

Tuscany  
February 1514

Rising from sleep as though surfacing through hazy water, Niccolo Machiavelli opened his eyes and drew a gasp of breath. It took a moment to shake off the haze and remember where he was.

As his mind awoke, he rolled over and stared at the stone wall, which was slowly growing moss. The small house was silent; his wife might be downstairs but for now he was alone. He lay still a moment longer, trying to decide if there was any reason to get out of bed.

No, he concluded. It was the same answer every morning.

Yet in spite of this, he swung his legs over the side of the bed and threw his feet to the floor, stretching his stiff muscles.

He was feeling hopeless. Again.

The countryside was not the place for intellectuals.

*I should be in the city; I should be at the Palazzo della Signoria making speeches, making deals,* he thought with a sigh.

He ran his hands through his short, dark hair and his shoulders dropped. His past glory, his political glory, was behind him. The only way to get ahead now was through his writings, the musings of an exiled man, politically dead to the city of Florence.

He tried to erase the thoughts that consumed his mind every morning, and prepare for another day in his new life.

The steps of the old house creaked as he walked downstairs, where his wife Marietta was working in their kitchen, but he was in no mood to talk. He nodded to her as he left the small country home, heading to their wood to supervise the woodcutters. As he walked outside, the crisp morning air snapped him more fully awake, and his steps quickened when he heard the voices of the woodcutters carrying through the trees.

“Frosino, come for more wood?” he heard the carter shout to his neighbor.

“No, I'm still looking for those ten lire owed to me by il Furbo!” Frosino's round voice boomed through the deserted woods.

Niccolo shook his head, a smile creeping across his face; after four years, Frosino da Panzano still harped after those ten lire, supposedly won in a card game of which he had no recollection. He didn't appreciate the nickname, though, referring to the political tricks which had made him famous throughout Italy only months before.

Il Furbo? Niccolo was no fox anymore. Now he was just a poor country man trying to make a living.

Frosino spied him through a clearing in the trees, and ran over to clap him on the back, shouting “Niccolo Machiavelli!” The large man always had an easy grin on his face. “Don't be glum, and stop skulking around your own woods. You look like a spirit wandering the arbor, waiting to enter purgatory.”

Niccolo's dark mood returned, and he barely stopped himself from scowling. He knew his frame was slight, almost wiry, and the comparison to the dead rang a bit too true.

Some days it did feel like his mind was dead, already entombed for eternity.

But his mood had not stopped Frosino, who continued to speak. "Certainly there are a few joys to be found in the countryside, eh?"

Rather than responding, Niccolo simply shrugged and sat on a felled log, settling in to hear the daily arguments of the woodcutters. He had nothing better to do with his days than engage in meaningless conversations with laborers.

"Now, now," scolded Frosino, "Don't you even want to know why I'm here?" Receiving only silence as his reply, Frosino continued. "There's news from Florence. Aha, see, you're interested in that."

Niccolo's heart had quickened at the mention of Florence, and his curiosity had been aroused. Knowing his feigned indifference had not fooled Frosino, Niccolo asked, "So what's this news, then?"

Frosino drew out the moment, leaving Niccolo waiting. "Well, I heard from a very reputable source—very reputable—that the Medici were considering reducing exile sentences."

Niccolo shook his head, chastising himself for getting his hopes up. "Who did you hear that from?"

"No, it's true! I mean, I heard it from my brother-in-law, that is, and he heard it from his son's godfather, who happens to live near the Vettori, who are, as you know, strong Medici supporters." Frosino's stumbling response confirmed Niccolo's pessimism. Clearly the man did not know what he was talking about, but that never stopped Frosino. "Well why wouldn't they lighten the penalty? They did after they exiled the Strozzi, and the Pazzi . . ."

"Oh, Frosino, that was decades ago," Niccolo burst out. "The Medici are still threatened by the recent Republican sentiment expressed in our city. They would be fools to let their guard down. Especially when they finally control Rome as well as Florence."

As he had done a thousand times, Niccolo quickly ran through the possible ways of gaining Medici favor in his mind—ask friends to intervene with the new Medici pope, dedicate a treatise to them, turn his back completely on the former Republican statesmen—but nothing seemed quite enough.

"Don't forget, Frosino, that as recently as a few months ago the Medici were openly torturing and murdering their enemies. They have certainly not reached the point of forgiveness."

"Still, Niccolo, it is so clear to your friends that you have completely given up hope . . ."

They sat in silence, watching the woodcutters slowly fell a tree, the carter stacking cut logs. Without another word, Frosino stood and left the woods, walking back toward his own fields.

Fields nearly overflowing with sheep and goats. Frosino simply did not understand the difference between working land and working one's mind. He was content

to sheer sheep for the rest of his life, without wondering about the outside world, the world of diplomacy and power and statesmanship.

Niccolo stopped that train of thought. *Well, that's not me.*

Pulling a small bound book from his pocket, he rose and walked in the opposite direction, content to spend a few hours absorbed in a work of ancient philosophy.

But his mind was restless. Even the words of Cicero could not calm him. Frosino's news about the Medici . . . it might change everything. Yet it had been weeks since Machiavelli had dedicated his little book to the Medici, and they had shown no signs of favor toward him. He was still in the countryside, still on his little farm, still so far from the center of power.

The torture was not far from his mind, either. When his ally Piero Soderini fled Florence, Machiavelli had been left behind. He had not thought that he was in any danger; after all, the Medici allowed Soderini to leave peacefully, even though he had been the leader—not just the leader, but the Gonfaloniere for *life*—of the Republican government that kept the Medici out of Florence for decades. Machiavelli himself had carried the messages between Soderini and Giovanni de Medici, the powerful Cardinal and now Pope Leo X, head of the Medici family, which allowed Piero to leave the city.

Yet within months, Machiavelli was taken captive, suspected of Republican sentiments, and tortured to see what he would reveal.

"It's a sign of their weakness," he hissed. Machiavelli hadn't realized he was speaking out loud until a flock of birds alit from the nearby brush. Shaking his head, he said, "Look at me. A washed up old man at only forty, at an age when I should be advancing in government, gaining status . . . and instead I sit in the woods talking to myself about another life." The past—his own past was nearly as glorious, in his memory, as the glittering centuries of ancient Rome.

Perhaps that was why he loved the classics. They reminded him of his past glories. But at some point he had to accept his new life.

"And who is weak?" a voice asked.

Machiavelli jumped, turning to face his wife, Marietta. Her wavy chestnut hair was pulled back from her face and she was holding their baby Bernardo on her hip. She would not be pleased to hear him railing against his new life.

"I am, Marietta, I am," Machiavelli sighed. "Frosino was just here with news from Florence."

It was Marietta's turn to sigh. "Niccolo, you need to give up these dreams. I don't enjoy this exile any more than you do, but at some point we must accept this as God's will." She stood facing him, and even at her short height she struck an imposing figure.

"How is this exile bad for you?" he snapped churlishly. "You would be caring for our house in Florence, just as you care for our house here. Is it really much different for you?"

Her eyes flashed and he knew from her growing scowl that he had crossed a line. But he couldn't help himself. Machiavelli sped on, his voice growing louder.

“I am the one who has lost my life! I am the one who can no longer hold my head high or even walk through the gates of my beloved Florence!” As he spoke he stood, and now he had the height advantage.

Marietta thrust a sharp finger into Niccolo’s chest, her face growing red. “Now see here, Niccolo Machiavelli, don’t act like you’re the only one who has suffered! I have left behind friends and family in Florence, even if such *woman’s matters* are beneath your lofty view!”

Suddenly his bluster left him. “Now, now, Marietta . . .” Niccolo said half-heartedly, but he knew there was truth in her words.

Marietta was right that he had little interest in the world of women, for their relationships and frivolous entertainments. What care did he have for domestic duties? Women could not run governments, they could not go on diplomatic missions or organize the military or any of the other tasks that he had done for the Republic.

They could not get him back in the good graces of the Medici.

Marietta turned her attention to the baby, who was in need of soothing. They were on well-trod ground, and both were stubborn enough to know that they would not be able to convince the other.

“I didn’t come out in the woods to fight with you about women,” she said, her voice calmer. “There’s a . . . message.” She chose her words carefully, which grabbed Niccolo’s attention. He knew from experience that Marietta spoke that way when she worried about his response.

“A message?” As with Frosino, he tried to sound uninterested.

Frosino was completely wrong that he’d given up hope. He might be cranky, but he grabbed on to any slim chance to get back in government as if it were a raft in a stormy sea.

“Yes, from Florence. I haven’t opened it, of course, but the man said it was urgent.”

“Who was it?”

“I don’t know his name, but . . . Look, Niccolo, I don’t want to get your hopes up, but he had the palle on his vest,” Marietta said cautiously.

Machiavelli froze. Just because the man was wearing the Medici crest, the six balls, did not mean he was bringing good news. In fact, it was even more likely to be bad news.

Niccolo reminded himself that Marietta had endured her husband’s torture, less than a year before, with cautious optimism. She trusted that he had not been involved in that silly Republican plot against the Medici; after ten years of marriage she was smart enough to know that her husband was calculating, never rash, and always thought through every decision with his eye on not just the immediate consequences, but every possible outcome, good or bad. He would never have joined that foolish plot, ill-conceived and ill-timed, coming just a few short months after the Medici retook Florence, when the family was anxious about maintaining their position and willing to make an example out of their enemies.

But even though he had been innocent, he was not naïve. Innocence was not a defense against torture in the tumultuous world of Florentine politics.

And he was guilty of one crime in the eyes of the Medici—he had worked for the Republican government that had banned the Medici from Florence. And for that, he had suffered weeks in prison, tortured nearly to his breaking point.

Still, in spite of his treatment at the hands of the Medici, Niccolo wanted to win their favor, wanted to prove himself to the family that had destroyed him.

Machiavelli had fallen silent, unaware of Marietta's watchful eyes.

“Niccolo?”

He shook himself from his memories, and locked eyes with his wife. “Ah, I think I should go read that message, don't you?” he asked, and turned to head back to their little house.

He looked back at Marietta to see if she was following and saw her shake her head, not realizing he was watching. Niccolo knew that she was used to her husband's lapses, those moments where his thoughts wandered. His mind was consumed by two topics, one, an escape, and the other, his reality. He was drawn to antiquity, the towering intellects of men like Seneca and Cicero, for the break that history provided from his current troubles. Otherwise, he was thinking about the Medici, about how to get back in their good graces, get back in government, back in power.

He knew that Marietta was worried he might be placing too much hope in this message—but there was only one way to find out what it held for him.