.

PART I

THE DREAMARQUISE OF CATS

ONE

During the first week of May 1747, as the saints' procession honoring the birth of King Don Carlos's heir made its way past Oriana's house, her twin brother Oriano suddenly dove in front of the cortege and was almost trampled to death. Nothing short of a miracle saved him, a miracle to which Oriana was the sole witness.

Oriana and Oriano spent almost the entire night before the parade in games and whispered expectations. The twins' bedroom, a narrow attic space, also served as a drying room for the festoons of oregano and dried peppers that hung from the rafters. Two glass jars full of fireflies emanated a greenish glow that barely lit the game they were playing. Their corn husk-stuffed mattress swished every time they moved to turn over a card. On a patched blanket, holy cards smudged by use were arranged in four rows of five. The eight-year-old twins sat across from each other and stared at them in concentration.

"My turn," said Oriana.

"That one," replied her twin, pointing at a card.

"Right. That's . . . Saint Barbara, protector of miners, prayed to for protection against lightning, and her day is the . . . third, no, the fourth of December. Turn it!"

Oriano turned over the card and held it close to the jar to

reveal a young girl crowned in gold, a tower being struck by a lightning bolt in the background. The little boy slapped his knee.

“You’re cheating! I know you are. Just tell me how you do it!”

“I am not. I just have a good memory. Now, that’s six against one. Your turn. That one,” she said, pointing at a card on the edge of the bed.

“Can I have a peek first?”

“Of course not. You know what Papà says. It’s no use agreeing to something if you break your word after.”

“Well, I haven’t agreed to lose six to one!”

“Just play your turn, Oriano.”

“All right, then. That’s . . . I think Saint Simon, patron of the leather people—”

“That would be the tanners.”

“Tanners, that’s what I said. Prayed to for . . . chicken, I mean, when you want to eat chicken, or have your chickens get fat. Am I right?”

“Go on.”

“And his day . . . his day is . . . can I have a hint?”

“Oh, I should think not.”

“You are the worst! His celebration day is . . . ah!” he said, suddenly beaming. “I know it! It’s the day Mamma and Papà married! I know because it’s coming in two Sundays, so it’s the fifteenth of May! Turn it over!”

Oriana turned over the card: an old man with a flame in his hand and a piglet at his feet stared at them with hollow eyes.

“Saint Anthony, protector of all smiths,” said Oriana, “sorry.”

“I’m done. I don’t want to play your stupid game anymore,” he said, and shook the coverlet, showering all the cards on the floor.

“Oriano! Those are Mamma’s holy cards! If they get filthy, she’ll only feed us bread and water for a week!”

“I don’t care. You cheated, you just won’t admit it!”

“I did not!”

“Yes, you did!”

A thump interrupted their quarrel. The twins jumped and stared at the trapdoor.

“I’m hearing a ruckus,” sounded Donna Lena’s muffled voice, “when I should be hearing prayers or silence. Need I come up?”

“Sorry, Mamma,” said Oriana. “We were just about to go to sleep.”

“You’d better. You still want to see the saints’ procession tomorrow, don’t you?”

“Yes!” the twins replied in unison.

“Then you must be on your best behavior. And if you lose one of my holy cards, I’ll shave your heads to shame you both. Do I make myself clear?”

“Yes, Mamma,” they sang together.

“Buonanotte.”

Quickly, the twins collected the cards from the floor, draped a black cloth over the firefly lanterns—leaving one alight so they could see a bit—and slipped under the sheets. In that cozy half darkness, the siblings breathed face-to-face, their foreheads touching. Oriana was the taller of the two, and slightly stockier, but both had the thick eyebrows of the Siliceo family, unruly brown hair, and their mother’s mischievous green-gray eyes.

“Do you think Papà will finally get a commission?” Oriano asked.

“I heard Mamma pray to Saint Anthony for it, so maybe he will.”

“Will the statue of Saint Anthony be there tomorrow?”

“Why? Are you still thinking about your spinning top?”

“Well,” he sniffed, “I wouldn’t have to ask Saint Anthony for it if Papà had bought me a new one.”

“If he could have, he would have.”

“And why shouldn’t I ask Saint Anthony? Or perhaps I could call the Night-One, the Duke of Under-earth, to come in his stead!”

While no one had seen the Duke manifest in nearly a hundred years, as patron of smiths and craftsmen and the earthliest of the seven Major Ones, his mere presence was said to grant gifts. Oriana stuck her head out of the blanket, as if to make sure they were still alone, then dove under again. She brought her forehead against her brother’s.

“You know Mother would *kill you* if she heard you speak their names.”

Being from Naples, their mother found the whole concept of Night Saints blasphemous, and hated all their silly rites. The only time she seemed to bear the idea was during Vigils, and even there she would pointedly make the sign of the cross. Luckily, Oriana’s Aunt Ciccerella thought otherwise. The girl remembered well how her aunt lay in bed with her on New Year’s Eve, whispering of the Night.

All Nocturnals were Diurnals once, the way all those who are now alive, one day will die. Some of the dead are told, and those who are sometimes come back, but with something of the Night, something wild and old.

Aunt Ciccerella told her that Nocturnals only existed when Diurnals told stories about them, especially at Night. She then listed the seven Major Ones, each an earl of their own domain, a part of the immortal darkness.

Should you need to call for their help, these are their names. Ossifrago, Baron of Twilight and Jester of the Night King. Uriene, Earl of the First Night, prophet, and dice master. The Emistuchivio, Duke of the dark that lies Under-earth.

Briace, Marquise of Fullmoon and Lord of were-creatures and lunatics. Serapide, Countess of Second Night, she-warrior, and bringer of dreams. The Grim King himself, Lord ruler of the Hour of the Wolf and of all Night. And finally his spouse, Queen of Dawn and our Lady of sorrows.

Few adults she knew would dare utter their names at night, even for protection. And yet calling out to them, daring them to respond, made Oriana feel safer, stronger. All her life she imagined seeing Nocturnals out of the corner of her eye. When at dusk the branch of a pine tree quivered overhead, she imagined the spiny face of a Mazapegul. And when the railing of a staircase shifted under the moonlight, Oriana thought it a Wyrmlithering over the palazzo to get a better look at her. Sometimes at night she heard songs in the wind. She could never remember their words, only a tingling sensation, like her whole body was on fire. Was that the Night? Though she had called out to it several times, she received an answer only once—the year prior, after Oriano returned from the spring market in Foggia.

In hindsight, she wasn't so sure that it hadn't been a dream. Not that sleep would have made it any less real, for the Night-Ones come out of dreams like swallows from chimneys. She remembered lying with her eyes wide open until she felt the dark pressing in on her from all sides. And when she stood up to open the small window above her bed, the sky was ablaze with stars. She stared at them for so long she forgot herself completely; she wasn't a little girl looking at the Night, she was the Night looking at a little girl.

Then, she saw it. A cloud of stars descended onto the roof and took the shape of a man. Had it been summer, Oriana would have thought them fireflies, but it was still too cold.

And if you see fireflies in early spring or winter, be careful. Garaudi wear cloaks made of eyes—stolen from vagrants—that glint in the dark. For they were makers of sublime beauty

but refused to see it until it was too late. And so the Duke of the Under-earth punished them by turning them blind.

It seemed like the creature was looking in Oriana's direction, though she couldn't know for certain. She ought to have felt scared under its gaze but didn't. It was blind, after all, slave to the Under-earth and its master. Poor, poor Garaude. The creature came ablaze, its cloak-eyes opening. Right in the middle of its form, she could make out a hood, and in that blackness, she imagined salty lips, soundlessly forming an O.

She had said its name. Was it saying hers?

She wanted to tell Oriano straightaway, of course. But even then, Oriana felt that the experience was meant for her and her alone. He had gone to the spring market without her, hadn't he? When her mother caught a fever, it was she who had to stay behind and help her in the house. He had the Day, and so she would claim the Night. Also, if she told him, sooner or later he would tell Mamma.

"If the Duke came," Oriano whispered under the bed covers, "I could ask him for a spinning top made of darkness, fire, stars, or wind. Can you imagine? Me spinning my top in front of our house and all the hats in Luceria flying high!"

"The Emistuchivio," she hissed, drawing closer, "will not come for a little boy. And anyway, you have nothing to offer him."

"But I do!" He beamed.

He emerged from underneath the blanket and walked over to a hole in the wall of their room. Carefully, by the fireflies' low glow, the boy retrieved a ball of cotton and unwrapped it to reveal two teeth. Sitting up, Oriana frowned at her twin.

"Don't the Tellers say," he began, cheeks flushed, "that the Duke sows children's teeth in the ground to grow his bone soldiers?"

"Who on earth did you hear that from?"

"From Aunt Ciccerella, at the Vigil of the Dead last year."

“And you’ve kept your baby teeth hidden in that wall for, what . . . months?”

“Think about it, two teeth, two Boons from the Duke!”

“That’s greedy.”

“I wanted you to have one. Isn’t there anything you want?”

She bit her lip. There *was* something she wanted. It was the very reason she had felt such disappointment when Oriano was allowed to go to the spring market in Foggia and she had to stay home. But she didn’t even dare think it, much less say it aloud.

“Oriano, if Mother sees this, she’ll bring Hell upon us. You won’t get to go to the spring market, and neither will I.”

“I’ll keep them hidden.”

“Promise me, then. Swear.”

He swore. They slid back under the blanket, whispering about secret keys that led to secret chests, which held all the treasures of the Under-earth. And even though at times Oriana tried to stifle her brother’s excitement, she was no longer able to quench her own. That night, they slept little, if at all.

The Day surprised them with a fullness of light that spelled disaster. Their father was still not back from his errand, and neither was their mother. She had gone to spin at Mamma Eba’s workshop with an old companion from Caserta, and the twins were expected to be clean and ready to go when she returned. Oriano was still too excited to be of any real help, so Oriana had to get the water from the public fountain in the piazza herself.

On her way home she caught a glimpse of her father’s workshop, just three houses down the street. For a moment, the little girl was transfixed. She breathed in its scent: coal, iron, sawdust. Despite her enthralment, she wouldn’t take a single step toward it; an old superstition in Luceria warned against a smith’s

children entering his workshop before they came of age. But the smithy's deep oak door was slightly ajar, and Oriana could glimpse inside from where she stood. By the forge's light, she spotted the square anvil and her father's hammer resting atop it. It was an old, ugly beast, dented and blackened by use. And yet in her father's hands, it could create wonders.

A draft made the smithy's door creak shut and the girl hurried home, careful not to spill the water. In a flurry of legs and arms, brother and sister washed in the tin tub. While Oriano splashed around in unabashed mirth, his twin trying to scrub the both of them as fast as she could, they heard the distant drums. The procession was about to begin. They were still frantically rubbing each other's heads when Donna Lena entered the kitchen, the baby Tato asleep in her arms. The twins froze, water still trickling from their wet hair.

Donna Lena was a robin of a woman, not small, but bent by the everyday labor she took on to make ends meet since her husband's lack of commissions. At twenty-six her beauty was fading, her luscious hair tamed, braided flat on the nape of her neck. Fatigue was her default state. Still, as she adjusted her shawl, she couldn't help but smile at her children.

"If you don't have your good clothes on," she said quietly, green-gray eyes narrowing, "by the time I finish two Hail Marys, I'll go without you."

Oriana and Oriano jumped out of the tub and bolted to their room.

The muddy street—surrounded on both sides by low white houses and crowned by rows of balconies—was a mass of heads swaying like sunflowers in the wind. All of Luceria's craftsmen were there: carvers and tanners, smiths, farmers in their straw hats and women dressed in black, each waiting for the statue of Saint Anthony, patron saint of their contrada.

Oriana, her mother, and her two brothers stood just outside their house, watching for the approaching statue. They had already seen the lily-adorned Madonna, Saint Sebastian pierced by arrows so realistic that his wounds seemed to ooze real blood, and Santa Barbara with her golden crown and the martyr's palm in her hands.

"Look, Harp-tooth, the Duke is farting stars!" someone shouted.

It was mad Totò, the scrawny cemetery guardian, talking to the old cat on his shoulder. A few people in the crowd tittered in response, though most ignored him. The approaching statue wasn't exactly farting, but a pungent cloud hung over it all the same. Fireworks shot from the thin metal ring around its head. Just like the illustration on the holy card the twins had studied the night before, the statue depicted Saint Anthony's customary halo, white beard, brown cassock, and plaster pig. Yet he was different from any other you might see in a neighboring town. He looked quite short—older, wilder—the pig at his feet vaguely misshapen as if it weren't a pig at all.

As the statue approached, cloaked in sparkling fire and enshrouded by smoke and the beating of drums, soft hymns could be heard from the rows of women. Some were holding tallow candles, so that by their light, the statue could help them find what they had lost. But a few carried strange crowns of dried flowers, barking puppies, or squealing piglets in offering—not to Saint Anthony, but to that other one, the Emistuchivio, Duke of Under-earth and Lord of the darkness that lives below the ground.

Oriana glanced at her twin. He held his left fist behind his back, lips moving in silent prayer. Oriana took his other hand and squeezed it, hard, in warning. She was still nettled by missing last year's spring market. She'd waited patiently for an entire year, twelve long, dreary months, and would not lose her chance once more. But as the procession approached,

Oriana felt her own excitement rise. She knew Night Saints were real and allowed herself to briefly fantasize about the Duke showing himself and granting her a Boon. At least their mother had not noticed, too lost in her own reverie. Even after ten years, she missed Naples bitterly. Sometimes Oriana thought her mother would always see herself as an outsider.

“It’s almost like in Via Reale, when Don Carlos came,” Donna Lena sighed. “The whole avenue was alive with carriages and there were fireworks on the sea.”

As Oriana watched it move closer, the statue itself caught her attention, particularly the metal arch where its fireworks sparked. Oriana tugged at Donna Lena’s arm, insistent.

“Mamma? Did Papà work on the statue’s arch?”

Donna Lena shushed her, rocking the newborn in her arms, and watched as Don Giacomino—from his bay horse—reached into his bag to retrieve a handful of almond biscuits shaped like doubloons. At once, a throng of children screamed, hands shooting up to catch them. The priest laughed as he showered them with biscuits, his youthful face flushed. The children surrounded him, catching biscuits in midair or scurrying to pick them off the ground. All but one. A boy stood in front of the horse, left fist held high, offering something not to the priest, but to the statue behind him. Oriana had barely noticed her brother slip away.

“Oriano!”

Donna Lena’s scream pierced even the roar of fireworks. Yet few heard her, and none saw the wide-eyed child on the road. Certainly not Don Giacomino, proudly trotting along at a steady pace. The horse’s hooves would snap Oriano’s bones before anyone would notice.

Oriana didn’t scream, didn’t run to her brother’s aid.

Instead, she looked up at the statue.

“Please,” she whispered.

The statue tilted its head, mouth agape.

She heard a soft snap, nearly drowned out by the surrounding noise. Then the statue raised its wooden leg and kicked the first porter in the back of the head.

At once, the young man stumbled and fell.

The statue and its metal framework followed, fireworks showering the crowd. The people scattered, shrieking, as the priest reined in his frothing horse. While the women wailed at the bad omen, Donna Lena scooped up Oriano and hurried off. As the chaos dissipated, the Lucerini found their culprit in the stunned porter, a beefy apprentice of seventeen, who was seized and carried away.

Oriana wanted to shout that it wasn't his fault. But then, whose was it? The Saint's? The Duke's? Or her own?

TWO

As soon as Donna Lena put Tato in the hammock and shushed him to sleep, she turned to her other children with eyes of furious emerald.

“You will go to your room and be very quiet about it.”

“But Mamma—” began Oriana.

“Now.”

Even half a century later, Oriana would remember the taste of injustice with bitter clarity. She and her brother scampered up the wooden ladder and through the trapdoor to their room. The chains of garlic and bunches of drying herbs hanging from the ceiling swayed in the sudden draft.

“I didn’t show the teeth, Oriana, like I promised! Just my fist! You’ll see, Papà will bring us both to Foggia.”

“Shut up.”

As her brother dove face-first into their corn husk mattress, Oriana sat on the edge of the bed. Was he sleeping already? He always had a talent for dozing off on command. She peered at her twin. Awake, he was as different from her as a sunflower from an artichoke. But when Oriano slept, his face better reflected the flesh and blood they shared, one the mirror of the other, like Day is to Night. Was she jealous of Oriano? How could she be? They were of the same, even if her brother was allowed to go to the spring market in Foggia last year and she wasn’t. Though, truth be told, she wasn’t thinking about that at all anymore.

Had anyone else seen the statue move?

She was certain that the Emistuchivio had listened to her plea. There was a word for people who had dealings with Nocturnals. *Night-touched*. Like Totò Ciotola, the mad cemetery keeper. A sudden noise made her start, one that would have wakened her from the sleep of Death: her father's hammer. Her back stiffened. That sound meant Mastro Peppo had finally returned from his errand. Soon he would finish his work at the smithy and come home, expecting to find the table set and the children in their seats.

"Come down, both of you!"

Her mother's voice startled her. But when Oriana turned, she saw with alarm that her brother was lying face down on the trapdoor, blocking her from opening it.

"What are you doing? Get up!" she commanded.

"It's no use, Mamma thinks it's all my fault, and so do you."

"Oriano, just—"

"No! It's no use! No use!"

She knew it was impossible to reason with him while he was in this state, so she grabbed him by the shoulder. At once, her twin turned his head and bit her. Oriana screamed. Before she could blink, they were wrestling on the floor, biting, scratching, and pulling each other's hair. She took his blows until she could grab hold of his arm and bite him fiercely just above the elbow. Her brother collapsed, sobbing hard against the floor.

Donna Lena was calling again, her voice impatient. Oriana waited for her breath to slow and then opened her mouth to respond sensibly, like she always did. But then, impulsively, she turned to her brother.

"Do you know what he's working on?" she asked. "I think he is welding the links of a chain. A chain so long it can wrap around Mount Vesuvius seven times, so strong it can hold back seven hundred horses at full gallop, so hard it can only be melted by the fire of seven Wyrms, and yet so

thin, so light, and so soft you could wear it around your neck like a silk scarf.”

Her brother gave no sign he was listening. Still, she went on.

The twins had played this game since infancy, but this time, it was as if her palate was an anvil and her tongue a hammer.

“He is also working on the seventy-times-folded-mansion, a palace made of layers of iron so thin that, when folded, it looks like a kerchief. But when you unfold it, not once, not twice, but seventy times, the cloth appears as what it really is: a huge iron palace with sixty-three doors and one little window, right at the top.”

“Another,” murmured Oriano, his face still buried in his arm.

Their mother called again, but this time, they both ignored her.

“What could it be . . .” she mused, sitting on the bed. “It’s hard to tell by the sound of the hammer alone. Is it an armored hat, which protects its wearer with cannonball-proof steel? Or maybe a mechanical snake that moves when your name is sung in reverse? A portable staircase? Or an infinitely bottomless cup? Which would you have?”

At last, Oriano sat up. He was still flushed, but his eyes had dried.

“I think I’d take the mansion. So that I could hide there, and Mamma would never ever find me.”

The table was set, the bottle filled to the brim, and bread on the cutting board.

When their father entered, the twins stood up. Mastro Peppo was still wearing the yellow garment of his trade and smelled of burnt wood. He was short, stocky, and balding, with the large face and curly beard of a tanned Neptune. Under the lush bushes of his brows, his eyes were the color

of unwrought iron. He took small, pensive steps as he approached and, unsmiling, sat down. His family followed.

Donna Lena poured the wine, and her husband filled their wooden bowls with steaming maccheroni. Each finished their pasta in silence. Oriana thought it part of their punishment for what happened at the procession. But Mastro Peppo had not uttered a single word, and his wife seemed as concerned as the children. Something was wrong. The smith hadn't touched his wine, instead staring vacantly at the bottle. Oriana had seen him like this only once before, after his own father died.

When at last Mastro Peppo spoke, his voice had the crackling sound of an old fire.

"The other night," he said, "all the door handles in Villa Mezzacasa were found twisted and changed."

It was well known in their town that two centuries ago, the Mezzacasa family had trapped Ossifrago, the Baron of Twilight, and used him to make their fortune. And sometimes, even centuries later, Nocturnals visited their home to play tricks on them. Donna Lena's face drained to the color of sourdough. She hated any mention of Nocturnals.

Finally, Oriana gathered her courage and asked, "Changed into what?"

The blacksmith wet his lips.

"Thorny vines," he said. "Tree branches. Leaves. The family said the leaves acted as tongues that whispered their dread, the thorns grabbed their cloaks to tell them their desire, and the branches grew eyes that saw directly into them. They axed everything down this morning and burned it all. I was there."

Oriana blinked. She could feel her brother's excitement like hot waves of perspiration. And her mother's contempt for the Night Saints like an icy draft.

"Papà, that's a lot of work for you, isn't it?" Oriana blurted.

Finally, Mastro Peppo smiled, showing off his beloved wrinkles.

“Seventy-two door handles,” he said, “in silver. Paid upfront.”

“I’ll make the coffee,” Donna Lena said.

She stood up, a hand over her mouth, unable to contain her pride. Oriana had scarcely an idea of how much coin that would be. Could they afford a new spinning top with it? Or even—the forbidden thought came to her in a flash—a book? By the stove, she caught her mother’s sideways smirk, the one she made when secretly pleased with herself. Wearing that thin smile, she carried the steaming pot to the table. The smell of coffee filled the room like the perfume of orange blossom at Easter, the very scent of happiness.

As he drank from his cup, the Mastro said, “If you two behave, tomorrow you can both come with me to the fair in Foggia.”

Oriano kicked her under the table, the *I told you so* in his green-gray eyes, but Oriana didn’t speak. Her heart was so ripe, she was afraid it would grow into an apple and drop out of her mouth.

“Not Oriana,” Donna Lena said.

The girl put a hand over her cheek.

“Why?” asked Mastro Peppo, putting his cup down.

“Because she flung herself in front of the Saints’ procession and almost caused a mortal accident. It was a miracle Oriano got away with his life.”

Oriana could hear her own heart thundering in her throat. She stared at her mother. Donna Lena had always been strict, but never cruel. And yet now, Oriana had the choking feeling her mother didn’t see her at all, like she was nothing.

“Is this true?” her father inquired.

Wide-eyed, Oriano opened his mouth, but no sound came out.

Finally, the boy nodded.

Oriana heard her chair scratching against the floor before

she registered that she had stood up. It was her moment to speak. But her fear, confusion, and fury were like tumultuous winds, each blowing her in a different direction. Would her version—one that included the favor of the Duke—even be believed? Offering it would accuse her mother of being a liar and her brother of being a coward. She was still struggling when she met her father's sad eyes. His decision was already made.

“Next year,” he assented, “she will have learned to behave.”

Oriana turned around and climbed the shaky ladder to their room, slamming the trapdoor shut so hard the oregano's festoons billowed as if from a storm. She felt such a storm ripping her to bits from the inside, all lightning and thunder. To leave the table unexcused like that was unheard of, and of course her parents immediately called her back.

But the trapdoor never opened to show her mother's furious face, and she didn't hear the sound of her father bellowing her name. Instead, the conversation downstairs resumed, stilted at first, and then in more cheerful tones, until she heard her brother burst out laughing, a sound of unfettered joy. It was right then that Oriana decided that her rebellion would not stop at cutting the meal short.

She would go to Foggia for the spring market, with or without her parents' consent.

THREE

Mastro Peppo and Oriano set off after dawn on a coach bound for the plains of Foggia, eight miles away.

Oriana was counting on her mother to leave her in peace for one morning, and she did. As soon as she heard Donna Lena leave for Mamma Eba's seamstress workshop, Oriana bolted from her bed and groped about for her shoes. Walking at a good pace, grown-ups could make the trip to Foggia in less than four hours. She would probably need five, maybe six. The real challenge would be staying hidden from the neighbors. For that purpose, Oriana donned her father's straw hat and his walking stick. On the road to Foggia, she'd be mistaken for one of the many child shepherds running errands for their masters.

She sat by the window and listened. Only when she heard the sheep's festive bells and bleating lamentations did she open the door. In the early days of May, most shepherds went back to their mountains in the Abruzzi. And as they were not from town, none would care for her presence unless she spoke to them. Keeping her face down, Oriana joined the woolly tide, the shouts of the shepherds right behind her. They would escort her up to Porta Foggia, one of the four town gates, and from there she would find the tratturi, the thin chalk road, to take her to the market.

When she reached the orchards, hours later, the sun was scorching her nape. Summer was close, and in Apulia, the heat baked the grass until it was terra-cotta. The olive trees were

in full bloom, though, twisted old men with white rows of flowers like teeth biting the hot syrup air. She had not brought any water, which she bitterly regretted. She didn't dare ask the shepherds, for fear that they would inquire about her, so by the time she saw the brown haze of Foggia on the horizon, her temples were pulsing in a vicious vice.

A forest of noise approached just behind the crumbling city gates, sounds both human and inhuman, animal and mechanical, natural and artificial: oxen bellowing, sheep bleating, goats clanging their bells, drivers shouting, dogs barking, hawkers crying, and sudden bursts of firecrackers. As she crossed the gate, vision caught up with sound: a stream of colors running into one another—the black cassocks of priests, the red scarves of the fish vendors, the wool jackets of the smiths, and the ragged variety of the stalls' awnings.

Oriana splashed her head into the cattle fountain, drinking avidly.

At last, she breathed, water streaming down her face, revitalized. Despite the pain in her legs, joy was riding the hot tempest of her heart. She had to find her father. If she were alone with him, without her mother, she was certain he would look at her disobedience with a forgiving eye and maybe even a few coins for what her heart most desired.

It was a little after noon and the market was at its peak. She looked around. The fair was divided into sections. There was the animal market with its high-fenced pens, where the steam rising from the oxen formed a mist that hung about them like ghosts. Then the meat markets with their long stalls, adorned with ribbons of assorted colors, fluttering in the wind. Among them a flock of sturdy women, crowned with wicker baskets, were talking with such gesticulating alacrity that Oriana could understand them even at a distance.

Then she saw Bruno, her father's apprentice. Seventeen years old, short, shaggy haired, and scoundrel eyed, he was

offering an apricot to the youngest of the basket women. She laughed in response, covering her mouth and slowly shaking her head. At once, Oriana tipped down her hat. She had never liked Bruno, though she couldn't say why. He was polite enough, yet somehow he gave the impression that he didn't care for them at all. It was vital he didn't see her, or he would tell her father before she had the chance to speak to him first.

"What are *you* doing here? They told you not to come."

She swirled around, her mouth dry.

But it was not Bruno or Mastro Peppo. She almost hadn't recognized Oriano in his Sunday best and small straw hat. Her twin yelped when she took him by the elbow and dragged him under the shadow of a large tent.

"Quiet," she said. "Do you have coin?"

Oriano blinked, pale faced.

"Well, no. I mean, yes, but it's mine!"

"I reckon you owe me, though, don't you think?"

Staring at her outstretched hand, the boy sighed.

"I suppose," he said, and put a hand to his waist pocket.

"But I wanted to buy a flaming apple. Maybe . . . we can share one?"

A few stalls ahead, a stand displayed candy apples. They were coated in sugar, then dipped in blue spirit and set alight by the vendor.

"Just one, Oriana, please! We'll take one bite each—no one will know."

"A spirit-soaked apple? Have you lost your mind? Now, scamper off before I tell Papà what really happened at the procession."

She wouldn't, but Oriano didn't need to know that. Also, she was not sure what had happened herself. As soon as Oriano handed her the coins, he turned and ran.

"And don't you dare tell Bruno! Or Father!" she yelled after him.