Chapter 1—The Preacher

Florence, October 1494

'Throw out everything that is noxious to the health of the soul. Let everyone live for God and not for the world. Live in simplicity and in charity.'

The preacher was barely visible to all except those members of the congregation who were closest to the pulpit of the Cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore. But the frame of this small, gaunt man concealed powerful lungs and a passionate spirit, which combined to hurl his words to the very back of the cathedral, where Niccolò Machiavelli was standing, near the entrance portico.

'Here it comes,' he murmured. 'The Great Denunciation.'

'You merchants and bankers, you think you can buy everything with money. You weigh your wives and daughters down with gold, and you pay the artisans to paint you as saints. But do you really think the Virgin Mary went about dressed in fine silks and draped with golden earrings? Do you? You should destroy these idolatrous images, abandon your palaces, and go back to the simple ways of Christ!'

A sigh rippled through the crowd.

'We will all die, my brethren, the rich and poor, the old and the young, the infirm and the strong, all will turn to ashes. But those who have abandoned Christ will leave behind a special stench, and no absolution offered by the corrupt priests of the Church of Rome will erase that stench from the nostrils of the faithful. Those priests, who pretend to live by holy orders, who absolve the worst sins of the rich in return for a handful of coins, but demand a week's wages from the poor for the same indulgences, they will be condemned to hellfire for all eternity. And the worst sink of iniquity is Rome itself! Yes! Rome is a cess-pool of wickedness and lechery, and all the vices known to man are practised there.'

Now there were shouts here and there, as the people grew more agitated. This was an old song that they had heard repeated many times in the preacher's sermons.

'The time is coming, my brothers, when all will be swept away, when these evil men who rule our church and our state are turned out by the sword of the righteous. I know this because God came to me and showed me a vision.' He paused, the fervent, prominent eyes sweeping across the crowd, gauging their mood. 'I saw a sword over Italy, quivering. Then, all of a sudden, the sword turned its point downwards, and amid a tempest, it set about scourging all the evil-doers in the land.'

The crowd was hushed, now: they had heard the preacher talk about his visions before, and they knew that there was something extraordinary coming.

'What did this mean? I, Fra Girolamo Savonarola, I will tell you: Florentines, that sword is that of the king of France! It is he who will cleanse Italy of the stink of corruption!'

As the crowd erupted into excited chatter, a tall, elegant young man gave out a snort of derision, loud enough to attract disapproving stares from those around him. Not that Agostino Vespucci gave a fig for that. 'King Charles is in Italy for more temporal reasons, I'll wager. Come on Nico, let's get out of here: he'll be raving for another hour at least.'

Niccolò fought the urge to giggle at the shocked looks on the faces of the people around them as he turned to follow his friend down the crowded nave towards the cathedral's main doors. Only an aristocrat like Agostino could get away with showing such disdain for Savonarola and all his works.

Emerging from the chilly shadow cast by the immense cathedral into bright sunshine, they hurried across to their favourite tavern, a low-roofed place with a jolly striped canopy that extended out into the piazza and sheltered a rough table and benches which they proceeded to colonise, shouting for wine and food as they sat down.

'On the way, lads,' fat Carlo the innkeeper said; he bawled instructions at one of his serving girls and then looked curiously at the four students. 'Been listening to the friar have you? And what song was he singing today?'

'The same as all his other sermons,' Agostino sniffed, picking at a thread on the sleeve of his padded and slashed doublet. 'Fire and damnation unless we all go about wearing ashes and sack-cloth. We should give up all material things, he says, and establish the City of God on the Arno.'

Carlo's face split into a red-cheeked grin. 'Florence as a new Jerusalem? He's barking up the wrong tree there, I'd reckon. Can't see all them Medici and Albizzi and the rest giving up their finery, can you?'

'You're right Carlo,' Niccolò laughed. 'No matter what Savonarola says, Florentines will keep on amassing money and spending it on paintings and sculptures to stuff into their grand palazzi, Carnival will always be a drunken riot, and the bum-boys in Sant' Ambrogio will continue to offer their arses to anyone who will give them a few scudi for the pleasure. There are so many delicious vices to choose from if you are a Florentine!'

'Still, Brother Savonarola has a point, I reckon, when he says the devil uses the rich to oppress the poor. Rich folks say that poor people only have themselves to blame for their misery, but when these great men force shopkeepers to sell their shops and farmers their land for a trifle, when they pay a pittance to labourers and artisans for their work, is it any wonder that people turn to thievery and prostitution?'

Having made this pronouncement, Carlo turned and waddled back into the inner recesses of the tavern, leaving the two friends to exchange bemused looks.

'Carlo doesn't exactly look like he's on the bones of his arse, does he?' Agostino laughed. 'I know for a fact he does very well out of this place, and what is more he owns a couple of warehouses down by the river which bring in a good income.'

Niccolò was unsurprised by his friend's knowledge of the finances of their friendly tavern-keeper: Agostino's sources of information were mysterious but comprehensive, and he always seemed to know the most surprising things about people.

'That might be true, Agostino, but Carlo is not so different from the rest of that crowd in the cathedral. There were plenty of poor artisans and beggars, for sure, but surely you noticed that there were also lots of well-off gentlemen and ladies swooning over every word, even as Savonarola denounces them. It's as if they go there wanting to be condemned.'

Agostino's reply was cut short by the chaos that enveloped them as the arrival of food and drinks coincided with the appearance of two more friends, students like themselves, shouting greetings and hurling orders at the poor harassed serving-girls. In appearance the newcomers were a mismatched pair: Filippo Casavecchia, the taller and leaner of the two, was perfectly and fashionably turned out in tight-fitting blue doublet and scarlet hose, covered with a short turquoise tabard that made no concession to the cold. His companion, Biagio Buonaccorsi, was almost the opposite, his chubby figure carelessly dressed in rumpled clothes that clearly had not had the attention of a laundress for some time, and his shoulder-length hair was in need of a comb.

'New hat, Casa?' Niccolò asked once everyone had settled down. 'Come into some money?'

Casavecchia removed the hat in question, an elaborate blue silk affair decorated with a long feather, and regarded it critically.

'It is elegant, isn't it? The latest fashion in Venice, or so the vendor in the market by the Ponte Vecchio told me. It was a gift from my uncle.'

'Never mind his damned hat,' Biagio said excitedly, 'you won't believe the news we heard there: the French have occupied Pisa and declared that they will restore it to its ancient liberty!'

That got everyone's attention, much to Biagio's satisfaction. King Charles VIII of France had entered Italy a month before with a huge army, intent on enforcing his claim to the throne of Naples. One after another, the states of northern Italy had thrown themselves at his feet; the Florentines had temporised, making vague promises of support, but that had not prevented the king from invading Florentine territory. The fortresses at Sarzana, Pietresanta and Livorno had all been taken, which was bad enough, but to lose Pisa was a body-blow, for the city was Florence's western gateway to the sea, and the jewel in the Florentine crown.

'And have a look at this.' Rummaging in the big purse that hung from his belt, Biagio extracted a leaflet which he slapped down on the table so that everyone could see. 'These are appearing all over the city, posted on walls and left in churches. I found this one blowing about the courtyard of the Studio.' The Studio was the official name of Florence's university, where they all studied together.

The leaflet was a cheaply printed effort, and most of its message was yet another exhortation to Florentines to think less of Mammon and more of God, but it was the headline at the top that was particularly arresting:

Oh, Most Christian King of France, free the people of Florence from the yoke of Tyranny!

'Savonarola was just singing the same tune just now in the cathedral,' Agostino said, frowning. 'But his message was that the French king was coming to cleanse us of our moral corruption, not to overthrow the government.'

'Is that what this means?' Casavecchia asked.

'Don't be naïve, Casa, what else could it mean? Whoever printed this—and we can be sure it was printed with Savonarola's approval—is calling for the downfall of Piero de' Medici and his friends.'

'But Piero is hardly a tyrant. After all, he is subject to the will of the Signoria, like everyone else.'

'Which is stuffed full of Medici supporters, as are all the other government committees.' Niccolò was brusque. 'Agostino is right; this is a call for King Charles to overthrow the government.'

'And replace it with what?' Biagio wanted to know.

'If the good friar is to be believed, the kingdom of God, though I expect the king of France might have a few other ideas. Let's see what Adriani has to say this afternoon; he always has original thoughts on matters political.' Marcello Adriani was their lecturer for the afternoon at the Studio, Florence's university.

'He won't be having any thoughts today,' Biagio said, again happy to be the first with the news, 'other than where the nearest latrine might be; apparently he has come down with a case of the flux. No lectures this afternoon.'

After a few not very sincere expressions of sympathy for their lecturer's illness, the friends indulged in another hour's drinking, talking, and harassing the serving-girls. By the time their impromptu party broke up, Niccolò was a little tipsy as he made his way through the crowded streets of Florence. It was late in the afternoon when he walked onto the Ponte Vecchio, and the butchers were starting to close up their stalls. Frowning, he came to a halt, guiltily remembering that the housekeeper had asked him to buy something for their supper that evening.

'Ho, there, young Niccolò, looking for something? You'd better be quick, or I'll be closed before you've finished your wool-gathering!'

'I'm not gathering wool, Marco, I am thinking.' Niccolò was indignant. 'It's different.'

'Looks the same to me. Come on, my wife will scream the house down if I am late for dinner.'

'All right, all right. Angelina wanted some beef. Three pounds or so, she said.'

The burly young butcher rummaged among the bleeding carcasses on his counter and set about chopping and cutting with the dexterity of long practice. In a few minutes, the required amount of meat had been carved, weighed and wrapped. 'There you are. And take some chicken livers as well, fresh today, on me.'

'Hah! You will do anything to keep Angelina sweet on you, Marco. Now, how much are you going to rob me for the rest?'

Agreeing on a price after a few minutes' good-natured haggling, Niccolò paid over the required coins and was on his way across the bridge and into his home district of Santo Spirito. Casa Machiavelli was much like its neighbours—four stories tall with a small warehouse on the ground floor where they stored the wine and oil produced on the family farm in the hills, the brown stone façade above punctured by windows whose green-painted shutters had been thrown wide open to admit as much light and air as possible from the narrow street.

Having delivered his parcels to the housekeeper, Niccolò went in search of his father and found him in his library, where he almost always spent the afternoon. Bernardo Machiavelli was proud of his collection of books, his most prized possessions, and spent many hours each day interrogating them. He was busy translating the writings of the ancient Roman historian Titus Livius from Latin to Italian, a project that had been commissioned by one of Bernardo's wealthier acquaintances, for which he was being paid a gratifyingly fat fee.

'Hello father,' Niccolò said, dropping his satchel on a chair. 'Angelina says there is bread and cheese, and some of her pickled onions, whenever you are ready.'

Bernardo looked up from his book, mildly irritated at the interruption. 'Yes, all right. You're home early.'

'Marcello Adriani is ill, so we were all allowed the afternoon off. Have you seen this?'

Bernardo picked up his spectacles and peered at the leaflet. ‘Well, well. The yoke of tyranny, indeed. I suppose they mean Piero and his friends.’

‘Who else would they mean? Is there anyone else who could be described as a “tyrant” in Florence?’

‘Piero is just a boy, though he thinks he is a prince and entitled to princely trappings.’ Bernardo was dismissive. ‘Lorenzo would never have been criticised so, not even through the side of the mouth like this.’

‘True enough, father,’ Niccolò said. ‘Though they didn’t call him “Lorenzo the Magnificent” without cause: all that money spent on building palazzi and country houses, and all the paintings and sculpture to adorn them. He lived like a prince, so it is hardly surprising that his son thinks he is royal.’

‘Who are the Medici anyway? Jumped up wool traders. There are plenty of other wealthy and ancient families in Florence who could claim the right to lead us.’

Niccolò smiled, always amused when his father’s snobbish streak came out. It was true, though, that the old Florentine families had always resented the Medici dominance of the government, even as they acquiesced in it, fawning on Lorenzo while they muttered insults behind his back. When Lorenzo had died, two years back, they had wasted no time investing his twenty-year-old son Piero with all of his father’s authority, even as they expressed doubts about his ability. Since then, the chorus of complaints had grown ever louder and more insistent.

‘Anyway, I doubt King Charles is much interested in changing the government of Florence,’ Bernardo went on. ‘He just wants us to stand aside while he marches through Tuscany on the way south to Rome and Naples.’

‘Oh? You don’t think he has been sent by God, like Savonarola says, to scourge us of our wickedness and licentiousness, and cleanse the corruption of the church?’

That provoked a predictable outburst. ‘Savonarola! That charlatan. But I suppose in these gullible times foolish men will believe in the ravings of a friar from…where *is* he from? Ferrara?’ Bernardo sniffed his contempt. ‘No doubt we shall soon see the government of the Medici replaced by the government of priests, and decisions made by the consultation of entrails.’

We are nearly at that point now, Niccolò thought as he left his father to his books and went to get something to eat. Savonarola’s outburst anointing King Charles as the scourge of Florentine vice was hardly new: he had been prophesying some such thing every week for months. But as the French army got closer, more and more people had crowded into the cathedral, and his credibility had soared. The great lords of the Signoria were increasingly afraid of him, and there was even a Savonarolan party beginning to emerge, dedicated, so they said, to his aims and ideals.

As for Piero de’ Medici, Niccolò hadn’t ever really given him much thought. Lorenzo had come to power in the year that Niccolò was born, the third generation of the Medici dynasty to hold power in the republic. His death had been a shock, but Piero’s accession had just seemed inevitable at the time, and if the aristocrats had doubts about his ability they didn’t say so in public, at least not at first. For Niccolò and his university friends, it seemed to be no bad thing that the government of an old man was about to be replaced by that of a man who was more or less their own age. His father was right about one thing, though. Where old Lorenzo had charmed his critics, Piero seemed to go out of his way to antagonise them, and that would lead to nothing good.

As Angelina fussed about getting the evening’s supper onto the table, Niccolò pulled his dog-eared copy of Dante’s *Divine Comedy* from his pocket and propped it open to read while he devoured bread and some hard pecorino cheese. There was little point in thinking any more about politics, he decided, since the Machiavelli family was hardly likely to be able to have any influence over them, so he might as well lose himself for a while in the great master’s poetry. Before long, he was climbing Mount Purgatory with Dante and Virgil, oblivious to the growing cacophony around him as the various members of the household arrived for supper.

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Under the portico surrounding the courtyard of the Studio, the dice clicked and clattered as they rolled across the flagstones, rolled to a halt, and announced their verdict—four, two, six.

‘*Zara*, dammit!’ muttered Filippo Casavecchia, the loser for this throw, having guessed wrongly the total of the dice thrown by his opponent. ‘And by just one! You have the devil’s luck, Niccolò.’

‘Whene’er a game of dice is broken up, the one who loses sorrowing stays behind, and learns, as sadly he repeats the throws…’

‘Yes, all right, Agostino, you know your Dante. But I’m not far behind. Another few throws and I’ll get even.’

‘Very well, Casa,’ Niccolò agreed. ‘But just three more. After that, like Dante I am abandoning you to purgatory.’

Casavecchia took up the dice again and was about to throw when a commotion coming from the gate connecting the courtyard to the street caught their attention.

‘Go and find out what’s happening will you, Biagio?’

Niccolò thought for a moment that Biagio might protest at this peremptory request, delivered with a cool expectation of obedience. But after a moment’s hesitation and the smallest of grimaces, Biagio shrugged and ambled over to the gate.

‘It’s a march of some kind. I think something is going on. Come and see for yourselves.’

When the friends got to the gate, they were confronted by a crowd of citizens tramping determinedly down the narrow street, shouting the same slogans over and over, ‘The People and Liberty! Down with the Medici!’ It was only then that Niccolò realised that the bells were ringing from the direction of the Piazza della Signoria. That was usually a signal for the citizenry to go to the piazza for an emergency assembly. Without giving it a second thought, they gathered up their dice and joined the jostling, cheering throng.

‘No idea what is happening, my young friend,’ the jolly-looking man marching next to him said in answer to Niccolò’s query. ‘But someone said that the Signoria has locked that brat Piero out of their palazzo. It’s the end of the Medici, I reckon.’

That *was* sensational news if it was true. Criticism of Piero had become deafening over the last few weeks, particularly since he had decided, without any authority from the Signoria, to dash off to the camp of King Charles and make all sorts of promises if he would refrain from attacking Florence. People had been particularly incensed when Piero had agreed that the French could keep all of the fortresses and towns they had taken, including Pisa.

Emerging from the narrow street into the broad expanse of the piazza, they found themselves at the back of a huge crowd gathered around the tall, fortress-like Palazzo della Signoria, the headquarters of the Florentine government standing on the south-east corner of the square. Held aloft on tall poles carried by their proud flag-bearers, the banners and pennons of the city’s districts flapped and snapped in the breeze above the mutter of the crowd. From every side came shouts: ‘The People and Liberty! Long Live Florence! Down with the Medici!’

A memory came to the surface of his mind: fifteen years ago, when he had been just a boy approaching his ninth birthday, his father had come home in a state of white-faced shock, taking pains to double lock the doors and close all the shutters. Bad men had attacked Lorenzo de’ Medici and his brother Giuliano, he said, and the city is in an uproar. Niccolò had never seen his father look so frightened as he told his mother in a low voice that the conspirators had killed Giuliano, and no-one knew whether Lorenzo had survived.

When he was older, his father had told him the rest of the story, how the population seemed to lose its collective mind, running wildly around the city torching the conspirators’ houses and stringing them up from the battlements of the government palazzo. Lorenzo had, of course, survived the attack though he had been badly wounded, and he had wreaked terrible vengeance on the surviving conspirators and their families. With a shudder, he wondered whether history was about to repeat itself.

Three long trumpet blasts rang out, and slowly the noise subsided into a gentle murmur. A man appeared on the small balcony projecting from the centre of the palazzo and began to read a proclamation. From their position at the back of the crowd, Niccolò and his friends could hear nothing clearly, but the gist was conveyed quickly enough in hurried summaries that passed from mouth to mouth.

‘He says that Piero de’ Medici and his brother Giovanni are banished from the city,’ the jolly man in front of them said. ‘He is an outlaw, and any man who kills Piero will earn a reward of two thousand ducats.’

‘That’s a lot of money.’ Biagio whistled. ‘If I were Piero, I would be on a horse out of Florence right now.’

Piero was apparently of the same view. That evening, when the friends gathered at Carlo’s tavern to chew over the day’s events, the story was being told that Piero and Giovanni had gathered their households and ridden out of the city towards Bologna. Stunningly, it seemed that the rule of the Medici really was over.

Chapter 2 – The Republic of God

Florence, November 1494

Ten days after Piero's ignominious flight, Charles VIII of France entered Florence in triumph, welcomed by a supine Signoria and an apprehensive populace who watched his vast army march through the Frediano gate in shuffling silence. Standing in the crowd with Agostino as the king arrived in the Piazza della Signoria, Niccolò was astonished at the sight of this apparently irresistible conqueror, a small, ugly man with a hunched back, bowlegs and a limping gait.

'*That's* the mighty King of France?' Agostino was equally amazed. 'He looks like a troll dragged up from the underworld!'

'Yet that dwarf has humiliated all northern Italy,' Niccolò said pensively, 'and stripped us of our defences. He might have got rid of Piero de' Medici for us, but what, I wonder, will he do next?'

'Well, I hope he moves on soon. We've got a dozen of his bloody soldiers quartered on us. They are eating like locusts and drinking us dry, and there isn't a maid in the house who hasn't had her arse pinched, or worse!'

Niccolò laughed in sympathy. His home, too, had been forced to house some of the French troops, much to the distress of his father and the rest of his family. 'He might be saying he comes as a friend, but he is behaving like a conqueror.'

'Which is what he is.' Agostino was sour. 'Though we, the vanquished, seem to have neglected to put up any kind of resistance. I fear Florence has simply swapped one master for another.'

That assessment seemed chillingly accurate over the days that followed, as Florence came to feel like an occupied city. French soldiers were everywhere, the Florentines' weapons were confiscated, and detachments of French soldiers were eyed with wary resentment by those few Florentines who had not locked themselves in their houses either in fear or as a mute form of protest.

In the Machiavelli household, hosting a couple of French soldiers placed a strain on everyone. His father retreated to his study and his books, refusing to have anything to do with them, and his sister Primavera likewise stayed her room, leaving Niccolò and his brother Totto to manage the household staff and ensure that there was as little friction as possible with the soldiers.

Not that they seemed particularly dangerous to Niccolò. They were both country lads, one big and muscle-bound, the other willowy and pasty-faced. After a few days, Niccolò and Totto got used to their presence and chatted to them in a mixture of Latin and the few words of French that Niccolò had acquired from somewhere in his eclectic reading. For conquering heroes, they seemed surprisingly nervous, and they kept asking how many armed men Florence could raise if put to it; a question that betrayed the cause of their anxiety.

Niccolò couldn't resist a teasing answer. 'As to that *messieurs*, I am told that at the sound of the city bells more than a hundred thousand armed men could be summoned from the countryside.' Whether that was true or not, he had no idea, but it seemed to impress the two Frenchmen while doing nothing to ease their nerves, as he had intended.

He was not alone in wanting to do something to unsettle these unwelcome invaders. Going to and from the Studio, he was startled to hear taunts shouted down from the windows of houses, directed at passing detachments of French soldiery. One day he had to duck to avoid stones that came hurtling from a doorway in the direction of a passing soldier. Then he noticed piles of wood appearing on street corners, which residents had nonchalantly placed, with every appearance of innocent intent, in a perfect position to barricade the streets in a hurry.

No one knew how long the French would stay or what price would be required for them to leave, but rumours went around that Charles had told the Signoria that he would sack the city unless they paid him two hundred thousand ducats and accepted the return of Piero de' Medici, an appalling prospect.

Then, suddenly, the occupation was over. The two soldiers billeted on the Machiavellis joined their comrades and marched out of the city, drums beating and trumpets blaring.

'So what happened?' Niccolò asked Agostino when he and Biagio met him in the Piazza della Signoria to watch a new statue being erected in front of the palazzo. 'You always seem to know what goes on in the Signoria.'

Agostino had an uncle who was currently serving his three-month term on the Signoria, and who often treated his nephew to an account of the goings-on behind the bluff brown stones of the government palazzo. Agostino, in his turn, clearly enjoyed the status it gave him when he was able to pass on the latest to his friends.

'It seems that we owe our liberation to Piero Capponi. You know, the former ambassador. King Charles told the Signoria that if they didn't agree to his demands, the city would be sacked at the sound of his trumpets. "In that case," Piero said, "if you sound your trumpets, we shall toll our bells!" And then he tore the draft treaty in half and walked out. That was enough to get Charles back to the negotiating table.'

Niccolò laughed, remembering his half-joking jibe at the two French soldiers. Perhaps the King of France had been told the same story.

'We still have to pay him a hundred and twenty thousand ducats,' Agostino went on, 'but he has at least agreed to return our fortresses to us.'

'What about Pisa?' Filippo Casavecchia joined them, pushing his way through the crowd in time to hear the last few words. 'Is he going to make them give up their rebellion?'

The citizens of Pisa had remained defiant. Having once been given their independence from Florence, they weren't about to give it up easily. 'All Charles promised was that he would deal with the Pisans when he has finished his Naples campaign,' said Agostino.

Not much of a promise, Niccolò thought. He was about to say so when a cheer went up from the people who had been waiting for Donatello's fine bronze statue of Judith decapitating the giant Holofernes to be levered into place in its new home in front of the palazzo. It had been seized and removed from the Palazzo Medici as part repayment of the debts owed to the state by the now-exiled Piero, and an enthusiastic Agostino assured them that it was an exquisite work by the great master. Niccolò, no aesthete, was happy to take his word for it.

'So what happens next?' Biagio asked of no one in particular as the crowd began to break up.

'I don't know,' Niccolò replied, blowing on his hands to keep them warm. 'But think of it—for the first time in our lifetimes, we are free to make a real republic, a place where every citizen can speak his mind and where every virtuous man can become a prince! We have recovered our freedom and we must preserve it at any peril!'

'As the Pisans are doing?' Casavecchia mischievously punctured Niccolò's excited rhetoric.

He was rewarded with a frown. 'Of course they defend their liberty. If we value ours, we should negotiate and make them our allies, not fight them.'

The words had come unbidden and unexamined, and were more than a little heretical, for Pisa was regarded by all Florentines as theirs almost by right, cheerfully ignoring the fact that it had its own long history before it ever became part of Florence's Tuscan empire. The sentiments surprised him as much as they did his companions, but he said nothing to soften them, letting his words hang in the chilly air. For him, they had the ring of truth, no matter how unpalatable they might be to his fellow-citizens.

'Well, there goes any chance of you being elected to the Signoria!' Biagio's loud laugh caused heads to turn among the slowly dispersing crowd.

'No chance of that, anyway.' Niccolò smiled back. It was true—serving in the government was an unpaid occupation, something that only those of independent means could undertake; means that the Machiavelli family did not have. 'Come on, let's get out of this cold. I heard that there is a new tavern behind Santa Croce that serves ravioli in broth so good that they are queuing down the street for it. And I've just enough in my purse to buy us a round.'

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'How, in the name of God, can an assembly of three and a half thousand members ever work?'

The question came from an indignant Marcello Virgilio Adriani, a prematurely balding scholar and lecturer of considerable renown and impeccably aristocratic antecedents who was formally one of their lecturers, but who had become more of a friend and mentor to the four students. They had gathered as they did every week, under the porticoes of the university, ostensibly to study classical literature and poetry together. Inevitably, the talk turned quickly to political developments, as the Republic of Florence was reshaped and reborn before their eyes.

Things had moved swiftly after the French departed. The old and long-disused mechanisms of Republican government swung creakily into action, and various assemblies had been called to debate the future constitution, mostly stacked with supporters of a newly-energised Girolamo Savonarola, whose ideas they championed with vigour.

After much vigorous debate, it was decided that the new republic should continue to be governed by the institutions that had always existed, even under the Medici: a small Signoria that served for a few months at a time, chaired by a gonfaloniere drawn from their number. But Savonarola had also proposed that the ultimate legislative supremacy should be vested in a huge new body, to be called the Great Council.

'I know what my Uncle Guidantonio thinks about it,' Agostino said. '"The people lack the discretion to choose wise men over the ignorant, so this new assembly will just be a great crowd of ignorant oafs. A disaster, in short". That's what he told the Signoria last week.'

The others nodded and muttered a chorus of assent, though Niccolò couldn't tell if they really agreed with Guidantonio Vespucci's assessment or were simply impressed because he was, after all, a senior aristocrat and a member of the Signoria.

He had a slightly different opinion. 'There is something noble, surely, about trying to establish a broad franchise to reflect the will of the people. Otherwise, we will end up with another government of oligarchs, which, you have to admit, has not been such a successful model of late.'

'Really, Niccolò?' Biagio was startled. 'I wouldn't have picked you as a Savonarolan!'

'Neither I am, Biagio. Can you see me giving up whores and dice in favour of a life of austerity and celibacy? No, I think the good friar's ideas about a Republic of God are unrealistic, to say the least. And Florence is the last place where any man of sense would try to establish such a thing.'

'Savonarola is hardly a man of sense.' Filippo Casavecchia snorted. 'A man of nonsense, more like.'

'Still, Niccolò makes a good point,' Adriani said, cutting short the group's laughter. 'Surely a well-ordered republic should have a means to reflect the will of the people as a whole, even if that will might be, let us say, ill-informed from time to time? So how can the natural excesses of the mob be restrained, Niccolò?'

'Well, the Romans had a solution to this very dilemma.'

He waited patiently while his friends engaged in the ritual rolling of the eyes and groans with which they always responded to his citations from Roman history; they thought he was obsessed with Roman constitutional theory. Nor were they entirely wrong. Helping his father with his translation of Livy had given him a profound respect for the inherent genius of the ancient Roman Republic, and he thought there were lessons that his own time could learn from their forebears.

'They too invested the sovereignty of the state in the people,' he pressed on. 'But they had the wisdom to subject their decisions to the deliberations of the aristocracy, people who were bred to government and who could take the long view of things.'

'SPQR,' Adriani murmured. '*Senatus Populus Que Romanus*. The Senate and the People of Rome, together. Yes, quite so, Niccolò. Yet I fear that our republic will find it difficult to arrive at such a balance. The people would not trust a senate made up of the *ottimati*, half of whom would rather have the Medici back than allow the people a say in government.'

'And they probably wouldn't be wrong in that,' Agostino said sardonically. 'You watch as the aristocrats fight back. They are just using Savonarola, you know, fawning on his every word because he sways the sentiments of the people, but they will turn on him sooner rather than later, mark my words.'

Over the weeks and months that followed, though, it seemed that Agostino was wrong. Far from turning on the friar, the aristocratic party, the *ottimati*, seemed powerless to stop him. The new council was elected and a Signoria and gonfaloniere chosen from its members, various other committees were formed to advise on foreign and domestic policies, and life seemed to settle down into a new, more tranquil pattern.

For Niccolò, this new tranquillity had a perverse effect. He became restless and bored with his everyday round. His formal studies came to an end, and though he saw his former friends from time to time, his life increasingly revolved around domestic concerns.

The Machiavelli were an old family, but they had never acquired any great wealth. Niccolò's patrimony consisted of the townhouse in the Oltrarno, a small farm in the hills outside Florence, and one or two other properties dotted around the city. It was enough to feed the family and ensure they would never want for the necessities of life, and when the time came for him to inherit, he would be able to live the life of a gentleman, albeit a modest one.

The trouble was, that seemed like a very dull prospect indeed. Tending the farm and managing a modest rent-roll were hardly taxing occupations and spending all his remaining time in the library seemed pointless, particularly at a time when it seemed as though history itself was unfolding all around him. Yet he could not for the life of him think what else he could do. The city's newly febrile political atmosphere had set off in him an incoherent desire to participate, to act, to influence events, but without money, and lots of it, getting into a position of influence seemed impossible.

So he had little choice but to watch, impotent, as the public life of Florence took its course. It was a course that became increasingly tense when it became apparent that Savonarola had been in deadly earnest when he talked of establishing Florence as a City of God. The city's youth, always restless and susceptible to the wiles of rabble-rousers, unexpectedly became his foot-soldiers. Gangs calling themselves the friar's *frateschi* roamed the streets, chanting hymns which they interrupted only to hurl abuse to anyone who had deviated from the strictly conservative dress codes that the new Great Council had passed into law as one of its first acts.

'It's all just too much to bear,' a petulant Filippo Casavecchia groused one afternoon at Carlo's tavern. 'One of the brats actually threw a ripe fig at me, just because the colour of my doublet was too bright, or something.'

It *was* pretty garish, Niccolò thought, bright yellow striped with green. 'Oh I don't know, Casa, they might just have good taste.'

While Niccolò was enjoying Casavecchia's spluttering outrage at that remark, Agostino thumped the table with his tankard, and then, since that didn't get the response he was after, he jumped on the table and stood looking down at them, hands on hips and a stern look on his face.

'Signori, I propose that we establish a new confraternity to give some relief to our fellow Florentines from the mischief of these over-zealous children!'

'Oh, I like that, Agostino!' Biagio laughed. 'And what shall we call it?'

'How about "The Company of Pleasure"? Hey Carlo, get us some paper and a pen: Nico, you're our wordsmith, you can write the rules!'

By now the whole tavern was listening, enjoying the performance. Pen and paper procured, Niccolò stared out into the piazza for a moment, and then began writing, reading aloud as he did so, with frequent interruptions from his friends.

'Item: No man older than thirty years old can be a member of the company. No old lechers here!'

'But the women can be of any age, surely?' Biagio contributed. 'And the Head of the Company can be either a man or a woman.'

'Speaking of which, we need a method of electing the company head. How about this: Of the men, the first Head will be he who has the longest nose; of the women, she who has the smallest feet.' Niccolò's suggestion was met with howls of laughter: it was well known that the size of the nose and feet corresponded inversely to the size of the private parts of each sex.

'Company members must always speak badly of each other, and reveal each others' faults without hesitation.' That came from someone in the crowd that had gathered around them, setting off a storm of other suggestions. Niccolò hurried to write them all down, and then, finally added a last flourish before calling a halt to proceedings:

> *It is resolved that no-one is ever to show by external signs the thoughts in his mind; rather, the contrary will be done, and he who knows best how to pretend or tell lies merits the most commendation.*

As a kind of intellectual protest against the strictures of the *frateschi*, the articles for the Company of Pleasure had a certain juvenile amusement value, though Niccolò and his friends were careful not to make sure everyone knew it was a joke, and he stuffed the articles themselves into the bottom of one of the coffers in the Machiavelli house that contained boring legal documents, to make sure they couldn't accidentally see the light of day. He wasn't at all sure that Savonarola's acolytes had much of a sense of humour.

The friar himself delivered sermon after sermon, claiming to have had more visions sent directly from God, and denouncing the new pope, Alexander VI, who remained strangely tolerant, doing nothing to stop the priest's harangues. Then the friar's genius for political theatre inspired another outrage—the so-called 'bonfire of the vanities'—when, on Palm Sunday of 1496, many of the city's artistic treasures were piled up and burned, along with the clothes and possessions of those who the *frateschi* considered immoral.

'He's finally gone too far,' was Agostino's verdict in the aftermath of the bonfire.

'Do you think so? It seems to me that half the city is appalled, but the other half is in ecstasy!'

'That may be so, Niccolò, but it adds one more log to a different bonfire—the one that the aristocrats are building under Pope Alexander.'

'So your uncle says." Niccolò was playful; Agostino's frequent citation of his uncle as the authority on everything that the *ottimati* were thinking had become something of a joke among the little group of friends.

Agostino had the grace to laugh. 'Yes, of course. But I hear the same from many others, I promise you.'

This time, at least, Agostino was right, though it took another year and a half before the pope finally excommunicated Savonarola and forbade him to preach for a hundred and twenty days. Even that didn't silence him, for he simply went to work with his pen, writing treatise after treatise which his supporters printed and circulated throughout the city.

But something had changed. The people of Florence began to entertain doubts about the charismatic friar they had adopted as their own, and the drab, dour society that he and his followers had imposed on them. Increasingly, parades of the *frateschi* were interrupted by Florentine toughs who pelted them with stones and wrested the crosses from their hands, threatening the boys with beatings or worse. An abortive attempt by Piero de' Medici to attack the city set the nerves further on edge. Then there was an outbreak of the plague, necessitating tough sanitary measures that drove people off the streets into a sullen quarantine until it passed.

In August, a plot came to light—five highly respected citizens were accused of planning the return of the Medici to Florence. The evidence against them seemed to be flimsy and extracted under torture. Nevertheless, the Signoria, still dominated by Savonarola's partisans, condemned them to death, and worse, refused their right of appeal to the Great Council under a law originally proposed by Savonarola himself. The Dominican remained silent throughout the whole episode, and the execution of the supposed conspirators provoked furious denunciations from every quarter.

Through all this, Niccolò remained an ambivalent observer. He supported the new republic, had high hopes for it, but this latest outrage was, for him, unbearable. 'How can they do it, father?' he all but shouted when he heard the news. 'Surely there is nothing more foolish than to make a law and not observe it.'

'What, you think that has never happened before?' His father was mild.

'Only in tyrannies. If a law is regarded as generally useful, it should be observed equally by all, no matter who proposed it or who opposed it.' Niccolò was insistent. 'By allowing his partisans to ignore his laws, Savonarola shows that he is no better than his enemies, and a tyrant in all but name.'

Bernardo raised his shoulders in a shrug. 'Calm yourself, son. There is nothing you can do about it. Now, do something useful and help me with these ledgers. I can't make head or tail of them.'

Which just about sums up my life, Niccolò thought sourly. While significant events unfolded in Florence and the wider world, he, Niccolò Machiavelli, was stuck trying to make sense of his father's impossibly confused bookkeeping and wondering what he was going to do with his life.

Then, in the new year of 1498, everything changed.

Chapter 3—A New Republic

Florence, February 1498

It was Ricciardo Becci who set in train the events that changed Niccolò's life forever. A friend of his father's, Becci had been living in Rome for the last three years, where he was Florentine ambassador to the court of Pope Alexander VI.

On his way back to the Holy City after a short visit to Florence for consultations with the Signoria, he had called at the family farm at the little hamlet of Sant' Andrea in Percussina, intending to share a cup of wine with his old friend Bernardo before continuing on his way south. But the weather had turned foul, and torrential rain made the road impassable, so the diplomat had been glad to accept the offer of dinner and a bed for the night. Niccolò's father retired soon after supper, pleading tiredness, leaving his son alone with their guest. Their talk soon turned to the febrile state of the city's politics.

'I tell you, Niccolò, this state of affairs cannot last much longer. The Signoria knows we cannot continue to allow this mad priest to incite the common people against the pope for much longer, but they are too afraid of him and what the mob might do to them if they oppose him, to do anything about it. And that fool Popoleschi isn't worth a pig's ear as gonfaloniere. Just dithers and wrings his hands.'

Niccolò struggled to keep a straight face. The stocky, bluff man sitting across from him in front of the fire in his father's study didn't look much like a diplomat and he didn't talk like one. He wondered if Becci was this blunt when dealing with the smooth cardinals and bishops in Rome. Perhaps he had just had too much of the rough red wine, made from the Machiavelli family's grapes, with which he had been plied over dinner.

'I am told that the Signoria have at least decided that the cathedral is too prominent a place for his sermons and that they have ordered him to confine his preaching to San Marco.'

That caused one of Becci's bushy eyebrows to rise. 'Your sources of information are impressive, young man. That was only decided yesterday. It might help; San Marco is on the edge of the city, and the monastery church is much smaller than the cathedral. If Savonarola had any sense at all, he'd take the hint and tone things down. But I don't think he will. He has truly come to believe that he has been sent by God to reform us all.'

'And the pope? What will his next move be?'

The ambassador frowned slightly, as if assessing what he could safely share. 'Piero de' Medici,' he said, eventually. 'Some of Alexander's advisers have been in talks with Piero's envoys and they are urging the pope to provide the necessary arms and soldiers to enable him to return to Florence and get rid of Savonarola.'

'But surely they cannot be serious?' Niccolò was surprised by his vehemence and it occurred to him, too late, that his outburst might seem impertinent to the older man. But he couldn't stop now. 'The pope would spend a great deal of money on a very chancy venture. It's not as if Piero has proven himself much of a leader, and surely Florence would find herself plunged into bloody civil war!'

'I suspect the pope knows that.' Becci was dry. 'Whatever Alexander's faults, he is not a fool. But he is running out of alternatives. If the government of Florence cannot shut Savonarola up, his only other option is to place the city under interdict.'

That, Niccolò knew, would be a calamity, perhaps even worse than civil war. An interdict would mean that the church would no longer look favourably on the city's citizens, and its priests would no longer conduct mass, take confession, bury the dead. In short, the people of Florence would be deprived of all spiritual comfort.

Pondering the implications of that reduced him to silence. Then a streak of irreverence emerged that occasionally startled his friends when he let his self-control slip. 'But it might not be such a bad thing,' he said, with the beginnings of a mischievous smile. 'After all, the people might discover that they don't need priests to intervene with God after all. And then where would Savonarola be?'

Becci stared at him, then roared with laughter. 'I see you have a rare sense of humour, young man,' he said when he eventually caught his breath. 'Though it's just as well we are out here in the country where no one can hear you, otherwise you might find yourself strung up by some of Savonarola's damned *frateschi*!'

He had meant it as a joke, but even as he joined the ambassador in laughter, another thought came into Niccolò's mind. 'You know, Ser Ricciardo, I was talking to one of the Franciscans last week, outside Santa Croce, and he was bemoaning the loss of income from donations and bequests that his order has suffered since Savonarola came to power. It's all going to the Dominicans, instead. Apparently, the faithful think that they have a better chance of getting to heaven if they donate to Savonarola's order rather than theirs.'

'You do surprise me, Niccolò. Is there anyone in Florence you don't talk to?'

'Well, I *listen* to everyone. But the point is, it is not in the interests of every priest in the city to see Savonarola and his Dominicans so powerful. The Franciscans at least might be pleased to see him brought down a peg…' Now he had Becci's interest. 'So if the good brothers of St Francis at Santa Croce could be brought to challenge

Savonarola's claims to be a prophet, he might at the least be distracted from his attacks on the pope. That is a thought worth pursuing.'

The diplomat's dark eyes considered that. 'Niccolò, you have an original way of thinking. Sooner or later, the wheel will turn, and we will have a government that will be better equipped to use your talents. When that time comes, nominate yourself for public office. I will support you, that I promise.'

Niccolò was taken aback, for though he had considered government service, he had been discouraged by the chaos of the republic's current politics. And then there was the fact that the most prestigious positions were unpaid, which meant that they were usually won by men who had far greater means at their disposal than Niccolò Machiavelli and could afford to devote the greater part of their life to politics. Even to win one of the lesser positions, which were considered less honourable but which were paid a stipend, would require the active support of a network of patrons and friends. He could think of several people who would gladly offer their help if he chose to run, but Becci's offer would carry significant weight.

He simply nodded and stammered his thanks, and they passed on to other subjects. But the idea of public office kept buzzing around in the back of his head, long after he had retired for the night. By the time he eventually fell asleep, he knew that this was where his life was going to go.

The next morning, as Becci was about to climb into the saddle and resume his journey, he paused and turned to his hosts. 'Niccolò, it occurs to me that it might be very useful if I could have a reliable report on the priest's next sermon.'

'Consider it done, Ser Ricciardo.'

With which, the Florentine ambassador to the Holy See had mounted his horse, which was skittish and keen to get on its way, and shouted a last farewell as he headed south along the muddy road, his horse's hooves kicking up mud as he went.

'What was that about?' His father was obviously mystified.

'Nothing, just a little job that he wanted me to do for him.'

Niccolò returned his father's enquiring look with a level stare that defied him to ask more; after a few seconds, Bernardo shrugged and turned to go back inside.

*

> *Still expounding Exodus and coming to that passage where it says that Moses slew an Egyptian, he said that the Egyptian represented evildoers and Moses the preacher who slew them by exposing their vices. Then he added, and this is what he was driving at, that he wanted to give the Egyptian another stab wound, a big one. He said that God had told him that there was someone in Florence who sought to make himself a tyrant, and that he was engaged in dealings and schemes in order to succeed, and that the desire to drive out the friar, to excommunicate the friar, and to persecute the friar meant nothing else than to seek to create a tyrant…*

As he sat in his father's library penning these words later that afternoon, Niccolò remembered the excited speculation that had run, whispering, around San Marco's church. To whom might Savonarola be referring? Who was it that was using the pope's excommunication of this holy man to set up a tyranny that would tear down everything he and they had built since the end of the Medici regime?

Names were whispered, some of them so ludicrous that Niccolò, leaning carelessly against the wall and trying to keep an expression of gullible enthusiasm on his face while his brain feverishly recorded every word, had almost had a fit of giggles. The cheap rhetorical trick that Savonarola was employing was contemptible, stirring up the crowd with a non-existent threat, cloaked in a 'vision' he said he had had from God.

It had always seemed strange to Niccolò that God, who had a pope and all those bishops to choose from for his confidences, should instead have picked this Dominican mendicant friar as his mouthpiece. Of course, no one had ever actually heard the voice of God whispering in Savonarola's ear, except the preacher himself, since the Almighty apparently preferred to communicate late at night when Savonarola was alone in his cell. But as he looked around the crowd that filled the church and spilled out into the piazza beyond, he felt he was alone in his scepticism.

Then Savonarola's sermon had taken a new tack. Perhaps realising that the Signoria was so afraid of him that he no longer needed to defer to them and that planting the idea in the minds of the people that the republic was under threat from some internal conspiracy would be sufficient to keep them confused, he had instead turned the full force of his denunciations against the pope.

> *He seeks to set them at odds with the Supreme Pontiff and says of the pope what could be said of the wickedest person you might imagine. Thus, in my judgement, he acts in accordance with the times and turns his coat accordingly…'*

And that, Niccolò thought as he absently scribbled a few more closing lines to his report, was the key, for it was evident that Savonarola had no intention of being turned aside from his course of confrontation with the pope and the church. If Ambassador Becci had been hoping that he would have some good news to report to the pontiff, he was going to be sadly disappointed. The Florentine Signoria was cowed, and Savonarola seemed to be the unchallenged master of Florence.

Yet, barely a month later, everything changed.

It was the Franciscan monks of Santa Croce who had lit the fire which turned into a conflagration. No one seemed to know who'd really started it, but one of the Savonarola's fellow priests on the other side of the city at San Marco had taken exception to a sermon by one of the Franciscans that attacked Fra Girolamo in violent terms. The upshot was an extraordinary challenge—that the two priests should walk through fire to see which of them was telling the truth.

Hearing of this madness from an uncharacteristically excited Agostino Vespucci, Niccolò was startled, and he wondered whether ambassador Becci had taken up his idea, even though he had meant it as a joke, and somehow contrived to incite the Franciscans to this act of defiance.

'What is it that the Apostle Matthew says?' Agostino exclaimed, 'that "a depraved and adulterous people look for miraculous signs"? Though surely there should be some less homicidal way to put this to the test!'

'Perhaps they will both die, and the people will see that these tricksters are mere conjurers, mountebanks whose promises of paradise on earth are just so much hollow nonsense.'

Agostino looked shocked by that remark, not so much because of the words as because his friend had dropped his mask of circumspection and revealed his real sentiments. He took a furtive look around the piazza to see if they had been overheard. 'Be careful, Nico, or you'll find yourself hauled up in front of the justices.'

Agostino was right to remind him that speaking so freely could be dangerous. But neither of them could have foreseen how swiftly the end would come.

The so-called trial by fire, when the appointed day came, turned into a farce. Ludicrously, the two friars spent hours quibbling with each other about the terms of the trial, infuriating the big crowd that gathered to witness this extraordinary event. The supporters of each side began to accuse the other's protagonist of wanting to get out of it.

Then a torrential downpour appeared, sweeping across the city and drenching the platform upon which the oil-soaked wood and kindling were piled. When the whole thing was finally called off, and the disgruntled crowd dispersed, still shouting imprecations at each other, Niccolò knew that Savonarola's authority was fatally weakened. For the first time, the ordinary people on whose support his career had been built hurled abuse at the friar as he was hustled away from the piazza surrounded by guards.

A few days later, the news came that king Charles VIII was dead, back home in France after his failed campaign to conquer Naples.

'The great prophet didn't predict *that*,' was Agostino's acerbic comment. 'So much for the French king's sword sweeping away all vice. You watch, the nobility will take their chance now.'

Agostino was simply repeating the views of his uncle Guidantonio, one of the leaders of the aristocratic party, but Niccolò had no doubt that his prediction would come true. It didn't take long; in early April a mob attacked the houses of several prominent Savonarolans, giving the authorities the excuse they needed to proclaim the friar an outlaw. Savonarola and two of his fellow Dominicans were arrested and thrown into prison, and after a few days it was proclaimed throughout the city that the friar had confessed to all sorts of crimes, including conspiring to take over the government.

That last seemed particularly implausible to Niccolò, and he said so to his father.

'Why would he conspire in secret to achieve the aims he expounded so loudly in public? He and his partisans were well on the way to controlling the government anyway.'

'After a few drops of the *strappado* most men will confess to anything,' was Bernardo's dour assessment. Niccolò shuddered at the thought of it: this method of torture, in which the victim's arms are tied behind his back and strapped to a machine that jerks the body into the air, usually wrenching his arms from his sockets, was excruciatingly painful and few men could endure more than a few 'drops'.

Another two uneasy weeks went by, and then it was announced that Savonarola and his two accomplices had been found guilty of treason, and condemned to death. On the appointed day, Niccolò stayed home, obeying his father's nervous demand that all of the family stay off the streets while the city's temper was so disturbed. It was from an excited Biagio that he heard the details.

'They were hung in chains on a platform that was constructed overnight in the Piazza della Signoria, and then the bodies were burnt. And the noise! Apparently gunpowder was mixed with the fuel, so all anyone could hear was the crack of explosions.'

'And the crowd? How did they react?'

'Silent, mostly. It was as if they were witnessing a martyrdom. Very eerie.'

'Savonarola as a saint? He would have been appalled at the very idea that his bones might become an object of veneration among the faithful.'

'No chance of that. The city fathers have commanded that his remains be tossed into the Arno.'

And so the turbulent rule of Girolamo Savonarola was over. His partisans were unceremoniously ejected from office, causing new elections to be held for the vacancies thus created. Among the new appointments was Marcello Virgilio Adriani, chosen as chancellor and first secretary of the republic, a post primarily responsible for foreign affairs. He was also the titular head of the chancellery office, which dealt with all of the republic's correspondence and kept the records of the deliberations of the Signoria and the other committees that collectively formed the government. It was Adriani who asked Niccolò to put his name forward for the position of second secretary.

'You would be perfect,' Adriani said when they met at the new chancellor's house. 'After all these years of factionalism, we need people in the chancellery who are non-political. I know you had your criticisms of Savonarola, but I don't know anyone who would say that you were a member of any of the parties either for or against him. Besides, Becci speaks well of you. He says you write a fine report and are a shrewd observer of the behaviour of men. There will be others who will covet the post—it has a salary of one hundred and ninety florins, after all—but I think you will find you have enough supporters to secure it.'

Niccolò needed little persuasion. The second secretary's formal responsibilities were for relations with the republic's subject states and territories, but in the overloaded and overworked chancellery office, the boundaries between the various posts were, he knew, fairly porous, and the second secretary was often called on to undertake all kinds of diplomatic missions. Adriani, an intelligent and charming but rather lazy individual, would likely confine himself to the more ceremonial aspects of his job, and delegate everything else to his subordinate. That would suit Niccolò perfectly well, for he could see that it was an opportunity to be at the centre of things.

But first, he had to secure the position. He was not wealthy and could not bribe his way into office as others could, and so he tackled the task in the only way he knew—by hard work. Having put his name in formal nomination, he crisscrossed the city, talking to everyone he knew who might influence the final election, offering soothing condolences to those who had been supporters of Savonarola, expounding his views more forcefully to those who had been his opponents and, to the surprisingly large number of people who, like himself, had been nervously neutral through the recent turmoil, he emphasised his literary skills, so important in a position that handled all the city's correspondence.

The ballot, when it came, was decisive, and he beat three other candidates by a handy margin of votes. He was now Second Secretary of the Florentine Republic.

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