

*La misura dell'uomo*

by

**Marco Malvaldi**

*Partial English translation by Lucy Rand*

*pages 295-296*

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## Dramatis Personae

*(cast of characters)*

### THE WORKSHOP

LEONARDO DI SER PIERO DA VINCI: painter, sculptor, architect, court engineer and very accustomed to reverie. In short, a man of genius.

GIAN GIACOMO CAPROTTI KNOWN AS SALAI: workshop boy at Leonardo, beloved student, thief, liar, obstinate, greedy. But he also has his flaws.

MARCO D'OGGIONO, ZANINO FROM FERRARA, GIULIO THE GERMAN: other students of the genius from Vinci.

RAMBALDO CHITI: Leonardo's former student, and unfortunately for him many other things.

CATERINA: Leonardo's loving mother, conceived when the notary Ser Piero da Vinci was dabbling with the surrounding farmgirls. A woman of a thousand and one attentive acts for our hero, and of equally abundant frankness.

## THE COURT

LUDOVICO IL MORO: Duke of Bari and Lord of Milan, 1.90 m of Machiavellian tonnage, illegitimate son of Francesco Sforza. It is not clear to him whether it is better to command or screw, but both things he likes very much.

FRANCESCO SFORZA: quite dead for more than 27 years, but omnipresent father of Ludovico il Moro. In his honor, there is a gargantuan bronze horse statue to build.

GIACOMO TROTTI: ambassador, eyes and ears of the Duke of Ferrara, Ercole I d'Este. Now no longer young, clever interpreter of court life. A bit of a spy perhaps, but that's why they pay him.

BEATRICE D'ESTE: daughter of the Duke of Ferrara and wife of Ludovico il Moro, large in appearance and dowry, naive but not to the point of not noticing the many rustlings of petticoats along the bridge of the Castle.

ERCOLE MASSIMILIANO: newborn scion of the Moro and Beatrice. He is two years old, but he is already noble.

MAXIMILIAN OF HABSBURG: Viennese, emperor of the Holy Roman Empire. He is not in the palace, yet it is as if he were there.

BIANCA MARIA SFORZA: niece of Ludovico il Moro, promised in marriage to Massimiliano for the upcoming Christmas.

LUCREZIA CRIVELLI: lover of Ludovico il Moro, she will be portrayed by Leonardo in the canvas known as *La Belle Feronnière*. But one must not say so.

GALEAZZO SANSEVERINO: count of Caiazzo and Voghera, a trusted son-in-law of Ludovico il Moro, a man of action and of a strength. He is the third Galeazzo of the novel, but is the most important one.

**BIANCA GIOVANNA SFORZA:** his wife, daughter of the first marriage of Ludovico il Moro.

**AMBROGIO VARESE DA ROSATE:** court astrologer, dressed in purple. Expert on the motions of the stars, a very smart generator of horoscopes. The important thing in the predictions, it is usual to say, is to foresee an event, or a date, but never the two things at once.

**PIETROBONO DA FERRARA:** direct rival of Varese da Rosate.

**BERGONZIO BOTTA:** tax collector of the Duke of Milan.

**MARCHESINO STANGA:** superintendent of the court treasury, official payer, unofficial pocket-breaker.

**BERNARDINO DA CORTE:** castellano.

**REMIGIO TREVANOTTI:** famiglia.

**ASCANIO MARIA SFORZA VISCONTI:** cardinal, brother of Ludovico il Moro. At that time, there was no law concerning conflict of interest.

**GIAN GALEAZZO MARIA SFORZA:** legitimate Duke of Milan as the eldest son of Ludovico, Galeazzo Maria, murdered a few years earlier. After having tried with his good manners to govern in his place and to have organized for his wedding the "feast of Paradise" entrusting the spectacular scenographies to Leonardo himself, his uncle Ludovico kindly locked him up in the Castle of Vigevano.

**ISABELLA D'ARAGONA:** his bride. Never seen, and it's better this way.

**BONA DI SAVOIA:** wife of Galeazzo Maria and mother of Gian Galeazzo Maria

Sforza, as well as regent of the duchy of Milan until Ludovico encloses her in the tower that will take her name.

CICCO SIMONETTA: his trustworthy adviser and talented man of state, who pays with his head (in a non-metaphorical sense) his loyalty to Bona.

CATROZZO: court dwarf of a certain level, polyglot. Dark as it suits any true ace of laughter and jokes.

### PALAZZO CARMAGNOLA

CECILIA GALLERANI: a woman of great culture and finesse, saved by Ludovico from her monastic destiny, becoming his favorite at a young age. In more recent times, after discovering that he had made her pregnant, the Moro himself proceeded to give her in marriage to Count Carminati de' Brambilla, detto Bergamini. She is the *Dama con l'ermellino* that still today we can admire in Krakow.

CESARE SFORZA VISCONTI: illegitimate son of Ludovico il Moro and of Cecilia. He is only two years old, but he already has discrete property holdings: at his birth his father thought to give him Palazzo Carmagnola – what is today the location of the Piccolo Teatro di Milano.

TEODORA: nurse of Cesarino Sforza.

TERSILLA: a cheerful and talkative lady in the company of Cecilia Gallerani.

CORSO: Cecilia Gallerani's servant.

## THE FRENCH

SUA MAESTÀ CRISTIANISSIMA CHARLES VIII: King of France. Weak of body and intellect, without ever having taken part in a battle he prattles on about war, about invading Italy and taking Naples. As they say, arms in hand, here we go.

LOUIS DE VALOIS: Duke of Orléans, Charles' cousin, future conduit in the campaign to conquer the kingdom of Naples, holder of secret claims on the duchy of Milan (as descendant of Valentina Visconti, his grandmother).

PHILIPPE DE' COMMYNES: Duke of Burgundy, French legate in the lands of Italy and in league with the Duke of Orléans.

ROBINOT AND MATTENET: the ugly and the beautiful. Unlucky minions of the Duke de' Commynes, they have a secret mission to accomplish in Milan.

PERRON DE BASCHE: originally from Orvieto, then ambassador on behalf of Sua Maestà Cristianissima Charles VIII and of the Duke of Orléans.

CARLO BARBIANO DI BELGIOIOSO: ambassador of Ludovico il Moro at the court of France.

JOSQUIN DES PREZ: ducal singer in the service of Ludovico il Moro, a genius of music in the flesh and in counterpoint.

## THE MERCHANTS

ACCARDO PORTINARI: robust representative of the Medici bank, greedy for steaks and *vaini*.

BENCIO SERRISTORI: a partner of Messer Accerrito, a tireless worker, but not during holidays.

ANTONIO MISSAGLIA: prestigious gunsmith, iron designer and friend of Leonardo.

GIOVANNI BARRACCIO: wool trader, illiterate.

CLEMENTE VULZIO, CANDIDO BERTONE, RICCETTO NANNIPIERI AND ADEMARO  
COSTANTE: merchants of wool, silks, needles and alum, who have credit at the  
Medici Bank.

## THE CHURCH

FRANCESCO SANSONE DA BRESCIA: General of the Franciscan Order.

GIULIANO DA MUGGIA: Franciscan preacher.

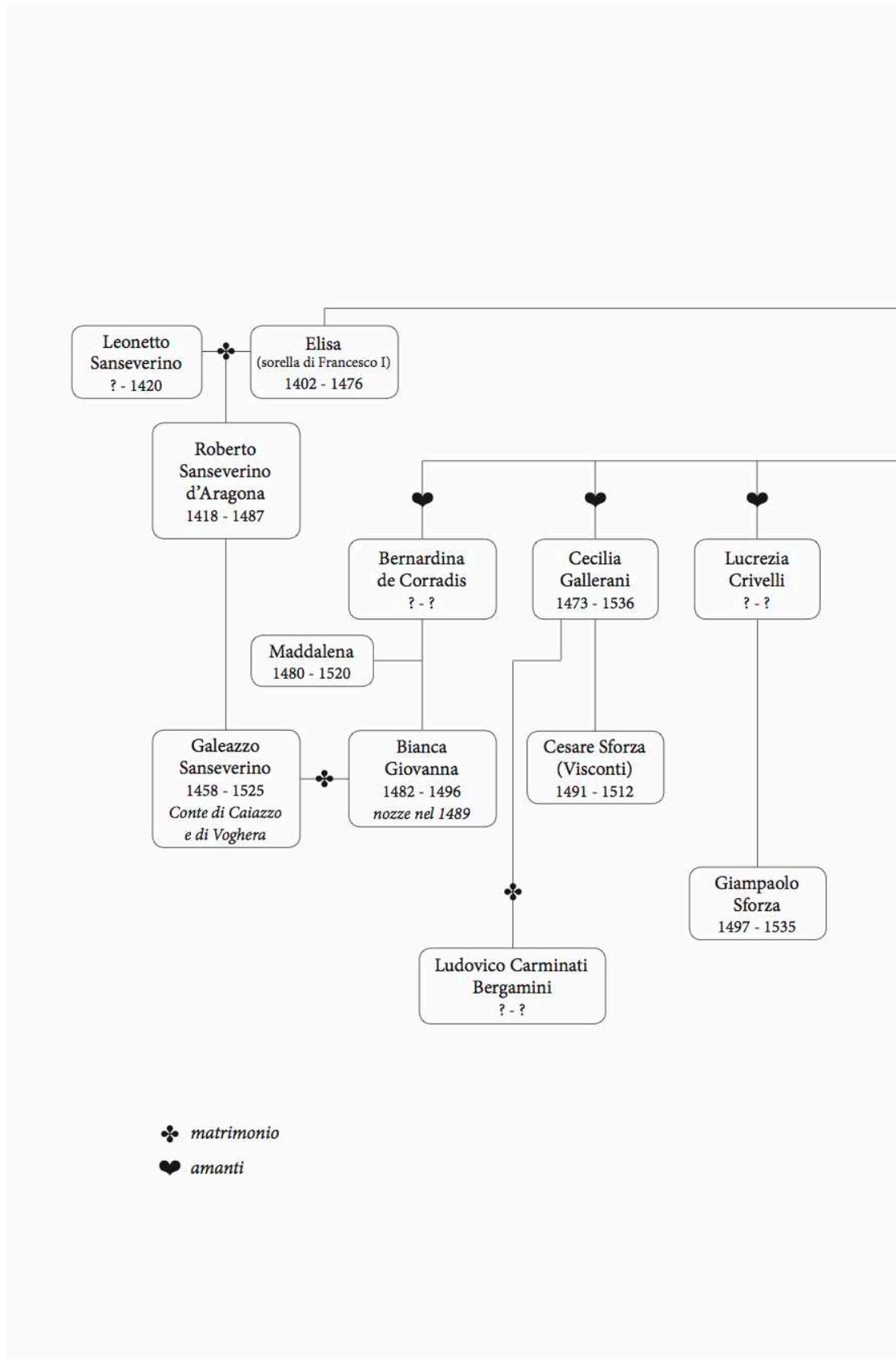
DIODATO DA SIENA: Jesuate father (ie belonging to the order, no longer in existence,  
of the *Poveri di Gesù in San Girolamo*), tenacious shepherd of his flock.

GIOACCHINO DA BRENNO: Jesuate friar and an intriguing preacher, instigator of  
agitation and agitator of stillness.

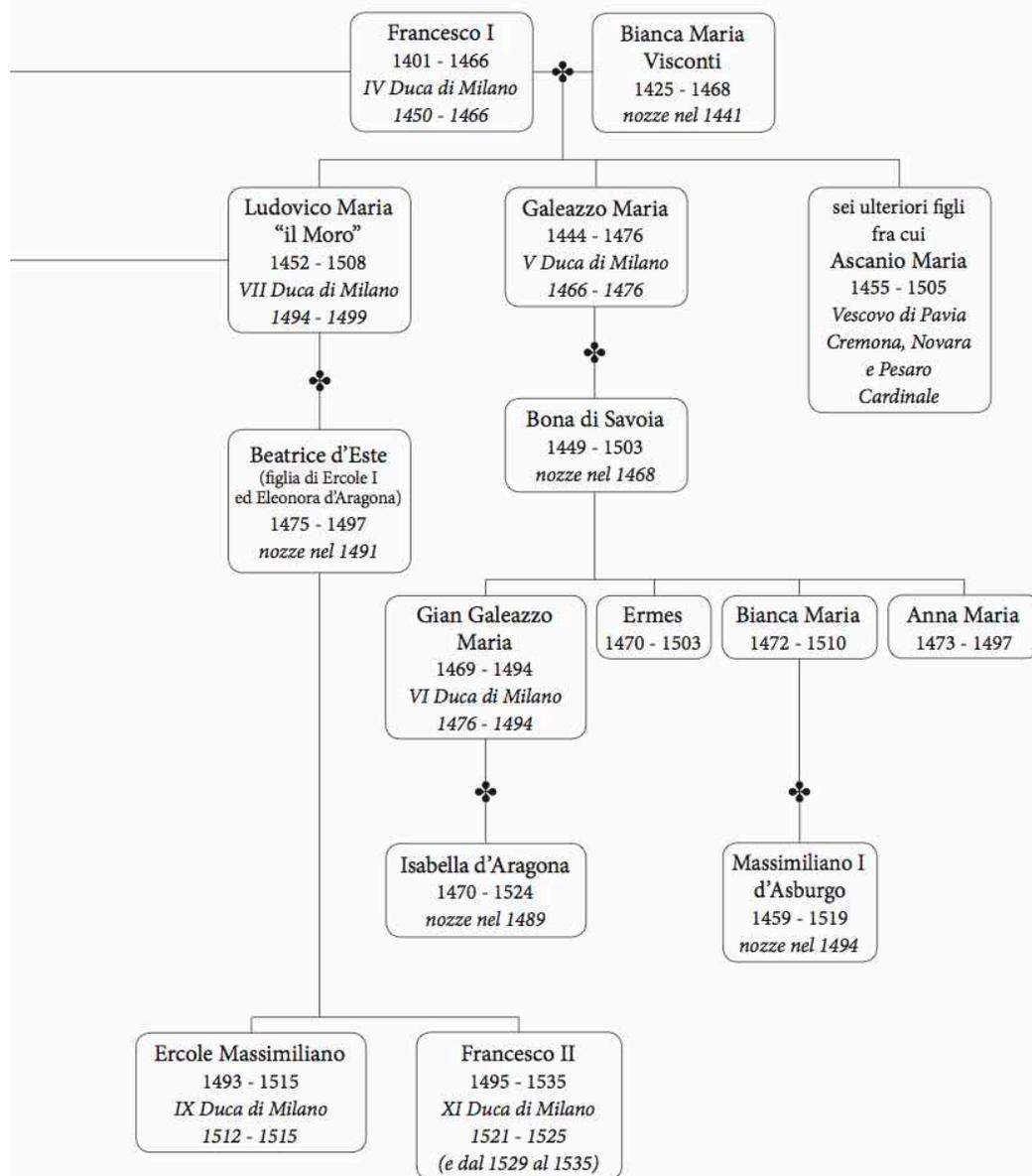
ELIGIO DA VARRAMISTA: Jesuate and graphologist, an expert in bills of exchange and  
letters of credit, former banker converted to the church via Milan.

GIULIANO DELLA ROVERE: cardinal, who has not yet well digested the election of his  
rival Borgia, Pope Alexander VI.

Family Tree



## Gli Sforza *Duchi di Milano*



## The Measure of Man

Talent hits a target no one else can hit;  
Genius hits a target no one else can see.

*Arthur Schopenhauer*

## Prologue

The man hesitated for a moment before entering.

It was useless to look around to see if anyone had followed him. The door to the *castello* was located in one of the older areas of Milan, on a damp, dark street that one arrived at only by going down a number of other damp, dark streets. Even if anyone had tried to follow him, they would have lost him some time ago despite the bright fabric of his rose-colored tunic.

To tell the truth, he himself had feared losing his way. Already once he had lost his bearings while walking through the tangle of narrow streets near the *castello*. Partly it had been his fault, he had never had a good sense of direction. Partly it was the fault of Milan, a city which had expanded badly, without a plan, without a shape, without a vision. It needed to be reconceived from top to bottom. Reorganized in a completely different manner. Radically different. In a way that had never been seen before. A multi-level city, for example. From the bottom to top, from the water to the sky. A city that was the opposite of a house, with the poor in the air and the rich on the ground, like in the Roman *insula* described in Vitruvio's book. Francesco di Giorgio had been right to translate his works from Latin. A great find, that one; the book had cost him a fortune but it had given him innumerable ideas ...

Realizing he was lost again, even if only in his own thoughts, the gentleman in the rose-colored tunic forced himself to concentrate. Letting his mind wander was

something that he did often and it was by far the most stimulating part of his day. But now was not the time. Now he was busy.

Slowly, but not calmly, the gentleman knocked on the large door. Almost immediately a creaking sound informed him that the doors were opening, and from where he stood in the darkness of the street the small entryway seemed almost bright.

Only one word was spoken.

“Enter.”

And he did.

## The Beginning

The first thing he noticed when he entered the *Sala del Consiglio* was how little light there was.

Despite the fact it was only mid October Milan was already cold, and before the lords returned to the castle from Vigevano the servants had covered the windows with *impannate*, which were white cloth covers impregnated with turpentine to make them as transparent as possible. They let in very little daylight but in turn stopped people from seeing what was happening inside the chamber. It was known to the residents of the castle as the ‘Sala degli Scarlioni,’ after the red and white zig-zag pattern that adorned its walls, but to others – the majority of Milan’s inhabitants, that is – it was the Sala del Consiglio, the Council Chamber: the chamber where the Secret Council regularly met. Six people, the six most powerful people in Milan, plus their Lord, the most powerful of all.

“Bring in the next one, castellan.”

Bernardino da Corte, the castellan of Porta Giovia, nodded and pulled the heavy wooden door open, announcing:

“His Excellency the general of the Franciscan Order, Francesco Sansone da Brescia.”

Tuesdays and Fridays were reserved for hearings. They were the days when Ludovico il Moro, the Duke of Bari but also, nevertheless, the Duke of Milan, granted hearings and attention to anybody who required him to solve a problem. Any type of problem and any citizen of Milan – which meant anybody who paid the taxes imposed

by il Moro, except those who did not pay them courtesy of il Moro himself. And the Milanese who paid taxes had the right to be listened to, not least because the taxes were rather high.

But the head of the Franciscan Order was not a citizen of Milan, in fact he was not a citizen of anywhere. Logically speaking he shouldn't have had the right to usurp even a minute of the precious time that il Moro allocated his subjects, hearing the pleas of the poor instead of imposing his will on unruly ambassadors, fiery steeds and submissive maidservants. According to common sense on the other hand, it would have been stupid to deny an audience to the general of the Order who was presenting himself as a simple citizen.

And Ludovico il Moro, Duke of Bari and Duke of Milan, was certainly not stupid.

“What an honor,” said il Moro, sitting down on his bench. “The general of the Franciscan Order requesting a hearing as if he were a citizen. To what do we owe this visit in such modest guise?”

“I am a humble Franciscan, your Lordship,” responded Francesco Sansone, “and I am not accustomed to special treatment. After all, the question I wish to submit to the foresight of your Lordship requires so little time that it would have been high-handed of me to request a private hearing.”

Welcome to the Renaissance, where every phrase gets measured and ringed like a piece of jewelry, each word is weighed on the precision scales and then the gold necklace is exhibited, not to show off its beauty, but rather the power of he who wears it. And where the meaning of a speech is to be interpreted taking into account who

gave it, who heard it, who was in the room and who wasn't, which names were said and most importantly which were left out.

Essentially, Ludovico il Moro had received the friar by using his title rather than his name, and by observing that he was visiting in the guise of a humble citizen; which meant that the friar, as head of the Franciscans, clearly didn't give a damn about him and the rest of the Council. To which the friar responded that there were a good many other more official, more solemn and inexorable ways in which he could have commanded il Moro's attention, calling him your Lordship, rather than Duke, reminding him of the fact that for most Italians Ludovico was merely a usurper.

"I'm glad, padre," responded il Moro. "So, do tell. The Council and I are ready to hear you."

"Your Lordship... forgive me, I do not see His Eminence the Bishop of Como. I hope he is not unwell."

"He is not unwell, padre. We recently decided to decrease the number of councilors, since forty-two was really an excessive number of people to carry out such an office, especially given that the causes and motivations for hearings have been greatly reduced over the last year."

Of course, the friar could have pointed out that if forty-two was too many before, perhaps now six was too few – even pardoning the fact that there was not a single ecclesiast among these six, which he had difficulty believing was a coincidence. Padre Sansone cleared his throat again.

"Your Lordship, I am here at the request of my Order to ask you to reconsider the case of the friar Giuliano da Muggia, who continues to preach in disregard of the rules of his Order and the content of the Scripture."

“I wouldn’t be able to, padre,” responded il Moro, after looking each of the Council members in the eyes.

“You are saying that the Lord of Milan would not know how to quiet a poor Franciscan?”

An astute exegete is certainly not needed to understand the heavily allusive meaning of the franciscan’s question, particularly the use of the conditional. And if the reader had picked up on it, it couldn’t possibly have escaped a member of the Council. Or Ludovico il Moro.

“Friar Giuliano was already arrested and tried sixteen years ago, as a result of your efforts. As I am not a prior of a religious order, I ordered that the process was revised, entrusting the duty to His Excellency the archbishop Arcimboldi. You know very well the outcome of the process.”

Padre Sansone took a deep breath.

The show trial against Giuliano da Muggia was an authentic masterpiece on the part of il Moro. All the witnesses, who were incidentally all laics and incidentally all members of Ludovico’s court, had enthusiastically lauded the friar’s sermons and minimized or pretended not to remember his outbursts against the Church of Rome. Which, in fact, were really the least of it.

Friar Giuliano did not stop at calling the Roman Curia corrupt, frivolous, decadent and repugnant; many others had already done that, including the Dominican with the whiny voice, Girolamo Savonarola, who had gained a reputation as a bringer of misfortune when he predicted the death of Lorenzo de’ Medici and various other troubles that promptly materialized.

No, friar Giuliano maintained that the Church of the capital of Lombardy could be independent from the Roman one. Like Savonarola, who wanted to make the

monasteries independent; apart from this guy wanted to convince the whole of Milan to separate from Rome. Milan, the city that was clearly becoming the richest province on the Italian peninsula, was the place that drew the best artists and sent off its finest doctors and most eminent mathematicians to the nearby University of Pavia with a handsome stipend.

This shouldn't have been happening, according to Padre Sansone and an influential colleague of his who sat on the throne of Rome. And so he had tried to bridle friar Giuliano. Certain things were better left unsaid, and having a Franciscan using a thunderous voice to invoke the separation of the Ambrosian Church from the Roman Church by any means possible – except bulldozers, as they didn't exist yet – wasn't exactly ideal.

But the process Sansone was instructing had been redirected by il Moro in a wholly renaissance manner. The poets of the court had composed stanzas that were recited throughout the city; everywhere, in the streets around the Broletto and along the Navigli you could hear Bellincioni's sonnet *O Milan Cristianissimo* and Giacomo Alfieri's sestet, which was extremely famous at the time but rightfully forgotten today, which thanked the heavens for sending friar Giuliano to Milan. Both of them were horrid, but effective. Il Moro had ingratiated himself to the citizenry, even before the court, gripping the Curia in its pincers between his own informed will and the obtuse will of the people.

“I know very well that friar Giuliano was Christianly absolved,” said Padre Sansone, after another long breath. “Friar Giuliano is a man of value, and his sermons are inspired by great excitement. Great excitement and great love for his flock. Friar Giuliano is a man who knows how to speak to people, because he says what the people want to hear.”

With which the religious man despicably reminded Ludovico that the favor of the people comes and goes. And at that moment the people were no longer largely in favor of il Moro.

The levy on salt and other recent taxes had not been taken well by the people, and Ludovico's popularity was no longer sky-high like it once was. If polls had existed at the time, the Tuesday morning councils probably would have started with a preventative meeting to analyze the consensus and properly address the intercession of il Moro. However, at the time, statistics were still a way off, the average man had still not been discovered, and the people could only make their will known by applauding. Or revolting.

“And friar Giuliano, who is a man of quick wit,” continued Padre Sansone, “can be brought to silence only with great difficulty. When he preaches at San Francesco Grande, the church fills up. People come from afar to hear him, and they leave feeling inspired. It would perhaps be opportune...”

What would be opportune, however, Padre Sansone did not manage to say, because at that moment Ludovico got up from his seat.

If we had been in Lodi, Ludovico il Moro would have been around four cubits plus one palm tall; if rather we had wanted to measure him by the city's standards, he would have been a little less than three cubits of Milanese cloth. In terms of the metric decimal system, the lord of Milan measured one meter ninety, which, combined with his icy stare and his long and severe black brocade garment, ensured that when Ludovico il Moro stood up, he was rather fearsome.

Slowly, after getting up, Ludovico walked over to the Franciscan's side and took him gently by the elbow.

“Come, excellent father,” he said with a smooth voice, but that was conscious of instilling. “I want to show you something.”

And, still by the elbow, he led the austere but terrified religious to the other side of the room, stopping at a magnificent map of the city frescoed on the wall.

“You see, excellent father, Milan is a wheel.” Il Moro’s hand traced a broad circle, emphasizing the walls that protected the city, then planted a finger in the center of the map, right on the Duomo.

“Milan is a wheel, and its church is its hub. A robust, safe and upright hub. But do you know what happens if this church remains immobile?”

Il Moro’s finger starts to tracer smaller and smaller circles, before spiraling tightly around the Duomo, and stopping.

“The wheel can spin and spin and spin some more, but the people who live within it...” il Moro stretched out his hands, “... won’t go anywhere.” After which, il Moro’s right hand came down on the franciscan’s shoulder, friendly but at the same time heavy. “Do you understand, excellent father?”

“I understand, I understand, ambassador. Please, do not worry about that. We have seen worse, I can assure you.”

“I can only apologize for the miserable conditions in which I present myself, but...”

Giacomo Trotti, ambassador of Ercole I d’Este, Duke of Ferrara at the court of the Sforzas, was ordinarily one of the most distinguished and serious people in all of Milan. But seriousness and distinction are often aided by an appropriate external appearance, and when somebody tips a chamberpot over your head, such qualities can be compromised somewhat. Unfortunately, as he walked towards Palazzo

Carmagnola for the usual Tuesday music gathering in Cecilia Gallerani's parlor, the old ambassador had been besieged by some boor tipping a pot out the window without looking and neglecting to shout the 'it's comiiiiing!' that even the rudest of people would usually call down to the street in order to avoid involuntary cascades of shit on people's heads.

"Come, come, ambassador, never mind." Cecilia Gallerani waved and one of the maid girls who was waiting down the hall walked forward with a forced ease. "Take the gentleman ambassador Trotti to the west chamber and assist him. We certainly won't start without you, ambassador..."

"I don't know how to thank you, Contessa..."

"Hurry up and get changed, and come and let us enjoy your company," responded Gallerani with a smile. "See to it, Tersilla."

And with a smile on her face the young woman disappeared through the door to tell the musicians to hold off little longer. For a moment Giacomo Trotti, ambassador of Ferrara, continued to gaze at the door through which Cecilia Gallerani had eclipsed. And, as always, the comparison began with she who in theory was his protégée and compatriot. A comparison that, as always, proved merciless.

On one hand, the slim and angelic Cecilia Gallerani, still as beautiful as she was in the portrait that messer Leonardo had painted of her years earlier, serene and at the same time austere, turned by three quarters as if observing the planned arrival of her lover, or awaiting Ludovico il Moro of whom she had spoken a little earlier, stroking the stoat that she held in her lap. On the other hand, that pudgy little ballbuster who responded, sadly, to the name of Beatrice d'Este and was the beloved second-born of his lordship Ercole. A little girl, indeed, perhaps polished of manner but certainly rough of heart, who in his silent monologues the ambassador had nicknamed Beatrice

– an ugly moniker that he hardly dared think, let alone say out loud. The rest of the world, however, adored her: her father, sister, mother, and many others, a category into which the ambassador Giacomo Trotti certainly did not fall.

“Come, your Excellence,” said the young Tersilla to Trotti, showing him the way with a motion but remaining understandably far ahead. “I’m sure we’ll be able to find something to fit you, don’t worry.”

Beatrice was adored by so many, and up until recently that included il Moro, who had fallen prey to the sincere and passionate love after which she had trapped him with one of the safest and well-tested methods that women of every nation and census have used for millennia: to not give herself to him, despite the fact that the two of them had been married for months.

“Here we are,” said the girl, entering the room and walking with certainty towards a chest from the side of which protruded a curious wooden form, similar to a ship’s wheel. “In here are the Count’s clothes. The husband of my Lady Cecilia is not as tall as you, but I believe you will find what you need quite easily.”

Nevertheless, il Moro found an outlet for his drives. Trotti had noticed that often, during the gala lunches – which were more or less every day – il Moro would disappear from the banquet to then return about an hour later with a satisfied smile on his face. Only a few days were needed to notice that, with a strange look, a few minutes before Ludovico got up from the table Gallerani would arrive at the tower of the Rocchetta, always at the same time. And so, while his quarrelsome little wife enjoyed the roasted meats, Ludovico il Moro fulfilled his desire for fresh.

“Take this one,” said the young girl, pulling out of the trunk a brocade garment that would have been tight on a man of even half the size of Trotti, who was hardly a titan. “I think it will fit you marvelously.”

Then Gallerani became pregnant. And Ludovico, who had once told Trotti he found “pregnant women repugnant,” stopped seeing her overnight. At the same time, he started going to see his young wife more frequently in her apartments at night-time, after going down the steep stairs that separated the two floors dressed in only a light silk shirt that he would, however, remove almost immediately. Trotti had also learned these things directly from the mouth of il Moro, who described his sexual encounters in an abundance of detail.

The lack of modesty with regards to private affairs should not be surprising; in the Renaissance, sex between a husband and wife was certainly not a private affair if one of the two was a reigning prince or heir to the throne. If we could ask Trotti now, he would be able to recount when Alfonso d’Este consummated his first night of marriage with Anna Sforza, in Ferrara, in the presence of Francesco Gonzaga, the Aragonese ambassador Simonotto da Belpietro and four or five other courtesans. They first undressed Alfonso and then put him into bed next to his young wife; but Alfonso didn’t believe in consummating the marriage and kept getting up out of the bed, perhaps intimidated by such a number of people in his bedroom or perhaps even, inexpert in worldly matters, convinced that the pussy would bite. It was thus down to Gonzaga to remedy the situation, quite literally driving the noble descendant under the covers with a cane, ensuring that he didn’t dare come out until the matter had been concluded.

“And finally, here are the bottoms,” said Tersilla, pulling out of the chest a pair of long tights in nine colors, French style.

An unsightly piece. Even Trotti, who was not particularly attentive to fashion, would never have been seen even walking next to someone wearing such a thing, and today he was supposed to put it on himself.

After all, if something was repugnant, it was repugnant.

So when Beatrice too, from il Moro's nocturnal visits, became pregnant, Trotti immediately began to worry. He was sure that, as his wife grew in size, the lord of Milan wouldn't have touched her with even a gloved little finger, and would have gone elsewhere to satisfy his instincts. And why not again with Gallerani, who remained the most beautiful woman in Milan, and for whom il Moro was left with a sincere and enduring affection, as so many claimed? Gallerani who, compared to Beatrice, was like a diamond next to a slice of salami.

Trotti looked mournfully at the items of clothing fate had presented to him. In Ferrara, he would have holed himself up in his house rather than wearing anything like this. But Milan was not Ferrara.

In Milan men moved about on mules, while women, well-to-do women, moved about in carriages – carriages that looked like a cross between an alterpiece and a Sicilian cart, gold-laden and showy, pulled by two or four mares, which were the terror of pedestrians. It may sound strange, but in Milan traffic was already a problem in the late fifteenth century.

Giacomo Trotti knew that, by the express command of il Moro, there were only a few carriages that had permission to access the Giovio Castle at any hour of the day or night. And Cecilia Gallerani's was one of them, although it hadn't been seen at the castle for quite some time. Not that this was decisive: il Moro could easily leave the castle for one of his affairs and go to the house of his lover, given that her husband resided in San Giovanni in Croce, towards Cremona at the time.

That's why Giacomo Trotti, ambassador to Ercole Duke of Ferrara, was there that day. To have a good look at Gallerani, to see if any new jewel adorned her forehead, or if she was flaunting any richly brocaded dress with gold thread, that only

il Moro would have been able to give her, as was customary as a token of love. In fact, one could be sure that such presents could not have been from her husband. The count Ludovico Carminati Bergamini, who il Moro had made Cecilia marry when he had made her leave the Sforza Castle, was one of the most miserly men not only in Milan, but in all of the Holy Roman Empire.

“Thank you, miss Tersilla,” said Trotti, with a ruefully polite tone. “Do you need a hand closing the chest?”

“Thank you, your Excellency, but I am able to do it alone. Just as I opened it. With this, do you see?”

And Tersilla, winking, showed him the strange wooden and iron contraption that was mounted between the trunk and its lid, ending in a kind of wheel.

“Messer Leonardo invented it and gave it to my Lady,” said Tersilla proudly, as if she had made it herself. “It is a lever machine. You turn the wheel, like this, and the lid moves up and down, with no need for a strong man. This object is a marvel, and you have no idea how much time it saves. Messer Leonardo is a genius, don’t you think?”

“Without a doubt,” responded Giacomo Trotti, who for once in his day as a diplomat had the opportunity to say what he really thought. “I don’t believe there is anything impossible for messer Leonardo da Vinci.”

“But it’s impossible!”

The man in the rose-colored tunic closed the chest petulantly. Behind him an olive-skinned woman of perhaps fifty stood with her hands on her hips looking at him.

“Perhaps you left it at the studio, in the upstairs room.”

“Impossible! I clearly remember putting it here, not even a month ago.”

“Ah, well, seeing as it was only a month ago...”

The rose-clad man shook his head, looking at the chest as if it were to blame. Then he looked up at the woman. He had an odd face, more masculine than beautiful, and there were many gray strands nestled in his long blond hair. His beard, though, seemed practically immune to graying. His eyes, usually sweet, had narrowed from an irritation that only parents can elicit.

“Don’t be sarcastic, Caterina. They are important projects, I don’t just carry them around with me as if they were nothing.”

“Could Salai have taken them? You said yourself he would take anything that wasn’t nailed to the floor...”

Struck by a sudden inspiration, which was something that happened rather often, the man turned and walked into the next room, continuing to talk.

“Giacomo knows very well not to touch my projects. If he did I’d beat him with a lash and leave him without dinner.” He carried on speaking to the woman as he rummaged through the papers on the table. “Anyway, about dinner, Caterina, isn’t an entire capon perhaps a little much for three people? I implore you, this evening to limit yourselves a little. We have beans and turnips, I think that’s enough.”

“For you perhaps. Quite apart from the fact that eating a bit of meat once in a while would do you more than good. You’ve been wasting away since I got here. It’s been three months and you’ve lost about ten pounds.”

“It’s been three months and it feels like ten years,” said the man, continuing to search. “Quite apart from the fact that I don’t eat the meat of animals, and I won’t today, or tomorrow, or ever, what’s making me waste away is this god-damn horse statue. And not finding these cursed papers, the devil knows where they’ve gotten to...”

“Pieces of paper don’t walk, my son.”

“Mothers, on the other hand, don’t do it enough, Caterina, my mother. So why don’t you take three steps out of my way and let me search for them in peace?”

“You were never so vulgar when you were young. Nor so miserly.”

“And what do you know? You were never there. And as for being miserly, they’re forcing me to be. I haven’t seen payment for two months. If you’ll excuse me.” The man moved his mother out the way with his hand and headed for the kitchen, looking under the oven.

“I haven’t used them to clean the chicken coop,” said Caterina in a patient tone.

“It wouldn’t surprise me if you had,” the man responded, standing up again and fixing his belt around his tunic. “As if it was never... Wait. I’m beginning to wonder...”

The man, his right hand still on his belt, brought his left hand to the collar of his pinkish tunic and pushed it down inside, drawing out a notepad crammed full of sheets and folded pieces of paper. Laying it down on the table, he opened it with the utmost care and took out two sheets of yellowed parchment, on which there were

designs of horses surrounded by words and other sketches. Almost instantly he put one hand over his face and raised his eyes to the sky.

“You had them on you?” asked Caterina, smirking.

“I must have put them there two days ago, before going to the castle,” he responded, looking at his mother as if working out whether she was angry. “Sorry, Caterina.”

“You can also call me mamma, sometimes.”

“Sorry, mamma. I lose so much of that stuff that sometimes...”

The dry sound of rapping on the door interrupted him. Caterina turned, but the man nimbly slipped in front of her and went to open it himself. It wasn't because he was embarrassed by his mother, no. Well, perhaps he was a little. It depended who the visitor was. But at that time of the morning the visitor could only have been one person.

The man in the rose-colored tunic opened the door, and found in front of him a figure a little shorter, quite a lot older, dressed in black brocade, his head uncovered, and his hat already in his hand in a gesture of deference. A butler. A butler of important people, but a butler still.

“Messer Leonardo da Vinci?” asked the old man.

“At your service,” he responded.

## Two

“Oh, Messer Leonardo, what a pleasure it is to see you.”

Standing almost at the center of the large parade ground known as Piazzale delle Armi, Ludovico il Moro beckoned Leonardo over. Next to him, skinny and rapacious, was the Master of Revenue for the provinces, the most excellent cavalier Bergonzio Botta, with, as always, a thick ledger under his arm.

“At your Lordship’s service,” responded Leonardo, circumspect. It was never easy to understand the motive for Ludovico’s summons. He could be enthusiastic, like the day after the Festa del Paradiso, when the Duke of Milan lavished Leonardo with praise and commendations in front of the entire court, or he could be completely the opposite.

“Come, come,” said Ludovico, with a peaceful smile.

“Signor Tax Collector, I believe the chamberlain is calling you.”

Which was a not very Renaissance way of inviting the Chamber Tax Collector to hurry away, because the Duke of Milan wanted to talk with Leonardo and only Leonardo. Bergonzio Botta, with a bow that he didn’t rise out of until he was already on his way, turned and set off in the direction of Santo Spirito. Ludovico remained in

silence, looking around without laying his eyes on Leonardo. Then, slowly, he headed towards the large southern gate, beckoning Leonardo to follow him.

“Your Lordship seems particularly happy this morning,” Leonardo ventured, sounding out the mood of his patron.

“I am, master Leonardo, I am,” Ludovico responded, still smiling, still walking. “And do you know why?”

“I hope your Lordship will be kind enough to share with me the reasons for his joy.”

“It is no secret,” responded il Moro, “Not anymore. The Emperor Maximilian of Hapsburg will do us the honor of marrying our wonderful niece Bianca Maria, during the Christmas celebrations. The Sforza lineage will be linked to the Emperor, Maestro Leonardo.”

There it was. For months Ludovico had been trying to foist Bianca Maria Sforza onto Maximilian of Hapsburg, the Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, seducing him with continual offers of friendship and, more importantly, a frightful dowry. Behind the curtains of the court, whispers of four hundred thousand ducats circulated. That is more than half the annual income of the entire Dukedom. Comparable to the current Italian Minister of the Economy promising his daughter to the President of the United States with a dowry of half the entire revenue of the peninsula, which would be in the billions.

“We shall begin with the wedding party in early November, Maestro Leonardo. And it certainly shan’t be difficult to organize the departure of the bride, and to gather together all of our loved ones, the joy of our lives, and our entourage here at the castle. In fact, it’ll be extremely easy. Do you know why?”

Ow.

Ludovico il Moro had received a particularly high level of schooling for a man of the time, but with no particular emphasis on Greek philosophy. Nevertheless, he seemed to have assimilated the dialectic techniques of Socrates with no problem, which ensured that his interlocutor would furnish the desired response on the simple application of a little pressure. They would say in the court that if il Moro starts to kiss you on the neck, beware: He's about to lift up your robe from behind.

“Your Lordship, I do not.”

“Because we have this splendid court at our disposal,” said Ludovico, sweeping his arms to show off the Piazza d’Armi, surrounded by the castle. “This splendid, open, spacious courtyard. And across...” Ludovico, by now at the gate, indicated with an open hand the enormous expanse across the drawbridge, “And just there, you see, an even bigger court, perfectly leveled, clear, free of adornments. In other words, Messer Leonardo, completely and utterly empty.”

And with that Moro's eyes, from the piazza, panned round onto Leonardo. His mouth still smiled. His eyes did not.

Four years had passed since the day Ludovico had officially engaged the services that Leonardo had boasted of being able to carry out better than anyone else. And ten years from when he had first sworn he could do it.

Ten years earlier, Leonardo had gone to Ludovico il Moro with a long letter in which he claimed he could design canons, dig rivers and underground passages, build indestructible castles and, only at the end of the letter in question, suggested that he could also paint a little. It was remarkable, especially given the fact that Da Vinci had been called to Milan as a musician, the player of a Lira da Braccio of his own invention. But one sentence in particular struck Ludovico il Moro.

*I have a plan to work on the bronze horse that will be the immortal glory and eternal honor of the auspicious memory of His Lordship your father and the noble House of Sforza.*

This promise became a job in the court, along with which Leonardo was given lodging, the two-story studio in Corte Vecchia next to the Duomo in which to work, and – in theory – a consistent salary. But, as the years went by, according to some, his promise began to sound like mere boasting. And among the believers of this was il Moro himself.

“It’s been three years, Maestro Leonardo, that you have assured me of your dedication to the plans for the monument in memory of His Lordship my father,” continued il Moro, still looking at Leonardo. “You have assured me more than once that the implementation of the monument is underway, so much so that I have had this large space in front of the castle, in which we find ourselves now, cleared and leveled for that precise purpose.”

“I am pleased to announce to your Lordship that the clay model of the horse is almost ready, and it will be possible to exhibit it on this same piazza at the end of next week.”

“The clay model?” Ludovico raised an eyebrow. “Is that true?”

“The full size clay model, your Lordship. Seven meters high, even approaching which in height and majesty an equestrian monument has never been seen before. I promise you, the model will be displayed in place within ten days.”

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### Three

“It’s excellent. Say what you want, but the only way to eat a piece of meat is to broil it over a fire.”

Accerrito Portinari placed his right hand on the table, first with the palm down, then the back of his hand, imitating a steak, which, as it happened, his hand resembled more than a little.

“A minute on one side, a minute on the other, and off. Not like these savages in Milan who stew it for hours. They torture it, as if they’re trying to make it confess who knows what sin. But we Florentines, we know. You shouldn’t ruin what’s already good. Nature made it perfect, and the sin is to ruin it.”

Accerrito Portinari put the knife down next to his already empty plate and beamed at Leonardo with a full and satisfied face.

“I agree,” replied Leonardo smiling, in turn putting his spoon down next to his plate, which at that point was half full and, contrary to Portinari’s had on it only vegetables. “I’m glad you enjoyed Caterina’s cooking. Perhaps you’d also like to try a little radicchio...”

“No thank you, I don’t eat scenery. Meat and wine, that’s all a Christian needs. Meat and wine are what’s meant for eating, the rest is just to make the doctor happy. And how about you, Messer Leonardo, how can I make you happy?”

Accerrito Portinari looked at Leonardo with piggy eyes that glowed out of his lardy face.

At the end of the fifteenth century, to be fat was a status symbol: it meant that you could eat more than necessary every day, and that very few of the calories you consumed were converted into manual labor. And indeed, Accerrito Portinari had never had to work too hard in his life. First as the son of Pigello, the representative of the Medici Bank in Milan, and then as his heir when the father passed away.

“By doing your job, Messer Accerrito,” responded Leonardo with a half smile.

“Do you have money to invest?” Accerrito’s grin became broad and cordial. “This is excellent news. You are talking to the right man. The Medici Bank is here for you, in the form of my humble person.”

The mention of the Medici Bank reassured Leonardo in no small way. After the death of his father Pigello, Accerrito had had more than a few solvency problems. In fact, at one point, Lorenzo the Magnificent had decided to close the Milan branch, and the prestigious *palazzo* at Porta Comasina, with its magnificent carved gate and Foppa frescoes, was even put up for auction. But at a certain point their luck changed: Accerrito found new financiers, including Giovanni Portinari who Leonardo knew, and he picked up where he left off, in exactly the same way as his father. Lending, investing, changing letters of credit, and it was evident from various details that things were going more than well.

“At this point, and I don’t mean to boast, but we are among the most sought-after bankers in Milan,” Accerrito continued. “But for you, Messer Leonardo, we have an opening. It all depends on when you would want it back. If you want it paid back within six months, I could give it to you with a ten percent increase. If, rather, you can wait a year, we could agree on twelve.”

“And if I wanted it in haste?”

“In haste?”

“I do not intend to lend you money, Messer Accerrito, but to request a loan.”

“Ah.”

Leonardo was, probably, the most competent person in the world at studying and evaluating human expressions, but his genius was hardly necessary to understand the facial expression of his companion; not even Botticelli, but even one of his pupils, Marco D'Oggiono or Foppa, would have sufficed to understand that the face of Accerrito Portinari was one of a sincerely disappointed man. It was also said that Leonardo would have been the only one of the aforementioned capable of painting his expression effectively, but at that moment it did not count for anything.

“I have been told that you lend money with interest, even very great sums,” said Leonardo, trying to run Portinari through the fundamentals of his job.

“This is true, Messer Leonardo.”

“I know that in the present year you have leant our lord Ludovico almost ten thousand ducats. I shan't ask you for that sum, you can be sure of that. I just need a small endowment to last me until the end of year, when I will receive various payments. I am still owed one thousand two hundred lira from the Confraternity for a painting...”

“The one they are calling *Virgin of the Rocks*? I've seen it. A truly marvelous work. You are a man of genius, Messer Leonardo.”

“Thank you, but you see, even a man of genius needs to eat. And so do his students, not to mention his mother.”

“So is what you say true? That the Caterina who brought us this excellent meat is your mother?”

“If it’s true that Christ died on the cross,” said the mentioned, entering. “Excellent meat, of course. And my favorite son doesn’t even want to try it. Won’t you have a little more wine?”

“Thank you, Ma’am, but I’m quite fine.”

Portinari waited a few moments after the woman left.

“Messer Leonardo, do you know how a bank works?”

“Of course I know. You borrow at twelve and you lend at fifteen. The three percent that remains is your profit.”

“It’s a little more difficult than that. The fact is I manage the money of a large part of Milan. All of the shopkeepers in *Via degli Armorari* are my customers. I even have customers among the wool-carders of Lodi.”

“I’m glad. It means that your business is going well, and that you can lend five hundred ducats to an artist from your own town.”

“My business is going well, yes. The quantity of money I manage is very high. Much higher than the quantity I have. You see, Messer Leonardo, the bank is like a juggler. It keeps the money of others in the air, and every so often when I touch somebody else’s money, a little of it stays in my hand. But even if I have ten plates in the air, only one remains in my hand, and not even that one is mine.”

Which, objectively speaking, was true. With a volume of business of almost one hundred thousand ducats, the worth of the branch was around a tenth – just ten thousand. The fact was that this was the discourse Accerrito Portinari gave whenever he had to refuse a loan to someone. Usually at that point Accerrito would start to explain to the poor man whose turn it was that he could not lend money to just anyone, but that he could do it in exchange for some precise assurances. However, seeing as his interlocutor was a man of genius, there was no need to explain.

“You are telling me that you cannot lend money to just anyone,” said Leonardo, still smiling. “I understand. But I am not just anyone, Messer Accerrito. You know me well. I have much more than poor rags to offer as surety. I have my studio, my paintings. You know me well, Messer Accerrito.”

“That’s exactly why, Messer Leonardo, I could not behave as a usurer for you. Five hundred ducats, and you offer me surety in the form of some works that are worth ten times that much.”

“If someone could afford to buy them, of course,” said Leonardo, shaking his head. “You’re right, my work is valuable, and that’s why so few people can afford to buy it.”

“It’s true. This is not Florence, where people like beautiful things and pay good money for them.”

“People like them here too, trust me. But they don’t have the money. And so they take out loans to pay for them. Here everybody takes out loans, even the Duke.”

A nasty smile crept onto Accerrito Portinari’s lips.

“To which Duke to you refer, Messer Leonardo? Be careful, because things are not at all clear here in Milan. The Duke of Bari, Ludovico the Moor, or the Duke of Milan, the dear Gian Galeazzo? Speaking of which, did you know that they cite you in a new ditty, precisely on this matter? I heard it sung the other day on the *Navigli*.”

And with that Portinari, in a good tenor voice, began to sing softly:

*They summoned the esteemed genius Leonardo*

*To the lady Isabella and the naked Galeazzo.*

*“We urgently need one of your wondrous constructions*

*To end my beloved husband’s malfunction.”*

The sad conjugal goings-on of Gian Galeazzo Sforza and Isabella of Aragon were, given the previously mentioned scarcity of privacy, known throughout Milan. For many months, the young Duke Gian Galeazzo was incapable of consummating his marriage with his lawful wife. It was not clear whether it was due to actual *impotentia coeundi* – as the Duke Gian Galeazzo insisted – or due to an ill-timed and unfavorable conjunction of the stars – as the court physician and astrologist Ambrogio Varese claimed – or whether Gian Galeazzo experienced physical attraction only to the robust page boys with whom he would loiter behind heavy curtains – as stated by the rest of the city, including the outskirts. The fact of the matter was that for various moons the marriage was not sanctioned by a good thrusting as God ordered, and Ludovico the Moor and the Archbishop Ascanio Sforza took the opportunity to force Gian Galeazzo to fulfill his duties. To not consummate the marriage is a mortal sin, his uncle and cousin told him mercilessly. So if you don't want to go to hell, see to defeating your natural shyness towards the quaint and do what you have to do, otherwise the marriage will be nullified, your wife's dowry will have to be returned and I shall lose tens of thousands of ducats, in addition to my pride.

Meanwhile, Caterina entered the room and started to clear the table of the few dishes. Ten seconds, perhaps less: enough to hear Portinari's quip and observe that the expression on her son's face had transformed into not a small frown.

"Alas, I do not have that power, Messer Accerrito," said Leonardo, looking away. "I can increase a person's strength, with some gear, but I certainly cannot alter their will or inclinations. And even if I could, I assure you, I would not want to."

"Please, Messer Leonardo, do not make that face. After all by now even in France they know that Gian Galeazzo is a buggerer, it's not a state secret. On the

subject of which, Messer Leonardo... you know that in this city there's fire for sodomy. Galeazzo Maria established it and it has never been repealed. This isn't Florence, where certain things are tolerated.

“And with this, Messer Accerrito?”

“With this I simply wanted to impart some advice. People talk. This is not Florence. Ah, my beautiful Florence... I don't know about you, but I miss it so...”

“Would you satisfy my curiosity, Messer Accerrito?” said Caterina, speaking in a garrulous tone.

“Of course, my lady Caterina.”

“Seeing as you so long for Florence, why do you not there return?”

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“You were rather boorish, Caterina.”

“You're right, but to a boor as a boor I respond,” said Caterina, continuing to move up and down the room. Accerrito Portinari had left a little while before, with salutations briefer than those he was welcomed with. “But how, you invite him to lunch, give him the best veal in all of Milan, and this usurer not only denies you some sacrosanct help, but also starts talking about fire. Usurers should burn at the stake, too, don't you think?”

“Too? Who else?”

The lady continued walking for a few seconds, mopping a bit here and there. Then, not without effort, she sat down in front of her son.

“Leonardo, I'm no fool.”

“I know that very well, mother. I am your son. If a woman bears a child by a black man, the child is born dark. But if the child is born black, both parents must have been black, wouldn't you agree?”

“Leonardo, listen. I heard, when you were in Florence, that you behaved licentiously, and I did not give it consideration. People are cruel no matter. Just think with the son of a maid. But now I come here and I see...”

“What do you see, mamma?”

“I see that boy roaming around the house, Salai. He doesn’t paint, he doesn’t prepare the colors, really he does nothing, but he lives with you in your house.”

“It’s not true that he does nothing. He is an extremely able thief.” Leonardo looked at Caterina raising an eyebrow. Almost immediately, Salai appeared in the doorway, probably intuiting that they were talking about him. “Mother, witty remarks aside, when a boy enters a workshop he always starts with the humblest of tasks. When I started at Verrocchio’s, I cleaned the chicken cages at the beginning.”

Yes, you have understood well. Every artist at the time had a chicken coop in the house, and not for food. In the time of Leonardo the technique for oil painting still hadn’t been fully mastered, so in fifteenth century Florence, tempera was often used for painting. That is mixing – *temperando*, in Latin, even if Leonardo did not know Latin, but the process worked regardless – pigments with a binder, such as egg yolk, which when dry would form a protein lattice that could adhere to surfaces and lock in the colors *ab aeterno*. Seeing as the opening of the closest supermarket would require around four hundred and fifty years, each artist, in order to have fresh eggs at his disposal, did the most obvious thing: he kept chickens in the house. That was where the apprentice would usually start: cleaning the chicken coop. Then, and only then, he would move onto other tasks more befitting his gifts: breaking the eggs, skinning the rabbits, grinding the pigments, and so on. Some time would pass before brush was put to board.

This explanation could be of interest to the contemporary man, but it certainly wasn't to Caterina, who knew very well how an artist's workshop operated, including what happened when the artist brought the pupil into the back room.

"Leonardo, listen," sighed Caterina, "You seldom go to mass, and that's that."

"Why should I go to mass? I would go, if the preacher read that which is written in the gospel. But I only hear preachers who mistake the will of God for the foolishness of their brains. Like Brother Savonarola in Florence, and Friar Gioacchino here in Milan."

"Friar Savonarola said that ill luck was due to strike Florence, and three days later the Magnificent died."

"And it took the voice of God? Lorenzo had gout, he couldn't stand up, he was swollen as a wineskin." With an open hand Leonardo motioned Salai, who moved closer and curled up in Leonardo's lap like a kitten. "I, too, can foretell that this rogue will rob something within three days. Just knowing him is enough."

"Messer Leonardo, it wasn't me! Last time you must have miscounted..."

"See, mother, do you hear? This is the call of Salai. The dog goes *woof woof*, the cat goes *meow meow*, and the Salai goes *it wasn't me*." Leonardo gave the boy's neck a slap, which was more of a caress than a blow. "And the preacher goes *the will of God, the will of God*. Each has his own call."

"Leonardo, child, be careful what you say. It is not only God who condemns, but man, too. In Florence you were spared because you had with you a descendant of the Medici family, and if they had condemned him they would have condemned you, too. But here we are in Milan, not Florence. Try to be careful of what you say, and what you do."

"And what do I do, mother, that is so reprehensible?"

“Leonardo, you know...”

“Mother, seeing as I know I shan’t feel shame if you tell me.”

Caterina fell silent, wringing the cloth between her hands.

“Do you refer to the fact that I do unnatural things, as the good Portinari said?”

Caterina, still silent, made an imperceptible hint of agreement.

“You are right, mother. I do unnatural things. In fact, to be precise, I do one and only one thing that is unnatural. And do you know what it is?” With great tenderness, Leonardo caressed the head of Salai, who moved his head like a purring cat, keeping his neck in the master’s hand. “I don’t eat meat. I do not feed myself on the remains of other animals that are inferior to me, like the majority of beasts in nature. Whether they are killed by me or by others it does not matter. To gorge on the meat of weaker animals is a natural thing, and not only do I not do it, but I abhor it.”

Leonardo stood up from the table, after having raised Salai with a slap on the back, visibly vexed by all that had happened that afternoon. Stretching, he smoothed down his rose-colored tunic.

“I abhor it, but for it I excuse those who are dear to me. So much so that I just brought you a piece of meat with which to make a broth, or *polpette*, or whatever you like. And I did not eat it, because to not do so gladdens me; and you did eat it, because to do so gladdens you.” Leonardo, by now at the doorway, turned around, smiling. “In the same manner, tomorrow I shall not hinder you from going to hear your beloved friar Gioacchino prattle on about infernos, apocalypses, earthquakes and locusts. Now, if you’ll excuse me I am going to bed. And if you will not excuse me, I am going to bed the same.”

## By Candle-light

The thumb ran down the horse's thigh, to where the muscle turned to tendon and disappeared from view. Behind the thumb, half a meter away, was Leonardo, calm and focused. That's it, the muscle. It inspired movement. It helped, but it wasn't enough. However it was easier than painting. To sculpt, indeed, was easier than painting. You're in three dimensions sculpting, it is sufficient to copy what you see and feel. There's a reason the paintings of the ancient Greeks were ridiculous, while their statues were masterful. It is easier to do things in three dimensions, isn't it? But in two, you have to have skill. Creating in two-dimensions requires shading and perspective. But the perspective of what? Of the right eye or the left? Artists all concerned themselves with how a scene appeared to the eye, but men have two eyes. Perhaps that's why we don't see the boundaries of things well. Or perhaps it is because there are no real boundaries.

Leonardo collected himself. The clay would only be soft and workable for another half an hour at most. He needed to work quickly. That's it, here. Touch here, and then there. Have a look, come back. Look, and feel.

Where are the boundaries between you and me, horse? Here, where my hand is touching you? But this is the boundary of touch. If I press down, it changes. And how do I distinguish you, horse, from a new block of clay? Only by touch?

If I move away I'm not touching you, but I can smell you. It's a good smell, of clay and water, earthy and fresh. And if someone touches you, if someone pushes you, I'll hear the noise. Until I'm too far away and can't hear it anymore. Perhaps that's where the boundary is between you and me, horse? But if I open my eyes, there, I see you. And if I move away, I can still see you, and you remain in my sight until you disappear over the horizon. So is it the horizon, the boundary between you and me, horse?

Leonardo looked around the room, casting an eye over the wax candle that was burning in the corner. It had gone down by two good inches since he started, so he had been working for four hours. Soon it would be time to go to bed and sleep for a while. An hour and a half, maybe two. Until dawn. There were five days left to deliver the work. The tail was missing, there was still time. And there was clay, which would become a tail, shaped by these very hands, the hands of Leonardo, son of Ser Piero, who from Vinci came to Milan, and in Milan who knows how long I will stay. Maybe we will stay here together our whole lives, my beautiful horse. And I'll see you every day.

And if I don't see you, because I leave, be patient. You are so well made that perhaps I may come across a wayfarer who will talk to me of you. Who will describe you, tell me of your curves, and perhaps show me a sketch of you. It's not the same as seeing you, but it goes beyond that. I can imagine you in my mind, as you are, or as even more beautiful. And that's how you'll truly be my horse.

Thus, perhaps there really is no boundary between you and me, horse. Like there is no boundary between il Moro and me, because even when he's not here I have to work on what he wants. Or between Salai and me, Dear God protect him and correct him. When he's not here, I worry about him. When he is here, I worry about him. And where is the boundary, the division? I love him, that boy. Like the son I'll never have.

## Four

The sun still hadn't appeared over the castle wall when the body was found.

A few minutes earlier the black of night had started to raise the curtain on the horizon, to reveal the spectacle of another brand new day. But inside the castle little could be seen, and even in the court known as Piazzale delle Armi, visibility was rather poor.

That was why Remigio Trevanotti, a servant of the castle, did not immediately know what the object he had tripped up on was. By regulation the object should not have been there, as it was the order of His Lordship that the arms courtyard remain free of movable objects at all hours of the day and night. It was a bundle of a strange consistency, almost like a sack full of large rocks from the river glued together. That was Remigio Trevanotti's first impression as he got up, cursing because it was down to him to now clear away such a heavy bundle.

It was only when figuring out the best way to mount it onto his back that he realized that was inside the bundle was a man.

A man too cold and too rigid to still be living.

“Dead?”

“Dead, your Lordship.”

“Stabbed?”

“It would not seem so, your Lordship.”

“Then what did he die of?”

“It is not clear, your Lordship.”

“Could it be *that*?”

“It could be *that*, your Lordship.”

“Do we know him?”

“I have seen him before, your Lordship.”

The voice was that of Bergonzio Botta, not only Ludovico’s tax collector but also, sometimes, his usher for morning hearings.

“It was one of the beggars who requested a hearing yesterday morning, and that your Lordship did not make it in time to hear. He passed by the castle again yesterday afternoon, to request a hearing again.”

“Do you remember his name?”

“I have surely written it in the list of impudents. I will go and get it now, your Lordship.”

“Go on, Bergonzio. But first please send for Magistro Ambrogio.”

While the servants lifted the body onto the table, Magistro Ambrogio da Rosate turned it over, waving a censer in which incense and lemon leaves burned. Incense because its hot and odorous smoke kept away the winds that transmitted infections, and the lemon leaves because Magistro Ambrogio liked the smell.

Having laid down the body, the servants remained next to the table, eyes flitting between the body and the physician, and feet pointing more towards the door than in front of them.

“Undress the poor wretch, may God have mercy on his soul.”

And so the servants did, with the rapid shredding movements of the terror-stricken, leaving, in no time, a nude man on the table, dead and somewhat pale.

Ambrogio da Rosate began to encircle the body slowly, like a hawk seeking its prey.

Ambrogio da Rosate was also seeking prey. Or rather, a sign. Any sign. But there were no signs of any kind on the body. There was no sign of a knife, or a dagger, or a puntilla. No blood seeping out of his mouth, his nose, his eyes...

“Turn him over.”

... nor any other apertures on his body.

Ambrogio continued to walk in circles, pensive, while the servants remained immobile, hoping that permission to leave the room would arrive soon.

Nor were there signs of poisoning by substances other than arsenic, which were popular at the time.

No bruises or marks that would suggest a beating, a brawl, or violent contact with a blunt instrument.

No congestion of the face or neck that would suggest an apoplectic fit. And after all, Magistro Ambrogio considered, if he had died from an attack, why go to the trouble of stuffing him into a sack and dragging it to the center of Piazzale delle Armi? What was the need to hide a poor man who had died of a heart attack?

No buboes, inflammation or other resounding symptoms of the evil that had destroyed almost half the continent more than one hundred years earlier. The purple wheals, the poisonous fungi that popped up under clothes and could only mean one thing. *That*, as Ludovico said and as Bergonzio Botta had responded. A disease so terrible that nobody in the court used its name, and that everybody was afraid of. The servants, the cooks, the guardsmen were all afraid, and so was he, Magistro Ambrogio

da Rosate, expert in the art of the stars but all too aware of his own mortality. He who had given him the order to examine the body was also all terrified.

“Have you finished, Magistro Ambrogio?”

“I don’t know,” responded Ambrogio, slow and cavernous. “I am very, very afraid that we are only just beginning...”

“What do you mean to say, Magistro Ambrogio?”

Ambrogio da Rosate turned to face the servant, forgetting the hierarchy of roles. His face was impassive, but his eyes looked stunned.

“Whatever this man has died of, it is a disease that has never been seen before.”

“Are you sure, Magistro Ambrogio?”

“I confess my ignorance, your Highness. It is not an illness I have ever encountered in either a man or a woman’s body, nor within the pages of any of my treatises.”

“So it isn’t the plague,” said Beatrice, with a faint hint of hope in her voice.

“With absolute certainty, your Ladyship,” responded Ambrogio da Rosate while behind the ducal couple a servant, on hearing the disease named explicitly, traced a quick sign of the cross with a furtive touch of his balls between the Father and the Holy Spirit.

“But something that kills nevertheless,” said Ludovico, his hands joined in front of his face. “And kills quickly. Messer Bergonzio, you told me yesterday you had seen that man alive. When, exactly?”

Bergonzio Botta, His Lordship’s official tax collector for the provinces of Lodi, Como and Vigevano, was not a cowardly man. He would be escorted by a handful of guards, it was often said, purely and exclusively for the motive of protecting his personal safety, which was put at risk by lightning, the plague, poisoning and all the

other calamities that according to Bergonzio were underrated by the majority of his kin. Hence, it was said, Bergonzio Botta was not a cowardly man: he was a real milksop. When Ludovico spoke, he had in fact just been counting the hours from when he had seen that young man at five, maximum ten steps away, and wondering whether the faint dizziness he felt was a first symptom of possible contamination.

“At nine of the clock, your Lordship,” responded Botta.

“And how did he look, Messer Bergonzio?”

“Well, just like when you saw him. A young blond man, about thirty...”

Ambrogio da Rosate, who had understood the question, tried to reformulate it.

“Was he shaking? Did he appear feverish? Was he pale in the face?”

“Quite the opposite. He was fit as a fiddle. Well, he looked it. I am not a surgeon, but he looked completely and utterly well.”

Ludovico il Moro’s face darkened, beyond that of the ‘Moor’ of his nickname, and he looked at Ambrogio da Rosate.

“I have never seen a disease like this, your Lordship,” admitted Ambrogio.

“Could he have been poisoned?”

“I have not seen anything on his body to make me think so, your Lordship. The eruptions and bleeding indicative of Cantarella or Acquetta di Perugia are not present. Any poison that enters our body leaves a trace, your Lordship.”

“Any poison leaves a trace,” il Moro repeated his words out loud, as if he found them particularly interesting, or knew they were true from personal experience. “I understand, Magistro Ambrogio. Now, tell me: what do the stars show on the subject?”

“I would have to consult the instruments, if your Lordship will grant me license.”

“Go on, Magistro Ambrogio.”

And off Ambrogio da Rosate went, after bowing deeply, slowly and with dignity. Ludovico let a moment or two pass in silence after the door was closed, as Bergonzio Botta felt for his pulse until his heavy dark cloth sleeve, trying to work out whether he had a fever or not.

“Messer Bergonzio, I will be needing you,” said Ludovico.

“At your Lordship’s service.”

“Send for Messer Leonardo.”

“I will go and call him myself, if your Lordship permits.”

“Messer Bergonzio, do you always go around with your escort?”

“Of course, your Lordship. Six capable, armed and well nourished men. Messer Leonardo is at no risk.”

Ludovico raised his eyes to the ceiling.

“Messer Bergonzio, what would the plebeian think if I sent for my most capable engineer and artist with a tax collector surrounded by armed swaggerers?”

“That he... that is, that there are problems between you and him, perhaps to do with payments...”

“I see that if you try hard to do so, you too, Messer Bergonzio, are capable of reasoning. Have Leonardo sent for by one of your men, alone and unarmed. He should come alone, with no fanfare or henchmen. And direct him straight to the medical room.”

“As you wish, your Lordship,” murmured Messer Bergonzio, starting to feel seriously unwell.

“You know, I would also like a room that opened onto the east wind,” said Leonardo, looking out of the open window.

Outside the sun, which merely appeared to be fixed in the sky, in fact rose, showering the room and everything in it with fresh, promising light. Including the dozens of crests that hung on the walls representing families of noble ancestry, static as a gentleman in the presence of a lord. And what a lord he was. Ludovico il Moro, the ruler of Milan, was said to have the Pope as his chaplain and the Emperor as his chamberlain. Il Moro was standing at the center of the brightest room in the castle. It was a sumptuous layout, open and elegant. It was just a pity for that bare-assed cadaver lying on the table in the middle of the room.

“Yes, I would like it very much. It gives a completely different feeling, don’t you think, your Lordship? The morning light is the most sincere.”

I would also like an east-facing room, perhaps Ludovico would have responded under normal conditions, that is, in the absence of an infected corpse. But on the contrary I, the ruler and effective lord of the city, must stay in the Rocchetta, with its small and dark west-facing rooms, until my good for nothing nephew Gian Galeazzo kicks the bucket. Although Ludovico would never have said it.

“The body was not brought here so you could paint it, Messer Leonardo,” said Ludovico, dryly. “Magistro Ambrogio claims that the winds that bring the plague blow from east to west, so this way we are at the least risk of exposing the city to contagion.”

There is no need to laugh, contemporary reader. Ambrogio da Rosate was simply obeying the medical knowledge of the time, when it was winds rather than bacteria that carried diseases, to the extent that hospitals at the time had their gates facing the Vatican, so that the Holy Spirit could enter easily. This fact, therefore, was not strange for Leonardo. Something else, however, was.

“The plague?”

Leonardo, with a raised eyebrow, moved towards the body, which he did not find objectionable.

“He doesn’t look like he died of the plague,” said Leonardo, sure. “To me, he has a very healthy and vivid appearance, for a corpse. Excuse my jest, your Lordship, but before death this man enjoyed great health.”

“That is the problem exactly. In fact, he doesn’t look dead. Magistro Ambrogio says he has no idea of the cause. He excludes the possibility that he was poisoned, or purposefully killed, but what stopped the heart of this man he says he does not know.”

“Magistro Ambrogio says he does not know. Ah.”

If he had been with his family, or in his workshop, he would have scoffed that Ambrogio da Rosate usually claimed to know everything, but in front of Il Moro he didn’t. Of all the Duke’s advisors, the astrologer’s word was never questioned. He continued:

“If Magistro Ambrogio, the best physician and surgeon on all the peninsula, said this, what could a painter such as me possibly add?”

“Magistro Ambrogio only looked at him from outside. I would like you to look at him inside.”

“Inside?”

“Is it not true, Messer Leonardo, that you amuse yourself with anatomy, and that to make your paintings and your works more life-like you often unclthe the bodies further, stripping them of their skin, and draw their features?”

Leonardo stopped breathing. But just for a moment.

At the time, human anatomy was more akin to necromancy than to life drawing. The position of the organs was known in an approximate and incomplete way, and where something did not make sense it was substituted by astrological symbols that

were about as useful as a putty screwdriver. There was good reason for this: dissecting a cadaver was not easy. Not prohibited, but not easy either. Dissecting horses, or dogs, or pigs, was feasible. Dissecting a woman, not so tricky: women were, after all, considered soulless, and so cutting them into quarters to observe their internal organs was not as unbecoming or as compromising, in terms of eternal life. But a man was a different kettle of fish. To find a male body intact and eviscerate it in order to look inside was neither easy nor risk-free, especially for somebody who was not a doctor. Leonardo did it, but he was not happy that people heard about it, not least because the ecclesiastical courts were in a hurry to misinterpret certain things.

“My observations of anatomy, your Lordship, are based on the many corpses I saw in Florence, and on the similarities between man and animal that they demonstrate, from which I deduced similarities and differences between the two. You see...”

“Listen to me, Leonardo. I don’t care what you do with dead bodies, as long as you don’t fabricate the primary material from living Christians. I am not my brother the Cardinal nor am I your friend who sits on the threshold of Rome. But I am the ruler of this city, and I must occupy myself with living beings before the dead and avoid the former becoming the latter. I need your help.”

“Please forgive me, once again, your Lordship, but I already have rather a lot of work to take care of, of which the bronze horse in memory of His Lordship your father is my first priority, and every minute is precious to me...”

“Messer Leonardo, I understand. You work a lot, and you are paid little. By many, myself included. All right, Messer Leonardo. I thank you for coming so promptly, and I permit you to return to your work. It is a time of crisis, if I have properly understood?”

“Alas yes, your Lordship. These are not times of joy. There is little money around, and those who have it keep it for themselves, even when they have promised it.”

“I know that you are owed a large payment from the Confraternity of the Immaculate Conception of San Francesco Grande.”

“One thousand two hundred lire, alas. Both I and the good De Predis.”

“This is extremely unjust,” said Ludovico, with an understanding nod. “You will be paid tomorrow. Have my word.”

It was this that confused Leonardo about Ludovico. He never explicitly promised anything in exchange for something else. He made you feel an obligation. As if he wanted to reaffirm that he was the lord, and ensure that you knew so very well, and that he remained the lord even if you didn’t want to believe it.

“Your Lordship is too good. I wonder...”

“Say it.”

“If you felt it was appropriate, whether I could also take a look at the front of this poor fellow. Magistro Ambrogio is a wise man of expertise, but his eyesight is not what it once was.”

“Go ahead, please.”

With just a hint of hesitation, Leonardo put a hand on the shoulder of the body, testing the resistance. Then, in a movement that was decisive and much more expert than his previous words had suggested, wrapped his hand around the corpse’s hip and, almost without effort, laid it on its back.

He remained for some seconds looking at it, intensely fixated.

“No external signs,” he said.

“No. Externally, no signs,” – responded Ludovico.

In theory, il Moro had said the same thing as Leonardo. In practice there was a big difference in meaning that at that point was difficult to ignore.

In the same way, it was difficult to not see that something in Leonardo's expression had changed. He was still serious, but without that lightness that he usually had in his eyes, and that brought joy to those who encountered it. As if he had seen something that had eluded the ducal astrologist, but was not entirely sure.

The two remained silent for some seconds more.

"I would need some things," said Leonardo in a practical tone, breaking the silence.

"I will send for the chamberlain immediately."

"Yes, thank you," responded Leonardo, without weighing his response down with pointless titles and possessive pronouns. "Send also for Giacomo Salai, at my workshop. He should bring my papers, the knives, and the other tools, which he knows. And other than those two, do not let anybody else enter."

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## Five

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“Leonardo da Vinci?”

“He is already in there, captain,” said the guard in front of the chamber door, moving to one side. Galeazzo, without saying a word, entered and saw Leonardo standing next to the table with a grave look on his face.

“My respects, messer Leonardo. Have you finished examining the body?”

“Just right at this moment, at the will of his Lordship,” responded Leonardo, still with a serious air about him. It was rare to see him so somber in the face.

Galeazzo Sanseverino looked around him. On the table the corpse lay in pieces, with the thoracic cavity open and the organs lying around it, like clothes strewn out of a trunk in a hurry. The sight would have turned anybody’s stomach, and in fact poor Salai was pale and his face was contorted.

“So, Giacometto, men are not so pretty from the inside, are they?”

“Your Lordship no, signor Galeazzo,” responded the boy, passing by him with a quick bow.

“Don’t vomit on me, please, I’m wearing a new tunic.” Galeazzo looked at the young boy who was putting the instruments away, almost more pale than the dead man. The little rogue. Two or three years had passed since he had stolen the girdle

purse that had almost half a lira inside, but Galeazzo Sanseverino was not the type to easily forget something, for better or for worse. And that little good-for-nothing was pleasant, but had a hint of the dark side about him. “Now, messer Leonardo, what do you say? Which malady killed this poor soul?”

“I must inform you, captain,” said Leonardo, wiping his hands on a rag. It was not clear how he had managed it, but while Salai was covered from head to toe in blood and guts, Leonardo had remained as squeaky clean as when he arrived. “Which malady, you ask me? A malady that is most difficult to protect yourself from, captain.”

*“That one?”*

“Worse, captain. Much worse. Human wickedness.” Leonardo threw the rag down on the table next to the body.

“This poor man, you see, was murdered.”

“Murdered?” Galeazzo was shocked.

“Murdered. Suffocated, to be precise. Death by lack of air to the lungs.”

“Please allow me, messer Leonardo, but this is impossible. I have seen many times the look of a strangled man, and he certainly doesn’t have such a serene appearance.” Galeazzo was not about to specify that he himself had strangled a couple of gentlemen, as it didn’t seem like the right time. “The tongue, the eyes, the face...”

“Excuse me, perhaps I was not clear. I did not say strangled, or choked. I said suffocated.”

“Of course, messer Leonardo. But even so, if something had been put in the poor wretch’s mouth, his eyes would surely be crossed, and...”

“No, no, none of that. There is no trace of fabric between his teeth, nor forced opening of the mouth. And there is no strong bruising. Forgive me, captain, I believe something altogether different took place.”

“Something different. And what, by the grace of the Lord?”

“Ah. What, you ask me? It is not so easy to explain it. I believe it would be appropriate to go together to visit His Lordship.”

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## Six

“Messer Leonardo, what a pleasure it is to see you.”

“Contessa, Cecilia, the pleasure is all mine. Thank you for receiving me in such a hurry.”

Cecilia, walking under the open gallery, had got close enough to Leonardo by now to see that he had a frown on his face. Around them the courtyard of Palazzo Carmagnola was calm and quiet, in stark contrast to the Piazzale in Porta Giovia.

“Please.” Cecilia Gallerani took Leonardo’s hands, cold and stiff, between hers, which were warm and soft. “Rather, I hope there are not grave reasons for this visit. I was expecting you yesterday, for the music. What brought you here with such haste?”

“I would prefer to talk about it somewhere secluded, Contessa.”

“Is it something that happened at the castle?” asked Tersilla, one of Cecilia’s ladies-in-waiting, the most charming in manner but also the most petulant.

“Tersilla, don’t bother messer Leonardo...”

“Is it that man who was found dead in the Piazza d’armi? Is it true he was killed by the Lord’s wrath?”

“Who told you these things, Tersilla?”

“Everybody knows,” said the damsel, shrugging her shoulders. “Today at the Broletto it’s all anyone’s talking about, and even friar Gioacchino talked about it in his sermon. They saw Magistro Ambrogio crossing the castle in a hurry, getting dressed as he walked.”

“You see, messer Leonardo, I have always told you,” said Cecilia, chuckling. “The castle is unable to keep a secret. There are too many people passing through, too many people hanging around. When I was still living at the castle, can you imagine, there was even an ape roaming around dressed as an esquire.”

“He’s still there,” said Leonardo. “His Lordship says he is more disciplined than half of his servants, and judging from what I’m hearing he is quite right.”

“Come, now. Tersilla, messer Leonardo and I are going to the blue room. Do not disturb us for any reason.”

“As you wish, signora Contessa.”

“And so, messer Leonardo,” said Cecilia, chuckling, “somebody in the castle has died by the hand of God?”

“I can’t agree,” responded Leonardo, collapsing into the extremely uncomfortable wood and cloth chair that he preferred, for unknown reasons, to the soft leather armchairs that were on offer throughout the room. “It is easy to invoke the wrath of God when we do not understand something. We did it with the eclipses, millennia ago. Then we learned that the movement of the stars could be predicted. Then, since we didn’t understand anything and couldn’t predict anything apart from the movement of the stars, we convinced ourselves that the movement of the stars could inform us of the fate of men. A bit like in that quip about the man who is looking into a puddle in an alleyway, under a torch attached to the wall. What are you looking for, my good man? I am looking for a ducato that I have lost, he responds. And did you lose it here in the puddle? No, he responds, I dropped it over there, in a puddle in the middle of the street. So why are you looking for it here? Because there is light here, the man responds pointing to the torch.”

“Cecilia laughed an affected laugh, with her hand on her throat. Then, again, with an air of wit, looked at Leonardo.

“Do you have it in for the ducal astrologer?”

“He’s a donkey in costume,” responded Leonardo. “Only good for offering pompous words. And I also fear that I exhibited a grave lack of tact.”

“So, tell me. Tell me about this death. First of all, what did he die from?”

“Murdered, your Lordship.”

“Murdered?”

“Suffocated, to be precise.”

Ludovico looked at Galeazzo, who returned his look vacantly.

“He doesn’t look like a strangled man.”

“No of course not. The man was suffocated by a mechanical force.”

“Please explain yourself, messer Leonardo.”

“You see, your Lordship, we breath by making air enter our chest mechanically, that is by expanding the chest and increasing its volume.” Leonardo brought his hands to his chest and took a deep breath, highlighting the movement of his ribs with his palms. “The nature of the movement of water and air is similar, and both tend to fill up whatever recipient surrounds them. But there is one difference, between air and water: one you can compress, crush, reduce in volume, while the other you cannot. You can blow a little air into a pig’s bladder, tie it up with string and squeeze it between your hands until it is so small that its puts up a great resistance to our compression, and you cannot squeeze any further: but if the bladder is full of water, that is not possible. And in the same way that you can squash air, you can also

compress a body full of air. But if there is a hole through which it can escape, the air will escape and not be able to re-enter.”

Ludovico, after a moment of reflection, turned to look at Leonardo.

“I do not believe that you have explained yourself sufficiently, messer Leonardo.”

“I believe that this poor wretch was squeezed into a corset, a doublet, which compressed him and squeezed his chest so tightly that all of the air came out of his body, and, unable to enlarge it again, he could not take in more.”

“What brings you to this conclusion?”

“When dissecting the body, I was able to see that the ribs, the slats across the chest, were broken in places. Not in the bone, but in the soft joints that join the slats to the column of his back, and to the bone that shields the heart. As if something had pressed inwards from every direction.”

Ludovico had joined his hands together and brought them in front of his mouth, rubbing them. After a few seconds, he lifted his eyes again.

“And one can die from such an incident?”

“Your Lordship, in the same way that one can die from drowning or from any accident that leaves them without air, yes.”

“Magistro Ambrogio, what do you have to say?”

Ambrogio da Rosate lifted his chin almost imperceptibly, and pointed up at the vault in the ceiling.

“The stars indicate death by a disease, messer Leonardo. The position of Mars moreover leaves no doubt.”

“Magistro Ambrogio, I am happy for you that you can read so many things in the stars,” said Leonardo, extending his hands. “For me the stars barely even indicate which way is north.”

“Your observations regard the body, a mere mortal thing,” responded Ambrogio, with a grave voice. “Mine regard the stars, the first and most clear emanation of the Eternal. I hope you wouldn’t want to compare that which we see in a body with that which we see in the stars.”

“Forgive me, Magistro Ambrogio, but you also looked at the body yesterday to see if there were signs of disease or of violence.”

“To get an initial idea of what had happened. As we had the body, it was the first thing to be done. But to be certain, and to link the past to the future, it is necessary to consider the stars. The stars never lie.”

If Ambrogio da Rosate and Leonardo had been alone at dinner, Leonardo probably would have started to discourse on the curious etymology of the word *consider*, which, from his very poor knowledge of Latin, he guessed would translate as *cum sideribus*, meaning together with the stars. But since they were not at the pub, but rather in the presence of the Lord of Milan, and Leonardo had taken it badly that this coat rack cloaked in purple cloth believed he could push his science into a back seat. The son of ser Pietro harbored a much higher respect for knowledge than he did for himself.

“I understand.” Leonardo turned towards Ludovico, with the look of somebody who had just been told the moon was made of cheese. “Like that Dominican friar who said to His Lordship your brother that he was born under the influence of the stars, and who foretold the conquest of the Peloponnese, of Asia, of Africa and of all Our Sea. What was his name? Annio da Viterbo?”

Leonardo, as everybody knows, was a genius. Thus it took no time at all, just a billionth of the time it took Jupiter to make one revolution of the Sun, to realize he had screwed-up sensationally.

To remind Ludovico il Moro that his brother, Galeazzo Maria, had believed the horoscope of a burly friar-astrologer who said he was going to conquer the world was not the correct move to make, considering that the same Galeazzo Maria had been stabbed to death not even three years afterwards, in the same Milan from which he had never moved.

“If you want to pay due honor to the memory of my family, you should hurry up and finish the monument I commissioned you years ago, rather than throwing doubt on the words of Magistro Ambrogio.”

“And so you weren’t believed?” Cecilia gracefully shook her head. “My poor Leonardo, you said the right thing at the wrong time. When will you learn that Ludovico does not take pleasure in certain topics?”

“I don’t believe I ever will, Contessa Cecilia. That’s why I have come here to ask for your help.”

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## Seven

Horse. It's beautiful, that horse. It looks almost like Galeazzo's Siciliano. But that one is more beautiful. Its legs are so very slim. But its muscles are well defined. It is the muscles that give the impression of movement. Muscle tensed, contracted, legs of steel. And the proportions. If you make the horse's leg as long as it is, the statue will seem stationary. You have to make it a little longer than in real life, remember. The back leg shorter, contracted, driving. The front leg longer, gliding. But that is all design. The muscles are art. It needs to be smooth, the horse, the muscles must be well defined. Today I will try sand with rabbit hair and the white of the egg. Oh!

“Are you hurt, sir? Do excuse me, I was deep in thought... Oh, ambassador, is it you? What a surprise! I do hope you're not hurt.”

“Absolutely not, messer Leonardo, absolutely not,” confirmed Giacomo Trotti, who had collided with a Leonardo da Vinci in full stream of consciousness as he crossed the road, and who in reality had only managed to avoid falling over by some sort of miracle. He was after all a man of seventy, even though he was depreciating well, who had run into a rather strapping one of forty. “And you, are you well?”

“Perfectly. Rather, I must apologize, but, you know, I sometimes find myself distracted and don't watch where I put my feet. It was fortunate I ran into you, and not one of these carts that run all over the place. It did happen to me once, almost run

over by a cart and, what's more, I was insulted by the woman driving it. An uncommon disgrace, I can assure you."

"Think nothing of it." Trotti placed a hand on Leonardo's arm. "It happens to me too. More often than it should to a man of my age. Are you going anywhere nice?"

"Not too far from here, near the animal market."

"I am also going that way. If you don't mind, I will accompany you."

"Of course not," Leonardo smiled. "Perhaps, as we are two, we will be more careful."

Trotti also smiled, internally. And his first task, making contact with Leonardo in a manner that appeared casual, was accomplished. Ludovico had explicitly asked him to do it in a way that would not make him feel he was being investigated.

"Are you going to buy some animals?"

"No, far from it," responded Leonardo, who seemed lost again in his thoughts. This man was distracted in a way that was almost worrying. "I am going to see an old friend who I believe can get me something I need. And who will charge me a small amount compared to what it usually costs."

"Eh, good things always cost so much. There's always less money than we need, living in Milan. When I lived in Ferrara, I would spend in a week what I spend here in a day."

Which, said by Trotti, could be perceived as having no ulterior motive. It was well known that the ambassador of Ferrara had few rivals in miserliness, the husband of Gallerani included. But, in reality, the good Trotti was baiting his hook.

I want to know if Leonardo is corruptible, is what Ludovico il Moro had straight up said to Trotti. I suspect – no – I am almost certain that the French want his projects, and Leonardo could justifiably complain about the money he does not

receive from me just as from others. They could buy them, or they could buy him. I want you to find out if this is possible. Go, ask questions, interrogate. With discretion, but with wisdom, as you know how.”

And that was precisely what Giacomo Trotti was doing.

“Money wouldn’t be a problem,” said Leonardo. “That is, it wouldn’t be if I had enough of it.”

“It seems nobody has enough of it,” observed Trotti. “Even the two French gentlemen who arrived yesterday did nothing but complain on the subject.”

“Tell me about it,” responded Leonardo, shaking his head. “More than half the dinner, last night, spent discussing money and how much they were earning.” Leonardo chuckled. “I would earn enough, I told them, if I didn’t have to keep spending money on new clothes, to replace those stained with wine thanks to other people’s clumsiness.”

Leonardo smoothed down the front of his tunic, in that compulsive gesture Trotti had often seen him do, as if he feared it was soiled again.

“People give too much importance to money, messer Giacomo. So many people are so convinced that it is something worth keeping in the house and gazing at, as if it were a painting or a piece of jewelry. But money has no substance, it has no body of its own.”

Meanwhile they had arrived at the piazza next to the construction site of the Duomo where the animal market was held. Beasts of all kinds: from chickens to cows, through rabbits and birds, with a great abundance of species not for sale too, such as flies. Leonardo slowed his pace, looking around, and the good Trotti, who had become short of breath, managed to reinflate the barrel of his body.

“And so for you, what is it, money?”

“Good question. You see, messer Giacomo, I am an *omo senza lettere* – an uneducated man – and when it comes to explanations and explications I fall alone into labyrinthine discourses. If you will allow, I’ll give you an example.”

On saying this, Leonardo deviated slightly from his trajectory, walking towards a seller of small birds who kept his goods in cages hung from poles, similar to barbells, curving under the weight of those flying creatures and, mostly, of their cages.

“Greetings, good man.”

“At your service, messere,” the man responded with a voice similar to that of his wares, standing still. “Matteo the bird seller is at your service. What are you looking for? We have green and yellow parakeets, or if you like music, we have nightingales that sing better than any instrument.”

“How beautiful,” said Leonardo, in a sincere tone. “You see, messer Giacomo, do you feel it fair that such a wondrous creation of nature is in a cage, impotent, just so that us men of the city can enjoy its song? Tell me, good man, how much do you want for this pair of nightingales?”

“Five dinars for these, messere. But they are coins well spent. They sing like angels.”

“I do not doubt it, my dear,” said Leonardo, putting his hand in his pouch. “Here you are.”

“And here you are,” said the man, untying the cage with the two nightingales from the pole and handing it to Leonardo. “It would be worth building them a bigger house if you want to keep them in your home.”

“Don’t worry, sir. There will be no need.”

And, opening the cage, he put a finger out to one of the little animals and it immediately hopped on. Leonardo took his hand out and lifted it up, like an inexperienced falconer trying to train a toy falcon. The bird suddenly took off, flapping its wings and flying around above the people, to then disappear over the houses in a matter of moments.

Giacomo Trotti turned towards Leonardo, who had followed the flight of the little bird with his face upwards, with an air of a cooperation and contentment. In the meantime the second bird, having seen the cage was open, had disappeared without anybody noticing.

“Isn’t it marvelous? I have always dreamed of being able to devote myself to the flight of birds. Perhaps, one day, I will be able to dedicate myself to it, when I have finished with this blessed bronze horse. Here, messer Giacomo. Did you see that?”

“Yes I saw. You spent five dinars on nothing.”

“On nothing? Excuse me, my dear, I gave freedom to a pair of nightingales, and I was able to observe and experience all that came from it. Their happiness, my happiness, your astonishment. In such situations, in which thoughts turn to hope, I have transformed my thoughts into flight, almost as though I were Almighty God. Don’t you think?”

“Of course, you are right. When one buys a good wine, he certainly doesn’t buy it to keep it and watch over it. One doesn’t buy wine for what it is, but one hopes to buy wellbeing, the pleasant sensation of intoxication.”

Giacomo Trotti nodded, pensively.

“I understand, messer Leonardo. You think in the same way as me. Money is an ambassador, it is a liquid. A means to obtain that which one needs. But on this

point, forgive me, you cannot tell me that the quantity of money you have does not matter. Even for you, the more money you possess, the more opportunity you have to do what makes you happy.”

“My good Trotti, I feel I have not explained myself well. That good bird seller and I, earlier, concluded a deal. I gave him five pieces of metal, and he gave me two nightingales. We were both in agreement on what those five pieces of metal meant. You see, money is a language. It works not because it has a nature of its own, but because all of us men have agreed to give it the selfsame power. And it is a language more powerful than our phrases and our words.”

“Of course, because everybody understands it.”

“On the contrary, because it is a secret code.”

“A secret code?”

“Of course. Think about it, messer Giacomo. You strike a man, or an ape, in the heart with an arrow: the same thing happens. The man, like the ape, dies. You try to give him food, a piece of fruit: the man, like the ape, eats it. But try putting a ducat in the hand of an ape, and insist on exchanging it for that same piece of fruit that you put in his hand.”

“He would rip my arm off.”

“Almost certainly. Yet, if he understood what he had been given, he could buy one hundred of those same fruits.”

Leonardo, standing still, turned towards Trotti.

“Money, like language, is a secret code through which men make agreements, and that is utterly incomprehensible for anyone who isn’t human.”

“Like natural language, you mean.”

“Even more powerful, because it is even more secret. You can train a dog, using language. You can tell it basket, sit, and other commands. But try to give it a ducat, and tell me if he wouldn’t try to swallow it.” Leonardo turned decisively into via degli Armorari, with the relaxed pace of a man who has almost reached his destination. “It is thanks to this that we men are the most powerful living beings, and that we dominate over all the other beasts of creation. Lions, pigs, monkeys, dogs...” Leonardo smiled, “... and also horses. And in the end it is horses that get the better of us. Enough of that for now. I’m here now, messer Giacomo.”

Giacomo Trotti looked around.

At the time in question, Milan was a city of manufacturing *par excellence*. Everything was made there.

Textiles, particularly rich brocade interwoven with the finest golden thread, but also any type of fabric made with Lombardy silk and Cotswold wool, which when worked in the Ambrosian factories grew in beauty while remaining warm and soft.

Garments, from the rags of humble servants, to the court ladies’ *cioppa* and *camore* overdresses, to the highest fashion of the dukes and duchesses, whose dresses were conceived and designed by the most sophisticated artists, including Leonardo, who himself had created the dresses worn by Beatrice for the famous Festa del Paradiso.

Moveable, combinable and transformable, like desks that transformed into lunch tables, and that bore encrusted in dark wood the warning NE GRAVIORA FERAM – do not load me with excessive weight.

But, above all, armor. Armor and weapons of every type, shape and use, not necessarily for war, in fact, hardly ever for war. At the time, indeed, weapons and armor were objects of high fashion, not only in wartime, and to wear them in the town

center during a procession was common. One would flaunt an object that was made for other purposes just for the sake of showing others how rich they were, as well as to evoke a superior aptitude for exploration and bravery. Today's equivalent would be driving an SUV through a congestion zone.

As a consequence, in a particular area of the city a thriving artisanal activity developed that very quickly, thanks to the enthusiasm of its participants, forced the prestigious and exclusive 'Made in Italy' even onto the complicated world of halberds. The exact same area was home to via degli Scudari, the ruling kingdom of sellers of luxury weaponry.

Now, it is true that Leonardo was a precursor to the dandies, and on elegance his own had much to say: but Trotti struggled to picture him in a suit of armor.

“Are you here to buy yourself a breastplate, messer Leonardo?”

“Oh no, certainly not, messer Giacomo. I am here to speak with an artisan who is an expert in metals. Do you have something to do?”

“On the contrary, I will gladly accompany you.”

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## Nine

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“Leonardo, Leonardo, when will you learn to stay quiet?”

Cecilia Gallerani, a work of embroidery in her lap, looked at Leonardo shaking her head. Leonardo, in front of her, sat on his usual wooden and cloth seat, with his clasped hands resting on his closed knees. In the room, other than them, only Tersilla remained. The two religious men had left without saying a word, friar Gioacchino with his chin up and Padre Diodato apologizing to the lady of the house, while Josquin des Prez went into the hall to gather the musicians and French delegates, in a cocktail of haste and politeness in equal measure.

“I apologize deeply, contessa, I never would have thought that one could interpret such intellectual inquiry as blasphemy towards the Almighty. I have been frequenting your salon for months, and have always appreciated the profound frankness and serenity of your guests when talking about philosophy. Yet it seemed to me that padre Diodato was not new to your meetings.”

“Not at all. It was not the first time, and he has always proven to be a man of intelligence, and also a courageous defender of the Holy Roman Church, but never inclined towards bigotry. Perhaps it was my fault, but I was curious to know this friar

Gioacchino of whom the whole city is talking. And I was not the only one, was I, Tersilla?”

“Oh, indeed you weren’t, signora Contessa. At the Broletto people spoke of nothing but his sermons. But I didn’t believe he was so... so...”

“I know, I know,” said Leonardo, raising one palm. “Our sense of justice is always satisfied when we hear somebody pouring scorn on evil, provided the evil ones are not us. But that is truly the kind of Christian who has not understood the parable of the Gospel and, blinded by the log in his own eye, was searching for the speck in mine. As if, within the walls of Milan, there was not enough evil without needing to produce more out of thin air.”

“Are you referring to the poor man who was struck by the divine wrath?”

“Divine wrath has nothing to do with it, my dear Tersilla. The man died from suffocation at the hands of a human, and for very ignoble motives, I believe. Like I believe that it will drive me to ruin if I don’t find an explanation for this act.”

The girl turned violently red, while Cecilia flinched – a quite suitable verb to describe the reactions of a lady in a historical novel. Especially if it is set in the Renaissance.

“Are you serious?”

“Sadly, Contessa, the man who has been robbed of consciousness was a poor workshop apprentice of mine.”

“An apprentice of yours?”

“One who was my apprentice. Rambaldo Chiti was his name.”

“Rambaldo Chiti. I do not know him. Have you ever spoken to me about him?”

“Not by name, signora contessa.”

“Now I understand. It was that rascal who paid with false money in your name, am I mistaken?”

“Him, Contessa, him and nobody else. I have reason to believe that, as I have perhaps already told you, that he continued that wicked business of his and counterfeited a letter of credit that was found in his possession. That is why I was visiting His Lordship today after dinner together with the illustrious Bergonzio Botta.”

“Illustrious, messer Leonardo?” said Tersilla, narrowing her eyes. “Forgive me, but you are calling one of those predatory dogs, who survive by scratching out every single coin from the pockets of artisans in the name of taxes, illustrious...”

“Tersilla!”

“Forgive me, signora Contessa, but that is what the people of the city call them. Predatory dogs. If they were good people, they wouldn’t need escorts.”

“Leave us alone, Tersilla, please.”

“As you wish, signora contessa.”

Tersilla got up, with a glint in her eye and a throbbing chest, and collecting up her skirts disappeared from the room closing the door silently behind her. Cecilia leaned forward towards her guest.

“Pardon the courage of my maid, messer Leonardo. She is a bright girl, who has had some frightful family histories. A year of floods ruined their harvest, and her dowry went up in flames. I took her with me to the castle to look after little Cesare. My little emperor, as I call him.”

“I understand. And whyever did you relieve her from this task?”

“How do you know that?”

“Your Cesare, Contessa, has just turned two. An infant of that age needs his nurse at all hours, yet for some months now I have seen miss Tersilla looking after you, and not him.”

Right, right. Cesare Sforza, natural son of Cecilia and Ludovico, had turned two in May of that year. It is true that people spoke of him as a precocious boy, since at the age of six his father would try to make him archbishop of Milan, when four years previously the little Cesare wasn't doing much more than eating and viceversa, and whoever was in charge of his wellbeing had to supervise him from morn til eve.

“You are right,” said Cecilia, reddening slightly. “You see, Tersilla is a bright young girl, albeit a little coquettish with men, but she comes from a family outside the walls, and was brought up in a rough nature. She often speaks licentiously, as you have just heard. I do not want my little one to grow up hearing vulgar words like those you have just heard, and for which I apologize again.”

“I don't see why sincerity calls for apology. Everyone here in Milan knows that the duchy has increased the taxes disproportionately, and as for the new tax on salt...”

Cecilia sighed, in the way one sighs when they see their college boyfriend walk past with his wife, a baby bump and a comb-over.

“You will never hear me speak badly of His Lordship Ludovico il Moro, messer Leonardo. Let's return to you, please.”

“Forgive me, Contessa. I didn't mean... Anyway, you see, the banker whose letter was counterfeited was my friend in Florence, and...”

“He was? So he died?”

“Yes, Contessa, last summer. Somebody here in Milan, to have permitted Chiti to falsify his signature and his handwriting, must have possessed an example, a

letter of credit to use as a sample. I tried, together with Botta, to list the names of the people here in Milan with whom he wrote to me to have done business. Some of whom, probably, you might know: they are carders or wool workers, like Giovanni Barraccio or Clemente Vulzio...”

“Barraccio I know well, I go to him for blankets and cloaks.”

“... Or jewelry and stone merchants, like Candido Bertone, or even sellers of needles and materials for working brocades and silk, like Costante in Porta Ticinese. Anyway, we are trying to find out if any of them have lost, or had stolen from them, one of these letters. Just today the chief of justice will go to visit these people to ask them for an account of their credit operations, and tomorrow he will go to Accerrito Portinari’s bank to look at the registers and see if they correspond.”

“And you?”

“And I will come with you now to listen to some good music and try to distract my thoughts.”

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## Twelve Plus One and a Half

(see above)

The group of men who proceeded along the Contrada di San Nazzario was curious to say the least.

Four guards, endowed with swords and iron chainmail, enclosed within them another two men, who conversed at ease; one was tall, vigorous, dressed in dark cloth, and the other average height, blond, with a well-groomed beard, in an impeccable rose-colored tunic.

“And so, how did you get to the person?” asked Galeazzo Sanseverino, looking about himself.

Fortunately, the road was semi-deserted.

After furtively leaving via the wooden jetty behind the castle, the two walked along Contrada dei Cusani until the crossing with Contrada Rovello, then took the narrow alley know as Contrada di San Nazzario alla Pietrasanta. To get to where they were going it would have been more convenient to take the Contrada Solata, which was much wider and brighter, as the name suggested, but they also would have been more visible, which both Leonardo and Galeazzo wanted to avoid.

“You see, Capitano, I have noticed a couple of times that the conversations had in the house towards which we are heading have had precise repercussions in the events of the following, or the same, day.”

“I see. So, whenever you talked about something surrounding the death of Rambaldo Chiti...”

“... something else immediately happened regarding the people involved in the affair. It happened every time that he was talked about in the house of Contessa Bergamini.”

“Not in your house, Contessa Bergamini. I would not be able to enter your home and tell you what I’m about to tell you. Or, better, to ask you what I’m about to ask you.”

“Any desire of yours is an invitation for me, your Lordship,” said Cecilia Gallerani, with her head low, but her eyes wide set on il Moro. There was a time that those same eyes caressed, but now they scrutinized.

“Don’t say it. You see, Contessa...”

“Once upon a time you used to call me by my name, your Lordship.”

“You see, Cecilia, once upon a time I was not married. Now I am, and my wife, the mother of my son Ercole Massimiliano, is very jealous.”

“I had my ways of knowing so,” responded Cecilia, turning her gaze towards the outdoor courtyard, and one couldn’t tell if she was looking over at the Rocchetta, where she lived during the first months of il Moro’s marriage, or at the brand-new cloth cover on the east window. “I believe you should exercise the respect that she has earned. After all, we are talking about the future Duchess of Milan.”

“The same respect that you owe to your husband, His Excellence Conte Bergamini. Where is he, at present?”

“In the countryside, at San Giovanni in Croce, your Lordship.”

“Would it be such a terrible idea to be together with him, for the next few months?”

“You mean that I should join him, or that I should call him home?”

“The former, Contessa. I am sure that you and the young Cesare would benefit from the country air. On that matter, Contessa, there is something else I need to tell you. It is the second reason I sent for you at the court.”

“On the matter of my husband?”

“On the matter of your home, Contessa.”

“You see, it happened twice while I was in the house that I mentioned the unfortunate events of the Piazza d’Armi and the death of Chiti. The first time was when I told them how the poor soul was murdered, rather than struck by lightning or afflicted by a disease. But the second was when I told the Contessa that I knew the name of the dead man and drew the link between him and the letter of credit he forged. If you remember, that same day I was in the court with Botta, to give some names of people who I knew had been in business with the late Bencio Serristori.”

“I remember. And Botta told me that you gave the name of this Giovanni Barraccio.”

“I’m impressed by your memory. You see, it occurred to me that after having named Giovanni Barraccio, and Contessa Gallerani having told me that she herself had directed Barraccio to Padre Diodato, poor old Barraccio was killed that very same night. To stop him from talking. He was the only eyewitness of the delivery of the

letter, the letter that was then never received. Padre Diodato could easily have said that he hadn't received a visit from Barraccio at all."

"And you are saying that it was the same hand that killed Rambaldo Chiti?"

Leonardo shook his head gravely, in spite of his brisk pace.

"Not the same hand, but the same head. The assassins are two different men. It was not Padre Diodato who killed Rambaldo."

Walking, Leonardo stumbled on a stone and lost his balance for a moment. Then, having resumed his rhythm, he continued.

"At the beginning I thought that Chiti had been forced into an armored corset, tightened until, along with his breath, he exhaled his soul. But then I realized that it wouldn't have been easy to convince a man to put on armor against his will, or to force it onto him. No, there was an easier way to do it. As easy as eavesdropping at the door when the Contessa is in confidence with a man who knows many things."

Leonardo turned towards Galeazzo, continuing to walk at a good cadence.

"If that man was coming to your house, on an amorous visit, and you wanted to hide him from the view of onlookers, wouldn't it be easy to convince him to climb into a chest of clothes with his knees bent, in the fetal position, and then close and tighten the trunk, like a pair of pincers, around the wretched soul."

"Quite some force would be needed to do this, Messer Leonardo," objected Galeazzo. "I don't know if a woman would be capable, especially if the man was strong and in good health, as Chiti was."

"On the contrary. You would just need a trunk with a contraption that multiplies your force, along the lines of a lever and pulley, so that for every arm-length turn made with minimal strength, there is a corresponding movement of one inch, but of enormous force."

“And does such a mechanical box exist, Messer Leonardo? Are you sure that the aforesaid possessed one?”

“I am sure, Capitano Galeazzo. I engineered and built it myself. And it sits in the house that we are about to enter.”

Galeazzo and Leonardo stopped at the gate. The service gate of Palazzo Carmagnola, the residence of Contessa Cecilia Gallerani Bergamini. Leonardo let his companion go first.

“Capitano, I believe it is you who should knock.”

And so Galeazzo did, firmly. After a few seconds, a pretty young girl opened the door, saw Galeazzo, saw Leonardo, saw, most importantly, the four armed guards, and turned white.

“The Contessa is not at home, signori...”

“It does not matter, Mademoiselle Tersilla. We were actually looking for you.”

## Fourteen

Cecilia Gallerani was standing motionless in the center of the courtyard.

Around her, the court was frescoed with the most important episodes in Milan's recent history, from the Peace of Ferrara to the wedding of Francesco Sforza.

Next to her was Leonardo, who had just been explaining exactly how the two of them had also just played an active part in the city's history, even if it was unlikely anybody would fresco their conversations and lines of argument. For painters, History consists, as we know, of battles, or of conquests. But painters, just like generals – as somebody would point out around four hundred and fifty years later not too far from this spot – forget that it is historians who win the battles.

“I knew that Tersilla and Padre Diodato lusted over one another, but I would never have believed that he could instruct her to do such a thing.”

“So you knew?”

“I knew, and I looked the other way.”

Cecilia held her hands in front of her, one inside the other. She was just twenty years old, Contessa Cecilia Gallerani Bergamini, but the way she moved and spoke suggested she had lived more than one life.

“Tersilla's family was sent to ruin by Botta some years ago. The taxes are harsh for those who have a lot of land, if the land doesn't return as it should. There was a

flood, which deluged the farm, and the seeds all rotted. But Botta and the Duke still wanted the taxes, and so they took them out of her dowry. I took her in because, in many ways I saw myself in her, and the destiny of a premature expiry.”

Cecilia looked around herself as if she did not deserve all that she had, but wanted it neither.

“I loved il Moro and I had been in love with him since I was sixteen, Messer Leonardo, after a promise of marriage was broken because of the lack of a dowry, and I risked being sent to a nunnery. Life isn’t easy for women, from a young age. Then we become old and invisible, or bothersome.”

Leonardo nodded, gravely, while looking at the portico.

“But il Moro was not to you what Padre Diodato was to Tersilla. He drove her to kill a person. And he himself killed poor Barraccio, who trusted in the Jesuate who had, apparently, got him out of trouble.”

“And with you, Leonardo, what is il Moro like? How have you regained his trust?”

Leonardo continued to look at the events of Milan, painted on the walls that surrounded him.

“I don’t like frescoes,” he said, after a few seconds. “He does not allow for corrections, the amendment of mistakes. Because we all make mistakes. I will never be capable of painting a fresco. I have been asked, but I am unsure if I should accept or not.”

“So you, too, make mistakes.”

“Continually, Contessa. Continually. But I hide them, from everyone, apart from myself. Only il Moro has discovered, by chance, one of my errors.”

“Which, Leonardo?” asked Gallerani, mildly incredulous.

“The worst possible mistake, from his perspective. The horse statue.”

“The horse?”

“The horse, Contessa. I miscalculated the bronze required to cast it. The way I have designed it, that horse wouldn’t stand up. And il Moro, like I said, discovered so through reading my notes. An irony of sorts, now that the clay model is finished...” Leonardo sighed, “... I must start again from the beginning.”

“Please explain something to me,” said Cecilia, with the tone of someone who is skilled at changing the topic. “You must forgive me, but Tersilla has been in my house for two years and I can’t fathom how you came to suspect the girl. How on earth did your thoughts end up with her?”

“In fact, Contessa, my first thought had been towards a woman. You see, the question that was tormenting Messer Galeazzo was *why* Chiti’s body was abandoned in the middle of Piazzale delle Armi. What tormented me was the *how*. How could somebody place something like that in the middle of the castle’s grounds, without anybody noticing? It could only have been done, I reflected, if the body was brought on a cart.”

“But Ludovico’s guards do not just wave any old cart into the castle...” Cecilia began, then stopped. She understood.

“Exactly. Not any old cart. But yours, for example. A cart like yours, driven by a pretty young girl who in the dark could look enough like you, is perhaps something that would cause one to divert one’s gaze. Contessa Bergamini can enter the castle at whatever hour she desires, and His Lordship will always welcome her. But it is preferable to pretend not to see her after she has entered, don’t you think?”

Cecilia agreed, slowly, while the two of them continued to walk around the courtyard.

“So from this I understood that not just any woman could have done it, but one woman in particular.” Leonardo pointed his left index finger into his right palm.

“Tersilla, who could use your cart. Tersilla, who possesses the chest devised by yours truly; the one that can be easily operated and increases one’s strength when opening, but also when closing. I had these images in my head that all matched up. My mental construction held up, like stones that formed an arch, rather than a heap. I then went on to interrogate the why, based on the how that I had constructed in my mind.”

Leonardo paused.

“And that why was not clear to me until I understood what Padre Diodato’s intention was, or that of somebody on his behalf. To provoke a banking and currency crisis. Or more generally to provoke a crisis, to turn Milan against itself. Anything that frightens can provoke a crisis. Like the wrath of God, or a possible plague, or worse still a disease that is yet unknown.” Leonardo spread his arms. “That’s why Rambaldo Chiti was placed within the castle. A dead body, the cause of which unknown, given the faltering medical science of Magistro Ambrogio, was certain to increase the fear. Therefore, once Rambaldo was dead...”

“Excuse me, Leonardo, but I must also ask you this. Why kill him?”

“It was necessary for saving the conspirators, Caterina. Rambaldo Chiti had requested a hearing with il Moro the day before he was killed. I imagine he hoped to save his own life by confessing. He was a skilled forger, but deluded and foolish in the ways of the world. If he had managed to speak with il Moro, not only would the

conspiracy have failed, but the conspirators would have been taken, tortured and killed.”

Leonardo slightly outstretched his arms.

“Padre Diodato came to know about it, somehow. I believe from Father Francesco Sansone, the general of the Franciscans. Jesuates and Franciscans talk, they are both poor of Christ and their communities follow the same noble principles, at least in discourse.”

“Right, right. Nice discourses. Truly,” said Caterina, putting on the table a roasted capon as big as a Christian, a Franciscan or a laic. “Now, I am most pleased that His Lordship Ludovico has thanked, honored, forgiven. and whatever else, you. But when is he planning to dig deep into his pockets?”

“He has already begun, Caterina,” said Salai, extending his plate to the woman, who served him with a hard ladle on the knuckles. Ouch!

“Eldest first, Giacometto. Leonardo, shall I cut you a small piece?”

“Mother, are you also an alchemist? Did you get this chicken with the philosopher’s stone, by touching a pumpkin, or was it an animal born and then murdered?”

“Oh my, Leonardo, you are so stubborn. You were saying, Giacometto? Who has begun?”

“The friars at the Confraternity of the Immaculate, Caterina. They paid this morning. One thousand two hundred lire for the maestro, and four hundred for Maestro Ambrogio.”

“And what’s Maestro Ambrogio got to do with it? What did that pompous buffoon of an astronomer do to help? He can’t tell the difference between a fart and a south-westerly wind and all he does is look at the stars.”

“Not Magistro Ambrogio Varese da Rosate, Caterina,” said Leonardo. “Maestro Ambrogio de Predis, who was my good assistant and painted the angels in the work I did for the Confraternity.”

“Oh, I see. No, because, really, if it was down to Magistro Ambrogio Varese the cause of poor Chiti’s death would be registered as tiredness. If it weren’t for you, my son, who recognized not only the illness, but also the afflicted...”

“I believe it is down to that, you know, Caterina, that the plot fell through.” Zanino da Ferrara took a large chunk of the roast, put it onto his plate and started to work into it with his knife. “Milan has three hundred thousand Christians. The good Padre Diodato, so to speak, must have thought that nobody would ever recognize the dead man’s soul, finding him so far from his parish. He hadn’t accounted for our maestro, who has hands as well as eyes.”

“But not only. Also quite an ass,” said Leonardo, very seriously.

There was a good minute of laughter, the type of laughter that springs out when both the mind and the stomach are free of hardship.

“You manage to joke even in the most terrible moments,” said Zanino. “This, this is another thing I envy.”

“It was not, as a matter of fact, a joke. You said it, Zanino, Milan has three hundred thousand inhabitants. I never would have expected to come across Rambaldo Chiti again.”

“And did you recognize him immediately, master?”

“Not immediately, no. In the immobility of death often we do not recognize the living. But almost immediately, yes.”

“However you did not immediately tell il Moro.”

“No, I did not tell him.”

And Leonardo turned towards Salai, who was finally filling his plate, pretending the conversation had nothing to do with him.

It was not he, Chiti, who used the false money the year before, and they both knew it. But Chiti was an adult, and he had been the mastermind. Salai was practically a child, and he had grown up quite a lot since then. This was partly because he had been sufficiently punished, and he had learnt.

Leonardo remained silent for a moment, then shook his head.

Zanino misunderstood the silence.

“So, maestro, do you intend to stay in Milan, in the service of il Moro?”

“You are the second person who has asked me that question today, Zanino.”

“Well then maestro,” Zanino wiped his mouth with the napkin. “You must have already considered your response.”

“Yes, Zanino. I will answer now how I answered this morning. If you are alone, I began, you belong entirely to yourself.”

“Are you alone, Your Lordship?”

Ludovico il Moro stood at the window of his own room in the Rocchetta, immobile. With Galeazzo Sanseverino’s light but decisive rap on the door, he just about turned with his eyes, but not with his gaze.

“Oh, Galeazzo. Come in, dear friend. How is it going?”

“I wouldn’t know, Your Lordship. I tried to present myself at the gate of Her Excellency the Duchess of Bari, but all that I got from her was shouted at and a silver jug.”

“I see. Close the door would you, Galeazzo.”

Sanseverino did so, with caution.

“It’ll soon pass, Ludovico, believe me,” said Galeazzo, slipping into familiar pronouns, as usual. “It is just the manner that has hurt her. It’ll soon pass.”

“You think? I don’t know, my friend, I don’t know. Trust, Galeazzo, is something that accumulates slowly, and something that can be lost in a single move. I can maybe regain my wife’s respect, but never her trust.”

Ludovico looked at Sanseverino as if he couldn’t quite get him into focus, and it didn’t bother him much anyway.

“You asked me before whether I was alone, and I didn’t respond. Yes, my friend, I am alone. Messer Leonardo once said to me: ‘If you are alone, you belong entirely to yourself.’” Ludovico gestured at the city that extended outside of the window, with a lift of his chin. “Even when I am alone, I stay here, and I see everything. He who sees further than everybody, is at once an easy target.”

Ludovico started to walk around the room, moving towards the center of the chamber.

“I feel, in these moments, like one of those men sentenced to dismemberment, tied to four horses, one horse per limb, and each of the horses pulls ahead, and the poor wretch can’t follow all of them, so he gets torn into quarters.” Ludovico opened his right arm, and gestured to his left leg. “On one side there are my obligations as a husband, and a father, and on the other my masculine passions.” Ludovico lengthened his left arm, and stretched out his right leg, forcing it. “On one side there is the

consideration of the State, the wellbeing of Milan, and on the other the alliances with the league I have formed. With Venice, with Florence, with Ferrara. Particularly with Ferrara. We have to trust one another, yet each of us aims to expand his power, and we all know so.”

Ludovico relaxed his limbs, and started to walk around the room.

“And I, dear Galeazzo, I can not trust anybody. I cannot confide in anybody, neither within or without, as I have seen. The reality is this, Galeazzo. I made the mistake of trusting Trotti, I made the mistake of trusting the dwarf, and I made the mistake of trusting others.”

“Not all, Ludovico, not all. There is still somebody in whom you can trust, right here, and you know that.”

Ludovico stopped, and looked at his son-in-law with a firm eye.

“Yes, Galeazzo, you are right. There is one person. And I believe, in this moment, that I need his advice more than anything else.” Ludovico placed a hand on the shoulder of his son-in-law, while he imperceptibly straightened his back, which was already straight as a marble column. “Thank you. Are you coming too?”

“Where?”

“To the astrologer’s room.”

“The astrologer?”

“I know, I know, I send for him so often, Magistro Ambrogio, but right now I do not want to lose valuable time. I need to know what the stars say, and I need to know now.” Ludovico, with a resolute stride, opened the door. “It’s better that I go straight away in person. Are you coming too?”

“No, your Lordship. I think you’d better go alone.”

“If you are alone, you belong entirely to yourself. This I said, once upon a time.”

Leonardo shook his head. “But to be alone in the way I mean, I need to be surrounded by people. Of all the jails I can imagine, I believe a desert would be worst of all of them.”

“I do not understand you, Leonardo.”

Leonardo looked at Cecilia and then continued to talk, looking at the ground.

“I have received offers, it is true. From various gentlemen, and from various places. But for the moment, for me, Milan is the best place to work, because it is the best place to live.”

Leonardo paused and sat down on the wall that surrounded the courtyard, between the columns. Cecilia, standing next to him, looked in the same direction, and listened.

“I believe I could state, Contessa, without false modesty, to be a man of intellect and talent. And I believe that these talents came to me through generation and through growth. Through generation, because I am the fruit of the free love of my parents, which was without constrictions and reasons of State. And through growth, because I have never had to worry about my security or survival. Watched over by my mother, and then by my father in the years of boyhood, I had everything I needed. I didn't suffer from hunger, like the needy, nor solitude, like the nobles. I was able to grow up in peace, free but not alone.”

Leonardo waited a moment, almost wondering if he was talking too much. Then, seeing as Cecilia was not about to say anything, he continued.

“To grow up properly, one needs freedom and tranquility. In a word, trust. But also rules and respect for them, because otherwise the strong overpowers the weak, or the shrewd deceives the foolish, and then liberty exists no more.”

Cecilia smiled, looking at Leonardo sideways.

“And do you intend to grow still? You are more than forty years old, Messer Leonardo.”

“The things I do not know and cannot do, Contessa, are so many that not only do I intend, but I must. And Milan is the ideal place for me. You are here, with your salon and the wonderful people who speak there. There are people who work here, and find problems every day, and each problem is, for me, a source of ten possible solutions.”

“And there is Ludovico il Moro who chases you.”

“Who stimulates me. Who obliges me to finish my projects. If it wasn't for il Moro, I'd never finish any of them. I am not Bramante, who starts three projects, finishes six and insists on being paid for ten.”

Leonardo also smiled, but then became serious again.

“I need both things to do my job. Freedom and incentive, in the correct measures, depending on how big the fire is. Indeed it is just like fire. Blowing on a candle puts it out, but wafting air on a hearth revives it, and the wind that blows on a blaze strengthens it and makes it grow. So, for the moment, for now, Milan is the best place to be, and Ludovico is the best client.”

“Leonardo, excuse me...”

“Yes, Contessa.”

“With regards to the client. You used the word, and it struck me. But also before, you said ‘Padre Diodato, or on behalf of him.’ Why? Who do you suspect?”

Leonardo shook his head.

“You have had Padre Diodato at your salon, Contessa. I discussed it with you once. Does he seem to you to possess extraordinary enough intellect to excogitate such a machine?”

Cecilia raised an eyebrow. Contessa Bergamini’s face said perhaps no. Leonardo stretched out his hands.

“This was one of the things that surprised me. Here too I am merely constructing ideas in my mind. But I fear that Padre Diodato is just a fool who was well instructed by somebody else.” Leonardo sighed. “Who this other person is, I cannot know. Nor do I know what the destiny will be for your Tersilla. Unless you, by chance, know something else?”

In actual fact Cecilia wrung her hands when Leonardo said the name. But Contessa Gallerani Bergamini shook her head.

“No, I don’t know either. I can only hope.”

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*page 281*

*A Note from the Author*

## A Book Full of Errors

Attempting to write, as an historian, a book about Leonardo da Vinci completely without errors would have been pretentious. Believing one could do so as a novelist with a degree in chemistry would have been delusional. I have no doubt, therefore, that there are many errors in this book, both historical and artistic, and that sooner or later they will be discovered. However, there are some aspects that may seem curious or far-fetched that are actually historically proven.

It is true that one of the most stressful problems in Milanese life at the time was traffic, caused by carts driven exclusively by ladies; the story of the two alleged counterfeiters, de Pesserer and Crancz, is also true; they were later released after it was confirmed they were alchemists.

It is also very like true that during in the period of which we speak Leonardo lived with his mother. Evidence is a note dated 1493, where he writes "*Caterina venne a dì i 16 di luglio 1493*", and a later note concerning expenses for "the burial of Caterina" amounting to 123 *soldi*, that is, six imperial lire, or if you prefer about one *ducato* -- a high cost for a funeral of the time, and difficult to justify for a member of the household staff. Also very curious is that in the note regarding the arrival of Caterina, the formula "*a stare meco*" is absent, when this phrase accompanied the arrivals of the students, from the Salai to Giulio Tedesco. Various scholars, including Luca Beltrami, agree on this hypothesis.

It is also likely that Salaì was a figure halfway between a favorite pupil and an adopted son: he followed Leonardo almost everywhere, and even if there were quarrels and disagreements, it seems that the relationship between the two is never doubted.

It is possible, but improbable, that he received the payment for the *Vergine delle Grazie* in the time that is stated: the question that “you owe me money for this painting” was discussed for about twenty years. The matter of the Sforza horse also lasted a long time, which Leonardo never realized in the end due to both technical and economic problems.

To understand in detail what enormous effort and what problems the fusion of the horse posed, the best reading is undoubtedly *Leonardo e il monumento equestre a Francesco Sforza*, by Andrea Bernardoni (Giunti). Which brings me to mention some of the books that might be interesting to those who, even if only for pleasure, wish to satisfy their curiosity on the subject of “Leonardo, Renaissance Man” with writing far more serious than the present.

To find out all that there is to know about the genius of Leonardo, as mentioned here above, a lifetime may not be enough. A good starting point is the beautiful book by Walter Isaacson, *Leonardo da Vinci* (Mondadori). The novel by Dimitri Mereskovskii, *Leonardo da Vinci* (Giunti) is very good, even if sometimes very lyrical. It is, among other things, the first fictional text where it is supposed that Leonardo lived with his mother while in Milan. (Incidentally, the fictional works in which Leonardo appears, as a protagonist or supporting actor, are many, and sometimes too many: my favorite fantastical Leonardo is the one that appears in the animated film, *Mr. Peabody & Sherman*, together with the wild and lonely genius who struggles to understand a flushing toilet in the 1984 film, *Non ci resta che piangere*.)

One can not speak of Leonardo without talking about Florence in the time of the Medici, where he learned at Verrocchio’s workshop and elsewhere, or without talking about the importance of money. Florence is probably the first company in which money becomes a founding, abstract value, and not just an accessory object, creating the kind of finance that we still use today.

At an academic level, the book by Raymond De Roover *Rise and Decline of the Medici Bank 1397-1494* is still, I think, the best reference for those interested in the history of Florentine banking. It is a difficult volume that is not easy to read, it requires time and patience, as well as an economic and financial competence that not everyone has. I, for example, do not have it, and some concepts became clear to me only after reading the more agile and pleasant *La fortuna dei Medici*, by Tim Parks (Bompiani) and *1345: La bancarotta di Firenze*, by Lorenzo Tanzini (Salerno). Also in the beautiful book, *La geografia del genio* by Eric Weiner (Bompiani), this aspect is explained in a very captivating way.

The other protagonist of this book is Ludovico il Moro, and therefore, indirectly, the city of Milan. If Florence was the city where the Renaissance was born, Milan is where it developed in the most complete way, in all its aspects: artistic, scientific and social.

The court of Ludovico il Moro was a central point in this development, and it is worth understanding in detail.

Perhaps a little dated but extremely enjoyable is set of four volumes by Francesco Malaguzzi Valeri, *La corte di Lodovico il Moro* (Hoepli). To those wishing to take a look at court life not so much on the surface, but more in depth, and in the correspondence between ambassadors and rulers, the two books by Guido Lopez, (*Leonardo e Ludovico il Moro: la roba e la libertà* and *Festa di nozze per Ludovico il Moro*) are undoubtedly pleasant reading, and well-documented. Equally pleasant, but possibly hard to find, is *Beatrice d'Este* by Silvia Alberti de 'Mazzeri (my edition is Fabbri). It is a fictional story, but definitely well done, of the short but intense life of Beatrice d'Este.

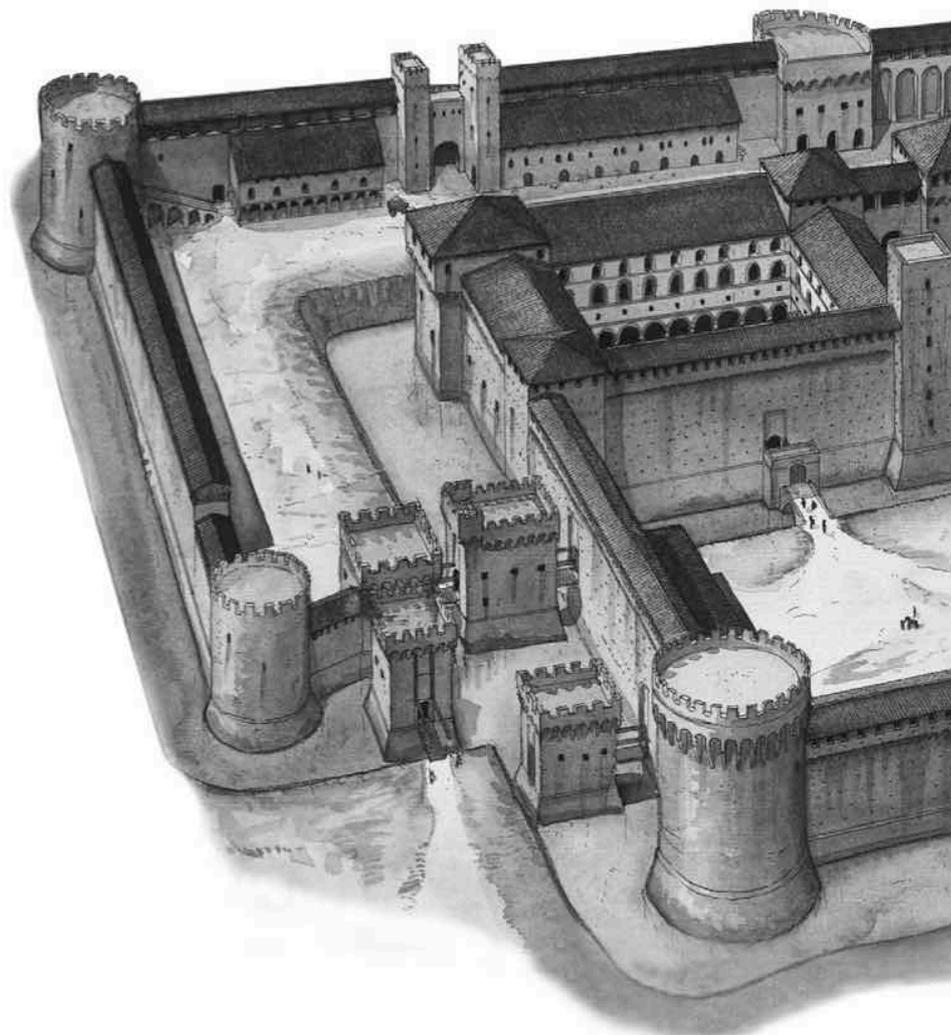
Approaching a figure like Leonardo, and claiming the right to describe his thoughts, requires a certain amount of hubris and chutzpah. I would never have undertaken it of my own initiative, but now I can only be glad that I did. I thank Giulia Ichino, first as a friend and then as an editor, for having thought of me for this project and for having followed this book every step of the way, putting me in

touch with experts on the subject whenever my ignorance made it necessary (which was often). The number of things I have learned in this year and a half of study on the Renaissance man *par excellence* has far surpassed my pious illusions; I thought I knew a lot about Leonardo, and I discovered I had just begun to scratch the surface.

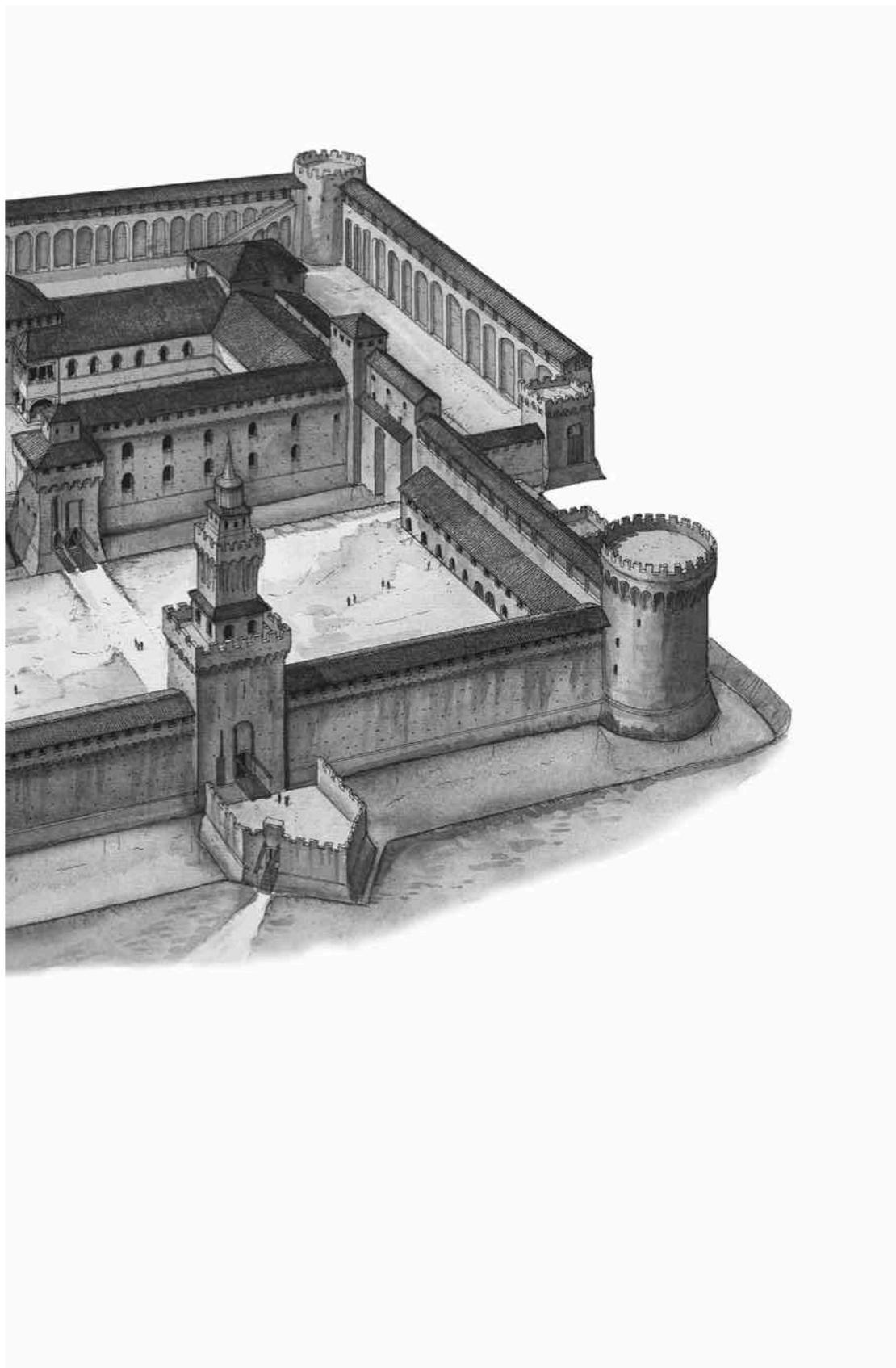
I could never, of course, have learned all these things alone. First of all, my gratitude goes to Dario Dondi of Giunti for introducing me to the world of Leonardo's manuscripts, and for his ability to grasp exactly what I needed to understand. I would also like to thank, in no specific order, Alessio Rossetti for his incomparable historical and urban competence on Milan under the Sforza, Luca Baldassari for assisting me with punctilious and sense of humor in writing in the Ferrarese language of the 1400s (almost 1500s), Luca Scarlini for his indications of the history of fashion and armor of the time, and Mariastella Botticini for reassuring me about some aspects of the history of finance I was not aware of - not that I am an expert on certain things now, but I know just enough to talk about them ...

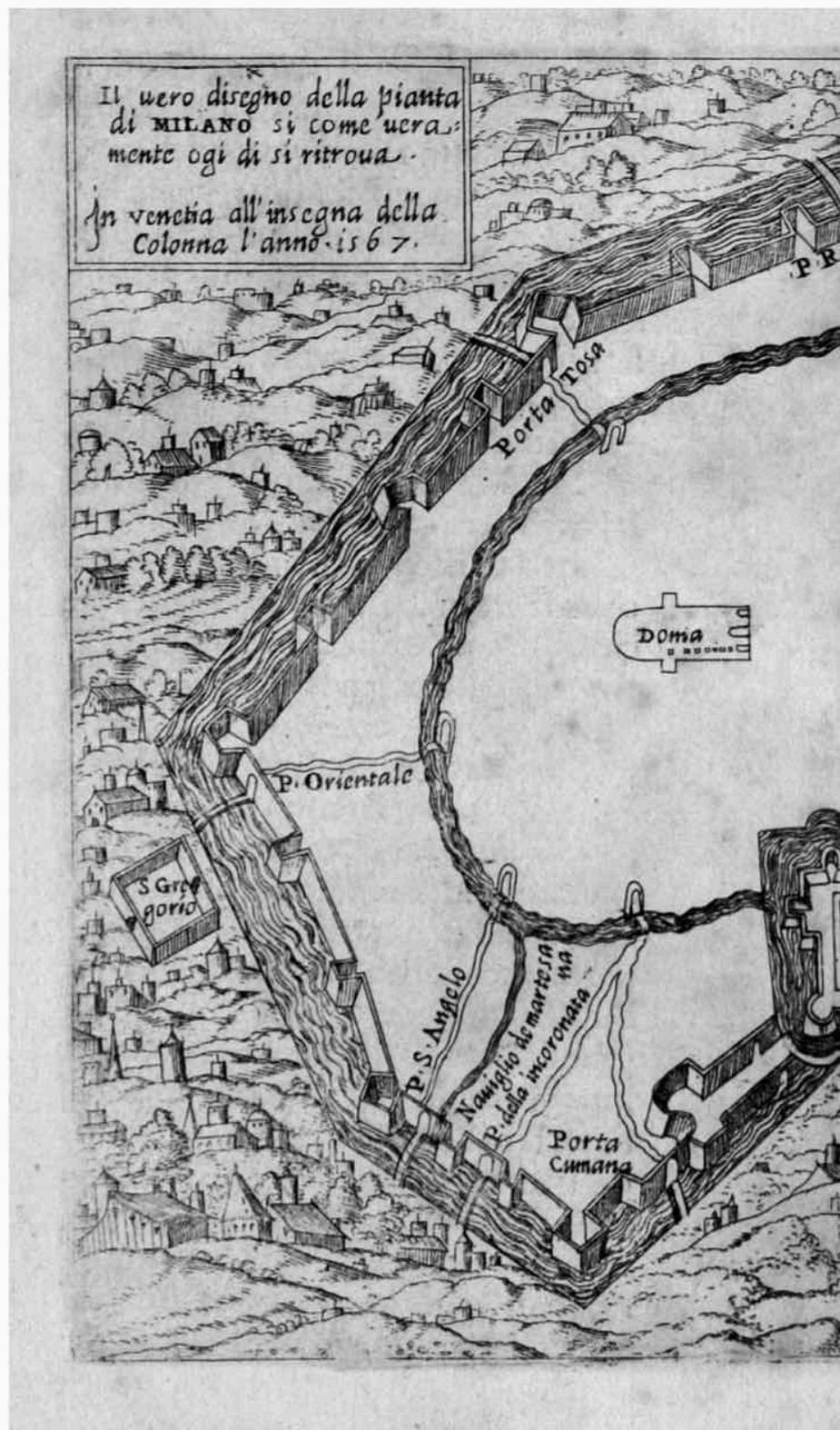
Which brings me, in closing this note, to warn the reader from using this book as a history book. This is a novel, and although many of the historical facts that are narrated are ascertained, it is not always true that the relationships between these facts existed. It is true that Leonardo never completed the equestrian monument to Francesco Sforza, as it is true that he recognized the non-invariance of scale in the proportions of animals; that the two things are in relation, I fear, is pure fantasy. But I also believe that writing a book with the genius from Vinci as a protagonist and not using any imagination at all would have been not only wrong, it would have been disrespectful to his great name.

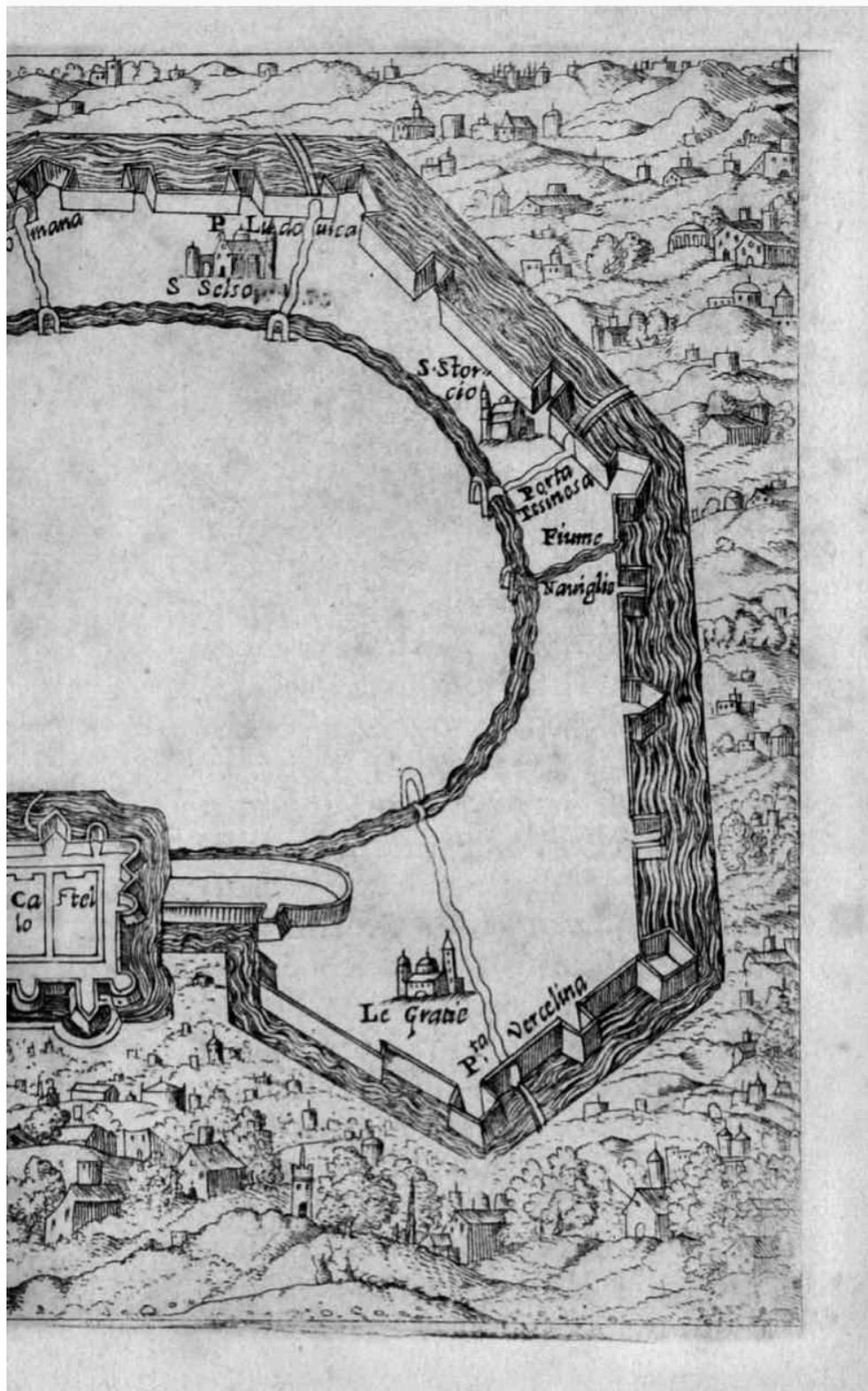
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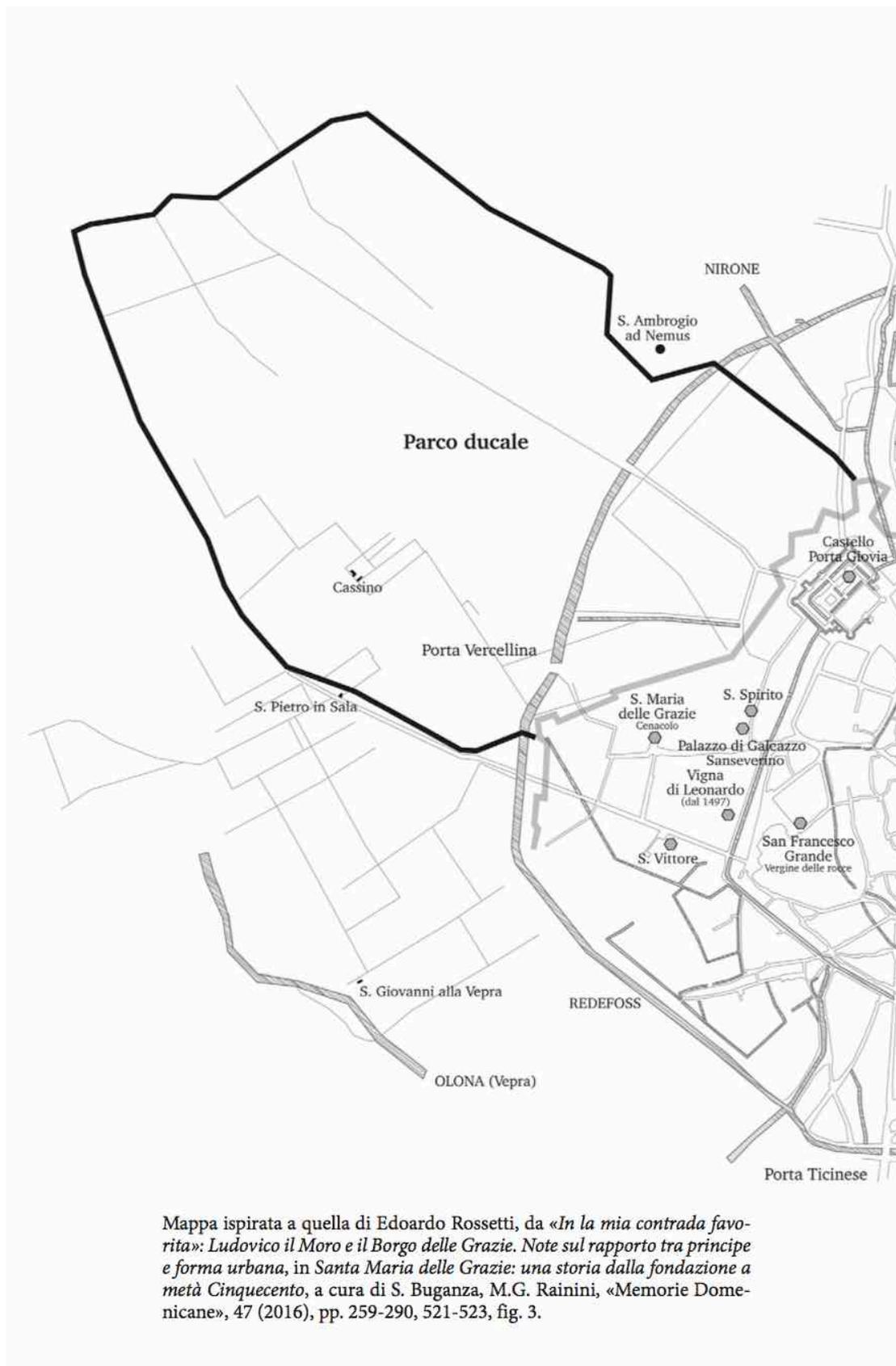


Il Castello Sforzesco al tempo di Leonardo









Mappa ispirata a quella di Edoardo Rossetti, da «*In la mia contrada favorita*»: Ludovico il Moro e il Borgo delle Grazie. Note sul rapporto tra principe e forma urbana, in *Santa Maria delle Grazie: una storia dalla fondazione a metà Cinquecento*, a cura di S. Buganza, M.G. Rainini, «*Memorie Domenicane*», 47 (2016), pp. 259-290, 521-523, fig. 3.

## Milano alla fine del '400





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