

Renaissance

By

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Book I

Chapter I

In my youth, I saw the world wake up from a thousand-year-old sleep, then in my years of ripe manhood, I saw it, once again, crawl back into bed; but in my wishful heart of melancholy old age I believe that it is only napping, and soon, once again, the world will rise up into the light of reason, beauty, and possibility. I am old and tired. I pay the price for the gift of so many years of life; my senses fail me, I can barely move about for the aching in my joints, and I have seen the passing of all who I have known and loved. The last of my old friends, the enigmatic genius, Michelangelo Di Lodovico Buonarroti Simoni died just this past year. It feels rude of me to have lived for so long, while all the others have left; it's like we were all together at some celebration and they have all left, but I didn't know when to leave. So I am still here. But alas, I feel that my time is nearing an end, so I thought I would, in one last backward glance, put down for history this account of my life; the life of Lorenzo Demarco from Florence, sometime painter, monastic student, soldier, officer, statesman, interpreter, writer, son, brother, uncle, father, lover, husband, and friend.

My world began in late May in the year of our Lord 1482, in the town of Florence, though it was several years before I would become aware of this. My papa, Sabastiano Demarco, named me after Lorenzo de' Medici, known affectionately as Lorenzo the Magnificent. My father had three true passions – aside from being passionately in love with my mother, Katarina – one was his belief in the one true faith, the second was his love for art, and the third was his devotion to Lorenzo de' Medici. Papa believed in the strong, benevolent hand of a single, all-powerful ruler, the kind of leader that Machiavelli would later define in detail in his masterpiece, *The*

Prince. He would always say, "We must respect, and obey our earthly authorities, for they would not be our earthly authorities if God had not ordained them to be." I wonder if after all that has happened, in the end, before he died, if he still believed this?

I have my own opinions of the magnificence of Lorenzo de' Medici, but I will invoke writer's privilege and keep them to myself. He was firm and sometimes generous. He laughed easily and participated in the traditional festivals, as well as organized many of his own; some would say he organized too many frivolous celebrations that were excessive and wasteful. Most of all, he helped to bring beauty to Florence, or I should say, more beauty to Florence; my city was always graced with great loveliness. Nestled in a valley of farms and grazing lands, among gentle rolling hills along the Arno River, the majestic walls of Florence surround the houses and magnificent buildings as they rise up to the heavens. Everywhere you look it can be seen, the great skill of her artisans and craftsmen in the inlaid work of her architecture, and the extraordinary skill of her artists in the numerous sculptures, gardens and fountains. Inside the best homes and public buildings, beautiful tapestries, furniture and paintings can be seen and admired - many have come from abroad, but so much of the great pieces of art were created within her great walls. It is these great pieces of art where some credit must go to the magnificent Lorenzo; he paid the highest for the best artists in the area and brought them to his court in Florence. I don't know if he was truly a patron of the arts, or even understood art at all, but he certainly enjoyed being around artistic people. It was he who took the young Michelangelo under his roof and helped him become a brilliant artist - mainly by exposing him to the wealthy people who would become his patrons. I've often wondered if I had been a little older, or Lorenzo the Magnificent had lived a little longer, then maybe I could have been a part of his court, and perhaps my skills as an artist would have advanced to the level of some of my contemporaries. I too could have been a great artist instead of a moderately skilled portrait painter. It would also have helped if the Lord had given me a little more talent.

My mother never wanted me to be an artist - in a real sense she got her wish. Mama wanted me to be a priest. From my earliest years I was under the tutelage of Fra Domenico Salviati, a Dominican priest. It was under his patient teaching that I discovered my true gift was for language; he taught me Greek and Latin in which I excelled. Fra Domenico would assign me a passage in the Bible and then have me translate it into Italian, and then he would have me do it again and again. "Repetition is the key to recognition," he would say. I can still hear his voice, "Good Lorenzo, now, again please, could we do it again please." Mama taught me her native language of German, which I also picked up quite rapidly. Mama said that this gift of language was a sign from God that I was to do his work saving souls. In my early world, the priest was still the only way to salvation; he was the emissary of God through which the road to heaven traveled, and the

communicator of the word as interpreted by the church. It would be almost thirty years before this belief would be challenged. Actually, the one true faith was being challenged in Florence during my early years. Perhaps that explains the brief popularity of the reactionary, Savonarola.

One of my earliest memories is of hearing the fiery voice of Savonarola. Michelangelo once said that, even in his later years, he could still hear the voice of Savonarola in his head; I still hear it too. He would begin softly, so everyone would have to be quiet and still to hear his words. Even in a crowd of thousands and from many yards away, his deep resonating voice could be heard as it would slowly build, stronger, becoming louder and louder, then it would explode, like thunder and his words would echo in my head; even now they echo in my head.

"The people are oppressed by taxes, and when they come to pay unbearable sums, the rich cry, 'Give me the rest!' When widows come weeping, they are told, 'Go to sleep.' When the poor complain, they are told, 'Pay, pay.' And what is it they need with our last small piece of silver? Vanities! Vanities!"

Though it was a hot day, I felt a chill, and instinctively, I buried my small frame into Fra Domenico's thick, black robe.

Fra Domenico gently patted me on my head and quietly said, "All right, Lorenzo, I think we have heard enough for today. Let's get you home."

We pushed our way through the dense crowd – Fra Domenico pushed while I clung tightly to his robe – and came out onto the winding road, paved in cobblestones, that led back into the Santo Spirito Quarter of the city. Florence is divided into four quarters: the Santo Spirito, on the left bank of the Arno River, and Santa Croce, San Giovanni, and Santa Maria Novella all on the right bank. We were nearly to my papa's shop, just inside the Porta a San Pier Gatolini – the main gate entering the city on the south side of Florence – before the ringing of Savonarola's voice had died down in my head.

Being a gunmaker, and one that specialized in making cannon, meant that Papa's shop was quite different than the average trade shop in the city. From outside, the shop looked much like most of the other shops on the street – via dei Serragli – except it was larger than most; gunmaking was very profitable. Papa seldom used the front door, which led to his showroom; he had little need for a showroom because most of his business was done outside of his shop. Most of his work was performed in the field or in nearby towns, as the need for good cannon arose. Papa would bring with him his preferred tools and the patron would usually supply the rest. The bulk of the shop was a warehouse used to store scrap metal to be melted down for small arms and armor, and to store wood for the stocks and the shafts of pikes, and various other weapons. There was also a work area with plenty of tools, a forge, cooling vats and various other large pieces of equipment. The warehouse had no direct access to the outside – you had to go through the showroom in front or through the living area in back. The living area consisted of three rooms. There was a large room

that served as a kitchen, living and dining area; the room opened up on a back street that ran parallel to the main road out front. The only furniture in the large room was a small wooden dinner table with two benches – one on either side – and a single x-chair that always sat in the corner except when company was over. Mama and Papa had one of the other rooms and I had the other to myself. I sometimes wonder what it would have been like to share that little room with brothers or sisters. As it was, having so much privacy spoiled me and made me less suited for the often-tight shared quarters I would experience in my travels. We had a cellar; the door was under the dining table. Down there we stored our most treasured possessions, food, and wine.

In his shop, Papa didn't make the fancy suits of armor and expensive guns; he made the simple, but reliable, weapons and armor for the common foot soldier. It was these common soldiers and militiamen that most frequented his shop. I believe Papa would have preferred to have just made these simple weapons and dealt with the common folk; this would have meant he could spend more time at home with Mama and not have to take such long trips, lasting for months or even a year, depending upon the campaign. But it was the army's need for cannon that paid the bills. Papa did not and would not make a decent profit from making small arms; he never charged a man more than he could afford and often worked for cost. Papa would say, "It's a sin to send a man into a battle ill-equipped and defenseless." When forging cannon on a major campaign, he would often see the numerous pikemen and regulars go into a fight with antiquated arms and armor; sometime with no armor at all. If you survived the first assault you could possibly scavenge equipment from the dead. It was not uncommon for Papa to use his scrap metal or pieces of used armor and weapons to equip one or more of these unfortunate men, at the expense of his profits.

As we made our way through the moderately populated, morning crowd, I saw Papa coming toward us; he saw us first. There was a hard look in his big brown eyes. He shook his head and asked, "Are you sure, Fra Domenico, that the boy should be listening to that mad monk?" I let go of Fra Domenico and ran into Papa's open arms; he lifted me up and kissed me on both cheeks. His eyes softened and he smiled at me. Then he put me down, patted the back of my head and said, "Oh, Lorenzo, you are getting to be much too heavy for me." He had lifted me up and put me down with such ease, I knew he was just teasing. Papa was not a large man, but he had powerful arms and a broad upper body from his work with metals.

"We agreed that Lorenzo's teaching would be my responsibility," Fra Domenico said sternly. "I do not want to be second guessed."

Papa smiled, and said, "But surely, Fra Domenico, don't you think that a boy so young should experience more of the joys of life before he has to take on its burdens? He should be allowed at least an hour or two a day to do as he pleases. After all, his time will come soon enough when he will have to work..." Papa was about to say work for a living, but caught himself

before the words came out. Papa was not convinced that I should or would go into the monastery. He did not regard the priesthood as proper work for a man, and Fra Domenico knew this. So if Papa made a reference to me working some day, then his message was clear; I might not be a priest.

Fra Domenico understood Papa's incomplete thought. He frowned, shook his round head and said, "It is never too early to learn that the world is an evil place filled with sinners, and that it is only from the church that we find salvation through the word of God." He made the sign of the cross in the air and whispered a small prayer and continued, "These are even more essential lessons for a priest, and so they must be ingrained in his very soul. But if you have changed your mind about Lorenzo's education, I'm certain that I can find better uses for my time. And I trust that you will explain to Katarina ..."

"You are right, you are right," Papa interrupted. Let us not argue about it, Fra Domenico," he added with a smile. "Now, why don't we go inside and find out what Katarina has fixed for us. All of Savonarola's talk of evil and eternal damnation is bound to build up your appetite. And, if we are to be condemned, should we not be allowed, as was our Lord, to have our last supper?"

Fra Domenico tried to remain grim, but soon a smile crossed his face, then his round belly shook with a chuckle. He said, "Sabastiano Demarco, you are a good man, but sometimes I think your humor is inspired by the devil."

We sat at our usual places around the small wooden table – me on one side and Mama and Papa on the other. Fra Domenico sat in the x-chair; the little chair creaked under his massive frame. Mama served cinestrata soup with bread and wine; it was delicious, as usual. Mama always made her cinestrata with extra cinnamon and nutmeg, just the way I like it.

Mama was a beautiful woman. I know that every young man thinks that his mama is beautiful, but even objective eyes would agree – Mama was special. She was tall, for a woman – slightly taller than Papa – but not too tall. She had straight shoulders, long legs, and was well proportioned – round where a woman should be. She carried herself with elegance, like a woman of much higher rank than the wife of a simple artisan. She had classic German features: sandy, blonde hair; pale, almost-white skin; small, gray-blue eyes; a tiny sharp nose, slightly turned up; and thin pink lips. There was always a pleasant expression on her face and a stoic smile – a slight grin that squinted her eyes slightly, but exposed no teeth. Her look fit her demeanor – quiet, thoughtful, pious, and at peace. At least that was the way she always seemed to me. As I said, a child's view of his mother is not always the same view as the world's. She rarely raised her voice, but always made her opinion known – usually with few words – even when she disagreed with Papa. Her premature passing left her forever young and beautiful; the price you pay for so few years of life.

I painted her picture, but my limited skills did not capture her true essence. If only she had still been around when Raphael was in Florence. Though I did not know him that well, I'm sure he would have painted her

for me, or at least helped me fill in what was missing; he found it hard to say no to anyone. I knew Michelangelo well enough to ask him, but I'm certain he would have turned me down; he found it easy to say no to everyone. But this is all irrelevant because while Michelangelo was in Florence when Mama was still alive, I didn't meet the man until after Mama's passing.

"Sabastiano Demarco, I will not have you speak so about a man of God," Mama said quietly, but firmly. "Savonarola has a good heart. He speaks for those who cannot, the poor, as well as all the hard working people of Florence. De' Medici is too busy decorating his court and entertaining the rich to care for the rest of us, which is most of us. We need a voice to say what we do not dare for fear of his harsh reprisal."

"Here, here," echoed Fra Domenico.

"Look Lorenzo, see how they gang up on me in my own house," Papa said to me with false anger. I smiled at Papa, but knew I was not to speak.

"Is that it, my friend?" asked Fra Domenico. "You disapprove of Savonarola because he openly attacks the Medici?"

Papa furled his brow and shook his head. He said, "My faith in Lorenzo de' Medici is independent of my contempt for Savonarola." Papa took a sip of his wine then continued, "Savonarola would have us fall back into ignorance and give up the light of beauty and reason that shines on Florence. He would have us go back into the darkness of the 13th century. The good old days..."

"No, Sabastiano," interrupted Fra Domenico, "he just wants to bring back God and the republic to Florence..."

"Bring back God?!" Papa interrupted. "If God was ever in Florence he is surely here now. Where do you think that the light is coming from? And we have a republic, but a republic needs a single voice to get things done, or else all the guilds and the Signory would be too busy arguing among themselves, in their own self-interest, to accomplish anything. Now if Savonarola had his way, he would be that single voice himself." Papa paused when he caught a glance from Mama; it was subtle, but the look meant that Papa should change the subject. Mama didn't like arguing, particularly at the dinner table.

Before Fra Domenico could respond, Mama offered him some more wine and gave him some more bread; he accepted both eagerly. Fra Domenico's meticulous eating gave Papa time to steer the course of the conversation to common ground. Just as Fra Domenico opened his mouth to speak, Papa started in on the Turks. It was Papa's complete devotion to the one true faith that made him hate the Turks. They were the enemy, because by their existence they cast a shadow of a doubt over our own beliefs; there can't be two distinctly different answers to the same question. At least that's the way I saw it. Though we knew little about Islam, we knew that it was not our faith; therefore, it must be wrong. They did not accept any of our truths such as the existence of the saints or the divinity of Christ. Without these basic truths how could they possibly expect to get into heaven? What else could

they possibly believe in? That's what I used to wonder. Papa was convinced that the Turks were put here just to test our faith; that meant that there were an awful lot of souls being sacrificed by following a false God, just to get us to believe what we already were devoted to. But then I was just a young boy; what did I know. I believed everything that Papa said.

"The infidel is creeping ever closer in the East," Papa began. "Only the Hungarians stand in the way of them and us."

"God bless them," said Fra Domenico, as he made the sign of the cross in the air and whispered a small prayer.

"Amen," said Papa. "I hear that the Venetians are planning another campaign against them soon, to gain back some of what has been lost."

Still in a combative mood, Fra Domenico frowned; he shook his head in contempt. He said, "Those Venetians, Sabastiano," accenting Venetians, "they do not fight for God. Sure, they will fight, but only for their own self-interest, to gain more territory for Venice. Remember that it was Venice who refused to join the Holy Alliance during the great siege at Otranto, and if Otranto had fallen, all of Naples would have been threatened, and then perhaps Rome itself would have been taken. Who knows what would have become of us if that had happened."

Papa nodded in agreement, smiled slightly and said, "You're right, Father. They would not fight with us then, but they fight now. Shall we refuse to fight with them just because they did not join us then? Aren't the infidels still our true enemy? And, is not the enemy of my enemy my friend? I tell you, if I were a single man, without responsibility, I would sail with the Venetian fleet. And I tell you something else, if we don't stop all of our petty bickering, they will take us down one by one. Just the way they have taken down so many others. If Hungary falls, then Venice, it will be our turn soon, and who will stand with us, if we do not stand with them now? We can't fight them alone and win. So now, we can't expect them to fight alone and win. If we could just stop fighting amongst ourselves, we could crush the infidel. We are so divided now, but still we manage to hold them back. Imagine what we could do if we were united and fought, side-by-side, as one."

Again, Fra Domenico made the sign of the cross in the air and whispered a small prayer, and said, "Amen. The French and the Spanish have to stop fighting over control of our lands, and join with us under God. Together with the Hungarians we could easily drive the Turks back into the hellish womb from which they have spawned."

"And what of the Empire?" Papa interjected. Their lack of leadership has made them useless in our cause, except as mercenaries. But Frederick is old and Maximilian will surely succeed him soon. The Germans are the best soldiers in the world. By themselves, a united German army could push the infidel off the continent, and maybe even recapture Constantinople."

As Papa and Fra Domenico went on, happily unified in their hatred for the Turks, Mama was reminding me of my table manners.

"Sit back, Lorenzo," she said quietly. "Don't crouch over your food, and eat slowly."

Mama had adapted the Florentine propensity for good table manners, and passed this trait on to me. To my disgust, I would find in my travels that we might have been the only ones in the world who did not graze like common field animals. Mama's own people, the Germans, were the worst; for a long time, I could hardly eat in their company without feeling revolted.

Papa and Fra Domenico continued to eat and talk long after I was through. Mama reminded me not to clean my teeth with my napkin; I put my napkin on my plate. I no longer listened to what was being said. Instead, I found myself watching Fra Domenico; his massive frame dwarfed the little x-chair. I watched and wondered how long it could continue to hold his weight. He must have weighted well over two hundred pounds, and a good portion of that bulk was in his massive balding head. The bags under his large, brown eyes, his puffy cheeks and jowls, his fat lips, and even his thick ear lobes all hung down – overcome by their weight. Only his broad nose, standing straight out, defied the trend to slide downward. The little x-chair creaked, but held its own.

Fra Domenico was my best friend in my youth. I spent so much time with him buried in my studies; I had no friends my own age. I loved this man who was my teacher, and I owe him so much. He was a stern teacher, as good teachers must be, but he had a kind heart and a gentle soul. My ability to learn so quickly impressed him, but he knew that my attention and passion was not always directed toward the faith and that concerned him. "Someday you will have to choose," he would say, "between the ways of God and the ways of men." I wanted both, I found both, but in the end, I don't understand either; the Lord moves in mysterious ways and men move in ways totally incomprehensible.

I was helping Mama clear the table when the, now post-meal, conversation turned to the topic of my studies.

"Lorenzo is exceptional in his abilities," said Fra Domenico. "There's no question that he has great potential, and will undoubtedly go far. I dare say that he will someday, and someday soon, surpass my meager abilities to teach him. The only thing that will keep Lorenzo out of the monastery is contaminated thought. Sometimes Lorenzo suffers from a lack of concentration. Lorenzo is all too often distracted by corrupt humanistic ideas, which some seem to believe are somehow enlightening and thought provoking, and that these are good things. I do not see it that way. How can any new thoughts coming from the whims of common men possibly compare to the time-tested truth contained in the mind of God? How can any God-loving man condone this pestilence of the mind, knowing how easily it is spread, particularly, to the young? For the young do not have the resources of time-tested faith to fight simple-minded rhetoric. Should we not be protecting our children from these very ideas and thoughts, instead of turning...?"

Papa knew it was he who was being criticized – possibly attacked – and defended himself. “I understand, Fra Domenico,” Papa interrupted. “But Lorenzo is just a boy, and he should be allowed some time to pursue childish things. When he is a man, he will ...”

It was Fra Domenico’s turn to interrupt. “Ah, but these are not childish things, as you call them,” he said sternly. “Lorenzo is being corrupted by the times, this place, this town, and from this house. This art thing, for example, is not a common childish pursuit, and it promotes secular ideas. I have often found him daydreaming and doodling in the margins of his studies.”

“What is wrong with that?” Papa asked, with a smile.

“Ah ha, then you are encouraging this art thing,” snapped Fra Domenico. “It is as I suspected.”

Papa ignored his comments and repeated his question, “What’s wrong with a little drawing?”

“It’s a waste of good ink and paper,” barked Fra Domenico.

“But these doodles, they are good aren’t they?” Papa asked, still smiling.

“That’s hardly the point,” Fra Domenico shrugged.

“Sure it is,” Papa said sardonically. “If these doodles are good then you can hardly call it a waste of good ink and paper. Perhaps the boy has talent.”

Mama joined in on the side of Fra Domenico. Mama and Papa often argued over my interest in drawing and painting. It was one of the few things that they ever really disagreed about, and to be the cause of that – although mild – conflict, still pains me.

“It’s disrespectful to the Father,” Mama said, “and you should not be encouraging it, Sabastiano. Fra Domenico gives so much of his time, and Lorenzo should not be allowed to waste that time on such nonsense.”

Papa sighed deeply and said, “God created so much beauty in this world, and art is just man’s attempt to capture some of that beauty, out of love and admiration of God’s work. And that is not nonsense. But...” He paused to make sure that his next words were heard. He said, “I do agree that Lorenzo should not be wasting the good Father’s time. All teachers have is time and knowledge, and neither should be wasted on inattentive or ungrateful students.” Papa turned to me, and in his best stern voice he said, “Lorenzo, you know you should not be wasting the good Father’s time. You know he has given so much of himself, just to help prepare you for the calling of the Lord. It is not right for you to be doodling during your lessons. Save your drawing for your own time. You understand?”

I nodded my head that I did, and was about to say so, when Mama spoke up. “And you had better keep on him about it this time, Sabastiano. You know how you let Lorenzo get away with so much. I don’t know why you don’t just forbid him from drawing altogether. It’s just a waste of time. What does a priest need with paintings and sketches? But if he must draw, do it on his own time, not on the good Father’s. And you had better punish Lorenzo if he disobeys you.” Then Mama turned to me, gave me that

angelic stoic smile and said, "I'm sorry, Lorenzo, but it is for your own good. Some day you will understand."

Mama was right about Papa and discipline; he wasn't very good at it. He was too kind hearted and gentle a man – an odd combination for a gunmaker – to punish me. Though I must say, I didn't really need much external discipline; with the exception of things that pertained to my art, I always did what I was told. In defense of this exception, I could not help my passion for drawing and painting. Sometimes I just found myself sketching without even thinking about it. Whenever I had a pen in my hand, it just seemed to come out of me. Sometimes it was in the form of illustration of text, and other times it was an unconscious attempt to capture something I saw around me. I never thought of it as a distraction, and believed that my sketches actually helped me retain what I was learning. Mama was also right about me, someday, understanding her objections to my art. I know now that if I had focused on my studies, and not had the distraction of my drawing, I would have become a priest; thank God for the distraction.

Mama, Papa, and Fra Domenico continued the familiar discussion about my studies, my future, and my enthusiasm for art; nothing was resolved and never would be. I know now that Mama and Fra Domenico only wanted what, they thought, was best for me, but I have always been grateful for my papa's steadfast, stubborn resistance to their demands. I didn't mind my studies; as I have said, I actually enjoyed learning. At the time, I thought I really wanted to be a priest – what does a boy know about what he will want when he is older – but I loved art and always have, all of my life. Sometimes a boy does know what he will want when he is older.

Every day, after the morning meal, I spent hours studying, on my own, in my room. My most frequent, and favorite activity – because I was so good at it – was translating the Bible from the Latin, to Greek, Italian, and German. German was the one I had the most trouble with because I had no other written sources to accumulate diction, so I had to constantly ask Mama for the words. But as my German vocabulary grew, it too became an easy translation. If I had kept my notes, I wonder how my work would have compared to Luther's translation.

On a piece of paper I would write, three columns across, first the Greek, then the Italian, and finally the German. I found that through the repetition and the thoughtful study of the words – necessary in translation to not just one, but three languages – I came to know that holy book that had ruled the continent for a thousand years. Though I must admit, I did not always understand its meaning; I still don't. There are so many contradictions, and stories whose meanings had to be explained to me by Fra Domenico or Mama, but if they hadn't told me, I would have never understood them. It seemed to me that the true measure of faith wasn't in God or the Bible, but in those who told you what the book meant; they were the ones telling you what to believe. I guess that's why there would be so many objections

to translating the Bible into common language; then the book would be open to anyone's interpretation – anyone who could read. But I am getting ahead of myself.

After several hours of writing and translating, the words began to stagnate in my mind; I found myself reading the same passage over and over. I knew it was time to put the work away until next time. I closed up the ink to keep it from drying out, and then folded up my papers, and put them in the little wooden box that Papa had made for my studies. The Bible stayed out because Mama and I often read together in the evening. I got off my stool and put the box in the small cassone at the foot of my bed, where I kept most of my meager possessions. I left my pen on the writing table in case I had time later to do some drawing.

As I came out of my room, Mama was sweeping the floor when she saw me. She gave me a smile – her eyes squinted – she stopped sweeping and asked in German, "Have you finished your studies for the day?"

I answered, also in her native tongue, for we often spoke in German when we were alone. I said, "Yes, Mama. May I go and watch Papa work for a while?"

"Of course, Lorenzo," Mama said.

I didn't really have to ask; Mama always said yes when I asked to go watch Papa work, but it was part of my upbringing that required me to ask. I started to leave when Mama spoke.

"I've begun to notice that you no longer want to spend any time with your mother," she said with a hint of false hurt in her voice. "I suppose it is because you are growing up, and you no longer need so much. At least not anything that your mother can provide."

I knew she was only teasing, so I played along. I said, "Of course I still need you, Mama. I don't know how to cook, so who would feed me?" Then I laughed.

Mama's smile broadened slightly and she said, "You little weasel. You think you are funny. Well, perhaps you are. But you are not too big to give your mama a kiss. So come here and kiss me before you run off."

Mama bent down and I kissed her; she patted me on the back tenderly, then I was off.

It always seemed odd to me that a peaceful, softhearted man like Papa would be a gunmaker. Papa was not an ambitious man and he did not seek fortune or much of anything. I do not mean this in a bad or disrespectful way – I loved my papa – but he was what most people would call lazy. He only worked because he had to and would have much preferred a life of leisure. Papa did not choose his profession; it was more like it chose him.

Like many young unambitious men, Papa was forced to take a military career; it was join the army or starve. Early in his military experience, he was sent to Wittenberg, Germany with a small detachment to purchase guns from a certain well-known gunmaker, Philipp Melchoir. On the first

day he was in the craftsmen's gun shop, as Papa told me, while watching Philipp Melchoir work he became totally and completely captivated by what he saw; what he saw was Philipp Melchoir's daughter, Katarina. Now for all the ambition Papa lacked for a trade or a career, he had an abundance of ambition when it came to love. Papa was able to convince my grandpa that he was very interested in learning the gunmaking trade, and because of Melchoir's reputation, grandpa was able to convince the army to let my papa stay with him as an apprentice; the army could hardly refuse the chance to gain an apprentice of Melchoir's as their gunmaker. Papa says that he practiced the art of gunmaking by day and the art of love by night. So that's how my unambitious papa became a gunmaker, and in another sense, how I came to be.

I went into the shop and saw Papa slightly bent over his anvil and pounding a white-hot piece of metal with a hammer; his powerful arms flexed. He squinted his big brown eyes as a small stream of sweat ran down between them and dripped off of the tip of his big, hawk-like nose. He pounded again, and again, sparks flew, until finally, he was satisfied, stopped pounding and examined his work.

I know I wasn't thinking about it at the time - it wouldn't have occurred to me then - but, looking back, I was beginning to look a lot like my papa. I would grow up to look a lot more like him. Neither of us were big men, but we were well-proportioned and very fit. I also had Papa's olive skin and black, curly hair, and mine would also turn gray early in my thirties. I didn't inherit Papa's hawk-like nose or other large facial features; I had my mother's small nose, thin lips and gray-blue eyes.

I watched for what seemed like a long time, and when Papa finally saw me standing there, he put down his tools, wiped the sweat from his face with the back of his hand, and waved for me to come to him. As always, Papa lifted me up, hugged me, kissed me on both cheeks, and reminded me of how big I was getting.

"Oh Lorenzo, you are getting to be so big," Papa said, as he lowered me down.

"I'll be too big for you to pick up soon," I said proudly.

"Never," Papa playfully barked back at me. "The day you get too big for me to lift in my arms, or I become too weak to pick you up, is the day I die."

Papa was true to his word; he never stopped picking me up, hugging me, and kissing me on both cheeks until the day he died.

We talked for a while about nothing important, and then I remembered something he told me. It didn't make much sense to me at the time. I only remember it because it was very important to him and he wanted me to understand.

"This is something very important to me, and I want you to understand," he said. "It might not make much sense to you, but maybe it will later, so I'm going to tell you anyway. Now you know that I am committed to the one true faith and I am a peace loving man, except, maybe, when it comes

to the Turks, but being infidels, they don't count. I also support, though not as enthusiastically as your mama, your studies for the priesthood. And despite his foolish support for that crazy monk, I have the greatest respect and love for Fra Domenico. I might have even become a priest myself if it wasn't for... that is you have to... what I'm trying to say is that you are not allowed... you have to take a vow of celibacy."

"Celibacy?" I questioned.

Papa looked away to hide his face - a little amused and a little embarrassed - then he looked back at me and said, "You'll understand that later too." As Papa predicted, what he was saying wasn't making much sense to me. Papa read the confused expression on my face and said, "I didn't mean to confuse you, Lorenzo. I got a little sidetracked. Now this is the important part. I consider myself a good, God-fearing, pious man who believes in peace and the preservation of life." He paused, then said, "I make guns, cannons that are used to kill people, and the Lord is pretty clear about how he feels about killing, 'Thou shall not kill.'"

When Papa hesitated, I tried to be helpful and said, "But Papa, you never killed anyone, have you?"

Papa smiled and said, "No, no, I haven't actually killed anyone, that's true, but don't you see? I have certainly made it easier for others to kill. And sometimes I think that, that... making it easier may also be a sin."

Papa looked troubled; he obviously had spent much time contemplating this conflict between his faith and his trade in his mind. The reason why it didn't make much sense to me at the time is because I didn't see a conflict; a child's faith in his father and in his God means that whatever his father does must be what God wants.

I said to Papa, "Papa, if God had not wanted you to be a gunmaker, then he would not have made you one. And if God did not make you a gunmaker, then you would not be one, because you would not do anything that God did not want you to."

Papa smiled at my simple faith and circular logic, and I believe that my words might have comforted him, in a small way, but he still felt the need to explain - try and explain - his position to me. Well into my early manhood, this would be a recurring theme in our conversations. Part of it might have been for me - he wanted me to see him in a positive way and not condemn him for any apparent contradictions in his behavior - but most of it was his own personal, internal conflict, and guilt over what he was doing and his faith. Papa went on to explain the need for guns in a violent, unsafe world; the good and the pious have the right to protect themselves from the evil and the sinful. When he finished, he invited me, as he often did, to go with him to the Piazza della Signoria on business. He was going to meet with a condottiere - the condottieri were the professional soldiers who roamed the Italian countryside selling their services to the highest bidder. Ironically, they seldom fought major battles; they preferred sieges and bombardments - thus the need for cannons.

"Before you tell Mama you're going with me," Papa said, "you can

sneak these into your room.” He pulled from his pocket and handed me two new brushes and several small jars of paint. “Slip these into your pants,” he said as he squatted down and helped me tuck them in front. “Hold on to these, you don’t want them to fall out in front of your mama,” he said. Then, with a sheepish grin, he looked over my shoulder to make sure we were still alone. “Follow a few steps behind me,” he said. Then he winked at me and added, “I’ll distract your mama, while you put these things away.”

When I came out of my room, Papa was standing, with his arm around Mama, next to the open door; a warm breeze blew in. Papa was dressed in his best doublet – he only had three – with his belt pouch tied around his waist. Mama motioned for me to come to her. She said, “Come Lorenzo, give your mama a kiss before you go.” I obeyed, then, Papa and I were out in the sunshine walking – heels clicking on the flagstones – toward the great square; it was only about a mile and a quarter to the square – the Piazza della Signoria.

We crossed the Arno at the Ponte alla Carraia – one of only four bridges that connected the two sides of the city across the great river. On the bridge, we stopped to watch the fishermen, down river, throw their nets. One of the men, standing on a scaffold at the edge of the city walls, lost his straw hat to a gust of wind; it fell into the water. He scurried down the ladder and as he reached out for his floating hat, he fell in making a big splash. Papa and I laughed as the other fishermen cursed him for scaring away the fish, then we went on our way.

As we approached the Piazza, I could see the tower of the Palazzo Vecchio – the town hall – and the great dome of the magnificent Cathedral of Florence, also known as the Duomo. Papa told me that the great dome was the first of its kind in all of Italy, perhaps the world. Papa was very proud of this fact and always reminded me of the dome’s history whenever we went to the Piazza.

“See the great dome, Lorenzo,” Papa said. “It is a symbol of Florence’s greatness. It was the first of its kind and now they copy it all over the continent. It was designed by Filippo Brunelleschi.” Then he asked me, as he always did, “Do you know why it is so unique?” Of course I knew, but I just smiled up at him and let him go on. “It’s size; that is why it is unique. Nobody ever made a dome that big, that grand. The designer who built the rest of the cathedral couldn’t figure out how to bridge the gap – his concept outreached his abilities as an architect. So the Cathedral of Florence sat unfinished for almost twenty years until Brunelleschi came along and finished the job.”

Once in the Piazza, we crossed over to the Palazzo Vecchio where Papa, almost immediately spotted the condottieri he came to meet; after a brief introduction they began to talk business. I tried to follow their conversation, but was soon lost, and then I became distracted by something I saw in the square. On the far corner of the Palazzo Vecchio – pointing out toward the

Piazza – stood a temporary wooden gallows. Hangings were a regular occurrence in Florence, but the location of the executions often varied depending on the quarter where the offense was committed. Most executions, and the most important ones, occurred here in the Piazza. From the gallows hung two men, with their hands bound behind their backs. From their appearance, it was obvious that they had been there for several days; the warm weather had taken its toll on their bodies. Knowing Papa would be busy for a while, I decided to move a little closer to get a better view. I was still a ways away when the wind shifted and a nauseating odor confirmed that they had been up there for a while. I was used to seeing corpses – you never get used to smelling them – but these two intrigued me. Who were these poor fools? What did they do that earned them the dubious honor of an execution in the Piazza della Signoria, right in front of the town hall?

It seemed to me that hanging, as well as with many other forms of public execution, must be a very humiliating way to leave this world. One of the poor soul's breeches had fallen down to his knees exposing his bare backside, now burnt and blistered by the sun. Papa had explained to me the difference in hanging by breaking a man's neck, or by strangulation; breaking the neck was more merciful, and strangulation was meant to make the victim suffer. It was clear that these men had strangled to death: their tongues were extended and black, their faces were bloated, and their eyes were bulging out of their sockets.

Most people passed by with hardly a glance in their direction, but there were several men in black robes standing in front of the gallows, praying. One of the men was Fra Domenico; quietly, I walked over to him. Up close, the smell of rotting flesh was overpowering. I now recognized the other men as followers of Savonarola – young zealots that referred to themselves as, "bands of hope."

When Fra Domenico realized I was there, he stopped praying with the others, made the sign of the cross in the air and whispered a small prayer, and told me to look and remember what I saw.

"Take a good long look, Lorenzo, and remember it well," said Fra Domenico. He reached out to me and put a hand on my shoulder, and continued, "I know that your papa supports the Medici, and I do not wish to come between a father and his boy, but this is ..."

"You need not worry about coming between me and the boy," Papa interrupted. "Unlike you, and those you so admire, I am not afraid of the free exchange of ideas. I want Lorenzo to learn to be his own man."

Fra Domenico frowned – his thick lips curved downward at the ends. He said, "Sabastiano, don't you stand there and play the superior. I sat at your table this very morning and listened to you praise the Medici, and put down the great and pious voice of Girolamo Savonarola. Do not pretend not to take sides."

"I'm not pretending not to take sides," Papa said confidently. "I have a side. I just mean that, while I will tell the boy what I believe to be correct, I

am willing to let him hear other views, no matter how wrong or foolish I believe them to be. Ultimately I am willing to let Lorenzo make up his own mind." Then Papa smiled and said, "Now come on, Father, let's not start up again. Why don't you tell us why you are here lending your valuable time to these two unfortunates? And why is the band of fools here..."

"They are here to pray for their souls, as am I," Fra Domenico interrupted with contempt in his voice. He made the sign of the cross in the air and whispered a small prayer, and then continued, "They have vowed to stay here and pray until the bodies come down. I, as have many of my brothers, come down regularly to offer our support and prayer."

"Well that's very good and thoughtful of you," Papa said, trying hard to sound sincere. "But I understand that these boys may be up here for a while. They are to be made an example of."

Fra Domenico shook his head and said, "We have seen far too many rotting corpses under the name of, example for the people. When the last of us is up there, whom will the example be for?"

Papa laughed and said, "Your rhetoric is getting sharp, and quite clever. Savonarola is rubbing off on you. But like him your passions are misplaced, or at least exaggerated. We live in violent times, Father, but justice and order still prevail." Papa gave a gesture with his hand toward the hanging men and continued, "Thieves and vandals do not fare well in Florence and can expect a short life. I see this as a good thing. It tells other would-be offenders that they should choose another profession, or pick another town to apply their trade."

"Sabastiano Demarco, I am shocked," barked Fra Domenico. "How can you put these two fine souls in the same category as common thieves?"

"Where else should I put them," answered Papa. "They stole property, defaced and attempted to destroy an artistic masterpiece."

"Where have you been getting your information?" questioned Fra Domenico. Without waiting for an answer, he continued, "You have been misinformed, my friend. All these boys did was to dump a little excrement in protest of tyranny on the statue of *Judith and Holofernes* and on the fountain next to it ..."

"I heard that they also stole a silver chalice," Papa interrupted. "Which they used to drink the rest of the wine that they had been consuming heavily."

"Yes, yes," said Fra Domenico. "A stupid little chalice. It was lying outside by the fountain, so they picked it up and took it with them, just to use to drink the rest of their wine. They had been using a leather pouch to drink from, and then they stumbled, by chance, upon a chalice, so they decided to borrow it - a civilized gesture, to drink from a cup. This is hardly a crime worthy of forfeiting one's life." Fra Domenico was becoming frustrated and it showed in his voice. He barked, "Not worthy unless, of course, the statue, the fountain, and the chalice happened to belong to the great Lorenzo de' Medici."

"Come on, Fra Domenico," Papa replied with contempt. "They were common thieves, well known for their unlawful deeds. But you, and your friends here, have made them out to be martyrs. Not only that, they were stupid common thieves. They stole a chalice from the most famous man in Florence, and then tried to sell it here in town. And then there's the statue. Donatello's, *Judith and Holofernes*, was created as a statement against tyranny. For Lorenzo to admire it so, just shows his compassion and understanding for the people. For them to pick this statue to deface further shows their stupidity – assuming their attack was actually intended as a protest. But I don't believe – and most people, including the men on the Signory, agree with me – that this was not a protest against tyranny, but the final drunken deed of a couple of professional criminals."

"So they were ignorant of the statue's significance," snapped Fra Domenico. "They were common, uneducated men, simple and poor. Perhaps they had a history of some past indiscretions, but what they did here, was it really worthy of their punishment? Did the Medici have the right to have them killed? For this misdemeanor?"

"Wait a minute," Papa interjected. "This was not Lorenzo's doing. It was the Signory that handed down their punishment. It is the counsel, not Lorenzo, that has decided to come down so hard on crime."

"And whom do you suppose controls the Signory?" snapped Fra Domenico sarcastically.

Papa sighed deeply, and said, "I do not wish to continue arguing with you over these two." Then Papa made a gesture of fanning his nose, and added. "And I do not wish to continue smelling them either."

Fra Domenico hesitated. I believe he had more to say, but he let it pass, and chose to comment on what they both agreed on. "The odor is overwhelming. I don't know how the 'Band of Hope' can stand it. I guess I just have a weaker constitution and a lower level of commitment."

"Or just a keener sense of smell," Papa added.

"Perhaps," Fra Domenico agreed, as he made the sign of the cross in the air and whispered a small prayer one more time.

We moved away from the gallows toward the opposite end of the square. We were following the lead of Fra Domenico who was heading toward the Duomo, where a small crowd of people was gathering.

On seeing the crowd, Papa said, "I'm afraid to ask, or do I even need to?"

"Yes, it's Savonarola they are coming to hear," said Fra Domenico. "He will be delivering a sermon in a few hours."

"Twice in one day, Father?" Papa questioned without really asking. "Well I'll say this for you, you're loyal." Then under his breath barely loud enough for me to hear he added, "or crazy."

We parted with Fra Domenico in front of the Cathedral of Florence. Kind words were exchanged between them, along with a reminder to me about being prepared for my morning lesson. Then Papa and I headed home; we passed Savonarola's long procession on the way. A cool breeze swept over the city.

Mama and I read from the book of Job – from Latin to Italian, then German. We hadn't gotten very far when my throat began to feel sore; I complained to Mama.

"Mama, I feel a little tickle in my throat," I said.

Mama looked concerned. She said, "Open your mouth." She looked inside, but didn't see a problem. She said, "I don't see anything unusual, but we better not read anymore tonight. Let's give your throat a rest. And just in case, I think you should say a prayer to Saint Blaise to cure you of that tickle. Now give me a kiss." I obeyed. "Now get into bed." Again, I obeyed. She blew out the lamp. The room was totally dark, but Mama had no trouble finding her way to the door. When she opened it, a shaft of yellow, flickering light streaked across her body and onto my bed. Mama turned back toward me, smiled with her thin lips and squinting gray-blue eyes. In that light, her beautiful sandy, blonde hair and white satin skin made her look like an angel. Then she said, "Goodnight, Lorenzo, Mama loves you," and closed the door.

I waited several minutes – staring and listening in the dark – then I got up, felt my way to the foot of the bed, opened the cassone, pulled out my little wooden box, stumbled to my writing table, opened the box, removed a small candle, and lit it. As my eyes adjusted to the dim light, I laid out a piece of paper and opened the ink, then I picked up my pen – left on the table from the morning – and began to draw. My subjects were the two hanging men I had seen that afternoon outside the Palazzo Vecchio. I was able to do a pretty good job – at least I thought so – considering I was relying only on memory. The thing I remembered the most about the victims – besides the awful smell – was the indignity of their appearance. Their lifeless bodies hung there, for all to see, two rotting corpses, bare flesh exposed, faces swollen and unrecognizable – a pathetic and humiliating way to die. I had finished my sketch when I heard Mama and Papa in the other room. Almost as a reflex triggered by the sound of their voices, I blew out my candle, but there was no need; Mama and Papa were not coming to check on me. They were just talking.

I waited in the darkness until my eyes adjusted just enough so I would not stumble; a thin strip of light was coming in from under my door. I walked toward it. I thought I heard my name; curious, I opened the door ever so slightly and peered out the crack.

I could not see them – they were behind the table on the ground by the fireplace – but I could hear them. To my delight, Papa asked Mama to let me pursue my passion for drawing and she agreed – as long as it didn't get in the way of my studies.

"We will let him do his drawings, as long as it doesn't get in the way of his studies," Mama said.

"Then I think I should look into finding someone to look at his work," Papa said. "To see if he has any real talent. Of course, I think he does, but who am I? Just a poor gunmaker."

Mama didn't say anything. I always wondered if Mama agreed to let me draw because she knew I had no special gift, and would give it up once someone who knew better had confirmed this fact to me.

Then it got quiet. I waited several minutes and heard nothing but the crackling of the fire and a few soft muffled moans. I was just about to close the door and go to bed, when I saw my mother stand up from behind the table; she was naked. Her ivory skin glowed, yellow, in the firelight. She stood there alone, not moving, for several seconds, then my papa stood up; he was also naked. Papa moved up close to Mama until their bodies touched – they kissed softly – then Papa lifted Mama up by her bottom; she wrapped her legs around him. It looked really funny to me, at the time, and I almost burst out laughing. Good taste prevents me from saying any more of what happened. I didn't really understand what I saw that night until many years later, but suffice it to say, my lack of siblings was not due to a lack of trying.

Chapter II

The year 1492 was an important year in Florence and the world: Columbus landed in the New World; Lorenzo de' Medici died; Lorenzo's son Piero began a brief two-year reign; the Spanish kicked the Moors off of the continent in the west; Charles VIII became king of France; Alexander VI became pope; and I turned ten years old. We didn't learn about Columbus' discovery until after this pivotal year, but when we did, Papa practically burst at the seams with Italian pride. He liked to remind anyone who would listen that Columbus was Italian, and would even insist that the great explorer was from Florence. Whenever Papa was corrected with the truth - Columbus was from Genoa - Papa would dismiss the fact with his own brand of logic. "No man from Genoa could possibly have performed such a feat. Like most fools outside of Florence, the people of Genoa think the world is flat and surrounded by ocean like in one of those primitive circle and cross maps," he would say. Therefore, "He must have been from Florence." I think Papa knew the truth, but he preferred to tell it his way.

Papa took Lorenzo de' Medici's death pretty hard. He predicted that it would mean hard times for our city; Papa was right, of course. They say Savonarola predicted Lorenzo's death, but I believe that this was just religious propaganda for his followers - the story seemed to confirm Savonarola's heavenly connections. Piero de' Medici took over briefly but he was not his father; he lacked Lorenzo's strength, leadership, charm, and good luck. Lorenzo was known as "The Magnificent." Piero was known as "The Fool," Piero the Fool. Piero was forced to flee the city and, once

again, Florence became a republic. Unfortunately this would not be a good thing. Savonarola's pious influence would soon gain control over the council, the Signory, and his views would become the law in the city – this would lead to disaster for Florence and him. For some reason, Savonarola was not able to predict his disastrous reign or his own downfall; perhaps his heavenly connections had been severed.

When Ferdinand of Spain announced that the Moors had been defeated and pushed out of Spain – effectively removing them from the western part of the continent – Papa was thrilled. His joy was slightly offset by the news from Hungary; the Turks defeated the Hungarians at the Save River, strengthening their hold in the region. So while we had won ground in the west, we had lost ground in the east. The reign of the new French king, Charles VIII, would mean trouble for Florence and the rest of Italy. The new pope, Alexander VI would also bring problems for our city, but that would be due to Savonarola and his apparent alliance with the new French king. So removing Savonarola improved our relationship with the new pope, but led to our problems with Charles VIII. But alas, I am getting ahead of my story – back to 1492.

My tenth year of life would be my last good year. It would be my last year as a boy, and the last good year for my little family. It didn't all go bad at once; it seemed to change slowly and imperceptibly. And it wasn't really a change from good to bad, but more of one from innocence and contentment, to responsibility and turmoil. I would soon begin to learn about normal human suffering due to love and death, as well as the abnormal suffering caused by what we often perceive as evil in the world. But I was still unscathed and unscarred in 1492.

My city seemed to know that this was to be my last good year and gave me a grand send off by putting on the grandest festivals – the best that I remember. Carnival was magnificent, and the May Day Festival was really beautiful, but the Feast Day of Saint John, in June, was the best. Saint John is Florence's patron saint, so unlike the other festivals that are often shared in celebration in other cities, this one was our own and therefore special to Florentines. The whole city participates in Feast Day, with every quarter decorating in their own unique way using banners of cloth and colorful ornaments. All of Tuscany joins in and comes to the city baring symbolic tribute in the form of small trinkets, baskets of food, and barrels of wine. There's lots of drinking and feasting all over the city. There's also music, plays, parades, horse races, and lots more.

I remember getting ready on the day of the feast and being very excited about going out and seeing everything. Adding to my excitement was an announcement by my papa that he had found me an art teacher – Maestro Tommaso Bramante. Bramante was a minor artist, who once worked, briefly, for the Medici. It turned out that Bramante had done little work of his own, since his early promise, and mainly lived by teaching others. Teaching for him meant touching up his talented student's work and

adding minor changes, then passing it off as his own work, and patronizing those of us with lesser ability just to collect a fee. Papa said that he had shown Bramante some of my drawings and that he thought I had talent.

"Bramante says that Lorenzo shows some hints of talent," Papa said.

Mama frowned and said, "Some hints? Not very encouraging."

"Don't mind that, Katarina," Papa said, "All art teachers talk like that. That's just their way. They like to play down a person's talent at first until they become their student. Then they work with them for a while, add their personal touch and wisdom to the student's work, then suddenly the student is a genius. All because of the teacher's patient tutelage."

Mama smirked again, and said, "If that's all he's going to do and you know it, then what's the point of sending him to this Bramante?"

"A good teacher's approval adds legitimacy to the artist's work," Papa said. "It's not like you or I saying Lorenzo is good, that means nothing to patrons, but if Bramante says it, ah, then it will mean something. Besides, he can make contacts for Lorenzo, open doors for him; get him name recognition for his work. Then if the boy moves in the right circles, who knows?"

"I think Lorenzo should have to paint something first," Mama said. "Before we start talking about talent. What has he done, but a few drawings, and sketches?"

"Oh, he'll paint," Papa said. "Every day, he will paint, and paint, and paint."

"Every day?" Mama questioned. "What about his studies? You promised me that his drawing and painting would not interfere with his monastic training. And what about Fra Domenico?"

"The boy will keep up with his studies," Papa said. "And as long as his studies aren't affected, Fra Domenico will have nothing to complain about. You'll keep up with your studies, won't you, Lorenzo?"

I smiled at Papa, but knew better than to get involved in their discussion; Papa understood and didn't expect me to answer. We all finished getting ourselves ready in silence.

Papa was dressed in his best doublet and breeches; his belt pouch hung on his hip. Mama wore a soft, red, tight-fitting, square-necked, sleeveless bodice, and a matching skirt with golden lace trim. Mama hated wearing hats, but it was the style; every woman over the age of thirteen was expected to wear some sort of headgear. So Mama wore a modest, embroidered, golden muffin cap that matched the lace on her skirt, and her golden, laced, belt pouch. When it came time to leave, Mama looked me over and found me presentable, except for a lock of errant hair that refused to stay down with the rest. Mama tried several times to force it down by dampening it and pushing it down with her fingers, but it continued to defy her and nature by forcing itself skyward. Mama frowned, shook her head, sighed deeply, and decided to just let it be. I can't remember what I was wearing; I can't remember what I was wearing yesterday. I'm sure I was dressed as a person of my age and stature should have been - then,

not yesterday – Mama would have made sure of that. I'm not as confident about the appropriateness of what I was wearing yesterday.

When we first stepped out on the street it was hazy, overcast, but as we passed our neighbor's shop along the Via dei Serragli – decorated in bright red silk cloth – the sun shed its veil, filling the day with light and warmth. Decorating shops in brilliantly colored banners of cloth is part of the Feast Day celebration, but we didn't have a real storefront to decorate so we didn't observe that part of the festivities. We wandered, seemingly without direction, through the Santo Spirito Quarter taking in all the sights and sounds. We had to stop for a moment to allow a procession of monks, carrying holy relics, to pass. They were followed, close behind, by a parade of citizens that filled the entire street. Mama and Papa were each given a candle by a man with an unnatural smile; Papa said he had probably had too much wine. We saw Fra Domenico in the procession – at the back of the group of monks and just in front of the trailing crowd – and he too wore an unnatural smile; Papa said he had probably had too much Savonarola.

I remember that Papa looked so proud – his chin was up and his chest was out – as he strolled along next to Mama. Mama seemed to glide along, as if she were floating just above the pavement; she gently held onto Papa's arm. Mama had that look of contentment that she always had, but I believe that she was also proud – proud to be seen with Papa. Occasionally, their eyes would meet and I knew – anyone who saw them also knew – why these two people were together. If souls of infants come from heaven, then their souls were picked by angels to be together long before they were born.

As they walked together, I ran out in front to see everything first, and take it all in; everything was so beautiful. Of course, there was the usual number of pickpockets, beggars, and prostitutes applying their skills – as was expected with any public event in Florence – but I could easily overlook them, for they overlooked me; I was not a viable target for their vocations. The majority of the people enjoying the festivities were commoners like peasants, small business owners, and farmers – most people are peasants, small business owners, or farmers – but there were also soldiers, public officials, and nobility in the streets. Festivals are the great societal equalizer; rich and poor mingle in the crowd, laugh at the same plays, dance to the same music, eat the same foods, and drink the same wines.

By afternoon it was seasonably hot, and on a typical June day the air would be filled with a variety of unpleasant odors such as: steam from cooling metal, kilns burning fuel, garbage, human waste, animal waste, raw fish and decaying flesh. But everything is cleaned up for festival days, and tradesmen take the day off averting the natural odors of the application of their vocations. Florence breathed pleasant aromas from flowers, sweet perfumes, and all the different foods being prepared on the streets. The sound of Florence was also much different on festival days; everywhere pleasant voices, laughter, and music – lots of music – could be heard.

Many of Florence's small business owners relied on festivals to make

their biggest profits of the year. Stalls were set up to sell everything from linens and cloth, to engravings and cabinets. There were also a number of artists selling paintings and drawing portraits. Grotesque caricatures were very popular with the commoners, particularly ones of famous people like the pope, the Medicis, or even Savonarola.

The plays or satires being performed in the various corners of the city, like the caricatures, were often used to make fun of the elite. This was usually seen as fun and harmless venting, but sometimes this was not the case; in conservative times such mocking of authority was not allowed and open ridicule of certain people could bring harsh reprisal.

We stopped to watch one short play. It was a hilarious little sketch that revolved around the beheading of a farmer for public perversion. There were caricatures of Savonarola and the members of the Signory, who pranced about on stage and shouted condemnations and demanded the punishment for the accused. The actor playing the accused, the farmer, was quite funny; he hopped about, with his hands tied behind his back, proclaiming his innocence in a silly voice. He was dressed only in breeches – no shirt – and just below his belt there was this exaggerated bulge of his manhood. At the climax of the performance, the farmer was bent over by two men, his eyes were closed, he braced for his execution, and then the mighty axe was wielded, but instead of chopping off his head, at the last possible moment, he was stood up, and the executioner castrated him. The audience squealed with delight. I still laugh when I see that silly man, in my head, jumping in joyous relief that his life had been spared, then suddenly realizing what he had lost. I remember Papa saying that he may have been better off losing his head.

“Oh, that hurts just to watch,” Papa said, still laughing. “You know, that poor fool may have been better off losing his head.” I giggled, and Mama smiled as she shook her head. The crowd was still laughing as they began to move away from the stage.

“What’s next?” Papa asked. “Unless, you would like to stay for the next performance.”

Mama smiled and shook her head again, and said, “Oh no, once was enough for me, thank you.”

“Oh, Katarina, you were laughing pretty hard,” Papa said – he exaggerated – as we slowly began to re-enter the moving crowd on the street.

“Yes, I was amused,” said Mama as she giggled and smiled broadly – showing a rare glimpse of teeth. “It was funny, but I don’t wish to see it again. Besides, we have so much to see, and we are boring Lorenzo just standing around watching a silly play.”

“I’m not bored, Mama,” I chimed in. “I could stay and see it again.”

“Don’t contradict your mother, Lorenzo,” Papa said with false sternness. “You’re bored.” Then he laughed, and said, “Mama’s right, there is so much more to see. So back to my question, what shall we do next?” Shall we go to the parade? I heard that there are going to be even more floats

than last year, with lots of color and banners. Or how about the horse races? No, they don't start until later this evening." Papa thought for a moment, as we slowly walked on – Mama was still holding his arm. I was a few steps in front of them – walking backwards – waiting to hear Papa's next suggestion. Then Papa suggested, "We could go over to the Palazzo Vecchio and watch the prisoner release."

Mama looked hard at Papa to judge his sincerity, and could tell right away that he was kidding, but I could not. I protested, "No, Papa, that's not any fun."

"Sure it is, Lorenzo," Papa said. "We can cheer on the prisoners as they are paraded before us, then we can offer our forgiveness, and call for their release. It really would be a good lesson for you in mercy and forgiveness."

I still didn't know Papa was kidding, so I began to plead. "No Papa," I said. "Let's do something else. Something fun."

Papa laughed and mercifully told me what he knew I wanted to hear, "All right, Lorenzo," he said, "let's find those floats instead." Then he couldn't resist playing with me just a little more. "You know," he began, "the floats are going to end up parading around the Piazza della Signoria. So if we follow them there we will be right there at the Palazzo Vecchio..."

"Papa!" I whined. He just laughed and Mama smiled.

We were almost to the Ponte alla Carraia, when we first saw the bright banners and streamers from atop the floats; they were across from us on the north bank of the Arno, just preparing to head up the road to the Piazza della Signoria.

As we stepped onto the bridge, our attention was drawn away from the glorious spectacle of the floats to another, subtle, and more ominous spectacle. The bridge was lined with men in black robes, praying out loud. Their prayers condemned the vanities and excesses of the festival – everything from the fancy dress to the overindulgence of food and drink. Papa tried to dismiss them by, once again, calling them the "band of fools," but I could tell that he was worried. With Lorenzo gone, who knew how much the influence of Savonarola and his followers would grow. My city was vulnerable; Peiro de' Medici was no leader and fear from foreign invasion and economic collapse ran high. Anything could happen, and anything might not be a good thing, but it wasn't going to happen today. Today my city lived as if there was no tomorrow, but alas, there is always a tomorrow.

I had my first art lesson with Maestro Tommaso Bramante a week after the Feast of St. John, and they continued, at least, once a week throughout the summer. In the fall, Papa surprised me by clearing out his rarely used showroom and converting it into an art studio; he insisted that he didn't need it. I suppose I didn't need it either, but at the time, it made me feel like a real artist. I had an easel, canvases, a chair, and a large wooden box for all my supplies; I no longer needed to keep my paints and brushes in my room. I had everything a young artist needed – except talent.

I remember the day Maestro Bramante first came to my studio; I

wouldn't call him maestro now, but I did what I was told then. I had been going to Maestro Bramante's studio for instruction all summer, but when he learned that I had my own studio in Papa's workshop he insisted on coming to me. Tommaso Bramante was drawn to money like crows to carrion. He used coming to my studio as a means to get closer to Papa. It was also at this time that I realized that gunmaking was actually a very profitable business; Papa had always played the pauper. It's not surprising that I should think of crows when I think of Bramante; he had a nose, which in profile formed a bent triangle resembling the beak of some massive bird-of-prey. His other features were small and his face was thin, as was his tall frame, this made that nose of his even more prominent and overbearing.

I was working on my masterpiece – a portrait of Mama – while Bramante was looking over my shoulder giving me instruction and insincere encouragement. I was concentrating on my work, but I couldn't help but notice Bramante was distracted; he kept looking back through the doorway into Papa's work area. He even asked me if Papa was back there working. It was obvious that he was, because we could hear the sound of a hammer striking metal. When the sound suddenly stopped, Bramante became very excited; I could hear him pacing behind me. His anticipation was rewarded when Papa came through the door wiping his hands on a towel.

Maestro Bramante immediately scurried over to greet Papa in such a way that you would have thought Bramante was at home and Papa was the visitor – he even spoke first, calling Papa Signore Demarco. When Papa responded addressing Bramante as Maestro Bramante, he cut him off.

"I insist that you call me Tommaso," Bramante said, interrupting Papa. "Maestro is only for my students. It gives them a sense of their place. Don't you agree? Huh?" Papa just smiled, so Bramante continued. He said, "Besides, you are the one who is paying me to teach your son. I am, in fact, your employee. I work for you. Perhaps I should call you maestro, huh?" Again Papa just smiled. Bramante was working desperately to get on Papa's good side. "Even if I wasn't working for you," he continued, "I can tell that you are a man of means, who demands respect, with this shop, one of the largest in the quarter. Your reputation as a gunmaker is known all over Florence. Surely you should have some title, just as ..."

"As I've told you before, Signore Bramante," Papa interrupted, "you have been misinformed about my means; I am just a modest gunmaker who earns just enough to care for his family. So you may call me Sabastiano, or Signore Demarco, which ever you feel the most comfortable with."

"In that case, let us speak as friends," said Bramante with a broad smile glued on his face. "I shall call you Sabastiano, and please, call me Tommaso."

Papa agreed and they began to converse about everything from the weather to politics; Bramante was careful to let Papa do most of the talking, and was cunning enough to agree with everything he said. Even on the sensitive issue of Savonarola, Bramante carefully mirrored Papa's opinion completely. Then when Papa spoke of his sadness over the death of Lorenzo

de' Medici, Bramante even managed to bring a tear to his eye and a lump to his throat. In fairness, Bramante may have honestly felt as Papa did about my city's late benefactor, but I doubt it. The Bramante I would come to know only felt passion for three things - wealth, art, and more wealth.

As their conversation waned - Bramante was now doing most of the talking - Papa worked his way around to see what I was painting. I believe I captured only about one tenth of the beauty that was my mama. I actually had captured more in the sketch, under the layers of paint; from the beginning I was quite good at drawing. That's probably why Papa was so sure I was meant to be an artist. My painting skills were still years away from rising to the level of mediocrity. But even with my limited abilities - capturing only a tenth of her loveliness - the painting was something special. I only painted her from the waist up so I could concentrate on her face. I had her German features basically right, and had the correct hue for her ivory skin, but those squinting gray-blue eyes and that thin-lipped smile just weren't correct. I think the only thing I really did superbly was the hair; I painted every sandy blonde strand one at a time, with a thin brush.

Seeing Papa's eyes widen, Bramante stopped in mid-sentence and turned to see what had captured his attention. He immediately turned my painting and Papa's reaction into a benefit for him. "Oh, I see you've noticed what we have been working on, huh?" he said with a sardonic smile. And yes, he did say we; he saw Papa's reaction, immediately assessed that it was positive, and Bramante knew he could exploit it. "Lorenzo's skills are coming along, wouldn't you say? Huh?" he said, still smiling. "We still need to do some work on those brush strokes, but we haven't been at it that long. These things take time."

Papa glowed with fatherly pride, and he mumbled, "Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, it's beautiful." He stared at the painting a little longer than he looked at me and said, "Come here boy." I obeyed, and he lifted me up with his big hands, hugged me, and then kissed both cheeks. Then he put me down and went back to staring at the painting. Several more seconds passed, then he abruptly said, "I have to get your mama. When she sees this she will know, as I do, what God has put you in this world to do."

Papa disappeared into the shop, but he quickly returned leading Mama by the hand. To my surprise, even Mama seemed to be impressed by my effort - perhaps moved or touched would be a more accurate description of her reaction.

Her eyes squinted; she smiled and said, "Lorenzo, it's wonderful." Then Mama kissed me.

Bramante, who could never read Mama like he could Papa, misinterpreted Mama's reaction and tried to capitalize, on what he thought, was her apparent appreciation of my skill. "The Lady has an eye for quality," he said. "But with such a lovely subject, we should expect nothing less. Huh? The boy is coming along quite splendidly, don't you agree?"

Mama ignored him, but Bramante continued to praise my work, careful

to point out his contributions and my vast potential – provided I remain under his tutelage. This would be a theme from Bramante for the next couple of years – my potential, channeled by his expert guidance, equals brilliance. But I didn't care what he said that day, or how much credit he tried to take, for I had succeeded as an artist; my painting had brought happiness and admiration from the only audience that mattered. Little did I know that at the age of ten, I had already reached the peak of my artistic achievement.

Of course Fra Domenico didn't want to see me wasting my time studying art; he knew my talents as a linguist and was training me to be a priest. One day, while we were working he told me his thoughts on the subject of art. I was having trouble concentrating that particular day and apologized to him and told him that I wasn't feeling well.

"I'm sorry, Fra Domenico," I said. "It just seems hard today." Then I offered a weak excuse. "I'm not feeling well," I said, but it was a lie.

Fra Domenico frowned; he knew I wasn't ill. He said, "You seem to be having trouble concentrating all the time, lately." He paused; I didn't try to speak, so he continued, "Is it this painting thing? I hear you've been taking lessons from Tommaso Bramante." It wasn't a secret, but I knew Papa hadn't told Fra Domenico about Bramante; Papa was putting it off to delay the inevitable argument. So now he knew somehow, and it, as well as lying to him about being ill, was making me feel ashamed and guilty; I said nothing. "You know, I know of this Bramante," said Fra Domenico. "He is not an honorable man. I have heard several stories of his business dealings. I don't think he can be trusted. I don't know about his skill as an artist, I am not familiar with his work, and I don't know what kind of teacher he is, but have your papa keep an eye on this one. You keep an eye on him too, Lorenzo."

"I will, Fra Domenico," I said sheepishly.

Fra Domenico was being surprisingly calm and understanding about the news of my art lessons, so I tried to repay his understanding by reassuring him that I would work hard on my studies and was looking forward to dedicating my life to God. I don't remember my exact words, and I probably didn't say it this well, but I said something like, "There are many ways to dedicate your life to God, and I will be able to do it by teaching His word and by painting. You have said that God is beauty and perfection. In art, the painter strives to find beauty and perfection in his work. So as a painter I will look for God in my work." Unfortunately, He wasn't there.

Even as I clumsily tried to defend my artistic aspirations, Fra Domenico did not get angry, as he had in the past, or try to argue against me. Instead he just reminded me that when God gives you a talent, you should not waste it.

"When God gives you a talent, you should use it to do His work," said Fra Domenico. He made the sign of the cross in the air and whispered a small prayer and continued, "You should not squander it away for earthly

gains, such as wealth. I don't know about your ability as an artist, but I do know that you have another gift, the gift of language. I struggled to learn Latin, and in different degrees, so did most of my brethren, but to you it comes like it was all born there in your head, and you just needed someone like me to pick it out for you. I believed, perhaps mistakenly, that this was a sign from God that you were chosen to do his work, simply because you can speak his language so well, better than most. But I have also observed that you can write and speak in German. And your papa told me that he had a Spaniard in his shop, and by the end of the afternoon, you were having a conversation with him. So your gift, from God, is not simply Latin, but all language. You probably could even learn Hebrew and read the words of God in their original form." He paused then added, "Whatever you do, you must use this gift of language. Now, again please, could we do it again please?"

We went back to work and nothing more was said on the subject. Now both of us knew we were just going through the motions. I believe that Fra Domenico knew, even before I was completely sure myself, that I would never be a priest.

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