

Confessions of an Assassin

A Short Story

By Anthony R. Wildman



The Death of Duke Alessandro by Gabriele Castagnola

To my lord Cosimo, Grand Duke of Tuscany, greetings.

You will know by now that your cousin, Lorenzino de' Medici, the assassin of Duke Alessandro, was killed in Venice, on the second Sunday of Lent. The men who did this deed, Captain Francesco Bibboni and his accomplice Bebo da Volterra, fled to the home of the Spanish Ambassador to the Serene Republic. He has arranged for them to escape from Venice and be escorted to you in Florence.

I thought it would be of service to you if I were to go to Lorenzino's house in San Paolo and search for any documents that might be of importance. On his desk, I found the enclosed paper; which, upon reading, I thought should be sent to your excellency at once.

Your servant, Count Selici di Friuli.

At Venice, 28th February 1548.

Confessions of an Assassin

My name is Lorenzino de' Medici, and I write these words under the shadow of my own death. I know that this dread sentence, suspended for so long, will be executed upon me very soon, for I have seen men lurking in shadows watching, patiently waiting for a moment when they might strike. How do I know that these men are after me? I do not, for Venice is full of thieves, rogues, and killers. But one gets to know the look of an assassin—I am, after all, one such myself, so I have merely to look in the mirror—and these men I have seen all have that look.

Not that death is a stranger to me, for I have lived with his presence for ten years and more, ever since I fled Florence, the blessed city of my birth, to wander homeless and stateless through the world. He has been at my shoulder in France, at the court of the Ottoman Sultan in Istanbul, and everywhere here in Italy, wherever I have sought shelter to lay my head. For such is the life of a political fugitive.

Assassins are paid to do their work, and mine will have been paid, I am sure, by one of the two men who have been offended by my deeds. One is Cosimo, Grand Duke of Tuscany, who has professed his hatred of me even though my actions led directly to his own power; the other is Emperor Charles of Germany, whose son-in-law I killed. Not that it matters not who has paid them, for the end result will be the same for me. Death and oblivion. All that I can do is try to put off the day of reckoning as long as possible.

So, my end is easily foretold. But before it comes, I am determined to set down, here in this paper, the truth. What I did is well known. Eleven years ago, almost to the day, I murdered Duke Alessandro of Florence, a tyrant and a libertine, a supposed member of the Medici family, though he was base-born and no true member of our clan. What is not so well known is why I did it. Oh, I did publish my reasons in a little paper that I called my *Apology*, and I have argued for the justice of those reasons ever since. But that was a polemical piece intended to spur others to action. It says nothing of my inner thoughts nor the path that I trod before I arrived at my moment of destiny. Neither does it tell of the involvement of others. All this I mean to explicate for you, my distant and unknown reader.

My fortune—and my fate—is in my name. I am a Medici, a member of that family that has governed Florence and her territories for more than a hundred years since Giovanni de' Medici made us fabulously rich by winning the banking business of the church. Money and politics go together in Florence, so he was soon the unofficial leader of the republic. His son Cosimo consolidated the Medici grip on the city, and Cosimo's descendants march through our history, one after another—Piero 'the Gouty', Lorenzo 'the Magnificent', another Piero, this one known as 'the Unlucky', and a second Lorenzo—until the name Medici became synonymous with the city itself.

That is the principal branch of the family, but I am a member of a secondary branch, the Popolani, who descend from Cosimo's younger brother, yet another Lorenzo. I am his great-great-grandson, and when I was born I was given his name—though all my life I have been known as Lorenzino, 'Little Lorenzo'. Where Cosimo's descendants spent their lives acquiring political power, our side of the family has mostly stuck with the banking side of things, a path that my father, Pierfancesco de' Medici, was content to follow.

He died when I was just eleven, leaving behind substantial debts and forcing us—my mother, my brother and I, and my two sisters—to leave Florence and go to live at the family villa in San Piero a Sieve. Then, in 1527 when the Florentines rose up in rebellion and threw out the government of the Medici, we fled to Venice, for none who bore the Medici name was safe in Tuscany. And so we entered the detestable state of exile, banned from entering or even coming within a prescribed distance of Florence and dependent on the goodwill of others. It was the first time that I had to endure an indignity that has since been my lot all too often.

As the world knows, the new regime in Florence was strangled after just two years, at the brutal hands of a Spanish army sent against the city by Emperor Charles; the dreadful siege that followed took more than twenty thousand lives. When we heard the news that the republican government had finally surrendered, I was excited at the thought that we might go home at last. But my mother had other ideas, summoning me from my schoolbooks to inform me that I was to go to Rome, where I would be placed into the care of the pope to complete my education. I was astonished and fearful at the prospect, yet at the same time elated, for I was sixteen and at the age when the prospect of adventure thrills the blood.

Pope Clement VII was then in his fifty-second year and had been on the papal throne for seven of them. He was a relative, of course: yet another great-grandson of old Cosimo. When I had my first audience with him in a small private room in the Vatican Palace, I could not tell what he made of me, this careworn old man whose face was drawn with worry lines and whose beard was streaked with grey. I saw little of him thereafter, for he consigned me to the care of various tutors and governors, for whom I was often a source of irritation and despair. Rome might be the seat of the papacy, but it is also a hotbed of temptations for a young man, and there were many distractions from the rigours of the schoolroom.

There was also another sprig of the Medici family tree at the papal court, a distant cousin of mine named Ippolito. His father was Giuliano de' Medici, the younger son of Lorenzo the Magnificent, though he had been born out of wedlock. Darkly handsome, he possessed a sparkling sense of humour and an enthusiasm for life that drew others to him. I liked him at once, and we soon became regular companions at the gaming tables, in the city's taverns, and at the city's bordellos.

Ippolito was also a cardinal. Though he was just eighteen years old and had never been ordained, the pope had conferred a red hat upon him and given him several wealthy benefices from whose

revenues he could sustain himself. He enjoyed spending the church's money, but Ippolito burned with a different ambition: to become the ruler of Florence. And why not? His grandfather was, after all, Lorenzo the Magnificent.

'If Cesare Borgia could do it,' he said to me once, 'why can't I discard the red robes and hat of a cardinal and take up instead the sword of a ruler?'

I forebore from reminding him that Borgia had come to a dismal end, dying in distant Spain, far from his homeland and without much hope of attaining power again anywhere. Such comments were not welcome to Ippolito, who wanted, above all else, to follow in his father's footsteps and rule Florence. The problem was that he had a formidable rival in the form of another cousin, Alessandro, known as 'The Moor' for his dark complexion and curly black hair, who, like Ippolito, was illegitimate. His father was another Lorenzo, the Duke of Urbino, who had succeeded Ippolito's father in Florence in 1516. After the duke died a few years later, Alessandro was placed in the pope's care until he came of age.

When the guns had fallen silent, and Florence was under the thumb of the emperor's armies, the Medici were restored. The question was, who would be chosen to succeed the Duke of Urbino at the head of the Florentine government? The choice was between the sons of the last two Medici rulers—Ippolito and Alessandro. The fact that both had been born bastards was swiftly resolved when the pope legitimised them by decree after Urbino's death.

At first, it seemed that the pope would favour Ippolito, but then they had a falling out (Ippolito never told me what caused the spat), and Clement shifted his favour to Alessandro. That was when he had decided that Ippolito should become a cardinal. It was a bitter blow, for he had never thought that his cousin would supplant him in the pope's schemes.

'He is not even a Medici!' he said to anyone who would listen. 'His mother was some poor peasant woman from Colvecchio who was married to a coach driver, so who is to say that his father *was* the late duke?'

Eighteen months later, Florentines woke up to discover that by the will of both pope and emperor, Alessandro de' Medici was now their hereditary duke. There was no longer to be any pretence that he served simply as its leading citizen, the convention that had served to cloak Medici rule for over a hundred years. The republic was gone forever.

Of course, it had never occurred to the pope or the emperor, or anyone else, that there might be another candidate for this new duchy. *My* family line was untainted by illegitimacy, and *my* forebears also went back to the roots of Medici power in Florence. If Alessandro had a hereditary claim to the ultimate power, so did I. But the Magnificent Lorenzo had, in his profligacy, all but ruined the Medici bank, and in his efforts to save it he plundered my family's coffers, and we were nearly broke. So, lacking money and lacking power, I was of little consequence to anyone.

As I turned eighteen and reached my majority, that fact rankled greatly. What was more, I did not know what my future would hold. Though not quite penniless, I was far from rich, and without money my prospects were slim. Fortunately my mother Maria, with all the tenacity of her Soderini family, intervened to make a difference on that front at least. Going back a generation, our branch of the Medici had commenced legal action against the senior branch to recover the money that had been stolen from us to prop up the bank; she now threatened to revive that action. To buy her off, Pope Clement gave me the governorship of Fano, a town on the coast near Urbino, which came with a decent income. To be sure, I had to spend some time there each year to administer those matters that could not safely be left to lieutenants, but otherwise, I was free to continue living in Rome.

My money worries might have been resolved, but I was still restless. The city's temptations tugged away at me, and I spent many evenings at the gaming tables and in low taverns in the city's seedier quarters, where I would drink late into the night, staggering back to the palace through back lanes and alleyways to avoid the city watch. Ippolito would occasionally come with me on these forays, but as his ambition grew, so did his caution, and he thought it prudent to refrain from anything that might get him into trouble with the pope.

Instead, my companion in these nocturnal adventures was a thuggish fellow named Piero di Gionnabbate, who had somewhere acquired the curious nickname Scoronconcolo. One night he had intervened in some tavern or another (I forget now which) to prevent my head from being beaten in by some card sharps who thought (correctly) that I had cheated them. It occurred to me that having someone of his build and menacing demeanour with me when I went out at night might be a good idea, and so I offered him employment as my servant and bodyguard.

Two years went by, during which I became ever more homesick. I really wanted to go back to Florence, but could not do so lacking the approval of the pope, something he seemed strangely disinclined to give. All my letters begging for release were returned with a polite but firm refusal scribbled in the corner of the page by some clerk 'at the instruction of His Holiness.' I could not divine what he wanted from me, other than that he wanted me to stay in Rome.

Then, one night in 1534, everything changed. I had gone out drinking with a gang of friends, hopping from place to place, getting ever louder and ever more inebriated at each tavern. We ended up at the sign of the Vine, a little ramshackle place in the shadow of the Colosseum. There, someone came up with the idea that we should emulate Alcibiades and hack off the heads of the pagan statues that stood within the niches of the nearby Arch of Constantine.

'These priests and cardinals are always taking pagan statues to decorate their palazzi,' he shouted, 'so why shouldn't we have a trophy or two for our mean homes?'

And so off we went, hammers and chisels having been procured, and smashed away at several of

the statues. Then, carrying our trophies, we went off to the Basilica of San Paolo, where we subjected the statue of Apollo and several of the Muses to the same treatment. I staggered back to my lodging at the Vatican Palace in the early hours of the morning, accompanied by Scoronconcolo bearing Apollo's severed head as my trophy of the evening.

What I did not anticipate was the rage that this act would provoke. When news of it reached the ears of the pope, he proclaimed loudly to everyone in hearing that the perpetrator should be found and hanged, no matter how illustrious he might be. Of course, my so-called 'friends'—lowlifes and rogues, most of them—either disappeared into the back streets of Rome or denounced me as the principal culprit and ringleader. Suddenly, I realised, I was in danger of losing my very life if the pope made good on his threat.

It was Cardinal Ippolito who rescued me. Fortunately he had heard that I was involved before the pope, and immediately came to see me.

'Lorenzino, you are a damned fool,' he said when he had heard out my version of the story. 'But since we are friends I will go and talk to the pope and see what I can do. I hope that I can at least save your neck, though I doubt you can stay in Rome.'

And so it proved. Ippolito went to the pope and pleaded on my behalf, telling him that I was most penitent and pointing out that if I were to be arrested and executed it would rebound on the reputation of the Medici and the pope himself. Clement reluctantly agreed and commuted the sentence; to appease the local authorities I was told to leave Rome and never return upon pain of death.

Where could I go? The answer was obvious: Florence, and the court of Duke Alessandro.

It had been seven years since I had been in Florence when I rode beneath the hulking arch of the Porta Romana, accompanied only by Scoronconcolo, and made my way down the Via Romana towards the Ponte Vecchio. The terrible siege that had restored Medici power in the city had left scars both on the buildings and in the demeanour of the people; there was something furtive and cowed about a population that had once been ebullient and outspoken. I assumed that it was their status as a subjugated city that oppressed them, for it was a state that Florence had rarely had to endure in its long history and one to whose humiliations its citizens were not used to suffering. But I would eventually learn that there were other reasons for the long faces and suspicious looks that greeted me as my horse picked its way through the throng that grew ever denser as we approached the old bridge.

My new home was the family palazzo on Piazza San Marco. It was a modest place by Florentine standards, but comfortable enough. As well as Scoronconcolo, I had a couple of servants to look after the house and a groom who managed the horses in the small stable on the ground floor. From here, I

began my campaign to gain the favour of Duke Alessandro. My only hope of advancement was to insert myself into the duke's household; after all, I thought, we *were* family (or so I believed, not giving much credence to the idea that Alessandro's father might have been a mere coachman) and he was at the head of a new regime. A relative whom he could trust might be exactly what he needed, or so I reasoned.

My name was sufficient to get me access to the Palazzo Medici, the elegant edifice on the Via Larga from within whose walls our family has commanded the city since Cosimo built it, and Alessandro only kept me waiting for half an hour before granting me an audience. He had, it seemed, been warned of my likely arrival by one of his agents in Rome, who had sent word of my troubles by fast courier.

'Well, cousin, it seems you have got yourself in some bother with the pope! Never mind, I am sure it was a mere indiscretion, the kind of scrape young men like us get into all the time, eh?'

I have to confess to being taken aback somewhat by the unexpected warmth of this welcome. It was something of a relief, too, for I had been fretting about how I might be received. Yet here I was, being greeted like an erring but much-loved brother by the Duke of Florence! Not surprisingly, my heart warmed to this young man, just a few years older than I, whose relaxed and easy demeanour was not at all what I had expected after Ippolito's bitter description of him.

What did match my expectations was his appearance. In Rome, Alessandro was mockingly referred to as 'The Moor' as a way of disparaging his origins—it was said that his mother was a slave—rather than as a description of his appearance. Still, seen in the flesh, he was indeed dark of skin, though not as dark as the real Moors that I had once seen in Rome, ambassadors from some distant African court, and his short-cropped black hair curled in tight ringlets. But otherwise his features were pure Medici, with his oddly expressive hazel eyes and long, prominent nose.

I told my story, and as I had hoped Alessandro replied that he did indeed have need of support from relatives such as myself, for his regime stood on rocky ground. He had been obliged to exile many of those who had supported the republican government or who were simply anti-Medici by permanent disposition, and this had caused resentment among the old families who had always held prominent places in the administration of the city and its dominions. What was more, the city was still suffering from the privations that inevitably followed the siege, which made the poorer part of the population restless and necessitated a crackdown on public dissent. None of that made for popularity, and so he had, he said, a great need for lieutenants he could trust.

I left the palazzo elated. True, Alessandro had not offered me any official post in his government, nor had he offered any source of revenue by which to sustain myself. But both would, I was sure, come along in time. The pope had not yet revoked my governorship of Fani so that salary was still being paid into the Medici bank's branch in Rome; for now, at least, I had enough money to live comfortably. All I had to do was stay in Alessandro's good graces.

Over the months that followed, I thought that all was going according to plan. I went to the Palazzo Medici almost every day, walking haughtily past the petitioners who sat on the stone benches out on the street, waiting for their few moments with the duke or his officers, and making my way up to the private apartments where Alessandro would be taking his breakfast. I usually remained at his side or somewhere nearby, except when he was closeted with his officials in councils of state, or when he was receiving foreign ambassadors. It made for an odd daily routine, filled with long stretches of idleness during which I had little to do except gossip and play dice with various other court hangers-on.

It was at night that I became Alessandro's constant companion. I soon discovered that once the day's cares had been shrugged off, he enjoyed all of the young man's vices: hunting, gambling, drinking and women. There were many sycophants among the proud Florentine nobility who were happy to host drinking parties at their palazzi, providing food and drink and lavish entertainment to entertain the man who was now their master, all the while fending off his attempts to seduce their wives and daughters. For the duke had, as I soon discovered, an inexhaustible thirst for sexual conquest.

In this, I soon became Alessandro's principal accomplice. My task each day was to determine which noble palazzo would host us, and then to command, cajole or persuade its owner, according to their disposition, to lay on a lavish party. The principal criterion for being selected for this honour was the beauty of the host's wife or daughters. Then, once the party was in full swing, I would discreetly arrange for some location where the duke could complete his conquest: a bedroom, a bower in the garden, and even, on one occasion, a disused attic room full of dusty furniture.

I was a young man, too, and I was not an innocent partner in these adventures. Nor was I simply a pimp. Alessandro enjoyed my company, for I flatter myself that I possess some wit and the education with which to furnish it. I could converse on art, music and philosophy and hold my own with the wealthy nobles who made up the ruling elite of Florence, entertaining them with stories of the Roman Curia even as Alessandro made off with their women in some other corner of their home. There were opportunities for me to satisfy my own needs as well, though I preferred to spend my seed on women of the lower orders whose parents and brothers were unlikely to come after me with a posse of armed retainers.

As the months went by, the duke became ever more careless of his state, and ever more in need of novelty. Bored with the civilised atmosphere of the drawing room, we took to roaming the streets of Florence at night, usually in disguise, drinking in low taverns and ending the night in brothels. One night, Alessandro took a horse from the stable behind the Palazzo Medici and insisted that we both ride it bareback through the city, shouting abuse at the astonished passers-by, who we forced into the gutters as the horse careered crazily through the narrow streets.

By the end of my first year back in Florence, I was certain that I had made the right choice to return. Alessandro still had not offered me any more substantial place at his court, but I was his closest

companion, and he honoured me in many other ways. For example, while the duke was away at the imperial court, I had the time to compose a play, and when he returned, he made the Palazzo Medici available for its first performance, commanding the presence of his courtiers; the play was a success, and for a long time afterwards I basked in the approval of the Florentine establishment as a man of letters, and not simply as the duke's sidekick.

All this time, I had been ignorant of the political situation in the country, obsessed as I was with the pursuit of pleasure. But after Pope Clement died in September 1534, everything changed, and I was set upon the path that led me to my final exile, here in Venice.

Honoured I might be, but I was increasingly discontented. I had come north hoping that I might regain the rightful place in the rule of Tuscany that was due to a member of the Medici family. Mine might be the junior line of our house, but my blood was no less worthy than that of Alessandro—and it was untainted by bastardy. Yet, though the duke showed me great favour, I was never allowed to progress beyond the pleasures of the drawing room to those of the council chamber. Whenever I made tentative suggestions that I might be included in this meeting or that, Alessandro rebuffed me with laughter and a joke.

Discontent soon matured into resentment, and in that fertile soil grew a greater curiosity about the state of affairs in the duchy. I began to look around me, and listen to what people said. In my leisure hours when the duke was away at Poggio hunting or travelling to other cities in Tuscany, I cultivated on my own account those representatives of the various families who had been exiled from Florence as Alessandro sought to secure his power. The principals of these families were, naturally, not in the city, having been banished to the provinces, but they had agents and junior members of their houses with whom I could converse.

What I learned shocked me. The carefree young prince with whom I had spent my days and nights carousing was a tyrant. With none of the old republican institutions to restrain him, he used his power to systematically degrade the aristocracy, plundering their coffers by way of fines and then exiling them on pain of death, usurping all their offices to concentrate power in his own hands, and ordering anyone who might threaten him in the remotest way to be arrested—and in some instances executed. It was well known that the chancellor of the Otto di Guardia, the body responsible for state security, would plant illegal weapons in victims' houses so that he could 'discover' them the next day as a pretext for an arrest. Corruption was rampant, and the people were sullen and discontented.

Then, one day, I was approached in the street by a man whom I shall give the pseudonym of 'Mario', for he still lives, and I would not endanger his life by revealing his true identity. He was, he said, an agent of my cousin Cardinal Ippolito de' Medici, and he sought a private word with me. When we had found somewhere discreet to talk, he conveyed greetings from my cousin and proceeded to make

me an extraordinary offer. The cardinal was, he said, well aware of the state of things in Florence, and had allied himself with those of the exiles who opposed the rule of his cousin Alessandro. Now that the pope had passed on to his ultimate reward, the time was right to move against ducal government and return to the old form of republic, when the city's great and good controlled the machinery of the state, not some bastard mule foisted on the city by the emperor.

Of course, I realised at once that what Ippolito was proposing was that he would be at the head of this new republic, ruling as the Medici always had, from the shadows. This was only to be expected. But Mario also conveyed another message. Ippolito, he said, understood that I, Lorenzino, should by rights be enjoying a place in the government of Florence and that I had been denied those rights for long enough. Help Ippolito back into power, he said, and there would be a place at his side. I would be made Gonfaloniere, the chief magistrate of the city and, therefore, his most senior minister.

When pressed, Mario was vague as to how this transformation was to be achieved. A delegation to Emperor Charles was planned, which would apprise him of Alessandro's various crimes and demand that he be removed as duke. But if that failed, more 'vigorous' methods might have to be contemplated. Assassination, in other words. I was not appalled by that idea, though perhaps I should have been. Whatever his faults, Alessandro had not been unkind to me. But the siren call of ambition was by now filling my ears, and the dizzying prospect that Ippolito held out drowned what voices of conscience I might have had left.

Not that I agreed immediately. I promised to consider matters and we parted, having made arrangements to communicate clandestinely with Ippolito when I had come to a decision. I dithered for a few days, and then a letter from my mother decided me. Though not formally an exile, she had refused to come home from Venice when Alessandro had been made duke, for she belonged to the Soderini family, staunch republicans all. Of course she knew nothing of my meeting with Ippolito's agent, but her letter was full of reproaches at my apparent failure to restore the family's fortunes despite my position at the ducal court. 'Was I a man of destiny,' she asked, 'or a mere courtier?'

Stung, I resolved to agree to Ippolito's proposal. I would do everything in my power to help bring down the regime of Alessandro de' Medici, the man whom I called my cousin but who I persuaded myself was no real relative, and restore the old republic. I would be a hero, whose name would be written with honour in the annals of Florence for as long as the city should endure.

The months that followed were a strange half-life for me. The duke returned from the country, and life seemed to resume as normal. Except that his spies had somehow heard of my dalliances with various members of the aristocratic opposition; one day, he challenged me on the subject.

'Cousin, cousin,' I said, smiling brightly. 'Surely you know me by now. I wish only to serve you, and by meeting with these miscreants, I can find out what they are thinking and perhaps fool them into revealing their plots.'

I could tell that he was not entirely convinced by my protestations, but he let the matter go, and our conversation returned to the question of whose household he was going to inflict himself upon that night. Meanwhile, secret letters from Ippolito told me that the delegation had gone to the emperor, carrying a long bill of complaint against Alessandro's regime, and he had high hopes that it would be successful. I replied with news of the duke's planned movements over the coming weeks and months, and details of his security arrangements. The notion that Ippolito and his confederates might try to take the assassin's path had never left my head, and I thought such information would be useful in the event of such a plan being executed.

Then, in the middle of summer, shocking news came from the south. Cardinal Ippolito de' Medici, having stopped at the small town of Itri on his way south from Rome, had died of poison. And the fatal dose had been administered at the behest of servants of Duke Alessandro of Florence.

Alessandro displayed all the expected forms of grief at the death of his cousin, but I knew that he was actually happy to see the end of his longtime rival for power in Florence. He denied, of course, any involvement in the murder. The men who had caused Ippolito's death may have been his servants, but they had acted without his knowledge or command. In fact, he suggested, they had probably been bribed by the new pope, Paul III, who was soon busy distributing Ippolito's various benefices among his own Farnese relatives. I did not believe this then and do not believe it to this day.

Ippolito might be dead, but the exiles who had supported him were still at the imperial court, which was now in Naples, pressing the case for Alessandro's removal from office. The emperor summoned the duke south to plead his own case and hear judgment. To my surprise, Alessandro asked me to go with him, along with many of the leading members of his government—Francesco Giucciardini, Roberto Acciaiuoli, Luigi Ridolfi and others. Our company also included another Medici cousin, Cosimo. Like me, he sprang from the secondary line of the family. It was the first time I had met the man who is now the ruler of Florence.

And so we set out, in the bitter December cold, on the long road south to Rome and thence to Naples. Unlike my own flight in the opposite direction, this was a journey made in great comfort. We stayed overnight in fine country villas, and when we got to Rome the pope greeted us with joy and ensured we were housed in a fine palazzo near the Vatican. Yet even here, the duke was not entirely free from his enemies; one day, we came out of our lodgings to see the words 'Long live Alessandro of Colle Vecchio!' scrawled on the palazzo wall, a crude reference to Alessandro's illegitimacy since his mother had been born in Collevocchio.

The duke, though, just laughed. 'I am obliged to whoever wrote that, for I now know something that I did not know before: where I came from!' We joined in his amusement and rode away, off to take

the road to Naples.

Arriving at that city, we were lodged in a palazzo not far from Castle Capuano, where the emperor himself was staying. There, we would spend the next two months entertaining Charles and his grandees and shuttling back and forth to his lodgings in the castle to listen to endless legal arguments as the duke's officials tried to make their case and refute that of the exiles. I, of course, had no role to play in proceedings, and it slowly began to dawn on me that I was there, as was cousin Cosimo, only because Alessandro wanted a show of Medici family strength.

Inevitably, our paths would cross with one or another of the duke's enemies, though we took care to avoid such meetings outside the formal confines of the imperial court. But one day, I met Piero Strozzi, one of Alessandro's most bitter foes, in the castle courtyard. To my surprise, he hissed at me and made a gesture that conveyed more eloquently than words his disdain for me.

'Traitor!', he said in a low voice. 'I suppose now that Ippolito is dead, you have returned to your master's side, like a whipped cur.'

I was angry at first and had an impulse to draw my dagger (nothing more lethal was allowed to be carried into the castle's grounds). But then sense prevailed.

'Quiet yourself, Lord Piero,' I said urgently. 'I have not deserted your cause, as I shall show you when the time is right. Believe me, I will strike a blow that will be remembered forever.'

He stared at me for a while, and then my vehemence seemed to persuade him. 'I believe you. But take care, Lorenzino. This faithless prince killed his cousin and many others besides: be sure that he does not get to you before you can get to him!'

The warning was as stark as it was unexpected, and for the first time, I realised that it was possible that my life might be in danger if Alessandro saw me as a real threat. After all, my enigmatic cousin Cosimo and I were the only living members of the Medici family who might challenge his right to the duchy.

When at last the emperor brought down his judgement, it was devastating. He ruled in Alessandro's favour, it was true, but he also took effective control of the Florentine government. Whatever Charles commanded in the way of legislation or taxes, Alessandro would be obliged to deliver. The duke was prohibited from proceeding against the exiles, and much of their confiscated property was to be returned to them. All of this Alessandro agreed to, and his reward was the hand of the emperor's bastard daughter Margaret, giving him a blood relationship to the most powerful ruler in Europe.

With this deal, he had betrayed his country, and I resolved that he must die.

Resolved I may be, but I had to bide my time. The peace deal in Naples was not the end of the exiles' ambitions, but with Ippolito dead and the various families unable to unite around a common aim, let alone a figurehead, nothing much could be done for now. By March, the ducal household had returned to Florence, and preparations got underway to receive Alessandro's new bride. The duke was much taken with the idea of marriage, though he gave little sign that he planned to change his habits, resuming his nightly revels almost as soon as we got back. More importantly, he was determined to impress the emperor when his entourage arrived the following month, and much of his working day was taken up with planning for that event.

The wedding took place in June, and as part of the celebrations, Alessandro commanded me to put on a performance of my comedy, *Aridosia*, which he had seen at the Palazzo Medici the previous year. A rickety stage was built in the Weavers' Guildhall in Via San Gallo, which threatened at various times to fall down altogether. But the performance was a success if the giggles of the little Duchess Margaret (she was just fourteen) at the broader jokes were anything to go by. I was much applauded as the play's author, which was gratifying even though the applause came from toadying courtiers who recognised my own fawning allusions to Alessandro in the text.

It was a bright spot in a year during which my festering hatred for Duke Alessandro grew like a canker, eating me up from the inside like an illness. My anger at his craven surrender to the emperor's demands in Naples, which had made Florence all but a province of his empire, was shared by others of his inner circle, but they said nothing, at least not in public, to criticise the policy or the duke. I had little option but to follow suit if I was to preserve my unique opportunities for access to Alessandro's person, without which no attempt on his life would be possible.

Coded messages of encouragement came from the Strozzi and other exiled families, along with more warnings that I should take care, that the duke could not be trusted, and that he might turn on me at any time. Though I took this with a grain of salt since I calculated that my correspondents were aiming to push me into action before I was ready, the idea that Alessandro might indeed catch on to what I was planning took root in my mind. This suspicion was not helped by the fact that, once married, he seemed to desire less of my company. I could not imagine that the little duchess, hardly more than a child, would long satisfy Alessandro's carnal lusts, and I assumed that he would sooner or later return to his roistering ways.

That prediction came true by Christmas. On Christmas Day, the duke hosted me for a long and drunken dinner, after which we went out masquerading, riding donkeys while dressed as poor shepherds. I was back in favour. For a day or two, my resolve wavered; the man had, after all, been kind to me, and if he had never given me power, did that matter so much? Why shouldn't I live a life of pleasure and perhaps make a reputation as a poet and playwright instead? And then two things happened that re-fired my resolve.

First, I received a note, coded and cunningly hidden beneath the false bottom of a box of sweetmeats, from Filippo Strozzi, the head of the Strozzi clan. It said that the exiled families had finally reached an agreement to call their followers to arms both inside and beyond the city's walls, as soon as Alessandro was dead. They simply awaited the deed to rise up and take over. Then, a day later, I overheard a conversation that made my blood run cold and determined me to act sooner rather than later. Two of Alessandro's councillors—Francesco Guicciardini and Luigi Ridolfi—were talking, thinking they could not be heard. The gist of it was that Alessandro had finally given them the go-ahead to arrest yet more of his opponents in the city. Guicciardini then seemed to read a list of names. One of them was mine.

Ridolfi was taken aback. 'Is this wise, Francesco? He is, after all, a true Medici, honourably descended...'

'Wise or not, the duke commands it, and it has been sanctioned by the emperor.'

From that moment, I had no choice but to proceed. It was Alessandro's life or mine. And so I set about making plans, hoping that I could execute them before I was myself done away with. I could trust no one except my faithful servant Scoronconcolo, who was by now so devoted to my person that he agreed to do whatever was required without demur. All I needed was an opportunity.

My chance came on Epiphany Eve, January 5th. Alessandro, in need of feminine company as usual, asked me to see who I could find to satisfy him. I had an idea.

'What about Caterina de' Ginori?' I asked. 'She is both beautiful and virtuous, and conquering her would be a feather in your cap. She lives just behind the Palazzo Medici, but best of all her husband is away in Naples on business.'

It was nonsense. I knew Caterina slightly, but I had no idea where her husband might be; at home in bed with her for all I knew. It did not matter, for the duke would never meet with her. Alessandro thought it was a splendid idea.

'Excellent. Bring her here after supper.'

'Of course. But might it not be more discreet for you to have this assignation elsewhere, now that you are married? You could come to my palazzo, for example; after all, it is just a few minutes' walk away.'

He considered this for a moment, and then, to my relief, he agreed. Later that evening, he arrived accompanied by a single servant. At my suggestion, the servant was despatched to watch my house from across the street so that he could warn the duke if anyone untoward should approach the house.

Then Alessandro, saying that his stomach was full after his heavy supper, announced that he was going to have a sleep while he waited for Caterina to arrive. This suited my purposes perfectly, and I conducted him to my own chamber, telling him I would go and fetch Caterina and bring her to him.

Half an hour later, Scoronconcolo and I crept into the room, swords drawn.

‘My lord, are you asleep?’ I whispered. When there was no reply, I plunged my sword into the prostrate form. Screaming in pain, the duke lurched upright and, despite the wound left by my sword, jumped off the bed and tried to make for the door, seizing a nearby stool as a makeshift shield. But Scoronconcolo was ready for him, and he pulled out his knife and slashed a long cut from temple to jaw. This new assault caused another howl of pain, which gave me the chance to push the duke back down on the bed, covering his bloody face with my arms in an attempt to smother him. He fought back, struggling and biting my thumb. Then, at last, Scoronconcolo landed the fatal blow, stabbing the duke in the throat. With a flood of crimson blood and a faint gurgling sound, Alessandro, Duke of Florence, finally died.

The whole thing had taken just minutes. I was shaken, but Scoronconcolo had been in many a fight and had himself killed often, and he took the whole thing in his stride. Leaving the dead duke on his bed, we left, locking the door behind us. I had had the foresight to arrange for a pass that would allow us to leave the city at night, and so we took our horses and rode for Bologna. From there, I sent letters to the leaders of all the exiled families, telling them what I had done and exhorting them to rise up against the emperor to restore the republic.

Nothing happened. Far from taking their chance to seize the city, these effete, impotent sons of noble houses did nothing. The people of Florence, I was told later, greeted the news that their duke was dead with passivity, even indifference. And when the pope’s representative in the city, Cardinal Cibo, so arranged things that the council decided that my other cousin, Cosimo, should be chosen to lead the city, there was no resistance from any quarter. Cosimo, the cousin I hardly knew, a stripling I thought of little account, is now, of course, Grand Duke of Tuscany, given that title by his puppet master, Emperor Charles.

And so I found myself an exile once again, my grand gamble a failure. For ten years I have wandered, settling at last here in Venice. I have tried again and again to fund and organise an uprising to restore the republic, all to no avail, for the Florentines seem to have been happy enough to surrender all their ancient independence in favour of the empty show of this new royalty.

So I must at last confess that all is lost. As is my life and reputation; I am now forever Lorenzaccio, ‘Bad Lorenzo’ in the minds of my fellow Florentines. Well, let that be as it will be. I have said all that I can about my motives and aims, and history must be the judge of my virtue. But I...

[Author’s note: Lorenzino’s confession tails off at this point. He evidently intended to add more, but

presumably lay down his pen in order to go and meet his cousin Alessandro Soderini, who accompanied him to what was to be his final rendezvous with fate, at San Paolo church, where Francesco Bebboni and Bebo di Volterra set upon him and killed him.]