The Borgherini Enigma

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Prologue. Florence. April, 8 of 1498.

The sun stood low and red, dying over the roofs of the city. Evening came rapidly, but the abbey that should at this time have stood calm and quiet, humming only with the evening prayers of the monks gathered in the church, was now filled with the angry shouts of very many running men. Steel swords and halberds sang their metallic tings, silver breastplates clang against mails, and the heavy bells sounded ominous tones from the tower high above. Not only monks hurried in the cloister yards. Men dressed in all shades of grey, but not wearing a specific uniform or any badge that could testify to their allegiance, all wearing arms, ran to the walls, climbed on the roofs of the abbey building, and formed ranks in the cloister grounds. Torches were being lit.

The Abbey of San Marco of Florence was not very large, for it stood almost in the middle of the thriving merchant town, well within the city walls, and space was expensive in this town even for Medici money. Many men still poured in through the main gate of the abbey, near the church, yet other men already prepared to close the large oak panels, and monks drew large wooden beams along to help secure the doors of the gate. A few men, all very young, were in command. Their shouts were louder and steadier than the cries of the crowd. These were captains, no monks. The monks fled in panic to all sides, some tearing at their hair, throwing their arms in the air, crying out of despair, lost and in shock, fearing for their lives. They knew not what to do, where to flee to. They ran from out of one hall into another, from one courtyard into another, looking for escape and salvation although knowing none could be found here and now.

One monk ran up the stairs of the dormitory, walked rapidly along the narrow corridor to a cell and opened a door. At the other end of the small room he saw before him, a hooded monk sat on a chair at a table. The monk was writing a letter at the light of a single candle. The man did not look up at the intrusion, seemingly unaware or untouched by the noise in the abbey. The monk at the door said, ‘Father, the time has come. The Signoria has gathered enough men!’

The Signoria was Florence’s elected Council of wise men who ruled over the city, eight Priors from prominent families, two for each quarter of the town, led by their Gonfaloniere della Giustizia, the Standard-Bearer of Justice, the highest official of the town.
The monk continued, ‘the Signoria kills our followers in the streets. Blood flows! More men of Florence are joining them by the moment. Few support us anymore. Soon, the Signoria’s horde of warriors will be here. I heard their drums and saw their banners at the end of the Via Larga. We will be besieged!’

The writing monk did not turn to the voice. He continued writing calmly for a while, then signed and set his quill meticulously down next to the velum on the table. He still did not move.
He sighed, bowed his head more, then looked at the small wooden Crucifix that hung on the wall, and said, ‘Your Will must be done.’ He prayed.
Then he said, only now addressing the monk who stood, nervously wringing his hands, at the door, ‘yes, Father Carlo, yes, I know. We have been expecting this, haven’t we? This will be our end, my friend, the end of the Reign of God in this town. Have the gate closed. We must gain some time. Has all been done as I ordered?’

'Yes, Father. Our Brother …'
'Don't tell me any names!' cried the hooded monk. 'I will be tortured! Just tell me whether all was done, as I asked!'
'Our Brother delivered the three keys, as you ordered, Father, to the three families that are immune to our power. A reliable monk of our abbey was given one part of the message. I set him on his way out of the back door a moment ago. He will escape. He knows the way. A Father of the other abbey has the second part of our message. These two know only they have a message, not much more. Our Brother knows what to do with the message, with time, and God helping. He will return to our abbey when all is calm again. I still doubt however a chosen one will ever be found. Captain Niccolò and I transferred the object two days ago, and we did as you told. All was prepared. Only we two, Niccolò and I, know where our power is now.'
'Do not doubt a chosen one will ever rise, though he will not be one of us. God's Providence is in charge now. You and Captain Niccolò are the only people who know! Even I do not know where our most treasured secret is hidden. I will be tortured, soon. I will not be able to reveal anything. But you, my friend Carlo, and our loyal Niccolò, you know! You must meet your Lord tonight!'
'I know, Father, I shall have to do that. If the moment has come, I, we, are ready. How should I die, however? If I kill myself, my eternal soul will be stained, and I will not be allowed to sit at the side of the Lord!'
'The Signoria will come. When all our enemies are assembled before our walls, you must fight. Do not kill, you, leave the killing to Niccolò. When the siege starts, open the gate and sally with twenty men. You and Niccolò must lead that sally. You will meet death. Have the gate closed behind your group. We must resist a while still, give our young monk some more chance to escape from the town, draw all our enemies to here. We will surrender later.'
'So we lost, Father, our cause, God's cause is lost forever! The hope of Italy is gone!'
The hooded monk glanced fiercely over the man at the door.
'Our cause is never lost! Large upheavals will shake this town, but in the end the Judgement will be on the sins of Florence. Do as I told you, and you will dwell in Heaven! Go now!'

The hooded monk stood, went out of his cell, and pushed the monk called Carlo in front of him. They went down the stairs. When they reached the cloister yard, the hooded monk raised his arms to the skies. His imposing, tall figure silenced the frantic monks. All the men, the warriors and the monks, stopped suddenly in their tracks, and flocked close to the hooded monk. The monk made a large sign of the cross on his head, breast and shoulders, and then he blessed the crowd. All the men knelt. They remained on their knees with bowed heads and folded hands, waiting for a signal from their leader.

The sound of drums could be heard distinctly now, right on the other side of the abbey walls, as well as the growing noise of the shouts of vengeance of a large number of men on all sides of the abbey. The Signoria's militia of armed citizens was no doubt ready to storm the walls of the sacred precinct of San Marco.

In the yard of the cloister, however, the defenders still knelt.
Then, the hooded monk said, 'rise you all! Prepare to defend San Marco! Captain Niccolò and Brother Carlo, open the gates now, and sally! We must face our Apocalypse!'

Chapter One. Florence, August 1512. Pierfrancesco Borgherini

The painter Francesco Granacci slumped in despair over his drawings, leaning heavily with his arms on the table. He ruffled the oily, black hair of his head with his long fingers, so that hirsute bristles peaked out on all sides. He sighed. He could always tell from their tousled, uncombed hair when his friends were in trouble. Well, this time he was in trouble. Granacci was as bored with what he contemplated on the paper, as the dog sleeping at his feet under the crude desk. He painstakingly added a thick line to the beginning of a crucifixion scene, but what he did was all wrong and to no use. He knew that the correct lines had to come at once and in profusion, or that they would not complete the drawing at all. He had started to draw a little in the early morning of the day before, then abandoned the sketch in black charcoal for almost two days, unable to advance the scene to something that made sense, inspiration as hard to grasp as a brightly glistening angel hovering in the air of his workshop. He had only decided in dire compunction this very evening to have a new go at the design for the large Calvary fresco he had promised to the monks of the monastery of San Gallo. The Monks had already received a nice "Virgin and Child with Saints", and the good fathers had been so delighted that they had ordered a Calvary. A few coarse layouts was all he had been able to finish this last week, and the sheets with vague ideas for the road of Jesus' sufferings lay scattered and hopeless before his eyes, further inspiration for the crucifixion eluding him. In a niche of a corner of the studio stood a two feet high, coloured, very old, finely sculpted stone statue of Saint Luke. Saint Luke had not helped.

Granacci thought he could appeal to the muse of painting, utter a prayer or two at her intention, but he had forgotten what prayers to use, and which muse to conjure up. Was it Clio or Thalia? Unable to recall who the muse of his art was, if indeed there even was such a creature, he inexorably sank into gloom. He recognised this mood well, the time before the spur of feverish creation, the time of fear and despair before the lines would flow and flow. He had to wait patiently until inspiration permeated his being and prompted his hand into action. His mind led him back to the image of a guardian angel in the air of his studio. He grinned. He had never seen an angel, but he sure knew how to paint one. Thalia was the muse of comedy; she was an appropriate muse for the art of painting. Finally, he had cursed the sluts for not accommodating him with the grand vision that surely would stun the Florentine wealthy into admiration for his art and skill. His guardian angel had not helped either.

How much he desired to be adored for the great artist he knew he was! But it would not happen with what he managed to put down on paper this evening! And so he sat, facing his large window panes, through which the last feeble light of the day lit his sheet like a white, deep hole in the surface of the table. He was actually waiting for that light to wane completely, so that he could tear up the paper with a sigh, and step out of his studio to find solace in the pitying arms of another muse, a fine creature of one of the newest brothels of the Mercato Vecchio. He drew in his mind the contours of the girl he would seek out for the night, the slender and flat-bosomed but delicious sinewy Giuliana, with who he sometimes thought he was in love with, and who would squeeze him and pinch him in bed as no other woman was able to in Florence. The knowledge that one did not fall in love with a prostitute only enhanced his gloom. He also dared not think about sweet Vermiglia, his faithful mistress of many years, who reigned over his snug little villa in the countryside.

Sudden sounds in the street, of men running and shouting, startled Francesco out of his dark thoughts. His studio lay directly on the narrow, usually quiet alley. His private rooms were above his workshop, his working space separated from the noise only by the closed, but unfastened door. Granacci did not know what was going on outside, for he had no windows on that façade. He was even more astonished at what happened next. A man stumbled backwards into his studio, slammed the heavy oak panels immediately shut in front of him, and braced himself against the closed door with spread legs and arms. The man then remarked the two heavy planks that stood always against the wall beside the door. He hastily took the planks and pushed them into the iron U-shaped handles on the walls to secure the door. Granacci usually closed his door with a key only, and very rarely protected his workshop thus with the sturdy planks on the panels from the inside. It was not infrequent that people entered his studio in haste, but Granacci fumed at the insolence of someone else closing his door for him. The man remained leaning with his two arms against the planks, as if the strength of the oak might not be enough to withhold the chimera that surely was pushing from the other side. Yet, nothing and no one banged on the door, and the sound of running feet subsided rapidly.

Francesco Granacci was not amused at all. He had a long and well-sharpened sword hanging in the right corner of his studio, but he grabbed a halberd that stood at arm's length against his easel. He had used the ceremonial contraption as a model for a picture not so long ago. Thus armed, he silently confronted the intruder. The man did not turn around however, so Granacci wondered what he should do next: stick the halberd in the man's back – which would be a difficult thing to do, for the device's blades were as blunt and as flimsy as a pig's tail – or simply hit the man on the head with it. He felt slightly ridiculous. Granacci just stood menacingly, and then, oh so slowly, the man deigned to turn his face to the room.

The man was young, probably late in his teens. Granacci had a good look at the youth's dress and he was offended as much by the colours as by the youth's intrusion. The young man wore a splendid, white folded shirt under a red-and-yellow jacket. Particularly gaudy however were his calzone, which had one leg red and the other yellow striped with red, a stupendous combination of hues never to be used side by side in a decent painting. The youth's jacket was equally striped, and Granacci remarked pink roses in the yellow bands. Granacci was stunned because of such display of flamboyancy. For a while he regretted the abandonment of the former Fra Savonarola's sumptuary laws of Florence, by which this youth would justly have been thrown in jail until the shades on his tight stocking trousers had faded.

The youth stared at Granacci with frightened, innocent eyes in a very pale face, of which however the cheeks flushed red. The youth's breast still heaved mightily, as if he had ran all around the fortified walls of the city. Granacci studied the face, as he was used to, with a painter's eye. The youth wore a wisp of a beard on his chin, indicating he might be a young nobleman. Thick, curly golden hair topped his nice, gentle face of fair complexion. The youth's hair was ruffled, so something was amiss with this boy too, Granacci could tell. The youth's fine, straight nose stood out against rather fleshy cheeks drawn over flawlessly designed cheekbones. His lips were thin but full-bloodied. Granacci found the face comely and pleasant, a face he would gladly have used in a dignified scene of Florentine courtiers, and for a moment he wondered whether the angel he had been thinking of had stumbled into his studio. Granacci was so enraptured by the youth's appearance that he lowered his mock halberd. The boy relaxed.

‘Four bandits attacked me in the street,’ the young man stammered, whispering and panting. ‘I am so sorry. The bandits are outside. They wanted to stab me. I guess they wanted to steal my purse, though I don’t have much gold on me. Your door stood ajar. I fell in here.’
The youth only then really noticed the pointed halberd. His eyes widened and he receded until he was with his back at the door. He raised a hand in front of him, as if that would stop Granacci’s thrust.
‘Please do not hurt me. I mean no harm! I will be on my way again, soon, as soon as the thieves are gone. Just let me wait for a while. I can pay you.’
The youth unleashed the leather purse from his belt and pushed it forward.

Granacci smiled, for he understood the boy would be no threat to him. He threw the halberd with disgust into a corner. The noise startled the youth once more. The young man was obviously a rich, spoilt son of a wealthy aristocrat, pursued by some of Florence’s worse cutthroats who had spotted the brightly clad youth like a firefly in a dark night.

Granacci said, ‘all right, all right! Start by telling me who you are.’
‘My name is Pierfrancesco,’ the youth replied, still catching his breath. ‘I am a son of the Borgherini family.’
‘I know the name,’ Granacci answered. The Borgherini were a wealthy bankers’ family, not one of the richest of Florence, yet very well-to-do, with a fine palace in the Borgo Santi Apostoli.
‘I was walking in the Via Larga,’ Pierfrancesco continued, ‘when four fierce-looking and foul-smelling hoodlums grabbed me, stuck a knife under my nose and dragged me on along the walls of the houses. At a certain moment, an oil-seller pushing a large cart loaded with barrels barred our way, right before a side alley. I could tear me free from the hands that held me, jump to the other side of the barrels and run into the alley. The thieves had to squirm around the cart, so I outraced them for a few paces, ran into alley after alley, and then banged against your door panels. I burst in here, luckily. I don’t think the thieves saw me come in, for they were still just behind the corner. Can I stay awhile, please, master? They will cut me to pieces if they catch me now! Can I stay a while, please, please?’

Granacci laughed out loud. ‘Sure you can stay, my lad!’ he said. ‘After all, this is a painter’s workshop, for painting is my trade, and my door is always open, especially to young, wealthy noblemen. My name is Francesco d’Andrea di Marco Granacci. Everybody calls me Granacci. I am pleased to meet you. Have a look around. The door behind you is well fastened now. Nobody will disturb us here. Sit down. Have a cup of wine. Now where did I leave that bottle? Sweet Jesus, I suppose I’m out of wine. Have a seat. Have a seat! Let me think!’
Granacci drew a rickety stool from behind the table.

‘So,’ Granacci continued, ‘you made acquaintance with the cream of Florence. I guess the thugs must be mad as hell by now, like bees kicked against their bottoms. But my door is about the only one in this alley, so it may not be long before your hoodlums realise you might have disappeared in this studio.’
Indeed, right at that moment fists banged hard on the oak doors. Pierfrancesco jumped in one step to the other side of the workshop, over Granacci’s sketching table, and glued himself to the farthest wall, squinting at the room and its recesses like a cornered kitten. The sight of the frightened youth made Granacci laugh even more. He had never met such a fast and scared red-and-yellow grasshopper. Pierfrancesco had a mute, vulnerable pleading in his look. Granacci therefore suppressed his mocking smile. He brought a finger to his lips, indicating the youth to remain silent, while he went up to his doors, listening eagerly with one ear to the

wood. He heard angry, impatient shouts, among which ‘open these doors,’ then silence, more angry discussions, and finally the steps of men leaving the alley.

‘The thieves are gone,’ Granacci whispered, somewhat disappointedly. He always loved to see a good fight, though preferably not one in which he himself was the victim, and he feared not a little having to confront four experienced knife-wielders no doubt originating from the other side of the River Arno, the side where, as everyone knew in Florence, lived the poorest thugs of the town. He turned to Pierfrancesco, who was a white in the face as the wall he was spread against. This Pierfrancesco definitely was no hero, grinned Granacci.
‘Don’t worry. The thieves have left. They may hang around a bit, though. You’ll have to stay here for a while.’
Granacci did not really know what to do and say next. He decided, ‘well, since we have no wine anymore, and since I cannot throw you out, nor let you walk alone by that same alley, for more bandits may be waiting in dark corners for you, we might as well go by the courtyards to my friend Bachiacca. He is a painter also. His real name if Francesco d’Ubertino Verdi, or Francesco Ubertini, but he is called Bachiacca. Bachiacca always has plenty of wine, and he will know what to do. He always knows what to do.’
Granacci grabbed a huge round cheese and a loaf of bread and said, ‘follow me, Pierfrancesco!’
‘I am not going out!’ the youth wept.
‘We are not going out of that front door,’ Granacci assured him. ‘We will leave the other way. Come on!’
Granacci dragged Pierfrancesco behind him, opened a narrow door in the back wall of his studio, and stepped into a garden. Pierfrancesco followed him cautiously, first looking suspiciously left and then right, still frightened, still expecting a bandit with a knife emerging from out of the falling darkness.

Granacci led the Borgherini youth through the garden. Granacci opened another door, drew the lad along, pushed open an iron gate, and then entered another garden. He walked left and right, passed into a stone-vaulted corridor, opened yet other doors and gates, and soon Pierfrancesco had lost all sense of direction.
‘Where are we?’ he whispered.
‘Oh,’ Granacci replied, ‘all these gardens and inner courts are interconnected but closed from the outside. We are almost at Bachiacca’s. Come along! Keep silent! You’ll scare people.’
Granacci pushed at the door of a house, which was closed. Granacci cursed, but then he knocked with his full fist on the panels and shouted, ‘open up, Francesco, it is me, Granacci! Let us in!’

A few moments later, bolts shifted. An old woman held the door ajar, peeked with one eye at Granacci, and then let the men step inside. Before them stood a stocky man with a powerfully sculptured head, and long, black and spiky hair that hung onto his shoulders. Bachiacca’s face was sunburnt and unshaved. He had a straggly beard of a few days all over his cheeks, dark eyes above a prominent, broad nose, and thick, sensuous lips. Bachiacca wore a long, once white robe, now splashed all over with a myriad of flecks of paint of all the colours of the rainbow and a few more. He waved a brush in his hands, and bade the men forward with a dirty hand that showed as many hues as his robe. When Pierfrancesco’s eyes got accustomed to the bright light that several torches, oil lamps and candles burning in the large room flooded the studio with, he remarked that Bachiacca was even younger than he was and that he had arrived in yet another painter’s dominion.

Granacci said, 'Bachiacca, how are you? We have come to you because I am out of wine!'
Pierfrancesco had another story. Bachiacca listened with interest.
'We should warn the Otto di Guardia, the Captains of the Guards,' Granacci proposed.
'What?' Bachiacca shouted, 'those assholes? They wouldn't know the difference between a thug living in the gutters and an honest citizen!'
Granacci remarked Bachiacca had told something profound about the Florentines in general, which sent Bachiacca in roaring laughter.
'Where is my sword?' he clamoured to the old woman. 'We will go out and teach those whoring thieves a dire lesson; that is what we will do!'
'Calm down, calm down!' Granacci cried. 'The thieves must be in another quarter of the city by now, ambushing some other innocent burgher. We will never find them!'

Bachiacca looked Pierfrancesco over. 'Carnival is still some time off, my friend. Those colours are horrible! Who made you put on those clothes?'
'They are the colours of my family,' Pierfrancesco replied in offended pride. 'I wear them to show our valour and honour.'
'Did your father tell you to give that as an answer, boy?' Bachiacca cried. He was not older than Pierfrancesco, so Granacci moved his head to and fro in real astonishment. Bachiacca affirmed a charisma that always astonished him.
'Calm down, I said,' Granacci repeated. 'We have a problem here. We cannot just go out in the streets now. And Pierfrancesco's family indeed is an honourable one. I know the name.'
'All Florence knows the name,' Bachiacca grumbled. 'There is an odd coincidence here, too. My full name is Francesco Ubertini; your name is Francesco Granacci and this friend is Pierfrancesco dei Borgherini. We are three Francesco's together! Anyway, I am called Bachiacca; everybody calls you Granacci as if people didn't recall your first name, and we will call this Borgherini yelp Pierfrancesco.'
'Right,' Granacci acquiesced, and Pierfrancesco nodded too.
Pierfrancesco had made two friends in a nick of time and he was glad, for he had made no true friends in his life until this evening.

'You sought wine,' Bachiacca remembered. 'I'll fetch some. I must have a bottle or two of Trebbiano left from our last drinking bout.' Bachiacca went to his kitchen.

Pierfrancesco looked around in Bachiacca's workshop. Granacci followed on his heels, eager also to know what another painter had been up to. Bachiacca had ample inspiration, or else he had found no buyers for his work, for whereas Granacci's shop had been practically devoid of pictures, Bachiacca's work covered the walls. Tens of panels were stacked against cupboards and tables.
Bachiacca still rummaged in his kitchen, so Granacci whispered to Pierfrancesco, 'Bachiacca works like an ox! He paints and paints. Look at these Madonnas; look at the portraits of saints! He likes these long, predella-like panels with garlands of flowers, birds and little angels. I wonder how he keeps it up! He must sit down and start painting, immediately, without thinking, the themes just flowing out of his mind. His pictures get bought in less time than he needs to paints them. Don't think for one moment he doesn't sell his works! He gets rich simply by selling the bulk. He is quite wealthy, you know! He does not need to work so quickly. His father was a goldsmith and he owns still two jewellery shops behind the Duomo, but he refuses to manage the shops himself. Money just pours in onto him. Look at this angel! He also earns a lot of money from cartoons for tapestries. Look here on this wall: he is painting a "Flagellation of Christ"! Don't you find his hues garish? He placed blue, a sexless blue at that, next to red! That is a horrible combination! He learnt to paint from the greatest,

from Pietro Perugino, but Bachiacca paints no grand, wide open scenes! He loves to depict tens of little figures in one picture, all of different expressions. I have to admit he succeeds in creating a certain harmony of movement in the crowds, but how can a viewer look in earnest, with pleasure, at that chaos? Intent and soul disappear in the thronging! Perugino never amassed so many creatures together on a canvas. Bachiacca also worked with Andrea del Sarto and with Franciabigio for a while. Maybe he caught a special idea from Andrea. His figures together resemble his grotesques, his flower grotesques.'

Granacci turned to find agreement with his opinions from Pierfrancesco, but Pierfrancesco was admiring with open mouth an almost finished, large painting that stood on Bachiacca's easel. The painting lacked only a background landscape, which Bachiacca would certainly fill in later with palm trees and exotic garden views. The picture was a portrait. It showed a young woman looking gravely out of the panel at Pierfrancesco.

The girl wore a scarlet-coloured velvet gown lined around her neck with ample ermine. Her long sleeves ended in ermine too. The ermine descended along her shoulders and opened low in the front to line her fair throat, until the cleft of her small breast. She had a high neck and a long face, drawn in profile yet directed at the viewer, and she inclined her head invitingly. Her left eye transfixed Pierfrancesco in a dark, entrancing look. The girl's cheeks were very pale. Not a touch of rouge enlivened her traits, but Bachiacca had painted her in tones of fine chiaroscuro to show the delicate volume of her face. The paleness of the girl's complexion inspired feelings of delicacy and vulnerability, so that Pierfrancesco advanced to her as if to comfort her. Yet she might be an enchanting nymph, he thought. The girl's very long but thin nose started high between her eyes and ended just above her pink lips. Her mouth was long and tightly closed, uninviting. The girl drew her lips in less than a smile. Her lower lip was short but moist and voluptuous. Her eyes were very dark and large and prominent, not sunken into her face, and not hidden under long eyelashes. Her eyebrows were probably plucked to a thin black line that perfectly delineated the slender arches of the eyes. Her luxurious dark-brown hair was plaited in thick tresses so that a double band of knots crowned her broad front and then flowed down along the two sides of her face until it ended on her shoulders. Behind the knots lay still more dark hair combed to behind her back. She was a beauty, a pale vixen of the city, a nymph of the forests that covered Florence's hills. Her hands lay in her lap, the slender and long fingers intertwined. It seemed to Pierfrancesco as if the girl had been waiting to capture him in her charm. She smiled mockingly at him and glanced as if she had expected him all along, and knew he would be enraptured by her alabaster fineness. To Pierfrancesco, this girl impersonalized dignified and chaste love, with a promise of more. She was the picture he had formed in his mind since many years of the girl that he would have liked to meet and fall in love with, the girl he would have liked to marry. She was all grace, inviting to be embraced, vulnerable, but he was sure she was also headstrong, a girl of quickly changing moods, a true Florentine woman.

Francesco Granacci tore Pierfrancesco out of this reverie. 'That Madonna is a strange picture,' he remarked, watching Pierfrancesco. 'Why did Bachiacca paint such a long face, so fine, with such a long neck? I don't understand these young painters! I know of no woman in Florence that is so fine. Florentine women have square or round faces, sensual faces, and full-fleshed heads. Our girls are not delicate like this.'
'He painted not only her face but also her soul,' Pierfrancesco whispered.
That remark left Granacci dumbfounded, for he had not expected such depth in his new young friend.

'Who is she?' Pierfrancesco asked.
'She must be a working girl, a model from over the Arno River, a poor weaver's daughter,' Granacci suggested, somewhat irritated.
'Who is that girl, pray, master Bachiacca,' Pierfrancesco asked, addressing the younger artist who entered the room triumphantly with a bottle of red wine in each hand.
Bachiacca was suddenly embarrassed. 'You shouldn't have peeked on my pictures. And certainly not on that one!' he said.
He put the bottles on the table and drew a white linen cloth over the panel. 'It is a portrait of a noble woman of Florence. I am not allowed to say who she is. The girl's father wanted to have her portrait, but he desires to keep his daughter a secret. She does not go out of her house. I had to go to her father's palace and paint there, to have her face. I am finishing the rest here, in my studio.'
Bachiacca saw with astonishment Pierfrancesco's frustration when the girl's face disappeared under the cloth, yet he knocked at Pierfrancesco's hand, which was already lifting a corner of the linen.
Bachiacca drew Pierfrancesco to the table. 'Forget that girl, Pierfrancesco,' he said, 'that young lady is not for you. She is not for anybody. She is too high-born. She will be a prince's or a king's plaything. If it is your time to chase girls, Granacci and I can show you a couple of real beauties, young women of gentler mood and with more sensuous, lush bodies than this one! I can assure you this one is a nuisance to her father, a hot-tempered yet fish-blooded witch.'

'I am sure Pierfrancesco has marriage prospects already,' Granacci began.
'Yes,' admitted the Borgherini heir. 'My father Salvi would like me to marry an Acciaiuoli daughter. He has agreed several years ago with Roberto Acciaiuoli to wed me into that family. I have never seen my future bride. There is no picture of her. I am not sure however my father's scheme will be fulfilled. The Acciaiuoli are Florence's finest family, whereas the Borgherini are only an upstart family, noblemen, yes, but mere peasants compared to the Acciaiuoli. All the better, I think! I would like to marry a girl I like and have chosen myself. But I would not want to disillusion my good father.'
Granacci rather thought Pierfrancesco dared not to confront his father over such a choice.
Bachiacca looked rapidly at Granacci with upward drawn eyebrows, and resumed, 'well, I have sworn not to reveal the identity of the girl and I will keep my oath. You should not have seen that picture at all'.
'And I,' Pierfrancesco sighed, 'have told too much. Please don't tell anybody about my father's scheme for me. Nothing has been decided in a definite way. My father assured me that if the girl was ugly to me I could still refuse her. Yet, I would hate to disappoint him.'
'The Acciaiuoli women are reputed to be fair,' replied Granacci soothingly. 'Let's drink to that!' He poured the wine in three green-coloured glasses.

Bachiacca had showed off with his two bottles in pride, but the wine emptied rapidly. Pierfrancesco was not used to drinking so much so quickly. He delighted in his two friends and would for no gold in the world have refused one full glass more. His mood gradually lightened to the ebullience quite habitual to Granacci and Bachiacca.
When the bottles were almost empty of the divine beverage, Bachiacca took a pensive air and said, 'there is something about your story, Pierfrancesco, that doesn't fit. Either you are not telling us the truth – which I don't think you do – or something else is amiss. Four bandits are after your money. They are knife-wielders. They only have to cut the leather throng of your purse and be off, yet they grab you and drag you along. Why? Where to? And then, you can

get away from them. Those men must have been pretty nervous to lose you in such a stupid way. Are you sure they were after your purse?'
'Of course,' Pierfrancesco cried, 'what else would those thieves be after?'
'Are you sure you have no enemies? Are you sure your father has no enemies? Could it be that somebody meant harm to you and not to your purse?'
'The Borgherini are honest bankers,' Pierfrancesco cried, drawing knowing looks from the other Francescoes. 'We are members of the Arte del Cambio, the Bankers' Guild, as so many other honourable people! We take the normal percentages on loans. I don't recall my father warning me of enemies!'

Granacci waved the upcoming argument away. 'It is time for you two to stop thinking about that brawl,' he said. 'My friends, more urgent and important matters are at hand. Our wine is up. I know of a tavern on the Mercato Vecchio where the wine is young but decent and the girls not decent at all but equally young. The cheese there is succulent, the bread fresh and the servant-women generous. Why don't we finish the evening there? The wine will be on me, if the Borgherini pay for a meagre meal, as is proper for the newcomers to our circle!'
Pierfrancesco was in an elated mood by then and would have happily agreed to wander to the confines of the Styx, which probably was his father's opinion of the Mercato Vecchio's inns.

Bachiacca gave a plaudit to the idea. Yet, he objected to one thing. 'Oh no,' he shouted, 'I am not wandering in Florence at night with a brightly lit lantern like Pierfrancesco! Every hoodlum in the city crawls to the Mercato at night and a youngster in such gaudy jacket and trousers, as Pierfrancesco wears now, will be undressed and cut to pieces in no time!'
The objection did not sober up Pierfrancesco, but he did recognise Bachiacca had a point. Granacci thought so too. He addressed Bachiacca. 'If we are to feast in the Mercato, Pierfrancesco has to change clothes! You surely have some less conspicuous ones for him, my friend?'
Bachiacca drew Pierfrancesco to the second floor and a few moments later Pierfrancesco came down the same stairs with open arms, showing off to Granacci. He wore a crumpled brown jacket over his own shirt, and grey breeches. He had a cloak of no definite but dark hue on his arms.
'That is better,' Granacci commented. 'You might be a painter's assistant or a servant or a Ciompi. You will blend with us in the tavern. Let's get on our way!' The three friends left Bachiacca's studio.

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The tavern was built of bevelled stones on the outside and of warm wooden panels on the inside. It was large, and had several interconnected rooms. People sat at long tables, on banks and stools. According to Granacci, some of the best wines of Florence were offered here. The tavern was filled with a boisterous lot. One half welcomed Granacci and the other half knew Bachiacca. Many hands had to be shaken. Pierfrancesco was introduced only by his first name, as a fine citizen of the glorious quarter of Santa Maria Novella, of the Vipera Ward. After he had paid drinks to all, as befitted a newcomer, Pierfrancesco was a friend of all. His money dwindled. Francesco, Francesco and Pierfrancesco found places after a while on banks at the end of a long table filled with shouting, eating, singing, drinking and bragging hosts. Granacci and Pierfrancesco sat on one side, facing the doors; Bachiacca pushed half-drunk men together for a place at the other side. The three were being served immediately with wine, ordered by Granacci while they entered, and with a large plate of cheese and bread. Granacci barely sat when a pretty servant-girl dropped on his lap and caressed his chin with

long, slender fingers. Another, plump, alluring monna bowed deep while she filled Pierfrancesco's cup, so deep he could not but delve his eyes into her ample, displayed bosom. Bachiacca was left alone by the girls, so he grinned and shook his head disapprovingly. Granacci remembered Giuliana and Vermiglia and ousted off the girls, shouting he would pour the wine himself. He pushed cheese and bread to Bachiacca.

'Why would somebody want to hurt Pierfrancesco?' Bachiacca wondered.
Granacci sighed. He knew his friend would not let the matter rest until he had found a reason. Bachiacca was like that.
'Who knows,' he said. 'Everybody is an enemy of everybody in Florence. Everybody spies on everybody.'
He asked to Pierfrancesco, 'how much do you know about what happened in politics to Florence in the past years?'
'Very little, I am afraid,' replied Pierfrancesco. 'I cannot say we talk much about these matters at the dinner table.'
'Hmm,' commented Granacci astonished. 'Let me tell you then.'

Granacci drank, and said, 'Cardinal Giovanni de'Medici is the uncrowned master of Florence. A Medici is ready to rule Florence once more! At Easter, Cardinal Giovanni led the Papal Army of Pope Julius II at Ravenna against the French, and though the French defeated his Spanish and Italian troops, their Commander Gaston de Foix was killed and the French retreated. It was a horrible battle. About twenty-five thousand men died. The Swiss army moved against the French and that knowledge alone chased the French back to Milan. Giovanni de'Medici was taken a prisoner, but he escaped on his own.'

Granacci paused, drank some wine, and then continued his story. 'The Church still performs miracles! How an overweight Cardinal like Giovanni, who knows of nothing but books and psalms, can lead an army and turn a defeat into a victory, is indeed a greater miracle than Christ chasing all the devils in the desert! Giovanni's army looted Prato in his absence. More than four thousand people were massacred in that town! In the summer, when Giovanni arrived at Prato, abhorred by the disaster, he was astonished to hear our Gonfaloniere-for-life, Piero Soderini, our great Republican leader, had abandoned Florence. Soderini resigned and left to his Highness, to the Medici Cardinal, the supremacy over Florence. The Cardinal and his cousin, Archbishop Giulio, will soon feast the return to Florence of the old Signoria rule, of course under the benevolent control of the Medici. Nobody will be elected Prior of the Signoria without the Cardinal's consent.'
'So we have two factions in Florence, one in favour of the Medici and another in favour of anything-but-Medici,' Bachiacca said. 'I suppose the old family of the Acciaiuoli and the new family of the Borgherini will support the Medici. But there must be a faction in favour of noble rule over Florence, and another in favour of republican rule, the aristocrats against the merchants and the poor. That faction, in favour of noble rule, is not necessarily in favour of the Medici, and the republicans are not all angry with the Medici and their supporters.'
'Right,' Granacci continued. 'A good part of the Florentines would welcome a return to the times of Lorenzo Il Magnifico – with or without the Medici – and yet another faction wants to re-instate the sumptuary laws of the devotion to the true faith of Fra Savonarola's times. Not in the least, the Guelph and the Ghibelline oppositions are far from forgotten. The Guelphs swear to the Popes, so they should support Julius II and Cardinal Giovanni. But the greatest part of the noblemen was constituted of Ghibellines, and these are now mingled with the wealthy merchant families. The Ghibellines are devoted to the German Emperor, but the

Emperor is at this moment much an ally of the Pope, so some Ghibellines, in search of something to oppose to, have declared sympathy for France.'

'Fine,' Bachiacca intervened. 'In other words, each Florentine – whether wealthy or poor – is openly for a cause and against a cause, and the same Florentine changes cause every few days, as quickly as he changes his shirt and stockings. If there were only two Florentines on earth, they would surely quarrel over something political, and they would modify their rule each day. If one would declare for the Pope, as the other, the first would immediately staunchly support France, just for the pleasure of smiting the second.'
Granacci smiled. He said, 'Florentines live for strife and disputes. Florentines must quarrel or they are not Florentines! Florentines are hotheads with sharp tongues and loose swords, and they love it! So don't ask whether a Borgherini has enemies! Of course he has enemies! The question is only who would be his enemies today, for tomorrow he may have others!'

'Yes,' Bachiacca nodded, 'there will always be a few people wanting to do harm to a Borgherini, even though Salvi dei Borgherini and his son Pierfrancesco may have no idea whether they are pro-Medici or anti-Medici, pro-Pope or anti-Pope, pro-Emperor or anti-Emperor, pro-France or anti-France, pro-Republic or anti-Republic, and so on.'
'I like the and-so-on,' Granacci continued, 'for Milan fights Venice over towns like Bergamo, Venice fights the Pope over the Romagna and Ferrara, the Pope fights Naples, and the Spanish Vice-Roy of Naples fight the French King because the French still claim Naples theirs. At times each of these factions fight the other one; when one party becomes too strong, all sorts of alliances are made between old enemies and the strongest party gets thrashed. The powers in Italy are the Papal States, the lands ruled by the Venetians, by Milan, by Florence and the lands owned by the King of Naples. These powers have one main preoccupation: that no one single power among them conquers land of the other. Of course, all together they want no foreign force to invade Italy, not the King of France, not the Emperor. A painter would lose his mind over such bickering!'

Bachiacca nodded. 'All of us, Italians, are good Christians, but it beats me how the last of the Ten Commandments is so easily forgotten, the commandment that says that one shall not set one's eyes on one neighbour's house or on any of one's neighbour possessions. Even cardinals and popes fight over cities and territories! Florence sits in the middle of all this, with its own troubles, and since spies of every country flock to Florence, this city is a powder barrel with a lighted fuse at its end.'

'Well,' Pierfrancesco remarked, 'if all those foreigners come to Florence, it must be to ask for money, and we, bankers, gladly offer them the means to continue warring at a monthly percentage! As a result, we bankers get rich, and pay painters to draw their pictures. And the painters pay the tavern-keepers and the tavern-keepers pay the wine merchants and the servant-girls. So Florence flourishes!'
Neither Granacci nor Bachiacca had expected such a Florentine down-to-earth conclusion; they roared with laughter and made their beakers sing to Pierfrancesco's wisdom.

Bachiacca said then, 'is your analysis not a caricature, Granacci? Things must be simpler than that! Pierfrancesco must be, like his father, pro-Medici and pro-papacy, and since the cardinals have won Florence, everybody should now bough to them and to their supporters. The pro-Republic, pro-Soderini clans, are done with. No Medici and no Medici supporter will be hurt in Florence. So what the hell could be going on against the Borgherini? The simplest

would be to believe indeed the thugs that attacked Pierfrancesco were merely thieves. I must be seeing conspiracies where there are none. Still …'
He watched Pierfrancesco, who suddenly blanched.

Pierfrancesco grasped Granacci's arm, spilling the painter's wine. Pierfrancesco's clutch hurt so much, that Granacci winced and looked angry at Pierfrancesco, who whispered, 'that man there, I am sure, was one of my assailers. He led the group. He enters the tavern now with three companions. They come through the doors! They must be the men that attacked me!'
Pierfrancesco made himself smaller, put his arm up on the table, leaned on it and hid his face behind his hand, as if he was sinking to the table from the drink. He watched the men through his fingers. Bachiacca, who had his back to the door, glanced over his shoulders and saw four dirty-looking, arrogant men, dressed in dark, ragged trousers and patched, leather jackets come forward, and search for a place to sit.

Bachiacca said,' talking of Spaniards, those four are Neapolitans! But they are not Italians! I have seen them before in town. Friends of mine drew my attention to them. Everybody avoids them. They are up to no good, dangerous men, cutthroats! They must be thieves, for sure. They know how to handle knives.' He hesitated, looked at Granacci, then cried, 'they are not going to attack a friend of mine unpunished! I am not going to abandon Florence to Neapolitan scum!'
Bachiacca jumped up from the table, and immediately strode with long, determined steps in the direction of the incoming men, his drinking can filled with wine still in his hand. Granacci groped to the other side of the table to withhold Bachiacca, but he was too late. Bachiacca was on his way to disaster.

The Neapolitan hoodlums had just found a free table and sat, two on either side. They had been looking around, but did not spot Bachiacca until he stood right before them. The men were astonished, yet not immediately on their guard.
Without ado, Bachiacca cried at them, 'you want to harm one of my friends, a Borgherini? You will not touch a friend of mine, you gutter lice! I am going to teach you attacking a Florentine! It is not because you Spaniards have won a battle that you can do in Florence whatever you want!'
Bachiacca kicked his foot in the back of the man that sat closest to him so that the man reeled almost over the table, winded and hurt at the blunt, wooden edge of the surface. At the same time Bachiacca slapped his wine can into the face of the man seated nearest. Then he pounced and punched with his fists at the head of the man he had just kicked.
The two other Neapolitan Spaniards probed in their jackets for their knives.
Bachiacca had already a three-legged stool in his hands and hit the wood in the face of the third thug. That man plied in two and thus blocked the way for the fourth to step from behind the table.

Bachiacca had time to shout, 'men of Santa Maria Novella, to me, to me!' He shouted the rallying cry of the quarter of Florence, in which the tavern lay.
In a nick of time, half the tavern stood. No man of Santa Maria Novella feared a good fight. Banks and chairs tumbled, tables were sent out of the way, and a brawl was on.

Granacci and Pierfrancesco were too stunned to move. They watched the scene with open mouths and sheer horror in their eyes. They looked at each other, then again at Bachiacca. One Neapolitan was down from the stool in his face, and another, who had had his back to Bachiacca, must have been wondering what had happened to him and the table. The other two

now recuperated from their astonishment and the stool blow. They were instantly on Bachiacca. One grabbed already Bachiacca's shirt and readied to hit the painter's face with the front of his head, while the other lunged to push a long knife in Bachiacca's belly. Bachiacca pushed at the table so that it spun against his opponents, but the men still came. Bachiacca found another stool and continued to cry 'Santa Maria Novella'. He clawed at a Neapolitan's face. Ten hands grasped at the Spaniards and swung them around. A Florentine youth sprang from upon a table between the fighting men, dragging the knife-master to the ground. Bachiacca did receive a Neapolitan head on his nose and then a fist on his left eye. He staggered backwards, blood gushing from his eyebrows, while at least five Florentines hit the hoodlums from all sides. The men of Santa Maria Novella landed a series of fist-blows on the faces and bellies of the Neapolitans.
Bachiacca slumbered slowly backwards and sank down between two tables, first to his knees; then he fell on his back. He lost consciousness.
The men of Santa Maria Novella continued to kick at the Neapolitans with fists and feet; the Spanish thieves lost their knives in the fight, and they rolled under the tables to seek protection from the blows.

There were also men living on the other side of the Arno in the tavern, weavers and wool-combers, and these now presumed the men of Santa Maria Novella were thumping on their neighbours from the glorious Santo Spirito quarter, so a man from Santo Spirito dealt a hard punch on the nose of a man of Santa Maria Novella. The men of Santa Maria Novella turned and faced their new assailers.

In no time, the tavern became a frantic mêlée of entangled, fighting men. Since no one knew really who was from Santa Maria Novella and who from Santo Spirito, everybody happily fought everybody.
Drinking cans got dented and cracked on hard heads; cheeks sliced open; blood gushed and mixed with wine and sweat. Claws clung and fists delivered blows to all sides. A woman threw a burning torch in the face of a man who grabbed her. A small barrel of wine flew over heads and crashed, spilling wine over the ground, on which already laid several bodies of groaning men. A man swung a club; another ducked, and kicked the man in the groin. Cheekbones and noses were broken by clenched fists. Eyebrows burst. A giant of a weaver flung a wooden bank all around him with extra-ordinary strength and knocked down all the men that stood in his way. The Neapolitans were beaten to jelly on the floor, but the brawl had gained the entire tavern so that everybody was thrashing at everybody. Bottles exploded to pieces, knuckles broke. Men fell on the sharp edges of potsherds.
Many men wore arms, but no knife or sword was drawn.

Granacci pushed Pierfrancesco under the table as soon as the wrangle began. This was not the first tavern-brawl he had witnessed. He knew what to do. He signed to crawl to the doors on hands and knees. They advanced slowly and painstakingly, avoiding bodies and sherds that fell from all sides around them. A foot planted itself on Pierfrancesco's hand.

Granacci reached Bachiacca and drew him on, over the ground. Pierfrancesco pushed at Bachiacca's feet and bit in a Santo Spirito leg. He got a kick of a foot in his mouth as reward. They neared the doors. Pierfrancesco hurt his arm while avoiding a stool that was hurled at him. Several people tried to open the doors and escape. Pierfrancesco trampled on knocked-out men and Granacci drew at a woman's skirts to get to his feet. Granacci stood and drew Bachiacca from under the skirts of two other fleeing servant-girls.

Pierfrancesco first went to his knees, delivered an uppercut which made him wince from pain in his knuckles, stood upright, and then ran out with Granacci, who still dragged Bachiacca along.

At a little distance in the street, Granacci grunted and plied in two from the pain of a fist thrust that had racked his side. Bachiacca groaned and brought his hand to his blood-covered face.
Pierfrancesco pushed Bachiacca on his feet, pushed him against a wall and slapped his face with flat hands. Bachiacca opened his eyes.
'You fool!' Granacci cried at him, 'why did you do that? Are you satisfied now? Are you awake?'
It took a while before Bachiacca grinned and nodded. He tried to stand firmly on his feet, but had to grasp the wall with both hands.

From the open doors of the tavern more men staggered out, some still fighting, and the brawl continued in the street. Bachiacca moved forward as if he wanted to return to the tavern, but Granacci drew him away, 'oh no, you aren't! No more fighting tonight for you! Stop it, Bachiacca, come along!'
Granacci said to Pierfrancesco, 'we have to get out of here. The guards will come!'
Pierfrancesco grabbed one arm of Bachiacca and slung the body over his back, holding a leg of Bachiacca under the same arm. He ran with Granacci out of the Mercato Vecchio, with Bachiacca on his back slumping like a sack of wheat, into dark alleys.

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Pierfrancesco dumped Bachiacca on his bed. Bachiacca had fallen asleep on Pierfrancesco's back. He was either criminally drunk or so bruised in his head by the Neapolitan's kicks that he merely grunted when he was thrown down. He turned to his side to doze on, his head buried in his right arm. The old woman came up the stairs and gently dabbed the blood from Bachiacca's face. She tore white linen to windings and patched up the wounds of the painter. She had obviously done this before.

Granacci sat in the studio, drinking water. His left eye was blackening; he had a broken lip and very scarlet, pulped cheeks. He must have absorbed a few nasty hits too. He held his ribs in pain on one side. He was pissed off with Bachiacca.
'What a hot-headed bloody fool, what a farnagaccio, a crazy fool,' he complained to Pierfrancesco. 'Give him one-tenth of a chance to show off, for good or for bad, and Bachiacca lunges at the occasion! I knew he would do just that, but I was too late. We should have kept quiet, hidden you, and learned more about those hoodlums, who they were, why they had come for you, maybe even whether they had a boss.'
'Were those men not just thieves?' Pierfrancesco asked, a little afraid and alerted. 'I suppose the Neapolitans will not return on me now, won't they? They endured a hard lesson. They would not dare to attack me again, wouldn't they?'
'No, I guess they shall not attack you again,' Granacci replied absent-minded to what Pierfrancesco asked him.
He continued his soliloquy. 'The moment I saw the men coming into the tavern and you recognised them, I could tell I would not be able to hold back Bachiacca. I do not count anymore the gutter brawls that man has been a partner in! He relishes tavern brawls and street fighting! How can an artist who has been a student of the fine, sophisticated, gentle, calm Pietro Perugino be so choleric? Perugino was grace and dignity impersonalised; he drew in

tranquil grandeur wide open spaces, monumental temples in ideal settings; he painted in princely glory. Bachiacca, one of his most gifted students, is a street-brawler!'

Pierfrancesco hurt in a few places too, but he had escaped the least harmed. He was dead-beat, though. He slumped at the table in front of Granacci and rinsed his mouth. Contrary to Granacci, he felt elated. He had been in his first tavern-fight! He heard his father always shout that his son was a milk-boy, a mother's baby, who shied away from any, slightest violence. Now, he had actually fought in a tavern! True, he had not terraced many opposers, but he had been at the centre of the brawl. He would not dare to tell to his father Salvi where he had been that night, but he had not fled disgracefully, and if Bachiacca was now sleeping in his cot, that was not to a little due to him, Pierfrancesco. Pierfrancesco grinned and drank the fresh, cool water to spit the dust of the tavern-floor from his crusted lips. Granacci just continued to grunt and dug his head in his hands.

Pierfrancesco looked at the white linen rectangle that stood against the wall. He gathered his courage and last energy to tear away the linen, but he let the picture where it was. He looked at the girl and followed her traits with his eyes, as if he were caressing her face. He studied the portrait, for he wanted to remember the face. He was convinced he was in love with the girl. He had first thought he was a fool, and then he convinced himself he did not know at all what love meant, but finally he was sure that - because he just could not forget the face - this must be love. The maiden smiled like a Madonna and her eyes caught his, straight on, as ever.

'I am going to find you,' he said boldly to the picture, inebriated by his experience in the tavern, 'and I will make you fall in love with me, and then we will marry and have children. And I will keep you in my palace and all Florence will bow to you when we organise feasts, and Florence will be envious of your beauty. What do I care that you are a princess! Nobody stops a Borgherini from getting what he wants, and certainly not Pierfrancesco dei Borgherini! I will show father; to hell with who he wants me to marry. I want this one!'

Pierfrancesco lifted his cup and said health to the picture. He chuckled. He would not have the audacity even to go up to the girl when he met her, and tell her something funny to start a conversation. He would never dare approach such a beauty alone. He was only having illusions about the girl.
Granacci watched his young friend with awe and surprise, without being noticed by Pierfrancesco, and only heard the words.
'Oh no, more trouble coming!' he sighed, and that was his only comment for the rest of the night.

In the early morning, Granacci and Pierfrancesco supported each other and walked arms-over-shoulders to the Borgherini palace in the Borgo Santi Apostoli. Pierfrancesco had to shout and bang on the wooden panels before the massive doors of the Borgherini manor creaked open. Granacci refused to stay and pass the night in the palace. He rambled along to his own house.

Chapter Two. Early September 1512. Margherita Acciaiuoli

A very bright, still warm sun dawned over Florence. The city was at feast. Giuliano de'Medici, the thirty-three year old son of Lorenzo Il Magnifico and brother to thirty-seven year old Cardinal Giovanni de'Medici, the confident of Pope Julius II, staged a pageant to celebrate the return of the Medici to power. Cardinal Giovanni had led the Papal armies of the Holy League against the French, and maybe not defeated them, but at the least chased them back north. Prato had fallen to the Cardinal and the atrocities that befell that town had instantly sobered the Florentine republican Gonfaloniere-for-life, Piero Soderini, to surrender the town to Giovanni de'Medici. The great bell in the tower of the Signoria, the 'Vacca,' the cow, had sound its moaning, mooing tunes over the city. Piero Soderini fled to Venetian Ragusa, and offered the town of Florence, without the least drop of blood, to Cardinal Giovanni. Therefore, Cardinal Giovanni could now ride into Florence and receive a plaudit from the people, as if Florence had finally been saved from all sorts of calamitous and malignant governments.

The Cardinal would ride on a white horse, accompanied by his friend and cousin Giulio de'Medici, only three years his younger. Giulio was the son of Lorenzo Il Magnifico's beloved and heroic brother Giuliano, who had been killed in the Duomo when the Medici brothers had been cowardly attacked by hired assassins in the ill-fated Pazzi conspiracy. Giulio was in fact Giuliano's illegitimate son by his father's mistress Fioretta Gorini, but still Cardinal Giovanni's cousin and confident. Giulio was already Archbishop of Florence. Lorenzo de'Medici, called Lorenzino, a youth of about twenty years old, would be in town too. He was the son of the deceased Piero the Gouty, eldest son of Lorenzo Il Magnifico and Lorenzo's erstwhile successor. Lorenzino was thus a nephew to the powerful Cardinal Giovanni.

Cardinal Giovanni and Archbishop Giulio would ride from the Via Larga to the Piazza della Signoria, followed by Giuliano and Lorenzino. Giuliano de'Medici was already the uncrowned ruler of Florence by the grace of the cardinal and the Pope. The Medici would parade and triumph in the city, and delight the people, the wealthy and the poor, the noblemen and the city-dwellers, with the festivities prepared by Giuliano in honour of the divine victor, Cardinal Giovanni. There would be stalls with free drinks of wine in the Via Larga near the Palazzo Medici, and dancing in the Piazza San Lorenzo, before the Medici family church.

Giuliano de'Medici ruled Florence in the name of his brother, Cardinal Giovanni. Of course, the elected Signoria, the Priors of the town, would govern over Florence. The Gonfaloniere di Giustizia, the Standard-Bearer of Justice, would head the city, but the men elected to the Signoria would all be supporters of the Medici, so that no decision would be made in Florence without the advice and consent of Giuliano.

Pierfrancesco had not dared to leave the palace of his father on the days following the tavern brawl. He was too frightened to meet the Spanish Neapolitans head on again. This day, however, his father had whipped him out, so Pierfrancesco had sent word to Granacci. Pierfrancesco's new friend came to the Borgherini palace, and both strolled into the centre of Florence. Pierfrancesco insisted they pick up Bachiacca, though Granacci feared the young painter would provoke yet another fight. Pierfrancesco had to dress in his gaudy Borgherini outfit, in the red-and-yellow colours, a large Borgherini badge stitched on his breast jacket,

but he had shaven off his nobleman's beard. Salvi di Francesco dei Borgherini had insisted his son wore the family badge proudly, and clearly visible at the Medici procession, but Pierfrancesco was ill at ease, still fearing the Neapolitan thieves.

Pierfrancesco Borgherini and Francesco Granacci sauntered into the Via Larga, Bachiacca trailing behind. They entered the street of the Palazzo Medici, of the monastery of San Marco, and if one looked to the left coming from the Duomo, also of the church of San Lorenzo. The Via Larga was as crowded with people as if a market had been held there that day. People packed the windows and the balconies of the street. Youths clambered on rooftops. Many people shouted the Medici rallying cry of 'Palle! Palle!' The traffic of chariots and carts and donkeys laden with goods had stopped. Guards blocked the Via Larga for such traffic. The people strolled at ease, but it was hard to advance in the throng if one wanted to walk quicker than the mass of men and women and children, all dressed up as if they were going to attend Easter Mass. Pierfrancesco and Granacci just let the crowd push them on.

The Medici would ride out of their palace, at the corner of the Via Larga and the Via de Gori, pass briefly at their family church of San Lorenzo, ride up again to San Marco and pay homage to the monks, then ply back all along the Via Larga once more to the Duomo, and enjoy their triumph throughout the very centre of Florence, until they reached the Piazza della Signoria. They would then be received at the Town Hall, by the Signoria, by the Priors of Florence.

The three bored and lazily advancing friends arrived from the Duomo and had just passed the side road that led from the Via Larga to San Lorenzo, when they heard applause. A commotion formed in front of them and the people pushed forward towards the Palazzo Medici. Soldiers of Florence rushed out of the courtyard and pushed the crowd apart. The cortège of the Medici would soon ride out of the palace. The heralds with trumpets that had been waiting in the street started to move as a group, and their high, shrill sounds filled the street, above the cheers of the crowd. A group of twenty drummers followed, dressed in Medici colours, and strode into the Via Larga. They beat an ominous roll of drums, which reverberated down and up the street, frightening the children and inspiring awe and fear in the bystanders.
'Why is it,' Pierfrancesco wondered, 'the sound of drums has such an ominous effect on people? Maybe it is because the drums beat like our hearts and the vibrations in the air reach our very being. I don't like drums.'
Behind them, the people pushed even more together to catch a glimpse of the illustrious men that would ride out soon.

A company of about fifty lansquenets armed with halberds marched in two rows at the sound of the drums. They were the German and Spanish guards of the Medici and they opened, walking slowly, to let the rest of the cortège walk between their two fierce-looking rows of long lances ending in gleaming axes. The Medici had taken no risk on this day. The crowd would not get near them.

Suddenly, Cardinal Giovanni de'Medici rode out of the gate of his palace, dressed in crimson robes and red Cardinal's cap, wearing large rings studded with precious stones on the fingers that held the reins of his horse. A long, heavy golden chain hung around his neck, down to his breast. He was a rather plump man with a round, innocent-looking face. His eyes darted over the crowd, gently but commanding, and his hand already formed a blessing. He rode a docile

white horse, and under his saddle hung a large yellow, brocaded cloth that almost touched the cobbled stones of the road.
The rest of his family, splendidly dressed, his brother Giuliano, his cousin Giulio and his nephew Lorenzino rode out next, all riding black horses. Behind them followed the Medici ladies, seated on smaller horses. Liveried footmen held their horses at the reins. A score of noblemen and wealthy merchants of Florence walked behind, among which Pierfrancesco's father Salvi dei Borgherini. Many other merchants and Gonfalonieri of the Guilds joined the cortège behind.
The three friends stopped and watched the procession pass them by, towards San Lorenzo. The common people joined the procession then at the end, dancing and laughing, so that a long parade of colourful Florentines took part in the triumph of the Medici. Young boys ran with the cortège, cheering and shouting the Medici name as well as 'Palle' Palle!'

Towards San Marco, on the two sides of the Palazzo Medici, stalls had been set up to serve free wine and cakes. Bachiacca drilled a passage to the wine, drawing Pierfrancesco and Granacci in his wake. Bachiacca proposed to wait there until the Medici returned from San Lorenzo and then again, from San Marco. He had no inkling to follow the procession all along, and neither had Pierfrancesco or Granacci.

They drank, standing at the stalls and Bachiacca joked with the servant-girls. They could breathe more freely here, for most of the crowd had run to San Lorenzo. Pierfrancesco drank little wine, but Bachiacca and Granacci emptied one cup after the other. He walked to the stall further on, where other servants handed out pieces of light cakes.
A very bright hue suddenly caught his eye. Pierfrancesco saw a splendidly dressed lady there, accepting a piece of cake. She wore a long-sleeved orange-hued gown that sparkled with gold thread and silver brocades. Her blouse was high-necked and lined with ermine. Red silk emphasised her chest and on her back she wore a cape of dark grey cloth lined with satin, but the cape hung low down her shoulders, opening to her white blouse. Her thick, dark brown hair was so long and luxurious that it covered the upper part of her cloak. It was topped by a flimsy woad-blue, laced satin cap encrusted with pearls. A garland of little white flowers crowned her head in a festive wreath. An old woman accompanied her. This woman dressed less glaringly, was probably a servant. The old woman looked anxiously about her, pushing women and men away from her lady, guarding her to left and right. When the orange-clad woman took hold of a presented cake, she brought the sweet delicately to her mouth and turned her head to Pierfrancesco. The lady was a young girl. She was breathtakingly beautiful.

Pierfrancesco gasped and stared. The girl seemed to be fascinated by his gaze, for her cake remained in mid-air before her opened mouth. She wiped away a crumble with one long finger, but continued to look with large, interrogating and probing eyes.
Pierfrancesco spilled some of his wine, which broke the tension that held him to the girl. He turned instantaneously and perfectly on his heels, which is not an easy thing to do and could have made a complete fool of him performed the wrong way, but he turned in the right direction without stumbling. He showed his back to the girl, but he was at Bachiacca in two strides.
Bachiacca was still drinking at the stalls, talking to two friends and he was unaware of Pierfrancesco. Pierfrancesco grasped the painter at the shoulders. Bachiacca turned, spilling his wine too, and clenching a fist ready to strike. The fist stayed where it was, and relaxed when Bachiacca saw it was merely Pierfrancesco who had so brusquely interrupted an agreeable conversation. Pierfrancesco at first did not speak, for he had lost his tongue, but he

held up his hand and his thumb pointed to something behind him. Bachiacca looked that way, over Pierfrancesco's shoulders, and noticed the girl. His mouth too opened. Then he smiled. Pierfrancesco brought his face close to Bachiacca's and whispered, 'it's the girl of the portrait!'
'Is it now?' Bachiacca answered calmly, coolly, but his amusement rising.
'I am sure it is,' Pierfrancesco said, 'please introduce me!'
'Pierfrancesco, are you sure you want that to happen?' Granacci intervened. He had watched the scene with growing apprehension. 'Women are a nuisance, and that girl means trouble!'
'Yes, I do,' Pierfrancesco insisted, excited and becoming a little angry, for he was impatient. 'Please, introduce me. Please!'
Bachiacca could no longer resist to Pierfrancesco's longing eyes. 'Fine,' he said. 'Let's go, then.'
He stepped past Pierfrancesco, who followed him docilely, turning once more on his heels the right way.

'A good morning to you, Lady Margherita,' Bachiacca said, walking up to the girl.
The girl did not look one moment at Bachiacca. She held her body a little obliquely and continued to watch, past her painter, to Pierfrancesco, who now stepped from behind Bachiacca and approached.
'A good morning to you, Master Francesco,' she smiled, but she kept her eyes on Pierfrancesco.
'May I present to you my friend, Pierfrancesco di Salvi dei Borgherini? Pierfrancesco, this is Lady Margherita di Roberto dei Acciaiuoli!'

Bachiacca's mouth remained closed, but Margherita's and Pierfrancesco's lips opened again and their eyes widened. They just stood there, surprised and embarrassed. Margherita's cake still hovered under her chin. She gathered her wits quicker than Pierfrancesco and the cake finally entered the open mouth. Her eyelashes moved and a mocking smile appeared on her lips, her cheeks reddened, and came to a light pink, ravishing blush.
'Are we supposed to be wed?' was all Pierfrancesco could utter, and that was about the silliest thing he could have mentioned, for the girl almost choked in her cake and then a high, pearling laugh startled the people around the stalls.

'Oh no,' she answered quickly, 'that was a very old story. Any marriage between the Acciaiuoli and the Borgherini has been called off. Didn't you know? Our fathers decided otherwise a long time ago! Besides, I marry only who I want to be married to!'
'Yes, of course,' Pierfrancesco replied, pushing Bachiacca aside. 'I saw a portrait of yours in the studio of my friend, Master Bachiacca here, but he refused to tell me who you were. It is a marvellous portrait! He painted you very handsomely.'
'He was very much supposed to refuse to tell who the sitter was of that portrait! He should not even have shown the picture to anybody! That was the agreement he had with my father. But I hear now he did boast with my portrait, to you! I don't think my father will be pleased with that.'
'Please, please, do not blame the painter! I happened to notice your portrait by accident only, and Bachiacca staunchly refused to tell me who you were. I am pleased and honoured to have found you. I am surprised, too. I never saw you before in Florence, and yet we live in the same street.'

The girl now coquettishly bit little pieces from her cake, flashed her eyes on Pierfrancesco and then back at the stall, then back to Pierfrancesco. A smile formed and disappeared from

her lips. She impatiently waved off her elder servant, who urged her anxiously to walk away from the men.
Margherita waited a while before she answered. ‘I lived for a long time in the country, in our Castello di Montegufoni, near Montespertoli, to the south. I was in the city only rarely. Recently, I have returned to Florence, to live in our palace here. I know your house. I have seen it.’ She did not add her father had forced her to Florence to meet young men that might be suitors.
Pierfrancesco noticed the girl liked to continue to talk, so he assembled all the courage that was left in him. ‘Yes,’ he replied, ‘our new palace is not far from yours.’

Pierfrancesco looked to left and right. ‘Should you not be accompanied? Are your brothers and cousins around?’
‘Oh, they ran to the procession. They all hurried to follow the Medici, leaving poor me unprotected and alone. Why do you ask? Would you accompany me? Would you protect me?’
Margherita Acciaiuoli provoked him, so Pierfrancesco kept an innocent face. ‘If I may, yes. I would be happy to serve you, provided your family allow me, of course.’
Margherita stopped her grin. This young man is truly gullible, she thought. ‘Well then,’ she said, ‘I would like to walk to the Duomo! Walk with me!’

Margherita once more slashed away the hand of her servant, who was obviously not so happy with the turn of events, her young lady strolling on with an unknown man in the Via Larga.
‘I will guard your lady,’ Pierfrancesco soothed, ‘and my friends the master painters Bachiacca and Granacci will certainly come too. I assure you we only desire to serve the lady of the Acciaiuoli. Bachiacca paints her portrait, so her father knows him and trusts him.’
He offered his arm to Margherita, who laid her fingertips on him.
‘My nurse accompanies me to master Bachiacca’s shop,’ told the girl.
Pierfrancesco cursed inwardly his friend, for Bachiacca had not told him he might meet the girl of the portrait in the painter’s workshop. Instead, he smiled meekly and walked at the side of Margherita. They descended the Via Larga together.

‘What happened to my master painter?’ Margherita asked. All the signs of the brawl were still on Bachiacca’s face: a bruised cheek, a pink chin, blue spots on his neck, a very black left eye, and cut eyebrows. The Francescoes and Pierfrancesco actually still suffered from sore ribs and bruised skin on various places of their bodies. They tried not to wince when the crowd pushed too brusquely at a sore spot, but Margherita could not suspect they had participated in a street brawl.
‘Master Bachiacca fell from the stairs in his studio,’ Pierfrancesco ventured, loudly enough for the painters behind him to hear, at which Bachiacca looked incredulously at the sky and opened his arms in a despair of protest. Pierfrancesco’s friends walked close behind.
Margherita saw not the astonishment of the painters when the couple advanced graciously like two courtiers of a King. In any case, Pierfrancesco was as proud as a French courtier.
When Pierfrancesco proudly passed them, the painters had watched in sceptical disbelief. They wondered how a scared peacock like Pierfrancesco could charm a woman of Florence, a noblewoman at that, in so short a time. They would simply never have thought such a thing possible. Pierfrancesco turned and winked at his friends. The painters had to push their fists in their mouths to burst out in laughter.

After a while, Pierfrancesco glanced over his shoulders again, and was glad that not only the two Francescoes followed, but also two of their friends.
‘The crowd is thicker here,’ Margherita remarked.

Pierfrancesco was absent-minded for a moment. 'Yes,' he replied. 'Can I see you again, later?' he asked.

Margherita was amused. She had had few admirers at Montegufoni, but since the few weeks she had arrived at Florence, she had already refused two marriage proposals and other suitors had been announced at the Palazzo Acciaiuoli. She was well aware that Salvi Borgherini had proposed a wedding between her and his son Pierfrancesco, but her father had refused politely at that time, and expressed to her his disdain for the supine son of a moderately wealthy but otherwise insignificant new rich man like Salvi dei Borgherini. Salvi Borgherini had not really wanted to accept the definiteness of the refusal in her father's voice and had left the Acciaiuoli palace with a slight hope of agreement. Margherita knew the answer was final. Her father rarely came back on something he decided. The Acciaiuoli despised the Borgherini; so much was a fact.
But Margherita admitted she did not dislike this young man after all. She felt oddly attracted to him, so instead of repulsing his clumsy, direct advances, she had now relented a bit. Pierfrancesco was not what she expected in a man. He was a lot what she loathed generally in men. He looked afraid and unsure, a fool, and he was too polite. She wanted a man that would defend her, a warrior, a self-confident yet courteous knight, a young man like the Saint George of the statue of Orsanmichele, who stood so charmingly with his sword and shield! Margherita rather thought Pierfrancesco would not be able to protect her much. Her old servant might well be more useful to fend off daring youths than this Borgherini puppy. Yet, Pierfrancesco had such a nice face! She liked his traits and would have trembled to touch his nose and eyebrows. She liked the way he talked and the way he stepped in line with her. She felt oddly at ease with Pierfrancesco, and that was a feeling that had stirred her with no other man so far. He looked like a man who would do everything she asked him to do, yet do it calmly and willingly, as if it were the natural thing. That would be impossible with the stupid braggarts that had come for her hand, however rich and warlike they were.
These thoughts circled in Margherita's head while she studied Pierfrancesco, and she was surprised at her conclusions. This quiet, handsome, charming, slender young man, so different from what she had always imagined a husband to be, pleased her a lot. She imagined him in Saint George's armour, and she was surprised to discover this Pierfrancesco resembled her Saint George very well! She drew a little closer to him, so that their bodies touched at times, as by accident. Pierfrancesco drew politely away of course, but just that slightest moment later than he might have, as if he cherished the proximity. Margherita was encouraged and pleased with that. The initiative would be hers!

They walked through a denser crowd as they neared San Lorenzo. The cortège of the Medici readied to leave from the church, so more people ran into the Via Larga to have a better view and to accompany the procession on the road to San Marco Monastery. When the heralds, guards and riders passed, Margherita and Pierfrancesco hid in taciturn agreement behind the spectators, both thinking the same thing, that the Acciaiuoli and Borgherini families, who participated in the triumph, and who advanced in the middle of the road, better not see them together.
Then they continued to the Duomo. Few people took the direction of the grand complex of buildings that was the cathedral of Florence, the Baptistery and Giotto's bell-tower included. Pierfrancesco glanced once more over his shoulder. Thirty paces behind, the four men, among which the two Francescoes, still followed, discussing something with energetic gestures. Pierfrancesco and Margherita remained silent.

Pierfrancesco broke the silence first. ‘Bachiacca is my friend. Would I be allowed to come to his studio when you sit for your portrait?’
‘The portrait is almost finished. I do not have to go to the studio anymore. Besides, Master Bachiacca painted me mostly in our palazzo. But I can arrange to visit him one or two times, still.’
‘Can I come then?’
Margherita hesitated and whispered, avoiding being overheard by her servant, ‘sure, why not? I will be accompanied, of course.’
‘Of course.’
‘People come and go at Bachiacca’s shop. I suppose there is no harm in a friend of the master painter visiting him by chance when I am there.’
‘No, I guess not. By chance.’
Pierfrancesco took an alley to the Duomo, an alley that was empty of people. He said, still whispering, ‘maybe if I ask your father to call on you once in a while he might give his consent?’
‘I doubt that. He seems not to like the Borgherini for one or other reason. But we might try to talk to him.’
Pierfrancesco looked at Margherita and his heart elated. He delighted in the ‘we,’ sensing that Margherita liked him and accepted to know him better. He dared not to believe in his luck. He held his head proudly.

Suddenly, four men barred their way, emerging from a side street. The men had run, for they were out of breath. They stepped slowly but resolutely to the couple and the servant woman. One man, clad in old black leather, led the group. The cruel face flashed very angry eyes, and the man swayed his arms wide along his body as if to add the gestures to his determination. Pierfrancesco recognised in horror the Neapolitan thieve. The man looked ferociously, for he had a long, bloody scar on his face. Red veins showed on his broken nose, and a dirty bandage was wound obliquely over his hair. His beard had grown thicker and he wore other clothes, but it was the same man.
Pierfrancesco grasped Margherita’s arm and stopped her. Margherita turned to him. He saw raw anger in her eyes. But then, the Neapolitans were on them. Margherita did not seem to care; the men were only harmless passers-by for her; the men would go out of their way. When that did not happen and when the men surrounded her, surprise and fear showed on her face.
One of the Neapolitans grabbed the servant woman, put a dirty hand with black fingers on her mouth and held her tight. The servant struggled but could not get free.
The Neapolitan bandit said in a coarse voice,’ so, the Acciaiuoli and the Borgherini have finally come together! Tell me what you know, boy! What clues do you have? What will the Acciaiuoli do next? Have the monks told you? Speak up!’

Pierfrancesco was flabbergasted. He stood between Margherita and the man, hid her behind him, and held his two arms at his back, on the sides of Margherita. Margherita did not move. She understood thieves had intercepted them. ‘Take our purses but leave us alone!’ she cried from beyond Pierfrancesco’s shoulder.
‘Oh no,’ replied the thief, bringing his face very close to Pierfrancesco’s. Pierfrancesco averted his head for the stinking, garlicky breath was unendurable. He saw so close the leering grimace in the thick-pored, pock-marked face.
The thief unfolded a long Spanish, curved knife. ‘What do you know, boy? Tell me or I’ll cut an ear from the little hussy!’

Pierfrancesco trembled on his feet. He kept his arms protecting on Margherita and held her behind him. Yet, he was determined to fight. He had no idea of what he should have known. He could not argue and plead in front of Margherita. He would probably be beaten savagely, but he would fight. He was cornered, so the only thing that could save him for a moment was to be vicious.
Pierfrancesco could endure much, but had these sudden flares of violence which had surprised opponents before, youths mocking him because he did not answer to their insults.
Pierfrancesco did not reply to the bandit. He acted rapidly. He feigned a quick step backwards, pushing Margherita further away. His left foot came up. He suddenly kicked the bandit in the groin.
The bandit stood too close to Pierfrancesco to see the leg coming. The Neapolitan had expected anything but that reaction. In a moment, the man plied in two from the pain in his parts. The next moment however, his face drew to a savage grim of revenge and he got caught of Pierfrancesco with his left hand. Pierfrancesco had only eyes for the knife, which came upwards with surprising speed to slice at his belly. Pierfrancesco doubled and with his left arm he averted the movement of the knife. The knife slit open his lower arm and part of his hand. The pain made Pierfrancesco turn left. Blood oozed on the cobblestones. But Pierfrancesco knocked his right fist in the face of the Neapolitan. The blow was probably not more than a fly's kiss to a hardened bandit, an affectionate slap, but Pierfrancesco hit the man's sore nose, and that hurt. Sheer hatred appeared on the man's face. His mouth closed in a firm slit. The knife withdrew a little, and then came forward again with force in a straight stab at Pierfrancesco. Margherita screamed. Pierfrancesco saw the knife approach in a thrust he could not avoid.
Another hand caught the thief's arm in a firm grip. The knife stopped and stayed a thumb's distance from Pierfrancesco's belly. Yet another fist punched hard in the Neapolitan's face. Men shouted. Margherita continued to scream. The servant woman screamed too, now.

A fight was going on behind Pierfrancesco's back. For a moment, he had forgotten about his friends, and so had the hoodlums, but the two Francescoes and their companions had turned the curve and they were instantly on the Neapolitans. Fists slammed, feet kicked, a sword cut a leg, a knife clattered on the ground, arms were twisted, a head banged against a wall, and then Pierfrancesco too hit his fists in the thugs that had attacked him and Margherita.
Then, remembering his vow to protect the girl, he drew Margherita aside, away from the battling men, with her back to the wall, and he stood before her.
The Neapolitans let go of them and fought the four men that had erupted in the alley. Soon, one of the Neapolitans lay on the ground in a pool of blood, while the other two fought the Francescoes. The last Neapolitan had doubled on his knees, holding the hand in which the servant woman had bitten ferociously in his other hand.
The two friends of the Francescoes kicked and hit this man. The Neapolitan chief was an experienced fighter, for he had dealt vicious blows to Pierfrancesco's friends, but when also the two other friends of Bachiacca and Granacci were on him, he relented.
The younger of Bachiacca's companions pinned the last Neapolitan to the wall of a house, threatening to pierce the man with his sword.
Finally, the two Neapolitans that were still on their feet stopped the fight, stepped back, then surged forward to free the other bandit, helped the wounded man to his feet, stooped to pick their knives from the ground, and went back a few steps again. The chief of the bandits saw more people entering the ally, people attracted by the noise of the fight. He drew his men into the side street, and the four men ran off. The fight was over as quickly as it had started.

Pierfrancesco lost blood. He was white in the face and felt weak. He went to a wall and leaned with his back to it. His four friends stood around him, panting, feeling with their hands at chins and cheeks and bones. Nobody else was hurt seriously.
Margherita's servant was in shock and continued to scream. Granacci spoke to her and calmed her, for she would attract the attention of the Florentine guards in the Duomo, which he preferred to avoid for Margherita's sake.
Margherita looked at Pierfrancesco's wound. She touched his arm and hand and did not shy away.
'We have to tend to that wound,' she concluded, 'it is long and deep.'

'Wait,' Granacci proposed. 'We have to think! Lady Margherita, you should avoid public fuss about this. I wonder what your father would say about your being involved in a street brawl with people your family does not know.'
Pierfrancesco and Margherita frowned. Margherita's father had not much approved of the Borgherini before; what would he think when he found out Margherita had been attacked by thugs for the Borgherini's sake?
Pierfrancesco was distressed, but Margherita shrugged. 'Things cannot be undone,' she said. 'My father will know we were attacked, but also that you all defended me. I was accompanied, not left alone.'

Bachiacca arranged matters. 'I and Francesco Granacci will bring Lady Margherita to her family at her palace. Relatives of her may be around the Duomo. I am not unknown to her, nor to her father, and Granacci – well, everybody in Florence knows Granacci. We are respectable master painters. She was in decent hands with us. If we do not find family of her in the Piazza of the Duomo, we will escort her to the Acciaiuoli Palazzo. You, Pierfrancesco, had best go with Andrea and Jacopo here, to Andrea's rooms in the Piazza del Grano. Andrea can stitch you up at his house. We will join you there, later.'

Andrea smiled, and Pierfrancesco blanched when Bachiacca spoke of stitching him up. Pierfrancesco nodded, however. He fought not to faint. Margherita stood still close to him, holding his arm.
She cried, 'don't you touch him, you butchers! He needs a physician!'
'Oh, sure,' laughed Andrea. 'That was just a joke of Bachiacca! A neighbour of mine is a doctor. We will bring this Pierfrancesco to him!'
Even Pierfrancesco grinned. He said, 'I am so sorry! Now we may not meet again. Your father and relatives will be so angry with me!'
'You protected me from those thieves,' Margherita replied softly, 'and you got wounded in doing that. My father will very much appreciate you guarding me. He may scold me, but he should be grateful to you.'
'Let's hope so,' Pierfrancesco replied. He was far from sure that the story of the old servant-woman would be interpreted that way. The blame for the attack would be put on his head. More so, because this was the second time the bandits had come for him.

Granacci urged, 'we have to go, then. Pierfrancesco will lose the little blood that still flows in his veins.'
He drew Margherita on, and with Bachiacca and the servant he walked quickly in the direction of the Duomo.
Margherita looked behind her and she waved at Pierfrancesco, who waved back, a feeble smile on his face. His two new friends, Andrea and Jacopo, led him in a side street to the Piazza del Grano.

On the way, the two friends of Bachiacca and Granacci kept talking to Pierfrancesco so that he would not faint. Andrea proved to be Andrea di Roberto di Francesco di Luca and since his father was a tailor, everybody called him Andrea del Sarto. He was a master painter of twenty-six years old. Jacopo's name was Jacopo Carrucci, but since he was born at Pontormo near Empoli, he was called Jacopo da Pontormo. Pontormo was a student of Andrea del Sarto since about a year, and he was only eighteen years old. Andrea del Sarto presented his friend. Pontormo was a very gifted boy, who had already worked with Leonardo da Vinci, Mariotto Albertinelli and Piero di Cosimo, and now with him, Andrea del Sarto.

Andrea del Sarto was a serious young man. He spoke almost all the way, alone, for Jacopo barely said a word, to keep Pierfrancesco's mind away from his wound.

Andrea was tall and well built, though a little overweight. He had a nice and full face, red cheeks, brown piercing eyes that testified to his intelligence, the beginning of a double chin, a small but long nose, and a rather sensuous mouth with thick lips. He was a kind man and Pierfrancesco could tell he liked to enjoy life.
Jacopo was stocky and his face was very sunburnt, and seemed too wrinkled and scarred for such a young man. Jacopo was an orphan, who had had a hard time until his talent for painting had been discovered. He was a very nervous youth. He showed an odd, innocent look in his grey eyes. He didn't say much, but his eyes darted constantly around, as if they needed to imprint every special feature in his mind, and everything around seemed to be special for Jacopo Pontormo. The eyes reacted to the least movement of the environment.
Jacopo had a bright, angular face, thin lips, and a broad nose with prominent nostrils. Without a word, he bound a cloth around Pierfrancesco's upper arm, which stopped the bleeding. Then he drew Pierfrancesco's sleeve over the wound so that the people would not notice that anything had happened. He walked close to Pierfrancesco's side, supporting him, and hid the wound.

They soon arrived at Andrea's workshop. Andrea occupied these rooms with another painter, with his friend Franciabigio, actually Francesco di Cristofano Bigi, but called Franciabigio. Franciabigio's master, Mariotto Albertinelli, had abandoned seven years earlier the art of painting and since Andrea del Sarto could not tolerate any longer the oddities of his elder master, Piero di Cosimo, Andrea and Franciabigio decided to hire a studio together and work as independent masters. Franciabigio was currently out of Florence, however.
Andrea del Sarto washed away the blood on Pierfrancesco's arm. A little later, Jacopo Pontormo brought a physician in, and the man indeed said he had to stitch Pierfrancesco's wound.
Before that, Andrea and Jacopo poured into Pierfrancesco half a bottle of grappa, a strong brandy of grapes, a mountain brandy. Pierfrancesco almost fainted from the drink even before the doctor started his work, and he sang all through the stitching, while cursing and shouting from pain between the words. He endured the ordeal to the end. Then, the painters led him to Franciabigio's bed and Pierfrancesco fell asleep almost immediately.

Pierfrancesco awoke in the evening. He went to the main room of the workshop, where he found the four painters finishing the rest of the grappa and a few more bottles of Chianti wine. 'Margherita is fine,' Granacci started. 'We brought her home. We didn't find any relatives of her near the Duomo. The Palazzo Acciaiuoli also was practically empty, so there was not much of a stir. Margherita sent a servant to warn her father that she was well, and at home. She said she would explain later to her father what had happened.'

Granacci was thinking. 'It is strange,' he said, 'those Neapolitans came back for you, Pierfrancesco. They might have sought revenge on Francesco or on me for having beaten them up in the tavern, but they came back for you! Why would they do that for?'
'I have not the slightest idea,' Pierfrancesco replied. 'They asked me what I knew, but I had no clue as to what they wanted. They also knew that Margherita was an Acciaiuoli, though she had arrived in Florence only a few weeks ago. She told me she had lived in her country castle until recently. The Spanish leader said the Acciaiuoli and the Borgherini had finally come together. What did they mean by that? That man also spoke of monks!'
Bachiacca opened his arms. 'It is an enigma, the Borgherini enigma,' he said. He slung his cup of wine against one he pushed in Pierfrancesco's hands. 'Let's drink to that!'
Pierfrancesco could do with some wine, for his head was sore and his stomach empty. His wound throbbed. He bit on his teeth. He did not want to show how much he was in pain to his friends.

Pierfrancesco was aware that Andrea del Sarto and Jacopo da Pontormo were studying him. So he looked innocently around in the workshop. The room was as large as Bachiacca's, almost a hall. There were large windows on one side and the other walls were almost entirely covered with cupboards of all sizes and types. On a table lay tens of sheets of paper with drawings.
'Andrea and Jacopo try out compositions many times before they start to paint,' Granacci explained.
Pierfrancesco admitted, 'I don't know much about paintings. How does one distinguish a good painting from a bad one?'

His question triggered an animated discussion.
'When people throng at your door asking you to paint something for them, anything, then you are a great painter and you make great paintings,' answered Bachiacca immediately. 'And when the people banging at your door are cardinals and popes and kings and emperors, then you are Michelangelo Buonarroti or Tiziano Vecellio or Raffaello Sanzio or some such man. Alas, I have to beg people to let me paint something.'

Andrea del Sarto laughed. 'That is a good criterion, Bachiacca! I also never seem to have commissioners thronging at my door. They wait until I starve and then they get the lowest possible price out of me, simply because I need the money to buy bread and cheese. We are poor artists, really!'
He drank, and continued, 'nevertheless, a painting, Pierfrancesco, should have a harmonious and original design in lines and surfaces. Design is the secret of paintings, as it is for drawings. A painting is only a drawing filled in with colours, so we draw first and then paint. Form is the first thing to seek in an object! Form is made of lines. Vertical lines have masculine power; horizontal lines have feminine tranquillity, and oblique lines bring restlessness in a picture, so they should usually be avoided. People like symmetry and repeating patterns, however small. Perspective should be right, as Piero della Francesca taught us, as one sees it, but not too pronounced either. The surfaces formed by the lines should be balanced against each other, the more so when they are coloured. The colours must be fitting to the subject. Never put green next to blue or to yellow. Avoid bright red next to blue. The hues must correspond: either contrast firmly or be of the same tone, bright or dark, but then not contrast. Yellow goes well with blue, green with orange or red, violet with crimson, white with black. I prefer the softer hues. Leonardo da Vinci showed us how hues can flow into each other, like the morning fog softens the transitions. There should be a mood in the colours

overall in the picture, either gloomy or joyful. Shadows should be right, in the right hues too. A shadow thrown on a red surface darkens not to black but to a brownish hue. The colours of the sky are darker upwards and lighter down below. Light can accentuate a prominent feature of the scene, such as illuminating the face of the Virgin or of the Child. A portrait is best in the vague form of a triangle. A natural landscape should open the view wide in the background, preferably in a top-down triangular form. Care should be taken with forms that capture the viewer's attention, but that drag that attention away from the main scene. Large eyes have that effect, and open windows. In a picture of figures one pair of eyes should look at another and then to the next, so as to guide the look of the viewer over the picture.'
He stopped, and then said, 'these are some of the tricks of ours and all these tricks must be used non-obtrusively, as if no tricks exist. Yet the viewer must be made to stand before the painting and be amazed and pleased, and be kept standing there. A picture must be seen. A picture that is not seen does not exist. A picture must capture the attention of the viewer for as long a time as possible!'

'Thank you, dear learned master for this course in painting, given in a few moments, whereas this takes five years or so to learn to a student of our art. But it is too much nonsense!' Bachiacca cried out. 'Just walk past a painting, Pierfrancesco, Try it! If in that first moment you like it, then the picture is a fine one for you and you can buy it. Do not care about what the sellers or the painters or the so-called art-lovers and art-collectors say about a picture! The only thing that counts is whether you like it or not. Nobody else can tell you when a painting is good or bad. You may find in a picture all the tricks and techniques Andrea mentioned and yet not like it. Then, such a painting is a failure! Somebody else may like it, but for you it will always remain a bad painting. If you like it, whatever others say of it, it will be a joy to savour until your old age! You like it instantly, or you don't. The rest is cows' shit.'

Jacopo da Pontormo also spoke. The other masters were surprised that he expressed his opinion. Bachiacca even forgot to drink his wine while Jacopo spoke. 'A painting should express feelings,' he said. 'Feelings are movement, things that happen. You do not paint the Madonna. You paint the soul, the spirit of the Madonna. The viewer must be puzzled, astonished, ravished and interested. If that means breaking the code of which Andrea spoke, then the code must be broken. The attention of the viewer can be drawn by vivid colours, by unusual representations, unusual poses, by strong chiaroscuro, by violence in the design, by contrasting the solidity of reality with the eeriness of the spiritual, by the imaginativeness of the scenes. One must amaze, exhilarate, dare, impress and impose! That is what painting is about!'

'It is enough for the viewer to be pleased by a picture,' Granacci said. 'That is the only criterion: the spectator must like the picture. He or she must be pleased, whatever pleasing means.'
'I know of people who would be pleased by ugly, horrifying things. Perverts can be pleased by ghastly, abhorring images!'
'Of course, of course,' Granacci corrected. 'There is a second criterion. The picture must of course represent something that is in line with the teachings of the Church-fathers. It must be morally acceptable. A picture must please the viewer and the Church.'

Pierfrancesco asked, 'do you always make paintings for people who pay you or do you sometimes make paintings for your own pleasure, only for yourselves?'
'We are artisans like furniture-makers and stone-masons,' Granacci replied. 'If our paintings do not sell, we starve. There are so many painters in Florence, Venice and Rome because that

is where the money is. There are fewer painters in Milan, Bologna, Ferrara or Siena because these towns are not so wealthy. We make what the people ask of us.'

Jacopo Pontormo's eyes started to shine and he interjected, 'no, no, we have something to tell to people! I want to tell them something of my life, of my feelings, of what I found out about life. I want to tell people the horror I feel at the beheading of John the Baptist and how much I love the Virgin, how much I pity the Child. I want to tell something to viewers! I would never make a painting for me only. I paint for other people, to speak to them by my art.'

'Paintings do not speak,' Pierfrancesco objected.
'Oh, but they do,' Bachiacca shouted. 'Have you ever seen an "Annunciation" by Pietro Perugino? Well, if you ever see one, look at what happens in the space between the Virgin and the Angel. There is always something wrong in the picture if you look well. The perspective is wrong, and a column that should be somewhere behind the scene is in fact right between the Virgin and the Angel, so that the two would not be able to see each other if the column were solid. But the column is God! That is how Perugino showed the invisible God in the painting, and that is quite a story! Many paintings tell stories.'

Granacci returned to Pierfrancesco's earlier question. 'No painter works for himself. We always work for others. We make something we think is nice or shocking, but the work only really exists as far as other people like it and hence buy it. It is our pride and joy, and our tragedy, for our best work leaves us first.'

Granacci cut the conversation off. He had been brooding over what he had said in the beginning. 'The thieves talked to you, Pierfrancesco, before they attacked you. What did they want?'
Pierfrancesco said, 'in fact, I think they did not attack us. They just stopped us and started asking questions. I jumped at them first. They seemed to be satisfied having an Acciaiuoli and a Borgherini together. I wonder why. They wanted me to tell them something that I was supposed to know, but I had not a damned idea what they wanted of me! So I just hit the Neapolitan.'
'They did not ask for money?' Bachiacca was amazed.
'No,' Pierfrancesco replied. 'No, not once did they mention our purses!'
'Then those thieves are very strange fellows!' exclaimed Granacci. 'If they were not after your money and sought not revenge for the tavern fight, what they did they really want then? What did they want to know? What is happening with you?'
'I truly don't know,' Pierfrancesco repeated.

'Well,' Bachiacca concluded, 'we are not going to find out now! One thing is sure; if those thugs want some information from you, they will be back. If I were you I would lay low for a few weeks. I would never go out alone, sneak out by side-doors – at least, if you have those at your palace -, and watch out. Never again wear those showy clothes and colours, and never wear a badge of the Borgherini openly. I can smell those hoodlums were no ordinary thieves. They knew too well how to fight. They want something else from you but money, maybe some information about your father's banking business. I would interrogate my father, and ask him who his enemies and competitors are at this moment. Maybe your father knows something you don't.'

Pierfrancesco thought that over. He remained silent. He doubted his father would ever confide anything of his business in him. Yet, soon now, he, Pierfrancesco, would learn the true business of banking and not just the accounting of it.

Finally, he changed subjects and said something that was far closer to his heart, 'Margherita told me I could be at your studio when she comes to look at her portrait and when you need to draw her.'
'The picture is finished,' Bachiacca said. He saw Pierfrancesco's pleading eyes. Bachiacca smiled as Pierfrancesco's disappointment showed so obviously. He shook his head, 'oh, well, all right, I suppose I might need to call her in a couple of times still to modify a few last details and bring the portrait to perfection.'
Granacci shrugged but added, 'oh no, there we go again! There is nothing but trouble from a young man in love! What will Roberto di Donato dei Acciaiuoli say when he finds out that his daughter is seeing a boy-lover in your shop, Bachiacca?'

Pierfrancesco was puzzled. 'In love,' he thought, 'am I now really in love? Is this what love is about? Is this love? Sweet Jesus! Am I in love with Margherita? Is this what people call being in love?'

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Three days later, Salvi di Francesco dei Borgherini, the patriarch of the Borgherini family of Florence, received a neatly folded and sealed note brought by a liveried messenger boy. The note was from the Acciaiuoli, summoning him to the Acciaiuoli palazzo for a private meeting the following day at noon.

Salvi was nervous when he walked the few paces from his own palace to the Acciaiuoli palace at the other end of the Borgo Santi Apostoli. He remembered well the barely concealed disdain with which he had been received the last time he had seen Roberto di Donato. Roberto di Donato Acciaiuoli welcomed Salvi personally and cordially, however. He immediately invited Salvi to have dinner with him, but he first drew the Borgherini patriarch into a little room near the courtyard, into his private office.
Salvi Borgherini was awed. Not only were the Acciaiuoli in quite another range of wealth as he, but their family famed in titles such as of the Dukes of Athens, and they prided in marriage alliances to the Medici.
Roberto di Donato, a burly man with a sagging belly and a big, red face, prayed Salvi to sit in a fine chair on one side of a sturdy table covered with sheets of paper, scrolls and books. Roberto then lowered himself with a groan on the ample cushions of a large sculptured chair, on the other side of the table.

Roberto scrutinised Salvi Borgherini, coughed to clear his throat, and then said, 'I apologise for asking you to come to my palace, but I rarely go out of doors these days for I am ailing a little. I needed to speak to you in private. The Acciaiuoli and the Borgherini do business together here and there, and that is going well. I want not so much to talk about banking and trade. I must talk about our children. My Margherita and your Pierfrancesco have been attacked by thieves a few days ago. Pierfrancesco defended well my daughter, for which I thank you. I heard he was wounded. Please tell him I wish him well.'
Salvi nodded.

Roberto Acciaiuoli continued. ‘It took me some time to hear all the details from my Margherita and from her nurse, to know exactly what happened. Margherita can be headstrong, you know, she is a real Acciaiuoli.’
Roberto smiled as though he cherished the image of his daughter in his mind, but then looked again at Salvi, who nodded and closed his eyes, as if he knew well how difficult children were at that age.
Roberto said, ‘the thieves were Neapolitans, Spaniards. They demanded our children to say how much they knew of something. I have no special secrets however in my business.’
Salvi Borgherini frowned and suppressed the grin on his face.
Roberto corrected rapidly, ‘oh, I have many professional secrets, but nothing unusual outside my normal doings. Would you have special secrets?’
Salvi shook his head.
‘So, I wondered what those thugs wanted of our children.’

Roberto was a man who usually went straight for the jugular. Salvi wondered what this conversation was all about. He was truly puzzled. Had Roberto called him in to chat about how difficult the raising of children was?
Roberto di Donato shifted uneasily in his seat and bowed towards Salvi, whispering, ‘many years ago, a monk gave me a key. That was a month before Easter of 1498. The monk said there were other such keys, but only a few.’
Roberto drew a small brass key from under a sheet of paper and showed it to Salvi.
He asked, ‘has such a key been given to you or to somebody of your family around that date too?’
Salvi Borgherini shifted his weight in his chair too now. His mouth was suddenly very dry. He thought, and then replied, ‘yes. A monk of San Marco brought me such a key.’
‘Do you still have the key?’
‘Yes. I do. It is the same key, but my key is cut differently at the end.’
‘The monk said that at one time, somebody who was worthy and capable of bearing terrible secrets would come for the key. It might be somebody of my own family, or somebody of another family of Florence, but it would be somebody dignified and brave.’
‘I had the same message,’ Salvi Borgherini nodded.
‘Maybe your son is such a person,’ Roberto Acciaiuoli suggested.
‘Or maybe your daughter.’
‘Surely you do not believe the bearer of secrets could be a woman,’ Roberto exclaimed.
‘It could be anybody,’ Salvi objected. ‘Families are continued in women, too. Maybe the announced is my son. Maybe it is your daughter. Maybe it is neither. Maybe it is someone else whose time has not come yet. Maybe the story was just one more devious mystery of the Preacher.’
‘You also believe then that the Preacher was involved?’
‘Easter of that year was a terrible time. Yes, he secret and the keys must have come from the Preacher. To what purpose however, I do not know.’
‘What should we do?’

Salvi di Francesco dei Borgherini was amazed. Roberto Acciaiuoli was one of the wealthiest men of Florence. Roberto’s money was old and his family had plenty, his trade connections went wide. His family had been Dukes of Athens and family women had married into the Medici - granted in the Popolani branch that had fought against Lorenzo Il Magnifico’s direct family - yet Medici still. Roberto Acciaiuoli was far richer than the Medici, far richer than the Borgherini. This Roberto Acciaiuoli was asking him, Salvi of the Borgherini, what to do?

Salvi sighed, ‘I do not know what to do. Do we have to do anything at all? We have too little information to act upon. The secret of the keys has not been revealed to my son, and I suppose also not to your daughter. We must wait.’
‘The secret has not been revealed to me, not to my sons, not to my nephews. It has not been revealed to your family either. Yes, wait is all we can do. I hate waiting.’ Roberto kept silence for a while. He played with the sheets of paper that lay on his table. He shifted and shuffled them. He was thinking, and Salvi did not interrupt him.

Roberto said, ‘I thought once it was too early for my daughter and your son to be betrothed.’

‘You hypocrite,’ thought Salvi di Francesco, ’you deemed the Borgherini too new a family and not rich enough for your daughter! You almost threw me out of you palace, rudely, squarely. There was no question of early or late for a marriage. What has changed?’
Roberto looked from his deeply set little black eyes at Salvi, and continued. ‘That is still the case; it is still too early for a wedding. Margherita refused several suitors already and I am not quite sure I can impose my will on her. No, that is not true; I do not wish to impose my will on her, for she is my darling daughter. I love my daughter and cherish her. She is a fine young woman. She grows up rapidly, now. She spoke in other words of your Pierfrancesco than before, in nice words, in other words than she spoke of the other young men she met.’

Salvi remained silent and savoured his silence.
Roberto continued, ‘suppose we let them see each other? Suppose we do not oppose them and let things happen as they come for Margherita and Pierfrancesco? Suppose we keep an eye on them, of course, but let the course of events go by and watch what happens?’
‘We could do that,’ agreed Salvi Borgherini. He still kept a straight face, but he was elated for the Acciaiuoli objected no longer to a marriage between a Borgherini and an Acciaiuoli. He guessed how difficult such a decision must have been to a man like Roberto di Donato, but the Acciaiuoli were too curious about the secret of the Preacher to let this chance pass them by. Secrets always held the promise of reward. The greater the secret, the greater the reward, the power, and the treasure. The Acciaiuoli could not let this chance be ignored. The Acciaiuoli positioned their chess piece, Margherita, on the board aside Pierfrancesco, Salvi thought. The Queen was on the board. What would Pierfrancesco be, a King or a pawn? Salvi was in jubilance inwardly. He too fumbled at the sheets of paper on the table however, now. He was worried. He liked Pierfrancesco. He had been harder with the boy than with his other children, for this was the boy that would be his successor. Despite the game of chess he sensed in Roberto also genuine concern for Margherita. He dared not look at Roberto, who would surely notice his triumph and the greed in his eyes, yet also the concern.

‘Letting them out in Florence could prove dangerous to them. Pierfrancesco has already been attacked twice now,’ Salvi said.
‘Twice?’ Roberto exclaimed, showing he knew nothing of the first assault.
‘The first attack was on him alone, by the same men, a week ago.’
‘I did not know of that first time!’ Roberto said, more alert now and letting some of his usual reservation pass. ‘So your son escaped twice. Maybe that could mean he is a brave and worthy young man. He protected Margherita well, too. I was surprised, for I felt him to be a rather uninspired young man in the past.’
‘My son astonished me too. Yet, I held my affection from him and scolded him a lot, to form his character. His true character starts to show. He is becoming a true Borgherini! He also had protection,’ Salvi added, wondering how Roberto knew his son. Had Roberto in the past informed on Pierfrancesco?

Salvi said, ‘he is with a group of painters, who seem to have befriended him and helped him. Twice they fought the bandits, also when Margherita was involved.’
‘I know of the painters, yes. People around Master Bachiacca. They are good men.’
‘Bachiacca, Granacci, del Sarto, Pontormo.’
‘I know Granacci well. He is an intelligent man, a good man. He is a man who can be trusted, and who can be brought into our cause.’
‘We should have our children be followed by our own men, our guards.’
‘No,’ Roberto said. ‘That would not work. If the secret must come to them, it will not be with our guards all around them.’
‘We would be throwing our children at the lions,’ Salvi protested.
‘We must let things happen and not intervene, unless there is a real danger, of course,’ Roberto decided. ‘If your son is worthy of my daughter, and if we want to know the secrets, then we will have to stand at our gates and look but not interfere, at least not in the beginning, not till things are clear. We must let matters go unless something grievous happens or is bound to happen. I will speak to Granacci. I also have a man who can follow them without being seen and warn us of dangers.’
‘Good,’ Salvi concluded. ‘We must keep in touch. I will let you know immediately when I hear of something new.’
‘I will do the same,’ Roberto hasted to add. ‘Our children are at stake. Let’s hope all will go well. And now, let us shake our hands and dine!’
The two men left Roberto’s office. The great Roberto di Donato dei Acciaiuoli drew Salvi dei Borgherini to the other side of the courtyard, to the first floor, into the large frescoed dining-room of his family, holding his right hand affectionately on Salvi’s shoulder. The two conspirators dined copiously.

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At the same time, two other men met in a small room. They sat in an ugly, grim castle perched on a hill in vineyard country, outside Florence. The castle was ungraceful and very old. It had been neglected. Green plants and little trees grew out of cracks in the walls. The planks of the wooden gates had split open and were not repaired. The fortress had a simple structure of four high walls and four round towers of large, built crudely of bevelled stones. Above the massive gates, set unimaginatively in the centre of the front wall, rose another, tall, square tower. Inside, to one of the walls, stood a small palace with many rooms and halls, but that house too seemed forgotten and neglected. The two men talked in one of the barbican towers.

One of the men was the Neapolitan Spaniard that had attacked Pierfrancesco Borgherini. He was clad in the same dark, dirty, sweat-stained leather jacket and trousers he always wore. A long, slim sword hung in a scabbard at his belt. The man clenched the hilt of his weapon. He was nervous. He sought excuses for his failures.

‘Yes, we failed, your Highness,’ he conceded. ‘I agree we failed. The young man has too many friends that guard him. You did not tell us about that. His friends appear out of nowhere and they seem to accompany him always. At the tavern we were attacked by at least twenty men. The job you pay us for is much more dangerous than we thought. We have been beaten twice, viciously. We need more money and more men.’
‘You are always demanding more money and never delivering, Giuseppe,’ the other man replied coldly. He twisted his dried-out, almost paper-white face in a grin. ‘You had better do what I demand.’

‘We tackled the boy twice,’ Giuseppe protested. ‘At least we are sure now the boy knows nothing of what you seek. He knows of no secret. He was scared; he would have talked; he was surprised by what we asked. I am convinced he knows nothing! Monks would talk to him, but I saw no reaction on his face when I asked him what he knows. You were mistaken. I am convinced the boy and his girl know nothing! We are chasing ghosts!’
‘If the youth has not been contacted yet, then he will be in the near future. I am sure of that! My source is reliable. So, in the future, I want no attacks on him anymore! The families will become suspicious and will guard him with warriors. Just follow the young man and the girl, have them followed by other men. They must not get suspicious. Let me know if something happens. Make sure the monks do not talk to him or to her, and if they do, and you cannot avoid it, warn me immediately.’
‘For how long should we trail the two?’
‘As long as it takes. Months, years if necessary.’
‘That will cost you, Your Highness!’
‘I double your reward. Hire the men you need. I want results.’
‘Then I will do as you desire, Your Highness.’

The Neapolitan knelt before the crimson-robed tall, haughty man. He kissed the large ruby on the ring of the man’s long, delicate fingers. He left the room, ran down a turning staircase carved out in stone, jumped on his horse at the gates, and rode back to Florence.

Chapter Three. Sunday February, 13 1513. Carnival in Florence.

In the following weeks and months, Pierfrancesco and Margherita met at first occasionally, and then regularly. In the last autumn months, they managed to see each other by chance, in the studio of the painter Bachiacca. Their go-between was Francesco Granacci, who organised the appointments and seemed to have easy access to the Palazzo Acciaiuoli. Margherita came with her nurse, and her father imposed an armed guard on his daughter, a tall, athletic man who walked behind the two women, looking defiantly at anyone who neared them, and who strode wide with both arms open, swinging his weapons in their scabbards as if he would not hesitate to slice instantly anybody's belly with his long dagger and heavy sword. At Bachiacca's workshop however, the man remained discreetly outside, at the door. Bachiacca grumbled the Cerberus standing before his house shied his clients away, but he put up with the man for Pierfrancesco's and Margherita's sake.

Pierfrancesco usually arranged to arrive at the shop a long time before Margherita and her nurse entered. The first time, Bachiacca even pushed a brush in Pierfrancesco's hands, trying to disguise poor Pierfrancesco in a painter's assistant. But the nurse was the same servant-woman who had already seen Pierfrancesco with Margherita, so that subterfuge was wasted effort, and Pierfrancesco tossed the brush aside. Strangely, the nurse did not object to Pierfrancesco's presence. She chatted with him as if she knew him since ever, and considered him totally inoffensive – which he was, of course. Still, Pierfrancesco and Francesco had rather expected the woman to run out of the studio with uplifted arms, screaming rape to the guard. She did not. On the contrary, she was very affable with Pierfrancesco and joked with him.

Other strange things happened. After a couple of such visits, Margherita stormed into Bachiacca's studio alone, though the guard still accompanied her to the door. Pierfrancesco was amazed. What, no chaperone for Margherita?
Bachiacca and Granacci invented occasions for Margherita and Pierfrancesco to meet, and Roberto Acciaiuoli proved extremely gullible. He never once argued against Margherita's visits to the studio, not once, not even when Bachiacca claimed for the third time he had not captured still the right shade of Margherita's eyes. Also, when Margherita proposed they walk a bit around Florence, that proved to be absolutely possible. The guard walked behind them at a respectable distance, but Pierfrancesco could walk with Margherita at his side.

Other amazing things came upon Pierfrancesco. His father, Salvi di Francesco Borgherini, told him to leave the account books aside for a while, and he asked him to assist at his business discussions. Pierfrancesco sat at his father's right at banquets organised to conclude vast loans of the banking house of the Borgherini, loans concluded with the foremost men of Florence as partners, with bankers, merchants and Priors of the Signoria. Later still, Salvi Borgherini sent Pierfrancesco with oral or written messages to the Bardi, the Strozzi, the Panciatichi, the Tornabuoni and the Peruzzi. Then Salvi let Pierfrancesco conclude minor deals on his own.

Thus it came that one gloomy day of November, in the midst of a hailstorm, Pierfrancesco delivered a message from his father Salvi to Roberto di Donato dei Acciaiuoli. Roberto accepted the letter without a word, but looked benevolently at Pierfrancesco, yet studying him as if he were counting every hair on Pierfrancesco's head. From then on, Pierfrancesco

brought such missives one or two times a week. Roberto Acciaiuoli took the messages himself each time, patted Pierfrancesco's shoulder, talked courteously with him, and even drew him in his office on the second floor. Later still, Roberto invited Pierfrancesco to stay for dinner and supper, and at the table sat Margherita, as innocently and sweetly serving her father as if she was ready to enter a convent. Pierfrancesco thought the first times he was but a clumsy fool. He did not know what to do with his arms and legs. He thought he blundered in his answers, reddened each time somebody addressed him, and felt like a gawky country-boy in this grand, distinguished Palazzo Acciaiuoli. Neither Margherita nor Pierfrancesco dared even to look at each other. They pretended not to hear and not to understand the blunt, teasing remarks of Margherita's brother and the queer allusions of the occasional cousin who had also been invited at the table. Pierfrancesco and Margherita also did not remark the little, malicious smiles on Roberto's lips when the two seemed to have forgotten about each other's presence. This happened a few times before the atmosphere relaxed.

With time, when Pierfrancesco came with a message, Roberto proposed Pierfrancesco to say hello to his children, which meant Margherita. Roberto told Pierfrancesco in which room or hall Margherita was and Pierfrancesco hurried to see her.

After Christmas, Roberto told Pierfrancesco that his daughter was to see the painter Bachiacca that afternoon, and claiming his guard was ill, asked Pierfrancesco whether he was free to accompany her to the studio to serve as her escort. Pierfrancesco almost gave all away, because he dropped to the floor the books of his father he held still in his hands at that moment.
Pierfrancesco accompanied Margherita to Bachiacca's. This happened almost each time thereafter. The third time, Margherita was angry.
'It isn't natural,' Margherita hissed like an angry snake, in the street, right outside the gates of the Palazzo Acciaiuoli. 'Something fishy is going on! This is not like my father.'
She pushed a determined chin higher, a gesture that Pierfrancesco had learned to recognise for the beginning of a fit of ill temper.
'What is my father doing? Is he selling me like a slave-girl? Does he want me out of the house because what I eat is too expensive for him? Does he believe I would remain a dried-out miser woman till old age, unmarried, disgraced, abandoned? Does he want to hand me over to the first idiot come? Is he gluing me to you?'

Pierfrancesco already knew he had better not protest at such moments. Margherita could be capricious and wilful, and nothing that he might say could then change her mood. Yes, by the month of December of 1512, a month of a bleak winter, when heavy rainfalls and icy winds blew forcefully down from the mountains over Florence, Margherita had become so familiar with Pierfrancesco as to tell without shame almost anything that was on her mind. Pierfrancesco longed for a kiss, or another sign of tenderness, but none had been offered. Margherita spoke pertly to him about everything that happened to her, displayed all her common feelings, her opinions of the world, but Pierfrancesco was starving for a sign of affection. He received no flirtatious looks anymore, no tender caresses but the occasional unintended touch. Nevertheless, he was happy to be with Margherita and the conspiration of their encounters opened their minds to each other, if not their hearts. Pierfrancesco was truly happy only when he was with Margherita. He enjoyed walking with her, feeling the gentle pressure of her hand on his arm. He strolled the necessary space separated from her, but remarked with pleasure the envious eyes of other well-to-do youths of Florence. Margherita was a striking figure, a tall and stunningly beautiful Florentine lady. Pierfrancesco advanced not a thumb further however in amorous forays. He desired more now from Margherita, but

he feared that if he forced matters she would be offended, and tell him to stay far from the Palazzo Acciaiuoli. The truth also was, he was not a little afraid of her. And there had been the minor obstacle of a ferocious guard a few paces behind them. So, he was content with what he received, which was scant more than Margherita huddling closer to him when they confronted the snow-laden winds along the banks of the River Arno. The road to Bachiacca's could be long and circuitous.

By the end of December, Pierfrancesco could invite Margherita to walk with him in Florence's streets. Nobody of the Acciaiuoli would have stopped them, so to him it looked pretty natural for Roberto to have proposed him to accompany Margherita. When Margherita now exclaimed she wanted not to be sold like a slave, Pierfrancesco was genuinely shocked, hurt, and feared the worst, for he had learned Margherita had a fierce character that was all the contrary of her seemingly frail, adoringly little face and slender limbs.

'I am not comfortable with this,' Margherita complained. 'I have the impression we are being followed. That man, there, fifty paces behind us, I have seen him before, from when we had still my father's guard with us. There is another guy walking along the Lungarno on the other side of the river, always looking at us, and I have seen that one before, too. In fact, I remember having seen that one in our cortile, our own courtyard a few days ago. We are being spied upon!'

Pierfrancesco did not answer to such suspicions, but he had imagined a couple of times spotting one of the Neapolitans that had assaulted him a long time ago. The man glanced from behind a corner. He had shrugged off his own suspicions, however, and taken his joy gladly, for he and Margherita could walk as if they were brother and sister, the best friends in the world. He would rather have bitten his thumb than broken that intimacy.

Soon, it would be Carnival in Florence. Roberto di Donato had already suggested that his children, speaking then only to Margherita and Pierfrancesco, could go to see the chariots and the pageant together.
'Who does he think he is,' Margherita said, her eyebrows in a dark frown. 'Is he planning to push us in each others' arms? Why does he poke us together like this? I bet your father is in the same plot!'
Pierfrancesco had wondered about the same since a few weeks. It was all too obvious for him, too. He had suddenly become a confident and even a counsellor to his otherwise very secretive father. He had been sent to the Acciaiuoli palace, and Roberto literally thrust Margherita onto him, though Roberto had before refused even to consider a Borgherini as a viable suitor for his daughter. Roberto di Donato and Salvi seemed to have become good friends on the best of terms. The Acciaiuoli had become a preferred partner to the Borgherini. What was going on, indeed? Except for Margherita walking at his side, Pierfrancesco could not notice any exceptional change in his life or in his status. The changes were minute. Could it be that he, and Margherita as well, were merely having stupid, unfounded suspicions? And what if Roberto and Salvi had indeed agreed to bring their children together, should he do something else with that knowledge than be happy? He didn't mind a little push, here. He relished it.

There was only one thing Pierfrancesco feared. It was so easy to be alone with Margherita, which was marvellous, but also dangerous. He was aware of the streak of impulsiveness in his own character. It was nice to touch hands by Christmas and to stroll hand in hand two weeks later. Pierfrancesco feared he would throw himself on Margherita one of these days, and do

what he longed so desperately: kiss those moist, red lips of her, long and passionately. Every night he dreamt of such a kiss. In his most daring imagination he pressed her magnificent body against his, felt her shiver and respond passionately to his embrace. He expected a hard slap from Margherita however, an end to their walks, an open scandal between the Acciaiuoli and the Borgherini, and a banishment forever from the Palazzo Acciaiuoli, with a reputation of a sexual pervert to crown the event. So, Pierfrancesco sighed, took Margherita's hand, pressed it just a little too much, and told her not to worry. They continued to walk, lost in thoughts, on the Ponte alle Grazie and watched the muddy waters of the winter Arno.

Pierfrancesco remained in his gloomy thoughts that day. He was doubly worried. If Margherita's father wanted to drive her to Pierfrancesco, Roberto's insistent actions might well have the contrary effect on the girl. Maybe he should talk to Margherita, and explain what he felt for her, tell her he didn't really mind but was rather happy with what her father did, and disclose what plans he had for the future. Plans he had enough. But he was paralysed with fear of being rejected. So, on the Ponte alle Grazie, he remained silent, dispirited, and stared with Margherita in the oily water that flew under them. He glared out of an eye's corner at the men on either side of the River Arno. He did notice each waited patiently, looking with interest at the flying gulls and at the heavy grey clouds in the sky. These men were following them, obviously. Pierfrancesco imagined one a man of Roberto dei Acciaiuoli, the other of Salvi Borgherini. He spotted another man at the end of the bridge. He could tell by the dress of the man, all in brown and much-worn leather, that this man was a Spaniard, and that knowledge made him quite nervous.

Pierfrancesco and Margherita decided to stroll to the workshop of Andrea del Sarto.

Andrea worked like a devil. He was painting panels for the decorations of a chariot for Carnival, and at the same time he worked feverishly at frescoes and paintings for several monasteries of Florence. Pierfrancesco and Margherita sauntered through the cold, almost empty streets of Florence, towards the Piazza del Grano.
Andrea was in his studio. He was painting indeed at the large panels for the coming masquerade. He worked at a chariot of Bacchantes. He decorated the panels in his workshop, and then brought them to the Hall of the Popes in Santa Maria Novella, where the chariot would be assembled. He also helped Piero di Cosimo on another such chariot. Andrea painted frescoes for the Servite Friars, the Franciscans, in the Church and monastery of the Annunziata. He made a series on the life of Saint Filippo Benizzi there, a Franciscan friar who had died in 1285. He had also obtained a commission from the Confraternity of the Scalzo, the Barefooted confraternity. The members of the Scalzo were all very wealthy commissioners. Andrea did his best to serve them well. The Scalzo owned their confraternity building opposite the garden of the Monastery of San Marco, above the house of Ottaviano de'Medici. The Scalzo house was dedicated to Saint John the Baptist, Florence's patron-saint. It had a cloister, a walled entrance court lined with columns, and Andrea painted in that cloister. Andrea was also painting a "Last Supper" in San Calvi. Franciabigio and Jacopo Pontormo painted with him on the frescoes. Pontormo seemed also to be much appreciated by the Servites. Pierfrancesco and Margherita found Andrea del Sarto very happy to work so much.

Pierfrancesco liked Andrea del Sarto most among his new friends, because Andrea was usually as timid as he. Andrea lacked the ambition of Bachiacca and the drive of Granacci. He lived for his work and cared less for how much money his pictures brought him. He had been a master painter since four years now, but he was famous – and had been famished just a little

time ago. He had been famished because he received little money for his work, so he worked much and took on any commission he could get. He worked for low prices because the commissioners knew he needed work. When he had too much work, he accepted many students and assistants to help him, so that his money dwindled that way too. Not just Franciabigio and Jacopo Pontormo worked with him, but many others. As many as five men could be working in his studio at one moment, and several others on his frescoes in the monasteries. Many other painters, some much older than Andrea, came to his workshop to discuss his compositions. Pierfrancesco met Rosso Fiorentino, Francesco Indaco, Ridolfo Ghirlandaio, Piero di Cosimo, Mariotto Albertinelli, Lorenzo di Credi, Antonio de Ceraiiolo, and even Pietro Perugino.

Also Baccio Bandinelli came, but Francesco Granacci was angry with this man. Granacci had studied in his teens with Michelangelo Buonarroti in the workshop of Domenico Ghirlandaio. At Lorenzo Il Magnifico's pressing demand, he had learnt the noble art of sculpture, together with Michelangelo, from the old sculptor Bertoldo di Giovanni in the garden of the Medici. Granacci was one of Michelangelo's dearest friends. Granacci never forgave Baccio Bandinelli for having cut up in the beginning of last October Michelangelo's cartoons for the "Battle of Cascina", a fresco destined to be painted in the great hall of the Signoria. This fresco had been commissioned by the former republican Signoria led by Piero Soderini. The new Signoria abandoned the project. Many artists of Florence had therefore supposed the cartoons were a damned work that would never be realised, and they were right. In a way, the cutting up of the cartoons in the Hall of the Popes was a homage to Michelangelo, for it proved beyond doubt how many great artists of Florence valued a piece of Michelangelo's work to copy and imitate, but Granacci bore a grudge to Bandinelli.

Pierfrancesco loved Andrea's nice, well-balanced compositions, his fine and delicate colours, and the difficult but perfectly executed smoothing of his hues. Margherita chuckled at Pierfrancesco's open admiration. She criticised Andrea's lack of divine expression, his lack of inspiration, lack of emotions, lack of vehemence, and lack of character. Andrea was too light-hearted, and placid, she said, too simple, too sober. Yet, Margherita too had to admit that no painter of Florence displayed so much skill and gentleness. Pierfrancesco thought Andrea's pictures were poetic, ordered, calm and serene.
Andrea had just finished painting an "Annunciation" in the Monastery of San Gallo and Pierfrancesco had visited that work with Andrea. Pierfrancesco found it marvellous and loved it. For Pierfrancesco, Andrea was the perfect painter, the painter who never made a mistake. Andrea explained in detail how he had brought a gentle feeling, a glimpse of tenderness in his picture, how cleverly he had ordered his figures in a composition. These exquisite, subdued touches would not be perceived by Margherita, but for Pierfrancesco, Andrea was a subtle artist who brought delicate mystery in his groups of figures, in warm and glowing colours. Pierfrancesco was sometimes moved to tears by pictures of Andrea.

Pierfrancesco was the only one to notice that the faces of Andrea's Madonnas in drawings, frescoes and paintings of the last months, resembled each other. The faces were mostly round, showing dark eyes, short noses, wide and open mouths. Andrea was embarrassed, blushed, and then confided in Pierfrancesco, saying he had fallen in love, and was obsessed by the face of his beloved. Pierfrancesco whispered to Andrea he had fallen in love with Margherita merely from seeing her portrait at Bachiacca's. Andrea was very unlucky, though, for the young woman he had fallen in love with was married. Her name was Lucrezia di Baccio del Fede and her husband was a hatter called Carlo di Domenico Berretaio, more commonly called Carlo da Recanati. Andrea was very unhappy, and as Pierfrancesco was in those days

not in a much better mood, the two derived some comfort from the confession of each other's misery. Pierfrancesco had been intimate with Granacci and Bachiacca; gradually Andrea del Sarto became his true friend and confident. Pierfrancesco went to Andrea's studio often alone in the evening and the two men talked from their hearts then.

Pierfrancesco and Margherita now looked around in Andrea del Sarto's studio and commented on the designs for Carnival. Margherita was soon bored, and no painter likes uninvited suggestions on his pictures while he is at them, so Pierfrancesco left with Margherita and walked to Bachiacca's shop, drawing a sulking Margherita behind. Bachiacca's workshop was open, but Bachiacca was not in. His assistants told Pierfrancesco the master was at Granacci's.
Pierfrancesco took Margherita to the courtyard, and then into the small gardens behind the houses. He remembered how to reach Granacci's workshop through the gardens. Margherita was surprised at that means of going from house to house, but she let herself be dragged on, amazed that such spaces even existed behind the houses in the town. Most of the gardens were only little courtyards without plants, but in one of them they walked in a place that was entirely hidden from all views, behind a set of high green bushes. Suddenly, Margherita drew hard on Pierfrancesco's hand, thus stopping him. Pierfrancesco turned and Margherita pressed her lips on his. They kissed. The kiss was a clumsy affair at first, as they sought each other's mouth and mind, but then it melted into tenderness. Pierfrancesco brought one hand behind Margherita to press her to him, and with the other he circled around her shoulder. Margherita inclined her head and the kiss lasted. Pierfrancesco moved his hands along Margherita's spine. His other hand found the small of her neck and caressed there.

Margherita withdrew, wiped at her mouth as if she needed also to feel the kiss with her hands, and then said with naughty, brilliant, laughing eyes, 'that was nice. We should do that again!' She closed her eyes this time, inclined her head again and brought it forward in a mock pleading that was in fact a temptation. Pierfrancesco kissed her once more, only lips touching, a kiss that was pure tenderness and sweetness. That kiss lasted even longer.
Margherita ran along, drawing Pierfrancesco to a wall, and there they kissed for the third time, body to body. This kiss was a passionate embrace. It was Pierfrancesco now who pushed Margherita away. He dared not to look at Margherita, for he had lost his self-control for a moment. It was time to stop kissing. They walked on in silence.

'Margherita,' Pierfrancesco began, 'do you really mind so much being pushed in my arms?'
'Oh silly,' Margherita stated. 'My father is spoiling the fun, don't you understand that? I make my own choices! Nobody needs to push me anywhere. I want no arranged marriage. If I want to kiss you, then nobody has to tell me to do so, and nobody has to lure me into it.'
'Well,' Pierfrancesco concluded, 'if they tried, although you object, they sure succeeded in their effort!'
'Don't say that ever again,' Margherita snapped, holding up a finger straight at Pierfrancesco's face. 'I chose you and you chose me; nobody else did that!'
'Yes, but …,' Pierfrancesco started, wanting to explain what he suspected.
'Shut up!' Margherita cried out. 'I don't want to hear it! I know what you are going to say! I noticed and told you we were being followed, or being spied upon, if you wish. Both our fathers are together in this! It was so obvious to send you with messages to my father, then after a while having you serve as my guard. Next time my father tells me to have a walk with you, I'll refuse! That will distress them!'
'That would also be a pity,' Pierfrancesco protested. 'I won't be able to kiss you, then.'
Margherita's answer was to grab Pierfrancesco again and to kiss him, hard and long.

‘Something odd is going on behind our backs,’ Pierfrancesco insisted. ‘I don’t understand what made your father change his mind about me.’
‘Neither do I,’ Margherita replied. She added, ‘and finally: I couldn’t care less. I would have chosen you anyway, father’s permission or not. Besides, you have money enough. And I have a few ideas on how to tease them a little, your father and mine!’
‘Oh no,’ Pierfrancesco cried out. Margherita kissed that oh no away.
They lost a lot of time between the two small courtyards of Bachiacca and Granacci.

Francesco Granacci welcomed them heartily, but he told them straight on he preferred to be left at peace with his work. He was painting rough, large panels for a Carnival chariot too, like Andrea del Sarto, and Bachiacca discussed the design with him and asked for advice for his own chariot.
‘What will your chariot look like?’ Margherita asked, drawing away white linen from a set of panels.
Granacci slapped at her hand. ‘It is a secret,’ Granacci whispered in her ear. ‘Secrets must be unveiled only at the right moment! You will have to come to Carnival to find out what it looks like. I can tell you however I will be on the chariot myself!’
Margherita giggled with delight.

So, Pierfrancesco and Margherita arranged to watch the Carnival masquerade together.

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Florence was in frenzy. At the time of Carnival, the townspeople felt that the long, bleak winter days were over. The colours of spring, the warmth of the new sun, the young foliage, and the hope of splendid flowers and the opening of the heavens to a blue sky revivened the spirits of the men and women. Blood started to flow through veins more rapidly, and the people emerged from dark winter lethargy finding suddenly unrestrained energy in their bodies and minds. Even the River Arno seemed to be flowing more quickly, which might have been truly the case, for the days before February heavy rains had whipped the city and the mountains that year.
Forty days of fasting in the period of lent were still ahead, and then the days of the Passion and Crucifixion of Christ, yet few Florentines left out more than the occasional honey-cake from their daily meals. After Sad Friday would come Easter, the Resurrection of the Lord, and then spring would really drive away any memory of the grim days of frost and snow.

When Margherita asked her father Roberto permission to watch the Florence Carnival procession with the young Borgherini, she was already running out of the courtyard with Pierfrancesco, dragging him behind her.
‘No, no,’ Roberto di Donato protested, ‘not like that! Carnival is dangerous! There are too many strange people in the city! Stay with the family!’
But Margherita called, ‘thank you, father, for your permission!’ She ran through the gates, calling back, ‘do you want me to marry ever or not, father?’
Roberto di Donato remained perplex, threw his cup on the cobblestones, damning his back luck at having such a wilful daughter.

Pierfrancesco ran harder when he heard what Margherita shouted, but as he dashed into the Borgo Santi Apostoli, he glanced back and saw Roberto di Donato at the Acciaiuoli gate, red with anger, stamping his feet in frustration and crying for his guards. Too late. Pierfrancesco

and Roberto's daughter mingled with the crowd in the Borgo, and ran on. Pierfrancesco dreaded facing his scolding father tomorrow, for Roberto di Donato would surely complain and cry to Salvi that Pierfrancesco just could not, absolutely not, elope with an Acciaiuoli daughter like that. Pierfrancesco did not really care. He was certain of Margherita's love, now. He was also certain she was as headstrong as her father, if not more so, and he was certain of Roberto's love for his daughter.

Pierfrancesco and Margherita ran in the Borgo Santi Apostoli past the Palazzo Borgherini. Pierfrancesco lowered his head there to avoid being spotted by somebody of his family. They sped towards the Piazza della Signoria.
The streets were filled with people. Most of them wore masks. Pierfrancesco also had brought two small, black masks made of silk and leather, and lined with variously coloured feathers on either side. The masks covered only one's eyes and had to be held up with a little baton, so they were useless to running youths. Pierfrancesco and Margherita did not use the masks for now; the masks were only a token, to be brought up when people bothered them, or when they wanted to make fun of other people.

Many men and women wore costumes. Pierfrancesco and Margherita had also not bothered with these. Pierfrancesco ran in his gaudy Borgherini outfit, the red-and-yellow striped tight trousers, and the red-and-yellow jacket with the pink roses on yellow bands. He was as colourful as the Pantalones, the Brighellas, the Pulcinellas, the Arlechinoes, the Stentorelloes and the Meneghinoes, the characters of the Commedia del'Arte, around him. It was still chilly around the river, so he also held a thick brown, woollen cloak with a hood on the arm with which he wore the masks. Margherita wore a simple dress of flame-coloured wool, a tight-laced bodice under which she wore a yellow blouse, and a heavy cape of dark red brocaded fabric, which hung on her shoulders. She had yellow brocaded little boots at her feet. On her hair sat a pink satin cap encrusted with Venetian glass jewels of all colours. Her cloak also had a hood, which hung loosely at her shoulders too. Pierfrancesco could not hold his eyes off her, which Margherita delightfully remarked, and chose to ignore.

Carnival in Florence was not merely one cortège of chariots to be admired in a single long serpent procession advancing slowly through the streets of the city. Chariots would emerge from everywhere, from every quarter and ward of the town. Each chariot simply moved through the streets at random, seeking acclamations, cheers and admiration for the work invested in the displays, and offering general delight. Pierfrancesco and Margherita had already seen one chariot on the Ponte alle Grazie in the far, moving from the Altr' Arno quarter, but they had not run to there. That chariot would soon roll into the city, and they could watch it with the other.

Musicians played happy tunes in every street and alley. Violinists and flutists wandered among the crowd. Groups of singers sang fine, romantic or ribald songs. Groups of up to twenty drummers marched, dressed in outrageous, garish hues. Jugglers and magicians, fire-spewing orientals and funny-dressed clowns, as well as brightly-clad country men on high stilts mixed with the crammed mass. Groups of dancing girls erupted from a side street, pirouetting and jumping, beating their tambourines. Florence was in joy!

At the Duomo, Pierfrancesco and Margherita saw their first chariot of the day close by. It represented the mythological scene of Paris and Helena. The chariot was a long and wide, six-wheeled platform drawn by eight oxen. The episode showed the rapt of Helena by Paris. One of the most beautiful girls of Florence had been chosen to impersonalise Helena, and one of

the finest boys was Paris. They stood immobile as two lovers on a green bed of palm leaves, holding each other's hands and looking at each other's eyes like enamoured angels. Behind them, Agamemnon raged, holding a monstrous halberd in his hands. Arms-crossed, impassive Achilles turned his back to Agamemnon and watched intently at the crowd as if he couldn't care less of what happened on the platform. Hector and Priam stood on guard in a castle-like structure, a high contraption of crenellated walls painted with patterns of large stones, representing Troy. The platform was hidden by decorated panels cut out of wood. At the front, where Paris and Helena embraced, the panels formed a background of sea-waves and of the low green hills of Ilion. In the middle the panels imitated the ragged mountains of Sparta, and at the end the scene was of the roads to Troy. The oxen wore long, red-and-golden cloths, which hid almost entirely their powerful bodies. Garlands of flowers adorned their silver-painted horns. Peasants dressed as Greek warriors, wearing mock swords and shields, stepped aside the oxen and drove them on. Twenty young girls were dancing Spartan virgins, and twenty young boys in gilded harnesses followed the chariot. The boys saluted and waved to the bystanders, the girls whirled around. All wore stylised white and blue masks. The cheers of the crowd accompanied this chariot made by the quarter of Santa Maria Novella.

Twice already, Pierfrancesco and Margherita had put on their masks, drawn their cloaks over their dresses and their hoods over their heads, to kiss passionately in recesses of the houses. Margherita seemed insatiable of kisses that day. Pierfrancesco happily complied. Then they ran on, cloaks open in the wind, masks down, and mixed with the joyful crowd.

They walked to the Piazza Santa Maria Novella, eager to see Francesco Granacci's chariot. This would be the platform constructed on Granacci's directions by the wards of Leon Blanco and Unicorno.
The chariot waited still in the Piazza for the sign to start moving. It would soon be set in motion. Granacci's chariot was about the same size as the one of Paris and Helena, this one however drawn by ten pairs of white horses. The horses had been decorated by garlands of red and green silk flowers, which hung over their bodies from head to tail. Each horse was led by a Greek hero, young men dressed in short, white togas that went no further down than their knees. The men had received a thick, white cape too, but they stood shivering in the old cold of the end of winter.
It was indeed Granacci's chariot, for Margherita cried out she had recognised their friend, after which she doubled over in laughter. Granacci throned in a scene of clouds as Zeus Moiragetes, the father and leader of the Fates. Granacci looked sternly, dressed in white toga, a gilded thunderbolt in his hand. He wore a mask of a terrible god with a long, white beard.

Granacci spotted Pierfrancesco and Margherita mocking him.
'The Fates drive Jupiter, not Jupiter the Fates,' Pierfrancesco shouted.
Granacci responded with a grave, rolling voice, 'beware of the revenge of the Fates, you mortals! I will release them on you! Make way for the Fates, for they spin the thread of your lives, measure them, and cut them with the scythe of death!'
In front of Jupiter three beautiful women sat on thrones, in a scene decorated like a Greek temple. Nona spun the thread of life at a distaff and spindle. Decima pointed a rod to measure the length of the thread, and Morta wielded a scythe to cut the thread. The fates should have been old hags, but that would have offended Granacci's tastes. Jupiter's daughters were handsome, generously endowed women. Pierfrancesco even thought he recognised Lucrezia del Fede, Andrea del Sarto's beloved, in Decima.
The fates were remorseless and unfeeling, so Granacci had painted ice-panels, a frozen river, and plains covered with snow at their feet.

Finally, the horse-drivers shouted the call to advance and the platform set in motion. Before the horses marched heralds clad in fierce red, flaming tones. These blew on their long, cupper trumpets with high-pitched, shrill sounds, to announce the reign of the Fates. The horses drew at the platform with a sudden shock. The Fates almost fell on their bottoms, Zeus swayed to left and right, and the entire Greek temple reeled over, threatening to capsize any moment. Granacci's columns and triangular tympanum held however, and the Chariot of the Fates of Santa Maria Novella moved slowly towards the Duomo.
A group of drummers followed the Fates, then a group of gonfalon-swingers, a large group of female dancers. Another group of Greek warriors, dressed in full bronze hoplite panoply, closed the long presentation. Pierfrancesco and Margherita laughed their heads off at Jupiter, let his companions pass, and then strolled on.

They sauntered through almost every street of the city, along the Lungarnoes of the River Arno, over the bridges to the Altr'Arno wards, to the Pitti palace, back over the Ponte Vecchio to the city centre and the Signoria, to the area of Piazza Santa Croce, where many chariots gathered, back to the Duomo, to the Mercato Vecchio and back to the Signoria. They mocked masked people and masks insulted them. When they remarked Acciaiuoli or Borgherini colours, the pink roses on a yellow band of the Borgherini or the red rampant lion of the Acciaiuoli, they closed their cloaks and ran laughing wildly into side-alleys. In cloaks they entered taverns to drink cups of spiced wine, Pierfrancesco holding his love at the waist. They ate sweetmeats and roasts at stalls in the piazzas, cakes and pastries in the streets.

Pierfrancesco was still suspicious. Several times, in various places, he looked around, and memorised the masks he saw. It seemed to him at least three of the masks were at street corners, in archways or at tavern entrances, at every place he went, but he couldn't be sure the masks were exactly the same. He convinced himself he was only imagining things, inventing stories that were not, and brushed the suspicions from his mind.

The quarter of Santa Maria Novella had built the Fates of Granacci and the Bacchanals of Bachiacca. The Bacchanals, built by the wards of Leon Rosso and Vipera, was a chariot that held only women, not one man was on it. Pierfrancesco and Margherita wondered where Bachiacca hid, unless he too was dressed as a woman. It was a wonderful chariot with painted, high arches that intersected all over the platform, decorated with panels of flower garlands and bunches of grapes. The women were Bacchantes, but there was no Bacchus on the chariot. Bachiacca had had the splendid idea to put several huge barrels of wine on his platform. The masked Bacchantes that stepped along distributed as much wine as one could drink. The combination of beautiful girls as Bacchantes and free wine was irresistible! Hordes of the poorer people accompanied this group throughout the town.

The quarter of San Giovanni also presented two chariots, one constructed by the wards of Leon d'Oro and Drago, the other by the wards of Vaio and Chiavi. The first was a winter chariot, the second a summer chariot. Santa Croce moved only one platform, but a very long one, representing the Ages of Man, from birth to youth, manhood, middle age and old age, nicely staged with couples of these ages. The groups showed at times separated, then danced and jumped together on the chariot in a merry-go-round. The Altr'Arno district of Santo Spirito took pride in two chariots. The wards of Drago and Ferza there represented the continents, among which the newly discovered Terra Incognita, the new lands of the west. The wards of Nicchio and Scala had made a chariot with a scene of Roman history, an

allegory on the founding of Florence by a Roman officer of Julius Caesar. In all, eleven platforms circled in Florence, passed bridges and returned.

Finally, as evening fell, four chariots assembled in the Piazza della Signoria, two in the Mercato Vecchio, three in the Piazza Santa Croce, whereas the two remaining ones positioned along the Arno near the Ponte Vecchio. There, all the men and women that accompanied the wagons made music together and danced.
Darkness set in. Evening came. Margherita's time to return home had come. She would have to return soon to the Borgo Santi Apostoli. Pierfrancesco also dared not taunt Roberto Acciaiuoli beyond the father's last grain of patience. Yet, he could not bring back Margherita before having seen at least for a few moments the apotheosis of Carnival, the most formidable chariot ever built in Florence, Piero di Cosimo's chariot. This platform had equally been built in the Hall of the Popes of the Monastery of Santa Maria Novella. Ever since Piero di Cosimo, a very eccentric painter, had devised that chariot for the first time, it had been the sensation of Florence, and now it was taken through the streets every year as the culmination of the procession, with magnificent success. Pierfrancesco had already seen it the years before, but this would be Margherita's first time. It had to be admired in the last light of the day for maximum effect. Pierfrancesco and Margherita hurried to Santa Maria Novella anew. They were just in time to watch the Hall of the Popes open. Forward rattled the Coach of Death.

The groups that accompanied the chariot assembled in the piazza. The large platform was drawn by ten black buffaloes, caparisoned with long, black pieces of draped cloth painted all over with large, white human bones and crosses. Alongside the buffaloes marched at least fifty men dressed entirely in black, holding torches. On their tight dresses were painted in glistening white the bones of a human skeleton, on their arms, breasts and legs, so that in the darkness it seemed an army of the dead marched. The men wore masks of human skulls, equally in white on black. The same skeletons were painted on their backs, so that also when seen passing it was as if the skeletons marched on Florence.
The chariot was painted entirely in black, too. It represented a gruesome landscape of rocks on which lay a series of tombs and a large number of coffins. This was Ezekiel's vision of the ruins, covered with tombs, in the Valley of the Bones. Over the tombs stood a huge figure of Death, a skeleton, brandishing its scythe. Death was a sculpture of plaster and wood, but the scythe moved and made circular movements in the air, towering high above the crowd.
Suddenly, horse-riders clattered on the cobblestones from a side-street. They joined the group that formed. The horses were a pity to see, for they were the most broken-down, old, famished animals of the poorest quarters of the town, chosen specifically for their ugliness, more than fifty of them. On each horse sat a rider, clad in black and painted over in white as a skeleton, wearing a black skull mask, holding a long torch. The horses wore black trappings, and white crosses were painted on these. A group of men advanced, all dressed as skeletons. Two held the reins of each horse in one hand, a torch in the other. These grooms guided the horses through the streets.
Then, ten more horse-riders arrived, each wearing black gonfalons, which showed white skulls as badges. These rode behind the wagon. Alongside the chariot now stepped heralds, black and white skeletons too, holding trumpets muffled at the end by black rags. Lastly, a great black standard, with a white skull painted on it, was brought forward and that standard placed itself in front of the groups. About fifty monks of the Monasteries of San Marco and San Gallo positioned themselves in a double row behind the black standard. All the monks wore torches.

Andrea del Sarto stepped out of the Hall of the Popes, ran to the chariot and drew a panel straight. He remarked Pierfrancesco and Margherita and joined them.
He asked, 'what do you think of our Black Death?'
'Gruesome, terrifying, frightening! Ezekiel's vision come to life, no, rather: to death,' shouted Pierfrancesco. Andrea had not really expected such an answer. He actually liked his work. Pierfrancesco saw his disappointment and added, 'I mean, it is a formidable representation, so lively and true! It is terribly impressive, wonderfully made. There is no such immense work in the whole of Italy!'
That brought a happy smile on Andrea's face. He said, 'It was really Piero di Cosimo's idea of a few years ago, this Chariot of Death. We kept it an absolute secret the first year. Piero created it, but Andrea di Cosimo and I helped him, and we have been improving the scenery ever since. Piero in fact invented this image for the Medici. The Medici family was in exile from Florence then, banned from Florence in republican times. The Medici family was beaten, defeated, but Piero supposed they would resurrect from the dead, as in the Prophet Ezekiel's vision. You will see! Also, Piero's prediction has come true. The Medici rule again!'

At that moment, the trumpets gave off a shrieking, moaning sound that pierced the night. Wooing sounds came from the tombs and the coffins opened. From the coffins rose tens of Dead, men and women dressed in black tights, painted upon with entire, white skeletons in front and back, with skulls as heads. The skeletons rose, swung their boned arms and legs and sang the Song of the Dead. They sang with raw voices that they were the dead, but they had once been like the spectators here, alive and well, like the spectators who would all return to cold earth one day. When the mournful song ended, the skeletons lay down in their coffins and tombs again, and the covers closed upon them. This scene would be represented in each important piazza of the town.

The group was now completely constituted and had tested its scene, outside, with success. The black standard-bearer set the group in motion. He rode slowly towards the Duomo. When the chariot moved, the company of more than a hundred men and women in skeleton dresses, all wearing torches, sang the "Miserere" psalm of David, a long and slow poem, at the mournful rhythms of a band of drums that closed the procession. The drums had been muffled also with rags, so that the sounds were particularly low-sounding and ominous.

Pierfrancesco and Margherita walked forward, along the monks and horse-riders. They wanted to accompany the chariot for a while, as it advanced towards the Duomo, and then they would have to return to the Acciaiuoli palace. While they stepped along, their cloaks opened. They had abandoned their masks before.
Suddenly, a monk who walked in front of the group of the chariot of death, looked at them inquisitively, and stepped out of the cortège.

The monk went straight to Pierfrancesco and whispered, 'I must talk to you. The time has come for you to learn the secret, my son. I am Fra Jacopino of San Marco Monastery. I have to hand you a part of the unveiling of the secret. You have a brave heart, you are the chosen one. You have to find the secret. It has been too heavy on my conscience.'
The man's eyes widened in terror. He looked at the crowd behind Pierfrancesco and said in a hurry, 'take this now, my son, I will explain later. Guard it well and find the secret! If anything happens to me, go and find Father Alessio Strozzi at Santa Maria Novella! He has something for you, too. Remember: Father Alessio Strozzi! God bless you, my son!'

The monk thrust a purse in Pierfrancesco's hands and closed his fingers on Pierfrancesco's. Then he was drawn backwards by the crowd, onto the marching group of the chariot. The crowd blocked momentarily Pierfrancesco's and Margherita's view of the platform and the skeletons.
Pierfrancesco and Margherita were utterly amazed at the words of the monk. In Pierfrancesco's hands lay a small, brown leather purse. They looked again at the chariot, at the group of monks and horse-riders, trying to find out where the monk had disappeared. Fra Jacopino was being drawn very roughly backwards by two men dressed in grey jackets and trousers. These held the monk at each arm, but the monk saw Pierfrancesco coming and he screamed and struggled. The monk got pushed against the horses of the chariot, which slung him from the hands of this opponents. The two men lost the monk for a moment. Fra Jacopino disappeared amidst the horse-riders and the torches swayed above him. He was blinded by the light, then he fell, and the Chariot of Death rolled on and over him. There was a commotion behind the chariot when a body was thrown aside, among the throng of people. The groups of the Chariot of Death continued to march, while a miserable brown heap lay aside. The two men that had grasped Fra Jacopino hurried to him at first, then stopped when they saw the monk was hurt, and rapidly mixed among the people to the other side of the cortège. People trampled on the formless body that lay on the stones, because all looked upwards, to Death. Pierfrancesco and Margherita arrived. Pierfrancesco touched the mass, found the head of the monk, and rolled him on his back. Blood seeped through the monk's robes. Pierfrancesco touched the man to look where he had been hurt. The monk was dead. He did not breathe anymore.
The people of the crowd passed by, without looking at the tragedy under their feet. They pushed Pierfrancesco aside. They only looked at marching and scything Death, swinging its instrument of taking life in the light of the torches.
Pierfrancesco drew the monk to a wall. The man's eyes were closed in peace. Blood oozed now also from his mouth and ears. His belly was a mass of blood and entrails. Margherita screamed.

Andrea del Sarto ran to them. Pierfrancesco still knelt at the monk's lifeless body, transfixed by the man's death, blood coagulating on his hands.
Andrea del Sarto hid Margherita's face against his breast so that she would not see more of the horror. He tugged at Pierfrancesco.
'You have to go,' he shouted. 'The monk is dead. You have to go! You cannot be associated with this death. It was a crime, I saw it! I will stay here, you go!'
More people from the crowd gathered around the corpse. Andrea pushed Pierfrancesco and Margherita away, closed their cloaks around them, forced their hoods down over their heads and said, 'go back to your palaces. I will take care of this. Go!'

Pierfrancesco and Margherita ran into the throng of people. They gathering crowd absorbed them. They ran in the streets, hooded shadows that death accompanied, to the Borgo Santi Apostoli, through alleys and streets, in the dark, by the shortest route. They did not speak until they stood at the gates of the Palazzo Acciaiuoli.

'Are you all right?' Pierfrancesco asked then.
'Yes, yes,' Margherita replied. 'Oh Pierfrancesco, that was awful! The poor man! How did that happen? Why?'
'It was no accident,' Pierfrancesco said. 'The monk was attacked and drawn off by two men. I saw it all! They struggled, and the monk fell among the horses, then the chariot's wheels rolled over him. It was murder! The men in leather jackets who held the monk were

Spaniards. I recognised one of them. It was murder! The same bandits that have been following us did this!'
Margherita started to cry and to sob.
Pierfrancesco shook her shoulders, 'Margherita, now you have to find as much courage as I. We must not tell our fathers yet what happened this evening. We must first find out what this was all about. Will you please now stop crying and go in as if nothing special has happened? If you do not do that, we may never, never see each other again. Do you understand?'
Margherita nodded and stopped crying. She wiped her eyes.
'What will you do?' she asked through her last tears.
'I have to go back. I will go to Andrea's studio and wait there until he returns. I will tell you later what happened. Go now!' Pierfrancesco kissed Margherita and pushed her through the gates into the cortile of the Acciaiuoli palace. Then he ran towards the Piazza del Grano.

Pierfrancesco had to wait until the middle of the night at Andrea del Sarto's door. Carnival was still going on all around him. Drunken people bumped into him, but he was oblivious of what went on. He just leaned against Andrea's door. He tried to comprehend what had happened to the monk, how it had happened. He still grasped the purse that Fra Jacopino had given him.
Three men approached, Andrea del Sarto, Francesco Granacci and Jacopo Pontormo. They recognised Pierfrancesco, and drew him in the studio. Andrea was as shocked as Pierfrancesco. At first, the men said nothing. Then Granacci sought a bottle of wine, and cups. He poured them all a large cup of the drink. He pushed the wine to them.

'What happened?' Pierfrancesco asked.
'The monk was killed,' Granacci replied. 'He suffered instant death. The chariot rolled over him. He must have hit his head against the stones, or his heart stopped. He died rapidly. Andrea called the guards, and two men of the Otto di Guardia came. They had look at the body and decided it was an accident. They took the corpse to the Monastery of Santa Maria Novella. It may be buried there, or at San Marco.'
'I was no accident,' Pierfrancesco cried. 'It was murder!'
'I saw it happen,' Andrea moaned. 'I saw two men drag the monk away from Pierfrancesco. The monk struggled. He fell. He fell first under the hooves of the horses, the hooves may have hit his head, and then the chariot rolled over him. Twice the wheels drove over his body. The weight crushed him. It was not exactly a murder, but not an accident either.'
'Why did the monk speak to you?' Jacopo Pontormo asked. He had been standing close to Andrea and had also seen the accident.
'He gave me a purse and said I had to find a secret'. Pierfrancesco put the leather purse on the table.

Pontormo asked, 'may I?'
Pierfrancesco nodded. Jacopo opened the small bag. He drew out a slim, long piece of leather. He said, 'it looks like a leather monk's belt, no, a piece of such a belt.' He showed the leather strip. Characters were cut in the leather, all along the belt. The characters formed no words. They were just a series of characters, nicely drawn, as if they formed merely a decoration of finely carved letters. Pontormo examined the belt.
'It must be a message, possibly a coded message,' he said, 'or simply a belt with decorative characters. To a monk the characters might mean the first verses of the Evangels, or something like that.'
He gave the string to Granacci, who looked at it but could also not find anything that made sense. Granacci pushed the leather strip back in the purse and returned it to Pierfrancesco.

The men drank their wine. They consoled and calmed Pierfrancesco. At dawn, Granacci accompanied Pierfrancesco to the Borgo Santi Apostoli, to Pierfrancesco's home; then he walked to his own house.

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'It was an accident,' the Neapolitan Spaniard said to the crimson-robed man opposite him, fearing the man's wrath. 'We took the monk when he spoke to the Borgherini boy, but he struggled and we were with him in the midst of a crowd. The monk fell and was crushed under the chariot.'
The Spaniard fingered his dagger nervously. He sat at a table in the room of the castle where he had to report at sunset every Friday.

'Yes,' the long-robed man reacted, pacing up and down the small room. He remained silent for a while, stepped to the small window in the round tower, and looked past the iron bars to the Tuscan landscape beneath. The landscape unfolded in the last light of the evening.
'Why do I fail so often,' he thought, 'why does nothing here happens the way I planned, the way I wanted things to happen?'
He turned to the Neapolitan and said, 'suppose it was an accident, indeed. Matters do not go as we wish. You should have intercepted the monk safely before he spoke to the boy, taken him and brought him here. We would have made the monk talk. The monk is dead now, part of the secret gone, we do not know how much information the boy has received, and what the monk's part of the secret was. You were incompetent.'

The Neapolitan chuckled. 'We did not know which monk would contact the boy. We did not know where. We did not know when. We saw a monk approach the boy at the least expected moment, at Carnival, in the dark of evening, in the midst of the Carnival crowd. Still, the monk could barely say more than a few words. We saw he gave something to the boy, though.'
'The boy saw you grab the monk. Even he will now deduce the death was not much of an accident. The boy may be puzzled, and the monk had not enough time to explain. It takes longer to explain than the time you observed. You must continue to observe the boy. For the moment I want nothing to happen to him.'
'For the moment?' the man dressed in leather repeated, touching his dagger. 'The boy is a Borgherini. One does not kill the son of a prominent family of Florence so easily.'
The crimson-clad man grinned sarcastically.' Yes, it will cost me more, will it not? I will not shun away from such a death if it is necessary, however! I did not rage just now because the monk had an accident! I was in anger because you could not catch the man with the secret he was bearing. That part of the secret is gone! The boy will be contacted again, or if the monk of San Marco has told him enough, the boy will contact yet another monk. When that happens, I want that man taken or killed before he delivers the secret. I may have the boy killed, too, depending how matters evolve, but not now, not soon.'

'We will do as you wish,' the Spaniard replied. I will come back here next Friday.'
'No. Not next Friday. Not for a few Fridays. I will send you a note when we can meet again. If something happens in the meantime, you will have to send me a courier. I have to leave Florence, possibly for months. I have to go to Rome.'

The Neapolitan left the room. The crimson-robed man remained alone in the room in the tower. He sat, banged with his fists on the table, and buried his head in his hands. The Neapolitan heard screams of agony sound from the room while he ran down the winding stairs.

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Florence was in turmoil long after Carnival, but not over the accident that had happened to Fra Jacopino and the Chariot of the Dead. Few people had noticed the accident. When the chariot left the Piazza Santa Maria Novella, the crowd had followed. Accidents were not uncommon during Carnival. Last year, a drunk had fallen from a bridge and drowned. The year before, a horse had pranced and kicked a dyer's woman to death with its hooves. Death came quickly in Florence.

Quite another story was the sensation of the moment, and this held Florence in a tight grip. The Signoria uncovered a plot to assassinate Giuliano, Lorenzo and Giulio de'Medici. The conspiration had been discovered just a few days before Carnival, and kept secret for a few days to find all the conspirators, so that the details only became public after Carnival.
The plot had been organised by Pietro Paolo Boscoli, a man of thirty-two years old. He had a few assistants. One was Agostino di Luca Capponi, a man of a very well known family of Florence. Also Niccolò Valori and Giovanni Folchi had helped. These men aimed to restore the republican ideals and constitution in Florence. The assassination of Giuliano de'Medici would be the sign for a general revolt in the city. The Signoria, Medici supporters, found a list of two dozen names of conspirators or of people that could be expected to have sympathy for the insurgents. These men were arrested and imprisoned in the Bargello prison. Nobody knew whose name was on the list. The Boscoli revolt therefore hung like a veil of terror over the city, for one's name could have been listed by chance, merely as possible sympathizers, without any real involvement of the listed men. Everyone who had ever shown sympathy for the Republic expected to be caught by the guards and imprisoned. Who was not free of such suspicion?
Troops of guards marched through the streets of Florence. Spanish troops were called in to protect the Medici palace and villas. They had been summoned by Cardinal Giovanni de'Medici, who lay ill in bed. The noble and the wealthy feared the vengeance of Giuliano de'Medici. Who was on the list?
Roberto di Donato dei Acciaiuoli and Salvi di Francesco dei Borgherini ran to the Medici place to repeat their allegiance to the Medici, to offer armed guards and funds. They had to wait in a long queue, for Florence entire seemed to have had the same idea. Roberto and Salvi were angry, humiliated, afraid, and both in a state of upper nervousness. Roberto forgot he had seen his daughter entering at evening in the courtyard of his palace, weeping. Salvi forgot to ask what had happened at Carnival to Pierfrancesco.
Two weeks passed. Pietro Paolo Boscoli and Agostino Capponi were executed by decapitation in the Bargello. The fear in Florence lasted all through the month of February. There were rumours about the names on the list. There were rumours of tens of men being tortured in the Bargello.

In the beginning of March other stunning news chased the rumours about the Boscoli events.

Pope Julius II, the della Rovere Pope, died on the twenty-first of February in Rome. The elections sessions for the new Pope lasted and lasted. On the ninth of March, Cardinal

Giovanni de'Medici was elected Pope. He was proclaimed Pope officially only two days later, on the eleventh of March.
Giovanni de'Medici had been granted the title of Cardinal when he was thirteen years old. On March fifteen of 1513 he was ordained priest. On the seventeenth of March he was consecrated Bishop. He was crowned Pope in great festivities in Rome on the nineteenth of March.

Francesco Granacci, usually a Medici supporter, but in the republican way, grinned in sarcasm. 'Giovanni de'Medici has been promoted a cardinal and a pope before he was a priest and a bishop. He is only thirty-seven years old and may have a long reign even though he is overweight. He has been educated by the humanist scholars of his father Lorenzo the Magnificent, so he does not believe in the existence of God. He has also inherited from his teachers his love for men. By men I men, not women. He is a sensual man and an expert theologian. He likes food excessively, as well as beautiful things. He will spend the money of Christ lavishly on monuments, churches, jewels and golden artefacts. Let's hope he also spends on paintings. Where in the name of God is the Church leading us?'

Nevertheless, Florence was overjoyed. It had a Florentine pope of an illustrious family at last, and that could only be good for the bankers, the merchants and the artists, and all the small professions would profit. Moreover, this Pope had not neglected his home town, but taken the name Leo for the Marzocco of Florence, the lion symbol. Giuliano de'Medici staged feasts in the city, waiting to receive the new Pope officially.
'Of course,' said Granacci. 'Giovanni's predecessors were called after powerful men, after conquerors and emperors, after Alexander the Great for the Borgia and after Julius Caesar for the della Rovere. Giovanni had to choose a name as grand as the Borgia and the della Rovere, so he chose the lion, the Marzocco, the symbol of Florence, and the mightiest beast among the animals.'

The months passed fast in the shadow of these events. Pierfrancesco and Margherita banned the death of Fra Jacopino from their minds. Pierfrancesco threw the leather belt in a corner of a chest and forgot about it. The two young people still met regularly, still met their friends the four painters. A morose atmosphere hung over their relation. Margherita was not as light-hearted as before. She seemed to have matured a lot. She too sat and talked, alone, with Andrea del Sarto, now, and also with Jacopo Pontormo. She clung to Pierfrancesco. She took his hand, his entire arm, and she walked at his side holding to his body as if despair glued her to him. Margherita was young, however, and a girl gifted with natural happiness. Her wit and joy only forced the men again to laughter by the end of spring.

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Roberto Acciaiuoli and Salvi Borgherini had too much to worry about during that time, to bother with their daughters and sons. They knew nothing of what had happened to Pierfrancesco and Margherita near Santa Maria Novella. Their spies had lost the couple that day. Roberto and Salvi waited patiently for something unexpected to happen, unaware that events had been inexorably set in motion. Had they known, they would have been very worried indeed.
At the beginning of summer, of that ominous year that ended on the number thirteen, Roberto and Salvi came to believe that nothing whatsoever would happen to Pierfrancesco – ever. Roberto wondered whether he had done well to let his daughter meet the Borgherini boy after all. He noticed the change in his beloved Margherita. He feared she had desperately fallen in

love with Pierfrancesco, and love was not the right feeling to start a good marriage, he thought. He studied the mysterious key given to him by a monk in his treasure chest once every while, and then he told himself he could have done worse. He argued that the Borgherini lad was a nice, good-looking, hard-working, intelligent boy, who was popular and liked in Florence. He had met the boy now also in meetings of the guilds and of the ward of Vipera. The lad would grow up to be a Gonfaloniere of his ward, of the quarter, and who knows, maybe a Prior of Florence. Roberto's business with the Borgherini was thriving. Pierfrancesco would inherit good money. But Pierfrancesco was not a son of the very wealthiest. The Borgherini were not as powerful as the Strozzi, the Peruzzi, or the Altoviti and other families. Roberto might have married his daughter in those families, maybe even to a Medici! When Roberto thought thus, he was not pleased anymore. Salvi triumphed, however.

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Pierfrancesco also had other things on his mind. He was growing up, from youth to adulthood. He sought how he should live, how he should be, how he should react to people and situations.
Pierfrancesco received little help from his father. He only learnt the business of banking, of buying and selling with his father. He did not understand why Salvi only bought and sold and was interested in little else. There had to be more to life.
Therefore, he tried to understand what drove his friends, the painters, why they were so passionately interested in the things they did. The art of painting also still puzzled him. He was still seeking to discover which paintings were good and which were less so. So far, when his friends explained, he expected more. He was not satisfied. Francesco Granacci, Francesco Bachiacca and even Andrea del Sarto had rather traditional ideas about the art of painting. Jacopo Pontormo had his own ideas, but rarely talked about them, for the other three master painters shouted the errors of his views to his face.

Once, when Pierfrancesco was alone in Andrea's studio with Jacopo Pontormo, he asked Jacopo what the difference was between the new ideas on painting and the old. Pontormo embarked on a discourse, longer than Pierfrancesco had ever heard him talk about anything.

Jacopo Pontormo said traditional views were born really with the writings of a man called Leon Battista Alberti, and that was the first time Pierfrancesco heard about Alberti.
Alberti had died forty years ago. He had been a Florentine scholar, who had studied and worked in Genoa, Venice, Padua, Bologna and Rome. He was a priest. He had worked for the Pope and he had been appointed canon of the Duomo afterwards. Alberti was also an architect who wrote many books on various subjects, his interests as divergent as on architecture and mathematics, painting, agriculture, and on many other sciences and arts. Alberti had written a book called 'Della Pittura' and in this book, told Pontormo, Alberti had said many important things about painting. Master painters had taken the advices of Alberti to heart ever since. Pontormo too had read this book, studied it, and he derived many of his views from that text, though he refused to interpret the counsels, now rules, too tightly.

'Leon Battista Alberti has been the first to explain the need of perspective,' Pontormo explained. 'He stated that when we see an object, an invisible pyramid of rays pass between our eye and the object. The most important ray is the ray to the centre of the object, for that ray decides on how large the object is seen. Then, the extreme rays, the rays to or from the contours of the object are important, for a painting is nothing else – according to Alberti -

than a cross-section of this visual pyramid with a vertical plane, a cross-section artificially represented with lines and colours. Alberti proved that this cross-section is proportional to the original. By using this theoretical image of the pyramid, Alberti taught painters how to draw the varying heights of buildings close by and farther away, the heights of figures at various distances, and so on. Later, another painter, Piero della Francesca worked along these concepts and defined the exact, geometrical laws of perspective. Perspective allows us to imitate nature better in a picture. Alberti taught us how to use a centric point in a painting and then how to draw straight lines from it, the lines representing the pyramid. You will have to read Alberti's book to learn the scheme in all detail, but once a master painter has understood the technique, it is really quite simple to use. Alberti also made the remark that we must say, like the philosopher Protagoras, that man is the mode and measure of all things, so whatever is painted will be great and small by comparison of a man painted in the picture. Without a human figure, it would be sheer impossible to know the height, width and length of an object.'

Jacopo continued to explain the writings of Alberti on painting. 'A painting is divided into three parts: circumscription, composition, and the reception of light. Circumscription is the design of the story by the drawing of the outlines in the picture. Without design of lines, there can be no fine composition of surfaces and reception of light in colours. Composition is how the parts fit together. Beauty is born from the composition of the planes of the objects. The planes must take shades and light agreeably.
For the figures of men and women, Alberti proposed to draw figures in the nude first, then to fold the figures in muscles and flesh, and finally in draperies. All the parts of a man must be proportional, as man is in nature. The basis of the proportions might be the head of a man, or the length of his arm. For me, a very important remark of Alberti is that men that are not dead should be painted in motion to express life, but in motion with loveliness and grace. Bachiacca applies that phrase exquisitely. The most graceful movements and the liveliest are those that move upwards in the air, that express elation. So I try to show this elation by all means, in my paintings. Furthermore, Alberti wrote that when many figures are painted, they should harmonise in size and function. In composition, what pleases the eye is copiousness and variety, and Bachiacca is a master in this. Bachiacca mixes old women and young maidens, boys and youth and old men, dogs, birds, sheep, horses, cows and flowers, fruit and landscapes.'

'Alberti said that solitude is fine for who desires dignity in painting,' continued Jacopo Pontormo, 'and that is certainly my case. Alberti proposed, however, to place always about nine or ten figures in a painting, in many dissimilar poses. He wanted each man to be painted so that the figure showed the movement of the soul, and that is expressed in the movements of the body, yet all should be according to the story of the picture. The movements should be natural and not too violent. Movements are to be moderate and sweet and graceful for the objects too.'
Pontormo paused. 'As to colours, Alberti wrote there were only four, namely red, blue, green, and grey. Each of these colours form a species when white or black is added. And then one can mix the species to create an innumerable number of hues. He said how a same colour altered its appearance according to the light and shade it receives. Alberti drew our attention to the wealth of colours that could be shown, as well as to the force of light and shade. We call this chiaroscuro, which allows showing volumes on men and objects. When the colours enter gradually into each other, we call this sfumato. As to the use of colours, Alberti wrote that grace was when one colour differs greatly from the other near it, so also when clear colours are near darker ones, that is when the colours contrast.'

'All painters know these rules or conventions by now,' Pontormo concluded. 'Alberti however wrote that a painting contained a divine force. For instance, the portrait of a deceased man makes that man live still a long life. A painting contributes to the delight of the soul and to the dignified beauty of all things. That is what I want to show, Pierfrancesco, more than anything else! Alberti said that any painter, who sees his work liked by viewers, will feel himself like a god. Therefore, anything that enhances the liking of a work makes me more of a god, and that is the only criterion, ultimately, of a sublime work. I certainly agree with Alberti when he said that the appreciation of painting is a good indication of the perfect mind, and you have well shown your interest, Pierfrancesco. Painting should be pleasing to all however, to the educated and the uneducated, and I believe with Alberti that everybody should be able to take delight in my art. I deduce from this that we painters, do produce art, but the only criterion worth taking into consideration for how much artful our work is, is the admiration of viewers, and that I believe does not depend on which rules we use and on which we break. For Alberti too, the aim of painting is to give pleasure. The artist should be good of will, for the goodness of an artist is worth more than his industry or the art he has in acquiring the attention of the viewer. Therefore, said Alberti, an artist should be human and affable. A violent and deceiving man cannot be a good painter.
So, when Granacci said, Pierfrancesco, that a painting is fine when a passing viewer likes it at first instance, and when Andrea del Sarto states a viewer should know something about the elements of style in the art of painting, I add that a painting can only be fully appreciated when these two conditions are fulfilled, plus when the viewer knows something about the artist's life and nature.
With the truly good painters, you will find good men, interesting men, men that have a message for you by how they live their life – whether in passion or in calm. Yet, it remains true that a painter can only find perfection in his art with diligence, much application and study. Above all, Alberti praised loveliness, much more than richness, and I think that is true in real life also. Alberti advised to think first thoroughly about the story of a painting, and then to perfect it afterwards. That means a painter must always first use his intellect, then his industry and art. A good painter must be an affable, intelligent man.'

Pierfrancesco listened eagerly and with patience. He used the opinions of his friends to shape his character.

Jacopo Pontormo had not finished. He whispered, as if talking to himself only, 'we live in times of great upheavals and tension. Our art must and will in one way or the other be a reflection of that tension. Alberti's views will be derelict. Harmony was Alberti's preferred virtue of paintings. I would rather break harmony if it is necessary to show the emotions of my figures, and to give strong emotions to the viewer of my works!'

'You have a rather pessimistic view on life,' Pierfrancesco replied.
'Reality is like that,' Pontormo answered. 'Even only in Florence the tension is mounting. Florence is a republic and the Republic thrived under Piero Soderini. Now that the Medici have returned and grasped command, there will be much hatred and much seeking of revenge. The Boscoli revolt was one of those manifestations. The Medici have no other choice than to devastate completely such revolts, with much repression and violence. If they do not do so, more revolts will come. Also, what is Florence compared to France and the Empire? Our resources are meagre compared to those powers. These powers will clash over us.'

'I wonder,' remarked Pierfrancesco, 'you say we live in a period of tension. I cannot more agree with you. In times of tension, do we not need weapons and strong arms, strong fortifications, more, instead of art?'
'I have given that some thought, too,' Pontormo said. 'I asked myself why people wanted paintings in the first place, despite all their worries. Not one commissioner of Andrea del Sarto or of me, while passing a contract to us, did not complain about the hard times they had in business and in life. Yet, I think, we, Florentines, and to a somewhat lesser degree all Italians, need beautiful objects as much as we need food, shelter, affection, friends, love, sex, and children. I tend to believe that need of art has been created in us by God, as other more immediate needs. My own, particular believe is, the love of beautiful pictures, with the love of everything beautiful such as colourful, fragrant flowers and fine buildings, is a remnant God preserved in us of our experience of the paradise of Eden before Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit. I know for certain that even when Florentines were at war, when monasteries were at pains to raise money, and when merchants were near bankruptcy, orders for paintings continued to flow in at the workshops of Florence's painters, orders for sculptures at wood-carvers and stone-carvers, and orders for golden trinkets at jewellers. Florentines seem to need art as much as air to breathe!' He laughed, 'once I understood that, being a painter, I looked at life a happier way!'
'So what you paint has to represent something else than what you see?' Pierfrancesco asked.

'Plato wrote in his "Republic" there are three levels of forms. First, Plato distinguished the perfect, ideal form of objects, the idea God created and perceived. Then there is the real object, one instance and realisation of this idea, less perfect, less real. Such an object can be painted or represented in a flat picture, and this form is even less the real thing, as if we look at the object through a mirror. So, we could argue, to where should our art tend? I believe it is to offer a glimpse of the ideal form, of the idea, as God sees the form. We, artists, will always fail in that, because we are only humans. But how far can we reach? I, Pierfrancesco, want to reach as far as I can towards the ideal with my art. Still, I will have to stick to this world, to the objects and figures, for two reasons: I have not the perception of God of the ideal forms, of the ideas, alas, and second, even if I would be able to paint the ideal forms, my viewers, humans, would not understand my paintings: their imagination would be strained too much, and they would reject my pictures, making my aim useless!'

'You talk of strange concepts,' Pierfrancesco said. 'When I look at a painting, I see what I see.'
Jacopo Pontormo laughed. 'As much happens behind a good painting as on it! And sometimes a lot more! I am sure you know that. You only have to take conscience of how a painting opens to so many feelings and interrogations in you. A picture is a treasure of small details, as many symbols, each symbol involving another complete image in our minds. One likes a painting because it invokes so much in a viewer. Saying a painting renders well objects and figures, shows for instance the folds of a velvet robe as well as in the real world, is not enough to explain the attraction, the beauty of a picture. Saying a painting has been drawn perfectly in all the features Andrea del Sarto explained, in the lines, colours, perspective, shadows, composition, symmetry, harmony, and so on, also does not explain why all paintings are so appealing. Saying paintings show rightly the emotions of the painter, or evoke strong feelings in viewers, is not enough to explain the appeal of paintings. Why is it we cannot live without beautiful things, why do we admire paintings? There is something else in paintings beyond imitation, calculated form and emotions shown, something indefinable, something philosophers have not been able yet to find. I can indeed only explain this as the remnant of the original love of God, the love that existed before His creation. Ultimately, since I could

come up with no other explanation, I recognised this even as one of the proofs of the existence of God. So, this is my proof, a painter's proof!'
Pontormo started to laugh, for he had puzzled Pierfrancesco. Pierfrancesco was not certain whether Jacopo Pontormo was serious or joking.

Pierfrancesco smiled. He agreed with Jacopo da Pontormo, and recognised there was much more to painting than simple picture-making. He would look at paintings in another way. Paintings nevermore would be merely visual experiences for him.

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When Pierfrancesco was not learning to be a fine adult, the games of Florence occupied much of his mind until the beginning of summer. Pierfrancesco was a calcianto, a good calcianto, and Bachiacca was his team-mate now. He played since two years in the Calcio team of the Vipera ward for the quarter of Santa Maria Novella, drawn to the game by his brother and two cousins. He was not a very aggressive player, but he was smart. He could run fast, and he was a master in avoiding being tackled by opponent players.
Bachiacca was a bull in the Calcio; he ran head down, without looking, just pushing forward, and he crashed then through all resistance with the speed and force of a bee-stung ox.
In April and May Pierfrancesco and Bachiacca played many matches against other quarters and wards and trained in many more matches. So far, Pierfrancesco had escaped unscathed, though he had stopped counting the blue patches of bruises on his legs and body. Both he and Bachiacca had been chosen as a member of the Calcio team of the Santa Maria Novella quarter for the grand "Torneo dei Quattro Quartieri" contest. Their team had been chosen for the finals of June. The Torneo would be staged on the day of the Patron Saint of Florence, on the twenty-fourth of June. For all Florentines, it was the most important event of the year.

Pierfrancesco had not told Margherita he played in the Calcio, which was on his conscience, for he was fairly certain she would find the game too violent for him.

Chapter Four. Friday June, 24. Saint John the Baptist's Day. The Calcio Fiorentino.

Saint John's Day came with a breeze from the mountain peaks that blew gently and refreshing over Florence. Soon however, the sun climbed, glimmered through the morning haze, and then shone bright, high and hard in the sky. Florence baked dry in a week of surly heat. The Florentines expected nothing better of Saint John, who had baptised in the desert. The Calcio players feared the hot weather that fried minds and nerves. Yet, the Torneo had to be played.

The area in which the matches were to take place had been set up this year in the wide piazza for which the quarter of Santa Croce was famed. It was a grand piazza, with proud houses all around, and the white marble of Santa Croce itself glistened in the light. Carpenters first built a fence of about four feet high all around a long rectangular field measured out in white chalk by the Maestro di Campo, the master-organiser of the Calcio Torneo. Then they filled the fences with wooden planks. The planks and the fence were sturdy, for the players would jump and bump into them, and yet the barrier had to hold. Wagons driven by oxen brought loads of orange sand. The sand came from quarries in the hills, and boats had carried it to the nearby Santa Croce banks of the river Arno. Men unloaded the sand in the space between the barriers, and distributed it evenly to about two feet thick. This would be the battlefield, the area in which two teams would fight and try to score each the most points. Other carpenters constructed tribunes all around the field, four gradations high, on all four sides. The tribune closest to Santa Croce was being decorated with flower garlands, with flags and badges of the quarters of the city. Long pieces of red cloth covered the benches on which the noblest and wealthiest families of Florence would sit, mostly in the afternoon, invited by the Signoria – which meant by Giuliano de'Medici. Then, a long net was hung at both shorter ends of the field, behind the wooden wall. Finally, at the centre of each shorter wall, men carefully dressed a narrow white tent with a red trim and a small flag on its top. During the games, the captains of the teams would stand there and shout orders. The standard-bearer of the quarter of the team would also take position there.
Meanwhile, the gonfalons of the four quarters of Firenze were brought to the field and put up all around it. On the Piazza Santa Croce, windows and balconies opened and large, multicoloured square flags were hung down. At those windows and balconies many people, spectators already, showed themselves, looking with eager curiosity at the preparations.

When Saint John's Day began, Pierfrancesco had still not really told Margherita he would be playing in the Torneo. He had told her once, absent-mindedly, he played the Calcio, but he had immediately embarked on another idea and Margherita had not noticed; in any case she had not delved further in this part of his life. Maybe Margherita had thought the game could not mean much for Pierfrancesco, as it meant little for girls, or maybe she had thought he could not make much of that game anyway. Then, three days ago, when he had met Margherita the last time, while Pierfrancesco ran out of the Acciaiuoli courtyard, he had cried as a last word, 'please come to see me play at Calcio! I play in the Torneo of Saint John's Day!'
He remembered the baffled face of Margherita, eager to ask more, but he had run out, grinning. He was glad to have this not on his conscience anymore. He had told her, all right, hadn't he? He would fight as a combatant for Santa Maria Novella in the Torneo of Saint John's Day!

Florence's calcianti played three matches that day. The four teams, one team from each quarter, played two to two against each other in the morning. The winners of each match fought in the afternoon. A referee inside the field had been assigned, called the giudice arbitro, as well as an outside referee, the giudice commissario. The supreme authority for the games was held by the Maestro di Campo. These men drew lots to decide on which teams would start.
Each of the four teams brought twenty-seven players in the field. Each team counted fifteen attackers or innanzi, five mid-team players or sconciatori, three last defenders or datori innanzi, and then also four goalkeepers or datori indietro. Each team had a captain and a standard-bearer; the latter had nothing else to do than stand in the field and wave the gonfalon of the quarter. The captain directed his team.
Pierfrancesco and Bachiacca were innanzi, attackers. Pierfrancesco had not been chosen so much for his raw force, as because of his cunning to dodge adversaries, find openings in the opposing team, and because of his speed on the difficult, sandy space. Bachiacca was the bull of the team.
The field was separated in two by a white chalked line; this line would soon disappear under the sand; it served only at the beginning of the match to position the teams.

The game was to grab a round, leather ball and throw or kick it over the four-foot wall at the end of the other's team territory, into the nets spun below the wooden wall. A ball thus thrown or deposed scored a point. A ball brought over the wall but over the net, or a ball touched by a defender after it had been thrown, scored only half a point. A calcianto could not kick or throw from too far, for a ball that hit a pole or that flew above the nets or aside, would lose half a point to the team that sent such a ball. When a point was made, the standard-bearer would run the length of the field, swaying his gonfalon triumphantly and shouting victory, to place the flag of the team at the tent on the other side of the field. The teams changed sides then.

For the remainder, the rules were simple. A team had to score as many points as possible in less than an hour, whatever way. Kicking the ball was difficult, because one might lose points when the ball went too high over the opposing wall, and kicking was hard and inaccurate in the sand. So players usually just took the ball in one hand, squeezed it against their breasts and burst forward, fending off with their other arm whoever tried to stop them. An opponent might grab your ankle and twist it while you were running, or throw his body into your legs, or grab you from behind and drag you over. Vicious feet and knee kicks on one's body were not appreciated, as were straight fist kicks, and kicks in the back or spine, but these were also not particularly outlawed. Punishment for such behaviour came in the field, not by the arbiter but by the opposing calcianti, for when one delivered such a kick, one received ten of the same back within a short time. The chastisement was deserved, instantly and brutal. The arbiters did not care too much about vicious blows, but fisticuffs and regular brawls inside the field would be stopped, primarily because they delayed the game, and the game had to be played on Saint John's Day. They disliked kicks to the head. They allowed about everything else.

The Calcio Fiorentino was unique in Italy, a tough game, which could be played only by the strongest, manliest, most aggressive, feral and also intelligent men with cunning for the game, of over eighteen and less than forty-five years old. There were a few slender types in a team, but most of the calcianti, especially the defenders and goal-keepers, were tall men, iron-muscled men with broad shoulders and bellies as hard as stone. Nerves of steel were needed,

for as the match proceeded and fatigue set in, players were tempted to break all rules, to start brawls and forget all patience, all tactics proposed by the team coach. A few among the players were soldiers, some tanners or dyers, stone-cutters or butchers, but many also were noblemen or youths from wealthy families. The Calcio was a game in which fortune or standing mattered less than skill of the game and aggressiveness and energy. Only the strongest of Florence participated.

Each team was dressed in the colours of its quarters: Santa Maria Novella's players wore red and Santa Croce's players were dressed in blue. The men of Santo Spirito wore white; the players of San Giovanni were in green.
In the first match, Santa Maria Novella, Pierfrancesco's team, was to play against the greens of San Giovanni. The players of Santa Maria Novella wore a red linen shirt and simple, red breeches. Stripes were allowed on breeches, as long as they were not in the colours of the adversary parties. Pierfrancesco wore breeches with his yellow stripes and the pink roses of the Borgherini. His mother also had stitched a small Borgherini badge on his red shirt.

At the beginning of the match, the twenty-seven Calcio players of Santa Maria Novella stood on the side of the terrain, talking nervously, and flexing their muscles. They played with their backs to the tribune of the notables of the city, with their backs to the façade of the church of Santa Croce. The twenty-seven men of San Giovanni entered on the field from the opposite side. The captains and the standard-bearers proudly positioned themselves before the Castello tent, before their goal.
The team of Santa Maria Novella now also entered the field under loud cheers and shouts, accompanied by shrill whistles from supporters of San Giovanni. The atmosphere was set. Pierfrancesco scanned the benches at his back, but he discovered no Acciaiuoli, and no Margherita. He was relieved and a lot less nervous.

At a sign of the commissario, the arbiter threw a white and red ball on the white line that separated the two teams. The ball bounced in the field. A calcianto of San Giovanni's team got caught of it. The man, a bull of a youth, burst immediately forward into the lines of Santa Maria Novella. Three reds were on him in an instant, pinning him to the ground. Ten other reds tackled the greens that tried to converge on the ball. A red forced the ball from the arm of the green attacker, jumped aside and tossed it forward, past the swaying arms of two greens, to another red innanzo. That man was brought down by two other greens.

The match was now on in full heat. Men ran, clenched onto others, drew and pushed, tore and forced to the ground, darted and were stopped by opponents. Every player was busy and had a task to perform. The men who did not hold the ball chose adversaries and tackled them, immobilising them, so that they could not participate in duels on the ball. They ran into adversaries, avoided other-coloured players to bump into them, and stopped running men of the other team. Every man of a team was busy either with the ball or with keeping others away from the ball.
After a quarter of an hour of this heavy work, the calcianti were streaming with sweat. They were dead-tired. Many players had stood for a while against the walls with bleeding noses, bleeding eye-brows, bruises on breasts and hips, legs twisted and backs scratched to blood. Shirts had been torn in two; the robust calcianti continued the match with nude torsos.

Occasionally, breeches were torn down, upon which the victim had to apologise, bow hastily to the public in abject apology, and continue the match. On Saint John's Day this was not forbidden, but avoided, so that the match not deteriorate in a general disgraceful downing of

breeches. Fathers did not like much their daughters to attend the games. The spectacle of fifty or so half-nude men wrestling in the sand and tearing off opposers' pants was not a delicate scene for young virgins to watch. The Florentine daughters were masters in turning around their fathers' vetoes however. They wanted to see the match, of course, exactly because of this aspect of the matches. The female spectators on the tribunes were many, and they relished the games.

At mid-match, Pierfrancesco stood sweating like an ox in the middle of the field, with naked torso. He rolled his muscles; his shoulders gleamed of the sweat; his head was covered with sand. His team had scored a point and half a point; San Giovanni had not scored. The teams had changed sides. Pierfrancesco looked at the tribune of Santa Croce. He spotted a few Acciaiuoli on the left side of the tribune, in the second row, among them two women, one of them Margherita. He could not well distinguish her clearly, for the sweat ran in his eyes, but she was there.

Pierfrancesco got caught of the ball, lunged forward head down, but two greens jumped on him and knocked him to the ground. He slammed down heavily on the arm that held the ball; the ball crushed his belly and two sweaty, bulky greens fell on top of him. He ate sand. He lost the ball, wriggled from under the two bullies, watched where the ball flew, and tackled a green that wanted to stop a red by grabbing his legs. Pierfrancesco was on the sand again. He felt the cobblestones underneath, because here the sand had been shuffled away by the fights. He stood up, a good way into the green's side. He stepped forward, received the ball from a friend, evaded two arms around his legs by jumping high and far, bumped against the wooden wall and bruised his lungs, ran a few steps on, stopped brusquely in his track and feinted a step to the right because an enormous green player held his arms open to him as if he desired to embrace him. The green was ready to squeeze Pierfrancesco to pulp, so he bowed and slid while falling, under the man's arms, feet forward, gliding over the sand and drawing it from the stones. He jumped up, ran again, dodged another green, kicked his fist in the breast of a green defender, winding the man, then turned as if he wanted to pass the ball to Bachiacca, who had followed him, but turned on his heels, a full round, and ran forward again to slam the ball over the adversary wall, into the nets of the greens. He had scored a point! At the last moment however, four greens crushed him and bore him into the sand. He just lay there, hurting all over, having received an elbow thrust in his stomach, a knee kick in his hips, a fist in his side. Such was the reward for victory. This afternoon, he would be bruised blue all over his body. He groaned and stood, only to have five reds jump on him and drag him lovingly back down in the sand, again. The standard-bearer of Santa Maria Novella ran screaming over the field, swaying his flag hysterically. The man ran to the other side and pushed the green standard-bearer contemptuously out of his tent. The teams changed sides and the match was on once more. Pierfrancesco now had his back to Margherita.

After half an hour, the match still stood two-and-a-half to zero. The match degraded into a very tedious, messy affair. No calcianto had the energy reserve to run and bust adversaries. Having the ball became a hard work of tugging and pushing and dragging on. The men agglutinated by four and five to the calcianto who possessed the ball. Brawls ensued. A red twisted a leg of a green. His companions tossed the man over the wall. Two more long, deep nail scratches bloodied Pierfrancesco's back.
A particularly burly green of San Giovanni had almost crunched his right arm to jelly. Pierfrancesco rammed a fiery elbow into the green's belly. The man had been out of the match for quite some time, winded, and turning double from the pain near the wall. That man now looked with fierce, angry black eyes at Pierfrancesco. Pierfrancesco could tell the man

was seeking revenge. He came at Pierfrancesco regularly, whenever he could, to catch hold Pierfrancesco and deliver him a blow on one or other part of his body. Pierfrancesco dodged the man twice; twice he winced when a leg shot against his hip from behind and when a fist landed only a fraction of an inch above his kidneys. Pierfrancesco could run away from that man each time he saw him coming, like a coward, or try to eliminate him. The outside referee noticed the feud. He watched them. Pierfrancesco could not down the bullying green without being noticed.
Only ten reds still played on with the same enthusiasm to win as before, Pierfrancesco among them. He threw himself time and time again in a group of battling men that held the ball, so avoiding his vengeful opponent. The greens scored a point and then the reds one more.

At three and a half to one, the match ended. The calcianti collapsed where they stood. The reds of Santa Maria Novella would play the final match of the Torneo in the afternoon. The players drooped off, one by one. The ones that were not too hurt remained to watch the second match. Pierfrancesco had pains in so many places he could barely sit. He endured the pain and watched the next match.
The whites of Santo Spirito fought the blues of Santa Croce. The blue calcianti of Santa Croce won after a hard-contested match, driven by the cheering crowd of supporters of the houses around their own piazza. In the afternoon, the reds of Santa Maria Novella would thus confront the blues of Santa Croce; two teams of the very heart of Florence would fight.

Pierfrancesco went home to refresh and eat a little, to put on a new red shirt and the striped breeches, and to rest for the final match.

Around noon, a servant knocked at Pierfrancesco's room in the Palazzo Borgherini. The woman told somebody wanted to see him in the courtyard. Pierfrancesco stood up from his bed, stretched his painful back and his muscles, and went downstairs. Margherita waited for him in the cortile, with her nurse. Two of her cousins stood grinning at the gates.
'Hi, Margherita,' greeted Pierfrancesco happily. 'It's so nice of you to come to see me. Did you like our match? I'm fine, you know!'
Margherita's face was not red-flushed with excitement. She looked pale.
She said, shaking her head, 'Pierfrancesco, please don't play the Calcio anymore! I don't want something to happen to you. I don't want you to play the Calcio this afternoon!' She was on the verge of tears.
'Margherita,' Pierfrancesco tried, 'I can handle it! Look, it's me, Pierfrancesco! I'm in one piece! We are all in one piece!' He ventured a few dance steps, but a pain shot in his back and he stopped with a wince.
'Well, I'm fine, anyhow,' he grinned. 'In an hour I'll be fresh to start again. My team counts on me. I scored a point this morning! I can do that again!'
Margherita went to very close to him. She slung her hands at his shoulders, grabbed like with claws onto his shirt. She hurt him.
She said, 'Pierfrancesco, I will marry you. I will marry you now, here. But don't play the Calcio! I went into Santa Croce to thank the Virgin for having saved you this morning, and I had a very bad feeling after that, in the church. I will marry you, you hear, but not if you continue that stupid game this afternoon.'
'Margherita, wait! Should it not be my father asking your father for you to marry me?'
'I don't care,' Margherita cried, tears welling up in her eyes. 'I don't want you to play! So don't, you fool!' She stamped with her feet and thumped her little fists at Pierfrancesco's breast.

Pierfrancesco took a sudden fright. He was as superstitious as any Florentine. When a woman had a premonition of something bad in a church, then one had to take care and not daunt the spirits. Also, he was so elated by what Margherita cried at him about marriage, that he would have granted her anything. Plus, Margherita could be as stubborn as a Settignano donkey.
'All right,' he conceded. 'Fine, fine! I can let my cousin Filippo step in for me. He has been waiting for that occasion. Our coach will be angry, but it is true I am not that fresh and pretty hurt in places. All right, I will not play the Torneo this afternoon. Are you sure you want to marry me?'
Margherita laughed through her tears. 'Of course I will marry you, you stupid. I was certain I wanted to marry you months ago. You can be slow sometimes, you know!'
'I'm fast in the Calcio!' Pierfrancesco grinned to tease her.
She pinched him in the ear, the way his mother used to do. 'You will not fight in the Calcio this afternoon, Pierfrancesco di Salvi dei Borgherini! Swear it! I will make it up to you.'

Margherita put her arms entirely around Pierfrancesco and kissed him, there, in the Borgherini cortile, so passionately and so long, that had Agniola Bonaccorso, Pierfrancesco's mother seen them, she would have run out screaming from the Borgherini palace, screamed all through the Borgo Santi Apostoli and have cried in the Acciaiuoli courtyard that her darling son, such a nice and sweet boy, had just been raped by an Acciaiuoli vixen. Luckily, Agniola Borgherini-Bonaccorso was absorbing a decent quantity of honey-cakes in the Piazza Santa Croce at that time, with great relish and total tranquillity of soul, chatting to her friends, Florentine monnas of great standing and opulence. The Acciaiuoli cousins at the gate were less pleased. They wondered whether their eyes saw true, for they knew Margherita as a very uppish maiden with boys.

'Wow,' Pierfrancesco said when they withdrew gasping for breath. 'A Calcio is well worth ten of such kisses, wouldn't you think?'
'It is,' Margherita laughed. 'The nine other are for you after the match and tomorrow, only when you let the Torneo now to others. Also, don't go out wearing your Calcio shirt and breeches, and don't wear those horrible Borgherini stripes! Red and yellow stripes with pink roses! Our friends, the painters, laugh at you each time you show up in that costume. Red and yellow! Horrible! Put on something decent. Wear something, something … blue and dark orange or grey, or whatever. I expect you to sit near me this afternoon! My mother will faint and my father will have an apoplexy and my cousins will want to murder you, but I want you near me, you hear? You will not jump into that sand-field by accident this afternoon! Now swear it!'
Pierfrancesco remembered the kisses. He swore.

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Pierfrancesco changed clothes and walked back to the tribunes of the Piazza Santa Croce to sit docilely next to Margherita Acciaiuolo, in the second row of the benches in front of the church.

Margherita's father indeed had a fit and her mother was obfuscated. 'Where are that boy's manners,' hissed Margherita's mother to Roberto di Donato. 'They are not yet betrothed and he flaunts himself with our daughter in public, in our own row, on Saint John's Day, as if he was already married in our family. You will have to talk to that boy and teach him manners! We will have to marry Margherita now to that impolite Borgherini, for Florence entire has

seen him with our daughter. Have you remarked the Altoviti grinning, the Bardi mocking? Who else could Margherita be married to now?'
'Yes, dear,' Roberto di Donato answered, catching his breath and touching the place on his breast under which beat a weak heart. 'I will talk to them both!'

Quite as surprised were Salvi dei Borgherini and his wife, Agniola Bonaccorso, who sat in the third row on the other side of the same tribune.
'If that slut of an Acciaiuoli daughter accepted or invited Pierfrancesco in that row, she must have drawn him to her bed! How low have the Acciaiuoli fallen to such open display of unseemliness! You will have to ask for her hand, Roberto, soon, or the scandal will sound in Florence like the trumpeters of Judgement Day!'
'Yes, dear,' Salvi replied, quite amused by the scene. He was more and more satisfied by his own cunning of having brought those two together. This affair went his way. He rubbed his hands.

At that moment, the trumpeters did sound, not those of doom, but of the grand cortège of the Torneo on Saint John's Day. The final Calcio match started, but before, a long procession of hundreds of notables of Florence paraded in the field. The procession formed a deluge of bright, contrasting hues, for all the people that participated were dressed in the most splendid robes and costumes Florence produced. Fra Gerolamo Savonarola – had he still been alive, blessed his name – would have condemned severely and promised the worst hell-fires over such overt display of wealth, joy and haughty satisfaction. The sumptuary laws the Preacher had forced upon Florence were happily forgotten by now. No hell-fire had stricken Florence so far, though the city had narrowly escaped the hundreds of Spanish cannon of Cardinal Giovanni de'Medici, now the glorious Pope Leo X.

On walked the red-robed Gonfaloniere della Giustizia, followed by a large band of drummers, the Sergeants of the Otto di Guardia, followed by the Maestro di Campo, the hero of this day, and his aides. Then marched the heralds of the Signoria, whose shrieking trumpet calls scared away all the pigeons of the piazza. After the heralds marched more drummers and several large groups of banderari, flag swayers, of every quarter and ward of Florence. The public applauded these groups loudly, for the spectacle of tens of large, multi-coloured flags swung proudly in the air, was grandiose. When the flags had been turned and turned frantically, thrown in the air and all caught before they dared to clatter on the ground, the referees arrived with the eight judges that would decide on the final score of the match. Several groups of soldiers and guards, lansquenets, infantry, artillery officers and cavalry, followed. No procession of Florence could be organised without the consuls of the seven major guilds, the five middle guilds and the nine minor guilds, with their proud gonfalons. And then the representatives of Podestà, of the Offices, the administrations of the city, of the captains of the Guelph Party, of the Pratiche and the Buonuomini, of the Monte dei Doti, of the officers of the public archives, the captains and Mercanzia of Orsanmichele, the Masters of the Dogana and of the salt trade, and many, many more, marched by. The notables found a place on the tribunes, the others stood man to man around the wooden walls of the field.

The crowd dozed near the end of the procession, subdued by the heat and boredom, but woke up miraculously when the two teams of the games walked on the sand. Pierfrancesco's heart banged with a stab of regret, for he would have loved so much to parade there, near Bachiacca and his comrades. In his stead, Filippo trod, waving with his arms and glancing with a sarcastic mocking at Pierfrancesco. A flaming look of Margherita held Pierfrancesco to his seat. Her hand squeezed him to the bench. The shouts grew to thundering cheers above the

piazza. All the drummers worked their sticks furiously, the trumpeters sounded their highest tones, and all around the low, wooden walls Florence's flags swayed. The sound of triumph of Florence must have been heard by the Pisans and the Sienese, so many miles beyond the hills and valleys. Behind the Signoria, the lions of Florence roared in their cage.

The procession thus finished, the match between the Calcio teams of Santa Maria Novella and of Santa Croce could start. There were far more supporters for Santa Croce than of Santa Maria Novella on the tribunes, so the supporters of the two defeated quarters shouted for the reds.

Pierfrancesco followed the match eagerly. He too shouted and cried and veered up from his bench when his team scored or made a decent run towards the goal. He also cried for Bachiacca, and to add to the scandal, Margherita shouted as loudly and gesticulated as wildly. The team of Santa Maria Novella was stronger, but the team of Santa Croce swifter. The blues darted to all sides of the terrain; the reds simply stampeded straight forward, crushing the blues. The lack of a Pierfrancesco on Santa Maria Novella's side was evident.
At half match the count was two points each. In the last quarter of an hour, the match deteriorated to blows and kicks, not at the ball, but at the opposing calcianti. The referees had to intervene several times to separate brawling men, Bachiacca usually in the centre of the mayhems. Very near the end, Santa Maria Novella's reds scored a point. The piazza exploded. So late in the match it would be sheer impossible for Santa Croce to score the equalising mark. The blues launched attack after attack. Twenty red bulls welcomed them with open arms, despairing patience and calm determination. Santa Maria Novella crushed every attack. No ball passed the red line.

When the signal of the end of the match sounded, the cheers, cries, whistles were ear-shattering. Cushions and hats flew in the air. The drums and trumpets sounded again. The calcianti of Santa Croce felt betrayed. They had expected to win. They hated the defeat. A generalised brawl started in a corner of the field. Soon, all the calcianti fought in the sand. Tens of spectators pushed aside the brightly clad men that had marched in the procession, and that stood impassively around the field. Some of them joined in on the fun. When the Maestro di Campo decided it was time to intervene, he would have been unable to stop the battle. Everywhere, men were wrestling, boxing and kicking. The Signoria called in the Otto di Guardia. Their sergeants, guards and the soldiers of the procession, drew the people away from each other, beat with the flat of swords, and levelled halberds to separate the fighting Florentines.
When the calm returned, several men remained lying unconsciously in the sand. The Otto di Guardia helped them on their feet. Many limped off, supported by the sergeants. One man lay head down and did not get up. It was a red calcianto of Santa Maria Novella. Soldiers turned the man around, slapped his face. The people on the tribunes saw a small group of arguing men standing around the lying man. Then, a cry was heard, 'è morto! È morto! He is dead!' Pierfrancesco looked through an opening in the group. The man in the sand was dressed in the red-and-yellow calzone with the pink roses of the Borgherini. Filippo Borgherini laid there, a sad heap of misery, with a broken neck.

Heavy injuries, nasty wounds, broken limbs were not uncommon in the Florentine Calcio. It happened that a man died in the field, or afterwards. The Borgherini family was struck with mourning.

The piazza quietened when Salvi Borgherini and his brothers carried their child from the Piazza Santa Croce. Even the Acciaiuoli were dumbfounded and participated in the mourning of the Borgherini.
Pierfrancesco ran down to the field, shouting at Margherita he would see her later. He was one of the four men who carried the lifeless body of Filippo on two large banners of Santa Maria Novella and the Vipera ward, wrapped around their flagpoles, to the Palazzo Borgherini. Running, shouting men of Vipera accompanied them.

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'It was an accident,' Andrea del Sarto said feebly, lacking conviction. Pierfrancesco, Margherita and the four painters sat on Sunday morning at the large working table in Bachiacca's workshop.
'Yes,' Granacci added, 'it was an accident. Accidents also were two assaults on Pierfrancesco, and an accident was the death of Fra Jacopino at Carnival. Four accidents happened near the same man in a few months' time. Who believes here this is only a coincidence?'
Granacci looked around for an answer. Everybody looked down at their hands, fingering at their nails or at papers.
'We have to do something about these accidents,' Granacci said. 'How many accidents will still happen? To whom? How long before somebody of us gets killed by accident? Don't tell me we are not in this! Who in Florence does not know the four painters, friends of the Borgherini boy?'
Pierfrancesco said, 'it is all my fault. I dragged you into this, Margherita and you four. I thought Fra Jacopino told me meaningless things. I was too busy with other matters. I forced Fra Jacopino out of my mind. I refused to think about him. I was a coward. Granacci is right. I have to pursue the matter and find Father Alessio Strozzi. Nobody can do that but me.'
'So true,' Bachiacca exclaimed. 'This has lasted long enough. We have to act! We too should have urged Pierfrancesco to see this priest. Let's go, Pierfrancesco!'
He went to the wall, took the sword that stood at a corner, and belted the weapon. He went to his door. Pierfrancesco and Margherita followed.
'Margherita, this may be dangerous,' Andrea del Sarto objected. 'Let us accompany you back to the Acciaiuoli palace.'
'What? Who are you guys?' Margherita cried. Her Acciaiuoli blood surfaced. 'Would you stop me from going with my man? Try! Pierfrancesco and I, we are in this, both. Bachiacca, give me a sword! The first one who will try to stop me, I will stick to the wall!'
Bachiacca grinned. 'You can have my sword any time, Margherita Acciaiuoli! I may even help you. You have more balls than this lot here!'
Granacci, Andrea del Sarto and Jacopo Pontormo remained seated at the table.
'We should not go all five to see the priest,' said Granacci. 'The monks of Santa Maria Novella will wonder what happens to them if they see us all coming. You go; we will wait for you at my studio.'

It was Sunday. Masses were being sung at the Church of Santa Maria Novella. More people than in the week attended mass. The large piazza in front of the church and the monastery was filled with people. Pierfrancesco looked at the marble front.
'Leon Battista Alberti designed the façade,' Bachiacca explained. 'Giovanni di Paolo Rucellai paid for it. Look at the inscription in Latin above, and the date of 1470. The façade is not that old, but the design is stunning. The marble inlays, grey on white, are marvellous. The general view is rather simple, symmetric, and austere but for the curving supports of the upper structure and for the suns in the tympanum and at various other places. The suns actually

represent the emblem of the quarter of Santa Maria Novella, but architects after Alberti found the round rose-like window a fine novelty, so they copied it in other churches. Such large open circles have been in use in France for centuries, though. Nobody used curves as supports on churches before, though. Alberti grafted a bold, new design of graceful curves above the older architecture below. Alberti always meant something special with his designs. Nothing he did was accident. I find it remarkable how he blended circle motives with rigid square and rectangular and triangular forms. Santa Maria Novella is a Christian church, and Alberti was a priest, but there is something pagan about the Greek triangle high above, even in the large sun motive there. I always thought that what Alberti meant to state with this design was that the knowledge of man, his wisdom and his pursuit of wisdom, should top faith. I wonder whether Alberti truly believed in Christ-God and in our religion. I would rather say he was a free-thinking scholar first, a philosopher in art and mathematics, rather than a religious man. My former teacher, Pietro Perugino, also believed there was no afterlife, you know! It is difficult to accept, isn't it, that the same Perugino who painted such extremely devote, pious, tender, serene pictures of the Madonna never believed in a spiritual life after death! The pious Perugino prayed at the altars of every church in Florence, in despair, but no God answered him when he asked for the truth of the afterlife to be revealed to him. He raged to God but God did not answer him. Well, maybe Perugino did not look for the right clues. I suspect Alberti was somebody like that too. And is not our Pope Leo X also like that?'

Pierfrancesco tore Bachiacca out of his soliloquy. 'Come on,' he said, 'to the monastery!'
They entered the gates of Santa Maria Novella Monastery. They asked a friar there to see father Alessio Strozzi. The Friar told them to wait. He sent another friar into the monastery. Pierfrancesco, Margherita and Bachiacca waited a long, long time at the gates.

'You very probably saved my life at Saint John's Day,' Pierfrancesco said to Margherita. 'I blame myself for the death of Filippo. I cannot undo that death. That death will pursue me my entire life. I will not be separated from you anymore. Never!'
Margherita might have kissed Pierfrancesco, but several friars were watching them. Kissing in a monastery was not seemly.

Close to noon, a priest in the immaculate brown robe of a Dominican monk walked to them. Father Alessio Strozzi was by name a nobleman of the greatest family of Florence except maybe of the Medici. The Strozzis were active in every trade that made money, and they were master bankers with daughter houses in Rome and every large city of the world. Yet, Father Alessio was clad in the humble clothes of a monk. He was a little man, with a happy complexion and a laughing mouth in a round face. He was a man of age, in his sixties, who held his hand under a pot belly. Red-veined blown-up cheeks made his face sympathetic. Here was a monk who loved wine and meat, thought Pierfrancesco.

'Greetings, greetings!' cried the monk when he approached, 'I have kept you waiting! Sorry for that! What can I do for you?'
Suddenly, he stopped in his track. His eyes widened as he looked intently at Pierfrancesco. 'You! You have come to me!'
The monk said nothing anymore. Pierfrancesco and Margherita were perplexed.
'Yes, father,' Pierfrancesco said, 'yes, I have come to see you. Fra Jacopino of San Marco sent me. I have not met you before, though. How do you know me?'
'Yes, yes,' Father Alessio answered rapidly, 'yes, Fra Jacopino would have sent you to me. When Fra Jacopino had that disastrous accident at Carnival, I thought the affair would end. It hasn't!'

'What affair?' Bachiacca intervened. 'What are you talking about?'
Father Alessio looked suspiciously around. 'Let's walk,' he said, taking Pierfrancesco and Margherita by the arm. 'There are too many eager ears here. Let's walk in the piazza. I like taking a walk whenever I can to avoid the atmosphere of the monastery. The air is cleaner outside.' He stepped through the gates. Pierfrancesco and Margherita had to run at first to catch up with the monk, and then they walked beside him.

'I don't really know what it is all about,' Father Alessio began. 'Fra Jacopino might have known, but he refused to tell me. He only said we had both half of a message that would lead to a terrible secret, a secret that would provide unheard-of power to whoever found it. He had half a leather strip with characters covered on them. The characters concealed a message. He gave me the other half of the belt. He told me the monks of San Marco were the guardians of the secret, and he the only surviving one. The secret was too heavy for him, so he confided in me, his friend. And, of course, to his confessor. His task was to choose someone to pass the secret to, but the person who handed him the coded message wanted it to go to a pure-hearted, trustworthy youth of a noble family of Florence.'

Father Alessio asked, 'did Fra Jacopino give you a long strip of leather, part of a belt?'
'Yes, he did,' Pierfrancesco nodded.
'Good, good,' continued Father Alessio. 'I can tell you the rest, then. Fra Jacopino did not trust the monks of San Marco. He wanted to pass the message not to a monk, but to a young, noble man of Florence, as his master asked of him. We discussed the matter, went over the fine youths of the best families, and only you, Pierfrancesco dei Borgherini, were up to our standards. We spoke to your teachers and to the people that lived with you, to your friends, even discreetly to your family. We thought only you would honour the secret, and handle it wisely, in respect and devotion to the Holy Church of Christ. Fra Jacopino gave you half of the message. Here is the second half.'

Father Alessio Strozzi pushed a purse in Pierfrancesco's hands, one like Fra Jacopino had given months ago.
'I wear that purse always, always on me,' continued the monk. 'I trust no one, and no place with that!'
He looked at Margherita, then. 'I have watched you too, my dear. Blessed be He who brought you two together. This is not a coincidence. When I saw you with Pierfrancesco, I had to find out who you were, and I cannot be more pleased. You have my blessing. The Acciaiuoli are part of the secret, as are the Borgherini.'
Pierfrancesco was impatient. He asked, 'what is this secret about, Father? I know of no secret!'
Father Alessio replied, 'I also do not know the secret, my son. Fra Jacopino only told me it was a secret that linked three families and would tear Florence asunder. The contents would be sought by the most powerful of the earth, not just of Florence. It is a terrible secret! But I do not know the code of the message, and I do not know to what the message leads! I only know the message suffices.'

Things happened extremely rapidly after this. Two men clad in rags, men that Pierfrancesco had neglected and shun as beggars standing to the walls of the monastery, ran up to Father Alessio, stuck a long, thin-bladed knife in his back and watched him fall, striking the monk twice more in the breast. One of the men then lunged for Pierfrancesco, but Bachiacca hacked with his naked sword, which had appeared very quickly out of its scabbard, right in the middle of the knife, knocking it to the ground. The sword came up again as quickly. It sliced

at the man's chin, sprouting blood out of a long wound. The man covered the slice with his hand and screamed. The second man held his dagger in front of him. The wildness of the fight went out of his eyes, however, when he saw more people from the piazza approach. He grabbed the arm of the other, and both ran to the other side of the square.

'Murder, murder,' Bachiacca shouted, 'hold those men,' but he pointed to a void, for the two assassins had already disappeared far in the people in front of the church. Pierfrancesco and Margherita bowed to father Alessio. Pierfrancesco held the head of the monk. Father Alessio made a sign of the cross to Pierfrancesco, and then his eyes broke. Pierfrancesco closed them with two fingers. Bachiacca felt at the monk's neck to seek a pulse, but found none. The monk was dead, struck expertly in the spine and the heart with a long stiletto, cutting his life. Pierfrancesco and Bachiacca took up Father Alessio and brought him to the monastery. They caused a great stir and chaos there. The monks called in sergeants of the Otto di Guardia. Pierfrancesco, Margherita and Bachiacca explained what had happened. They had wanted to speak to a friend of theirs, a monk, when they had been attacked. Two witnesses came with them to the monastery and confirmed this story. Margherita wept softly in a corner of the room. The sergeants concluded a robbery had taken place and an accidental death caused. 'Another accident,' Pierfrancesco murmured. He had carried two corpses in three days' time to rooms of sorrow.

When the sergeants left the monastery, Pierfrancesco, Margherita and Bachiacca returned to Granacci's studio. They accompanied first Margherita to her home. Pierfrancesco explained what had happened to Margherita's mother. The woman asked nothing and took Margherita in her arms, leading her inside the house. Pierfrancesco remained awkwardly in the Acciaiuoli courtyard; he returned with his friend to Granacci's.

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In the following days, Pierfrancesco, Margherita and the four painters sunk into a dire state of morose stupor. Their determination to solve the mystery dissolved. When they met, they hardly spoke of anything. They met for short gooddays and goodevenings. They were depressed. Storms and heavy rains battered Florence in response to their mood. The River Arno, swollen by the torrents of the mountains, rose to the point of threatening to flood the city. The friends remained inside their workshops and palace and worked. They dared not to think about what to do next. The first to shake himself out of his gloom was Francesco Granacci. He threw his brushes to the wall, put on his black cloak, and went to his friends, one by one. He ordered them together at the evening of the next day.

Pierfrancesco meanwhile, had explained to his father all about the death of father Alessio Strozzi. Salvi Borgherini had the banker's ability to question a stone and get a confession out of it. Pierfrancesco had to admit he also had been attacked and might have been stabbed to death. Salvi made the connection with what had happened to Filippo Borgherini. Salvi stared aghast at his son. He realised only really now to what dangers he had exposed Pierfrancesco. Salvi had a sudden urge to run to Roberto di Donato Acciaiuoli and call off the whole affair. It dawned to him however that if he, Salvi, and Roberto di Donato, abandoned seeking the secret, the mysterious attackers would know nothing of their decision. The danger would last. The dies were cast. Salvi's duty was now to protect Pierfrancesco totally. Salvi immediately assigned two guards to his son, who were to accompany Pierfrancesco at all times, to all places. Salvi grumbled something about sons being the ruin of their fathers.

Pierfrancesco grinned when he met the two guards the first time. Parro was an old companion of Salvi, Salvi's personal servant of years. Parro was a stocky, strong man, and heavily built. He walked with legs wide apart as if he had been a cavalryman all his life, so that his body swayed to and fro while he stepped. Pierfrancesco could tell he would walk at ease behind Parro, for Parro would open a large corridor for him, even amidst a dense crowd. One push from Parro and you found yourself lying in the gutters. Parro inspired deference in hoodlums, for he was a well-muscled, broad-chested, fierce-looking man, square-jawed and with a full black beard in his face, who might easily be taken for an experienced mercenary soldier. Leandro was a youth of about the same age as Pierfrancesco. Leandro was a stable-boy, a half-witted young man, to whom few tasks, even simple menial ones, could be given to good accomplishment. And Leandro had a very bad temper. At the slightest offence he would jump at you, whoever you were, and then he boxed and kicked viciously. Leandro would kick first and never think, because he was unable to think. Parro would have his hands more than full just with checking on Leandro, rather than with protecting Pierfrancesco.

When Pierfrancesco answered to Granacci's call, the two guards waited for him in the Borgherini courtyard, wearing boots, leather calzone, and leather jackets with the badge of the family. They looked fiercely about, strangely proud of their new assignment. But they held each a huge, very ancient halberd, as well as a long sword and a short and long dagger. Pierfrancesco refused to leave the Borgherini palace with the two halberdiers, arguing the long lances would be to no use in the narrow streets. He forced the men to abandon their ridiculous halberds, and told them to walk behind him. From then on, Parro and Leandro accompanied him each time he went out of the palace and he truly felt a little safer, his back covered by the two men. He even got used to Leandro's songs. When Pierfrancesco arrived at Granacci's place, he told the men to remain standing at the door until he came back out.

Granacci's friends arrived one by one, threw their soaked cloaks in a corner and sat at the studio's long table. Granacci brought two huge jugs of Trebbiano wine, placed them before them with the comment that wine chased bad moods and filled their cups.

Margherita was not with them. Roberto di Donato had heard of the assassination in the Piazza Santa Maria Novella and under the never-relenting pressure of his wife he refused to let his daughter out in the streets. This time, Margherita could scream and weep as much as she wanted, Roberto kept firm.

Pierfrancesco feared he would not ever see Margherita again. These last days he had been nagging at his father Salvi, demanding him to talk to Roberto di Donato Acciaiuoli and ask for Margherita's hand in marriage. Salvi had refused bluntly, and no arguments could change Salvi's mind. Salvi estimated the moment was wrong. He said Roberto di Donato would need time to absorb the shock of the murder of Father Alessio, and he, Salvi, needed time to absorb the death of his nephew Filippo. Salvi did not know anymore what to do, and he supposed Roberto was at a loss, too.

'You all look like the Florentine clouds,' Francesco Granacci started, 'sombre, water-laden and to the point of bursting.'
'I will not be allowed to see Margherita again,' Pierfrancesco despaired, 'any prospect of marriage is drowned.'
Andrea del Sarto's relation with Lucrezia del Fede was at a low too. He drank his wine and brooded on his own. Jacopo Pontormo said nothing, as usual. Bachiacca emptied three cups of white wine in a row, was too busy drinking, and needed a few more to be the old Bachiacca.

‘What is this,’ cried Granacci, hating the morbidity that had taken possession of his friends. ‘Are we, the finest painters of Florence, the most intelligent citizens of this glorious town, the most imaginative and the most talented, going to abandon all hope like Dante at the gates of hell? Have you all turned into weeping women?’
Bachiacca looked up from his cup. ‘I am fed up with those Spanish thugs,’ he shouted. ‘I have seen a few faces by now. I am going to wander in the city, find them and pierce them with my sword like pigs on a spit.’
‘You will do nothing of the sort,’ Granacci said, happy with at least one reaction. ‘We think first. Has somebody an idea?’

Nobody answered, Bachiacca just grinned, so Granacci continued, ‘Pierfrancesco, have you looked at those belts?’
‘Of course,’ Pierfrancesco replied, gulping wine like Bachiacca, seeking solace in drunkenness, and knowing it would only bring him a more terrible headache tomorrow. ‘I have done nothing but that! I put the two belts together. The two make one belt, all right. There is a beginning at the leather, and an end, as if it were a real belt. Which it isn’t. I had the two parts stitched together. I wrote the characters that are carved in the leather on a piece of paper. They make no sense. The characters are gibberish. I have two copies of the series of characters here, for you all.’ He put two white sheets of papers on the table. He said, ‘I remembered Julius Caesar, then.’
Bachiacca exclaimed, ‘for all heavens, Julius Caesar!’

‘Yes,’ Pierfrancesco said, ‘Julius Caesar! Julius Caesar and the merchants of Florence. They used a code to hide their messages, too. You take the alphabet and substitute each character of your message by another one, further in the alphabet, but you follow a pattern. For instance, whenever you have an A in the message, you put a D and for every B you write the letter that follows the D, which is E, and so on. I worked for two days and tried every possible substitution, backwards, of course, and even forwards, but arrived at nothing. Then I tried to substitute by random alphabets, substituting A by the first letter in that random alphabet, and so on. I stopped after very many such tries, for the number of random alphabets one might use is staggering! Then I tried alphabets from sets of words such “the Medici family” or “Lorenzo Il Magnifico” or “Giovanni de Medici Pope” or “the supreme Republic of Florence”, all in vain. If the message has been coded in such a substitution scheme, then the Julius Caesar scheme does not work, and as for the random alphabets, well, they are just too many to imagine and we don’t have a clue as to a set of words that might form the basis of a substitution alphabet. Anything might go. I don’t have a clue.’

‘I could catch one of those Spaniards and force a code out of them – if they have one,’ Bachiacca said.
‘Father Alessio said nothing about code-words,’ continued Pierfrancesco. ‘He said the message was a code, yes, but he said nothing about anything we needed to solve the code and read the message. He may have been killed before he could tell. So we’re stuck. Fra Jacopino told me about Father Alessio, so we got the second part of the enigma. Father Alessio gave no other name before he died, no indication whatsoever, to proceed. We’re stuck. Do you have any idea?’
Nobody answered. The heads sank down again.

‘We just have to solve the code,’ Pierfrancesco said. ‘You copy the series of characters, and try. I will not be able to marry Margherita without the message. The message leads to something that has to be found or solved or done. I’m sorry, but you are the only ones that can

help me. I appeal to you. I have nobody else. Roberto di Donato and my father Salvi know about the attacks and the accidents and the murders. They are no fools. They blame me. I had to tell everything to my father. I do not know how much of my story he told to Roberto di Donato, but Roberto refused to let Margherita come with me. And then there are still the Neapolitans out there, waiting for me. There must be many of them, for the two that killed Father Alessio had faces I had not seen before. They are at least five, waiting for me. They killed Filippo at the Calcio instead of me. I have no doubt Filippo's accident was murder. After the assassination of Father Alessio, one of the men lunged for me with his knife. He wanted to stab me. Margherita was with me. What if they kill Margherita? I might as well jump into the River Arno now, and drown, so that the whole affair ends with me, and Margherita be safe!'

'Stop that kind of idiot talk,' Granacci cried. 'That is no solution we can consider. We have a coded message, so we solve this code. Let's sleep on it, each of us copy the series, and have an idea. We will find the code!'
'I tried everything!' Pierfrancesco cried.
'Then there is only one thing to do: pray to Saint Rita of Cascia,' proposed Bachiacca, 'to the patron Saint of hopeless causes!'
The men sank into their cups.

Suddenly, Bachiacca cried out, 'I am a stupid dumbass!'
'Yes,' Granacci said. 'We all know that, Bachiacca. If it can be a consolation to you, we are not much better. And it does not solve our problem!'
The others grinned green, but Bachiacca didn't mind. 'No,' he said, 'you don't understand!' He crossed his breast, 'the blessed Saint Rita inspired me! We are painters; Pierfrancesco is a banker. No wonder we cannot solve codes. We need an artisan of codes, a scholar, a spy, somebody who knows about codes.'
They all looked sheepishly at Bachiacca.

Granacci exclaimed, 'I am more of an idiot than you, Bachiacca! You are right! How did I not think about that? I know just the man you mean. Only one man in Florence knows all about war and politics and secret codes, and he doesn't even live inside the city. We need help from him. I'm riding to the Albergaccio of Sant'Andrea in Perussina tomorrow!'
Andrea del Sarto shook his head. 'You can't do that, Francesco! Not him! He was part of the Boscoli plot! Are you going to mix us, the Borgherini and the Acciaiuoli families to such a man? That will awaken the Medici immediately. They will spy on us day and night with more men than the Otto di Guardia has in Florence, and bring more poisons and daggers at our heels than we can imagine!'
'If there is somebody in Florence who can solve the enigma, then it's him,' Granacci replied stubbornly. 'I know him. He was never involved in the Boscoli affair. He is a republican, yes, but so am I. He was innocent and has been set free from prison in March. He is free and clean, his name is pure. I also know just the thing he cannot resist to bring him back to Florence. Moreover, he must be dying to come back, if only for short periods.'

'Will somebody tell me what this is all about?' Pierfrancesco asked.
'He is going to get us Ser Niccolò di Bernardo dei Macchiavelli,' Bachiacca replied amazed, and proved thereby he not at all as stupid as he seemed.

Chapter Five. Saturday July, 2 1513. The Company of the Cauldron.

'Who is this Niccolò Macchiavelli?' wondered Pierfrancesco, scepticism clear in his looks.

Granacci answered, 'Ser Niccolò di Bernardo dei Macchiavelli is a man of forty-four, a Florentine by birth. He was born in a family that has once been rich and distinguished. His father was only an impoverished lawyer, however. He is a scholar, a diplomat and a skilful administrator, who has served the Republic under Piero Soderini. He has read more books than you and I even suspect to exist. He must know all about codes. He was secretary to the Second Chancery and Secretary of the Dieci, the Ten, the Florentine Council of War. He has been responsible for Florence's security under the Republic. He has been on diplomatic missions for Piero Soderini to Rome, France, Siena and other cities, and to the Emperor. He was also secretary to the Nine of the Militia. In that function he organised Florence's first militia, the men in the red uniforms, our own republican troops, so that Florence did not need to rely on mercenary soldiers anymore. He was a friend of Piero Soderini, the Gonfaloniere della Giustizia who led the Republic after Lorenzo Il Magnifico's rule and Fra Gerolamo Savonarola's domination over the Signoria. He liked Caesare Borgia, the son of Pope Alexander VI, the famous condottiere, erstwhile cardinal and Duke of Valentinois. He did not really Like Cesare, but he was fascinated by Cesare's character and charisma.
Niccolò knows all about rulers, war and ruthlessness in politics, about armies and soldiers. In February of this year, his name was listed in the paper found at Pietro Paolo Boscoli's, a paper mentioning men supposed to favour return to true republican rule. Niccolò was not aware his name was on that list, and nobody asked him anything. He would have rebuked Boscoli, for he does not really oppose the Medici. The Signoria had him imprisoned, tortured and they put him to trial. He refused to admit any role in the conspiracy, despite having been tortured by the strappado up to four times.
After his trial, in which he was cleared of all guilt, he left Florence. He is not a broken man, but the episode embittered him against his hometown. He retired to a farm called the Albergaccio, a farm at Sant'Andrea in Percussina, where the countryside is lovely and the Chianti marvellous, but where winters are lonely, hard and long.
Niccolò will hold no important function anymore in Florence. The Medici will see to that. But he would like to return, and serve Florence again. He loves the city and its inhabitants. He is dying for Florence to call him back.'

'We can see him at his farm,' Pierfrancesco suggested, 'but I do not understand why he would help solve our mystery.'
'He must taste the air of Florence to solve our case,' Granacci replied. 'He will come when I ask him, for he was my friend, once. Do not worry. I know just the one thing that will bring him back! Niccolò longs for the society of Florence, to talk to people, to discuss in our confraternities, to be admired, to be appreciated, to be recognised for the genius he no doubt is. He hates the isolation of his Albergaccio. I have seen him there in May. We have a supper of the Company of the Cauldron next Sunday. We will invite him. It will be easy to persuade him. He will ride to here as fast as any horse can carry him. He is not banned from the city. He sits only, sulking, in the countryside, waiting for people to implore him to return. I'm going to offer him that! He cannot then refuse to help us.'
'What in heaven's name is the Company of the Cauldron?' Pierfrancesco asked impatiently.

Granacci grinned. ‘You don’t know much about Florence, do you, Pierfrancesco? You have still to learn a lot! Well, you are still young. Let me explain.’
Granacci cleared his throat with a cup of wine and continued, ‘the Company of the Cauldron is a fraternity of artists of Florence. There are only twelve members, but each member may bring four friends to the meetings of the fraternity, which are suppers. These suppers are held in the Rustici palace. You are going to ask who Rustici is.’
Pierfrancesco nodded.

‘Giovanni Francesco dei Rustici is a painter and sculptor born in Florence from a noble family. He is much more a sculptor than a painter, studied in the now famous Medici garden where also I and Michelangelo Buonarroti studied with Bertoldo. He learned drawing with Verrocchio and Leonardo da Vinci. Rustici enjoys a high reputation as a sculptor, but he is a somewhat strange fellow. He is of the solitary type, yet he loves to entertain his friends and spends a fortune at the suppers to which he invites us. He founded the Company of the Cauldron. The Company has no other aim than to organise the suppers at Rustici’s, but of course, the artists of Florence thus meet, learn to know each other better, hear about commissioners, and sign contracts for assistance at large works. For the suppers, each one must bring an amount of food and the most willing prepare a special dish, food prepared in a novel way and presented in an original from. For instance, the food could be assembled in the shape of a statue or a monument.’
‘Why is the company called “of the cauldron”?’ Pierfrancesco interrupted.
‘Rustici is a truly extravagant person. His only delight in life is to be extravagant. One evening, he invented a special decoration for his invited artists, a scenery that is now used each time. He ordered a large saucepan, kettle or cauldron to be made out of a huge oak winevat. The members sit in this vat or cauldron during the supper. There is no table inside the winevat, but Rustici’s hall, in which he hosts us, is on the piano nobile, the first floor of his palace. When the supper starts, the floor opens in the middle, between the two parts of the winevat, and then a tree rises out of the floor. On the branches of the tree we find plates covered with the food. The tree comes up, then goes down again, and up again, laden with other and more food, and so on.’

Pierfrancesco shook his head in disbelief. He marvelled at how many such extraordinary, strange pageants still existed in Florence. He discovered a world of glamour and joy that was utterly alien to the austere atmosphere of the bankers of Florence, and more so of the industrious Borgherini.

‘And you think you can tempt this Macchiavelli out of his foxhole to the supper of this Rustici?’ Pierfrancesco asked.
‘Of course! He will love it! Every painter with some name to himself will be at next week’s supper of the Company! If I can get Rustici to accept Macchiavelli as one of my friends, and you of course, Niccolò will grab the opportunity to be accepted once more in the most famous brotherhood of the renowned painters of Florence!’
‘Who will be invited?’
‘Rustici will be the master of the ceremony. I will attend, and so will Andrea del Sarto and Domenico Puligo, another painter and friend to Andrea. Bachiacca will come, and Piero di Cosimo, Lorenzo di Credi, Mariotto Albertinelli, Ridolfo del Ghirlandaio, Francesco di Cristofano who is called Franciabigio, as well as the architects Andrea Sansovino, Jacopo Tatti and Baccio d’Agnolo. Leonardo da Vinci, Pietro Perugino and Michelangelo Buonarroti are not in town. Not everybody will bring four friends; usually we are about twenty-five. This

reminds me I still have to work on a dish for the supper and I even have no idea what I'm going to prepare. Andrea is working on a dish too.'
'Do I have to bring a dish?' Pierfrancesco asked incredulously.
'No, no, don't worry about that! Send a few bottles of wine, some capons, cheese and fruit to Rustici's in the morning.'
'I am not an artist!'
'No, and Niccolò is also not a painter, not a sculptor and not an architect. But you are my friends, and remarkable people of Florence, and I can invite who I want, provided Rustici agrees. I will have no trouble with him. Of course,' said Granacci, 'it will cost me. I will have to promise him to bring something out of the ordinary, but have no fear, people will talk about Granacci's dish years to come.'
'I insist to pay for the ingredients and the work,' Pierfrancesco said, laughing, 'and I will buy wine, cheese and pastries and have those sent to Rustici's Sunday morning.'
'Then that is what we will do. First, I have to ride to Sant'Andrea. No need for you to accompany me. I have to regain Niccolò's confidence, so it is better that I go alone. We will talk with him after supper, and introduce you during the meeting.'

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Francesco Granacci rode to Sant'Andrea early in the morning of the next day. He had not to insist. Niccolò Macchiavelli would attend with relish and delight to the supper of the Company of the Cauldron. He shook Granacci's hands from his table to when Granacci was back on his horse.

Later, Granacci had a tough job convincing Rustici to allow Macchiavelli at the meeting. Rustici loved to play the game of accepting-refusing. At every objection of Rustici, Granacci promised a grander dish. Granacci sweat pure salt. In the end, Rustici accepted with a condescending smile, happy to have played one more joke on one of his friends. Granacci would have to spend the rest of the week designing a dish and then have the wondrous scene be constructed with the aid of his friend, the grocer of the Mercato Vecchio.
Rustici would satisfy the appetite for grand, exceptional dishes of the men of the Company, Granacci was enthusiastic, for he too adored surprising his friends. Pierfrancesco was less happy, because the bills for the piece were as extraordinary as the supper. He forgot the price however when he heard Margherita laugh, high and loudly in her husky way, at each description he gave of Rustici's Company and of what Granacci was busy constructing with much trials and curses. Pierfrancesco was not after all, to his amazement, persona non grata at the Acciaiuoli. He could come and see Margherita at the palace. Margherita, alas, could not attend to the supper at Rustici's, for the Company of the Cauldron was exclusively male, and her father did not allow her out of the palace anymore - at least for the moment, because Margherita was working at him almost every day, and the fortress called Roberto would soon yield, she said.

On Sunday, Pierfrancesco sent his due in wine, cakes, capons and cheese to Rustici's palazzo. In the afternoon, he went to Granacci's shop. Bachiacca arrived at the same time. Granacci refused to let them in. There was much noise in the shop; a horde of grocers and their assistants worked inside. Granacci's dish was to be a surprise for everyone, so Granacci ordered his friends to a tavern for a while, and to return to the shop only when he had transported his dish to Rustici's without being spied upon. Pierfrancesco and Bachiacca spied from behind a corner, anyway, but they only saw a long, wooden plateau being carried by four servants in Rustici's livery, a large white cloth draped over a high lump in the middle.

‘That can’t be a dish,’ Pierfrancesco exclaimed. ‘It’s huge!’
‘You have never been to Rustici’s suppers, haven’t you, Pierfrancesco,’ Bachiacca said, laughing. ‘You’ll see!’

Pierfrancesco and Bachiacca returned to Granacci’s shop and the three of them walked some time later to the Rustici house. They arrived at a small Florentine palazzo of large bevelled stones, entered through a massive gate of ancient columns and walked into a nice courtyard. The palazzo prided in an elegant cortile of colonnaded arches. Evening fell. Giovanni Rustici’s servants were lighting torches in the courtyard. These formed a corridor of flames leading to the entrance of the dining-room.
The three men went up a wide flight of stairs to the first floor, passed a large door, and entered a vast hall. The spectacle was eerie. Rustici had drawn heavy, black curtains in front of the windows, so that no light entered the room from the outside. Torches and candles lit the room. They bathed the scene in a soft, flickering light that amplified all features of the hall in shifting shadows. Rustici obtained such a strange, ghostly effect by having placed the torches and candles high above the eating place, in carefully chosen sites.
Pierfrancesco saw the two halves of an enormous, crudely sculpted winevat and the benches inside, on which the artists and their guests would eat. Vines had been draped over the vat and the seats.

A few guests had already arrived, sat leisurely on the benches and joked with a man at the other end of the winevat. That man jumped up when the three friends arrived, shook their hands and Giovanni Francesco Rustici welcomed Pierfrancesco warmly. Rustici was a tall, serious man, neither slender nor plump. Black eyes flashed at Pierfrancesco, mocking, challenging, but also laughing eyes. Rustici’s face was angular. Pierfrancesco could distinguish every bone of the man’s skull, which he thought amazing for someone who loved suppers so much, and the man’s skin was sheer parchment drawn over the bones. Rustici was less than forty years old, but he appeared ten years older. A smile never left his mouth however. Pierfrancesco was immediately at ease.

Rustici said in a high-pitched voice, ‘welcome, welcome, my friends. Welcome my young friend. You must be Pierfrancesco Borgherini, the art lover and Granacci’s special guest. Welcome! Sit down. We wait for the others to arrive!’
More of the others arrived at that moment, and Rustici continued welcoming. The room filled with people, and with voices of greetings and laughter. Granacci sat and held a place for Niccolò Macchiavelli between him and Pierfrancesco. Bachiacca sat on the other end, near Rustici. Andrea del Sarto entered, chewing already on something he had confiscated downstairs. He sat next to Pierfrancesco.

When Niccolò Macchiavelli arrived, a stunned silence fell. A rumour of whispers took over. A few eyebrows went up, a few mouths tightened, a few chins rose. Rustici welcomed Macchiavelli warmly however, and introduced him loudly to everybody as his very special friend, a great servant of the state of Florence, a remarkable man cleared of all suspicions that might have hung over his head. Macchiavelli was obviously pleased at this kind of reception and attention he received. The Company of the Cauldron applauded him, the first invitee honoured that way. Granacci gleamed.

Rustici, imperturbable in the tumult of the first moments, drew on a chord that disappeared in a wall. Liveried servants entered with bottles of white Trebbiano and red Chianti wine. They offered splendid Venetian glass cups to the guests, and poured. They served from the middle

of the winevat. After a few glasses, the laughter, applauses and joyful shouts, from one side to the other, intensified.

Niccolò Macchiavelli sat between Granacci and Pierfrancesco. Pierfrancesco studied the man. He stared, but Macchiavelli was entirely taken in by the decoration of the room and by Rustici, so that he did not remark he was being gauged.
Macchiavelli engaged in the conversations. He was not a very remarkable figure. He was a thin man, and not tall either. His head was small for his stature, his face angular like Rustici's, his very dark and singularly round eyes beading tiredly. Macchiavelli's hair was as uniformly black as the clothes he wore. Pierfrancesco noticed the sharp, protruding aquiline nose placed like a beak, the sunken cheeks, a thin and often tightly closed mouth, and the black, slack hair. A cold, sarcastic, haughty expression lay on the man's face. Even when he talked or laughed, his face remained close and distant. He laughed softly, drawing his lips just a little longer in his face, not opening his mouth. Only rarely his face transformed to an emotion, to wonder, to a smile, a frown, to anger or perplexity. Yet, there was something young, boyish even in this man, and Pierfrancesco was taken in by the innocence and openness of the face. Pierfrancesco thought Macchiavelli's figure inscrutable, and his conversation unimaginative, but he sensed another character of unquenched passion underneath, hidden.

Pierfrancesco listened to what Machiavelli said. He was impressed by the erudition of the man. Macchiavelli had something to say about everything, seemed to know all the ancient authors by heart, especially Tacitus from whom he quoted often, and seemed particularly fond of the Roman emperors, of which he would talk with some passion. Gradually, Macchiavelli too relaxed. He laughed loudly sometimes, heartily. Pierfrancesco saw the man's very black eyes dart to and fro, taking in the men and the room like a hawk. More smiles came, and the arms that had been held stiff to each side of Macchiavelli's body finally opened in gestures. Pierfrancesco discovered warmth and benevolence in his neighbour's eyes. He engaged in a conversation with him on the banking business. Macchiavelli prayed Pierfrancesco to call him Niccolò.

The artists rapidly drank somewhat more than each a bottle of wine. Among the bottles served were a few brought by Pierfrancesco.

Rustici drew on the chord once more. The supper of the Company of the Cauldron began in earnest. The servants stepped away from the middle of the winevat and positioned themselves to the sides. The floor opened, slid down and a little later a table rose in the middle, laden with all sorts of food. The Company applauded the first table. The scene was grandiose. The food was arranged like a huge Greek temple, almost a man high, made by Andrea del Sarto. The temple was in the form of an octagon. Its columns were red, white-veined, huge sausages, resembling porphyry. The temple stood on a dais of gelatine, patterned like a chessboard in various colours. The roof of the temple was in sugar, and when Andrea del Sarto tilted it, one could peer inside to find an altar cut in veal with a psalter in macaroni pasted on it. One could even distinguish the letters on the two pages, drawn in red and green peppers. Most marvellous however was the choir inside the temple. The singing choir was constituted of roasted thrushes in various poses, singing with open beaks. Two pigeons represented the bass singers and six Ortolans, most preferred delicacies in Florence, formed the sopranos of the choir. The tribunes inside the temple were of marzipan. The guests applauded the work. The temple was indeed a grand opening for the supper, a piece of art and a delight for the tastes of the company.

Everybody praised Andrea. Andrea del Sarto explained humbly he had only drawn the design. His favourite butcher had executed the work. A conversation ensued on who the real artist was, the man who had invented the scene, or the men that had so diligently assembled it in real food. The discussion focused on the qualities and differences of artists and artisans. Rustici listened.

When most of the elements on the table had been destroyed and eaten, each man taking what he liked, Rustici ordered the second masterpiece of the evening to be served. The dish that rose from the floor had been designed by Domenico Puligo. He offered a large roast pig, sculpted into a young woman working a distaff, spinning wool threads of sugar. The girl looked at a brood of roasted but reconstituted chickens. The scene stood on several plates laden with all sorts of fowl.

When the fowl were eaten, Granacci nudged Pierfrancesco from behind Macchiavelli, for Granacci's dish would be brought on. While Granacci's large table was being raised, a group of musicians entered the hall, sat in a corner and brought forth languorous tones of violins and violas and flutes.
In this music, up rose a huge scene of fruit and sugar. Granacci presented the "Judgement of Paris". Venus, entirely nude in glorious beauty, received the golden apple of discord from Paris. Paris thereby chose her instead of Hera and Athena as the most beautiful one, and received the love of Helena in reward. Hera and Athena stood behind Venus-Aphrodite. Majestic Hera was dressed in long draped robes. Athena was the figure as one might have imagined her in the Parthenon temple of Athens, helmeted and armed with lance and shield, wearing a statue of victory in her hand. Helena had been sculpted behind Paris. She also wore a long robe of draped white cloth to her ankles. Paris was a Greek hero, dressed in his bronze hoplite panoply with spear and shield.
The five figures stood on a platform made of all sorts of herbs and spices: rosemary, thyme, parsley, a stream of peppers. Venus stood on salads of various colours. The figures were wonderfully formed from vegetables and fruit. Thick, sculpted and assembled carrots for example constituted the figures' legs. The rumps and torsos were sculpted in pumpkins and cucumbers and marrows. The faces also were sculpted pumpkins, the features of the faces delightfully fashioned however from peas and beans. Their cheeks were from red apples. They had corn ears for ears, aubergines as necks, artichokes for hair, and nuts for eyes. Grapes and cherries hung down their ears. Paris' hair was of cabbages, leaves splendidly assembled and tinted. Behind the hero, Granacci had placed a fortress-like structure of towers and crenellated walls, representing Troy.
The rest of the table was covered with fruits of all sorts, apples, pears, grapes and plums, forming hills and a stream. The figures and the decorations gleamed in the light of the torches and candles. They had been frozen in a transparent, fine layer of sugar, and sugar also held the figures together and upright. There were apples and pears and other vegetables and fruit on the table, for which it was actually not the season. These had been sculpted in sugar and marzipan and honey cakes, also coloured as if they were real products of nature.
The guests' attention was drawn to two portraits on either side of the Paris and Helena scene. These were the portraits, entirely painted and executed in sugar and egg-yolk, of Pierfrancesco and Margherita.

Granacci explained his sculpture solemnly, reading from a piece of paper. 'Divine Ser Giovanni Francesco Rustici. I present to you and to your honourable and most famous guests Paris and Helena in the Florentine incarnation of Pierfrancesco Borgherini and Margherita Acciaiuoli. They are two youths, desperately in love, that we, artists of this good city, must

unite in love. May our city, unlike Troy, offer the lovers sanctuary of happy life for eternity. I let you discover the portraits of the couple, painted in comestible sugar by my friend Francesco Ubertini called Bachiacca. The idea of the scene has been provided to me by Messer Niccolò Macchiavelli, here at my side, who might thereby be considered the right artist of the evening. I propose to drink to our young Borgherini friend, who gracefully offered us the means to delight you with a part of Homer's myth this evening. Enjoy the sweets!'

By the end of the speech, Pierfrancesco's face was as red as the golden apple of Venus. The merry companions of the Cauldron congratulated him and cheered, toasting their glasses to his. Pierfrancesco was very embarrassed. Everyone of any importance in Florence would surely hear of the remarkable supper that had been held at Rustici's this evening. He was not married yet, and even not yet betrothed to Margherita. The Acciaiuoli would judge the event as an additional forcing of their hands by the Borgherini.
'What have you done,' Pierfrancesco whispered to Granacci. 'You have exposed Margherita!'
'Don't worry so much,' Granacci hissed. 'Do you want to be married to her or not? We made the marriage unavoidable! You can always blame us and tell the Acciaiuoli you were entirely innocent. If necessary, we will back you!'

The Company of the Cauldron clapped in their hands and continued to do so until Pierfrancesco stood and thanked for so much mirth. The men ate the figures of Troy. When most of the fruit and the vegetables had been destroyed by insatiable mouths, Rustici took Pierfrancesco's portrait, broke the sugar in pieces and distributed them to the painters around him.
He said loudly, standing with grace, 'dear and noble Pierfrancesco, we wish you much happiness and fortitude. May Florence be proud of you and may the Italians say, like the ancient Romans, happy Florence, lucky to have born a man like Pierfrancesco Borgherini! We are your friends, as from this evening supper. You are in our stomachs and in our hearts. We will not eat your beloved! That honour must be reserved to you alone. From a woman eaten nothing in the universe can separate you!'
With those words, which drew quite some roars of laughs, Rustici handed over to Pierfrancesco the portrait of Margherita. Pierfrancesco's stomach had enough sugar in its hold for a year's survival. He broke up Margherita's image in pieces and handed them to the friends beside him, saying, 'may you join in my happiness, in gratitude for your kindness and help.'
Niccolò Macchiavelli also accepted a piece. Margherita Acciaiuoli was thus massacred for the delight of Florentine stomachs, and the sweet sugar forged an unforgettable link between the friends.

Pierfrancesco leaned to his neighbour. 'I am grateful to you, Ser Niccolò dei Macchiavelli,' Pierfrancesco began. 'You returned from your farm to Florence.'
'I did not just come back here to help you,' Niccolò replied courteously. 'I had to come to Florence sooner or later. You just offered me the opportunity I was only too eager to grasp. I am writing a text that should recall what I have learnt of my study of the great men of the ancient and the contemporary world. I had to read a few more books in the libraries of Florence, books I did not have at my farm. I am also a very, very curious man, and your enigma puzzles me and tickles my mind! Such secrets are irresistible to me. Curiosity is my main sin, I am afraid.'

'We have a problem, my friends,' Rustici declared.

The Company of the Cauldron looked at him, wondering what the issue might be.
'This dish,' Rustici continued 'calls on several questions for us to solve!' He paused. 'To begin, a piece of art must please. We can all agree to that. Why is this dish a piece of art then, because it pleases our palates or our eyes? Suppose the food were excellent, tasting extraordinary well, but the sculpture ugly. Should we then say the dish was not art?'

They all agreed that a fine dish was not necessarily art. Granacci said that a dish had to be pleasing to the eyes to be called a piece of art, but a simple dish well presented though not a sculpture, would be for him a piece of art.
'Then my cook makes many pieces of art and should be called an artist,' Rustici intervened.
'Why not?' Granacci wondered. He argued then that even if the food was bad, putrefied and stinking, but finely sculpted, it would still be pleasing to the eyes and be a piece of art.
No, no, said many others, bad food, even well sculpted, would rebuke and not be pleasing. The work would be gratifying to the eyes only, but certainly not to the mind. Rustici objected, for even a putrefying sculpture would be art, because one could pinch one's nose and still find the scene pleasing.
True, said the others, but why would one pinch one's nose? This food, finely presented, was a real object, and that object should be considered in its entirety. A piece of art should not be pleasing just to the eyes, but to all the senses, in its entirety, to the mind. A stinking sculpture would not be pleasing, so not art.

'Well, I do not fully, wholeheartedly agree, but I accept your opinions so far,' Rustici said. 'Another issue is even more serious. The concept for this dish, this piece of art, as we all agreed to call it thus, was proposed by the illustrious Ser Niccolò dei Macchiavelli, our friend.' Macchiavelli beamed, but wondered where Rustici led the Company to.
'The composition, the design, was Granacci's,' Rustici continued. 'The work of assembling the dish was done by Granacci's grocer. What is the name of your grocer, Francesco?'
'My grocer's name is Dino di Guasparre Nori,' Granacci replied.
'So,' said Rustici, 'who then would we call the artist for this piece of art? Niccolò had the idea; Granacci made the drawing; Dino assembled the pieces. Who is the artist? Where does the artist begin and the artisan start?'
'That is indeed not an innocent question!' Niccolò Macchiavelli exclaimed. 'Indeed, a painter might have an idea for a picture and have his assistants paint it. Would he then be the artist and his assistants the artisans? I suppose there would be no issue if the painter drew the composition in charcoal outlines himself, or drew the sinopia of a fresco picture, and his assistants then only filled in the colours; in such a case, I suppose, we would all agree that the painter really is the artist. But what about the artisans? If they filled in the drawing with fine colours, excellent chiaroscuro to show the volumes of the bodies by the shadows on the dresses, a fine landscape in the background, the play of light on a majolica vase or a glass filled with wine, would then the artisans also not be artists?'

The point was hotly disputed. The men agreed that more than the idea, more than the initial concept was necessary for the conceiver to be called an artist. The artist, to be called by that name, had at least to draw or to explain in detail a complete composition of the story of a picture – "story" in the way Leon Battista Alberti spoke of "istoria", the overall image. If the painter did this clumsily, he could not be called an artist, or at least not a good one.
The painters and sculptors in the cauldron of the winevat agreed much less however about calling their assistants artists. Some argued assistants were indeed artisans, not artists. Others said the relation master-assistant was quite another thing than the relation artist-artisan. A master could have artists as assistants. Still, some men did not agree that assistants, or

artisans, who did not design a composition, should be called artists, however finely the assistants could fill in details and colours. Of course, assistants could be artists when they designed a picture by themselves, but only then; as assistants they were artisans, not artists.
'Is it not strange, then,' Rustici marvelled, 'what happens to a painter-artist or a sculptor-artist who can design fine compositions and fine poses, which might very much please our minds, yet is incapable of painting nice details and fine colours. Would such a man be an artist?'
Rustici let these words sink in.
'Such a painter might still produce fine pictures by the aid of his artisans-assistants,' Rustici argued with some cunning.
No, no, no, the artists shouted from out of the winevat. An artist should be able to work as well, as finely, as his assistants. Otherwise he would not be a good artist.
'He would not be a good artist,' Rustici agreed, 'but would he be called artist nevertheless or not?'
Many were in favour, but not all.

'What is certain so far,' Niccolò Macchiavelli sighed, 'is that I am not an artist although I had the idea for the dish, and I wholeheartedly agree to that. We all said that Granacci is the artist for this "Judgement of Paris", for he composed a fine scene pleasing to the eye, the palate, the nose, and the mind. I would be happy to call Dino the grocer also by the name of artist, because he has assembled the various foods so diligently, with such skill and fine taste, in such matching nice colours and forms, that surely we have an extraordinary pleasing object before us.'
Although some noses went up, some fronts frowned, the wine helping, and nobody on this joyful evening wanting to begrudge Niccolò's proposal, all drank to Niccolò, to Granacci and to Dino di Guasparre. Only Bachiacca continued to grumble, saying that however fine the craft applied, in food or in painting, a piece of art needed a soul to be called art, and only when an artisan infused a soul in a work could he be called an artist, the soul being the design, the story and the composition.

'Should we also not toast on the one who made this all possible?' Francesco Granacci asked. 'Without someone to pay for this dish, for any piece of art, there would be no art. So I propose to drink to our young friend, Pierfrancesco Borgherini, the commissioner, who allowed us this happiness!'
The Company of the Cauldron stood and drank to Pierfrancesco.
When the glasses were empty, Pierfrancesco remained standing and said solemnly, 'there is one more person to whose health we should drink, for if the noble Ser Giovanni Francesco Rustici had not founded this Company of the Cauldron and not offered us his palace, his servants, his wine, his decorations, his other dishes, his good mood, his generosity, his intelligence, then there would be no art this evening, and a lot less pleasure in our lives!'
The wine glasses were filled once more and emptied as readily. Rustici held his glass to Pierfrancesco, showing to all how pleased he was with the address of his new guest.

The supper was not at its end. The wine continued to flow way into the night.

The last dish was Rustici's. The floor opened once more and a tree rose majestically above the guests. Around the tree stood a large cauldron made of pastry, in which Hercules dipped his father to grant him eternal youth. The figures also were sculpted in pastries and honey cakes. The members of the Company and their invitees greatly praised the work and slowly, smacking their lips of last delights, they gulped down the delicious pastries.

When Rustici's pastries had been absorbed, the men continued to drink and to discuss. Then they wanted to walk into the night, homewards.

At the gates of the Palazzo Rustici, the men had to walk off at least two by two. No man alone would have been able to stand upright alone. Granacci went part of the way with Pierfrancesco, the guards Parro and Leandro walking behind. Granacci told Pierfrancesco he would host a meeting at his workshop every third evening, to discuss the Borgherini enigma with Niccolò Macchiavelli. The first meeting would be at next day's evening.

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It was a good thing the first discussion of the secret message was only in the evening of the day after Rustici's supper, for Pierfrancesco reached home way after dawn. He slept the rest of the day, and late in the afternoon he still had a banging brain and a thirsty throat. Parro and Leandro were in no better state, for although they had had to wait the whole night for Pierfrancesco, they had not been forgotten by Rustici's servants. Servants always seemed to fraternise and conspire so that they could complain about their masters' extravagancies. Parro and Leandro and Rustici's servants had emptied the rests of every bottle of wine served at the supper. At sunset, Pierfrancesco and his two acolytes walked to Granacci's studio.

Niccolò Macchiavelli had arrived some time earlier. He would come early or late, alone, not together with the painters, as if he visited his friends by chance. Bachiacca, del Sarto and Pontormo sat already around the table. The men first proposed to meet each time at another place, not in any scheme, at the place decided upon each previous evening. The next reunion, the day after tomorrow, would be at Bachiacca's.

Pierfrancesco brought a sheet of paper, on which he had copied the characters of the belt. The strange series of characters, in two rows for the two parts of the belt, was:

ItFfxfrbhMbGbbbb.synrfryoxylSTDgra.fshf.yrzdk.mRvfch
Zp1x.kzyxbonhra..dArx.eaFCitpotzqlenkfoDca.gcl.tr….

There were exactly a hundred and four characters in the text, Pierfrancesco told.

Macchiavelli looked at the series.

Pierfrancesco said, 'I don't understand anything about these characters. I copied the upper case letters and the small letters, exactly as they are engraved on the leather. I noticed dots between the letters, so I copied you those too, although I doubt they mean anything. If the dots mean spaces between words, then there are very long and very short words in the text. Please remark the strange set of four dots at the end! Why so many dots at the end? I substituted already the first letter with another letter of a second alphabet and then every following letter in the message by the corresponding one of the second alphabet, as many places further in that second alphabet. For instance, I replaced the "I" by a "B" of the second alphabet, and then I calculated how many places in the alphabet the "t" was from "I", then replaced the "t" by the letter at the same number of places further from the "B". I repeated that substitution, starting with every letter of the second alphabet. Such substitutions yielded nothing but more gibberish!"

'Yes,' Niccolò said, not keeping his eyes from the text. 'I would have done the same to start with. You applied the substitution of Julius Caesar. So you did about twenty-six substitutions already. Without offending you, I would like to be systematic at this, too. I would like to repeat what you did, just to get a feeling of the text. Did you realise however, that whereas you used the common alphabet, the one starting with "ABCD" and so on, the man who has devised this message might have substituted with another sequence of letters than the common alphabet?'
'Oh yes,' Pierfrancesco replied. 'I realised so much halfway my replacements. The realisation pushed me into despair, for instead of about twenty-five substitutions of all the letters of the message, I found myself at an impossible task! There are far too many possible alphabets of all the letters mixed up in various ways. I took my Bible and used the sequence of letters from the first phrases of Genesis, then of the Evangels, of the Epistles of Paul, even of the Revelation of Saint John, as well as a few other phrases, but none gave me something other than unreadable combinations. I also knew not what to do with the dots, and with the numeral "1". Father Alessio provided me with no additional clue; he said the message contained all necessary indications, though he did not know which ones.'

'Well,' Macchiavelli sighed, 'I will work a little at this for two days and tell you what I found.'
Macchiavelli folded the sheet, and slid it in an interior pocket of his jacket. Then he looked at Pierfrancesco. 'This will be fine for me to start on,' he said, 'but I would like to see the original belt, too. One never knows what it might tell us additionally. Also, please make additional copies of the message and hide them at different places in your palace. One other person at least should know about those places.'
'Why all that?' Pierfrancesco asked, suspecting and fearing the answer.
'Francesco Granacci told me you have been attacked before. When you come with the belt, you may be attacked again. The belt may be stolen. So you have to make copies. If only you know where the message is, and something happens to you, the affair stops. I do not believe Salvi di Francesco Borgherini would appreciate that!'
'No, I guess he wouldn't,' Pierfrancesco replied, adding as laconically, 'neither would I.'

Macchiavelli laughed, 'no, I guess you wouldn't, my young friend. Please excuse me for being unfeelingly methodical sometimes!'
Pierfrancesco nodded but did not answer. He thought a while, then asked to Macchiavelli, 'I appreciate very much, Ser Niccolò, that you help us here. I wonder however why you help me thus, spending much of your time with boring letter plays. All this might lead to nothing. What do you expect to be in this for you?'
Macchiavelli seemed to weigh his answer. Then, he said, 'you do not realise how important it is to a man condemned out of Florence to be called back so warmly in a circle of friends. I had no illusions left, none, about the character of my countrymen, and wallowed in bitterness at my farm. Your message brought me back to life and back to friends. I am grateful. Besides, since Father Alessio said this mysterious message might tear apart Florence, I might as well witness that in the first row. Your story captivated me, puzzled me, appealed to me. I am afraid I am just as much caught as anybody else around the table here. It will be my great pleasure helping you to find the secret!'

The men around the table smiled, for Niccolò Macchiavelli had spoken for them all.
There was not much more to discuss that evening, so the friends split rather rapidly.

Pierfrancesco left the studio with Niccolò Macchiavelli. He was curious about the man who was eager to help him and who seemed to be a new friend. Pierfrancesco was still amazed from having made so many friends in such a short time, friends not brought by his neighbourhood or by his father and his family. He was also eager to hear from Macchiavelli about the state of Florence, and so he started a conversation while they walked in the street.

Pierfrancesco said, 'you told me you studied the life of ancient men and of great leaders of our time. The great men of Florence have determined our fate and our wealth, and they continue to do so. I would like to become such a great man too. What should I do?'
Niccolò Macchiavelli was startled by Pierfrancesco's desire. He said, 'great men determine their own fate and the fate of their family sometimes, but the fate and the wealth of a city are decided by other forces.'
Niccolò walked on for a few paces in silence. He turned his head to Pierfrancesco, seemed to ponder about him, and then decided, 'have you ever been to the quarter behind Santa Croce?'
'I have been around Santa Croce, yes,' Pierfrancesco said, wondering why Niccolò suddenly changed subjects.
'Have you been inside the houses there?'
'No, I haven't,' Pierfrancesco admitted.
Again, Macchiavelli remained silent for a while and studied Pierfrancesco.
'Tomorrow morning right after dawn I will be at the Palazzo Borgherini,' Niccolò continued. 'No need to have guards with you where we'll go. I will show you the wealth of Florence!'

Niccolò abruptly said goodbye to Pierfrancesco and hurried into a side alley. Pierfrancesco remained perplexed. He went his way to home.

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The following morning, Pierfrancesco waited at the gates of the Palazzo Borgherini, dressed like a common man of Florence. Niccolò Macchiavelli appreciated him when he walked by, and Pierfrancesco joined him. Pierfrancesco fell in step with the former Second Chancellor. The men walked slowly to Santa Croce, Niccolò in the lead. Only when they had the church at their back, Niccolò spoke.
'Have you ever wondered why Florence is such a clean town?' Niccolò asked.
'The city is kept clean by the Commission for Public Cleanliness,' Pierfrancesco replied, like his teacher had taught him.
Niccolò laughed. 'Have you seen the young boys and girls gather the droppings of the dogs, of the horses, even of the oxen in the streets?'
'Yes, of course. Do not the boys and girls bring the dung to the gardens and to the country to fertilise the lands?'
'That too,' Niccolò acquiesced. 'Let me show you where most of the dung goes, though!'

They walked the length of the church of Santa Croce, holding the church to their right. Several alleys there led to the centre of the city and towards the Porta alla Croce. Machiavelli took one of those larger streets on his left, into the Via delle Conce. Pierfrancesco smelled an intense stench in this street. He had been around Santa Croce before, but not so far inside the quarter, and he had not smelled this horror then.
'This is the street of the tanners,' Niccolò said. 'There are more tanners in the Via dei Conciatori, a side street of the Via delle Conce, on our right. This is where the leather of Florence is made, the leather your father no doubt sells or finances, the leathers he orders to be dyed, to trade with.'

Macchiavelli pushed at a door and entered a corridor along which several rooms lay. The stench was unbearable, but as Macchiavelli stepped inside, Pierfrancesco followed.
Many people were at work in the semi darkness. In a first room, Pierfrancesco saw heaps of cattle hides laying aside the door. Men dropped the skins on a table and scraped the last remnants of meat and fat from the hides. It was hot in the house, this summer morning, and humid. Hundreds of flies gathered on the rotting rests thrown on the ground. The hides gave off a putrefying stench that filled the air and made it heavy to breathe. On a second table, two men received the hides and poured a yellow liquid over the skins. A sudden nauseating smell invaded the room. The liquid seeped to the ground and ran in a stone channel of the floor, out of the house. Pierfrancesco was fascinated.
'Urine,' Niccolò explained. 'The urine will loosen the hair from the hides, so that it can be scraped off.'
He drew Pierfrancesco to the following room. Four more men received the skins, still soaked in urine, from the first tanning of the day. They rubbed the hides with yet another substance.
'Tallow or alum,' Niccolò commented. 'The tanners apply these substances to prevent the hides from rotting, and also to make the leather pale.'
A man saw Niccolò and said hello to him by a nod of the head. 'Bon dia, Carlo,' shouted Macchiavelli.
'Do they know you?' Pierfrancesco asked.
'They do,' Macchiavelli answered. 'How do you want me to serve Florence and be ignorant of how Florence's people work? I knew how Florence did by coming to these houses.'
Pierfrancesco had read Dante Alighieri. He had a vivid impression of Macchiavelli leading him to the Inferno like Virgil had led Dante.
'Look at the men's hands and arms,' noted Niccolò. 'They work in acids all day. They breathe the acids. These men die young! When the plague was over Florence, this quarter died first. Too many families live in too few lodgings. The rotting hides, the excrements concentrated the disease. The epidemics killed thousands here.'

In the adjacent room, other men were – as Macchiavelli explained – really tanning the leather. Men and boys rubbed dung on the hides being brought in from the previous room.
'This is the bating of the leather,' Niccolò said. 'Bating is necessary to break the last fibres in the hides, so that the pieces of leather be completely flat and docile to work. Bating is done with dung. So you see where the excrements of Florence go!'
The smell in that room was the least bearable, even for Macchiavelli, so that he stepped quickly through the corridor and went outside.
Pierfrancesco puffed for fresh air. He saw the smelly result being hauled on carts. One cart was being filled just then, and drawn away by oxen. Niccolò and Pierfrancesco followed the cart to the border of the River Arno.
On a large field by the river bank, many men ran to the cart, unloaded the stinking hides and washed them in the stream. This was upstream from the centre of Florence, so Pierfrancesco was horrified to see what dirt the river drew to the town, to the Ponte Vecchio, to near the Borgo Santi Apostoli. No doubt more offal from that bridge joined the rotting rests of the tanners, for the butchers of the Ponte Vecchio also threw the wasted rests of their meat in the Arno.

Niccolò drew Pierfrancesco to a series of pits, where vats contained a sour smelling liquid. The hides were hung over a pole and soaked in the pit.
'There is oak bark in the water of those pits,' Niccolò said. 'The tanners leave the hides now in there for a few days. Then they remove the hides and bring them to there!'

Pierfrancesco looked in the direction Niccolò pointed to. Tens of hides, now leather, lay on the field to dry in the sun.
'In smaller tanneries,' Niccolò said, 'tanners do not use urine to tan, but the brain tissue of animals.'
Pierfrancesco was close to getting sick. Niccolò looked at Pierfrancesco and could tell he should speak no longer. Pierfrancesco made convulsive spasms with his mouth. Macchiavelli drew Pierfrancesco after him, further to the river, where the air was fresh and where a slight breeze from the mountains swept over them.

Pierfrancesco needed some time to get his stomach in control. He walked on, not at Macchiavelli's side, but behind him.
Niccolò turned. He grinned at Pierfrancesco, saying, 'so now you know where the urine and the dung of the streets of Florence go, and even the cattle brains The result is some of the finest, if not the very finest tanned leather of Italy. This is part of the real wealth of Florence, Pierfrancesco! If this work stops, or if other parts of the world learn to tan as exquisitely as does Florence, then Florence's wealth disappears. When Florence cannot sell her leather, the merchants cannot trade and without trade there can be no banks. Vital to our town are not the bankers, not the merchants, but the way these poor men tan leather, and how much of this quality is produced. The men of the Via delle Conce are magicians, for they turn urine and dung and cattle hides into gold.'

As Pierfrancesco and Macchiavelli walked along the Arno, Niccolò held the silence for a while. Then he said, 'leather, of course, is only part of Florence's wealth. I cannot show you all today. There is much you can discover on your own. Walk to the Via dei Saponai and find out how soap is produced from oils. Walk to the quarter Altr'Arno of Santo Spirito and find out how the bevellers and sculptors work stone. Look for the carpenters. Talk with the butchers on the Ponte Vecchio. Find the forges of the jewellers at Santo Spirito. The jewellers have shops near the Ponte Vecchio and near the Duomo, but their workshops are in Santo Spirito! Find the wealth of Florence, young Borgherini! The wealth is with the innumerable weavers of Santo Spirito. Firenze prides in the best looms of the world! The wealth of the Borgo Santi Apostoli, of the Acciaiuoli, the Altoviti, the Bonacorsi and the Borgherini, the wealth is there and here, in the streets beyond Santa Croce, in the dung and urine!'

Macchiavelli marched on. 'There is one last part I can show you today, however,' he said. 'We walk to the Corso dei Tintori!'

Niccolò Macchiavelli explained how Florentine merchants bought wool from all over the world. The wool was woven to cloth in Florence, and woven so tightly that few other places produced finer and denser cloth. Niccolò said however that no other place could bring such wonderful hues on cloth and on leather than Florentines.
'Dyeing is a difficult process,' Macchiavelli said. 'It is not enough to dip cloth in a solution of water and pigments. Also, the pigments that painters use do not work for cloth. First, a mordant has to do something to cloth, so that it will fix the colours on the fibres. This colouring of the cloth is done so well that neither the sunrays nor rain will change the hues. Only Florence can achieve this in so many splendid colours! Our dyers use alum. Alum originally was brought in from the land of the Turks, and then from the Papal States, until alum deposits were found near Volterra in Tuscany, in our Florentine land! The great wealth of the Medici came from the alum trade. The Medici own the alum of Volterra, and by the alum they hold Florence! Everybody thinks the Medici hold Florence by gold, and that is true, of course, but where does the gold come from? From alum!'

Niccolò and Pierfrancesco had reached the Corso dei Tintori in the quarter of Santa Croce by then, and Niccolò again pushed open a door to a workshop. Pierfrancesco stepped into a kind of cortile, except that the yard was lined with the façades of the houses. Large tubs stood in the courtyard, some half buried in the ground. The tubs here held a reddish liquid. Men and women dipped long stretches of cloth into the tubs. The men's legs, feet and arms and hands were coloured as red as the cloth in the tubs.'
'The right colour for red comes from a plant, madder, cultivated in fields north of Florence,' Niccolò explained. 'With alum, it provides a very fine red, the best and brightest in the world, the red that makes Florentine cloth so valuable. This here is an alum vat, where the mordant is applied to the cloth. Further along, there, where the water is boiled, powdered madder is added to the water. Such is the real dyeing process. The dyers need water and wood; that is why the dyers live here, beyond Santa Croce, but near the banks of the river. Wood is brought in from the mountains on barges, and then fired here to warm the baths.'
To the side of the warms baths, the smell was almost as bad as in the tanneries. It was hard work to dip the cloth in the baths. It was hard work to haul the liquid-soaked cloth out of the vats. It was extremely hot in the courtyard, for despite the heat of the summer, many fires sent hot air sideways. The dyers did not only pour powdered madder into the baths; other ingredients were added.
'Every dyer has his secrets,' Niccolò whispered, 'but secrets are transmitted in the families and tend to disperse. I believe they all use about the same barks and other stuff now, but still nobody wants to tell what they put into the baths.'
Niccolò walked around the vats, Pierfrancesco in his wake.
'Red cloth and red silk is produced from madder; blue cloth from woad. The woad comes into blocks like those, there, mostly from the region of Toulouse in France. That is why we have an interest in keeping the peace with France. Indigo comes from the Orient, probably from far east, but a major trading place is a town called Baghdad in Syria. Indigo is also a dye extracted from a plant, though I have never seen one. Painters use pigments from minerals mostly. The painters need only small quantities, of course, and those they buy from the apothecaries or druggists. That is why the painters are members of the Guild of Doctors and Apothecaries'

Macchiavelli turned and left the courtyard, back into the street.
'I do not show you the places where silk is made from silk worms,' Niccolò continued. 'Explore those on your own! Those places are very interesting too. All those people who work very hard every day of the year are very poor. Yet, most of them own their tubs and baths and rooms where they tan the leather. If something happens, so that these people cannot work anymore, or refuse to work because they starve although working, then Florence dies. We need hides, urine, dung, alum, wool, silkworms, madder, woad, pigments, and wood for the fires, carts and oxen for transport. Weavers need looms. A ruler of Florence had better ensure all of this continues to come to our city.'

Pierfrancesco's head spinned. His father had not taught him so much in one day as Macchiavelli had.
'The people of Florence you have seen working are the minor people, the little people, the poor. They are not from another city, not from another country. They are Florentines! They live and work within the walls of the city! They are poor because the nobles want them to be poor, and because the merchants exploit them. The noblemen despise them, kill them and rape their women with impunity. The merchants rob them and make certain they stay poor, for it is only the poor and uneducated that will work for them at low wages or low prices. They had to

fight to have their own representation in the guilds. Yet, they too are talented men with special gifts, and the inheritors of family secrets. Few of them, however, are honoured, though they excel in their professions.'

'Without the enigma,' Pierfrancesco thought, 'I would not have met the painters and not this strange Niccolò. I would have known little about art, and understood nothing of the real origins of the richness of Florence. I would not have known love. Was I given this secret so that I should learn all these truths?'

Next, Niccolò brought Pierfrancesco to a strange spectacle: to a field of grass in the swampy neighbourhood along the River Arno, where a patchwork of colours unfolded to their eyes. These fields were the tiratoio, where the dyers brought their cloths to dry in the intense rays of the sun. Cloths of all colours glistened, still wet, in the bright light. Many of the patches were garish red, but also other deeper hues of red lay there, blues of various shades, greens, purples, and yellows. Precious silk hung on poles. A few armed guards watched out, for silks were very expensive. For a painter, this place was a magical mosaic. No painting, however bright, could compete with the deluge of impressions of hues this vast expanse struck the viewer.
Niccolò Macchiavelli made a wide gesture with his arm, offering the spectacle of hues to Pierfrancesco, saying, 'behold the wealth of Florence!'

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Two evenings later, they met at Bachiacca's. It was difficult to meet in Andrea del Sarto's studio because Andrea shared that with Franciabigio and the sculptor Jacopo Sansovino. These last were hard at work in the shop.

Everybody sat around Bachiacca's table and received a cup of wine. Macchiavelli appreciated the wine, smacked his lips, said there was nothing better on earth as a cup of true Chianti, and then said, 'I have looked at the message and tried out about the same substitutions as Pierfrancesco. Like Pierfrancesco, I came up with nothing!'

The faces around the table sank, but Macchiavelli continued, 'I tried to count the letters, and substituted the letter that appeared most frequently by letters such as "a" and "e", hoping to discern words, but that also yielded nothing. You see, one way of defeating the use of random ordered alphabets in a substitution code is to count the number of times a letter appears in a long Italian or Latin text, for instance in a text of Dante Alighieri, and then do the same with the letters in the encoded text. You make a list of the letters in sequence of the number of times they appear, both in the Dante text and in the secret or encoded text. Then you start substituting the most frequently appearing letter in the secret text with the corresponding most frequently appearing letter of the Dante text, and so on. I obtained nothing readable, neither in Latin nor in Tuscan.'
The friends were disappointed. They had not expected the message to be so hard to solve.

'Let's have a look at the belt,' Macchiavelli proposed.
Pierfrancesco handed over the strip of leather.
Macchiavelli placed the leather on the table.
'Yes,' he said, scrutinising the engraved characters. 'The dots are really dots. They must have a meaning. I did not know what to do with them, though. I wondered whether they might hide something, but no, they are just dots, nice and simple dots!'

He opened the belt entirely and laid it out, as long as it was, on the table. The leather strip curved and curved on the flat space, curving upon itself.
'It indeed looks like a belt,' Niccolò said. 'One remarks easily the end of the buckle, a few holes at the other end. The leather is as thick as a normal belt. It is a narrow belt, though, less than a thumb wide. Our belts are wider, aren't they?'

Macchiavelli continued to look at the object, all eyes eagerly trying to detect a light of hope in Macchiavelli's face. Niccolò just studied and studied the leather. Suddenly, he moved, startling the men, pulled off his own belt from his calzone and laid it next to the secret message, also in full length.
'Look,' he shouted, 'your secret belt is longer than a normal belt! Mine is somewhat over four feet, your belt is near six feet long! That is considerably longer than a real belt, but it might be the belt of a very fat monk!'
The friends relaxed, laughed, and drank.

'Wait!,' Niccolò exclaimed again, 'wait!' He paused, all eyes still on him. 'This is not a belt at all! It can't be a belt! Look, my belt lies flat on the table, completely flat, though I wear it around me always. Your belt turns, twists, and curves everywhere. You see? It curves so much it cannot be stretched out flat on the table! Also, and I was puzzled by that at the beginning, it is not wide enough to be a real belt. Such a narrow strip is not very practical, isn't it? Of course, this is a secret message, so the object can have the appearance of a belt, but it is not necessarily one.'
Nobody understood where Niccolò was heading with those remarks. Pierfrancesco could tell Niccolò didn't know that either; the man was just thinking out loud.

Macchiavelli still stared at the leather strip. 'The curves puzzle me,' he continued to say. He drank, stared again.
Suddenly, his eyes lightened and sparkled. He threw his hands in the air and cried, 'I got it! I got it! My friends, this definitely is not, I repeat, not a belt! You will never guess what this is! Oh wonderful, wonderful!'

Pierfrancesco had no idea what had got into Niccolò. The faces of his friends remained blank.
'What you have here,' Niccolò dei Macchiavelli said triumphantly, 'is indeed a leather strip and no belt. It is disguised as a belt, but it is the strip of a scytale!'

Bachiacca was the first to cry, 'a what?'
'A scytale!' Niccolò repeated. 'A scytale is a very ancient method of hiding a message, much more ancient than Julius' Caesar's method of substituting letters. Let me explain what a scytale is. You take a rod of some thickness, and wind a leather strip around it, very tightly, one turn right next to the other. When the strip is all around the rod, you write your words along the rod, one letter on each turn of the strip. You may thus write two lines, three lines, four lines or even more, depending on how small you write. When you unwind the strip, the long text on the strip cannot be read any longer because after the first letter of the first line comes the first letter of the second line, and so on. The letters have been mixed to gibberish.'
The men looked incredulously at Niccolò.

'One would never be able to read the original message,' Andrea del Sarto remarked.
'No indeed,' Niccolò agreed. 'You send off a messenger with such a belt; the messenger gets caught; strange characters are discovered on the belt, but it is just a belt, so the object gets discarded. Your message does not get to port, but it remains hidden. The scytale, my friends,

was used by the Spartans! When a general went to war, the Spartan command gave him a rod as thick as another rod they kept at Sparta for this campaign. The rod could be round, but I suppose it could also be cut with a triangle profile for three lined messages the length of the rod, or in a square, a hexagon, an octagon profile, and so on, depending on how many phrases they could send at a maximum with one belt. The general only had to wind the strip of leather around his own rod, and read the message on the rod! How clever! I am sure this leather belt is such a strip of leather for a scytale!'

Macchiavelli shook his head in wonder, and then continued, 'the men who made this strip gave us an indication, for they might as well simply have wound the strip around a rod, and we would never have been able to guess this was a scytale strip! They gave us a clue! They wound the belt around a rod, put water or another product on the leather, maybe heated it, or whatever, in such a way that the strip kept the memory of its having been wounded. Do not forget: the Florentines are masters in working leather! Therefore it curves so much! We have found one clue more of the strip. This is a scytale strip, I am sure of it!'
'Yes,' Andrea del Sarto said dryly, 'but that leads us nowhere. Like the Spartan generals, we need the rod that goes with it. We do not have such a rod. No rod, no message!'

'One clue leads to another,' Niccolò remarked.
'Two monks gave me the belt,' Pierfrancesco said. 'Do monks have rods, staffs, sticks?'
'No, not usually, not unless they have difficulty in walking,' replied Bachiacca rapidly.

Granacci had remained at first as silent as the others; now he said, 'if we suppose the rod around which this was wound was not really very thick – too thick would have been clumsy – then that rod could also not be too long, for if you wind this strip around a rod of almost any thickness, then the length of the rod should be no more than a two feet long or so. What do monks use that is only one to two feet long, not too thick?'
'Candles,' Jacopo Pontormo mentioned almost absently, drinking from his cup.

Even Macchiavelli was stunned. 'Candles? Candles? Why not?' he said. He took a white sheet of paper from Bachiacca's drawing table and rolled it up evenly until he had a roll that resembled a candle, about a thumb thick. He wound the strip before his friends around the slender roll of paper. The strip neatly wound along the roll, lay flat on the roll, whereas before it could not lie flat on the table before.

'Yes, it is a scytale,' Niccolò murmured. 'The rod might have been a wax candle or a bronze or wooden rod of the same thickness. It is not too difficult to read another sequence of letters along the roll, but I read nothing that makes sense for now. A candle's length would suffice, you see? A feet and a half I must have here on this roll of paper! That length would have been enough!'

Pierfrancesco, Granacci, Bachiacca, del Sarto and Pontormo still said nothing. They were in awe for the master at work.
'It should not really be much of a problem,' Macchiavelli continued. 'Let me experiment with this. With such a roll of paper I can try out various thicknesses. Also, as I come to think of it, if the phrases are written straight along the roll or the candle, or something like it, then I can try out the combinations on paper, too. It suffices to re-arrange the characters. Suppose there are three lines along the rod. I simply write the first letter, the second beneath the first, the third beneath the second and then the fourth next to the first, the fifth next to the second, the sixth next to the third, and then I start again from above, and so on. This will take some time,

but I doubt there will have been more than eight lines along the candle. I may come up with something readable!'

The friends applauded and cheered.
'I will need the original belt, I am afraid, Pierfrancesco. Will you let me have it, at least for two days? I might find a quicker way on paper, I may have to experiment with this, and there is nothing like the original!'
Pierfrancesco hesitated for a few instances, but then he granted Niccolò's wish, and said, 'the belt is yours!'
'No, no,' Macchiavelli objected, 'the belt is yours, Pierfrancesco, not mine. I do not forget that. Do you recall what Father Alessio said to you? He said you were the one who had been chosen. The belt and its message are not the end, just the beginning of a longer story. I am not sure the message brings luck to somebody else but you. The day after tomorrow you will have your belt back!'

Macchiavelli rolled the belt up and pushed it inside his jacket. He asked a few more white sheets of the sort Bachiacca used for his drawings, rolled them up, and held the roll equally under his jacket, as if he had bought pictures from the painter.

The following meeting, two days from then, would be held at Bachiacca's again.

The men decided to eat together that same evening and to feast. Bachiacca invited them. He brought a meal of fish on the table. The supper was rich and copious. They had sturgeons, craw fishes, salted trout and mullets that evening, followed by soles cooked with nuts, herrings and onions. After the fish Bachiacca served cannelloni stuffed with a little beef and mushrooms. The white Trebbiano wine flowed in the cups and disappeared as soon. Bachiacca at last placed demijohns of red Chianti on a small table in a corner. He brought in plates of cheese with almonds, fruit and honey, and bread.

While they were eating, Pierfrancesco asked to Macchiavelli, 'our fathers and teachers tell us to be virtuous. Do you believe truly virtuous men find grace in the eyes of God, so that their families are protected by heavenly care?'
Niccolò Macchiavelli thought awhile before he answered. He said, with a sceptical frown, 'no, I do not believe so. Men that are virtuous in all respects can become martyred Saints, but they will lead their family into grief, the prey of so many that are not virtuous! A family leader will by necessity have to apply some of the vices to provide security and prosperity to his own. This sound sad and cruel, but I believe it to be true. For instance, a fine leader would have to be parsimonious with his money and not overly generous, even though the Bible proposes the rich to give alms until they become poor. A leader must not rob others, nor be overly miserly, but he must be careful with his means. He must not be cruel, but not be stupidly compassionate with his enemies either.
Most men, Pierfrancesco, are not virtuous, gentle and brave. You had better learn that now, and take it for certain. In my experience, men are liars and deceivers, cowards and ungrateful. Even if they can at times be what the Church would want them to be, they are more often not so. I suspect that out of every ten people, two are truly virtuous, gentle, honest, even altruistic people; two are no doubt criminals and unscrupulous deceivers, and six are anything between those two extremes. These proportions, I think, are right whatever the trade, function, or talent of the people, whether they have received education or not, whether they are rich or poor, and whether they are priests or monks or lay people, cardinal or bishop or duke, king, emperor or pope, tanner, stonecutter or weaver or peasant. So if you do not want to be hurt, it is better to

be feared a little rather than to be loved. It is of course also much better to be feared than to be hated, so there is a difficult stance to hold for a family leader.
The hero Achilles was educated by the Centaur Chiron. The Centaur was half man, half animal, so that Achilles learnt now to act as a man, than as an animal. The allegory may shock, but it holds very well. A leader therefore cannot and should not always be guileless, honest, compassionate and kind. He may have to act against what religion and faith teaches, for he is surrounded by wolves. Would you act otherwise, you would be the victim of wolves. Try to be strong, always, and esteemed by many, so that many might be outraged when a wrong is done to you. You cannot be a virtuous man among the corrupt, for you will be destroyed.'

'I should be like a fox,' Pierfrancesco concluded.
'Truly a merchant's answer!' Niccolò exclaimed. 'No, Pierfrancesco, I'd rather you be a lion, everybody aware of your strength, the very epitome of power, everybody aware of immediate and straightforward, strong reaction when a wrong is done to you. Is not the lion, the Marzocco, Florence's symbol? Be a lion, be a Florentine, Pierfrancesco!'
Pierfrancesco laughed now too, 'that means I am on the right path,' he said, 'I have to let the pink roses of the Borgherini aside for a while, to embrace the rampart lion of the Acciaiuoli!'

The painters, who had become silent when Niccolò spoke and heard the conversation, now toasted to those words of Macchiavelli.

Pierfrancesco, however, was a little sad at Macchiavelli's words. 'Don't you believe then, Ser Niccolò,' he said, 'that all of our actions are determined by fate, by the fortune controlled for each of us by God?'
'I do believe in fortune,' Macchiavelli replied, 'but within the events ordained by fortune we can direct how fortune advances. I believe in our free will. We can prepare for ill fortune and profit handsomely from good fortune. The key to prosperity is to adapt our ways and to keep our mind open to change our attitudes, our methods of dealing with the realities of life, as the circumstances make necessary. A man who is unable to change his ways will come to ruin! It is always better to act, even rashly, than to remain obstinate in the old ways and do nothing. In a war, it is always the more audacious general that wins!'
Niccolò sat closer to Pierfrancesco and asked, so softly that the painters could not hear him, 'look at your friends. They will all continue to have commissioners ask paintings from them, but with time only one among them will be imitated by the next generation of artists. What painter represents the future to you?'
'That must be Jacopo Pontormo,' Pierfrancesco replied. 'Yet, Jacopo is still searching for the future of the art of painting.'
'He will find the new art!' Niccolò firmly said.

Later still, Pierfrancesco walked home with Niccolò Macchiavelli.
'How are you doing with the painters?' Niccolò asked.
'Fine, fine,' Pierfrancesco replied. 'They are nice. They are good friends …'
'But?' Niccolò asked.
'They are a jolly lot, but they take their art very seriously!'
'Of course,' Macchiavelli nodded. 'Their art is their profession. They live by it. Who does not take his profession seriously? Banking is a serious business too. Moreover, have you ever seen somebody laughing or even smiling before a painting?'
Pierfrancesco was perplexed. 'Indeed, no!' he agreed, 'paintings do not induce to laughter!'

'You see?' Niccolò continued. 'Laughter needs movement, either in acts or in thoughts. Paintings are fixed for eternity. Painting is a very serious matter. Nevertheless, one can have happy feelings in front of a painting.'
'Yes,' Pierfrancesco agreed. He had learnt one lesson more.

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Two days later in the afternoon, Pierfrancesco and Margherita persuaded Roberto di Donato to let Margherita accompany Pierfrancesco to her painter's studio. Roberto mellowed when Pierfrancesco explained he and his friends progressed discovering a fabulous treasure. Pierfrancesco would have promised the entire treasure to Roberto for half a day with Margherita. He longed desperately for her kisses and caresses. Roberto proposed to accompany Pierfrancesco, but Margherita wept, and Pierfrancesco argued suspicions would arise if Roberto went with them. Reluctantly, Roberto allowed Margherita to accompany Pierfrancesco. Roberto loved his daughter dearly, so he forced two additional guards on them. Two proud, arrogant guards dressed in ceremonial Acciaiuoli livery stepped in front of the couple, two beggar-thieves of the Borgherini in black leather behind them.
Pierfrancesco and Margherita touched hands but dared not to kiss; they felt like two doomed led to their prison. They drew many an awkward look while they passed in the streets, and sighed with relief when they entered Bachiacca's shop.

Granacci was already in the studio; del Sarto arrived a little later with Jacopo Pontormo. Niccolò Macchiavelli pushed open the doors and entered surreptitiously, quite later.

'Who are all those armed people in your street?' he asked anxiously to Bachiacca. 'I almost turned back, afraid of being arrested, afraid you had been assaulted, afraid of the Lord knows what! I hid in a corner for some time. Nothing moved however, I saw del Sarto and Pontormo go in, and nothing happened. I waited a while, then also came in.'
'Two Acciaiuoli guards and two Borgherini guards protecting a precious jewel: that is what happens out there!' laughed Pierfrancesco, 'there is nothing to worry about! I agree we should not do this too often, for we will draw curious looks and attract undue attention. The jewel is here. Ser Niccolò, may I present to you Margherita di Roberto dei Acciaiuoli? Margherita, this is Ser Niccolò dei Macchiavelli!'

The honourable and noble Ser Macchiavelli stepped closer to Margherita.
He said, still a little nervous, 'my dear young lady, I am happy, honoured and pleased to finally meet you. I heard so many praises from this young man, praising your beauty and character! I have to say you are more beautiful and more graceful than he could describe!'
Margherita blushed, nudged Pierfrancesco and gave him a naughty look, which made him blush as much.

Everybody took a place on the benches around the table. Niccolò Macchiavelli took the mysterious belt from under his jacket and gave it immediately to Pierfrancesco.
'I can give this back to you,' he said, 'I don't think I will need it anymore. Hide it well. It must contain something very important, indeed. The people who encoded the message were extremely serious with what they did. The more I work on it, the more I respect the men who guarded the secret.'

'Good,' Pierfrancesco replied. 'Have you found the original text?'
'I'm afraid no,' Niccolò Macchiavelli answered.

The painters sighed. Bachiacca slammed his fist on the wood.
'I found another clue, however,' Niccolò continued. 'We are one step further; one more layer of the onion has been peeled off.'

'What have you found then?' Bachiacca cried, 'why is this all so difficult?'
'I wound the strip around a roll of paper, like a scytale, and then worked on a sheet of paper. I discovered part of the solution rather rapidly, and then stumbled upon another enigma. The men hid the message not twice but thrice. On a white sheet, I placed the first two characters one below the other and formed two lines with the rest of the characters. Then I put each time three consecutive characters one below the others to obtain three lines, then four to have four lines, then five by five, and so on. I placed up to eight characters one below the other, and then placing the ninth after the first again, obtaining up to eight lines or phrases. I discovered no readable text in any case, not with two, not with three, not with four, not with eight. But I did find something interesting at four characters one below the other! Here it is!'

Macchiavelli handed over four sheets of paper around the table. On each sheet he had written in large characters the original series, split in four lines.

Ixhb.roSrsykvZ.brd.Colfal.
tfMbsfxTahr.fpkoaAeiteo...
FrbbyryD.fzmc1zn.ratznDgt.
fbGbnylgf.dRhxyh.xFpqkccr.

'That is very clear,' Andrea del Sarto grinned. 'More garbage!'

'As you can see,' Machiavelli continued, 'several interesting features appeared!'

The faces of the friends remained sceptical. Margherita looked at Pierfrancesco, but she too smiled nervously, and Pierfrancesco drew up his shoulders.

Macchiavelli said, 'oh you, little of faith, hear me out! First, look at the dots! It seems to me they separate words, coded words of course, but words nevertheless. The first word is "Ixhb", the second word is "roSrykvZ".
Each line on the sheet before you has exactly twenty-six characters. The dots at the end of each line make sense now. They serve to fill the line when the last letter of the line is not in the twenty-fifth position. For instance, in the second line it takes three dots at the end to reach twenty-six positions, because the two words in that line plus the dot in the middle make up only twenty-three letters.
The same system works for all the lines. In any other scheme of numbers of lines, this does not work out so neatly. The dots are dispersed in other schemes. With two lines one obtains also dots at the end, but also more dots in the middle; this scheme makes no real logical sense. So, my friends, we have here a message of four lines or four phrases, four words in the first line, two longer words in the second, three words in the third line, three words again in the fourth and last line.'

'Great,' said Andrea sarcastically. 'That gives us four unreadable words in the first line, and so on, in all twelve unreadable words! We advanced well.'

'Who is this guy?' Macchiavelli asked, smiling, 'is he always so pessimistic? Is he called Incredulous Thomas? There is more to the code!'

Niccolò waited triumphantly.'

'You have applied Caesar's substitution to this new combination and you found the words,' Pierfrancesco tried.
'I did that, too, yes,' Macchiavelli replied, 'but such a substitution yielded nothing. Our men were far more intelligent!'

Niccolò paused, prayed everyone to look at the sheet again. 'Do you notice how the message contains upper case letters and lower case letters?'
'Of course,' the others replied in choir.
'Right,' Niccolò continued. 'The first letter is in upper case. Certain words start with an upper case letter, which I believe is either a weakness, a failure if one really wanted to hide the text better, or yet another clue deliberately introduced. I think it is a clue, indicating we are guessing the right way. To me, this feature confirms my feeling that these are indeed words.'
He paused once more. 'Now then, how did the men proceed further? Two other features struck me. There is a numeral "1" in the third line. I had a beginning of a hint with the "1", but what really did it for me was the occurrence of uppercase letters dispersed among the lower case letters!'

The men and Margherita still shook their heads. Whatever might the enigma hide? They felt foolish. Bachiacca had a laugh that resembled a spasm.
'Because of the enigma's sake,' Macchiavelli said slowly, distinctly, exultantly, 'I have to tell you about Leon Battista Alberti!'

'Do you know who Leon Battista Alberti was?' Macchiavelli asked.
'Of course we all have heard of Alberti,' the painters nodded.
'Margherita and I read "De Pittura", Alberti's treatise on the art of painting,' Pierfrancesco confessed, glancing at Pontormo.

'Well then,' Macchiavelli continued, and this time it was he who was amazed, 'then a long explanation will be superfluous. I wonder you are aware, however, he wrote a treatise also on the art of hiding messages?'

'We did not know that,' the others said.
'Alberti studied the art of ciphers for the Vatican, at the demand of a friend who was in search of an unbreakable code. Alberti was not only a scholar on art. He was also interested in mathematics. He studied encoding and decoding, and devised a very ingenious scheme to hide texts. His treatise was called "De Componendis Cifris", written in Latin in the late 1460's, about fifty years ago.
The scheme works with two superimposed disks, a large disk and a smaller one. Alberti wrote twenty-four characters in lower case on the outside ring of the first, smaller disk, the characters being shuffled in a random way. He also wrote twenty-four characters of the normal alphabet, in the normal sequence, in upper case, on the outer rim of the second one. This second disk was larger than the other. Then he attached both disks to a common axle, so that both disks could rotate. So, one saw two rings of characters, one ring within the other, upper case characters on the larger ring, lower case characters on the smaller ring. Included in the characters of the outer ring were the numerals "1" to "4" and among the lower case characters of the inner ring he included the Latin "et", our ampersand. The numerals could be used to refer to a set of phrases in a codebook; we can ignore these for the moment.'

Niccolò Macchiavelli paused a long while, drawing the two circles of the disks on a sheet of paper and then writing the two series of characters inside the circles, along the lines.
He said, 'to encode a message, Alberti proposed in his easiest scheme to turn the inner disk, calling it the Mobilis, versus the outer disk, the Stabilis. He held the outer disk fixed, and turned the Mobilis.
The encoding of a message starts with one lower case letter, maybe the first letter of the original message, maybe any letter, which we might call the Key. Alberti just chose this letter on the Mobilis and turned the Mobilis to whatever character he chose on the Stabilis, but this last character became the first character of the encoded text. In the case of our text, that would be the "I". He wrote this down as an uppercase letter, by the way.
He noted after that "I" every letter of the Stabilis corresponding to the character of the original message read from the Mobilis. In this way, all the characters of the original message are noted in the encoded text as the corresponding letter of the Stabilis, but written down in the encoded string as lower case characters.
After a few letters of the original text, Alberti turned the Mobilis to another position. He turned the Key to another upper case character of the larger disk. To indicate to which character he turned the Key, he wrote that character of the Stabilis in the encoded text as an upper case character.
That is why you see lower case characters in the encoded string and upper case characters. Each upper case character indicates a turning of the Mobilis so that the Key stands at a new position in the alphabet of the Stabilis.
Then, the encoding continues, but with another position of the lower disk.'

'Clever,' Bachiacca admitted. 'Such a scheme defies the counting of letters to search for letters that frequently appear in texts, such as "a" or "e"!'
'Right,' Macchiavelli said, 'and this first, simple scheme, explained by Alberti in his treatise, fits exactly with our text here. Alberti proposed other schemes, but I have a hunch the first scheme of his treatise was used for our text. We have a sequence of lower case letters, interspersed by an upper case letter here and there, indicating a turn of the Mobilis. The dots separate the words, but the dots only serve as line fillers and word separators after the scytale move. My friends, the man or men who encoded their message first thought of a scytale, then of an Alberti coding scheme! We know how to decode the message.'

'No, we don't,' Andrea del Sarto objected. 'We don't have the disks, and we don't have the first lower case letter that you must bring under the "I" of the Stabilis, the Key. Therefore, we have nothing!'

'So right!,' Niccolò sighed. 'There is a description of a possible inner and outer disk in Alberti's treatise. He explained his scheme using the letter "k" as the starting Key. I tried that disk on our coded message, and obtained nothing. I tried the other letters of Alberti's Mobilis under the "I" of the Stabilis to start with, but got nowhere. Whoever encoded the text used another random placing of the characters on the Mobilis than Alberti. Alberti's scheme is so good we cannot possibly hope to decode the text without the right disks.'

'So we are in search of the Alberti disks,' Granacci concluded. 'Let's think! Where might we find such an object? Maybe yet another monk has it, and will bring it to Pierfrancesco!'

'What should it really look like?' Bachiacca asked.
'Just two concentric disks with a pin in the middle,' Niccolò said, 'two disks made of wood or of metal, for instance of bronze. Characters must be engraved on the outer rings.' He thought

more, ‘I suppose also a drawing of the rings would suffice, an inner and an outer circle with characters drawn around, most probably lower case characters on the inner circle, upper case on the outer.’

‘A drawing of two disks is even not necessary,’ Pontormo explained. ‘One circle with characters outside and inside would be enough. If the outer sequence of letters is the common alphabet, we would have enough with simply a sequence of characters, the sequence of the Mobilis, plus one letter, the Key. Could it be that the coded message contains that sequence in itself?’
‘I don’t see how that would be possible,’ Macchiavelli said. ‘But yes, simply a string of characters, twenty-four or so, of a shuffled alphabet, written on a strip of paper, would suffice!’

‘I know a place where there are circles of Leon Battista Alberti,’ Pierfrancesco remarked, ‘a place where Alberti drew many circles, even inner and outer circles.’
‘Where is that?’ Niccolò asked, not at all astonished at hearing Pierfrancesco.
‘There are circles on the façade of the Church of Santa Maria Novella!’
‘Leon Battista Alberti designed that façade many years before he wrote his book on ciphers,’ Niccolò said, ‘the façade was one of his first major works of architecture.’
‘Who says Alberti had not thought about coding schemes a lot earlier than the book he wrote? Besides, it took many years before the façade was finished. The façade mentions 1470 for the construction of that front. Would Alberti not have gone to Santa Maria Novella in the later stages of the works? The circles I speak of are on the upper stores, on the last stages of the building of the façade!’
Macchiavelli remained silent. He was amazed.

‘Why don’t we have a closer look at that book of “De Cifris” of Alberti?’ Jacopo Pontormo proposed. ‘Maybe we can find indications for another Mobilis alphabet in there.’
‘I checked and checked,’ Macchiavelli said. ‘There is no indication of a disk in Alberti’s treatise. He only explained the scheme with an example.’
‘Do you have a copy of his book?’
‘No, I don’t. Alberti’s treatise, as far as I know, has not been printed. There must be one or more copies in the library of the Vatican. There is one copy in the library of the Monastery of San Marco, here in Florence, where I found it many years ago, when I began to read Alberti’s works. I even applied his encoding scheme a couple of times.’
‘That is a strange coincidence,’ Pierfrancesco said. ‘San Marco is the monastery where Fra Jacopino lived. The text originated at San Marco!’

‘Yes,’ Macchiavelli replied. ‘When you mention this, the other monk, Father Alessio Strozzi, was a monk of the Monastery of Santa Maria Novella. Maybe that was a hint, too! The monasteries of San Marco and of Santa Maria Novella may be linked in this one enigma. We receive hints within hints, my friends!
Your suggestion, Pierfrancesco, to have a look at Santa Maria Novella’s façade may be astute. A friend of Alberti asked for an encoding scheme, and I have to admit Alberti delivered his method very rapidly. He might indeed have studied this subject before, so that he only had to write his ideas on paper, the concepts he discovered a long time before. San Marco, Santa Maria Novella: those are the places we are drawn to. Let’s have a look at Santa Maria Novella!’

Chapter Six. Sunday July, 17 1513. Santa Maria Novella.

Pierfrancesco dei Borgherini and Margherita dei Acciaiuoli walked in the Piazza Santa Maria Novella, looking at the church. It was Sunday, the Sunday that followed their last meeting with the painters and with Niccolò Macchiavelli in Bachiacca's studio. The piazza baked in the heat of noon. The air was humid and hot. It lay heavy on the men and women that walked in the piazza and entered the church for High Mass. The people stepped slowly, dragging their legs forward, wiping the sweat from their faces with handkerchiefs of coloured lace.

Niccolò Macchiavelli was not with Pierfrancesco and Margherita. He had wanted to return to his farm in the country for a few days. Pierfrancesco did not blame him, especially not if Niccolò's reason was to avoid the leaden air of Florence for some time. Niccolò had promised to be back in town soon. The painters agreed Pierfrancesco had better have a first look at the façade of the church before they would discuss what to do next.

Pierfrancesco and Margherita had therefore asked that Sunday to attend mass at Santa Maria Novella, and Roberto di Donato was not in a mood to refuse such pious intentions. Two Acciaiuoli guards and two Borgherini guards strolled aimlessly around in the piazza, watching the people, especially the men that were armed. Pierfrancesco had asked the guards to keep some distance from him and Margherita, so as not to draw curious looks. Pierfrancesco studied the façade from the far, but the façade was not on his mind at that moment.

Pierfrancesco asked to Margherita, 'do you not think it strange we can again wander on our own in Florence, together, even accompanied by guards?'
'Not really,' Margherita replied, striking at the folds of her blue dress. 'No. Our fathers know we will be married sooner or later. They have accepted that fact deep inside their minds. They only have not yet openly realised it and said it.'
'Would you like to be married soon?'
'Yes, of course.'
'Furtive kisses now and then are nice,' Pierfrancesco said. 'I long for something more, however. I want to hold you to me, and to kiss you for as long as we want.'
'I want babies,' Margherita replied curtly.

Pierfrancesco had the act rather than the result in mind. He blushed. He did not mind anymore the directness of Margherita's candour. In the beginning of their relationship he had been a little shocked, but after a while he had learnt to appreciate the brutality of her honesty to him, accepted it as a sign of her love. He still often reddened in the face, however. He looked at Margherita, saw her eyes blink naughtily, and her lips quiver in a knowing smile. He loved the way those lips and eyes moved together in tiny spasms while her thoughts flashed. He reddened more. Margherita had been waiting for his embarrassment, as she did so many times. So now she opened her mouth in a soft laugh, reddened in the cheeks too, and drew him on.

Pierfrancesco did not want to let the matter go, this time. He stopped Margherita and said, 'I can ask my father to go to Roberto di Donato for your hand in marriage.'
'I don't want to get married to Salvi di Francesco Borgherini,' laughed Margherita. She added, more seriously, 'yes. It is time. I will speak to my father first. I will tell him I don't

want any other husband in Florence, and I will explain him our marriage is in his interest, too. After all, your family is sufficiently rich and he would have grandchildren sitting on his lap.'
'I have not enough money yet to build a house for us.'
'We will have to live in the Palazzo Borgherini, then. Your father will have to provide us with rooms in the palazzo. Our fathers will discuss about all such details, I surmise.'
'Good. Then I will ask my father to speak to Roberto di Donato.'

Pierfrancesco remained silent for a while, looking at Santa Maria Novella but thinking about other things.
He said, 'we are allowed to meet at the painters' studios, accompanied by guards, of course, but still allowed to meet without Acciaiuoli or Borgherini eyes on us.'
Margherita laughed and replied, 'yes. I am afraid our friends are our wardens too. Have you noticed too they never leave us alone in a room?'
'They must be our wardens!' answered Pierfrancesco. 'My father ordered a new "Madonna with Saints" by Granacci. Our palace is filled from top to bottom with Madonnas, though. My mother complained we have more Madonnas in our rooms than Florins!'
'They must be both in this, Pierfrancesco! My father and Salvi together. I wonder why they let us be so much together, yet watching us at all times. They are playing a game with us. They push us together. I am certain of that. My father rather thought you were not such a good choice for me. He has changed his mind. It must have something to do with the secret. I often wonder whether they know something we don't. I hate being a puppet, a Colombina on a string. We have to cut the strings that hold us one of these days.'

'Colombina is clever and crafty and rather wild. She always makes fun of Arlecchino,' Pierfrancesco said. 'Arlecchino is a gentle idiot. Am I your Arlecchino?'
Margherita did not answer, but he saw her thinking about his words.
He continued saying, 'one way to cut our ropes is to marry.'
'Another way is to elope together,' Margherita suggested, disappearing together for an entire day or so, hiding and returning to our palazzos in the evening wearing crumpled clothes. That would bring all the other puppets to dance!'
'We cannot do that,' Pierfrancesco hastily said. 'You would be compromised. As long as the secret of the belt is not solved and this affair ended, something ugly may still happen to me. I must keep you free for a life after me.'

'Don't be so pompous, Pierfrancesco!' cried Margherita angrily. 'There is no life for me after you, so I will not even consider such a thing. You see, Pierfrancesco dei Borgherini, I am very much aware that you are an Arlecchino, always anxious and fearing things. You are one who would rather flee than stand, wouldn't you? So, normally I should despise you, as no doubt many other girls, attracted at first by your considerable male charm, have done before me. You damn well charmed me too. You succeeded very well in that, and I too would have sent you to oblivion, as I have done others before you, had I not observed that despite your Arlecchinesque behaviour at times, you also act with great courage and decisiveness. You are a strange man, Pierfrancesco Borgherini, fine and slender in appearance, yet muscled and strong, explosive in battle and in Calcio. You are so honest it sometimes disconcerts me. You have a brain, Signore, that dominates entirely your natural bodily instincts of anxiety. You surmount your apprehensions by your thinking. Your brain forces you to act despite your fears. People call that courage, Pierfrancesco Borgherini, and I rather prefer having a courageous Arlecchino by my side than a ruthless fool or an unscrupulous bastard. So don't you talk about something happening to you, or talk of keeping me free. Just make sure nothing happens to you, and if you will not - then I will! I'm afraid, my dear, I'm tied to you

with another of those strings that hold us, but this string is of the toughest, gilded steel. When I said I wanted babies I was serious. Do you know what it means when a girl says she wants babies from a man? It means she feels no other man is worthy to have babies by her!'
'I suppose you love me then?' Pierfrancesco asked, stunned by her sudden diatribe.
Margherita's mouth fell open, 'oh, shut up!' she cried. 'You truly are an Arlecchino! I am going to weep now. Look at your stupid façade and tell me what you see.'

Pierfrancesco studied Santa Maria Novella's façade in earnest now, a lot happier and lighter of mood than when he had arrived here.
He knew a few things about the monastery. He had interrogated priests and monks the last two days. A very long time ago, centuries ago, the Florentines had fled the Lombard invasion. They sought refuge in the mountains, past Fiesole. Later, they returned to the River Arno valley to till the neglected fields. They called their lands the "terrae novellae", the new fields. In these lands, they built a little church dedicated to the Virgin Mary, and called it Santa Maria Novella. That first church had disappeared now; new churches had been built above it, as well as a large complex of a Dominican monastery. The church had become a basilica. Giovanni di Paolo dei Rucellai paid for the façade, the design of which was of Leon Battista Alberti. The works had started around 1458, but the works had lasted until 1470, so quite into the 1460's when Alberti had devised his system of ciphers. The drawing of the construction had been made before 1458, as Niccolò Macchiavelli had stated, but Pierfrancesco imagined Alberti modifying parts of it way into the 1460's, and showing up at the construction site until in those years.

Pierfrancesco was particularly interested in the circles on the façade. He first took in the global image of the architecture. He saw a large structure below, of a long rectangular architecture. This was built on the two sides of the high doors of the basilica. On each side stood four arched avelli or family vaults, topped by arches and above those arches, higher up, still more arches. The arches were only half circles, so those did not interest him. The patterns of this lower structure up to the first cornice were mostly rectangular, despite the eight arches. Pierfrancesco looked intensely at the façade, then closed his eyes and imagined the church before him, in his mind. He checked he had all the details of the façade in his brain.

Alberti had built above the lower part a long rectangular structure, an entablature that resembled a Greek architrave. The entablature was a long, narrow rectangle holding fifteen squares drawn in black marble on the long, white rectangle, and each square held a double circle. Pierfrancesco walked as close to the church as he could, to scrutinise these circles. Had Alberti thought these double circles could turn one against the other in opposite directions while he designed them here?
Pierfrancesco could not make out any engravings of characters, on none of the circles. He saw nothing but perfectly polished white marble. He doubted he would find his Alberti cipher disks there, but very finely engraved characters might still be hard to detect from below.

The structure became more complex above the entablature. Pierfrancesco half-closed his eyes and discerned two tympanums. The overall form above was a tympanum, a large one, a large triangular form above the base, above the massive rectangle of the door to the church. But that tympanum was broken up by curves. It consisted of a marble rectangle above the entablature, supported by two strange forms on each side. These looked like scrolls unwound upwards, with a roll at each end. These parts looked like triangles, but one side curved by the scrolls. The scrolls looked like the volutes above Greek columns, here set obliquely.

Above the central rectangular structure stood another tympanum, a smaller one, purely triangular in form, very like the typical tympanum of an ancient Greek of Roman temple, and the sides of that tympanum flowed into the scrolls, forming the oblique sides of the larger tympanum. It was a tympanum inside a tympanum. Like a secret within a secret, Pierfrancesco thought. The central rectangle of the large tympanum held inlaid patterns of stylised flowers, which were not really circles, plus one large oculus, a window of stained glass that no doubt would allow the sun to throw multi-coloured light into the basilica. The oculus was a double circle. Pierfrancesco could not detect engravings of characters around the oculus. He saw a sun in a double circle above, in the Greek tympanum. He brought his attention back to the scroll structures. He gasped.

Each of the two side structures held twelve circles along the opening scroll, and two at the end. There was a large inlaid circle inside the triangle of this supporting architecture, which seemed to hold the central rectangle in place, and a smaller one above. Each circle was a double circle, sixteen circles on each side. Pierfrancesco counted the circles. Thirty-two in all in the volute-structures, one on the oculus and one on the sun above, fifteen on the entablature, forty-nine circles, mostly double circles, in all – if he had not discarded a few. No wonder, Pierfrancesco thought, Leon Battista Alberti had thought about circles for an encoding scheme too.

Pierfrancesco had been inside the monastery before, when he was still a boy, accompanying Dominican monks who had taught him the basics of Christian religion. He knew that to the right of the church was the cemetery of the avelli and to the left the smaller, original cloister of the monastery. Beyond this cloister lay the larger, newer cloister. The halls and rooms of the monastery spread all around the cloisters. Here were the reading rooms, the scriptoriums, the kitchens and the dormitories, various halls, chapter halls and chapels.

Pierfrancesco and Margherita walked inside the Basilica, awed by the height and majesty of the vault in the nave, the magnificent patterns of white and black marble on the arches of the vault. The colours of the stained glass windows were wonderful. Towards the choir, the central altar, were the chapels of the most powerful families of Florence, the chapels of the Rucellai, of the Bardi and the Strozzi, the Gondi and the Gaddi. Grand frescoes decorated the walls: paintings of Masaccio, Sandro Botticelli, Duccio di Buoninsegna, Filippino Lippi, Domenico Ghirlandaio, and many other artists. No church in Italy could boast so much art, except maybe Santa Croce in this same town of Florence.

During mass, Pierfrancesco's thoughts lingered not on the miracle of bread turning into flesh and wine into blood, nor did he really hear the phrases of the psalms sung by the choir. His thoughts wandered from Margherita's declarations of affection to the inlaid marble circles on the front of Santa Maria Novella.
He discarded the large oculus and the sun-motive. He discarded also the circular patterns of the entablature, for those could be seen clear enough from the ground. He was left with the thirty-two circles of the most curving part of Alberti's architecture. How could he get close to those patterns, inspect them and find the coding sequences – if there were any?
He could have scaffolding built at the façade. He dismissed the idea. The abbot of the monastery would never allow a scaffolding to be erected there, just for the fun of letting Pierfrancesco Borgherini have a good look at the circles of the front.
Pierfrancesco then played with the idea of ladders, but ladders were dangerously unstable, and he doubted such high ladders as were necessary could be found in Florence. He might try to reach the roof behind the scrolls, and look over their rim.

He might ask the abbot to have scaffolding set up inside the monastery, a small, inexpensive scaffolding of poles and planks, not very wide, just to reach the lower roof of the basilica. He did not need to get on the higher roof of the vault. On the lower roof, other scaffolding or a series of tied ladders could lead to the rim of the volutes and there he could look down. Such a scaffolding in the small cloister on the left of the façade would not be a big issue. From there, he could observe the left scroll. The other side could be an issue however, for the scaffolding would have to be erected inside the cemetery, against the church's wall. Pierfrancesco pained his brain for a better solution, but found none. Then he worked out a story to obtain the abbot's benevolent help.

When the mass ended, Margherita pinched Pierfrancesco out of his dreams and both returned slowly to their palaces.

Before they arrived at the Borgo Santi Apostoli, Pierfrancesco said to Margherita, 'I love you. I loved you from the first moment I saw your portrait at Bachiacca's. I would like to live with you. I would like to care for you and feel your love every moment of the day. Knowing you in somebody else's arms would be intolerable to me. I need you, for if I am an Arlecchino, my courage comes from having you at my side.'

They arrived at the palazzo Acciaiuolo and Pierfrancesco continued, 'We have arrived. I wonder when I can see you again. I crave for being alone with you. I too have enough of this game. There are still a few moves to play, however, and we cannot avoid those. First, our fathers will have to move. Let's both work at that!'
They kissed in front of the Palazzo Acciaiuoli; Margherita entered her home and Pierfrancesco ran to Bachiacca's.

Granacci was not at Bachiacca's studio, but Andrea del Sarto and Jacopo Pontormo were still at diner with Bachiacca.
Pierfrancesco explained to the painters he had seen many, very many circles on the façade of Santa Maria Novella, and he exposed his idea of the scaffoldings.

Andrea del Sarto proved to be most helpful. 'I know the abbot of Santa Maria Novella quite well,' he said. 'I will have a talk with him. The abbot was interested in a painting of mine for the abbey. I can use that as an excuse for the talk, and mention our interest in the patterns on the front of the church, in the techniques of the marble inlays, and so on. If he sees all through me, which is quite possible, I will explain him a few things about our affair, without going into all details. I also know a carpenter who can put up the scaffolding. That will cost money, however.'
'Money is not an issue,' Pierfrancesco replied, 'not for the scaffolding. If I have not enough money, the Borgherini and the Acciaiuoli have all that might be needed!'

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The scaffolding was set up against the walls of Santa Maria Novella, one from inside the small cloister and the other from inside the cemetery. The scaffolding was practically hidden from outside the monastery. The carpenters built a rickety structure of poles and planks, just large enough to bring a man on the roof. A few planks and a ladder were needed on that roof to let a man look over the rim of the marble scrolls.
The abbot had not believed one word of what Andrea del Sarto had told, but when the matter of a painting for the monastery was brought up, he changed his mind rapidly, and asked no

further. If a painter or two wanted to climb to his roof, he couldn't care less. The abbot wanted a few men up there anyway, to check what state the roofs were in, and if del Sarto offered to pay for the scaffolding, the abbot could have the inspection done for almost no money.

On Thursday of the same week, Granacci, Andrea del Sarto, Bachiacca and Pierfrancesco stood at the first ladder of the scaffolding.
'We can reach the scrolls now,' Pierfrancesco said.
'What scrolls?' Granacci asked. 'The scrolls, as you call them, are not what you think. They are sails, actually, the sails of the Rucellai! The Rucellai took sails as their family symbol, because they were keenly aware their wealth was driven by fortune, like a ship needing wind in its sails to navigate.'
'Up to the sails then,' Pierfrancesco corrected.

Andrea del Sarto held a pole, looked up, shook the planks with one hand, remarked how the entire contraption shook and swayed.
He said, 'I doubt this will hold even one man.'
Granacci added, 'even in the Sistine Chapel, on Michelangelo's scaffolding, there were more planks, better tied together!'
'Oh shut up, you two,' Bachiacca cried. He pushed Andrea del Sarto and Granacci aside and said, 'Pierfrancesco and I will go up.'
'Be careful,' shouted Granacci after the climbing Bachiacca, 'look out where you put your feet!'

Pierfrancesco and Bachiacca climbed on the ladders. Pierfrancesco was afraid of heights. He only let loose one hand when his two feet stood firmly on a plank and when his other hand held a pole of which he had tested before how well it held and how far it could move. Bachiacca climbed like a cat. He was in no time on the roof. He ignored how the scaffolding moved under his feet.
The view of Florence from so high was splendid. All the roofs of the city unfolded before their eyes. Pierfrancesco looked once, and then avoided looking down. He walked on feet and hands on the roof of the side of the cloister, over the rungs of a ladder that had been placed there. Bachiacca was already higher up, looking over the rim of the volutes. Pierfrancesco remained on the roof's tiles, two hands to the marble wall.

Bachiacca looked and looked again. He said, 'none of the circles have characters engraved on them! You can come up and have a look for yourself. There is nothing on this side!'
Bachiacca climbed down and pushed Pierfrancesco up. Pierfrancesco reached the top and hung with both arms over the rim. He looked down, but felt like a dead pigeon hanging with lame wings over the volutes. He closed his eyes. He summoned all his courage, remembering Margherita's confidence in him, and looked down again. He checked each circle, painstakingly, circle by circle, inside and outside, but he saw no marks of characters. He climbed down. He shook his head to Bachiacca.
'Other side,' said Bachiacca.

On the side of the cemetery, Granacci insisted to go up with Pierfrancesco. The two men climbed up the ladders. Pierfrancesco did the hanging job again. He saw no characters in or around the circles. He was disappointed. If not on the façade, where could Alberti disks be found? He climbed down, on to the roof, and let Granacci have a look.

Pierfrancesco panted, not so much from the effort, as from the strain of being so high above the ground. He dared not to move on the inclined tiles, and feared gliding off any moment. Like at the other side, he stood braced with both hands against the marble wall. He looked aside.
'Nothing here!,' cried Granacci. 'I'm coming down!'
Pierfrancesco stared at the wall right before him, the back of the volutes. He saw a sign on the wall, engraved in the thin plaster that protected the marble there. He let Granacci come down to the roof, to beside him, and asked, 'what is this?' He pointed to a drawing on the wall.

Granacci gave the drawing not more than a quick glance. 'Oh, that is a masons' sign,' he said. 'A double triangle, one right and one upturned, in a double circle. In all houses the masons cut this always in the plaster. It brings luck to the house, and fends off sorcery. Masons are very superstitious people, you know, and if you could see how sometimes they put up slender walls very high, without support, you would understand them.'
'Granacci, look closer! There are characters in that circle!'

Granacci stepped between Pierfrancesco's arms until his eyes were only a few thumbs from the wall. 'You are right!' he exclaimed. 'Some of the signs have faded, but they are there, all right! Do you still have that piece of paper and charcoal? I will copy the drawing and the characters.'
Pierfrancesco stooped and Granacci put the sheet on Pierfrancesco's back and copied the drawing. In the drawing were indeed two alphabets, one inside the circle, one outside. Alberti had used the masons' sign to engrave in it his own sequence of a cipher disk.

'Do you see one or more characters apart?' Pierfrancesco asked, 'we need one character for the Key.'
'No,' Granacci replied, 'but there is a tiny circle in the middle, the eye, probably. Have a look for yourself.'
Pierfrancesco found no sign for the Key.

The two men climbed down. Granacci wanted to go up again on the other side, to check whether there was not another masons' circle there. This time, he and Bachiacca ascended the scaffolding, mercifully letting Pierfrancesco wait below.
They soon came down again. 'Nothing,' Bachiacca started to say. 'There is also nothing on the other marble wall, high up the nave. We went as high as we could on the roof, looked, and found nothing there!'

The men unfolded the sheet and looked at Granacci's drawing. The double circle held a normal alphabet written in upper case on the outside, including the numerals "1" to "4". Inside the circle was a shuffled alphabet in lower case, including the Latin "et".

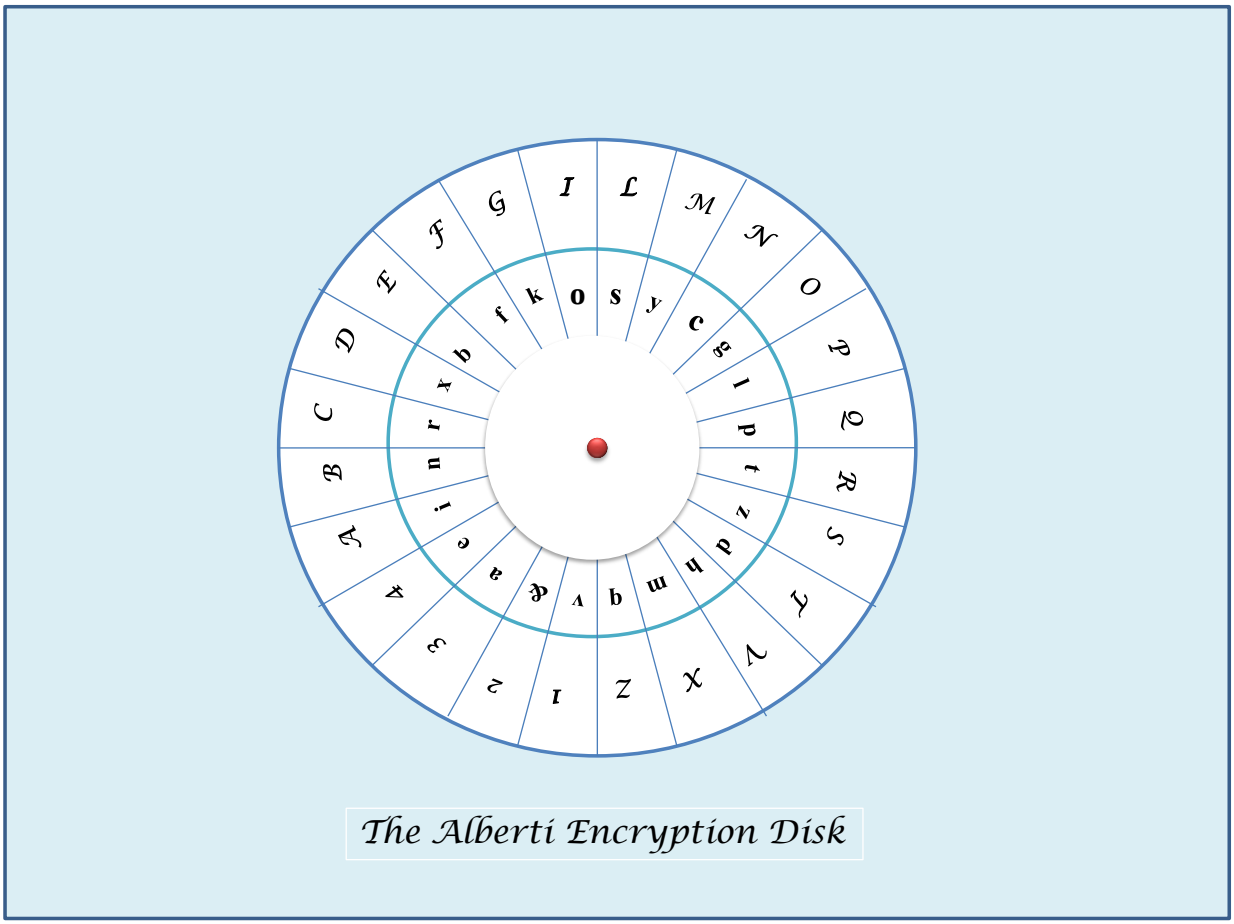
The alphabets as Granacci had copied them were, for the outer disk, all in upper case:

1234ABCDEFGILMNOPQRSTVXZ

and for the inner disk, all in lower case:

aeinrxbfkosycglptzdhmqv&

'There can be no doubt,' said Granacci. 'We have found an Alberti cipher disk! Let's hope it is the right one!'
The men cheered victory



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Niccolò Macchiavelli was back in town at the end of the week. Francesco Granacci brought him the Alberti disk in drawing. Niccolò started to work, filled with excitement and expectation. He cut two circles out of a thick sheet of paper, wrote the sequences of Santa Maria Novella on them, and positioned the inner disk so that a lower case letter fitted the "I", the first letter of the encoded text, on the outer disk. He decided to decode only the first word. The work was tedious and boring, like all the previous decoding schemes he had tried, until he realised the small sign Granacci had copied in the centre was not an eye but, actually, a letter, the letter "o" in lower case. He turned this "o" of the smaller disk under the "I" of the larger disk. He started to decode.
He was so exalted by the result that he ran immediately to Granacci's studio.

Many a Florentine looked astonished at a man dressed entirely in grey running through the streets without a cloak, running as a madman.
Macchiavelli panted like a man who had run all around the walls of Florence when he pushed Granacci's door, shouting like Archimedes 'eureka, eureka!'

Granacci hushed Macchiavelli and let him catch his breath on a stool. He finished rapidly with his clients, told his students to have a walk along the Arno River to draw studies of Florence's many bridges, dismissed his assistants for the day, and then asked in a low, conspiring voice to Macchiavelli, 'what do you mean, Niccolò, have you decoded Pierfrancesco's message?'
'Of course,' replied Niccolò,' 'I would not be so excited if I had not discovered the words! The others must come! This is sensational! The Borgherini enigma is solved! Solved!'

Granacci mustered enough patience to run to Bachiacca's by the rear gardens. Bachiacca ran to the Piazza del Grano to fetch Andrea del Sarto and Jacopo Pontormo. Granacci hurried to the Borgo Santi Apostoli and shouted from the courtyard of the Palazzo Borgherini for Pierfrancesco, asking him to make speed to the workshop. Pierfrancesco dropped his accounting books and ran to Granacci's.

The men sat eagerly around Macchiavelli. Niccolò placed his sheets of paper on the table. He said, 'the people that encoded Pierfrancesco's message indeed applied the Alberti disks of Santa Maria Novella! The Key was the letter "o", inscribed in the centre as a small circle. They used a very simple scheme really, the first one in Alberti's treatise. Each upper case in the message means the Key, the "o", has to be turned with the entire lower disk to the upper case letter of the outer disk mentioned in the message. As long as the series shows lower case letters, one decodes along the letters of the small disk to the corresponding letters on the larger disk.
The encoders overdid the job, as first-time encoders would. They changed positions far too many times than really necessary. The string of characters and words translate as this.'

DVE.CINTURE.TRE.CIAVI
MAGNIFICO.RESTITVITA
ACCIAI.BORGER.SODERIN
BADALONE.SANTA.NOVELLA

'Alberti used no letter "u" and no "h" in his alphabets,' Niccolò continued, 'so the message could be:'

Due cinture tre chiavi
Magnifico restituita
Acciai Borgher Soderin
Badalone Santa Novella

Meaning,

Two belts three keys
Magnifico restituted
Acciai Borgher Soderin
Monster Santa Novella

'We know what the "two belts" mean. Two belts have been given to Pierfrancesco, costing the lives of the two men. I don't know about the three keys, but "Acciai" must mean the Acciaiuoli, "Borgher" the Borgherini and "Soderin" probably the Soderini. The Acciaiuoli are a very ancient noble family of Florence; the Borgherini are relatively new but upcoming and wealthy people; the Soderini were wealthy republicans. These three families might represent

three categories of the leading families of Florence, excluding the belligerent parties such as the Medici, the Bardi and the Strozzi. The Acciaiuoli were strongly pro-Medici. The Borgherini were rather neutral in the past, though moderately pro-Medici too. The Soderini were pro-Medici, later antagonistic.

Macchiavelli paused, drank a little water and continued, 'the Soderini were strongly linked to the Medici, especially to Lorenzo Il Magnifico, until the republic proposed Piero Soderini as Gonfaloniere delle Giustizia for life. Piero asked not for this honour. He did not think however, that after the strange domination of Fra Gerolamo Savonarola, the Medici could return. The Medici never forgave him, and considered him an enemy. Piero Soderini was very sad about that.
Piero Soderini ruled until the latest change of rule. He defended the Republic against any rule by one person or family only, even against the Medici, but he surrendered Florence to them very rapidly when the Medici attacked with their Papal army. Piero fled to Ragusa.
Piero's brother, Francesco Soderini, is a cardinal, and it was Lorenzo Il Magnifico who secured him his first function in the church, in times when the Soderini were still good friends of the Medici. Cardinal Francesco rather opposes Giovanni de'Medici, Pope Leo X. He had much influence on the cardinals of Rome. Giovanni de'Medici lost a few rounds during the election, but Cardinal Francesco could not present another candidate capable of gathering more votes than Giovanni de'Medici. Giovanni then spoke to Cardinal Francesco. He proposed to have Piero Soderini return from Ragusa, from exile, not to Florence, but to Rome. I suppose much money was involved in the transaction. Cardinal Francesco finally supported Giovanni de'Medici in the election, and Cardinal Giovanni became Pope Leo X. I heard Piero Soderini was back in Rome, with his brother, Cardinal Francesco. In a way, the Soderini made it possible for a Medici to become pope; the bargaining money was Piero.'

'What may the "three keys" mean?' asked Bachiacca.
"I guess the three keys are with the three families, with the Acciaiuoli, the Borgherini and the Soderini, whatever the keys may mean!' said Niccolò. 'I believe "Magnifico" means not "magnificently", but refers to Lorenzo de'Medici, called "Il Magnifico", but I am not certain. I have no idea what the three keys mean, nor the word "restituted". It may come from "restitution", returning something to a proper owner.
I also do not understand what a monster has to do in the message, for "badalone" means monster. The last phrase may mean "saintly new monster", whatever that may lead to, or the "monster of Santa Maria Novella". I rather vote for the second interpretation. So, here we are now! We have decoded the secret text! How do you propose to proceed?'

'We still have that word "monster" to deal with,' said Francesco Granacci stubbornly.
'Filippo Brunelleschi once conceived of a ship that was to bear that name, an enormous ship, designed to transport large quantities of wood from the mountains to Florence, and marble from Pisa, always a tricky trip on the River Arno. The ship sank on its first voyage from Pisa to Florence, however, and that was almost the end of Brunelleschi too. I do not think the word refers to Brunelleschi's ship, though. There are many monsters, demons, and devils in all churches. It may take us a hell of a time to check on all those in Santa Maria Novella. Besides, "Santa Novella" may refer to the monastery, not just the church, and then we may have to scan all the frescoes in the cloisters and the halls of the monastery!'
'I happen to know Santa Maria Novella quite well, and there is a very notorious monster there!' Andrea del Sarto said.
"What do you mean?' Niccolò asked.

‘The “badalone” of Santa Maria Novella is the lectern that stands in front of the main altar. It was called so because it was so ugly, and it has remained ugly. It is a very large lectern, used by the priests to put on their Bibles and psalters when they sing mass. I know of only one badalone in Santa Maria Novella, that lectern!’
‘A lectern,’ Niccolò exclaimed. ‘Yes, then the word badalone might refer to the lectern. We must have a look at that piece!’
‘Or we look at every monster and devil in Santa Maria Novella and look out for some hidden meaning on, at or around the monster,’ Bachiacca said, refusing to let go of his one idea.

‘Three keys of which two may have something to do with the Acciaiuoli and the Borgherini,’ Pierfrancesco said, ‘is an enigma I can lay before Roberto di Donato and before my father Salvi. I would not be surprised they knew more about this. They have been acting strangely these last months. We can start from there. The secret must have something to do with Santa Maria Novella.’

‘I have a hunch it also originated in San Marco, perhaps together with Santa Maria Novella,’ Macchiavelli said. ‘Fra Jacopino, the man who started it all, was a monk of San Marco, and San Marco was the monastery of the Medici. Lorenzo Il Magnifico, and even more his father Cosimo, favoured San Marco. We might have a talk with people in San Marco. To whom can we talk there in confidence?’

‘Fra Bartolommeo!’ the painters cried in unison. ‘We talk to Fra Bartolommeo! Fra Bartolommeo is a painter, like us. We know him well. Mariotto Albertinelli was his partner and friend. Franciabigio and Jacopo Pontormo have been students of Albertinelli. Albertinelli took them often to Fra Bartolommeo. Fra Bartolommeo likes gossips! He knows everything that happened in San Marco the last twenty years.’

‘Who is this Fra Bartolommeo?’ Pierfrancesco asked. ‘I have heard his name as a painter, but that is all!’

Francesco Granacci, who knew everybody in Florence with family tree and story and history, explained. ‘Fra Bartolommeo is a Friar of San Marco of about forty years old. You would give him easily fifty years, however. He aged badly. He is not a Florentine, but he has worked here almost his entire life. He was actually born near Prato, in the village of Savignano, about three hours of walking, north-west from Florence. He studied painting with Cosimo Rosselli in Florence and lived then with relatives near the Porta San Piero Gattolini, so that he was called Baccio – for Bartolommeo – della Porta.
Baccio della Porta has a fine talent for painting and he draws well. He received commissions from many noblemen of the town.
When he was young he was a timid, humble, good-natured man, and he was particularly pious. He loved to hear sermons, and that became his major problem. Baccio heard in San Marco the sermons of Fra Gerolamo Savonarola, the preacher of Ferrara, a priest of the Order of the Friar Preachers. Baccio was much impressed by that priest’s devotion. Fra Savonarola preached fear into the Florentines. He preached of the Last Judgement, of the Apocalypse, of the Revelation of Saint John, and he described the horrors that would befall that day on the people that lived in sin and luxury. Savonarola preached in the church of San Marco about what would happen to the wealthy people who did not give alms to the poor, were dressed in crying colours and gaudy robes, wearing wigs, spending lavishly on costly dinners, and decorating their rooms with tapestries and expensive paintings. They would not enter the Kingdom of God, he shouted.

Many people of Florence thought Fra Savonarola was right, and among them was Baccio della Porta. Baccio believed Fra Savonarola's claims of having communicated with God and with the Saints. Savonarola's appeal to the Christians of Florence to live a simple, virtuous life was in line with Baccio's character. Savonarola also condemned the asking of interest on loans. This had in fact always been condemned by the Church, but even the popes lent from the Medici for an interest, and Florence's bankers and merchants thrived on profits from loans!
Fra Savonarola ordered his followers to make a bonfire of all those vanities, of books on philosophy, of song sheets, of lutes and other musical instruments, of wigs and expensive laces, of all sculptures and pictures of nude figures. Baccio della Porta and Sandro Botticelli were among the painters who threw their own paintings and drawings in the bonfire.
At the time when Fra Savonarola became the virtual ruler of Florence, forcing the Signoria to adopt his sumptuary laws, Baccio set up a workshop in Florence with Mariotto di Bigio di Bindo Albertinelli, who was two years younger than he. Mariotto had studied also with Cosimo Rosselli, at the same time as Baccio. Mariotto and Baccio were good friends. Their workshop was very successful.
Fra Gerolamo and his followers, called the Piagnoni, held Florence in their power for over four years. That was after the Medici had been driven from Florence because they had supported the French in their invasion of Italy. Fra Bartolommeo painted a fine portrait of Fra Gerolamo Savonarola, so he knew the Preacher very well. I believe that picture is still in San Marco.'
'What happened next?' Pierfrancesco asked. He knew almost nothing of that period. Salvi had never talked to him about those tumultuous times.

Granacci continued. 'Gradually, the other Orders challenged the Dominicans of San Marco and Fra Savonarola in particular. Around Easter of 1498, the Signoria had the courage to seize Fra Gerolamo Savonarola and to imprison him. For that, the Priors had to lay siege to San Marco!
The monks of San Marco, as well as the Piagnoni - among whom Baccio della Porta -, shut themselves up in the monastery. The Signoria and the nobles of Florence attacked San Marco. Fra Savonarola and his closest friends, Fra Domenico da Pescia and Fra Silvestro, soon surrendered. Many guards of Fra Savonarola, and many of his followers, were killed in the attack. During the assault, Baccio, very much fearing for his life, promised to become a Friar if he survived the ordeal. The uproar ended, San Marco was captured, and Baccio could flee San Marco in the chaos without being seen. He returned to Prato, his hometown, and held his promise. He became a monk in San Domenico of Prato. That happened thirteen years ago. Baccio, now Fra Bartolommeo, stopped painting. This was a great loss for the art of painting in Florence, for he was one of our greatest artists at that moment. Fra Bartolommeo stayed only a few months in Prato. His superior shipped him back to San Marco. Fra Bartolommeo refused to paint for about four years.'

'Mariotto Albertinelli told me he was very much depressed when his partner, Baccio, became a Friar and stopped painting!' interrupted Jacopo Pontormo. 'Mariotto equally stopped painting for a while. He opened an inn, a tavern, at the sign of the Dragon at the Ponte Vecchio, and a hostel outside the Porta San Gallo. Later, he too returned to painting, though.'

Granacci continued to tell about Fra Bartolommeo. 'After four years, years in which Baccio had not taken a pen or a brush in his hands, he began to paint again. He heads the workshop of San Marco now. He works there for instance with his friend, the sculptor Fra Ambrogio della

Robbia, a son of Andrea della Robbia. This Fra Ambrogio, like other members of the della Robbia family, works in glazed terracotta.
Fra Bartolommeo works a lot like Pietro Perugino. He paints only religious scenes. His scenes are somewhat placid to my taste, too traditional. He still believes, secretly, in what Fra Gerolamo Savonarola preached: art should only show the stories of the Evangels in the purest, most pious, simple narrative way to aid the church in teaching the Bible. Fra Bartolommeo is a kind man, so his pictures are sweet and tender, yet he truly brings the gentle emotions of the Virgin and Christ Child to his viewers, to inspire to devotion the monks and the spectators of his images. Recently, during the Republic, he worked for the Signoria and for Piero Soderini. Cardinal Francesco Soderini was his confessor. Raffaello Sanzio of Urbino, with Michelangelo Buonarroti the greatest artist of Rome, came to work with him. Raffaello thought Fra Bartolommeo the art of perspective, and Fra Bartolommeo taught other techniques to Raffaello.
Fra Bartolommeo is a master of draperies, of fine colours of light and shadow, and of smooth transitions of colours, which he learnt from Leonardo da Vinci. Fra Bartolommeo has been to Venice a few years ago. He saw the works of the great Venetian painters, of the Bellini family. Although he is a monk, he likes to learn from others, and he likes to travel. For all that Fra Bartolommeo has seen and experienced in the Monastery of San Marco, keen observer as he is, a gentle monk and a person of confidence, he must know all about San Marco. If you want to speak to him you have to hurry, however. I heard he will travel to Rome soon.'

'It would be good to talk to Fra Bartolommeo then,' Niccolò Macchiavelli judged. 'I did not know he was so closely associated with Fra Savonarola. Lorenzo Il Magnifico and San Marco are involved in the secret. The most prominent figure of San Marco was Fra Savonarola, and Savonarola knew Lorenzo Il Magnifico well. Yes, Fra Bartolommeo would be the right person to talk to.'

'We add people to the many that already know about our message,' Pierfrancesco said. 'How well can we rely on this Fra Bartolommeo? He was connected to the Soderini, to Savonarola, to a lot of strange people among the Piagnoni. Can we trust him?'
Niccolò answered first, 'Pierfrancesco, it is my experience that the best people in a society are the artists. They have the same weaknesses as all people, but less so. They like money but they are not greedy. They live for art, for beauty. They have a craving for the sublime. They experience life better than we do. They are envious, of course, but mostly only of each others' works. They are intelligent and sensible men. They are more tuned than others to pain and injustice. The vagaries of life affect them more profoundly than us. I believe we can explain our story to the Brother.'
'I assure you,' Jacopo Pontormo added, 'Fra Bartolommeo will not betray you when you appeal to him honestly and openly, and ask him not to tell the secret to someone else.'
'Good,' Pierfrancesco replied. 'First however, I need to have a serious talk with my father and with Margherita's father. I am certain they know more about this. Then we go to San Marco.'
And so they agreed.

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Pierfrancesco insisted to talk to his father immediately. He demanded to discuss important matters alone, in his father's office. When Salvi di Francesco dei Borgherini sat sternly before Pierfrancesco, thinking his son had lost money in his business, Pierfrancesco ordered full attention of his father to what he was going to say.

First, he wanted his father to ask for Margherita Acciaiuoli in marriage. Salvi did not object anymore to that, and seemed to have expected such a plea from his son. He visibly relaxed, for obviously his son had not lost golden florins.

Then, Pierfrancesco explained all what had happened with the message on the belts and how he and his friends had decoded the secret text. Salvi Borgherini sank in his chair when Pierfrancesco told him the deaths of three men were no doubt connected to the enigma. Pierfrancesco was brief and direct. He said he had been watched all the time by Acciaiuoli and Borgherini spies. Salvi sank deeper. Pierfrancesco asked straight to Salvi's face whether his father had received a special key.
The office was cool, yet Salvi sweated profusely. The water ran down his face. He wiped at his eyes with a white cloth he kept in a drawer. He sought time to consider whether he could tell the truth to his son. He remembered the message. One day, somebody would ask him the key. He was stunned and filled with apprehension now, for that man was his own son! Salvi waited for a long time before answering, but then he admitted. Yes, both he and Roberto di Donato dei Acciaiuoli had such a key. Salvi even showed the key to Pierfrancesco, the key he had kept hidden in a secret place of his office for so long, the key that had burned in his hands for so many years.
Pierfrancesco remained very calm. He was angry at his father for not having confided in him. He did not chide his father though. He said he wanted them both to go to the Palazzo Acciaiuoli, now, unannounced. Time was up. Salvi nodded and they went out of their palace, to the other side of the Borgo Santi Apostoli, father and son walking hurriedly, but the son in the lead and determined. Since the key had been brought by a monk of San Marco, Pierfrancesco was more and more convinced the solution of the enigma was to be found in San Marco.

All along the way, Salvi prayed that Roberto di Donato would be absent from his palazzo. Roberto di Donato was in his office on the ground floor of the palace however, near the cortile, and he welcomed the Borgherini, instantly guessing why they came to him. Pierfrancesco refused to say a word without Margherita. Roberto di Donato seethed, but Salvi's face showed him the Borgherini were here for very serious matters. Margherita was called for, and came to the office.

Pierfrancesco asked his father to talk about the first point they had agreed upon. Salvi Borgherini asked the Acciaiuoli for the marriage of their daughter Margherita to Pierfrancesco. Roberto di Donato sought to gain time. He had rehearsed the riposte in his head. He said such grave matters had to be discussed at leisure. A marriage was a business matter in Florence. Discussions first, agreement later, said Roberto di Donato. No, shouted Margherita, much to the dismay of her father. Agreement first, discussions later! Her marriage was not a business matter. It was a matter of suffering and great sorrow or joy for a lifetime, a matter of life and death. She threatened to call all the fires of hell on the Acciaiuoli if she could not marry Pierfrancesco. Roberto di Donato knew very well his daughter could do just that. She would set his palace in uproar. Wasn't she an Acciaiuoli, as stubborn as an Acciaiuoli and as crafty as an Acciaiuoli when she really wanted something?

Roberto suppressed a first inkling to have his guards grab Margherita and throw her in one of the darkest cellars of his palazzo to teach her manners. He loved his daughter dearly, especially this one. Margherita was his very special sweetheart. She was a witty girl, always had been, the joy of his palace. Her laughter filled his place, a pleasant welcome from the constant grudging of his wife. This girl resembled him, her father, much more than her

mother. She should have been his eldest son! He rather preferred her to marry a young man she respected and loved than a rich fool she despised. He agreed to the marriage, in principle, on condition the discussions about the couple's funds would be mutually satisfactory. He calculated he was in a nice position: the Borgherini could not demand too high a dowry now. Margherita and Pierfrancesco agreed.

Then, Pierfrancesco explained the story he had already told to his father. Roberto di Donato was much impressed. Margherita held Pierfrancesco's arm. He told how he had climbed on the roofs of Santa Maria Novella and how the belts' text had been found by Niccolò Macchiavelli. When he heard the name of Macchiavelli, Roberto di Donato began to sweat as much as Salvi had. Yet, he listened on. At the end, he too showed the key he had kept in a secret place in his drawer.

Two bronze keys, each about three thumbs long, each with other patterns incised on the part that was to open a lock, lay on the table.

Pierfrancesco said he might one day need the keys. Roberto di Donato and Salvi promised to hand him over the keys. Salvi refused to return to the Palazzo Borgherini with his own key. The object burned in his hands, he said. The two keys remained in Roberto di Donato's secret place. Unknowingly, Salvi had linked an unbreakable bond with Roberto by handing over the key to the Acciaiuoli, for not once before in his life had somebody given such a precious object to Roberto on trust only. Before Salvi and Pierfrancesco, Roberto showed his daughter how to have access to the hiding place.

Roberto di Donato invited Salvi and Pierfrancesco to his dining hall, to drink a cup of wine and to announce the betrothal of Margherita. So they did. Roberto and Salvi needed quite a few cups of Acciaiuoli white Chianti to regain their wits. As the evening moved into night, Acciaiuoli and Borgherini feasted. A servant was sent to fetch Salvi's wife. Agniola Bonaccorso would have liked to run, but she managed to walk pompously, slowly, dragging the trails of her heavy, best robes along the Borgo Santi Apostoli, accompanied by a flurry of maidservants. She arrived like a queen in the Acciaiuoli cortile, to be greeted by a no less grandiose wife of Roberto di Donato.
The night advanced. With each cup, both Roberto and Salvi were more convinced there was no finer or better-matched couple in Florence than their Margherita and Pierfrancesco. Even their two wives, who had been almost sworn enemies before, gleamed with pride and satisfaction. In the future, not two single but a double common front would threaten the other Monnas of Florence.
Early in the morning, Salvi, Salvi's wife, and Pierfrancesco, accompanied by Acciaiuoli guards wearing halberds, walked the street to their own palace.

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Pierfrancesco, Niccolò Macchiavelli, Francesco Granacci and Jacopo Pontormo went to the Monastery of San Marco on foot. Granacci found four men too large a group, but Jacopo Pontormo insisted to come, arguing he admired Fra Bartolommeo's paintings much. He said he did not want to waste the opportunity to hear the great master talk of his life, and doubt of his art.

San Marco was a Dominican abbey, splendidly built by Michelozzo di Bartolomeo for Cosimo de'Medici, and thereafter kept in good order by Medici money. The church was a fine

one, though not very large. The entrance to the monastery lay to the right of the church. The monastery took pride in two cloisters, like Santa Maria Novella. A smaller one, called the Cloister of Sant'Antonino, was closest to the front street. Sant'Antonino was a Dominican and Florentine Saint, who had lived in this monastery in the last century, and who had also been Bishop of Florence. A larger cloister, the Cloister of San Domenico, was further behind. Baccio d'Agnolo had just finished the bell-tower of the Cloister of Sant'Antonino, explained the Friar who led them through a Daedalus of rooms and corridors to the workshop of Fra Bartolommeo. The Friar also pointed out to Pierfrancesco the first of many frescoes painted in San Marco by the brother-painter Guido di Piero, later called Fra Giovanni da Fiesole and later still Fra Angelico. The frescoes were extremely nice, worked in magnificent colours, and presented very clear delineation of figures. Pierfrancesco had seen a few paintings of Fra Angelico before, but never so many together.

When they entered San Marco's workshop of paintings and sculptures, the Friar monk pointed out a man in the farthest corner. Fra Bartolommeo sat near a window with his back to the entrance. He was contemplating a large altarpiece. The picture was unfinished. Only a drawing was on the canvas. Fra Bartolommeo turned. He wore a simple, coarse Dominican robe, held by a leather belt knotted around his middle. A strong nose below large, deep-set dark eyes was the most prominent feature of Bartolommeo's fleshy face. His lips were thick and sensual, strangely coloured red, contrasting in a pale, parchment-like skin. He was almost bald and the hair at both sides of his head was greying. He was only forty years old, but he looked much older.

Fra Bartolommeo recognised the men that came in. He threw his charcoal aside, and shook with both hands and obvious warmth and pleasure first the hands of Francesco Granacci, then of Niccolò Macchiavelli and Jacopo Pontormo. Granacci presented Pierfrancesco.

Fra Bartolommeo was hard to tear away from his work. He said, 'I am working at a "Virgin with Child, Saint Anne and other Saints". Piero Soderini commissioned this altarpiece over a year ago for the main council room of the Signoria. I could not finish it before Piero had to flee from Florence. I wonder what will become of the painting. I worked very hard at the composition, but I think I have it right, finally. You see, the Virgin Mary thrones on a dais, with the Child on her lap. She looks to the infant Saint John the Baptist. I drew Saint Anne above the Virgin, for the Holy Family descended of Anne. Was not Saint Anne the Mother of the Mother, the true protector of the Holy Family? So, she towers above and embraces all. Do you remark the triangular form of the throne scene? To the right, a panel of a Saint brings balance and symmetry with the figure of Saint John the Baptist. On both sides, in a symmetrical pattern, I placed five Saints. I had a real issue on the right side of the picture, for I had no figure like John the Baptist there. So I used one of the five Saints there to bring balance with both the corresponding Saint on the left and with John the Baptist. I am rather satisfied by that trick. The symmetry is nicely preserved. I broke the symmetry of course a little, here and there, to make the scene livelier, and to hide the structure from first view. I opened Saint Anne's arms for the same reason, and that fits with what I tried to express for her. Saint Anne looks upwards to the skies. The viewer will follow Saint Anne's eyes. Together with the larger triangular structure made by Saint Anne and the two knelt Saints below the stairs, pointing upwards too, the structure may help to inspire feelings of heavenly elation in the viewers.'

He paused but continued, 'I had to fill in the base of the largest centre triangle, so I placed two winged angels there, below the stairs, and these angels respond like angels of Earth to the

winged heavenly angels at the top of the frame, above Saint Anne. The angels hold the book of the law, or the book of the Prophets predicting the birth of the Saviour, the birth of the Child Jesus. Above the book I drew God, in fact the Trinity, in three faces: a face in the middle and two faces looking to left and right. The three faces are the three aspects of God of which the early philosophers and theologians wrote so much, the aspects of God the Father as the Creator of the universe, the Son as the Creation, and the Holy Spirit. The Trinity has rarely been presented as the three faces of the same God, but that is how elder theologians regarded the Trinity. God looks to all sides, so that we cannot escape his watching us. I believe the structure is right, and the message too. Structure, strong composition based on elementary forms is necessary in a painting, for did not God bring order in chaos to create the universe? The music we make, here at San Marco, is also pure emotion, singing in endless variations of the same tune, the same structure. Only strong substructure holds a picture together when emotions are shown openly. I believe man has two sides: rational thinking and emotions. Both have to be expressed in a painting, not one without the other. Only then do we have a harmonious picture. Alberti forgot to mention that in his document on the art of painting.
But I talk and talk, like an old egoist. What can I do for you?'

Niccolò Macchiavelli, the better diplomat, spoke first. 'Fra Bartolommeo, we have come to you on important matters. We hoped you might help us with your knowledge of the events that happened at this monastery. Fra Jacopino lived here, didn't he?'
'Yes,' Bartolommeo replied. Sadness veiled his eyes. 'Yes, Fra Jacopino was one of my dearest friends. He was a very nice man. He died recently.'
'He died handing over a secret message to a young man he deemed worthy of guarding it in his place. That young man stands before you. It is Pierfrancesco dei Borgherini, our friend.'
Fra Bartolommeo did not answer. He looked in turn at Niccolò, at Francesco and at Pierfrancesco. He lowered his head as if he reflected on something. He waited. Then he turned, looked out of the window, still not speaking. Niccolò, Granacci and Pierfrancesco looked at each other, wondering what was happening. Why took it so long for Fra Bartolommeo to say something?

Finally, Fra Bartolommeo turned to the friends. His face relaxed. He said, 'well, I am delighted to meet you then, Pierfrancesco dei Borgherini. I have heard the name. Fra Jacopino told me about a secret message. He wanted to pass it on to a trustworthy young man. So you are the one to whom he gave it?'
'Yes,' Pierfrancesco replied. 'He gave me a secret and he died for it. The message was in code, and difficult to decode, and in several pieces. A Father of the Monastery of Santa Maria Novella gave me one of the other pieces, and equally died in the act.'
'Died or murdered?' Fra Bartolommeo asked. He did not wait for the answer and said, 'that must have been Father Alessio Strozzi. Father Strozzi was in this together with Fra Jacopino. A monk of San Marco and a monk of Santa Maria Novella joined in a secret by the wish of he who devised the secret.'
'We have the entire text,' Macchiavelli continued, 'and we decoded it, but the message is vague, presenting only more hints. We wondered whether you might tell us what the secret is about.'

'I think I can trust you,' Fra Bartolommeo said. 'Fra Jacopino trusted you, young man, and he was the warden of the secret. I trust Francesco Granacci and I trust Ser Niccolò Macchiavelli, a true statesman of the Republic. Fra Alessio Strozzi knew a few things, but he never knew what the secret was. Fra Jacopino had part of the message, and he knew the secret. I have no

additional part of the secret, but I know what the secret holds, like Fra Jacopino knew. We were the only ones in San Marco who knew of the secret, and believe me, it was a very heavy burden we wore.'

Fra Bartolommeo paused. He said, 'I do sincerely hope, young Borgherini, the secret will be safe with you, so that you can decide what to do with it, for the greater good of Florence. You will have a very special responsibility, and a temptation that could lead even Kings and Princes to perdition. Still, I too believe it is time we of San Marco and of Santa Maria Novella do not have to suffer from its existence any longer. It is time to make amends, to forgive and to bring the secret back to Florence. I will tell you what it is about. We have to talk in another room.'
Fra Bartolommeo strode to a side door. The men followed him. They walked through a corridor, through several rooms of the monastery, until they came to a small hall. A table and four chairs stood in a corner of the hall. Fra Bartolommeo led the men to the table.

'Sit down,' Fra Bartolommeo said. 'Have a look at the portrait on the wall, behind you.'
The friends looked at a small portrait of a monk with a long, hooked nose, face hidden in a monk's hood.
'I painted that portrait fifteen years ago,' Fra Bartolommeo continued. 'It is the portrait of Fra Gerolamo Savonarola, at the height of his glory. He wears no jewels, for his glory was humble. He scarcely ate more than a few bits of bread, cheese and water, and he possessed only two Dominican habits. Yet, whatever he wanted, the Signoria and the wealthy of Florence gave him gladly. The story of the enigma starts with that man and with another one, four years earlier than the date at which I painted this portrait. The two men were the Preacher from Ferrara, Fra Gerolamo Savonarola, and the man who invited him to Florence, Lorenzo de'Medici called Il Magnifico.'

Fra Bartolommeo stopped, let his words sink in, and then he said, 'Lorenzo was dying. The Medici do not live long. They eat too much. They eat the wrong things, too much meat, too few simple vegetables. They drink much wine. They stay too much inside their palaces. They take too much pleasure in women and worry too much over their money. God punishes such men with early deaths. Lorenzo was dying in his bed in the Villa Careggi, the Medici villa in the hills of Florence. With his last breaths he asked to see Fra Savonarola.
Lorenzo's sins weighed heavily on his mind and he wanted to confess to somebody who was close to God. He was in physical and spiritual pain. Lorenzo had taken interest on loans; he had had mistresses; he had killed people. He had stolen money from Florence, and he had committed so many other crimes, only God could keep count of. Lorenzo had already received the viaticum, the Holy Sacrament of the dying, from another priest, but he waited for Fra Savonarola.
On that day of the beginning of April in 1494, Lorenzo de'Medici confessed his sins to Fra Gerolamo Savonarola, both men alone in Lorenzo's death room. Fra Savonarola told to Fra Silvestro what Lorenzo had confessed, and Fra Silvestro told Fra Jacopino, who told me. It is a deadly sin to betray a confession, but Fra Savonarola said the confession was not completed. The sins received no pardon. Fra Gerolamo was not only a brother, you know, he was a priest! He had not reached the end of the confession, the end in which the priest makes a sign of the cross and forgives in the name of God. So, Fra Savonarola told he could speak about that conversation with Lorenzo de'Medici.
First, Lorenzo regretted the sacking of the town of Volterra. Lorenzo murdered the men of that town out of greed in 1472. Large, new deposits of alum had been discovered near Volterra, but the Volterrans withdrew the mining concessions from the Medici and gave them

to some of their own citizens. In a riot, Florentines and Medici clients were killed in Volterra. Lorenzo had to break the town. Against the advice of the Signoria and against the advice of Tommaso Soderini, the father of Piero Soderini, Lorenzo hired a mercenary force and the Lord Condottiere Federico da Montefeltro of Urbino, and laid siege to the city. Volterra surrendered after a month, and opened its gates. The mercenaries had come to loot. The Montefeltro could not withhold his troops, so Volterra was pillaged. The mercenaries raped the women and murdered the townsmen. Lorenzo confessed the horrors of the massacre. He had wanted to make amends, but it was too late. One cannot give money to the dead.
Lorenzo also confessed and regretted the murder of the Pazzi. The Pazzi had revolted against Lorenzo in 1478, and killed his beloved brother Giuliano in the Duomo. Lorenzo had taken revenge. The corpses of the tortured and executed Pazzi swung at a rope from the towers of the Palazzo della Signoria.
Lastly, Lorenzo confessed having stolen money from the Monte dei Doti and other public funds of Florence in 1479. The money of the Monte dei Doti was destined to provide dowries to the daughters of the poor, so that these girls also could marry honourably. Lorenzo had been practically bankrupt at that time. He had embezzled money from the Monte and of other funds of Florence, tens of thousands of florins.
Fra Savonarola told Lorenzo de'Medici to have faith in God, in God's love and in His power to redeem the sinful. Lorenzo would be forgiven on two conditions. Fra Savonarola wanted Lorenzo to secure a true republican government in Florence, a government over which no single Florentine nobleman would exert its power. He also asked Lorenzo to do restitution of everything he had stolen from Florence, from the public funds, as well as from the city's merchants, bankers, noblemen and artisans. Most of that money had been stolen by the usury interests the Medici demanded for loans.'

Fra Bartolommeo waited here, but continued his story before the men could ask questions. 'Friends of the Medici were in the Villa Careggi. The poet Poliziano was there, and the scholar Pico della Mirandola, and others. They later told that Lorenzo Il Magnifico had turned his head away from Fra Savonarola, had asked him to leave and let the other men in. But Fra Savonarola told Fra Domenico and Fra Silvestro – who were burned with him in the Piazza della Signoria – and also to Fra Jacopino, that Lorenzo de'Medici promised to do restitution. Lorenzo may have thought his crimes could not be forgiven, not even by God, so he broke off the confession. But a day later, a heavy metal box, closed with three unbreakable inside locks, was brought from the Palazzo Medici to San Marco. A Medici servant gave three keys to Fra Savonarola. Fra Gerolamo opened the box with the three keys. He found hundreds of papers in the strongbox. Each paper was a debenture, a letter of indebtedness, stating the debt someone owed to the Medici family. At the show of such a letter, the family whose name was mentioned had to pay immediately the amount of the debt to the bearer of the paper. The papers contained also the sums the debtors were bound to pay regularly to the Medici. The papers were not on the name of one man in particular, but on family names and on institutions. They were on almost all the important families of Florence, on the Strozzi, the Rucellai, the Panciatichi, the Tornabuoni, the Borromei, the Niccolini, the Ardinghelli, the Pazzi even, the Rinieri, and so on.'

Niccolò Macchiavelli interrupted Fra Bartolommeo. Niccolò's eyes slit to a thin line when he said, 'and Fra Savonarola used those letters to establish his power and have the Signoria agree to everything he ordained! I always wondered how Savonarola exerted such power so suddenly over Florence, over people who despite being devoted Christians forgot the tenants of their faith so often.'

'Yes,' Fra Bartolommeo added sadly.' Yes, that is what Fra Savonarola did. I loved Fra Gerolamo and I admired him very much, for he brought the kingdom of God to Florence. I knew of how he had forced power on Florence only much later, after Fra Savonarola had been executed. Fra Jacopino told me. I thought Fra Savonarola had brought God's power over Florence, but Florence responded to only one power: the power of money. Fra Savonarola used very earthly means to secure his rule. May God forgive him! To this day, I believe this sin was ultimately the reason why God abandoned the Preacher and delivered him to the revengeful Signoria. When the Priors of the Signoria and the wealthy and noble families finally realised that together they did not have to fear the debt papers, then Fra Savonarola's power was broken. His religious power was still great, especially with the poorer people of the town, but that religious power was soon challenged, and then Fra Savonarola stood powerless before the Signoria!'
'And then the Monastery of San Marco was under siege,' Niccolò Macchiavelli concluded.
'Yes, San Marco was besieged,' Fra Bartolommeo continued. We were more than five hundred in here, but we could not win. We had almost no arms. Fra Savonarola surrendered. Many were killed. The remaining ones, mostly monks, had their lives safe. I returned to Prato and became a monk.'

'So the enigma, the secret message, refers to the box which contains the letters of debts?' Pierfrancesco asked.
'Yes,' Fra Bartolommeo replied. 'Imagine the power he who finds the box can wield! The debentures are still valid. Since Fra Savonarola's death, all the wealthy families of Florence have been wondering what happened to the letters! They know the letters exist somewhere, for Fra Savonarola threatened them all with the debts. The papers could tumble bankers and merchants, weaken them, force them to bankruptcy and destroy them. All the families have been looking for the letters, overturning San Marco in the days after the siege, hoping to find the debentures. The family that would have found the box would have burned its own letters, and then started to wield the letters of indebtedness on the others! The box was never found, however. Many believe the box is still hidden in a secret place of San Marco. All the families fear the letters might re-appear one day.'

'I understand now why certain, many people, might kill for the box,' Pierfrancesco said. 'The people who have murdered Fra Jacopino and Father Alessio Strozzi might be of any family of Florence! I have many questions: who hid the box, why, and why has the secret been given away only now?'
'Those are very pertinent questions, young man! Fra Gerolamo Savonarola hid the box. I don't know who helped him. Fra Jacopino never knew where the box had been hidden. Fra Savonarola gave a clue to the hiding place to Fra Jacopino, another to Father Alessio Strozzi. Fra Savonarola encoded the message that would lead to the box. He hid the papers, because he felt near Easter of 1498 that the Florentines would grab power from him. He told Fra Jacopino he would not tolerate one single family to find the box and misuse its contents to set up a new tyranny over the city. Fra Savonarola would have liked the monks of San Marco and of Santa Maria Novella to use the box whenever necessary, but his own story taught him such secular powers were not for religious men to wield. So, in the very last days before the siege of San Marco, Fra Savonarola asked of Fra Jacopino to give the box to a young noble, wealthy man of Florence, a man strong and wise enough to bear and master the contents of the box. Fra Jacopino recently told me he had not long to live. He thought he would die soon. Only now had he found a young man who might be up to the task. I suppose he meant you, Pierfrancesco dei Borgherini. He had another reason to want to hand over the secret. In the box were many letters of debts of the popes. Fra Savonarola and Fra Jacopino feared the box

might fall into the hands of the Medici, who would then not only exert power over Florence with renewed force, but also over the papacy, over the entire world. Fra Jacopino wanted to avoid that very much. He predicted, however, Giovanni de'Medici would be the new Pope. He said a Medici would not use the letters against a Medici Pope, especially not over a Pope who had just re-established Medici rule over the city. The box, in Medici hands, could not hurt the Pope anymore, and in the possession of the Pope, would even strengthen the papacy. The time was right for the secret to come to the surface!'

Granacci asked, 'the secret message mentions three Florentine families, all Medici supporters: the Acciaiuoli, the Borgherini and the Soderini. Why these three names?'
'There were three leading families from which Fra Savonarola found no letters in the box,' Fra Bartolommeo explained. 'Fra Savonarola trusted the Acciaiuoli because they were of an old, noble and wealthy family. The Acciaiuoli seemed to be honest in the business they had in Florence. They were only mildly in favour of the Medici, and mostly only wanted to be left alone and go on with their business. The Borgherini were a new promising family, relative newcomers to Florence. They also were only distant Medici supporters. The Borgherini had a mind of their own. The Soderini were staunch supporters of the Republic.'
'The Soderini were also supporters of the Medici,' Niccolò Macchiavelli remarked. 'Tommaso Soderini was a close advisor of Lorenzo Il Magnifico and of Lorenzo's father. Tommaso's son, Piero Soderini, was educated together with Lorenzo and Lorenzo secured the appointment to Bishop for Piero's brother, for Francesco Soderini!'

'Right,' Fra Bartolommeo agreed. 'But when the Signoria exiled the Medici from Florence, because they were traitors to Florence and had handed over the city to the French King, and after the execution of Fra Savonarola, the Soderini were the first defenders of the Republic. Fra Savonarola knew the brothers Piero and Francesco Soderini hated the tyranny of the Medici over Florence. They wanted dearly to bring Florence back to true republican rule!'
'That meant bringing Florence under Soderini rule!' Granacci exclaimed.
'The Soderini are honest and true citizens of Florence,' Niccolò Macchiavelli objected. 'Piero Soderini was Gonfaloniere for life, but he did not rule as a tyrant. He was appointed by the people. He constantly asked the advice of the Priors and of the committees. He really has been a good republican, the best man that could arrive to power after Fra Savonarola. Cardinal Francesco is a pious man.'

Fra Bartolommeo continued, 'three families among the very best of Florence, three trustworthy families, three families that did not seek power over the city for power's sake. To these Fra Savonarola gave the keys to the box. Where the box is, I have no idea. The secret message leads to the box. Fra Jacopino and Father Alessio Strozzi also did not know where Fra Savonarola hid the papers!'

Niccolò Macchiavelli, Francesco Granacci and Pierfrancesco continued to talk for a while with Fra Bartolommeo, but they learnt little more.

Fra Bartolommeo showed them the paintings he had made in the monastery. He brought the friends to places on the first floor where no lay man was permitted to come. He showed them the former sleeping place and the little office of Fra Gerolamo Savonarola. Fra Bartolommeo allowed Pierfrancesco entering a few non-occupied cells of monks, to show him frescoes made on the walls of the cells by Fra Angelico. Each cell of San Marco prided in a devout picture of Fra Angelico, mostly Crucifixions. It was there and then Pierfrancesco began to appreciate and love the delicate paintings of the former monk of San Marco.

Finally, the three men said goodbye to Fra Bartolommeo and left the monastery.

'We have only two more things to do,' Pierfrancesco whispered. 'We have to get the last key from the Soderini. The Soderini, Piero and Francesco, are in Rome. I may have to travel to Rome! We also still have to find a monster in Santa Maria Novella, no doubt to discover yet another clue! Only those words, "monster" and "Santa Novella" can refer to the hiding place in the message, for all the other words refer to the belts and the keys!'

'I will think about the Soderini, about how it would be best to convince the Soderini to hand over the key,' Niccolò proposed. 'You have a look at Santa Maria Novella. You, Pierfrancesco, will have to think what you will do with the letters of indebtedness. Will you use them, hand them over to the families, or give them to somebody else, to Giovanni de'Medici, to Pope Leo X maybe?'

Pierfrancesco did not answer. He had no idea what he would do with the debentures. He had to talk to Margherita about the papers. How would she react? Would she wield the power? How would Niccolò react if he, Pierfrancesco, gave the papers to the Pope? Just how much did Niccolò Macchiavelli like Piero Soderini? Many more of such questions circled in his mind.

The men separated. Niccolò first left the three others. Granacci wanted to accompany Pierfrancesco to the palace, but Pierfrancesco, lost in thoughts, waved him off. He said he would walk on with Jacopo Pontormo until he was almost in his home street.

During the visit to the monastery, Jacopo Pontormo had not spoken a word. He kept pace with Pierfrancesco. Pierfrancesco could tell Pontormo was still thinking about Fra Bartolommeo's design. Pierfrancesco asked, 'Fra Bartolommeo seems to be a master of composition. Will your art resemble his?'
Jacopo Pontormo was quick to respond. He said, 'no, no! I still believe in a good composition, but there is more to life than God's order. God allowed for a lot of freedom in his world. All is chaos around us. God created the world out of chaos; much of the chaos remained. How can one stay disciplined, draw tranquil scenes and change and change and change one's designs in drawings until one has found the ultimate harmony of forms? Forms should come spontaneously on the canvas, created and ordained by the artist's natural talent. How can one paint by subduing one's emotions on the canvas? The artist's emotions should be in the painting! My best pictures, the ones that give me most satisfaction, must reflect the chaos of our world. They will show a lot of movement of bodies, nude bodies like Michelangelo represented, strong colours and contrasts of hues, strong shades, figures that show the elation of the spirit in longer features than merely present in nature, and poetic grace expressed in the scenes. I don't care too much for perspective and balance and symmetry! My figures will express what I feel and they will try to arouse strong feelings in my viewers, too. I want paintings that are not just fine and beautiful, not just nice things to hang on the wall of grand halls, but pictures that draw viewers to them, puzzle them, make them wonder about what I wanted to tell. The new art may still produce Madonnas and Crucifixions, but it will be an art that has a lot more soul and power than current pictures. The new art will have an existence of its own, be a separate universe in its frame, and be a very special object, instead of just a nice decoration.'
'Yet, people often seek only decoration, just a fine object, with art,' Pierfrancesco remarked.
'I know,' Jacopo Pontormo replied. He sighed. 'The new art will be another kind of art. I suppose the two kinds of art will continue to exist side by side. I am afraid my art will not be

appreciated by many, but I also believe more and more the artist will receive more attention as a person in the future: how he lives, what he wanted to express, why he wanted to paint in a certain way. This kind of painting will demand much more from the painter, and also a lot more from the viewer, meaning less viewers will be able to appreciate this new art. So be it!'
'Well then,' Pierfrancesco said, 'I hope many commissioners will like this new kind of art too, for otherwise you may end a very poor man!'
Jacopo Pontormo laughed. 'Oh, I will produce both kinds of pictures,' he said.

Not so far from the Borgo Santi Apostoli, Pierfrancesco's and Pontormo's routes separated. Pierfrancesco walked the last few streets to the Borgo Santi Apostoli alone, and that was an error he should not have let to happen.

When he was almost inside the Borgo Santi Apostoli, a cart driven by a horse passed. Pierfrancesco stepped aside to give way for the cart. He strode in the narrow space between the wall and the cart, which really rode too close to his side. One man drove the cart; another one sat behind, legs dangling from the platform, looking to the other side of the street. The horse pushed Pierfrancesco to the wall. The horse passed by. Then, the man in front and the man behind looked coolly, emotionless at Pierfrancesco, and jumped from the cart. Pierfrancesco was blocked between the cart and the two men. He was aware of the danger too late. Too late he saw the leather jackets and the leather calzone of the men, their long daggers, their grim, revengeful eyes. Too late he recognised the faces. Something hit his head from behind. The dim light in the alley turned to black.

Chapter Seven. Sunday July, 24 1513. Castello di Gabbiano

Pierfrancesco woke with a terrible headache. He was thirsty, but his mouth was gagged. A foul-smelling, dirty cloth was tied over his mouth, and bound behind his head. The cloth tore at the sides of his lips and tasted of oils. He could not move his hands. His arms were tied behind his back; even his wrists and fingers were kept together by leather thongs. He lay on wooden planks that moved. He was tossed to left and right. He surmised he was inside the cart that had cornered him in the street a while ago. He saw the wooden planks under him. He could not see where he was, for a brown, heavy cloth lay over him, covered his body and legs and feet to over his head. The cloth was roughly woven; it let some sunlight pass. Pierfrancesco knew therefore it was still day, not evening or night, but he could not tell for how long he had remained unconscious after having been knocked on the head. He remembered well what had happened just before he had been hit. He groaned and shifted his weight. His shoulders hurt. His arms and legs would be chafed from the friction over the planks. Splinters of wood pinched in his hands. The cart moved slowly, painstakingly, bumping him often in sudden jerks to left or right, probably when the wheels passed in the holes of the road. Pierfrancesco therefore thought he was outside Florence, in the countryside.

The men that drove the cart did not speak. Pierfrancesco did not hear anybody say a single word. He did not hear any of the normal noises of the city: ox-carts being driven by, people yelling, horses neighing, water-sellers crying, dogs barking, or even the shouts of guards. The cart must have passed the gates of the city and drove on a road already far in the country. He eased himself in a more comfortable position. He could turn over only with difficulty. Lying on his back was impossible, for he then lay on his arms and hands, which hurt even more, and with the cloth on his nose he had it hard to breathe. He almost suffocated under the cloth. He suffered from the heat of the day. He sweated profusely, and moved his head desperately to open a fold and get more air. The cloth stank foully. He could only lay sideways.

The cart drove on for a long time. Pierfrancesco could not tell how long it had advanced, for he had lost all account of time. When the light under the cloth dimmed, as evening fell, the horse dragged on even more slowly. Pierfrancesco sensed the cart rolled upwards, on a hill, in the mountains. Some time later the road must have become very steep, for Pierfrancesco slid with his feet to the back side of the cart. The cart stabilised, tossed less on a levelled road. The cart stopped.

Pierfrancesco heard shouts. Then, hands drew the cloth away from him. It was evening outside, the sun had set. Pierfrancesco saw the last orange rays of the sun disappear over the horizon. He tried to sit up. A hand helped him with that. He was still in the cart he remembered having seen in the alley of Florence. Two men dressed in leather jackets looked at him with uninterested eyes. One man held him up; the other drew him from the cart. Pierfrancesco fell hard on the earthen ground. The two men helped him on his feet, but he could not walk, for his feet and legs were tied together. One of the men unsheathed a long dagger and cut the ropes from his legs. Pierfrancesco could walk and run, and he looked frantically around for a wood to run to, but the two men held him firmly. The men did not cut the ropes around his arms and hands, and they did not remove the gag from his mouth. One of the men told him to move, pried him with the dagger. While the other man still held him, Pierfrancesco stumbled forward.

He looked around. The cart stood outside the gate of a castle. Pierfrancesco saw the massive walls, a large round tower at each end, and a high square tower above the gate. The castle was a fortress, rough, ugly, simple, not the pleasure palace of a wealthy Florentine, rather an ancient family castle of people used to live primarily in the country. He saw no people but the two bandits, and that surprised him. The castles in the mountains above Florence were usually also farms. Vineyards and grain fields always surrounded the castles. Pierfrancesco ventured a look behind, over his shoulders. One of the bandits kicked him with a fist into his side, so that he fell. He stood up and looked again. The castle had been built high, on a mound, dominating the Tuscan countryside of rolling hills, high pine trees and vineyards on the slopes. He was in wine country, all right, but the vines were in disarray; grasses and herbs and wild flowers grew above the vines, and the vines looked as if nobody had worked on them for ages. Pierfrancesco thought the castle abandoned. The bandits might have found it without occupants, and used it as a temporary base.

The men pushed Pierfrancesco on, under the gate, through open, thick and strong oak doors strengthened with much iron, into the courtyard. The courtyard was almost square; four round towers stood at each corner. He saw only a few windows in the walls, all rectangular, rather small, long, set in high walls of bevelled stones. Even the courtyard was a fortress! He found not one graceful item on the walls or in the courtyard, no sculpture, no iron ornament. This was not a large castle, Pierfrancesco thought, more the castle of a fierce bandit nobleman than the pleasure manor of a Florentine merchant.

The men drew Pierfrancesco on to the round tower Pierfrancesco had seen on the left from the outside. They dragged him through a small, low door, and instead of ascending the winding stairs upwards, they took him down a straight staircase into the entrails of the castle. Pierfrancesco went only a few stairs deep. Then he stood in the last light of the day that seeped through very high-set, small mullioned windows, and in the reddish light of torches burning along the walls of a very long cellar.
The hall was long, but not very wide, and arch-vaulted. Pierfrancesco understood this cellar-hall ran under the entire left part of the castle, from round tower to round tower. It might have been a wine-cellar, but Pierfrancesco saw no wine-vats. At the end of the hall were three cells of iron bars, constructed against the leftmost wall. The men pushed him roughly in the first cell, closed the iron doors and drew double chains around the door, closing the bars with a lock. Again Pierfrancesco thought these cells might have been places where the owner of the castle protected his best wines.
Pierfrancesco was imprisoned in a cellar dungeon. One of the men threw a piece of bread through the iron bars. In a corner stood a wooden bucket that stank, and over which hovered tens of flies. A large jar and a wooden cup stood on the other side. The men left Pierfrancesco in the cell and left. Only one torch kept burning on the entrance side of the hall. The shadows of the men danced on the walls as they went up the stairs. It would soon be night.

Pierfrancesco needed to drink desperately, but his mouth was still gagged, his hands still tied together. He brought his face to an iron bar and rubbed his face many times up and down along the bar, until the gag shifted and moved over his chin, freeing his lips. In the effort he tore the ends of his lips open. He could breathe better now. He looked for something to cut his ropes with. The hall was large, but wiped clean around the cells. Not one object of iron or of wood lay near the cells. On the far other side stood a table propped against a wall, and a few old, dust-covered and worm-eaten chairs, way too far, out of reach. Pierfrancesco felt at the bars with his hands, behind his back. The bars were rusted. He felt every bar of the cell, as well as the chains on the iron door. One of the bars of the doors was particularly rusted and,

contrary to all the other bars, this one had a square profile. Pierfrancesco rubbed the ropes against this bar, up and down, moving his entire body against the bars. He worked a very long time, almost until he was exhausted. Night fell outside and only the last embers of the torch gave him a little light. His rope broke. Then he started on the leather thongs that tied his hands. By the time these broke too, the torch had burnt out, and he stood in total darkness. He remembered where the jug was, hoped it would contain water. He tasted a little of the water and found it fresh. He drank. He drank almost the entire jug. He emptied his bowels in the bucket on the other side.

Pierfrancesco was not afraid of the dark, nor of the animals he heard shuffling around in the hall, rats and mice, no doubt. He was afraid because he was alone with his thoughts, and Pierfrancesco had a vivid imagination. His thoughts amplified the dire situation he was in. He imagined being left to rot in the cell, left to starve, be tortured and killed. He chased such thoughts by thinking of Margherita and by praying to God, the Virgin and Child and all the Saints he knew, praying for liberation by an angel like Saint Peter had been liberated from his prison in Rome.

It was cold in the cellar. Pierfrancesco longed for the heath of the summer day. He crouched against the door, crossed his arms before his chest and plied his legs up against them. He trembled from the cold in small spasmodic quivers, but sleep came rapidly.

Pierfrancesco awoke from the cold before dawn. A thunderstorm raged outside. The winds howled, raindrops pelted on the stones of the courtyard, and water spat in the cellar through the high windows. Lightning flashed the cellar white, and a little later thunder roiled ominously through the hall and reverberated on the walls. The storm did not last long, but Pierfrancesco sought not to sleep again. He drank the last water of the jug, and crouched in a corner. After dawn, he stood and paced up and down the cell. He saw a rat disappear with a last piece of the bread. Other rats had gnawed at the rest during the night. Pierfrancesco ran a little along the bars of his cell to smoothen his muscles. He jumped a few times. He drew his body up on his arms against the iron bars. He waited.

Pierfrancesco waited the entire morning and part of the afternoon. The cellar warmed up steadily, but remained fresh. Nobody entered the hall to give him bread or water. Pierfrancesco was hungry. He heard not one human sound outside.

Late in the afternoon, he thought he heard shouts. Horses' hooves clattered in the courtyard. Men shouted near the windows above, and shadows of men passed there. Pierfrancesco stood, struck the dirt from his jacket and shirt and trousers, and stood to confront his gaolers with dignity. His heart thumped from fear and expectation.

Bolts shifted. Five men stepped in the cellar, coming from the door through which Pierfrancesco had been brought in. The men walked arrogantly, faces stern, hard, eyes filled with disdain. Pierfrancesco recognised the four leather-dressed men. He had seen them at one or other time during the previous attacks on him. Two were the same as those who had been around when Fra Jacopino and Father Alessio had been killed. The third man was the one who had tried to interrogate him when he had protected Margherita. This man was obviously the leader of the bandits. The fourth man, he thought had seen around the Calcio field the day his cousin had been killed. The men spoke Spanish to each other. They spoke loudly, and they spoke about Pierfrancesco, because they kept looking at him all the time. The fifth man, Pierfrancesco had not seen before. That man was a surprise.

The man was dressed in a long red, coarse woollen robe, which fell almost to his feet. He had red leather boots on, and a fine silk scarlet band tied the robe around his middle, closed with a silver buckle at the side. A heavy golden chain hung around his neck. The chain fell long on the man's chest, and on the chain hung a large golden, enamelled crucifix, a crucifix studded with five red stones, rubies no doubt. Pierfrancesco also remarked on one of the man's fingers of the right hand a golden ring, with a large black stone. This man was a cardinal or an archbishop!

The man stopped before the cell, studied Pierfrancesco through the openings in the bars. Pierfrancesco summoned all his strength to stare back at the man, equally studying him. The man had no beard. He was very clean-shaven. He was an old man, a very old man, but few wrinkles had redrawn his altogether open face. He had a tight and sunburnt, healthy skin, a face that was neither fleshy nor emaciated. His face was elegant, finely sculpted, and almost tender. His nose was long and straight, planted above thin lips, under elongated eyes and thin eyebrows. The man's eyes were of a strange mixture of yellow and green and brown rays, which opened and closed as the man stared. The eyes were calm, staring fixedly, rarely moving. The man looked gently, even mildly, as if he pitied Pierfrancesco. Pierfrancesco had an uneasy feeling when he looked in his turn at the man, for he would never have thought a man with such a compassionate face capable of cold murder. Pierfrancesco thought of this man as of a gentle bishop, blessing his flock and distributing alms and food to the poor. He did not see an evil-doer and a gaoler. The man was tall and slender and he moved with tranquil elegance, devising Pierfrancesco from all sides. When the man stepped around the cell, Pierfrancesco moved with him. Only then did Pierfrancesco see icy determination in the eyes, and an arrogant smile distorted the face to a cruel frown.

The cardinal spoke Tuscan. He ordered the men out of the cellar. Only the Neapolitan-Spanish leader remained with the cardinal.
The cardinal spoke. 'So, young Borgherini, you have already cut your ropes, I see. You are a crafty little nuisance of a boy!' He paused, and the continued in a warm voice that was used to preach soothingly, 'we do not need to speak in mysteries, don't we? You and I know what we are after! You have been to the Monastery of San Marco. No doubt you have found out where the secret is. Tell me what you have learnt there.'
Pierfrancesco did not reply. He stared at the cardinal and tried to grin, but supposed his mouth only made a quivering spasm.
The man continued, 'you had better answer me, young insolent! We have many means to make you speak. We may for instance bring your girlfriend here too, that Margherita Acciaiuoli!'

Pierfrancesco shouted in anger, 'if you hurt Margherita just a little bit, I will kill you! Do you realise what you have done? You have imprisoned a Borgherini. Imprisoning a Borgherini or an Acciaiuoli will bring the militia of Florence here. The Medici guards will come and the Papal guards and the good citizens of Florence too, all in arms! Nobody, you hear, nobody shall dare to imprison a free man of Florence! Open this door and let me go while you can, otherwise you will be punished! Your dried-out body will bounce in the wind, hanging from the towers of the Palazzo della Signoria!'

The cardinal burst out in laughter and his laughs filled the cellar. He moved yet a pace closer and said, 'hear, hear! The young lion roars! His girlfriend has a lion and the boy only roses, but the rose-boy thinks he is a lion! The young lion is in a cage, ready to be punished if he is

not gentle and polite. Do we have to teach you manners, puppy? Nobody is going to touch me, Borgherini! And you are going to talk, one way or the other, gently and politely, or in agony by force. The choice is yours, but talk you will!'

Pierfrancesco was still not over his surprise. The man spoke with a low, gentle voice, slowly and distinctly, no doubt practised to speak in churches and in synods of bishops and in chapters of monks.
The cardinal repeated, 'what have you learnt at San Marco? Where is the treasure of the Preacher? Tell me!' He thundered these last words at Pierfrancesco.

'I know of no treasure,' Pierfrancesco replied. 'We were at San Marco with painters to look at the frescoes on the walls.'
'Liar,' the cardinal shouted. 'You were with Macchiavelli. Macchiavelli is not interested in paintings. Macchiavelli is interested in power. You solved the secret the monks of San Marco and of Santa Maria Novella conspired to keep hidden, and then passed on to you. I want that secret! You are in my hands and I can crush you. I can do with you what I want. Tell me the secret!'
'I know of no treasure,' Pierfrancesco repeated stubbornly – and he thought, foolishly. 'I never understood the gibberish the monks gave me. I threw it all away.'
'No, you didn't!,' the Neapolitan intervened. 'You had many meetings with your friends, the painters, and with Ser Niccolò Macchiavelli. We know all about that. So, speak up!'
Pierfrancesco kept his silence.
'Well,' the cardinal concluded. 'If you desire to remain silent, we will make you speak.'
He addressed the Neapolitan, 'get your men back in here. Tie the Borgherini's hands at his back. Get long ropes.'

The Neapolitan leader grinned, went out of the door. An instant later he returned with three of his men. They opened the cell. Pierfrancesco fought the men, but he received fists in his belly, winding him, and he was slapped in the face so hard he almost fainted. The men tied his hands at his back, tore off his jacket and shirt. Pierfrancesco stood with nude chest in the centre of the hall. One of the bandits threw a thick rope over an iron beam that ran from one arch to another, tied one end of the rope to Pierfrancesco's arms and tugged at the other end, so that Pierfrancesco's arms were jerked upwards. Intense pain shot in Pierfrancesco's shoulders. He expected to be hauled in the air, but the men kept him on the ground. Pierfrancesco stood with the tips of his toes on the stones of the cellar floor.

'Wait,' the cardinal ordered. He said, 'Pierfrancesco Borgherini, do you know the good old method of inflicting pain in Florence? I suppose you have heard of the strappado! You just felt a little pain. Soon, we are going to draw you up on the rope, high up, as high as that bar. At first you will not go so high. Your body will hang from your arms at your back, and that will cause pain. We will drop you to the floor. You may break a bone or two. Then, we will drag you upwards again, a little higher, and we will drop you again. You will not fall to the floor, this time. Just before hitting the ground we will draw the rope up again. That will jerk your arms upwards while your body continues to drop, causing you excruciating pain. We will hold you in the strappado as many times as needed; each time we will drop you from higher up. You will squeal like a baby, and you will wish to be dead to escape from the pain, but there will be no escape. We have time, you see! We have all day and all night and all of tomorrow. You will faint and we will reviven you and draw you up, again and again. If that is not enough, we will brand you with red-hot irons on the chest. You will speak, you hear!'

‘You are a disgrace to your faith, cardinal!’ Pierfrancesco spat out.
‘The treasure was stolen from the Church and has to return to the Church, thief,’ the cardinal shouted. ‘I will leave you now. Think about your punishment. Do not forget that you will speak. We will be back in a few moments. When we come once more through that door, there, we will start the strappado immediately. Think and think well. We can hold you as long as we want. Tell us what you know!’
Pierfrancesco was in agony, for the pain in his shoulders augmented each moment, and he was afraid of what would happen next, but he was also raveningly mad at the men that were about to torture him. He hissed, ‘go to hell, cardinal!’
The men tied the rope to an iron ring on the wall, so that Pierfrancesco was drawn a little higher. His toes did not reach the ground anymore; his pain was worse. Then the men left the cellar. Pierfrancesco groaned and wept, certain that the bandits would be drinking wine to make them even more impervious to his suffering. They would enjoy the torture. He hung in the cellar.

After a long time, near sunset, a time that felt like an eternity to Pierfrancesco, the door opened and three men entered, the cardinal and two Neapolitans.
The cardinal said, ‘will you talk now, boy?’
‘Go to hell,’ Pierfrancesco cried. He prayed the Virgin and the Child for strength and a miracle.
The two Neapolitans went to the ring, and untied the rope. Pierfrancesco enjoyed a temporary relief from pain when he touched the ground with the flat of his feet. He grunted.
‘Draw him up!’ the cardinal cried.
The two bandits drew on the rope and Pierfrancesco felt a terrible pain in his shoulders and arms while his body went up in the air. He was suspended on his arms in mid-air, two feet above the ground, and the Neapolitans held him there for a time. Pierfrancesco almost fainted from the pain.
‘Tell us what you found,’ the cardinal shouted again. He tugged at Pierfrancesco’s feet. Pierfrancesco cried out.

Suddenly, Pierfrancesco heard shouts in the courtyard of the castle, the clattering of horse-hooves on the cobblestones, and the clank of arms. The cardinal looked around, amazed, and the Neapolitans looked up at the windows from where the sounds came, equally surprised by the noise. They heard a cry of pain, more shouting, and fighting outside. Swords clang on swords. Then, a falconet fired and the sound rolled like thunder in the cellar. The Neapolitans dropped the rope. Pierfrancesco fell to the ground. He damped the fall with his feet, succeeded but little in that, and then fell hard on his shoulders. He cried out once more in pain and did not attempt to move. He rolled over to ease the pain in his shoulders somewhat, but the pain continued to haunt him. He wept and cried. He looked at the cardinal. The face of the man was a mask of horror and hatred. The calm elegance gave way for wild looks of terror. The Neapolitans stood equally transfixed. Pierfrancesco wondered what was happening outside the cellar. The shouts stopped. He heard many men running into the tower, up the stairs, crying battle cries he could not make out. He looked at the door.

The cardinal was the first to realise he was on the brink of a catastrophe. He cried, ‘leave him!’ and he pointed to a small door on the opposite side of the cellar, a door that seemed to lead to the second tower. The three men let Pierfrancesco lying. He groaned on the cold stones of the cellar. The torturers ran for the door, the cardinal in the lead.

The door of the cellar, the door of the first tower, was thrown open. Several men burst in, men armed with halberds, lances, end old rusted swords. The men were no soldiers, no guards; none of them wore a uniform of some sorts. They stormed forwards without fear, after the Neapolitans. The cardinal opened the door on the opposite side and disappeared in the black opening. The Neapolitans followed, slammed the thick wooden door shut, and Pierfrancesco heard iron bolts being drawn. The men that had assaulted the cellar banged against the door. It did not yield.
A man called, 'Baccio! Where is Baccio? We need the falconet!'
Pierfrancesco cried and at last one of the assailants turned and knelt beside Pierfrancesco.
'Well, well, my friend,' Bachiacca grinned, 'it seems we were right on time! You had a taste of the strappado, hadn't you? I hope it was just a little taste! Don't fear, it is all over now!'
Bachiacca then called very loudly to the others, 'we have found him! He is alive! Pierfrancesco has been found!'
Other voices relayed through the door and the windows, 'Pierfrancesco has been found! He is alive!'
Pierfrancesco managed a smile. Bachiacca patted Pierfrancesco's head in sympathy. He unsheathed his dagger and cut the ropes that tied Pierfrancesco. He helped Pierfrancesco stand. Pierfrancesco embraced Bachiacca and wept again, this time of joy. He could not stand on his feet. Bachiacca held him up.

A man dressed entirely in black, holding a naked and bloodied sword in his hand, entered the cellar, came up to Pierfrancesco and Bachiacca, and said, 'the fight in the courtyard is finished. Five hoodlums fought us. We killed two, wound a third, but two fled in the second tower. The wounded one also fled'
Niccolò Macchiavelli looked at Pierfrancesco then, 'are you all right, my friend?'
'Yes, I'm fine. I feel like a chicken tied on a string, though,' Pierfrancesco managed to say.
'the cardinal and two more Neapolitans have run also to the second tower, through there!' He pointed at the small door.

Pierfrancesco saw a bulky man step through the door. He recognised his father's architect, Baccio d'Agnolo. Pierfrancesco had never seen the jovial man armed before. Now, Baccio wore two daggers in his belt, and leather harness over wool padding on his chest so that he looked twice as massive as he normally was. A very long ugly sword hung in his scabbard, and he carried a falconet. Baccio grinned at Pierfrancesco, but then the other men drew Baccio to the opposite door. Baccio loaded his falconet with powder and an iron ball as thick as a fist. He braced himself on his two stout legs, and another man brought fire to the weapon. The powder hissed, sparkled, and then the deflagration of the powder shot the ball to the door. Baccio was thrown backwards, but another man held him standing. The door cracked in an enormous cloud of burnt, acrid power, dust and wood splinters. The men cheered and hacked with halberds at the rest of the wood. They kicked the door aside and ran into the tower.
Two more men ran now into the cellar, and then a third. Andrea del Sarto and Jacopo Pontormo, each armed with a sword, ran to Pierfrancesco, followed by Ser Giovanni Rustici.
'The castle is ours!' they cried. 'We had better leave now.'
Bachiacca and Andrea del Sarto held Pierfrancesco between them. They took Pierfrancesco's shoulders, but Pierfrancesco cried out from pain. So they held him simply at the chest and middle, and made him walk up the stairs, out of the cellar.

The sun had set when Pierfrancesco emerged from the door of the leftmost tower. He had a vision in the courtyard, a vision that reminded him of the Apocalypse. Men with torches waited for him. Phantom shadows flickered in the torchlight. In the middle of the yard

pranced two massive destriers, on which sat two large men dressed in silver harnesses, helmets on their heads, brandishing long swords. The horses wore long cloths, as if they had been fighting in a tournament, and the cloths were of the colours of the Acciaiuoli and the Borgherini, and the men were Salvi di Francesco dei Borgherini and Roberto di Donato dei Acciaiuoli. The warriors in the courtyard, all armed to the teeth, wore the liveries of the rampant lion of the Acciaiuoli and the pink roses of the Borgherini. They were the servants of the two houses. Pierfrancesco's heart elated to see his two fathers thus defend the rights of Florence. Then he saw a large gonfalon between two other, swirling in the wind. He saw a white flag with a red Virgin and Child in it, a Sedes Sapientiae, and he made a sign of the cross. The other gonfalons were the rampant lion of the Acciaiuoli and the red-and-yellow banner with a stripe of roses of the Borgherini.

At least twenty men were at arms in the courtyard. Pierfrancesco saw two corpses in leather jackets lying near a wall close to the door of the tower. Out of the tower strode Niccolò Macchiavelli, shouting orders like a condottiere, sword still in hand.
'We leave the castle! Our business is finished here!' he cried. 'Everybody out! On the horses! The other bandits have escaped by the second tower. In pursuit!'
The men ran through the gates. They pushed Pierfrancesco on. Pierfrancesco ran also now.
'The cardinal!' he cried to Niccolò.
Niccolò stopped running. He looked at Pierfrancesco in surprise. 'What cardinal?' he asked.
'There was a cardinal with two Neapolitans in the cellar. They ran to the second tower. Catch the cardinal!'
'Yes, we will,' replied Niccolò. 'Our men are pursuing them.' He ran on.

Pierfrancesco, Andrea del Sarto, Jacopo Pontormo and Bachiacca ran down the hill. Two bends further, many horses grazed in a field, guarded by a few men.
'On the horses,' Macchiavelli bellowed. 'Bring young Pierfrancesco to safety! We have to pursue the bandits!'
Andrea del Sarto jumped on a palfrey and Jacopo Pontormo helped Pierfrancesco behind Andrea. There were not enough horses for everybody. Andrea drove his horse to a gallop, back to Florence. Men ran after them.

They rode at large speed down the hills, into the valley of the Arno River. Andrea brought Pierfrancesco not to the Borgherini palace, but to the Palazzo Acciaiuoli. This was the headquarters of the expedition. Men at arms walked in the Borgo Santi Apostoli. Servants of the Acciaiuoli and of the Borgherini together, in armour, waited for them at the gates and in the cortile. Torches burned everywhere. Francesco Granacci was there, and seemed in command of the courtyard. A little later, Jacopo Pontormo also stormed into the palace on horse. Granacci helped Pierfrancesco from the palfrey.
A high scream pierced the night. Pierfrancesco was thrown to a column of the cortile, as a body catapulted on to him. Margherita Acciaiuoli covered him with kisses, weeping and laughing at the same time. Other women erupted from the doors and surrounded Pierfrancesco. Roberto di Donato's wife was there, and Pierfrancesco's mother. He smiled through his kisses. The women drew Pierfrancesco to the first floor, to a bedroom, and forced him on a bed. Two doctors and a woman undressed him. Margherita chased the other women out, but the women drew her out, too. The doctors tended to his wounds. Then, more women entered and they tended him sweetly, like Irene the wounded Sebastian.

Later, Pierfrancesco lay heavenly in a huge bed of the Acciaiuoli, ointments on his wounds, refreshed and content. The women had also brought him to eat. A group of men entered

boisterously his room. Francesco Granacci came in, Andrea del Sarto and Jacopo Pontormo, Niccolò Macchiavelli with Salvi and Roberto di Donato. Margherita was allowed in.

'How did you find me?' Pierfrancesco asked.
Granacci tapped on the shoulders of a smiling but shy Jacopo Pontormo. 'Here is the hero of the day,' he said. 'Jacopo, by pure chance, saw you being caught near the Borgo Santi Apostoli. He could not intervene then, for he was not armed. He didn't lose his mind! He followed the cart from a distance, up to the castle. Then he ran back to Florence. He was more dead than alive from sheer exhaustion when he arrived at my studio. He drank two bottles of wine before he could speak!'
Pontormo made a sign as if Granacci had not all his wits.
Granacci continued, 'we raised our friends of the Arte dei Medici e Speziali, the Guild of Doctors and Druggists, of the Pharmacies and the Painters, our Guild.'
It was this gonfalon of the Guild of Doctors that Pierfrancesco had seen in the castle: the white gonfalon with a Virgin and Child, the Madonna of the Rose.
'We could not let your parents unknowing of your whereabouts,' Granacci continued, 'so we told your father and also Roberto di Donato. We joined our forces. We had close to fifty men to attack the castle. Your father and Roberto di Donato wanted to call on the militia of Florence, on the Otto di Guardia and on the Medici, but Niccolò withheld them. Also, Jacopo Pontormo had not seen more than five, six men at the castle. We asked Niccolò to organise our expedition. We left our horses below the hill until our men on foot arrived. Then we took the castle by surprise, in the evening.

'What was the castle I was kept a prisoner in?' Pierfrancesco asked.
Everybody looked at Niccolò Macchiavelli. Pierfrancesco wondered why the others were a little embarrassed when Macchiavelli did not answer immediately. Niccolò hesitated; then he said, 'it was the Castello di Gabbiano.'
Pierfrancesco should probably have known that castle, but he didn't.
Macchiavelli continued, 'the Castello di Gabbiano was formerly the fortress of the Soderini family. Ever since Piero Soderini went in exile, it stood abandoned. We do not know who the people were who brought you there.'
Pierfrancesco did not push his question further, but a clearer picture was forming in his mind.
Niccolò Macchiavelli said, 'I proposed not to alarm Florence, because then the secret would be known by everybody, and God only could predict the consequences! We might have had a war at our hands, a war among the families of Florence. The Soderini still have many friends and clients in the city. We only told the Guild of Doctors that one of our men was illegally held and being tortured. They answered our call without further questioning. We liberated you.'

It was decided Pierfrancesco would remain in the Palazzo Acciaiuoli until he had completely recovered. Salvi laughed and said the recovery might last long with Margherita lovingly looking after his son. Everybody smiled and they left the room proudly, assured of once more having well defended a citizen of Florence.
Pierfrancesco, however, asked Margherita, Granacci and Macchiavelli to stay on for a moment.

When the men and women had left the room, Pierfrancesco told, 'I saw a cardinal in the castle. He was the one who wanted to torture me. He was the leader who has ordered the killing of the monks and of my cousin.' Pierfrancesco then described the cardinal.

Niccolò Macchiavelli reacted first, saying, shame showing in his voice, 'yes, Pierfrancesco. You already made the connection, I can tell. The man you describe is indeed Cardinal Francesco Soderini!'
Granacci and Margherita gasped.
Niccolò continued, 'I saw a man dressed in red robes. I feared the truth. He and the men dressed in leather escaped through the small door at the other end of the cellar, and then through a back door of the second tower. Horses must have been waiting for them outside, on the other side of the castle. It was dark. I could not distinguish the men. When they rode off, we were on foot. We had to run to where our horses stood, down the hill, and when we pursued the men, we could not catch them. They escaped! Your description fits the cardinal. I know him well. I saw him often together with his brother, with Piero Soderini. When Jacopo Pontormo described the castle, I knew it was the Soderini castle. I brought the men there. Your fathers wanted to set fire to the castle of Gabbiano, and to call in the Medici. I stopped them, for we surely would have had a bloodbath.'

Pierfrancesco asked, 'what do you know about the cardinal? Why would he seek the secret with such vehemence?'
'Lorenzo Il Magnifico secured the bishopric of Volterra for Francesco Soderini. You know the importance of Volterra to the Medici, the importance of having friendly people, almost family, controlling high places in the alum capital. But Francesco resigned from that office four years ago for his nephew Giuliano. He must be about sixty years old now, an old but indestructible man. He is a priest, ordained in San Lorenzo, the Medici church. He was an assistant to Pope Sixtus IV and ever since worked much in the Curia of Rome. When Piero Soderini led the Republic, he returned to Florence and worked, like me, as a diplomat to his brother.
About ten, eleven years ago, we were ambassadors together to Cesare Borgia, the son of Pope Alexander VI. We worked together for six months, so I know the cardinal intimately. I was fascinated much by Cesare, by his abilities as a statesman and as a condottiere, and so was Francesco.
In 1503, Francesco was promoted to cardinal on special request of King Louis XII of France, the result of another of his embassies. He returned to Rome then.
Francesco is a brilliant man, a student of law at the University of Pisa, and a man entirely devoted to Florence and to the Church. He was also a confident and friend of Pope Julius II. He may have hoped therefore to be appointed Pope instead of Giovanni de'Medici, but Julius always preferred Giovanni. Giovanni had the Medici's ease and calm of age-old families. Francesco was too anxious for Julius, too radical. Still, I do not count anymore the titles Cardinal Francesco received, from abbots and popes and kings, many of which he abandoned later.
Francesco Soderini is intelligent, unscrupulous in his designs, ruthless, ambitious, adventurous, and pious. He does not shy away from audacious schemes and justifies his actions in the belief he works for the divine aims of the Church. He can be very dangerous. He will not hesitate to call a revolt, initiate a war, intrigue with kings, or depose a pope, if he thinks such would be best for the Church. I had not thought him capable of cold-blooded murder, though.'

Margherita asked to Niccolò, 'Ser Macchiavelli, where do you stand? You were a friend of Piero Soderini, a friend surely also of his brother, this Cardinal Francesco. From what Pierfrancesco told us, the cardinal knew you had been at San Marco's. The cardinal knows about the secret. Just what is your role in all this? What can we expect from you? On what side are you?'

Macchiavelli did not answer. He looked over all his friends with piercing eyes, probing for suspicions and reproof. He saw but interrogating faces.

Pierfrancesco said, 'you served Piero Soderini. You must have had some esteem for him.'
'Yes,' Macchiavelli replied. 'Yes, I served Piero Soderini. I respected him and thought of him only when I served him, and not of me. Piero was considerate to me, paid me with honour and shared honours with me.'

Niccolò Macchiavelli was sad. He lowered his head, and then said in a humble voice, 'I am a friend of the Soderini. Piero Soderini helped me, trusted me, promoted me, supported me and rewarded me. I admire Cardinal Francesco in many aspects. You believe therefore I betrayed your trust, don't you? You have reason to think that. I understand. Nevertheless, I tell you I did not know till this day the Soderini were involved. If truly Cardinal Francesco tortured you today, then I cannot condone what he did. I was close to Piero Soderini, not to Francesco. I do not believe Piero could have done what Francesco did. It is true that when I heard the Castello di Gabbiano was to be attacked, I hesitated, and convinced everybody not to call on the guards of the city, for the scandal would have been great. The Soderini still have many followers in this city. We might have provoked a revolt, more killing and murdering. I thought of all that and hesitated. I wanted to avoid more killing. Until this evening I did not know the Soderini were back in their castle, but I guess I feared that fact.'
Macchiavelli paused, then continued, 'I was drawn into this story with your friends the painters, Pierfrancesco, and I chose my side when I entered Granacci's studio. I would like to find the secret papers with you, but if you cannot trust me I will return to my farm.'

Pierfrancesco pondered over Niccolò's words. He looked at Margherita. She closed her eyes briefly. Pierfrancesco said, 'no, Ser Niccolò Macchiavelli. I trust you! I saw you lead the men that liberated me. The cardinal would have known more if you had betrayed us. It makes sense that our adversary is a Soderini. Soderini is the third family name mentioned in the secret message. The monks of San Marco must have given a key to Cardinal Francesco, ordered to do so by Fra Gerolamo Savonarola. I suppose ever since, for fifteen years, the cardinal watched what happened at San Marco. Fra Jacopino has not kept silence. The cardinal must have heard Fra Jacopino wanted to hand over the secret. Was he not the confessor of San Marco, of Fra Bartolommeo? Cardinal Francesco guessed what the secret was about. He opposed Giovanni de'Medici's election to the Papacy. He is still opposed to Medici supremacy over Florence and Italy. The secret paper would help him in his battle. It is not certain Piero Soderini knows about all this. I was surprised, too: the cardinal talked several times of a treasure, never of papers. He may not really know what is in the box!'
'With a treasure the cardinal could also wield power,' remarked Niccolò Macchiavelli.

'Yes,' Pierfrancesco said. 'Do you realise you are all in danger now? I doubt the cardinal has seen your faces well. You also entered the cellar only when he had fled. Yet, he knows you had been with me at San Marco. If he has not seen you at the castle today, he will find out in a day or two. He may try to take you and torture you too. Our story is not finished yet.'

'I am staying at Bachiacca's tonight,' Granacci answered. 'We will explain everything to del Sarto and to Pontormo, too. Niccolò has been invited at the Palazzo Borgherini; he will be safe there. Like Caesar said, the dice are tossed now. We must act quickly. Pierfrancesco, sleep well, for tomorrow morning first hour we have to confer on what to do next. The cardinal may need a day or two to get back on his feet. We must not give him that time. We

have been spied upon, been tracked, people have been killed around us, we ran after secret within secrets. We have to take the initiative. We know the face of our adversary. I say we take the initiative tomorrow morning.'
'Well spoken,' Margherita acquiesced. 'It is high time those thieves and murderers be taught who the Acciaiuoli, the Borgherini and the good citizens of Florence are! The Guilds are with us. I say: find them and smoke them out!'
Niccolò and Francesco laughed. Niccolò replied, 'well said, noble lady, but let us be cautious. I still would not like half the city fight the other half, and I would hate to see more corpses of Florentines hang from the tower of the Signoria. Stealth has been used against us, stealth we must use. Tonight we are safe. Tomorrow morning early, we meet, and then we decide what to do next. A good night's sleep will advise us how to act in wisdom.'

The men left. Pierfrancesco and Margherita remained alone in the room. They kissed and kissed. Pierfrancesco caressed her face. Margherita wriggled her body on the bed, covering Pierfrancesco with her wide robes.
The door cracked. Margherita jumped up and was in an instant back beside the bed like an innocent angel, striking at the folds of her robe. Roberto di Donato and his wife entered. Pierfrancesco thanked Roberto profusely. Roberto was proud of having done his duty as a man, as a Florentine and as the undisputed head of the Acciaiuoli. He was glad his wife was silent this time, and looked at him again with respectful and admiring eyes. He had gained the respect of his household as never before. They wished Pierfrancesco a good night. Roberto di Donato shook Pierfrancesco's hands several times. A little later they left the room. Roberto's wife drew her daughter with her.

Pierfrancesco slept, but he had terrible nightmares. He dreamt of hundreds of hands groping for him and hurting, of burning flames. He saw the vaults of a cellar, arched ceilings and iron bars. He tossed and tossed in the unfamiliar bed.
Then, a beautiful lady in nightgown ran to him in his dreams and embraced him, chased the nightmares, and that beauty was Margherita!

Chapter Eight. Monday July, 25 1513. San Jacopo sopr' Arno

Monday morning, at the crack of dawn, the painters and Niccolò Macchiavelli knocked at Pierfrancesco's room. Pierfrancesco was awake and up. He had bruises all over his body; large patches of blue covered his thighs, legs, arms and back, and his shoulders hurt very much. He was wrapped in bandages from top to toe. Despite the wounds he was fresh in the mind, alert, and out for revenge. He had no thoughts of fear. He could walk. Roberto di Donato offered a room to meet. He and Margherita joined the men. Salvi Borgherini arrived a little later.

Granacci spoke first. 'We still have two things to do: find Cardinal Soderini, extract the third key from him, and find the box. Since the Soderini does not know where the box is, and since he has no clue, we should first handle the cardinal.'
Niccolò answered,' we should think about how our enemy will react on his discomfiture of yesterday. Always anticipate on what your enemy's intentions are; otherwise he may surprise you.'
Granacci continued, 'The cardinal must be licking his wounds and remain in hiding. He will seek to know who attacked him yesterday. He did not really see who killed his men. He will have to listen to the rumours of Florence, but that may take a few days. One or other guildsman will surely talk. The cardinal will also be gathering more hired killers. He will hide in the meantime for fear of being attacked. He knows he has been found out. He will not doubt we know by now who was behind the killings of the monks and the attacks on Pierfrancesco, because Niccolò Macchiavelli is with us. He will be alert, protected, and plan more attacks.'
'Where might he hide?' Pierfrancesco asked.
'He could be in any fortress of his friends,' Granacci answered, 'or in any house of Florence.'
'I know where he has been the past week,' Andrea del Sarto offered suddenly. The men were quite astonished, for not only did Andrea rarely spoke at their meetings, he also had a very precious piece of information the others lacked.

Andrea added, reddening in the face, 'I know a woman called Lucrezia del Fede.' The painters smiled, for Andrea indeed knew that Lucrezia very well.
'She lives in the Drago ward of the Santo Spirito quarter, near the Porta San Frediano,' Andrea said. 'She has a house not far from the Palazzo Soderini. She told me there had been much commotion around the Palazzo Soderini last evening. The Soderini own a lot of houses there, near the Ponte alla Carraia. She knows a friend of a cousin who works in the palazzo. That woman told her Cardinal Francesco had returned to Florence, and lived in the Palazzo Soderini. He has been there on and off ever since Piero Soderini fled Florence.'
'Have you learnt all that this night?' Bachiacca asked, grinning.
Granacci quickly intervened, 'we cannot possibly attack the Palazzo Soderini. The cardinal has servants. He will be well protected.'
Niccolò asked, 'does he have a chapel in his palace?'
'No, he hasn't,' replied Andrea del Sarto. 'You did not let me say all. The cardinal holds mass in the little Church of San Jacopo sopr'Arno every day. Lucrezia confirmed that. He will probably be at the noon mass in that church today.'
The men looked at each other with blank faces.
'So what?' Bachiacca asked.

Niccolò Macchiavelli told him, ‘Andrea is right! We are all as stupid as asses! How do revolts start in Florence? How does mischief begin in Florence? Where can leaders be surprised when they least expect it?’
Nobody answered, but Andrea del Sarto smiled, for he could tell what Niccolò was thinking. He had had the same thought during the night.
Niccolò said, ‘in Florence, revolts start with an attempt of murder on the leading men, in the place where they expect it least, in church during mass! Leaders always seem to think they are safe in church. They think nobody would dare to desecrate a church with murder. Yet, was not Lorenzo Il Magnifico’ brother Giuliano murdered in the Duomo at the start of the Pazzi revolt, and Lorenzo nearly too? I am certain Cardinal Francesco’s defences will be down in San Jacopo sopr’Arno. There will be guards, but not many, and certainly not many inside the church. We have to surprise him there!’
‘We cannot possibly take a cardinal during mass,’ Jacopo Pontormo protested. ‘There will be many people inside the church, all of Francesco Soderini’s ward and quarter. We will stand no chance in the church!’

Andrea del Sarto reddened more. ‘I have Lucrezia waiting in the courtyard,’ he said. ‘She knows the church well!’
‘Isn’t that woman married?’ whispered Bachiacca to Granacci behind his hand. Granacci made a movement to silence him, smiling meekly.
‘Well man, what are you waiting for?’ bellowed Roberto di Donato. ‘Get the woman in here!’

Andrea sped through the door. A few moments later he was at the door again, drawing Lucrezia with him. The men snorted. Lucrezia was much woman. She had very thick blond hair that hung low over her shoulders and thus accentuated a sunburnt, more than beautiful face. She had large breasts and broad hips. She walked as if being admired and desired by men was her natural due. Margherita watched Pierfrancesco. She raised her eyebrows at him in warning. Granacci and Bachiacca knew of Lucrezia, but had not actually met her yet. They gleamed at a Florentine monna of such quality, while Niccolò Macchiavelli disapproved of their sudden open enthusiasm for the woman. Lucrezia would have been able to entice lust in a stone. Roberto di Donato straightened his back. He welcomed Lucrezia warmly, as if she were a noblewoman of Florence, drawing also anxious and reproachful glances from his daughter. Lucrezia was only a little impressed by the men in the palazzo. She blushed, but Pierfrancesco wondered whether she blushed because she was a little shy or whether she thus embellished her face to better cast an innocent spell on the men, especially on Granacci and Bachiacca. Jacopo Pontormo, who knew Lucrezia well and did not like her, raised his shoulders to Pierfrancesco. Roberto di Donato bade monna Lucrezia to sit. Lucrezia had suddenly several servants around her.

Niccolò Macchiavelli asked, ’monna Lucrezia, we thank you very much for coming here. We would like to know more about the Church of San Jacopo sopr’Arno. What kind of a church is it? I have never been in that church, did not even know it existed!’
Lucrezia answered and her low, warm, somewhat rough voice added to her sensuality. Bachiacca and Granacci visibly melted in place. They hung at her lips. Lucrezia spoke slowly, holding all attention on her. Her eyes looked alternatively humbly at the table, then flashed suddenly at each man in turn, with startling emphasis of a stare and a flirt. Pierfrancesco was not at all at ease when her bright light blue eyes caught his, and held his eyes.
‘San Jacopo sopr’Arno is a very old church, one of the oldest of Florence,’ started Lucrezia del Fede. ‘It is not a church of the Drago ward, but of Nicchio. It is but a little church, tucked away amidst houses in a small street, in the Borgo San Jacopo, along the Arno River. That is

why few people of Florence know of it. It is at some way from the Soderini palace. The church is but a small one, but it is a nice one, and its priests are gentle people who help much the poor of the quarter.'
'There are many, large, fine churches near the Palazzo Soderini,' Granacci said. 'Why would Cardinal Soderini sing masses at San Jacopo?'
'San Frediano is nearest to the palace, but the surroundings are very poor and therefore unsafe. Santa Maria del Carmine is grand, and about as far as San Jacopo for the Soderini, but many people go to mass there, people not really of the ward of the Soderini. Santo Spirito is the church of the quarter, much larger, but even more people attend mass there, and there are so many priests and monks there that the cardinal has it difficult to find a time that suits him to celebrate mass. That is what my cousin's friend told. The Soderini are at ease in San Jacopo, and can do there as they please. San Jacopo has but one entrance, in the Borgo San Jacopo. The rear side of the church is over the Arno River, no entrance there, and no Lungarno either!'

'I know the Borgo San Jacopo,' Bachiacca commented. It is a narrow street with high houses. That street can easily be guarded. The three side streets are alleys that only lead towards the quarter of Santo Spirito, not to any Lungarno along the river. Five men can easily hold the stretch of that street where the church is! The Soderini have only to walk the Via di Santo Spirito to get past the Ponte Santa Trinita and then they are in absolute safety! The church is right after the Palazzo Fresco di Baldi.'
'How can we get in and out the church?' Niccolò Macchiavelli asked.
'There is only one entrance, at the front, under the portico,' Lucrezia started to tell.
'Then we have to look for another solution,' Niccolò interrupted. 'We can get in but not out with the cardinal!'
Lucrezia smiled knowingly, looking at Andrea del Sarto – who reddened once more, for he must have told everything to his lover. Granacci was not happy with that. Lucrezia continued, 'you did not let me speak,' she said, 'there is a way to leave the church behind, in the sacristy, by a large window. That window cannot always be reached, though!' She paused, holding the men in expectation, and cherishing that.
'What do you mean?' Granacci asked.
'The sacristy is at the end of the nave, to the right of the choir. A small path, usually overgrown with bushes and grasses leads along the Arno to the behind of the sacristy. That path is often under water when the Arno rises. In summer, the Arno is low, however. If you want to leave unseen, then you could leave by that window, have a ladder waiting for you below, on the path. The path goes behind the Borgo San Jacopo to the Ponte Santa Trinita, behind the Palazzo Frescobaldi.'
'And then we are in no time at all in the Borgo Santi Apostoli and in the Palazzo Acciaiuoli or the Palazzo Borgherini!' Granacci affirmed, amazed at Lucrezia's smartness.

'So we arrive at San Jacopo sopr'Arno first, a few moments before the cardinal, take the cardinal in the sacristy, sneak him out of the window of the sacristy, and while his cutthroats wait in the Borgo, we run along the Arno to the Ponte Santa Trinita. Neat!' Niccolò exclaimed, admiring Lucrezia overtly also now. 'She is as sly as she is alluring,' he thought. 'Why is it we always seem to find a friend of a friend who knows how to work our issues out? Is that not the miracle associated with Pierfrancesco? Are the heavens on his side, always? Or is this simply Florence?' Niccolò Macchiavelli was amazed.

‘The cardinal will never suspect we would be capable of abducting him in clear day, immediately after the fight at the Castello di Gabbiano,’ Bachiacca added. ‘I like this! It is brilliant!’
‘And then we drop him in the deepest, dirtiest cellar of our palace and let him scream as much as he wants,’ Margherita said sweetly. ‘And you leave him there to me, so that I can scratch his eyes out!’
The men roared with laughter.

‘Wait, wait, wait,’ Niccolò Macchiavelli cried. ‘We have to do this today! We had better hurry and move. How should this go? Imagine! We enter the church some time before mass. We go to the sacristy. We cannot go all in there, only two or three of us. We had better be disguised as priests or as monks, and hide daggers and a cudgel in our robes. We act in the sacristy as if we dress to assist Cardinal Francesco for mass. There will be people in the sacristy. We oust them out, one way or another. The cardinal will change in the sacristy for the celebration of mass. We grab him instantly and hit him on the head with the cudgel. We open the window. We wrap him in a cloth and bind him. Some of us should be waiting beneath the window with a ladder. We should not draw too many suspicious eyes from the other side of the Arno, so we have to be quick. We lower the cardinal down the ladder. We carry him along the path to the Ponte Santa Trinita. We throw him in a cart of ours, as he has done with Pierfrancesco. We ride to the Borgo Santi Apostoli. A thousand things could go wrong, but if all works well, and if we act with speed and determination, it could all be done in a nick of time! By the moment the cardinal is supposed to start his mass, adding some uncertainty in the priests, and by the time the guards suspect what has happened, we can be inside the Palazzo Acciaiuoli, right on the other side of the church, over the Arno! It sounds all so simple I almost cannot believe we might get away with it. What might go wrong?’
‘Only two things could really go wrong,’ Granacci said. ‘We might have it difficult to get in, the priests forbidding us entry to the sacristy, or there might be a guard or guards in the sacristy. Later, before we had the time to get away, a priest might give the alarm. And we might be spotted on the bridge. If one or more guards are posted on the other side of the Arno and see us lowering a package from the window, then we are done for!’

‘One guard at the door of the sacristy and one guard inside, we can handle,’ Bachiacca said. ‘Just let me go with one other of us to the sacristy. I propose Granacci and I to be the ones for the sacristy. Maybe Niccolò can come too, for the brains – if we might have need of brains. We may have to decide on an alternative solution rapidly. Andrea del Sarto and Jacopo Pontormo should wait with a ladder beneath the window. Why not with Baccio d’Agnolo? Baccio is devoted to us and he is a real architect. He can say he is inspecting the structure of the church and of the houses along the Arno. A Monday is a fine day for inspections. I doubt there will be guards at the other side of the Arno. Pierfrancesco and Margherita, disguised as a merchant couple, should drive the cart and wait at the end of the Ponte Santa Trinita. Pierfrancesco is hurt in his arms. He cannot carry and heave, so he should take this part of the plan on him. Who would suspect a couple of innocent peasants driving a cart? They also should be inconspicuous.’

‘And what should I do?’ Lucrezia asked. Bachiacca and Granacci grinned. They just loved this woman!
Niccolò answered first. ‘We need you to start the operation. You come with the three of us to the Borgo San Jacopo, quite a time before us. I want to know where the Spanish hoodlums of the cardinal are in the street. So, you go into the Borgo first, disguised as a flower-seller. You

find out where the bandits are, and how many they are. You return to tell us. We will be dressed as monks.'
'How do I know somebody is a bandit?' Lucrezia asked.
'They will wear leather jackets and look like Spaniards or Neapolitans,' Andrea answered. 'If you doubt, try to sell them a flower. They will flirt with you or curse you in a language you don't understand.'
'You also better be in the church, afterwards,' Niccolò added. 'If there is a commotion too early, you might faint or something, or cry murder at the door, so that the Spaniards lose a few moments to get out. If you see too many guards running to the sacristy, warn Pierfrancesco and Margherita on the bridge!'

'I don't believe my ears,' Roberto di Donato cried. 'You are actually going to capture a cardinal in clear daylight and you hope to get away with it!'
'Yes,' Pierfrancesco nodded decidedly. 'This is so unexpected, so reckless, so surprising, we might succeed. The moment is now! The cardinal will not suspect anything like that. He has fewer guards. We are in number. We can make him disappear in no time!'
'And then what?' asked Jacopo Pontormo. 'What are you going to do with him?'
'We need the third key,' Pierfrancesco replied. 'If the key is in the Palazzo Soderini, we make him write a letter allowing us inside the palace, and we get the key. We also tell him we have the papers and tell him we can blackmail his family and all the Soderini clients. We have to bring him to swear to leave us in peace in the future.'
'There will be no letters of debts of the Soderini in the box,' Niccolò remarked. 'Fra Bartolommeo told us so!'
'He does not know that,' Pierfrancesco replied. 'Remember, he still thinks the box contains a treasure. There is no time to lose. Roberto, we need a long ladder, ropes, a large coarse cloth and a horse and cart! We need monks' robes and belts.'
'That we have, except the monks' robes,' Roberto agreed. 'Also, I will post some of my most reliable men at the Ponte Santa Trinita and in the Borgo Santi Apostoli. I will disguise them as ordinary people walking by. Others of my men can wait on this side of the Arno and catch guards before they sound the alarm in the Borgo San Jacopo. If something happens with the guards, you will have help!'

Pierfrancesco and Margherita dressed as a couple of merchants. Roberto led an old horse and cart in the courtyard. Baccio d'Agnolo was called for, and ran in a little later.
Baccio grumbled, 'who would believe me inspecting houses this day?' Yet, he was all excited about his role, and eager to help the Borgherini. He knew San Jacopo sopr'Arno well for having studied its plan when he was young. He found a ladder high enough in the Acciaiuoli palace. He took charge of the operation along the Arno.
Andrea del Sarto had already left and returned with three monks' robes.
'Where did you get those so soon?' Niccolò asked.
'I have friends in Santa Maria Novella,' Andrea announced. 'Even monks have to wash their robes once every while!'
'Don't tell me you also sleep with a washerwoman now,' Bachiacca grinned.

All was ready for the expedition on the Soderini cardinal.

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The sensual flower-seller Lucrezia left the Palazzo Acciaiuoli. Sometime later, Granacci, Bachiacca and Niccolò, dressed as monks, walked to the Borgo San Jacopo, over the bridge,

the Ponte Santa Trinita. They saw Lucrezia walk, but as too many men's eyes were attracted to her swaying figure, the monks walked on the other side of the bridge. Lucrezia disappeared into the Borgo, while the monks admired the reflections of the Lungarnoes in the river water. Lucrezia flirted with every man she did not know. After a long while, Lucrezia walked back on the bridge, past the monks. She whispered, 'two at this end of the street, two at the other end before the first side street. One under the portico of the church. Hurry, the cardinal is on his way!' She walked on.
An old horse drove a cart onto the bridge; a young merchant couple held the reins of the horse.
A few more men walked on the bridge, whistling a happy tune and chatting.
An architect and two masons emerged from behind the cart, holding a long ladder. They sprang to a path that ran along the Arno.
The cart reached the Santo Spirito end of the bridge. The horse turned and the cart placed itself to the side, right before the path the masons had taken, ready to drive back to the centre of Firenze. The young couple admired the view of the houses along the Lungarnoes and of the Ponte Vecchio.
The three monks slid their hoods over their head as if to protect their faces from the sun, and walked into the Borgo San Jacopo. The street was fresh, in shadows. The monks arrived at the façade of San Jacopo sopr'Arno. The church stood inconspicuous in the street. Its colonnaded portico continued the lines of the houses. The portico was built simply, arches over columns, but the columns were slender and fine, probably old Roman columns recuperated from an ancient temple. The monks saw a dirty-looking man wait there, leaning against one of the columns. The man was bored and scarcely glanced at the monks coming to mass.

The monks walked slowly through the nave to the sacristy at the other end. The first monk, Francesco Granacci, passed the door and saw a surprised priest putting on the ceremonial robes for mass.
Granacci said, 'Father, Cardinal Francesco told us to assist at his mass and to wait here for him. We serve with him, today.'
'All right,' the priest said. 'You can wait here. The robes are in the closet, there!'
The priest did not bother with the monks. He did not question the oddities of a cardinal.

The three monks waited, but they had an issue. There were four boys with the priest in the sacristy, as well as another man who helped the priest. The monks had not counted on so many people in the small sacristy. Granacci was worried, and so were Bachiacca and Niccolò. Four boys could scream all Santo Spirito to alarm!
The priest was ready. He left the sacristy with two of the boys. The man arranged some of the robes in the closets, and then he left too. Two boys only remained in the sacristy.
'Boys,' Niccolò called. 'Here is a whole florin for you two! Can you wait outside at the door, tell us when the cardinal arrives, and then stay outside?'
The boys showed surprise, but they liked the florin. They nodded and went outside. Granacci sighed with relief.
Bachiacca went to the window. There was no mullion at the window, and it could indeed be opened by its iron frame. Bachiacca tugged at the metal and the window creaked, but opened easily. He looked down. A ladder lay in the grass beneath, and three companions stood there, gesticulating and pointing at the roofs of the church. They saw Bachiacca and made him a sign. Baccio, Andrea and Jacopo were in place.

The monks waited what seemed like an eternity.

Suddenly, the door opened. A boy's head appeared, crying, 'the cardinal arrives!'
'Thank you, my boy,' Niccolò said nicely, 'now wait for us outside!'
The boy left the door ajar. Two monks opened cupboards and fingered golden jugs and platters. The third monk strode to the side of the door. The door was thrown open. A man dressed in leather entered, followed by a man dressed in a long, red robe. Bachiacca closed the door shut behind them. The cardinal was surprised to see monks, two monks, faces drawn inside hoods, directed at the tables.
He cried, 'I want to be alone in the sacristy! Get out!'
The two monks threw themselves on the guard. Bachiacca hit the cardinal on the head, from behind, with his cudgel. Cardinal Francesco slumped to the ground with a low groan. Granacci had his hand on the guard's mouth. The man bit through Granacci's flesh. Granacci kept holding the man's arm however, and Niccolò clung to the guard's other arm. The man started to kick with his feet. He struggled wildly, desperately, but Bachiacca hit him too on the head, a lot harder than he had done with the cardinal.

Granacci danced around, his hand in pain. Not a sound escaped his lips. Niccolò ran to the door, braced himself against it. Granacci and Bachiacca pushed a heavy sacristy table against it, and blocked the door. Granacci stepped to the window. He whistled. A rope came through the window. The monks drew up the rope and found a rough cloth attached to it. Bachiacca tore a sleeve from the guard's arm, tore it to pieces and gagged the cardinal, and then bound the man's hands together at his back. A second rope came through the window. The monks enveloped the cardinal in the cloth and bound him with the first rope. Bachiacca bound the second rope at the middle of the package.

Heaving the package to the window was hard work, but the three monks succeeded in the effort. They balanced the package over the window sill. They lowered the enwrapped body until the two masons received it, beneath. The architect and one of the masons walked off holding each an end of the package, walking on the green path, in the direction of the bridge.

Bachiacca made sure the man on the floor of the sacristy would not gain consciousness for a long time yet. He gagged this man too, and bound his arms and feet with church ropes. The three monks climbed down the ladder. People on the other side of the river might have been amazed at this spectacle, but no screams were heard. Niccolò was the first to climb down the ladder. He placed his feet firmly on the rungs. Granacci climbed after him, then Bachiacca. Bachiacca expected to hear bangs on the door of the sacristy and guards rushing in, but all stayed quiet. When he descended on the ladder he drew the window shut.

Three monks and a mason threw the ladder in the River Arno, after which they ran towards the Ponte Santa Trinita. There, a package was being heaved by an architect and a mason onto a cart. The cart moved. It moved slowly, but drew no particular attention. On the other side of the bridge, an attractive flower seller watched the scene. Men strolled on the bridge and walked towards the centre of the city. Ten paces behind the cart went three monks. The cart rode into the Piazza Santa Trinita on the other side, a little square in front of the bridge. The cart rode into the Borgo Santi Apostoli.

At that moment, screams of anger and frustration could be heard at the Santo Spirito side of the bridge. Had the cart and the monks been a little later, they might have seen men in leather jackets running and jumping around at the end of the Borgo San Jacopo. As it was, nothing special was to be seen in that street, and also not on the Ponte Santa Trinita or in the Piazza beyond. A few men were strolling into the city, flirting with a beautiful flower-seller. The few

people around were amazed at the frantic screaming. The leather-coated men shouted in Spanish. They clung to the people on the bridge and asked them things. The people of Santo Spirito were simple men; they did not understand that language.

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Cardinal Francesco Soderini awoke with a terrible headache in a dark cellar, a cellar not unlike the one of his own castle of Gabbiano, only a smaller one. He could not move, for his feet and legs and arms were bound tightly. He could not scream for help, for a dirty cloth filled his mouth, and that cloth too was tied behind his head. The cardinal wondered where he was. He could tell who had brought him here, however. He lay on damp, cold stones, fuming over the people who had dared to imprison a cardinal of the Church.
Evening fell and total darkness invaded the cellar. A door opened. Four men descended the stairs that led into the cellar. They each held a torch. The men secured the torches in holders along the walls, and then turned to their prisoner. Three of the men wore masks and long, black robes. The fourth was Pierfrancesco Borgherini.

Pierfrancesco cut the ropes, untying the cardinal's feet and legs, and helped the man up. He made the cardinal sit on a chair. Then he cut the gag.
Cardinal Francesco shouted, 'you miserable little scum! How dare you molesting a cardinal of the Church of Rome?'
'I only see a thief, a murderer and a gaoler of honourable citizens of Florence,' Pierfrancesco replied. 'I will do with you what I want, Cardinal, cardinal who deserves not to be a cardinal!'
'What do you want from me?' the cardinal cried. 'Let me go from here, now, or I will have you tortured and killed by the Pope's soldiers!'
Pierfrancesco roared with laughter. 'The Medici will love to hear your story, Soderini, I am sure! Do you not fear the Pope to hang you instantly from the walls of the Palazzo della Signoria?'
The cardinal did not reply.

'First,' Pierfrancesco said, 'I want a key from you.'
'I have many keys,' Cardinal Francesco replied.
''Yes,' Pierfrancesco laughed, 'you would have many keys, keys to castles and towers and dungeons, keys to bishoprics and maybe even to the Vatican. I want the key you received from a monk of San Marco near Easter of 1498. You know what key I want! I want the Preacher's key!'
'I will give you no key, insolent puppy!'
'I am not an old Florentine,' Pierfrancesco continued, smiling grimly. 'I am a new Florentine. I do not apply the strappado! Yet I know ways, new ways, to make you bend. I have a box, you see, and that box is closed. The box opens with three keys, of which I have two. I can open the box with force, but why would I risk deteriorating the contents of the box by violence? You know we have the two other keys, so just give us the third key!'
'I have no key,' the cardinal repeated stubbornly.
'You did not let me speak out,' Pierfrancesco said. 'A man like I, who did not hesitate to catch me a cardinal, is capable of nasty things. This time, it is you who are in my power, and it is I who can do to you whatever I want. I will not hesitate! I can be as unscrupulous as you, Cardinal, to reach my aims. I can simply make you disappear forever. Would that not be a shame for such an intelligent man like you, who would be able to do still so many brilliant things in Rome?'

Pierfrancesco paused, walked around the cardinal to have his words sink into the mind of the man, and then he said, 'let me tell you what is going to happen, Cardinal. I will start to pry you with the point of my very sharp dagger. I will pry you just a little at first, to make you feel what pain means. Then I will slice into you. Then I will burn your handsome face with that torch, there. You see the one that has the high flames? That one is the hottest! I am not a strappado man; I am a new Florentine!'
'You will never have the key!'

'Hush, hush, always interrupting people!' Pierfrancesco continued. 'If after the dagger and after the fire you still refuse to give me the key, then I shall have to abandon you and open the box by force. I don't like having to open the box by force, so I will be angry. I shall want you out of my way. I will use another key for that! This is a story of keys, you see.'
Pierfrancesco showed a large, rusty key, the key to another cellar of Roberto di Donato, but the cardinal did not know that.
'This is the key to the lion cage of the Via dei Leoni, to Florence's emblematic lions behind the Signoria. Yes, I can open the cage, and I can push you in that cage, and the lions will roar with pleasure and keep some good people awake, but tomorrow the Florentines will be amazed to find pieces of red tissue near the lions, and bones and fresh blood, and a few weights of torn flesh. Maybe your head will be found, but I doubt that. Lions particularly favour brains and ears and eyes. There is nothing you can do about this, because nobody knows where you are. We made sure of that. You should have seen your mercenaries running to all sides, panicking, and finding nothing! And that is not all. Afterwards, when I have opened the box, I will use the box's contents to smash your family and your family's clients to smithereens!'

'You cannot touch my family!' Cardinal Francesco cried.
'Oh, but I can, I can!' Pierfrancesco put in. 'You think the box contains a treasure. Wrong! The box does not contain a treasure. It contains something much more lethal! It contains letters of debts, debentures, the debentures to Lorenzo Il Magnifico, the letters of debts owned by the Medici on all the wealthiest citizens of Florence. I will use the contents of the box and ensure the bankruptcy of the Soderini and of all your client families.'
'You shall not do that!'
'Why not?' Pierfrancesco asked coldly. 'Of course I can, and I will! We might of course also agree to another course of events.'

'If I give the key, you will anyhow use the box's contents to ruin the Soderini. You will give the box back to Giovanni de'Medici, to that unbelieving Pope, the abomination that sits on the throne of Peter!'

'Hear me well, Cardinal Francesco,' Pierfrancesco said. 'I have a deal for you. I may swear on that crucifix you have around your neck not to use the box on any Soderini, and to destroy any letter of debt to the Medici of the Soderini and of the Soderini clients. In return, I want the key to the box and more importantly, you shall swear on that same crucifix to leave me and my family in peace, to leave in peace the Acciaiuoli and the Borgherini, as well as my friends. You know my friends are the painters of Florence, as well as Niccolò Macchiavelli. You shall swear and call the wrath of God on you if you transgress that oath, and you shall swear not to believe you can break the oath by thinking you act in the interest of the church. We swear each an oath, Cardinal, and then you can go. You refuse to take the oath, and you shall receive the dagger, the torch and finally, the lions. I am taking a last chance on your devotion to the Lord, but you have to choose quickly!'

The cardinal was an old man. Old Florentines were tenacious, hard of character, stubborn and vindictive. Such men were not to be beaten by fear. The cardinal might have considered his life spent at his age, aspiring now to a life of leisure. This cardinal, Pierfrancesco could tell, did not think one moment of his age; his age did not matter. The cardinal was one of those men who thought they would live for eternity. Francesco Soderini would fight on; his physical fitness did not matter. He would continue to seek power and seek to destroy the power of others. Pierfrancesco therefore also ignored the man's age, not referring to it. He only hoped the cardinal would realise his situation, and believe the ruthlessness of his opponents matched his own.

The change in Francesco Soderini's attitude was slow to come. Then, Pierfrancesco saw the quivering of the lips, the eyes close and open again, the head lowering in acceptance and then get back up in arrogant looks, the struggling of hands and arms hoping to be freed. The cardinal, in the end, realised he was bound and well bound, unable to regain his liberty, desperate in the knowledge that winning a little time would not bring his mercenaries to him.

'Help from your Spanish hired bandits will not come,' Pierfrancesco said in a whisper. 'They truly do not know where you are. They did not see who abducted you. Even if they guess who captured you, they wouldn't know where to look for you. All of my friends are here, not out on the streets. My families are in their palaces, guarded and on guard. There was only one person capable of thinking and of scheming with those mercenaries, and that man was you. Without a true leader, without a commander, your cutthroats will just wait and wait. They are like a headless cow for the moment. Within a few days of heavy drinking they will regret not being paid. Then they will return to Naples or to Rome or wherever, to a place they can be hired by other wealthy men.'

Pierfrancesco waited. The cardinal continued to wring his hands. He gave up only after a long time.
'The key and the oath, or the dagger,' Pierfrancesco repeated.
'All right, all right,' Francesco Soderini said, his voice barely audible. 'I suppose I am beaten this time. Swear the oath and I will give you the key.'

Pierfrancesco swore his oath, but added in one breath his oath was only on the condition he had the key in his possession.
'Now you swear the oath,' Pierfrancesco ordered. 'Do you swear to give me the key to the box, the key monks of San Marco gave you near Easter of 1498, and to leave the Acciaiuoli and the Borgherini in peace, and not to seek revenge in any way?'
'I will,' said the cardinal.
'Fine,' Pierfrancesco said. 'Where is the key? If it is at your palace, we will send somebody neutral for it, but you will have to write a note allowing our messenger inside your palace.'
'There is no need for that,' Francesco Soderini grinned suddenly triumphantly. 'You did not search me! The key was on me all the time. It is sown in the seam of my robe. Take it!'
Two of the masked men sought in the red robe and found a key in the scarlet band tied to the middle. They cut open the seams and held the key to the torchlight. They left the cellar to compare the key with the two other ones kept by Roberto di Donato. They returned a little later, nodding. Pierfrancesco had the three keys.

'I am a merchant,' Pierfrancesco then said. 'I know the value of a contract. We will put the oaths on paper and sign them.'

All resistance had abandoned Francesco Soderini. He nodded in acceptance.

The three masked men bound the cardinal again at the legs. They left the cellar, accompanied by Pierfrancesco. Pierfrancesco wrote the two oaths, which also contained parts of the story of the attacks on him, and of the murders of Fra Jacopino, Father Alessio and of his cousin Filippo. The oath of the cardinal would be a confession. He copied each oath. The men returned to the cellar with ink and a pen. They untied the hands of the cardinal. Cardinal Francesco Soderini and Pierfrancesco signed the two papers and the copies.

When all was done, Pierfrancesco cut the ropes of the feet of Cardinal Francesco. The cardinal stood in the middle of the cellar, head sunk on his breast, the two papers in one hand, his other hand still held at his back.
Pierfrancesco saw the marks of defeat and of despair. Cardinal Francesco brought a hand to his grey-white hair. The cardinal's hair that had remained slick all this time, was thoroughly ruffled now. The cardinal looked many years older. He had aged in the cellar.

Despite his aversion for the man's acts, Pierfrancesco pitied him and asked, 'was the power of the box worth its while? Why did you want the power of a treasure or of the letters of debts? What was it you wanted to accomplish really, that you cannot now?'

The cardinal waited, sighed, then told haltingly, 'Giovanni de'Medici became Pope only because I had to bring back my brother to Italy. Piero would have died of homesickness in his exile at Ragusa. I controlled the election. We could bargain. Giovanni became Pope because I wanted something from him and he something from me. The election finished, I have nothing left to control him. My family was robbed; our fortune is gone, robbed by the Medici and others. The treasure could help. One buys power and influence with gold. I work so hard for a new Church, in which there would be no place for cardinals that can become Pope without being priests, no place for popes that seek only power and do not believe. I seek a Church that listens to people and cares for people. Our Church must be reformed. The last of our Popes, Alexander, Julius, and now Giovanni, are lechers, murderers of thousands, thieves. They steal from the Church and are Pope only because thus they can be princes, equals of emperors and kings. That must stop! It can stop, too, for there are many good priests, bishops and cardinals in our Church, but the last years only the worst among the cardinals have gained power by deceit and ruthlessness. A movement is on its way in Germany to protest against the current state of the Church. That movement may kill our Church, our Papacy, in the end. We must reform first, rapidly, for our world is changing. We must change radically, and people like the Medici only want to perpetuate the old ways.
My brother, Piero Soderini, received a letter about ten years ago from one of our Florentine Vespucci family, a man called Amerigo dei Vespucci. The letter was brought to him from Spain by Benvenuto Benvenuti. Amerigo wrote he had been in four voyages to a newly discovered land in the west, a vast land inhabited by pagans. Amerigo Vespucci had gone to Spain to trade for Florence, and Don Ferrando of Castile allowed him on the ships that sailed to the west. We, Florentines, should also send men to those lands, and bring God's word to the people that live there, build churches, and lead the pagans to our faith, not in the way of the last Popes but in the true way. The land has been called America after Amerigo by a German cartographer. Amerigo thought the land was enormous. Think of what such a land could do and what it could mean in wealth to our families of Florence!
The treasure could help build a new faith and a new society, but only if it fell in the right hands. If the box contains letters of debt, I probably would not have used them. I cannot ruin

Florence to realise my dreams. The letters would not have given me power over the Medici either.'

The cardinal paused, and then addressed Pierfrancesco directly. 'Pierfrancesco Borgherini, think hard about what you will do with the letters! If you use them, you may destroy Florence. If you give them back to the Medici, the Medici will destroy Florence! The power of Giovanni will be limitless. He will control Florence entirely, and with Florence he will control the huge funds that control our world. That power, he will squander in Rome on golden trinkets, on pictures, on gilded apartments, on monuments, on orgies and feasts, and so will his successors. His cousin Giulio may be the next Pope. Our Church will never reform, and sooner or later be condemned by God like Sodom and Gomorrah. So, young Pierfrancesco, think well about what you will do with the debentures! If you use them on the merchants and bankers of Florence, you will wield a power for which you will be hated. Is it hatred you seek?'
Pierfrancesco did not answer this last assertion of the cardinal, but he was singularly moved. He thought for a while, sighed, and then said, 'we will bring you to a room in another place of the cellars. There is a bed in that room and food and wine have been prepared. You will have to spend the night there, imprisoned. Tomorrow morning, we will bring you to a place where we will release you.'
The cardinal nodded in understanding.

Pierfrancesco was on the point to leave, when the cardinal halted him.
'You have fine friends,' Cardinal Francesco remarked.
'Yes,' Pierfrancesco replied. 'That was one other reason you could not win from us. We were seven people thinking about what to do next, and even other men of Margherita's family and of my family joined us. In your group, you were the only one to think. Had you eliminated one of us, the others would have continued to harass you, and that was indeed what happened at the Castello di Gabbiano. Once you were caught, your game was up. You had nobody left to dare to act. When you were wiped out, we did not have to fear your mercenaries anymore. My companions and I are bound by friendship. Your mercenaries are only loyal to you as long as they can expect more money. My friends always said the truth to me, and never flattered me. That was why I trusted them. You, Cardinal Francesco, have but courtiers and flatterers around you. Your mercenaries only told you what you wanted to hear.'

Pierfrancesco and the masked men brought Cardinal Francesco to his prison for one night. Afterwards, in the large hall of the Acciaiuoli, the three men took off their masks. Granacci, Bachiacca and Niccolò cheered with Pierfrancesco. Margherita joined them.

Niccolò Macchiavelli said to Pierfrancesco, 'you have been moved, haven't you, by what the cardinal told?'
Pierfrancesco looked at Niccolò and answered with a question, 'I do not understand the cardinal! He seems to have excellent, even noble motifs for his actions, yet he ordered mercenaries who did not hesitate to kill. How can one be at the same time a devotee of the Church and do such mischief? Does the man have no conscience? He is a man of the Church; he should know what is right and wrong!'

Niccolò replied, 'I have given such attitudes much thought. You see, we live in a house of bricks and stones, in our manors, farms, villas, palaces, and we like living there. We built those houses to our liking. The houses shelter us and protect us. If we fear bandits, we can build a fortress around us.

We live however also in another house, in an invisible house we carry with us at every step, a house that has no physical weight yet often weighs heavily. That second house is the construction of our beliefs, values, thoughts, birth and education, our experiences and our aspirations. We build that second house as much as our stone house. It is a home in our mind, our mind itself, and a very personal house, very different from person to person. According to that house of beliefs, we act. People do not realise how different those second houses can be from one person to another. Your second house and my second house and the house of our friends the painters are much the same, I would say. The second houses of thieves, murderers, rapists, intriguers and condottieri are totally different from ours.
The house of beliefs of Cardinal Francesco had been forged in the Soderini family and in the Medici family, and both families have lived through very traumatic, tragic events. Cardinal Francesco worked in Rome under the Popes amidst lies, intrigues, power games, conspiration, manipulations, collusions, double-dealing, wickedness and betrayals. That environment shaped his mind and built his second house. He acts accordingly!'

'So the cardinal does not know the difference between right and wrong?' Pierfrancesco asked.
'Of course he does,' Niccolò Macchiavelli continued. 'He knows his right, his wrong, the image of right and wrong in his own house! I believe no man can act against his image of what is right all the time, for doing so would destroy any man's mind in the end. The cardinal acts along what he believes to be right, his notion of right, the notion of right in his own second house. He must think it is justifiable - and hence good - to murder, if that is needed to reach the aims of his Church! Of course, he works mostly only for his own glory!'

'How did you found out about the existence of the second houses?'
'It happened when I was an ambassador of Piero Soderini!' Niccolò replied. 'To be a good ambassador, one has to know the persons one is an ambassador too. You have to study how your opponent thinks, what his image is of the world, what his frame of mind is. I described all of that as a second house. The image worked miracles! I always tried to imagine how the second house of my opponent was. The same is true for the person you serve, of course. You can only give good advice to somebody like Piero Soderini if you know how he thinks and what he thinks, what his aspirations are, according to his own second house. Otherwise your advice will be of no use, be blown into the wind, not listened to. A good servant has to find out what the second house of his master looks like.'
Pierfrancesco laughed and asked, a little incredulously, 'do all servants know the second house of their masters?'
'Lord, no!' Niccolò cried. 'In actual fact, very few people study the men they have before them, asking what their beliefs might be. Some men, and more women than men, do have a strong intuitive talent to act and talk differently according to the character they have before them. Very, very few people seek to know by rational thought how the second houses are constructed.'

Niccolò paused. He said, 'I was particularly fascinated by Cesare Borgia. The Borgia was a charming man, a fine general, but also an odious and totally unscrupulous man. I too at first was bewildered by such a man. I too did not understand how any man could be of such diverse and contradicting character traits, and act so alien to what my own idea of right and wrong was. I thought my ideas on right and wrong were universal ones, generally accepted. I was wrong! When I found out whose son Cesare Borgia was, how he had been educated in the ruthlessness of his father, Pope Alexander, then I understood. From then on I knew also how to address him.'

'You talk about Francesco Soderini and about the Borgia as if they were normal people! I can only abhor them!'

'What are "normal" people, Pierfrancesco? For each person, "normal" means "like me", their second house is like my second house. It is very hard for young people to understand that others can be utterly different. You will have to accept, Pierfrancesco, that people can have second houses that are completely alien to your own. That may come as a shock, but it is the truth. You may ask now whether there is a norm, one special second house that is the good one, the right one, the moral one, the correct one. Well, I suppose it is wise to state there is none. I can tell you, the older I become and the more I am looking for an exemplary second house, the less I find it.
My best advice is to look to the Evangels of Jesus Christ. That is the only book in which I might find an ideal second house, even though I suspect it is only a very partial one. Whether one believes in a God or not, the Evangels provide one with a set of rules, a framework, with which to build a second house that leads to gentleness and understanding, respect and love for others.'
'Do not the Evangels lead to weakness?' Pierfrancesco asked.
Niccolò laughed. 'Yes,' he said, 'but not if you are well armed. See to it that you always have adequate defence! Always remain powerful, and then live happily and in line with the Evangels.'

'Do you believe Cardinal Francesco has not read the Evangels?' Pierfrancesco asked, slightly sarcastically.
'Oh, he must have,' Niccolò grinned, 'but he must either have read the Book but not have let the messages therein really penetrate into his second house, or he must have ignored some of the passages. How many times has he read the Evangels? Once? Twice? How many people compare their acts to what the Evangels show us to do? How many people read them and reflect on their actions? How many people read them, but do not compare their actions to the texts? My long experience is that the number of people who really have read the Evangels and compare their past or future deeds with what is written in the Books is very low indeed! In fact, confession is a means of the Church to have us reflect on our deeds, but even during confession people do not think enough about what they did. They confess only what they believe having done wrong according to their second house! How could they do differently? In his particular second house, the Cardinal must have judged that cruelty was justified in view of his great aim.'
'I cannot agree to cruelty,' Pierfrancesco exclaimed, 'not in any scheme of justification!'
'Were you not ready to use your dagger on the Cardinal, to burn him and throw him in the lion's den? In my experience, all rulers use a degree of cruelty to stabilise their position, even the one that are pious. Some cruelty seems necessary to hold rulers – or family heads - in place. Long, enduring cruelty however always leads to the end of a rule. Francesco Soderini is not a really a cruel man.'

'Still,' Pierfrancesco continued stubbornly in this line, 'Cardinal Francesco should have wondered seriously, in earnest, whether he was doing the right things.'
'I have remarked that people do not know themselves their second house well or at all. It takes always someone else, Pierfrancesco, to comprehend one's true nature. You are lucky to have Margherita to tell you who you really are. Margherita will show you your particular second house, and believe me, when she will show it to you, of course your darkest sides, you will not like what she says and you will be angry! Think: is it not maybe because of this that God has created man and woman, and has Christ not said that one is not complete without the

other? A cardinal like Francesco Soderini has nobody to explain to him what he is like, and he would not accept somebody else to tell him what his nature is. So he is a blind man groping around in the world, a man probably to be pitied; he does the right things for his second house and in his mindset of the second house, but the right things for him does not mean the right things for you or even for most of Italy.'
'You are very, very lenient,' Pierfrancesco replied. 'There is a nag, here! Your concept of a second house is quite near to Socrates' belief that a man cannot do harm knowingly. Did not Socrates state violence originated in stupidity, in lack of knowledge of the good, in lack of education? The concept of the "second house" seems to hold that a man is not aware of doing harm to others because his second house tells him his acts do not harm or are less harmful than the alternatives!'
'In some people that is truly so, yes, Pierfrancesco. This is probably what happened in Cardinal Francesco's mind. However, the existence of a second house does not mean people could not knowingly do harm. People can be very aware of good and wrong, yet do wrong in self-conservation, in greed, vanity, in the seeking for power, and so on. Also: the second house that does not learn what crime is, does not excuse crimes. To understand does not mean to forgive,' Niccolò answered. His face hardened, 'I do not forgive easily.'

'The cardinal seems to have been terribly shocked,' Pierfrancesco said.
'Is it you who pity him now?' Niccolò asked. 'I believe the cardinal has been challenged in this cellar for the first time, by somebody who showed how wrong his second house was. The awareness of the fact that maybe, just maybe, his personal second house was not right, has forced him to reflect deeply on his own nature. The cardinal has been wondering whether his nature was right or wrong. I saw him thinking and doubting in the cellar, after you spoke. I saw this often come as a terrible shock to people. A strange aspect of second houses is that as long as the owner changes his ideas and opinions himself, shakes and modifies his second house himself, nothing particularly distressing happens. When somebody else shakes one's second house however, and it dawns upon a man that his house is in peril, that knowledge may come as a major disaster.
I use the terms "second house", Pierfrancesco, where I should talk of "fortress", for the second houses are as unshakable and impregnable as fortresses. So you can imagine the distress caused in a man or a woman when the second house is besieged, and worse, when it is captured! That is why, for instance, I would advise to a ruler who conquers a new land not to change the laws or the taxes of that land. When second houses are shaken, revolt and panic and distress usually result. Cardinal Francesco has been forced through such a distress in the cellar. He is an intelligent man. He must be bewildered, and will be unable to act for a while. He needs to think and assess, then rebuild his second house. We will be safe for a few days.'

'Will Francesco Soderini seek revenge despite his oath?'
'I don't think so,' Niccolò replied,' but one can never be certain. I believe he will drop the matter. The Soderini are truly noble men. Piero Soderini was somebody who could almost split his personality and think about any of his actions coldly, rationally, reflecting on the justification of his second house as if he were another person.
We use our second houses to cope with the world, to master in our mind the events that happen to us. Cardinal Francesco's second house doesn't master the modified view of the world that suddenly dawned on him. So he must be recreating another second house, one that will incorporate his failing in the Borgherini enigma. That will take some time. Cardinal Francesco is Piero's brother, and at least as intelligent as Piero. I rather believe, once the shock which you made him go through passed, he will understand where he erred.

So I repeat: I think we will be safe. Men may harm you either because they hate you or because they fear you. Cardinal Francesco, after what you said to him, has no cause for hatred or fear for you. You spoke very cleverly!'

'You seem to have liked the Republic very much,' Pierfrancesco continued his talk with Niccolò Macchiavelli. 'Yet, you also seem to have liked Piero Soderini, who ruled like a King!'
'Piero Soderini was a prince indeed, but a prince appointed by the Republic,' Niccolò replied. 'He was not a prince appointed only by the nobles of Florence, or self-appointed, and out to exploit the people. The noblemen always want to exploit and oppress the people, so the people are usually hostile to the nobles. The people were not hostile to Piero Soderini, so Piero could continue to rule easily. And he did not oppress the people – nor the noblemen for that matter. Piero worked much to retain the friendship of the people and the nobles. Florence did not let him down, but when Giovanni de'Medici threatened to destroy Florence, the same way Giovanni's army had devastated Prato, Piero took the noblest course of saving our town rather than have her destroyed. He went into exile voluntarily. In a way he abandoned the people to slavery, but at least there was some hope the Medici would rule well. Piero had Lorenzo Il Magnifico in mind!'

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Cardinal Francesco Soderini ate and drank and slept in a room of the cellars of the Palazzo Acciaiuoli. In the morning, carts of several merchants stopped at the palace and a few entered the cortile. Carts left the palace. One of the horse carts, entirely filled with bales of cloth, and that had previously been allowed in the courtyard, left the palace almost empty a little later. Only one hooded driver had held the reins of the horse when the cart entered; it had two hooded drivers when it left.

The cart rode slowly to the Porta San Gallo, to the northern walls of Florence. It rode through the gate to the hills. It stopped a little further, beyond the gate. It halted behind a series of trees and bushes, hidden from view. The two hooded drivers dropped a package there, unbound the package, cut the ropes of the man's feet and legs, and left him in the bushes. The man's hands were still bound behind his back; he was gagged, and a wide leather thong was bound on his eyes so that he could not see anything. The cart rode on, leaving the man lying on the ground. The cart turned east, to the Porta Santa Croce.

The man ultimately succeeded in freeing his hands, take the gag from his mouth and the leather thong from his eyes. The cart had disappeared a long time by then.

Granacci and Pierfrancesco drove the cart to the Corso dei Tintori, as they had promised to the merchant that brought dyed cloths to the Acciaiuoli. Then they walked back on foot to the Borgherini palace in the Borgo Santi Apostoli.

The guards of the Porta San Gallo saw a haggard, old cardinal dressed in a dust-stained red robe run to the inside of Florence. They did not halt the ecclesiastic. Cardinal Francesco Soderini had a long, long time to walk from the Porta San Gallo past San Marco, along the Via Larga, to the Duomo, and from there to the bridge of Santa Trinita, back to the Palazzo Soderini.

Chapter Nine. Wednesday, July 27 1513. Santa Maria Novella.

Once more, Pierfrancesco Borgherini looked at the façade of the church of Santa Maria Novella. He proudly walked hand in hand with Margherita Acciaiuoli. They strode together like so many young couples of Florence. Francesco Granacci strolled at Pierfrancesco's side, talking to him; Andrea del Sarto chatted with Margherita.

'Oh yes,' Granacci affirmed, 'I paint really nice pictures. I have a real talent for painting; I always had. I also studied sculpture, but I hated it.'
He laughed, 'I guess sculpture was too much hard work for me. There is an old adage in Florence that says some people live to paint and others paint to live. I paint to live! I will produce fine pictures that delight people, and I will give them exactly what they describe, what they want to have, in a fine composition and nice colours. Do not expect me to paint something absolutely new or fantastically striking, something scandalous or secretive or emotionally laden. Yet, you will receive a fine, professional picture, and I will add all the little angels your heart may desire, for the same price. It is true I remained a fresco painter essentially, such as I was taught by my ever master Domenico Ghirlandaio, so my colours will be brilliant, but a little chalky.'

'My family was rather wealthy,' Granacci nattered on, more to himself than to Pierfrancesco. 'I was good for nothing but for painting. My old folk had money and that was maybe the reason why I was never passionate about my painting. I have always been a person without great sorrows. I was never hungry nor without a shelter. I do not take life too seriously, and never had to. Certainly not like Pietro Perugino! When he was young, Pietro lived in wooden boxes in the streets of Florence, you know! Later, Pietro was very voracious for commissions of paintings. My first master was Filippino Lippi, who was the pupil of Sandro Botticelli, and the son of Filippo Lippi. Sandro was Filippo Lippi's pupil and promised to take care of Filippo's son Filippino. The artist I admire most is my friend Michelangelo Buonarroti, though he is not an easy man! Michelangelo has something obsessive terribly hanging over him. Michelangelo changed our art, not I! I like to paint stories and figures, and I know I have fine colours. I do not look too deep into the meaning of my scenes or into the souls of people. Yet, the people who commission pictures from me do not expect more. Michelangelo paints for the Pope; I am content to decorate the halls of Florence. I get paid less, but more regularly than Michelangelo! I paint for merchants who know that work must be recompensed, not for Popes who expect you to work for heaven, for nothing that resembles gold. My paintings are nice to be hung in happy dining rooms, in large, sunny halls, and I can even render sad stories of martyred Saints to look nice and decorative. That is me, happy, no-worries Francesco Granacci!'

'In fact,' Granacci continued, 'I entirely agree with Plato when he said that pictures are only a poor likeness of the real truth, the idea, of objects. We, painters, copy only what appears, not the essence of the objects, and we cannot do better. We should not take ourselves too serious therefore. Pictures are a mere triviality, but do they not make life pleasant? Why should we, artists, refrain from making pictures that make people so innocently happy? The Bible defends making images. The Bible says man should not make images of anything in the heavens, on the earth or in the water, because there is a danger that people would adore the images and bow to them. I do not believe pictures are that powerful! People who adore images really adore the idea that the image represents, but according to Plato pictures are only

poor copies of the real truth. So I suppose the Jews and the Mohammedans do not really have to banish representations of living beings.'
Granacci strolled on and thought, then said, 'a strange thing though is, the less I take my paintings serious, adding little angels and nice figures in magnificent dresses, the more I put them there to induce an idea in my picture, a more profound meaning. Is not the idea the most important element of our art? When the first Italian painters showed a red bird to indicate the passion of Christ, were they not acknowledging the power of the symbol, of the idea, rather than of the representation, the bird? It is all so confusing! I try not to be serious and I always glide into some kind of other world living behind my paintings! I always seem to want to say something to the viewer. Me, Granacci! Imagine!'

'I have also been thinking,' Pierfrancesco said to Granacci. 'We are looking for a monster in Santa Maria Novella and we all took it for granted there were very many devils, demons, deformed animals and horrifying scenes in the frescoes of our churches. Why is that? Why do painters represent such ugly things and yet claim to make beautiful pictures?
'You used the word "beautiful",' Granacci replied, 'although of course you might have mentioned the word "fine". A picture composed of ugly scenes can be fine, meaning painted with excellence in the story, in the design, in the lines and in the colours, so that it is worthy of admiration for the skill with which it was produced, and even for the idea that was at its conception. However, can such a picture be beautiful? Many people equate "fine" with "beautiful", although the two notions are very different. So, our churches are filled with fine pictures, but whether these are also beautiful is quite another matter!
Nevertheless, even pictures of horror scenes can be perceived as beautiful, but only if the idea behind it is beautiful, for instance when the picture shows a Bible scene and illustrates the horrors one escapes when one loves the Evangels, or also when the painter expresses his warm feelings of compassion for the sad things that happen to his figures. In other words, an ugly picture can be beautiful when it hides beauty underneath, behind it.
I do not like such art particularly well. I rather prefer to show nice scenes to spectators, but I guess other artists, such as our Jacopo Pontormo, might be tempted to show the world how ugly it is, so that the spectators might become conscious of its lowliness. Such artists will try to change the world by their art. They are an entirely different breed altogether than men such as I and Bachiacca. I show my viewers how beautiful our world is, and tempt people to seek more of that beauty. Pontormo, I suspect, will show the world how sad and low it is, and hope people change their ways, away from the ugliness. I doubt that kind of painting works well!'

'You have been more than a friend to me,' Pierfrancesco answered, changing the subject,' you have been a brother to me.'
Francesco Granacci was a true Florentine, a man with a keen eye and a quick, sharp tongue, and ill at ease with the display of emotions, so he avoided being led into compliments. He asked, 'how are we going to have a look at the monsters without being noticed?'

At that moment, Jacopo Pontormo ran to them.
Pierfrancesco said, 'one of us should stay at the entrance of the church and watch out for the mercenaries. I believe we have lost them definitively. I saw no leather jackets around, but I as well would like to be sure we are not followed.'
Jacopo Pontormo volunteered immediately, 'I'll remain at the end of the church and warn you if I see something suspicious,' he said.

They walked through the nave. Masses were being sung in several chapels, but not in the nave. The painters stood and walked to different places, not in a group. They looked at every

devil or monster they could distinguish on paintings and frescoes in the church, and they also sought for lecterns.
Pierfrancesco remembered having seen only one large lectern in Santa Maria Novella, the wooden badalone near the main altar. The people in the church remained at a respectable distance from the altar. Pierfrancesco and Margherita did not dare to walk up to the lectern. They stood at a few feet. The lectern was not graceful. It had not stolen its name of 'monster'. It was crudely sculpted in common wood. It was only a utilitarian object of little value, put here merely for its practical use of allowing the large Bibles and the huge psalters to be placed on a very firm and stable stand, so that the priests could read while they sang or recited, facing the devotees. On the lectern here, three books could be placed almost vertically but slightly inclined.

Pierfrancesco could not tame his curiosity. He let Margherita stand where she was, and walked up to the badalone. He strode around the lectern with one hand on his back, as if he were admiring the wooden piece of furniture. Nothing was admirable on the piece, and Pierfrancesco discovered no text, no scene, and no story of figures, nothing that might allude to one more clue of the secret he sought.
He returned to Margherita. 'Nothing,' he whispered.
Francesco Granacci walked up to them, and then also Andrea del Sarto.
'There are two other bronze lecterns in the chapels,' Andrea said in a low voice to Pierfrancesco. 'We checked them. We found no sign, no message, nothing!'
'And yet,' Pierfrancesco said in despair, 'yet, there must be another clue here! There is only one badalone here!'

Margherita looked at the men. She looked at the lectern. She said ,'are you men daft and blind? Is there not something that strikes you?'
The painters and Pierfrancesco looked at the badalone. They shook their heads of no, they remarked nothing special.
'Look on what the lectern stands!' Margherita whispered.
The badalone stood on the ground, on the marble slabs of the church, so Pierfrancesco was puzzled. Had Margherita lost her mind?
Francesco Granacci's eyes gleamed suddenly. 'She means the box, the lower structure of wood,' he whispered, 'the box!'
The wooden lectern had to be stable, despite heavy books lying high above, on its top. The lower part of the lectern was therefore a large wooden box, supporting the lectern tablets. The name of badalone had probably been given to the lectern because of this inelegant – but practical – box-like structure. The box was about four feet wide and long, four feet high, a perfect cube of wood, decorated only with loaves sculpted in the wood.
'The box!' Granacci continued to whisper, 'the box! There may be anything in that box!'

Pierfrancesco understood. The box of the lectern could not be Lorenzo Il Magnifico's box, but inside anything could be hidden. The word 'badalone' or 'monster,' had been chosen not only to draw attention to the lectern but also to its box structure. Pierfrancesco looked and looked with open mouth. The lectern had to contain the secret box inside it!

Pierfrancesco pointed his head to the back of the church, giving a sign to leave. The friends walked outside, and then remained silent as long as they strolled to Granacci's studio.
Inside the workshop, Granacci burst out in cheers. 'We have the box!' he cried, 'the box must be in there! Margherita is a genius! Margherita was right!'

Andrea del Sarto was less optimistic. ‘All right,’ he said, ‘the box is in there. How, the hell, are we going to get it out of there? Smash the lectern to pieces in full daylight? Run it over by accident? The damn thing may be filled with stones or lead! How are we going to get it out of there?’
In lack of imaginative suggestions, Granacci poured wine to all of them, also to Margherita.

Bachiacca erupted into the workshop from the doors of the gardens. Granacci told him about the lectern and about their issue.
‘Why are you guys so gloomy?’ Bachiacca wondered. ‘We have everything here for a solution!’
‘Will you stop laughing at us?’ Andrea del Sarto smirked.
Bachiacca shook his head in lack of comprehension. ‘Violence we cannot use, not inside a church. So we can use ruse and money, can we not? All that we have here! That old contraption is half eaten by woodworms. I know it; it is ugly; it has no artistic value whatsoever. So, we have here Andrea del Sarto, a great friend of the Abbot of Santa Maria Novella, and we have Pierfrancesco Borgherini the great and wealthy, as well as Lady Margherita dei Acciaiuoli, daughter of one of the five most loaded families of Florence. Isn’t that the solution? What more do you want?
‘Oh, boys, he is at it again,’ Granacci grinned.
‘No, no, no,’ Bachiacca laughed. ‘Just listen to me! What would you do without me?’

Bachiacca sat, drank a little wine, and continued, ‘that lectern will fall to pieces one day and it is so ugly even the monks make faces at it. The young devote Pierfrancesco and his betrothed lady, Margherita here, the most marvellous couple of Florence, have taken pity on Santa Maria Novella’s monstrous lectern! Santa Maria Novella deserves better! Pierfrancesco and Margherita would like the monastery to get rid of the ugly piece, so they offer as a wedding present a new one, a splendid one, sculpted by the greatest wood sculptor of Florence, the most remarkable, wonderful Baccio d’Agnolo, our own best friend. The fine and noble artist Andrea del Sarto, here, will persuade his friend the Abbot to allow Baccio d’Agnolo to make a new lectern, paid by the Borgherini – or by the Acciaiuoli if necessary. Andrea will add we are willing to move the old contraption out of the church to be torn up in the studio of a friend of his, the good painter Francesco Granacci!’

Margherita guessed halfway the scheme of Bachiacca. So she shouted and clapped in her hands while the men were still looking absolutely stunned, but also amused, at Bachiacca. Then, the studio trembled from the cheers and the laughter and the shouts of victory. Granacci brought in more wine. Niccolò Macchiavelli pushed open the door and asked why there was a feast.

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Andrea del Sarto had legs of lead when he visited his friend the Abbot. He spoke in the smoothest words possible. The Abbot wondered why for heaven’s sake somebody would take an interest in his lectern, and he strongly suspected Andrea del Sarto of the strangest schemes, but though he probed and probed, and saw Andrea sweat under his questions, he could not find out what was behind the interest. Finally, he too wanted a nicer object, and he knew the skills with wood of Baccio d’Agnolo. If the Borgherini wanted to pay Santa Maria Novella a new lectern, then why refuse? Andrea del Sarto charmed his friend.

Baccio d'Agnolo needed three weeks to assemble and sculpt the badalone nuovo that still stands at Santa Maria Novella's altar. He delivered a rare masterpiece in wood, one of the very finest wooden objects of Florence. The new lectern retained the name of "badalone" or "monster", for Baccio repeated the old structure, only adding finer decoration and more elegant tablets. The Abbot was proud and satisfied. Granacci hired a horse and a cart and three workmen. Together, they tugged the old lectern out of the Church, rode with the cart through various streets in a wide arch to Granacci's studio.

All the friends, included Baccio d'Agnolo, waited impatiently at the studio for the arrival of the lectern. Baccio shoved Bachiacca aside. Bachiacca had been waiting with a big hammer to smash the lectern to pieces as soon as it stood in the middle of Granacci's room.
'No, no,' Baccio cried, 'no need to destroy it! Let me do it! You guys don't know wood!'
Baccio took his chisels and a much smaller hammer. He pried open one of the panels of the badalone's box. The panel fell away. The friends discovered a large metal box covered with dust inside. The box filled the badalone almost completely. Four men were necessary to heave the box out of the lectern. The box was put on the table. Three locks held the box closed.
Pierfrancesco said, 'Margherita, the honour is yours!'
Margherita Acciaiuoli stood at the table, smiling, beautiful as an angel, with three keys in her hands. She showed the keys triumphantly to all. The men cheered.

'Wait!' an imperious voice thundered. Niccolò Macchiavelli later told he had never shouted so loudly his entire life. His cry silenced everybody.
Niccolò said, 'we cannot open the box!'
'Why not?' Bachiacca shouted.
'We have to agree first on what to do with the contents. The contents, the papers, are not ours! Hear me out! I say the papers are for Pierfrancesco and Margherita alone! We all, we should not take anything from that box. It is a box of sins. Fra Jacopino was a wise monk. He esteemed no man in Florence worthy of the papers, no man wise enough to master the power the papers provide, no man more dignified or nobler of character than Pierfrancesco. My friends, are we not all hoodlums, feeble characters, humans of weak morals, unreliable in passions and aspirations? We must not wield the powers that are in there! Only Pierfrancesco and Margherita still have the innocence of heart to do that! I propose they open the box and guard the secrets that lay in there, and I propose we have nothing to do with it!'

A stunned silence answered Niccolò Macchiavelli's words.
Jacopo Pontormo was the first to break the amazement. He said, 'Niccolò is right! We cannot open the box. It belongs to the Church, passed on by Fra Savonarola to Fra Jacopino and to Pierfrancesco.' His voice was definite.
'But, but,' Pierfrancesco stammered, 'you all worked at the secret. You lost time you could have been working, painting, sculpting, writing. Part of this treasure should go to you too!'
Margherita nodded.
'I have been working at a book,' Niccolò Machiavelli said. 'I may call it "The Prince", "Il Principe", and it was by thinking of you, Pierfrancesco, walking and talking with you, that I was truly stimulated in writing most of it. What do I care about wealth, money or power? I would not live happily with power. I have enough money for me, for my wife and children. My greatest wealth I have already received, your friendship, and the friendship of you all. I thought Florence had forgotten me, had rejected me and thrown me like a dead carp in the river. I cherish your friendship! For me, seeing this box, knowing the contents, the Borgherini enigma is solved. I have enough with that knowledge.'

'Well spoken,' Bachiacca said. 'That box frightens me. It will corrupt my soul. Let it remain closed until it reaches the Palazzo Borgherini. Pierfrancesco and Margherita can decide there what to do with the papers.'
'Yes, let the box remained closed,' the others said.

Pierfrancesco sighed soberly. 'We will let it be closed here, then,' he said. He turned to Margherita, 'what will we do with the contents?'
Margherita waited but a short time for her answer. She had already given this some thought. She said, 'we cannot spread the debt letters onto Florence. We must destroy the papers and tell our fathers the letters were spoilt by worms and humidity. I want us to read the debentures however, for the Acciaiuoli and the Borgherini have enemies. I want insurance for both our families. We keep the debentures on our enemies, to be used only when our families are deadly threatened, and only then. The rest we burn!'
'Well spoken,' the friends repeated.

'We cannot leave our friends unrewarded,' Pierfrancesco protested.
The painters retorted by saying the friendship of two powerful, wealthy families of Florence would be enough reward.

It was then that Pierfrancesco Borgherini had an idea, which made him, Margherita and his friends, famous for eternity.

He said,' I have money but I am not so rich that I can build my own palace. My father Salvi told me he wanted me to have the Palazzo Borgherini after his death, and I indeed love the palace in the Borgo Santi Apostoli. Until I inherit the place, Margherita and I will live in a few rooms of the palace, in apartments. I want to give something worthy of Margherita's wisdom and beauty to her, not just bring her in rooms like any other of Florence. So, I have been thinking!'
The men waited for what was to come.
'I propose,' Pierfrancesco continued, 'to have our furniture, our chests, cupboards, tables, bed, to be sculpted in the best wood and the finest decorations by Baccio d'Agnolo here, in remembrance of the Borgherini enigma. Then I propose that you all, my friends, paint on Baccio's wooden panels the most beautiful pictures, each in your own style. The pictures must be the very best Florence's artists can produce, and represent the styles of today and the styles of the future. I want you to show what you can do when you choose your subjects yourselves, how splendid art can be, and to have something in the Palazzo Borgherini that can compete with the Chapel of the Medici painted by Benozzo Gozzoli!'

The painters and Baccio d'Agnolo were extremely happy with Pierfrancesco's offer. They were charmed and not a little moved by Pierfrancesco's generosity.

Francesco Granacci said, 'we cannot fill Pierfrancesco's rooms with pictures of the Madonna and with Crucifixions, like Fra Angelico did at the monastery of San Marco! Their rooms deserve something more cheerful!'

Bachiacca, always resourceful, replied, 'why don't we paint scenes from the life of Joseph the Egyptian? Joseph, though loved by his father Jacob, was cast off by his brothers.
Pierfrancesco thought at the beginning of our story he had been cast off by his family too, even if only a little. Joseph was thrown in a well and rescued by foreigners. Have we not rescued him when bandits attacked him, and saved him out off a dark pit, the cellar of the

Castello di Gabbiano? Joseph was thrown in an Egyptian prison. Was not also Pierfrancesco imprisoned? Then, Joseph gained the respect of Pharaoh. Did not Roberto di Donato began to respect and love Pierfrancesco, so as to give him his daughter in marriage, like Pharaoh let Joseph marry his daughter? Joseph became a rich man, and so did Pierfrancesco, and maybe the box will bring him more wealth. Joseph grew up to become a very wise man and a fine administrator of Egypt. Has not Niccolò here asserted it was by talking to Pierfrancesco he had had the best ideas for his book? Joseph reconciled with his brothers and saved his father. Pierfrancesco regained great respect from Salvi Borgherini, so that he, Pierfrancesco, will be the future head of the family! There are many other similarities between Joseph the Egyptian and the life of Jesus Christ, so Pierfrancesco and Margherita can also imagine having an allegory on the life of Christ in their rooms, and tell so to the people that visit them, even though forever the Borgherini panels will refer to the Borgherini enigma! Have no fear, we all are going to take our time and discuss the subjects, confer on the scenes we can paint and love best. We will paint a different scene each. Does that suit you?'

Pierfrancesco nodded and Margherita beamed. The other painters applauded.

Later, when the men split, Margherita talked to Bachiacca, her painter. Pierfrancesco, who waited for her, lingered on next to Niccolò Macchiavelli.

Niccolò said, 'Pierfrancesco, our fates separate here. We will see each other once in a while, but we go our own ways.'
'We go back to our little lives,' Pierfrancesco agreed.
'No, no,' Niccolò objected. 'Do you realise how much you changed, how different you are from the Pierfrancesco I met at the beginning of this story? You have grown up! Your courage transformed you. You took risks and coped with them, despite your fears. That is what growing up is about, taking risks and responsibilities and going forward with them, handling them with imagination and boldness.'
'I shared my risks!' Pierfrancesco laughed.
'That also is growing up,' Niccolò said. 'Only idiots and fools walk on their own. Cardinal Francesco is a poor man, for he has no friends – only people that owe him. Part of growing up is making friends, to learn to give and take. Baccio and the painters now rely on you to introduce them to commissioners!'
'I owe them,' Pierfrancesco acquiesced.
'I wish you well! La piace vio con voi, peace be with you,' Niccolò finished.
'Yes. I wish you luck too. I hope your book will be published and read. Please send me a copy. I am certain it will be a book of wisdom, and not your last one. Goodbye!'
Pierfrancesco Borgherini and Niccolò Macchiavelli shook hands. Margherita walked up to them.

Pierfrancesco and Margherita left the workshop. They sauntered into the noise and bustle of the streets of Florence. Macchiavelli watched them be absorbed by the liveliness of the Florence he loved so very much. He sighed, and then went his own way.

Chapter Ten. Epilogue.

Pierfrancesco Borgherini and Margherita Acciaiuoli brought the metal box of Fra Gerolamo Savonarola to the Palazzo Borgherini. Roberto di Donato and Salvi were wise men. They judged the same way as the artists. They left the box to their children.

Pierfrancesco and Margherita sat in a room of the Borgherini palace on both sides of a table, the box between them. Margherita gave the three keys to Pierfrancesco. Pierfrancesco opened the box with firm hands. The locks turned as if they had been oiled yesterday. Neatly folded papers, some closed with wax stamps of the Medici, filled the box to the brim. Pierfrancesco took the papers out one by one and handed them to Margherita. Margherita opened the letters, named the debtor and the amount, and sorted them in two piles. In one pile went the papers of friendly families, of the Soderini clients, and of families unknown to Pierfrancesco and Margherita. In the other pile Margherita stacked the debentures of families that might ever hurt the Acciaiuoli or the Borgherini. When the box was empty of papers, Margherita took the first pile, and then hesitated. Pierfrancesco held her hand. Servants had lighted a fire in the hearth. Pierfrancesco and Margherita threw the letters with two hands in the fire. The flames devoured the paper and parchment.

The box without the letters was not empty. Cardinal Francesco had been right too, for the box contained golden florins and ducats to five thumbs high. The money was not enough to be called a major treasure, but it could pay for their furniture and paintings and much more. The florins and ducats were set aside.

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Pierfrancesco dei Borgherini and Margherita dei Acciaiuoli married with great pomp in 1515. The artists of Florence feasted them. Their apartments in the Palazzo Borgherini were ready for them. Baccio d'Agnolo delivered the finest chests and cupboards he could make. The paintings on his panels by Francesco Granacci, Francesco Ubertini called Bachiacca and Andrea del Sarto soon became famous in Florence. Jacopo Pontormo provided his pictures later, but his panels were the most marvellous, the most enigmatic and the newest of art that Florence could produce.

In 1517, Cardinal Francesco Soderini plotted an uprising in Rome against Pope Leo X, against Giovanni de'Medici, the first Medici Pope. With the cardinals Petrucci, de Sardis and Corveto he planned to poison the Pope and elect Cardinal Riario in Leo's place. The doctor that was to administer the poison, Doctor Battista Vercelli, failed. The doctor was tortured, confessed, and was strangled by a Muslim executioner so that it could not be said a Christian servant of the Pope had executed the doctor. The cardinals were not executed. Each of them had to pay a fine of twenty thousand florins. Pope Leo X created at once more than thirty new cardinals to dilute the influence of his enemies within the Church.
At the end of October of that same year, Martin Luther nailed his ninety-five theses on the doors of the chapel of Wittenberg Castle, demanding reform in the Church of Rome.

Niccolò Macchiavelli died in 1527, in the year of a new uprising of Florentine republicans against the Medici. That uprising came after the mercenary troops of the Emperor sacked Rome. The year before, Giulio de'Medici had been elected Pope. He had taken the name of

Clement VII. Pope Clement sent his army, led by General Colonna, against Florence. The generals Malatesta and Orsini defended Florence. Michelangelo Buonarroti worked on the fortifications of the city. While the Papal troops bombarded the city, the Florentines played a game of Calcio in the piazza in front of Santa Croce, a place that could easily be seen from the heights around Florence by the Papal army. Thus, Florence defied Rome! General Malatesta, a mercenary general, and therefore unreliable as all mercenaries – as Macchiavelli had written in his book 'Il Principe' – fled in 1530, and the town surrendered. Pope Clement first appointed Baccio Valori as governor of Florence, executed the main Gonfaloniere of the revolt, Francesco Carducci, and later placed his illegal son Alessandro de'Medici, called the Moor because of his dark skin and because he had been conceived on a Moorish servant, as leader of Florence. Alessandro received the title of Duke of Tuscany in 1532, thus establishing a dynasty of Medici rulers in Tuscany that lasted until 1737.

Pierfrancesco Borgherini supported the Medici in 1527. When the Medici were expulsed, Pierfrancesco had to flee a while from Florence. An art merchant called Giovanni Battista della Palla was a shrewd buyer and seller of Florentine art at that time. He was also an agent of King Francis I of France. He sent many fine pieces of Florentine art to the Castle of Fontainebleau, to the palace of King Francis. He coveted the Borgherini panels. When Pierfrancesco Borgherini was out of the way, della Palla persuaded the Signoria to let him have the Borgherini panels and present them as a gift to the French King. No doubt, the Priors that were jealous of Pierfrancesco's popularity saw an excellent occasion here to spite the Borgherini.
Della Palla and a delegation of the Priors of Florence one day entered the courtyard of the Palazzo Borgherini. They had bad luck, for Margherita Acciaiuoli, now Borgherini, waited for them in the cortile, a broom in her hands. She feigned amazement when the men dressed in red robes lined with ermine stepped in, appreciating the palace. She asked politely what their business was. Della Palla dared to address her haughtily, claiming the panels of Granacci, Bachiacca, del Sarto and Pontormo.
Margherita landed her broom on della Palla's head, and then on his back, and she threatened to do the same to the Priors that had had the audacity to enter her courtyard uninvited. She threatened to call the good people of Florentine to her help, and a good many of the people already gathered at the palace's gates, alarmed by her screams. The Priors were ashamed and dared not disarm, let alone harm, Margherita Borgherini.
'How dare you,' she shouted,' rob a prominent, good family of Florence of its possessions, of the paintings of our glorious palace, paid for by my father-in-law Salvi Borgherini? Is this the republican spirit? Did the Republic make thieves of the Priors? Do you condone the thieving of this bastard of a French eunuch called della Palla?'
By then della Palla lay half unconscious on the stones of the cortile of the Palazzo Borgherini. The Priors took della Palla by the shoulders and they drooped off under the continuing shouts and blows of the infuriated Margherita. The people in the streets laughed with the Priors as if they were idiots. The Priors fled from the Borgo Santi Apostoli and never returned.
When Pierfrancesco could come back with the Medici in 1530, Giovanni Battista della Palla was captured, imprisoned, and recognised as the anti-Medici, pro-France and pro-republican agitator he was. He died in captivity.
Margherita Borgherini-Acciaiuoli had not feared so much to lose her paintings. Although the pictures meant so many memories of excellent men, she feared most that the panels would have been torn from their frames. Behind the panels, the Signoria would have discovered tens of letters of debt, due by many families of Florence to the bearer of the papers.
When the Priors ran out of her courtyard, Margherita dropped her broom and started shaking all over her body. She ran upstairs, opened the secret double panelling behind the famous

paintings, and burned the last contents of the metal box that fifteen years before had been the Borgherini enigma.

Historical Notes

Justification

"The Borgherini Enigma" is not history writing. It is a fantasy. Four historical facts are at the basis of the novel, but the story that links the events together is totally fictitious.

First, Lorenzo de'Medici, Il Magnifico, indeed called Fra Gerolamo Savonarola at this deathbed. Lorenzo confessed the massacre of Volterra and of the Pazzi family, as well as the pillage of the Monte dei Doti, the public funds that provided money for dowries to poor girls. Savonarola allegedly demanded of Lorenzo to return Florence to a republican government, to return what he had stolen, and to have faith in the redeeming Christ. Lorenzo de'Medici, also allegedly, turned his face and did not answer. He certainly did not, however, offer a box with credit notes to Fra Savonarola.

Second, Leon Battista Alberti was indeed interested in cryptography. He wrote in 1467 a little book called "De Componendis Cifris," in which he explained the encoding scheme used in this novel. He also described the encryption disk in that book, but never placed a copy of the disk on the façade of Santa Maria Novella. Alberti designed that façade, in 1458, ten years before he wrote his book on cryptography, but the works on the front continued until 1470. You might have a look, but there is no masons' sign, and no Alberti disk, on the other side of the volutes of Santa Maria Novella!
The scytale was an ancient encoding means, already used by the Athenians and Spartans several hundreds of years before our era.

Third, the painters Francesco Granacci, Bachiacca, Andrea del Sarto and Jacopo Pontormo produced indeed many panels for the bridal apartments of Pierfrancesco Borgherini and Margherita Acciaiuoli. Fourteen of these panels are extant, but dispersed over various European museums. Baccio d'Agnolo carved the furniture for the apartments.
The panels of Jacopo Pontormo and two panels of Bachiacca are in the National Gallery of London. The panels of Bachiacca are entitled "Joseph receives his Brothers on their Second Visit to Egypt" and "Joseph pardons his Brothers". The four paintings of Jacopo Pontormo are "Joseph sold to Potiphar", "Pharaoh with his Butler and Baker", "Joseph's Brothers beg for Help" and finally also "Joseph with Jacob in Egypt". This last painting may date from around 1518, so it may have been made a few years after all other panels.
Four additional panels of Bachiacca are in the Borghese Gallery in Rome: "The Sale of Joseph", "The Arrest of Joseph's Brothers", "The Search for the Stolen Cup" and "The Finding of the Stolen Cup".
The two large panels of Andrea del Sarto are in the Galleria Palatina of the Pitti Palace in Florence. They are entitled 'Episodes from the Life of Joseph'. These panels were the ones particularly sought after by Francis I of France, but bought in 1584 by Grand-Duke Francesco I de' Medici and exhibited in the Tribune of the Uffizi Gallery, from where a century later they were brought to the Medici's private palace, the Pitti Palace.
The two panels by Francesco Granacci are in the Uffizi of Florence. These have as titles "Joseph presents his Father and Brothers to Pharaoh" and "Joseph led to the Prison".
The "Borgherini Panels" are thus in two museums of Florence, in one museum of Rome and in one of London.

Fourth, Niccolò Macchiavelli wrote "The Prince" from July 1513 in first draft, to probably as late as 1515. Macchiavelli wrote the book originally for Giuliano de'Medici, ruler of Florence in 1513, brother of Giovanni de'Medici, Pope Leo X and brother of Piero de'Medici, sons of Lorenzo Il Magnifico. He dedicated it however in his introductory letter to Lorenzo de Medici, son of Piero de'Medici, and hence nephew to Giovanni de'Medici and Giuliano. Our story plays in the first half of 1513, the months of the genesis of the work.

Notes

Family names in Florence were in plural form. Hence, Pierfrancesco's full name was Pierfrancesco di Salvi dei Borgherini, for Pierfrancesco of Salvi (his father's surname) of the Borgherini family. I left out often the "dei", meaning "of the", for modernity's sake; I continued to use the "de' Medici" however, such as in Giovanni de' Medici instead of Giovanni Medici, since this is common in history books.

In the beginning of the sixteenth century there were four quarters or "Quartieri" in the city Florence, within its walls: Santa Maria Novella in the west, Santo Giovanni in the north, Santa Croce in the east and Santo Spirito in the south. Santo Spirito was the quarter "altr' Arno", on the other side of the River Arno, on the other side of the centre where the Duomo was. Each quarter had four wards. The wards of Santa Maria Novella were, counter clockwise, Vipera, Leon Rosso, Unicorno and Leon Bianco; those of Santo Giovanni were Leon d'Oro, Drago, Vaio and Chiavi. The wards of Santa Croce were Ruote, Bue, Leon Nero and Carro; those of Santo Spirito were Scala, Nicchio, Ferza and Drago. Each quarter and each ward had its gonfalon or standard, and its Gonfaloniere or standard-bearer.

Francesco Ubertini called Bachiacca probably never made a portrait of Margherita Acciaiuolo. I described her fictitious picture using his picture of 'Mary Magdalene,' a panel currently in the Galleria Palatina of the Palazzo Pitti in Florence.

Baccio d'Agnolo was also the architect of the Palazzo Borgherini in the Borgo Santi Apostoli of Florence, built for Salvi Borgherini as of 1507. The building was only completed in 1530, yet I made Pierfrancesco live in that palace already in 1512. After 1530, Margherita Acciaiuoli ordered a private garden to be made in a space of land on the other side of the street. The palace of the Borgherini and the garden can still be visited. There is an Acciaiuoli palace in the same street, now a hotel, but there was also a larger palace behind that one, on the corner of the Lungarno Acciaiuoli. That palace had a view on the Arno, and far sideways also at the church of San Jacopo sopr' Arno. The Castello di Montegufoni, originally of the Acciaiuoli family, still exists and can be visited.

The Via Larga is currently called the Via Camillo Cavour.

The names of Margherita Acciaiuoli, Pierfrancesco and Salvi Borgherini are historical. Giorgio Vasari mentions them in his "Vitae". I am no historian, so I could not find out the surname of Margherita's father and grandfather; the surname of Roberto di Donato Acciaiuoli is therefore an invented one. The surnames of Roberto and Donato were common in the Acciaiuoli family, however. Also the name of Pierfrancesco's mother, Agniola Bonaccorso, is invented.

The castle of the Soderini family, the Castello di Gabbiano, is well preserved to this day. It is currently a fine hotel and a winery, fifteen kilometres south of Florence. Its Chianti wines are famous. Originally a fortified farm of the Bardi family, dating to the twelfth century, it passed to the Soderinis in the fifteenth century.
The Soderini were banished from the castle when Piero Soderini fled to Ragusa (the current Dubrovnik) for Cardinal Giovanni de'Medici's army of the Holy League in 1512. I left the house in the hands of the Soderini for a while, in 1512 and 1513. The castle is a marvellous place to visit. Its rooms are magnificently decorated and the views splendid, its vaulted wine cellars unique.

A strange as it may seem, the Company of the Cauldron really existed. Giovanni Rustici organised the suppers in his large house, inviting the main artists of sixteenth century Florence. The dishes prepared by Andrea del Sarto, Domenico Puligo and Rustici himself are those described by Giorgio Vasari in his "The Lives of the Great Architects, Painters and Sculptors of Italy" of 1550, in his life of Rustici. Vasari described the large wine vat in which sat the guests, as well as the tree that rose in their middle. Granacci's dish was an imaginary one, not described by Vasari.
Carnival was truly sumptuous in Florence. Giorgio Vasari described the "Chariot of the Death" in the life of Piero di Cosimo.

Fra Bartolommeo explains in the "Borgherini Enigma" the composition of an altarpiece, the "Virgin with Child, Saint Anne and other Saints". That painting still exists and can be seen in the Museum of San Marco in Florence. It has remained unfinished, in the state of drawing only, as Pierfrancesco Borgherini sees it in the novel. Piero Soderini indeed commissioned it for the Signoria.
The portrait of Fra Savonarola by Fra Bartolommeo can be seen likewise in the Museum of San Marco. In 1513, Fra Bartolommeo left Florence for Rome.

The leather industry is still important for Florence, with its famous fashion houses such as Gucci and Ferragamo. Most interesting to visit is the "Scuola del Cuoio", the leather school of Florence, founded after World War II, currently housed in the erstwhile dormitory of the monastery of Santa Croce.

The statue of Saint George to which Margherita Acciaiuoli refers to, was sculpted by Donato di Niccolò di Betto Bardi called Donatello (c. 1386-1466) for a niche in a corner of the church of Orsanmichele. The original is currently in the Bargello National Museum of Florence. It is a masterpiece of the early Florentine art of sculpture.

Amerigo Vespucci (1454-1512) made several voyages to the continent that would be later called America in his name. It was the cartographer Martin Waldseemüller (c. 1470-1522), working at Saint-Dié-des-Vosges in France, who first used the name of America on a world map, published in 1507. Amerigo Vespucci wrote an account of his first voyage of 1497. He sent this in the first years of 1500 in a letter to Piero Soderini, Gonfaloniere della Giustizia, letter published in Florence in 1505-1506.

Filippo Brunelleschi (1377-1446) indeed built a ship to transport large quantities of goods nicknamed "Il Badalone", the monster, in 1421. He received from the Signoria a three-year exclusive contract for his invention. The ship sank, laden with marble, on its first voyage from Pisa to Florence, almost ruining Brunelleschi's reputation. Brunelleschi was the architect of the Duomo of Firenze.

The great lectern in the centre of the Main Chapel, the Cappella Maggiore, of Santa Maria Novella, which can be seen currently in the church, dates from the end of the sixteenth century and was not sculpted by Baccio d'Agnolo (although other woodwork of Baccio can be found in the church). It is still called "Il Badalone," the Monster.

Niccolò Macchiavelli did not write of the notion of "second house" in any of his writings. Still, the notion might allow to solve the puzzle of his book "The Prince": how can an obviously very moral person like Macchiavelli, the ideal, loyal civil servant who served the Florentine Republic so well, propose a ruler to be ruthless, violent, shoving all moral considerations aside when necessary to reach his goals of remaining in power. Macchiavelli might have imagined what a ruler's "second house" was, how the ruler's mind was constituted and then worked out by logical reasoning how the ruler should act. A text rationally constructed in this view has no place for moral considerations from outside the ruler's "second house".

The art of painting evolved in Florence from Renaissance to High Renaissance in the early sixteenth century. Under influences from Rome, where Tuscans and Umbrians like Raphael and Michelangelo worked, and with influences that seeped in from Germany (Albrecht Dürer), some painters of the High Renaissance period made works that were entirely different from previous styles. The new style was called, much later, after Giorgio Vasari, Mannerism, of which Jacopo Pontormo was one of the protagonists. Mannerism showed much more openly emotion and movement, figures in distorted poses and proportions, extreme foreshortening on nudes, violence and dramatic effects in rather obscure scenes, and powerful colours. Florentine Mannerism was a style of great tension, responding to the times of upheavals in the town.

Appendix - The Borgherini Panels – A short description

In 1515 Pierfrancesco Borgherini, a wealthy nobleman of Florence, furnished an apartment of his Borgherini Palace with fine panelling, chests, chairs and a bed all carved in walnut wood by Baccio d'Agnolo. Giorgio Vasari tells in his "Lives of the Artists", a book published in 1550, that the Borgherini wanted to ensure that the paintings for these apartments corresponded in excellence to the rest of the palace. That palace belonged to Pierfrancesco's father, Salvi Borgherini, and it had been built by the same Baccio d'Agnolo as architect. Pierfrancesco Borgherini, or perhaps Pierfrancesco's father, Salvi Borgherini, therefore ordered a series of paintings from four Florentine artists. The work was for the marriage apartments of Pierfrancesco Borgherini and Margherita Acciaiuoli, who was also of one of the best-known families of Florence. All scenes on the chests and also on the paintings were to represent themes of the life of Joseph the Egyptian.

Francesco Granacci, sometimes called Granaccio (1469-1543), was then forty-six years old. Andrea del Sarto (1486-1530) was twenty-nine. Jacopo Carrucci called da Pontormo (1494-1556) and Francesco Ubertini called Bachiacca (1494-1557) were only twenty-one. They were all still very young artists, though well accomplished already. They were all among the very best painters of their generation.

Of course, Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519) and Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475-1564) were still alive, but too famous and too far from Florence.
Michelangelo was desperately sculpting the tomb of the Rovere Pope Julius II, and in 1515 he also feverishly worked for the new Medici ruler of Florence and Rome, for Giovanni de' Medici, Pope Leo X. Michelangelo was quarrying marble for the façade of the Medici church of San Lorenzo in Firenze. He quarried in Carrara and Pietrasanta, and was thus too occupied to take on a commission in Florence. Besides, Florence was under Medici reign again and one could not compete with a relative of Giuliano de' Medici for commissions, especially since the Medici Pope had put Giuliano in command of Florence.

Piero di Cosimo (1461-1521) and Lorenzo di Credi (1459-1537) were definitely of the elder generation and so was Pietro Perugino (1448-1523), whose best period was past. Furthermore, Perugino had left Florence in 1505 for his native Perugia, his reputation slightly damaged. The only other great name of Florentine painting that could have worked at the rooms was Fra Bartolommeo (1472-1517), but he too was not of the new generation, a devote friar of San Marco, and thus maybe not so appropriate for decorating bridal chambers. Fra Bartolommeo was in Rome too for a while, then sick, more and more paralysed on one side of his body, and he would die only a little later than a year after the Borgherini paintings were finished.

Florence in 1515 was in a precarious period of peace. Its history of the end of the previous century had been dramatic. Firenze now licked its wounds.

The ruling Medici family had had to leave the town in 1494 when the French King Charles VIII fought an expedition in the north of Italy. Piero de' Medici, who had succeeded on Lorenzo Il Magnifico as uncrowned ruler of the city, obviously did not know how to handle the armies of the French King. He panicked. The Florentines remarked his weakness, loathed his irresolution, and threw him out of the city. Charles VIII entered Florence. Piero fled the

town, accompanied by his brother Giuliano. Cardinal Giovanni de' Medici, the most intelligent of the family, fled in monk's clothes.
The Republic of Florence was re-installed in its former form, and the elected Signoria and its Gonfaloniere della Giustizia ruled once more. During this period, the monk Fra Gerolamo Savonarola of San Marco became the virtual ruler of Florence, dominating the people of Florence by frightening preaches of the Last Judgement, imposing strict sumptuary laws. Fra Savonarola's virtual rule lasted until the nobility and the Signoria dared to challenge his statements of being an envoy of God, could take full control again of the state, imprisoned and tortured Savonarola, and finally burnt him publicly in the Piazza della Signoria in 1498. The Signoria then ruled Florence for a few years as a renewed republic. It fought until 1509 a long war to recapture Pisa. The Florentines felt they needed a more stable government than a council of Priors elected for only one year. Piero Soderini was appointed Gonfaloniere della Giustizia for life.

In 1512, Pope Julius II warred once more against the French with the Holy League of north Italian states. His condottieri, plus the Pope's confident for war, Cardinal Giovanni de' Medici, had a hard time to defeat the French armies, but could accomplish at least the withdrawal of the French to the territories around Milan and Turin. Cardinal Giovanni de' Medici, who had diligently supported the Pope, returned to Florence. The republican Gonfaloniere Piero Soderini fled the city and abandoned it to the papal armies, thereby avoiding a bloodbath, as had happened just days earlier to the town of Prato, which had been pillaged and massacred by the mercenary army of the Pope. Cardinal Giovanni de' Medici entered Florence triumphantly with the Pope's army commanded by the Spanish Neapolitan General Raymond of Cordona. Florence received a new constitution. Like before, the Signoria was elected from Medici supporters only. Cardinal Giovanni installed Giuliano de' Medici at the head of the state, seemingly in no function of a name, but the Signoria took no decision without consulting Giuliano and what Giuliano wanted to order was accepted by the Signoria..

This all happened at the time when Michelangelo finished painting the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in the Vatican. In 1513, the commissioner of Michelangelo's ceiling, the Warrior-Pope Julius II died, and Giovanni de' Medici was elected as the new Pope. He chose the name of Leo X, following the example of previous Popes named for great conquerors such as Alexander for Alexander the Great and Julius for Julius Caesar. The name Leo was a reference to the symbol of Florence, the Marzocco, the lion, and lions were still kept in a cage behind the Signoria of the home town of the new Pope.
In 1515 Francis I, King of France attacked the north of Italy, fought the Swiss armies, defeated them at the Battle of Marignano, and took Milan. But Florence was left untouched and at peace. Giuliano de'Medici could continue to rule Florence in the protection of the Medici Pope Leo X, who lived until 1521.

Giorgio Vasari writes on various accounts of the Borgherini panels.

He recalls them in the life of Jacopo Pontormo. He told that Jacopo painted panels on the chests, but foremost made a picture that hung in a corner on the left as one entered the living room of the Borgherini.

Vasari also gave us an anecdote on what happened to the paintings later on.
The city of Florence was besieged in 1529 by the Papal Armies, after the Signoria had banned once more the Medici and restored republic government under the Gonfaloniere Niccolò Capponi. Pierfrancesco Borgherini, who had sided with the Medici, had to leave for Lucca,

leaving his wife alone. Giovan Battista della Palla, who had already in the past been an agent of Francis I the King of France, wanted to present to the king in the name of the Signoria the panels of the Borgherini, though he proposed to pay Margherita. But when the party arrived at the Borgherini palace, lady Margherita poured upon Giovan Battista the worst abuse ever offered to any man. She called him a "low class second-hand dealer, a cheapskate two penny trader" and so on. She showed the bed that was her nuptial bed bought by her father-in-law Salvi, told them that if they wanted to give presents to the King of France they could strip their own houses bare to send him ornaments, and take the beds from their own rooms. The men drooped off, so that the paintings and furnishings remained in Florence.

Vasari also talks on the panels in his life of Andrea del Sarto. Here he said that Andrea made pictures with many small figures of the stories of Joseph. Andrea devoted an extraordinary amount of time to the paintings, so that his scenes would be more perfect as those of Jacopo Pontormo.

Fourteen panels are extant and currently dispersed over various museums.

The panels of Jacopo Pontormo and two panels of Bachiacca are in the National Gallery of London. These panels of Bachiacca are entitled "Joseph receives his Brothers on their second Visit to Egypt" and "Joseph pardons his Brothers".
The four paintings of Jacopo Pontormo are "Joseph sold to Potiphar", "Pharaoh with his Butler and Baker", "Joseph's Brothers beg for Help" and finally also "Joseph with Jacob in Egypt". This last painting dates from around 1518, so it was made a few years after all other panels.

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The two panels by Francesco Granacci are in the Uffizi. These have as titles "Joseph presents his Father and Brothers to Pharaoh" and "Joseph led to the Prison"'.

The Granacci and the Bachiacca panels are somewhat less interesting for art history than the paintings of del Sarto and Jacopo Pontormo, but nevertheless finely made.

The Granacci paintings

Francesco Granacci, who was originally also known as Francesco d'Andrea di Marco, was a student of Domenico Ghirlandaio. He painted in Ghirlandaio's workshop, and thus he saw also Michelangelo Buonarroti arrive there, when Michelangelo made his first apprenticeship in painting. Granacci became a youth friend of Michelangelo. Michelangelo left Ghirlandaio's

workshop early because he wanted to sculpt, but Granacci remained and stayed on as assistant to Ghirlandaio.
Later, in 1498, Michelangelo engaged Granacci to help him on the Sistine ceiling. But Michelangelo soon dismissed all assistants, and Granacci returned to Florence.
Granacci worked then alone as a painter and received commissions like the panels for the Borgherini rooms. He did not have the personality of an innovator in art, and he continued to work on examples he had seen from Ghirlandaio, Perugino and Fra Bartolommeo, but he had nevertheless the rare talent of being a fine painter. Few pictures remain of this lesser known artist.

Pietro Perugino had left Florence in 1505, but his sublime images were not forgotten. Francesco Granacci remembered Perugino's views of the vast open squares in which this artist situated his major scenes such as the "Marriage of the Virgin" (now in the Museum of Caen, France) or the "Presentation of the Keys to Saint Peter" (in the Sistine Chapel, the Vatican, Rome).

Granacci produced his painting "Joseph presents his Father and Brothers to Pharaoh" entirely in the composition and style of Perugino.
Granacci used also tempera painting on the wood panels, whereas the other artists applied oil painting. The ideal of an open space where notables of an imaginary town meet to walk and discuss politics and trade, a view that originated with Perugino, can be found immediately in Granacci's scene. This was the ideal of living in an urban environment, the environment in which the Florentine humanists imagined the ancient Greek philosophers, after the writings of Plato and Aristoteles and many others were re-discovered in the beginning of the Florentine Renaissance.

Granacci was thus influenced by Perugino, and painted in line with the atmosphere of admiration of an idea of classical art that was a hallmark of Florence in the last quarter of the fifteenth century. Perugino, and hence also Granacci, were painters of the tradition of the Renaissance, not really of the High Renaissance, the period of the first half of the sixteenth century, even though Granacci modernised his style after 1510, after having helped for a few months Michelangelo at transferring the cartoons for the Sistine ceiling.

On the left of the panel of "Joseph presents his Father and Brothers to Pharaoh", Joseph intercedes between the men of the court of Pharaoh and his father and brothers. Granacci did not know much of Egypt except the story in the Bible, and anyway the story of Joseph had to be recognised by Florentine citizens, so he represented the Egyptian court much as a Florentine court of his own times.
Pharaoh wears a heavy beard, always a sign of wisdom and nobility for the Florentines, and Pharaoh in the Bible story was a wise potentate. Pharaoh wears a headdress that is more Persian than Egyptian, but this detail adds the oriental note that was needed to situate the scene. The court that accompanies Pharaoh is dressed as Florentines were.
On the other side of Joseph are Jacob and his eleven sons. They have come with their shepherds' staffs and kneel in front of Pharaoh, for they have a plea and they stay at a respectable distance. Further to the right and in the middle background, Granacci painted other "Egyptians". They point in surprise to the left scene, so that the viewer's attention is directed back again to the left, to Joseph, in this long panel.

Remark the beautiful landscape in the background in Granacci's picture. Perugino had also painted a thin blue line of a landscape at the end of his "Marriage of the Virgin", but nothing

like the lush view that Granacci added. Landscape painting had become more fashionable, though still indeed as background.

Granacci painted mostly in ochre hues, but his picture may have been more colourful when he made it. The tempera technique Granacci used may have faded his colours on the wood. Still, some of the remaining bright tones indicate the skills in harmony of colours of Granacci, and also other known panels of this painter show his preference for the soft pastel yellow-born hues. On or near wooden chests, these colours would have better suited in the rooms of the Borgherini.

The panels of Bachiacca

In the right part of the National Gallery panel "Joseph pardons his Brothers", a panel painted by Bachiacca, Joseph receives his brothers. They abjectly kneel and bow deep to the ground before him. Joseph reveals himself as their brother, and he pardons them. In the left scene, the brothers are led to Joseph. Benjamin, the brother of the same mother and the youngest, is brought in as a prisoner.

In the middle scene of the picture "Joseph receives his brothers on their Second Visit to Egypt", Joseph's brothers present gifts to him, as if he were an Egyptian prince who holds their fate in his hands. On the left one can see Joseph's brothers advancing into Egypt, respectfully bringing the gifts of Jacob. On the right, the brothers leave again. They have not recognised Joseph as their brother.

"Joseph receives his Brothers" is an interesting picture when looked at as an evolution from Francesco Granacci to Andrea del Sarto.
Bachiacca used the Perugino hexagonal temple, a structure that this painter depicted several times, but he did not anymore show this architecture in the far, as Perugino had done. Bachiacca brought the temple to the foreground, and Joseph thrones in the middle of it. He pulled thus the horizon much closer to the viewer, involving the spectator more directly in the picture. The figures all cover the foreground, so that there is no landscape or wide square anymore in the back. The figures receive full attention, and move before us as if in a parade. Indeed, the timeline is respected from left to right, since the brothers arrive, are received, and leave again. Bachiacca tells a story that moves in time, o na static panel.
The temple building is in the foreground, and it is filled with people. As a result, the elevated sense of cosmic space is gone, an effect eagerly sought by Perugino, and replaced with the intimacy of figures. The viewer is placed close to the action, amidst the crowd that fills the panel.
This feeling of togetherness is different, but not less interesting or less nice than the Perugino image of grandiose timelessness. It gives a much more human and warm feeling to the viewer, and creates a more sympathetic symbiosis between artist and spectator. We are almost led into believing we are in a marketplace, amidst the bustle of sellers and buyers. Gone is the elevated image of philosophers discussing in an ideal environment!
If these panels were in a living room, they must have given a sense of warm presence in the room, so that even a lonely visitor would have felt accompanied.

Remark how intelligently Bachiacca painted a landscape symmetrically on the left and right of the panels, and how skilfully he used the little free space he had in the long panels to generate yet a sense of far lands. Bachiacca also painted the landscape in all fine details.

Vasari told how Bachiacca took delight in painting little figures, and later in depicting grotesques. Still, Bachiacca placed his figures with this landscape in an imaginary universe, like Perugino did. These details are the ones by which Bachiacca communicated the dignity of the Bible story.

Bachiacca took an obvious delight in presenting his figures. And so do we. He was a lesser-known artist, but what he did on the two Borgherini panels is remarkable. All figures are in different natural poses, and all are in movement. A viewer may remain a long standing before this picture, admiring the details of the figures.
On the left the donkeys are being relieved of their packs and the gifts are being brought to the middle, to be presented to Joseph. All is life, but strangely enclosed within the concern for the scene itself and for the work that is going on. None of the figures look at the viewer; none tries to attract his or her gaze into the scene. The scene is confined to itself, happily committed to its own life, and although the story is so warmly close to us, we remain on the outside, as neutral spectators, and the viewers remain excluded from the scene. The scene is oblivious of the viewer. Even Joseph does not look straight at the viewer; he looks sideways. Therefore the spectator is kept at a distance, and the scene may give an impression of coldness after all. We remain unfulfilled. We forget that these scenes were probably painted for chests, which indeed were set in a closed, intimate and private space with a life of its own.

Granacci painted one scene, but Bachiacca combined three scenes in one. Bachiacca gave much more attention to the figures therefore, so that the viewer would be more interested in the lively scene.
Bachiacca also used much brighter colours, and he painted in oil on the wood. The pure colours make a wonderful cortège of the most splendid Renaissance dresses. The figures of the panel are all in movement, so that this picture gives a very different sight than the static, placid, frozen impression of Granacci's painting. Clearly, art in Florence was evolving towards showing somewhat more openly the emotions of the figures in paintings.

Bachiacca thus seems an artist who was more tuned to the future in the art of painting than Granacci. Bachiacca knew how to take traditional images of Florentine art and to adapt them in an innovative, personal view. All his figures are harmoniously assembled in a lively, natural long scene, in which all figures are in different movements, and in which also animals are depicted. Thereby the painter wonderfully used the dimensions of the panels he had. Few paintings of Bachiacca have survived, but we see here a painter with much skill and imagination, who also dared to show his personal idea on the scenes of Joseph.

Bachiacca wonderfully distributed his colours to a harmonious whole. A far comparison with pictures of Fra Angelico might come to mind when we look at the delicacy of these hues. Bachiacca painted equally in very light, pure tones: pure red, blue, green and even golden. But his colour surfaces are always small, and he painted the clothes in all details of folds, and in endless patterns of colours varying with the shadows of the light.
One can detect horizontal symmetries in the colours on both sides of the temple. Look for instance to the edges of the frame or the edges of the temple and to the colours that are used there. Bachiacca, as Granacci and the Florentine artists before them, gave much attention to form and composition in their paintings. That is the ordered spirit of Florence in action, the sense of organisation and discipline that made the city so prosperous.

Bachiacca made a marvel of the two panels, entirely in the Florentine style of rational composition and clarity of design in line and form. He first drew a complex scene of all the

figures with well-designed contours, and then he filled in the surfaces with his wonderful colours. His colours are bright and Bachiacca let a bright sun shine from the left, so that he could sharply mark the shadows on the temple, enhancing the effect of space and volume. In such a long and small panel this is almost genial skill.

Bachiacca's second panel of the National Gallery, "Joseph pardons his Brothers", is equally wonderful.
Here Bachiacca showed that he was really as good a landscape painter as the best Flemish or German artists. We remark again the symmetry and the open space in the "open V" form, as he applied in the first panel. But he allowed still more attention to the landscape, which represents a river in the middle and two valley flanks to left and right.
Again, the soft harmonious colours and the details of this landscape are marvellous.
In the figures, Bachiacca varied his hues. Whereas in the first panel the red tones dominate, here that dominance was granted to the olive greens.

It is only after having well looked at the details of Bachiacca's two panels of the National Gallery, that we start to understand why the Borgherini rooms had panels by a lesser name as Bachiacca. The artist was still young, but Pierfrancesco Borgherini must have known of the great potential of this artist. We can only regret that Bachiacca did not perfect the skills he showed in the two Joseph panels, and that so few other works have come to us of this artist. Bachiacca's panels however were not less worthy than the works of the other three artists.

Four of the panels on the life of Joseph the Egyptian made by Bachiacca have entered the collection of Cardinal Scipione Borghese. These are now in the Borghese Gallery in Rome, the finest jewel among the jewels of Roman museums. It is not known how the panels arrived there, but they seem to have been already in Rome in 1650, when they were mentioned by the then curator of the collection, Giacomo Manilli. The panels relate the sale of Joseph, the arrest of his brothers, the search for the stolen cup and the finding of the cup. The panels are rather small, and seem to have been located in the lower levels of the Borgherini- Acciaiuoli bridal rooms.

The first panel in the Borghese collection relates the "Sale of Joseph", an early episode in Joseph's life, whereas the other panels represent various episodes of the story of the stolen cup, leading to the arrest of the brothers.
They show each a different set of figures and form by that a different class. Still, there are similarities. The "Sale of Joseph" and the "Arrest" contain four figures. The two other panels have many more figures in them. So, although the first panel is on another episode than the three others, it makes with the second a visual symmetry, as compared to the two other panels, so that the positioning of the paintings was probably more visually striking on the walls in the Borgherini rooms.

Bachiacca used warm and bright colours: a pink going to red, golden yellow, green with golden folds and a greyish blue lined with white.
In the three paintings on the scenes of the Stolen Cup appears a man dressed with a wide brimmed hat. This man searches for the cup, seems to have found it and arrests the brothers. Bachiacca may have suggested that this was Joseph himself, disguised with a wide hat, the more so since in the first panel the young Joseph is shown also dressed in a pink-red robe.
All the figures are nicely painted and they are in vivid action. Bachiacca presented the scenes in such a way that they can be easily recognised.

Also the symmetry of colours in the three last scenes of the Stolen Cup is the same: yellow-golden to the left, red in the middle and blue on the right. This allows the viewer to classify each panel as belonging to its group.
In the first panel, this order of colours is reversed and slightly modified in hues: blue-purple is painted to the left, a yellow-red in the middle and a brown-yellow on the right.
A painter that has thus thought of indicating differences of scene, but similarities in visual effects, had to be a master artist. Bachiacca certainly was that. He handled the panels graciously in fine detail. He also composed his landscapes in the background very nicely, and drawn with minute attention.

In the "Arrest of Joseph's Brothers", Bachiacca even painted a personage disappearing into a panel, thus creating illusion of a space hidden behind the wooden frame. What was hidden in that space? Viewers such as the Borgherini couple might have amused themselves at discovering other small details, such as how the figures move from one position to another in the various panels. Indeed, in the three last paintings Bachiacca represented the same figures, in the same clothes and wearing the same hats, but in different places and poises. The paintings are thus not only a visual delight, but also a delight for the curiosity of interested viewers. Bachiacca's pictures were objects of amusement.

The panels of Andrea del Sarto

Andrea del Sarto was ten years younger than Francesco Granacci. In his two panels, so devotedly painted taking enough patient time, del Sarto recalled many scenes of the Bible stories of Joseph.

Granacci showed only one scene in each of his panels. Del Sarto made a countryside painting, which we will call the "Canaan" panel and a city view, which we will call the "Egypt" panel, for these paintings also refer to these sites and to these parts of the stories. The Egypt panel refers to the life of Joseph in Egypt, but like Granacci, the buildings show a Florentine Renaissance setting. The many figures of the two del Sarto panels are also dressed as Florentines, but for a few details that denote the oriental touch.

In the Canaan panel of Andrea del Sarto, one can see mainly stories of the crime of Jacob's sons. In the foreground, Jacob and Rachel are talking. Rachel's son and brother to Joseph, Benjamin, points to a scene of the background. Benjamin walks towards the well in which Joseph's brothers have thrown Joseph, and where they all are discussing his fate. There is thus no unity of time, since various scenes that happened at different moments of time are shown in the same picture.
Andrea Del Sarto nevertheless tried to bring a spatial line in the narratives. Benjamin points to the start of the stories. A bit further than the scene of the well, Joseph's brothers sell him to travellers on their way to Egypt. Then we should look at the imposing promontory of the background, the hill with trees that Andrea del Sarto majestically placed in the middle of the panel. Here Reuben kills a sheep and drenches Joseph's cloak in the blood. Then he descends the hill with the reddened cloak. This scene makes one think of course of Golgotha, the Crucifixion site, also a hill of Jerusalem.

Jesus Christ was crucified on the hilly site of Golgotha, and Jesus was represented in the Middle Ages as the slaughtered Lamb of God. Del Sarto succeeded in combining Joseph's

story and the symbols of the death of Jesus. Therefore the hill mounts to the heavens in his panel.
The story of Joseph bears much parallel likeness to the passion of Jesus. Joseph was betrayed and thrown in a well. Jesus also was betrayed. Pharaoh imprisoned Joseph. Caiaphas imprisoned Jesus. A lamb was slaughtered to redden Joseph's cloak. Jesus was compared to the Lamb of God and lost his blood on the cross. Joseph had to flee from the seduction by the wife of Potiphar, whereas Mary Magdalene was a converted harlot. Joseph interceded for his brothers to Pharaoh, while Jesus interceded for all mankind to God the Father.

This likeness between the two stories, in which Middle Age theologians saw mystic parallels, may be the reason why Pierfrancesco Borgherini ordered the paintings of Joseph. Many pictures of Jesus's passion in one living room might have been too directly religious and shown too many cruel scenes, which might have hurt the sensitivity of Margherita Acciaiuoli. Pictures of the life of Joseph could be more picturesque, less obvious than pictures of Christ, and could give the owner of the house a status of intellectual for recognising the symbolic parallels. That may be the reason why the series on the life of Joseph is a not so rare subject in the Italian Cinquecento, a period in which few pictures were made of the Old Testament. The parallel can in particular be seen in the Granacci picture, where Joseph is directly depicted as the incorporation of Jesus.

In the right foreground of Andrea del Sarto's painting, Reuben shows the bloodied cloak of Joseph to Jacob. Jacob tears at his garments in a sign of despair and mourning. On the left foreground is the home of Jacob. Here the family weeps over Joseph's presumed death and over the coming famine. Benjamin also can always easily be found.

Del Sarto's paintings are in beautiful colours, subdued and yet bright and contrasting, so that the scenes and figures stand well out from the background. The figures can be recognised because they keep the same clothes in the same colours throughout the various scenes. So we can easily follow Jacob, Benjamin and Reuben. Reuben can be discovered in almost all the scenes: he wears a red robe, a wide hat, and a yellow short cloak on the shoulders.

Del Sarto and Granacci tell stories. But remark the difference in vision.
Granacci uses Perugino's elevated image of the imaginary, ideal town square, inspiring feelings of the sublime. But this image was now a traditional one. Perugino had used this view several times already, and Raphael, a Perugino student, had copied it. Granacci's figures are static, moving yet poising as if in a halted dream, caught in a moment of slow motion. Granacci's picture shows the grace of old Florence, the dignity and the aspirations of the Renaissance. But the picture remains an ideal, far from Florentine reality. And Granacci did not innovate, nor did he openly impose his own personality. He remained traditional, and also painted but one scene in each painting.

Del Sarto also did not reject traditional views on the art of painting, and he certainly continued the Florentine tradition of giving prominence to drawing, lines and form over colour. But we detect an evolution, which make historians call this period the High Renaissance.
Del Sarto introduces a liveliness that forebodes the Baroque. His figures are all in motion and more expressive. Even when the persons are talking and standing still, their arms and hands move. In the front scene of the Canaan picture, Benjamin is all nervousness and impatience. He is pointing to the crime scene of the well.

Del Sarto liked to tell much of the life of Joseph, and so capture the interest of his viewers. So he showed many scenes in one painting, and diligently combined these in the space of his panel in a fluent timeline. He made obvious the parallels between Joseph and Jesus in an intelligent way. He brought the various stories in a well-balanced composition. Thus in front are three scenes, presented in a symmetric way around the centre family scene. By depicting his figures in smaller dimensions higher on the panel, he created perspective and a vast panorama. Del Sarto created an illusion of a very wide landscape in his Canaan panel.

Joseph is not present at all in the Canaan picture; del Sarto hinted only at Joseph's presence, so that although invisible Joseph becomes present in the panel but only in our minds.

In the Egypt panel of Andrea del Sarto, Joseph takes part in various scenes. Joseph is imprisoned; he leads his father in; in a final scene Joseph kneels before Jacob and reveals who he really is. On the left are a small scene of a bedchamber and a splendid small image of a nude man. This may be a reference to the bridal room for which the picture was made, and a reference also to the tale of Joseph and Potiphar's wife in which Joseph had to flee away nude.

The evolution from Granacci to del Sarto is obvious. Granacci showed the Platonic ideal of elevated concepts. Del Sarto brings the viewer back to reality. Granacci represented an ideal, whereas Del Sarto told stories in a more expressive way, and introduced symbols in a subtle way. Granacci's message is simple; del Sarto's messages are dense. Both artists transported the stories into their own times and dressed the actors in Renaissance attire. But del Sarto's aim was not to depict refined courtiers. He told many but simple stories of everyday people.

In these paintings landscapes obtained ever more importance, and that may have been under the influence of northern art. In the Granacci picture the landscape is far behind. Perugino also reduced his landscape behind the temple to a thin blue line of far hills. Granacci emphasised it already more than Perugino, and added details of trees and fields. Bachiacca's landscapes gain more importance. Del Sarto developed the landscape as an important element of the symbolism of his Canaan picture, since the central promontory recalls Golgotha. He too finished trees and bushes of the hills in all detail. He gave much more attention to nature, and honoured it with minuscule details.

The four paintings of Jacopo Pontormo

Jacopo Pontormo made his pictures for the Borgherini Palace when he was twenty-one years old. He had studied with the best masters of Florence, starting with Leonardo da Vinci. He learned his profession with Piero di Cosimo and with Mariotto Albertinelli. When he was eighteen years old, around 1512, he entered the workshop of Andrea del Sarto, but he had left Andrea already when the Borgherini rooms were furnished. Pontormo never stayed long with one and the same master, and he was known as a good artist at very young age.

Giorgio Vasari wrote in his "Lives" that Andrea del Sarto worked to make his pictures better than the ones of the other artists. But we may doubt on whether del Sarto made his pictures after Pontormo, to compete with his erstwhile pupil. Moreover, we are certain that Pontormo made his "Joseph in Egypt" panel two to three years later than the other paintings of the

Borgherini apartment. Was in fact not Vasari competing with Pontormo and denigrating his competitor?

In "Joseph sold to Potiphar", the scene shows Joseph as a young boy standing before his new master, Potiphar the Egyptian. On the left are the Ishmaelites who sold Joseph, grappling for their payment.
Pontormo painted Roman statues on high columns in his pictures. Here he painted a statue of charity and may have emphasised the moral message of the Bible story.
In "Pharaoh with his Butler and Baker", Pontormo showed the butler descending the stairs to be saved whereas the baker is brutally taken from his cell and then on the lower left led to his execution.
"Joseph's brothers beg for Help" is a smaller and longer panel. One sees Joseph seated on a parade car and his brothers knelt before him, begging for food. On the right in this panel the opulence of Joseph's good management is seen for people wear the sacks of wheat on their shoulders. This panel is inscribed with the words in Latin for "Behold the Saviour of the World" and "Behold the Salvation of the World". This is a reference, this time of Pontormo, to "Ecce Salvator Mundi" or "I am the Saviour of the World", one of the titles of Jesus Christ.

The four panels made by Pontormo are in the same style, but his last picture, "Joseph in Egypt", is the most accomplished.

Jacopo Pontormo seems to have been inspired by the Canaan picture of del Sarto for his own last and largest panel of "Joseph in Egypt". Pontormo painted here on the left the episode where Joseph presents his father to Pharaoh. On the right foreground Joseph is seated on a parade chariot and he listens to someone who is giving him a petition. The parade chariot could be seen as an extraordinary extravagancy here. But Giorgio Vasari himself talks in his "Lives of the Artists", and in particular in the life of Andrea del Sarto of such parades and cortèges.

Vasari recounts how in the same year 1515 when the Borgherini panels were made, Giovanni de'Medici, the true ruler of Florence, now Pope Leo X, wished to grace his native town with an official and triumphant visit. The city of Florence, of course by order of Giuliano de'Medici, offered a reception worthy of a king. Vasari tells of the wonderfully decorated arches and gates that were erected on the way of the Pope, as well as the statues that greeted him everywhere on the road. Antonio da San Gallo made a temple with eight sides, which must have been like the Perugino-Granacci temple. Granacci himself built and decorated together with Aristotile di San Gallo an arch between the abbey and the palace of the Podestà. The façade of the cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore, then still unfinished in marble decorations, was made of wooden panels decorated by Andrea del Sarto. Other artists, all the best of Florence, worked at the decorations: Baccio Bandinelli, Rosso Fiorentino, Jacopo Sansovino and many others. When Pope Leo entered Florence in September of 1515, Vasari wrote that this spectacle was judged to be the most grandiose ever devised, and the most beautiful. Jacopo Pontormo of course must have participated in this feast and it almost certainly inspired him for his pictures. There was in Florence a tradition of showing fine parade chariots during feasts and processions, for instance at Carnival.

Behind the scene of the chariot in his picture, Joseph and one of his sons, who is probably his eldest son Ephraim, climb the spiral stairs. On top of the stairs Ephraim is well received. Finally on the upper right the dying Jacob receives Joseph and blesses Joseph's sons.

Jacopo Pontormo painted on the left in this picture a scene in which Joseph presents himself before his father Jacob. We prefer to adhere to this, Vasari's interpretation of the scene. Another explanation can be that the scene is Joseph presenting his father to Pharaoh.
The same scene, even with Joseph dressed with a cloak in almost the same colours, can be found as the main scene of del Sarto's Egypt painting. Del Sarto pictured stairs on the right to show scenes of the imprisonment of Joseph. Pontormo also painted stairs with episodes on the right. Del Sarto placed buildings on left and right. He painted a palace on the right and a bedchamber on the left. The palace has low stairs that lead to the door.
Pontormo also used buildings on left and right and also low stairs. But the bed scene is on the right and the stairs are the stairs of a parade car on the right.
Del Sarto leads a natural promontory to the skies in the Canaan picture. Pontormo also used an image of elevation, but he showed the spiralling stairs to heaven.

Pontormo thus used separate elements of del Sarto's picture and re-arranged them.

The references to del Sarto are clear however. It is as if Pontormo had wanted to take del Sarto's picture and use it to show how differently he, Pontormo, could handle such a same subject.

We saw an evolution from the Perugino vision of Granacci to the multitude of figures of Bachiacca and to the combination of landscape and storytelling in many scenes of del Sarto.

With the pictures of Pontormo altogether forces of a higher level were at work. Here is an entirely new vision. Figures play a dominant role with Pontormo, as in Bachiacca's panels or as in del Sarto's, but immediately we obtain an impression of aesthetic elevation, such as hinted at in the Granacci views, now very obviously forced upon the viewer. Pontormo combined these feelings to an extraordinary fantasy. His pictures seem to elevate the soul to a sublime, aesthetic dream.

How did Pontormo inspire such feelings of spiritual transcendence? The effect is mostly created by the long, narrow spiral stairs that ascend to the top of the frame, and by the long slender Greek columns that rise to the heavens. Even more, Pontormo painted the leftmost antique statue in a poise in which it is groping and reaching out for the skies. This statue elegantly indicates the direction of a noble soul seeking beauty and spiritual values of another nature than the economic values of the Florentine traders. The same line of ascending aspiration is to be found in the scene of "Joseph revealing his Father and Brothers to Pharaoh". The figures there creep over the stairs, then kneel, then hesitantly advance, as a soul ascending in humility to God.

Jacopo Pontormo represented the lightness of the soul also by his colours. He used very bright hues, the shades of water-colours or of the chalky hues of early fresco painting. In this aspect too, he contrasted consciously with del Sarto's heavy oily colours.
Pontormo maybe took del Sarto's picture as example, and then he set his own picture off against this example of his former master, to create a vision that was very different from del Sarto's design. Thus to del Sarto's warm, even sombre colours, Pontormo applied the very light tones of fresco. Against the dense landscape he put the bright colours of his own middle landscape, in which there is neither green of meadows nor brown of trees but merely the light yellowish tones of the desert or of a sun-scorched rock.

Pontormo showed that he too could picture in various scenes in a balanced, natural composition in the same frame, and yet stay consistent in vision. But he replaced the warm earthiness of del Sarto and del Sarto's appealing density of narration with the elevation of mind of Perugino. In doing this he surpassed Perugino, and created something entirely new.

In del Sarto we found the realisation of the rational, economic, down-to-earth almost immediate materialistic Florentine mind. Pontormo was the radical, mystic thinker, the impulsive and melancholic lonely genius and poet, who drew the images of figures and scenes into extremes of the bizarre and of fantasy. Of course, youth is inclined to such daring excesses, and Pontormo was quite younger than del Sarto when he painted this last scene. Pontormo's first three panels testify to this same vision, but he pushed the vision deeper and thus introduced yet another stage in the art of painting, now called Mannerism.

Jacopo Pontormo took del Sarto's picture, analysed the scenes, dissected them and then re-assembled them differently with the composition of a wizard into a new painting, with an entirely new vision. This vision was inspired by a deeper sense of religion and of the Bible story of Joseph, and influenced by the stress and horrors of the continuous strives that racked Tuscany and Florence. Pontormo took his concepts as far as he possibly could, in a daring magic. He showed emotions and pathos as had not been done before in Florentine painting. He probably never went further in his subsequent pictures, as of course his youth matured. Therefore this panel of his has remained an oddity, regularly printed as an extravagancy from the times of Pierfrancesco Borgherini.

We agree with Giorgio Vasari, himself a Mannerist painter, when he stated in his "Lives" that it would be impossible to find another picture executed with as much grace, perfection and excellence as this painting by Jacopo. Jacopo Pontormo created hereby a new style of art in Florence, which other painters – such as Rosso Fiorentino - would take further yet. Pontormo's Borgherini panels so impressed, that he created Mannerism in Florence.

Epilogue

The fame of the Borgherini panels passed the borders of Italy. Today the Borgherini panels are practically forgotten as a marvellous collection, and so are the Palazzo Borgherini, its garden and its furniture. Less tourists visit the Borgherini palace than the grander sites of Florence, fewer still recognise one collection in the series of paintings. But the Borgherini panels still exist, and were preciously preserved over the centuries, always a sign of great quality.

The Borgherini panels show stories. They are not portraits and they do not present Joseph, Jacob and Joseph's brothers in full, large, filling the frame. The panels are a splendid and important example of the art of story-telling in the art of painting. But where Granacci, Bachiacca and del Sarto merely told the stories, Jacopo Pontormo thought deeper en felt deeper the epic and the spiritual meaning on the Bible story, and he showed those feelings in his pictures.

One of the great artists that would understand and continue Pontormo's style was a young child that accompanied Jacopo Pontormo everywhere. Jacopo Pontormo painted his young friend, pupil, confident, later assistant and lifelong companion, Agnolo Bronzino, as the child

seated in brown clothes on the stairs of Pharaoh's palace, down beneath the stairs of art that Bronzino was to ascend brilliantly.
Bronzino is seated among the angels and already talks happily to the aristocrats of Florence, like the young Christ among the Doctors. These noblemen would be the later commissioners of Bronzino for the wonderful portraits that would constitute his renown.