

Introduction

1513: LIFE IN EXILE

The memory of prison plagued him, and the torture he endured during those brutal days of winter just one short year ago settled deep into his bones. Niccolò Machiavelli had spent the last fourteen years working as chief ambassador for the Republic of Florence. He loved his native city above all else, and served it well. But all that came to an abrupt halt when the authorities showed up at his door, dragged him from his home, and threw him in prison without so much as a word of explanation. His interrogators showed little mercy. They jerked his hands behind his back, fastened them to chains linked to pulleys, and hoisted him into the air with savage indifference. It was a well-known and rather effective form of torture: the *strappado*, they called it. Florentines knew it as the *corda*, and would often gather in the Piazza della Signoria to witness common crooks and conspirators fall victim to it. The snap of Niccolò's shoulders failed to arouse any feelings in his interrogators. All in a day's work. The pain consumed him, eclipsed only by his anger,

resentment, and the unrequited knowledge he was innocent of the charge they levied against him. Only when he drifted into unconsciousness could he hope to ever escape the torment of it. But they made sure to keep him awake at all times, splashing him with water if necessary.

Niccolò had certainly been aware of the cruelties committed in Florence's most infamous prison, the Bargello, while serving as secretary of the Second Chancery for the Republic, and he no doubt witnessed a traitor or two undergoing much of the same treatment, but now he knew of its inhumanity and powers of persuasion firsthand. He could hardly be accused of being averse to such methods, however. Far from it. The state and the security of its people ranked supreme in his eyes. In fact, he firmly held that the state and its institutions had a sacred duty to preserve their powers, especially when it came to ensuring the freedom of its people. Every broken bone, crack, fracture, and dislocated joint he suffered reminded him of that very belief. As he hung there, his wrists bleeding beneath the ropes that hoisted him high above the chamber's hard granite floor, the bitter irony of that belief nearly brought a smile to his lips.

On an unusually cold afternoon that following December, just nine months after his release from custody, Niccolò sat in his study in his country home in Sant'Andrea in Percussina with those gruesome, not-so-distant memories still swirling around in his head. They ran on a seemingly endless loop. A daily occurrence. Truth be told, Niccolò rarely dwelt on the past. His slender frame, medium height, close-set eyes, and aquiline nose gave the misleading impression of an inconsequential man, unconcerned with the world around him, but his sharp, hawkish eyes saw the present with eerie precision, and could divine the future like no other. His tight mouth and thin lips saddled

him with an almost permanent sarcastic expression that managed both to command respect and lend an air of levity to his persona. His friends and colleagues in the Signoria, the city's center of government in the Palazzo Vecchio, held him up as a man of action, of unstoppable vigor and determination, invaluable to their efforts to keep the city safe and free.

But in the autumn of 1512, when the Republic fell back into the hands of the Medici, matters were about to change for the worse. The Medici, Florence's long-established family of bankers, were as ruthless as they were generous and forward-thinking, and as eager for the cold control over the masses as for the attainment of knowledge and beauty. They had already ruled over Florence prior to 1494, and it must be said that during that time their spiritual, intellectual, and financial support for the arts proved the envy of all Europe, but the Florentines desired freedom, a government run by the people. After the ouster of the Medici in 1494, a free Republic was installed, and for the next fourteen years Florence enjoyed democratic rule.

Niccolò's loyalty to the old, "free" Republic marked him as suspect almost immediately to the incoming rulers. It was no secret that he preferred the will of the people above all else. He was known to say that the people desired their own freedom, nothing more, nothing less. "It is in the interest of the aristocracy and members of the ruling class," he would go on to say, "to strip it away from them." Plain and simple. Those who knew him understood he wasn't advocating rebellion with those words as much as voicing a political truth he had gleaned from a lifetime of acute observation of human behavior and many years of experience as an ambassador for the Florentine Republic. As far as he was concerned, the sooner aspiring princes, tyrants, and kings understood that truth, the better.

Niccolò cherished these quiet moments alone in his study. They soothed him and put him at ease. He looked up from the manuscript on his desk—his “little book,” he called it—and scanned the four walls teeming with classic tomes. Many of these books followed him from his youth on via Guicciardini, a stone’s throw from the Ponte Vecchio and Piazza della Signoria, to his country home on Florence’s hilly outskirts where he lived in exile with his family. He liked to converse with all the many authors as if they were sitting right there with him in that cold, drafty room, body and soul: Aristotle, Plato, Cicero, Ovid, Thucydides, Plutarch, Tacitus, Virgil, Dante, Boccaccio, Petrarch, and, of course, his two steady companions, Livy and Lucretius. He addressed them as equals, but with reverence, and oh so much urgency.

“I walked out of the Bargello a free man,” he uttered to no one in particular as he rose to stoke the fire, hoping to remove the stubborn chill from the room. “Those blundering conspirators got what they deserved,” Niccolò muttered, scorning the men with whom he was accused of plotting a revolt. “Let them die.” He brooked no tolerance for their display of incompetence. “Oh, let them die!” he was heard shouting from his prison cell as the conspirators ascended the executioner’s block. “Their foolishness has caused nothing but anguish for the innocent!”

Niccolò knew full well that while nothing endangered the survival of a ruler more than courtly intrigue—not even war itself—no enterprise could be more foolhardy and statistically futile. “How dare they accuse me of such an infamy!” He also knew that any failed attempt to topple the Medici’s nascent government would provide more than enough pretense for their tyranny. Being a man of uncompromising practicality and stark realism, Niccolò easily grasped the self-serving logic of the

powerful. He accepted it as fact. And he had precious little time for artless neophytes and would-be insurgents. Their failure always resulted in death and inevitably prolonged the suffering of the guiltless.

The massive window in Niccolò's study looked out onto row after row of Chianti grapes. He had visited this piece of family land nearly every summer since his birth forty-four years ago. The tiny hamlet of Sant'Andrea in Percussina sat fourteen kilometers southwest of Florence. He always wondered as a boy why the house was nicknamed the *Albergaccio*, or "bad hotel," and assumed it was due to the abundance of scoundrels and villains that roamed the nearby hills. He loved coming here just the same. Everything about it smelled of freedom. He particularly enjoyed running through the spot of woods beyond the vineyard, sprinkled with fir, ash, and pine. But he saw none of its beauty now. His thoughts drifted elsewhere as he fixed his gaze over the wooded hills that flanked his vineyard. In the nine months since his exile, since the end of the tragic war that toppled the Republic, these sparse woods had been a modest source of income, and he depended on them almost entirely for the sale of firewood. A meager existence. He fed his four children and dear wife, Marietta Corsini, with these sparse earnings, but even these harsh realities remained far from his mind at this moment. His thoughts instead swirled with concerns of the political state of his beloved city and of the entire Italian peninsula. He was burdened with far too much insight into the pangs of the human condition, and far too much desire to remedy it.

Niccolò was a city animal; life within the peace and tranquility of the Tuscan countryside terrified him. The notion of leading what he believed to be a pointless existence, wasting away to nothing in a puddle of country serenity, literally

kept him awake at night. The taverns, government halls, town squares, and park benches of Florence met his needs, satisfied his intellect, and fed his soul. The steady exchange of ideas in a city rife with ideas was his life's blood. A sense of uselessness, emptiness, taunted him now, day in and day out. Meditating in his study, reading and rereading his books, communing as it were with ancient historians, recalling his many personal experiences as Florence's ambassador, and diligently writing down all his thoughts, political, personal, and otherwise, would have to fill that void.

As he glimpsed the encroaching night sky, Niccolò's musings kept returning to his many years as Florence's ambassador to the kingdoms of France, Spain, Naples, the Holy Roman Empire, and his neighboring Italian city-states, including the Vatican. He needed desperately to write it all down, to make practical use of his experiences, and to save them for the benefit of others. The title page of a short treatise on his desk caught his eye. He had written a first draft in a flurry of creativity over the past few weeks. The ideas and principles he brought to light within its pages filled him with a mixture of hope, pride, and sheer dread.

"I must be useful," he whispered to himself as he dipped his plume into a brimming well of iron gall ink. "I must be useful."

But before Niccolò did anything else, he knew he had an urgent letter to write, some thoughts he had to get off his chest. His friend and longtime colleague during his glory days as secretary of the Second Chancery, Francesco Vettori, had recently written to him from Rome grumbling of the sheer boredom of life in the Vatican. The papal city's obsession with decorum, formality, and unwavering convention drove him crazy. The predictability of it all tormented him, he wrote. Niccolò, who was not one to be outdone, felt compelled to teach his dear

friend the real meaning of boredom, and to share with him a bit of the frustration that followed him from his prison cell to his oppressively tranquil and uneventful exile in the country. And, of course, as a way of saying “Niccolò shall always prevail,” he fully intended to share the news of his new book with him, a treatise as steeped in traditional rhetoric as it was in truly original and provocative insight. Its title was straightforward and clear: *De Principatibus*—literally, *Of Principalities*. But it was often referred to simply as *The Prince* because it laid the groundwork for becoming a powerful, respected, and feared ruler of a sovereign state while articulating in no uncertain terms how to acquire and maintain it, by any and all means necessary.

Chapter One

1478: SCHOOL DAYS

Niccolò was imbued with an interest in human behavior and its effect on political interaction as far back as he could remember. As he composed his letter to his dear friend, he thought back on his childhood in Florence, the city that would mold his character and shape his entire future.

Florentines ate, drank, and breathed politics. At the time of Niccolò's birth in 1469, the city was quite wealthy and at the vanguard of western civilization in terms of cultural achievement. A rebirth in classical thought had been blooming there since the mid-1300s, with the likes of such literary and political giants as Petrarch, Boccaccio, Coluccio Salutati, and countless others. For them and numerous other scholars of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the ancient cultures and societies of Rome and Greece—their art, architecture, literature, and their innate faith in the integrity of the state—provided principal sources of inspiration for their city.

At the core of this return to the classics by Italian humanists

was not necessarily an overwhelming thirst for knowledge, although it certainly fueled the curiosity of many, but rather the need to apply a new moral system that complemented the customs and mores of the powerful merchant class, which had risen to prominence in the affluent city-states of central and northern Italy. Niccolò could boast neither the upbringing of the rich merchant class nor of a Florentine noble. He hailed from an old Tuscan family that originated in the tiny commune of Montespertoli, twenty kilometers southwest of Florence, not far from the home he would occupy later in his life in Sant'Andrea in Percussina. The family also owned properties in the Santo Spirito section of Florence, where Niccolò was born and raised. No matter how astute his prowess in the political arena, or how extraordinary his expertise and understanding of it, his social status as a “commoner” would render it nearly impossible for him to ever hold high office. He accepted it as a political reality. What choice did he have? Although he could claim some noble blood going as far back as the twelfth century, especially among the Montespertoli members of the family, his branch of the Machiavelli tree was firmly rooted in much humbler soil. His father, Bernardo, a lawyer by profession, could have by no means been considered a wealthy man. However, the family was hardly in dire straits. Bernardo's wife, Bartolommea de' Nelli, a pious woman from a well-established Florentine family, in all probability possessed a certain degree of culture given the simple fact that she could read and write. She composed poetic verses of respectable quality, all religious in nature, and all dedicated to the Virgin Mother. She and Bernardo were married in 1458. Their bond produced four children: Niccolò's two older sisters, Primavera and Margherita, and a younger brother, Totto.

One day in particular always stood out in Niccolò's recollection of his early years in his home on via Guicciardini. The year was 1478, and young Niccolò was approaching his ninth birthday. Primavera and Margherita, thirteen and ten years old, respectively, and four-year-old Totto were helping their mother in the kitchen as she prepared holiday cakes sweetened with candied fruit, nuts, and honey for the upcoming Easter season. Bartolommea was hardly alone in that endeavor. Every woman worthy to be called a true Florentine took great pride in the city's gastronomic customs, and therefore every dinner table within miles of the Arno river, the muddy waterway that coursed through the city, showcased the obligatory *Torta di Pasqua*. Tradition was not to be ignored. This did not mean, however, that the task of making sure Niccolò got to his Latin lessons on time fell by the wayside.

"Niccolò, Niccolò, come here!" she shouted. "You mustn't be late."

Bartolommea pulled two florins from her tapestry-embroidered purse. Niccolò came running, carrying a brand-new leather satchel over his shoulder stuffed with a copy of Cicero's *De Re Publica*, a leaden stylus, and a sheet of crude parchment. Bartolommea unstrapped her son's bag and slipped in several slices of fresh unsalted bread, followed by a wedge of fresh *casciotta*, the local sheep's cheese, and a handful of dried black olives from their grove in Sant'Andrea.

"And Ser Batista is to get every florin," she reminded him as she sealed the coins inside. Ser Battista di Filippo da Poppi had recently taken over for Master Matteo as Niccolò's Latin tutor.

His mother's voice grew solemn, and her cadence slowed considerably as she locked eyes with her young son. "And go straight to your lesson."

Niccolò knew what was coming next. He'd heard it a hundred times.

"And there's no stopping to chat with those blowhards by the bridge. Do you hear me? They will warp that delicate mind of yours beyond repair."

"But they speak of great men in our history, men who helped build our city," Niccolò said respectfully. "Their words ring as true and as close to my heart as the sermons I endure from Ser Battista."

"He is Florence's finest tutor," she shot back.

"His knowledge of books has no limit, it is true, and I am grateful. But there are those who have lived through much of our history, it is a part of them, and their words are like poems to me."

"Your father doesn't labor day and night to fill our shelves with fine books so you can learn your truths from the mouths of drunks. And I am no fool. You think I don't know they speak of women and nothing else? So much for your sweet poems! Now go, or Ser Battista will lock his doors to you. Go."

Niccolò smiled mischievously and scooted off.

The trip to Ser Battista's studio crossed the heart of the city. Niccolò ran as fast as he could through the crowds on the Ponte Vecchio, Florence's oldest bridge, now reserved for the city's finest jewelers and goldsmiths, and past the Porcellino market and the old drunks his mother had warned him about—although he made sure to slow down to catch a word or two of wisdom—and then hurried to the steps of the church of Santa Maria del Fiore, known to all Florentines as the Duomo. The front door of his tutor's studio was just a few meters down the road. Luckily, the key was still in the door.

Once Niccolò was inside, Ser Battista wasted no time in

chiding his young student. Teaching was his life, but patience hardly ranked as one of his virtues.

“Do you think I have all the time in the world for young fools like you? Let us get started.”

Young Niccolò refused to be intimidated. He always came prepared. After only two years of Latin, he spoke it and wrote it as if he were Cicero himself.

Ser Battista relentlessly tested the boy’s grammatical skills to root out his weaknesses, but the declensions rolled right off of Niccolò’s tongue, and the fluency of his translations into his native Italian impressed his tutor to no end. Deep inside, Ser Battista thoroughly enjoyed passing on his knowledge to such a gifted pupil, but for the sake of principle he refused to show it. No student could ever presume to receive perfect marks.

“The highest praise is always reserved for God Himself,” he often said. “And second place must go to the venerable professor,” he added with a wry smile. “And, of course, the student naturally comes last in this hierarchy.”

Despite all the discouragement and ridicule, Niccolò had discerned his tutor’s deep respect for him from the first time he set foot in his studio, but rather than take advantage of the soft spot Ser Battista had for him by ignoring his studies as any normal young student might do, Niccolò reveled in peppering him with questions on Florence’s heritage. No subject concerning the history of his beloved city was off limits. He especially enjoyed hearing of the great men who founded Florence’s political institutions. Ser Battista obliged him without reserve. All of Florence’s noted professors, officials, merchants, artisans, and even laborers believed that the best training in life, and in the political arena in particular, focused on the reading of ancient history and moral philosophy. Serving your country

well, fighting tyranny and corruption, and holding values such as honor and glory were foremost in the minds of all Florence's citizens, young and old alike.

"Such enthusiasm for such a young boy!" his tutor happily declared as he prepared to deliver what Niccolò knew would be a longwinded but thoroughly illuminating lecture on the *studia humanitatis*, the humane discipline to which Florence had been committed since the rule of its first chancellor, Coluccio Salutati.

"Is it true that Salutati believed we are not under God's heavenly control?" Niccolò asked.

"Who filled you with such nonsense?" his tutor was quick to respond.

"You so much as said so yourself," answered Niccolò respectfully.

"The man was a passionate advocate of freedom. That is quite different," argued Ser Battista, "but he was a true believer of Our Lord Savior."

Young Niccolò thought for a moment. "Although God created the heavens and the world that surrounds us, and He has written our fate in the stars, in the end, living a moral life is our own responsibility," he said. Ser Battista suppressed a smile as Niccolò quickly continued, "God has given us the freedom to choose. This much I can see for myself."

Ser Battista took great pride in the budding wisdom of his students. A natural result of his teachings, he presumed.

"With freedom comes responsibility," he said. "If there is one thing you must always remember, young man, it is precisely that."

For a boy of nine, Niccolò felt uncharacteristically fascinated by something his peers routinely despised: responsibility. It was a concept his father, Bernardo, would often encourage in his

children, and each time Niccolò would take his words to heart. He saw the benefits of it everywhere.

“Salutati felt a deep sense of civic duty,” Ser Battista continued. “When he took hold of the reins of the government nearly a hundred years ago, our city and a good portion of our troubled peninsula were engaged in bloody conflicts. It is our curse!” he roared, working himself into a frenzy. “Salutati’s calm words of diplomacy saved Florentine lives. He is a hero to the Republic.”

Although Niccolò devoured every minute of his tutor’s rolling discourses, he could hardly get a word in edgewise. For someone so full of questions, comments, observations, and opinions, it took every ounce of respect and patience Niccolò could muster to keep his mouth shut. He just sat back and listened. Ser Battista adored details and always began at the very beginning. He lauded Salutati’s expert training in law at the prestigious University of Bologna and his break with the mindset of only applauding the contemplative life, so touted in earlier times. Salutati vigorously supported man’s worldly activities such as politics and commerce. Following his election as secretary of the Florentine Republic in 1375, Salutati wasted no time in creating the conditions for the city of Florence to assume a leading role in the rebirth of classic thought and logic. These opening words, uttered so eloquently by Ser Battista, kept Niccolò’s undivided interest, attesting to the boy’s innate predilection for statecraft, but his ears really pricked up the moment his tutor broached the subject of Salutati’s diplomatic skills.

Just like his new hero, Salutati, Niccolò loved to solve problems no matter what their nature. Niccolò was always driven by the desire to figure out how to anticipate possible conflicts and injustices. The old habits of relying on staid scholasticism to communicate abstract philosophical ideas held absolutely no

charm for either Salutati or his young admirer. Niccolò enjoyed nothing more than captivating and persuading his young friends on via Guicciardini with the force of his well-chosen words. There could be no greater power, he thought, a notion that naturally drew him to emulate his Roman model, Cicero.

Salutati also realized that the written word had a seductive power all its own. When Ser Battista went on to explain how Salutati's style of writing, a natural blend of high and low verbal register, became a formidable mode of diplomacy and eventually set the standard for Florentine ambassadors for years to come, Niccolò's intuitive beliefs were confirmed.

"As the Republic grew increasingly embroiled in the bloody conflicts plaguing our peninsula," said Ser Battista, "the power of the pen rivaled that of the sword." Florence, in particular, he noted, rose to the occasion and promptly surged to the forefront of diplomacy and political propaganda.

Niccolò finally found a moment, a slight lull in Ser Battista's verbose lecture, to interject. "My father praises Leonardo Bruni as well. He called him our greatest chancellor."

"Your father grew up under Bruni's rule," Ser Battista replied with a smile, "as did I."

Niccolò sat back in his chair, surrendering to the can of worms he had just opened for his garrulous tutor who, as expected, rattled on in praise of how Bruni later refined what Salutati had so brilliantly started. Bruni took office as chancellor in 1427 and ruled intermittently until his death seventeen years later. It was evident that Bruni held a special place in Ser Battista's heart. His earlier oration on Salutati was thorough, but noticeably stiff, a bit distant, and scholarly. Salutati cut an important figure in Florentine history, and Ser Battista felt duty-bound to show the man a certain modicum of respect, but he had met Bruni in

the flesh many years ago, so his level of enthusiasm rose dramatically upon the mention of his name. He shared many of Bruni's ideals and revered him as the precursor of philological studies. Talking about such a great man to his young pupil enlivened his spirit. Arms that rested calmly at his side during descriptions of Salutati's life now flailed and gesticulated without hesitation, and his cheeks blushed red with enthusiasm. Niccolò even detected the hint of a smile on his tutor's face, which of course Ser Battista did all in his power to hide.

"If you truly want to learn the history of our great city," Ser Battista said as he pulled a book from a sea of tomes that lined every inch of his studio walls, "I urge you to read this from cover to cover. Your grasp of Latin is quite sufficient, young man."

Niccolò's eyes lit up at the sight of the book his father had mentioned so often at the dinner table: *Historiarum Florentini populi*.

"It will accompany me everywhere," Niccolò replied as he bowed with respect, overjoyed to have received his tutor's vote of confidence. "And I shall read his every word."

Ser Battista's next reaction nearly sent the young pupil flying off his chair in surprise. It seemed his dour teacher had found something uproariously amusing in Niccolò's innocent words of appreciation. The man burst out laughing, and evidently couldn't stop. Niccolò had never witnessed such a spectacle within those hallowed walls. It was the kind of laughter that could easily be perceived as hysterical, the sound of a madman on the loose. Watching the body of an old, gray-haired professor thrash about so uncontrollably—his eyes spewing tears of pure joy—began to truly frighten the boy. *Has my distinguished tutor gone mad?* he wondered. *What could I have possibly said?*

“I shall read every word!” howled Ser Battista, his sides now splitting with unbridled laughter.

Niccolò’s eyes remained fixed on him, following his every move. He had heard mention of Ser Battista’s idiosyncratic ways—his days, even months, of uninterrupted solitude, alone in his room with books and papers stacked to the ceiling, with little to eat or drink. His father had warned him of the insanely difficult, convoluted, and cryptic questions Ser Battista would ask of his less-promising students, hoping to discourage them from ever setting foot in his studio again. His seemingly supernatural ability to recite Cicero’s orations verbatim, in Latin, for hours on end were legend, but Niccolò had never heard of these intermittent fits of out-and-out guffawing and childlike giggling. All the boy could do was wait for the insanity to stop, which it eventually did, and quite abruptly, in fact. Niccolò just sat there, torn between his curiosity of what would come next and the fear of finding out.

The old Frankish hourglass that stood prominently on Ser Battista’s oak desk released its last grains of sand. Ser Battista was a busy man and a new pupil stood waiting outside his door. It had already been well established in Niccolò’s previous meetings with his tutor that he never exceeded his time limit. He therefore expected to either be kindly ordered to leave or receive a long-winded explanation of what had just transpired. At this point, both options seemed perfectly acceptable to the boy; leaving this madhouse would relieve him of the awkwardness that would surely follow, but he also knew enough about himself—despite being merely nine years old—that sooner or later, his insatiable curiosity would have to be satisfied.

It turned out to be sooner rather than later. Ser Battista pivoted in his chair and zeroed in on a series of tomes on his massive

bookshelf, all roughly the same size and bound with identical cloth dust covers. He then tipped eleven more books off the shelf into his waiting hands, all in rapid succession, and piled them one on top of the other on his desk, forming a free-leaning monolith of sorts that wobbled ever so slightly, enough so that one false move or the faintest puff of wind would have them all come tumbling down. No one dared make a sound or move a finger. Time stood still. Niccolò had no choice but to wait for his tutor to break the ice.

Ser Battista placed the original book gingerly atop the other eleven, then sat staring at the precarious stack of tomes.

“*Historiarum Florentini populi*,” he whispered with reverence. A moment later he added the words, “*libri XII*.”

Bruni’s already-famous writings on the history of Florence came in twelve massive volumes. Bruni wrote without the yearning for the myth and romance of the previous centuries. He believed in a serious inquiry into the ancient world, an intensity of investigation that would lift Florence out of the shadows of the long, dark period that followed the collapse of the Roman Empire. He reached a level of thought that Ser Battista felt he could share with only a select few of his students. His piercing blue eyes fixed on the young boy sitting in front of him.

“Twelve volumes,” he whispered in his native Florentine. “Are you still so arrogant that you can promise you will read every word?” Ser Battista tilted his head in Niccolò’s direction, awaiting some sort of response.

Thirty-five years later, as Niccolò sat in his study about to compose a heartfelt letter to his dear colleague in Rome, he would recall this exact point in time as the beginning of his passion for history, his interest in great rulers and thinkers, the rule of law, and the institutions that go into making a just and

sustainable sovereign state. He would remember with fondness how he accepted Ser Battista's daunting challenge with the simple words "*Sì, Maestro.*"

Chapter Two

1513: COMMUNING WITH THE ANCIENTS

“**M***agnificent Ambassador, I cannot tell you in this letter anything other than what my life is like right now, and if you should care to trade with me, I should be quite happy,*” wrote Niccolò. It pained him to pen those first few words to Vettori. He paused a moment to reflect. “*I am living on a farm,*” he continued, then paused once again.

“I am living on a farm,” he repeated under his breath. Somehow he found the anguish of his days in prison at the mercy of his interrogators, and the unholy torture they inflicted upon him, as less of a humiliation than the tedium of his present existence. His life, as miserable as it was within the cold walls of the Bargello, brimmed over with purpose. As a respected member of the free Republic and a public servant, he felt proud to be an integral part of a government dedicated to serving its people. He accepted without reservation all of its inherent political dangers and deadly intrigues. Of course the new regime would

accuse him of conspiracy, he reasoned, and hold him prisoner. He thought it only natural.

Niccolò ran the Second Chancery from 1498 to 1512. He oversaw all internal as well as foreign affairs, and served as the Republic's key ambassador for the highest-ranking government official, Chancellor Piero Soderini. Undergoing the pains of the *strappado* at the hands of the Medici government was practically considered a badge of honor. Each time they bound his arms behind him and hoisted him into the air, wrists snapping and shoulders popping from their joints, it reinforced the value of his fourteen years of service to the Florentine Republic. As peaceful and as wholesome as life was on the farm, and as rewarding as it was to live by the fruits of his labors, Niccolò couldn't shake the feeling that the world was passing him by. The thought of no longer making a difference haunted him.

"*I get up before sunrise,*" he wrote, determined to convince Vettori that the dreariness of his Roman life could never compare with the tedium of the *Albergaccio*. "*I would then prepare some birdlime, load a stack of cages on my back, and venture outside in the hopes of catching a few thrushes.*" This pastime, as pitiful and strange as it was, had thankfully gone by the wayside as winter progressed and birds migrated farther south. He would now go into the grove each morning and remain there for several hours to oversee the work of felling trees for firewood. Once there, he'd kill some time with the woodcutters, who always had a hard-luck story to tell about themselves or their neighbors.

Niccolò went on to describe all of his other daily activities with equal objectivity and distaste.

"*After leaving the grove,*" he wrote, "*I would go to the inn across the way and converse with the locals about their worries, petty grievances, and life-long beliefs.*"

Niccolò often admitted in private, however, that he enjoyed much of his time with the local farmers, artisans, and laborers who frequented the inn, regardless of their often-skewed opinions and misplaced convictions. This routine pastime represented his primary connection to the day-to-day happenings of the world. Rather than venture across the street to access the inn, not the most respectable of places, he would slip through the narrow underground alleyway that served as his wine cellar and enter the adjoining cantina leading to the inn's well-stocked kitchen. From there he would wander into the main room and join an ongoing card game. Taking this circuitous route helped him to maintain a certain amount of integrity among his neighbors and protect him from their idle, and often derogatory, chatter. *Better not to be seen entering a den of iniquity*, he thought to himself. After all, despite being regarded as a commoner while living in Florence, to the locals he was a landowner, a keeper of servants, and employer of day laborers, farmers, woodcutters, harvesters, and grape pickers. To them he was no doubt a man of respect. His time at the inn usually preceded a meager lunch hour with his family, which he described as a meal with *"such food as this poor farm of mine and my tiny property allow."*

Niccolò sat back in his chair to gather his thoughts. He shook his head in dismay and mused, *Today, of course, was no different.*

Once he consumed, digested, and slept off his midday meal, the next third of his day was a rehash of his earlier activities in the inn, which typically revolved around playing card games like *cricca* and a version of backgammon called *tric-trac* with the village butcher, miller, and furnace tender. Niccolò viewed this part of his routine with some ambivalence. It wasn't all gloomy; in fact, he thrived on it to a certain extent.

While living in Florence, he thoroughly enjoyed carousing with friends and colleagues until all hours. No tavern, street corner, or brothel was safe from the unrestrained merriment of Niccolò and his “gang,” as they were known. Biagio Buonaccorsi was a loyal friend who remained at his side from early childhood and through his years at the Second Chancery. He and Niccolò were inseparable. His card games with Biagio and the locals never failed to provoke lively disputes, insults laced with choice profanity, and countless squabbles over money, right down to the penny. Biagio loved to argue about anything and everything, and Niccolò argued right back. He recounted all this to Vettori in his letter with a mixture of sarcasm and worldly pride.

“It keeps my brain from growing moldy, and it satisfies the malice of this fate of mine,” he quipped.

After years as Florence’s number one diplomat, waging hard-fought intellectual and psychological battles with formidable heads of state throughout Europe and the Italian peninsula, engaging in a few good old-fashioned brawls with the townspeople had its guilty pleasures. But it was how he spent his evenings that Niccolò wanted desperately to share with his dear friend in Rome.

Never one to wear his heart on his sleeve, but neither one to stifle true sentiment, Niccolò held back a tear as he began his next paragraph. He’d been through so much in the past year. As hardened as he was to the indifference and shameless cruelty of the world, especially the world of government and politics, he was, after all, made of flesh. His mask of stoicism and sophistication worked its magic in the public arena, before diplomats, ministers, heads of state, kings, cardinals, and popes, but within the four walls of this study, his inner sanctum, he freed his spirit of

all restraint. He surrounded himself with books written by great minds, and felt no shame in conversing openly with them on the dire issues of state. He consulted with each of these men, all of them noble thinkers, gifted leaders, historians, and poets, as if they were ready and eager to share their hard-earned wisdom with him. It was a nightly meeting, and one that Niccolò cherished above all else.

In preparation for another book, still in progress, on the superiority of the republican form of government entitled *Discourses on the First Decade of Titus Livius*, Niccolò conferred nearly every evening, for months, with the ancient Roman historian Titus Livius. Livy, as he was called in the vernacular, was the author of *Ab Urbe Condita*, an exhaustive history of ancient Rome from its mythological founding by Aeneas after the fall of Troy to the city's actual beginnings in 753 B.C. on the Palatine hill to the rise of Augustus Caesar. Livy welcomed Niccolò into his circle with great affection. It was this intimate connection with Livy, and with all the ancients, that he wanted so desperately to share with his friend.

Niccolò leaned back over his desk to reread what he'd composed so far, making sure the letter effectively conveyed how his life had changed. He wanted his friend in Rome to absorb, in particular, the words he used to describe the last third of his day. Vettori had survived the Medici takeover and currently held an ambassador's post in the court of the new pope, Leo X, formally Giovanni de' Medici. Niccolò's purpose in maintaining communications with Vettori, however, extended beyond his friendship. First of all, he wanted to keep abreast of important matters of state with a knowledgeable insider, and second, he hoped to somehow slip back into the fold, perhaps with a small

post within the new regime. A kind word or letter of reference from someone still rubbing elbows with those in command could make this happen.

Niccolò had written Vettori just two weeks earlier asking for some assistance in precisely this matter. In fact, Vettori figured prominently in Niccolò's ultimate plan to have his treatise, *The Prince*, delivered directly to members of the Medici family and eventually to the pope himself. Besides his desire to transmit his knowledge and unique insight garnered from his experiences as Florence's ambassador, Niccolò hoped to use his "little work" as a calling card of sorts for future employment within the Medici government. More than anything else, Niccolò needed to feel that he was being of service to the city of his birth, and ultimately to the entire Italian peninsula. In the bigger picture, he desired nothing more than to help mold the type of ruler that could find the courage and resourcefulness to rid Italy of the pangs of foreign invasion and occupation. The image of the prince he had described in his treatise was designed to do just that.

"On the coming of evening I return to my house and enter my study," he wrote. He glanced over at his dusty woolen cloak and grimy field boots in the corner of the room, then down at his crimson velvet housecoat and lambskin bedroom slippers. A smile crossed his lips, and he returned to his missive, satisfied.

"I then remove the day's clothing covered with mud and dust, and put on garments courtly and regal," he continued. *"Once appropriately attired, I enter the ancient court of ancient men, where I am received by them with great affection."*

Niccolò hesitated to jot down the next few words for fear of being thought insane.

“They speak to me,” he whispered to himself. “I ask them the reason for their actions, and they kindly answer me.”

He, of course, was not crazy. There was no saner man alive. He knew he was alone in that room and that no voices actually beckoned him. Yet he could hear them. Loud and clear. Their words revealed the wisdom of the ancient world. They provided the very oxygen Niccolò needed to survive within this luckless existence of his. For four peaceful hours each evening he forgot his troubles, the dread of poverty disappeared, and the fear of death no longer hovered over him. He was exactly where he belonged.

A rush of pure energy pulsed through Niccolò as he dipped his plume into the inkwell, anxious to dash off his closing words.

“I feed on that food which is mine, and for which I was born,” he added with unabashed self-regard. *“And since Dante says it does not produce knowledge when we hear but do not remember, I have noted everything in my conversations with these great men in my little work, The Prince, where I debate what a principedom is, how it is acquired and sustained, and ultimately why it is lost.”*

Niccolò felt confident that the fourteen years he had spent at the service of the Republic, his high-level diplomatic forays throughout the continent, and his knack for discerning human character had uniquely qualified him to discuss the art of the state. He hadn’t necessarily written *The Prince* with the intention of showboating his political acumen or soliciting a job, but he hadn’t been wasting his time during his tenure at the Second Chancery, either, and he was hell-bent on making that fact known.

“I shall dedicate this book to His Magnificence Giuliano Medici,” he wrote, hoping that Vettori would act as his intermediary. As

the son of Lorenzo il Magnifico, the celebrated ruler of Florence throughout Niccolò's entire youth, Giuliano was a big fish in the Medici family. Niccolò swallowed a bit of his pride as he laid down the next sentence: *"It is my wish that our present Medici lords make use of me even if they begin by making me roll a stone."*

Niccolò's mood turned dark. He stopped writing for a moment to absorb the anger that surged within him. He let it color his thoughts and energize his words. After all, he'd been a responsible citizen his whole life, and honest to a fault. His dedication to his city, his government, and ultimately to his beleaguered country never wavered. Not a penny that didn't belong to him ever found its way into his coffers, despite the hundreds of opportunities, and despite the frequency and ease with which government officials almost uniformly would skim public funds. Niccolò was principled, upright, and trustworthy, and everyone knew it, even the new Medici lords who had him arrested for malfeasance. He scratched the final words of his letter in near rage.

"I have been honest and good for my whole life. And as a witness to my honesty and goodness I have my poverty!"