

The man
who seduced
the
Mona Lisa



a novel by

Dionigi Cristian Lentini

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The Mona Lisa**

«Tektime S.r.l.s.»

Lentini D.

The Man Who Seduced The Mona Lisa / D. Lentini — «Tektime S.r.l.s.»,

This is the story of the man who conquered and seduced the one who, immortalized indecipherably by Leonardo, with her gaze then seduced the world. It is the story of Tristan, a young pontifical diplomat with a mysterious and dark past who, among strategies and deceptions, between adventures and plots, between intrigues and the wars of Renaissance Italy, brilliantly carried out his missions, one after the other, using the art he knew best, the most powerful weapon: that of seduction. However, the moment came when fate commissioned him the most important undertaking ...

A precariat researcher from the CNR of Pisa, an expert in cryptography and blockchain, accidentally finds a strange encrypted file in an archive of a Tuscan abbey that contains an incredible, extraordinary, unpublished story ... from which he can no longer detach himself. In a cold night in which History gave the general rehearsals of the Renaissance, while the lords of Italy annihilated each other for the ephemeral control of the fragile borders of their States, a young pontifical diplomat with a mysterious past preferred to try his hand at the art of seduction more than that of war. Who was he? He was no prince, leader, prelate, he had no official title ... yet talking to him was equivalent to conferring directly with the Holy Father, he moved casually on the complex political chessboard of that period but never left a trace, he wrote History every day but never appeared in any of its pages ... he was everywhere and yet it was as if he did not exist. From a lordship to another, from a kingdom to a republic, between strategies and deceptions, between adventures and plots, Tristan successfully completed his missions ... until fate commissioned him the most important undertaking: to discover who he really was. To do this he had to decipher a letter from his real mother, kept hidden for 42 years by the most powerful caste of the time. To do so, he had to go through that incredible temporal interstice with an extraordinary and unprecedented concentration of characters (statesmen, leaders, artists, writers, engineers, scientists, navigators, courtiers, etc.) and who significantly, drastically and irreversibly have changed the course of history. To do this he had to seduce the one who Leonardo

had immortalized indecipherably, and with her gaze had seduced the world.
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The Man Who Seduced The Mona Lisa

**ON THE OCCASION OF THE 500th ANNIVERSARY
OF THE DEATH OF LEONARDO DA VINCI**

The Man

Who Seduced

The Mona Lisa

A NOVEL BY

DIONIGI CRISTIAN LENTINI

The story told here is purely the result of the author's fantasy and imagination.

The information, references and historical references contained herein are merely to provide a truthful historical framework to the storyline.

Any reference or analogy to facts, episodes, characters or places that really existed is purely random.

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[On the occasion of the 500th anniversary of the death of Leonardo da Vinci]

Translation by Rosemary Dawn Allison – August 2020

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For my uncle

Don Giovanni Lentini

Prologue

“Hi stallion :-) You were fantastic last night. Don't think too much about it: you can't always be John Holmes... :-) As soon as I get to the office I'll send you something about that Don Juan friar I told you about. Have a good day.”

It was the private message Francesca had sent while he was heading towards the abbey in his dated methane gas convertible.

He hadn't even heard the ping of the notification. In fact, he was on speakerphone with Professor De Rango who, for the 33rd time, was recommending that he do a good job and to take care to say hello to father Enzo, the rector's abbot friend... and who knows how many other directors and managers.

“It's amazing how the cellular network is so widespread in this remote mountain area,” he thought.

After exactly twenty-seven seconds he decided to implement the emergency plan foreseen in such cases by the survival procedure against head breakers.....: “simulation of the sudden loss of signal by activating the state of unreachability for the next 30 minutes”.

Claudio, a forty-year-old researcher without a permanent contract at the Institute of Informatics and Telematics at the CNR in Pisa, eight years of checks and “while actually employed” contracts on his curriculum vitae, had been sent urgently to address a problem the Anglo-Saxons call: “*Damage assessment and disaster recovery*”, in practice it was an intervention that would assess the damage and restore the data to the digital archive at an ancient Tuscan abbey that had, 48 hours earlier, suffered a cyber attack by an exalted Russian hacker.

Obviously, the thought of spending the whole week in a medieval library recovering digitized scrolls, reinstalling operating systems, analyzing Gregorian chants of prayers and songs (perhaps without even a porno movie), while the world outside was at that time *concerned with blockchain* and cryptocurrency, filled him with tremendous enthusiasm.

Over the past year he hadn't produced a single scientific publication. This was not because he had not done enough research or hadn't achieved concrete results... perhaps it was simply because he hadn't yet found anything of true value that was worth sharing with the rest of the planet. For this reason, as soon as they could his colleagues mocked him, who, unlike him, were now publishing and patenting every single fart they emitted into the air after a meal of beans in Valleriana.

In short, that morning not even the Eagles' cd “Hotel California” could cheer him up.

He arrived at the summit where the abbey stood at 9:37, when the guitars of Don Felder and Joe Walsh were ending with one of the most beautiful solos in rock history.

“Oh, doctor, welcome to our home. The most reverend father has been waiting for you since yesterday... Come, come, I'll explain everything.”

A cordial and alarmed friar welcomed him; he was immediately shown the way to the violated archive.

The situation was less serious than imagined: the main server was out of action, a Trojan ransomware had encrypted half the world with a 2048-bit AES key and a ransom of 21 bitcoins had been demanded. Most of the friars didn't even know what ransomware or a bitcoin was, but fortunately the restriction (read/write only) to access permissions to the files of the backup archive had held... and besides – then they say that it isn't true that monks are lucky – the last available copy that the automatic synchronization and backup procedure had produced was only 16 hours and 18 minutes before the attack. In short, if it hadn't been in a sacred place, our researcher would no doubt have exclaimed: “What the f...!”

Therefore the bulk was safe. It was only about eradicating the virus and restoring about 9 terabytes of scanned manuscripts and books, and returning them manually to the mainframe from the disc copies. What relieved Claudio the most was that this operation could also be handled in Pisa, thus he could avoid the problem of his already tried palate coming into contact with the succulent dishes of that infamous three Michelin star restaurant named “The Refectory”.

So, after only 4 hours, having given the friar, who seemed to be more alert, the necessary instructions for the restoration of the host, Claudio removed the bare essentials from the rack, loaded everything into his car and went home.

Ah, meanwhile the smartphone had begun again to receive and that red dot on the right indicated two messages:

– the first, from the very nice Professor De Rango, stated verbatim: “Not even the most banal freshman makes use of these tactics anymore! The phone picks up perfectly out there! I understand t I broke your... but it's important!!! Let me know as soon as we have solved it. Thank you.”

“Yes, 'we have'...” he thought.

– the second, from Francesca, contained a photo of a newspaper extract from eighteen years earlier.

His girlfriend, in fact, knowing of the trip Claudio had won to that monastery, had managed to retrieve a copy of an article from the archives of the local newspaper where she worked, which reconstructed the dark story of the death of Father Sergio, a young heartbreaking friar, who had been murdered by a jealous husband who just could not bear to have his wife going to confession so frequently.

The body was found in front of an altarpiece in a gruesome scenario halfway between “The Da Vinci Code” and “Seven”, between “The Name of the Rose” and “Basic Instinct”.

Since then the case had been closed but no one had ever been able to understand what the word “*sinemensura*” really meant that the luminary from the Reparto Investigazioni Scientifiche (RIS or the Department of Scientific Investigation) had noted as being written on the habit of the poor religious man.

Probably, indeed, almost certainly, if he had not read that article, with over 370 000 files to be analyzed and the Roland Garros final on TV, the researcher would not have even minimally focused on that small directory of the *file system* on the last disc named: “Father Sergio”.

Inside, there were dozens of files containing love poems, photos of beautiful young women and a single file extension “.axx”, an encrypted format that was protected by a password.

Claudio knew very well that the probability of guessing the password (11 characters out of a possible 95) was almost 0.0000000000000000000175% and that with a brute *force* attack of 100000 attempts per second it would have taken about 1 billion 803 million years to find, but, for once, he put the numbers aside and decided on a single attempt:

he typed “sinemensura” and there, like a pirate standing over his treasure chest, unfolded the most beautiful story he had ever read.

I

The Ferrara War

November 1482

The icy wind of that winter evening did not whip the battlements of the Castle of San Giorgio as much as the wind of passion raging in pulsating veins.

It was the month of November in the Year of our Lord 1482, Mantua was freezing, deserted... and Beatrice was lying on the bed in her room gazing dreamily at the imperial eagles on the ceiling... her mind was inundated with newfound imagination... unspeakable thoughts that, for a lady of her rank, brushed upon indecency. She knew that when the chatter of the Gonzaga servants disappeared from the noble floor, he, that charming diplomat now lord of her mind, would arrive, regardless of, if not profiting from, the reckless absence of her cousin and promised husband (the Marquis, with her father, had been fighting for two days beneath the walls of Ferrara strenuously defending the Este family, threatened by the Venetians of Count Roberto di San Severino).

In fact it happened that Girolamo Riario, the avaricious lord of Imola and Forlì, strengthened by the high patronage of his uncle Sixtus IV, having the declared objective of shortly taking possession of the Duchy of Hercules of Este, had managed to persuade the Doge of Venice of the need to wage war on Ferrara that had, for some time, been threatening the monopoly of the salt trade in the Polesine.

The d'Este family, were certainly more refined than military, and not casually related to the king of Naples (Ercole as they were linked by marriage to Ferdinando d'Aragona's daughter, Eleonora) and had been able to weave alliances with the neighboring Italian lordships, including that under Ludovico Maria Sforza known as "the Moor" (or "il Moro"), to whom the Duke of Ferrara had promised one of his daughters in marriage during unsuspecting times.

Thus the entire peninsula was soon divided against each other into two armed blocks: on the one side were the Papal States with Sixtus IV, Imola and Forlì with the Riario, the Republic of Venice, the Republic of Genoa, the Marquisate del Monferrato and the County of S. Secondo Parmense; on the other the Duchy of Ferrara under Ercole d'Este, the Kingdom of Naples under Ferdinando d'Aragona, the Duchy of Milan under Ludovico the Moor, the Marquisate of Mantua by Federico Gonzaga, the Duchy of Urbino with Federico da Montefeltro, the Lordship of Bologna ruled by Giovanni Bentivoglio and the Republic of Florence with Lorenzo de' Medici.

After the summer, the Venetian troops clearly held the advantage: they had conquered Rovigo, besieged Ficarolo, taken Argenta and now were also besieging Ferrara. The situation had become even more critical for the Este family since the most experienced leader of the anti-Venetian coalition had died from malaria in September: the notorious Federico da Montefeltro.

Unexpectedly, the pontiff, who in the meantime had defeated the Neapolitans at Campomorto, suddenly decided to put an end to the hostilities, negotiating with the king of Naples. Ludovico il Moro, in fact, working through diplomacy, had managed to convince the closest advisors of the Holy Father that the rapid expansion of the Serenissima in northern Italy was likely to be dangerous and would threaten both Milan and Rome; therefore, it would not at all convenient to anyone to continue that expensive war just to satisfy the mad ambitions of the Riario.

Too bad that Venice, one step away from final victory, obviously had no intention of giving up; rather it wanted to end the game, before winter turned even colder.

In fact, that afternoon the Lagunari, taking advantage of their opponents' careless move, decided to launch a new attack from the north to the detriment of the garrison of Francesco Gonzaga, who

was seeking a way to resist the opposing force of attack, concentrated more on defensive strategy and was completely unaware of what was about to happen in the incensed rooms of his beautiful palace...

Just two taps on the door: to the young lover it seemed that a bell had struck, like the heavy pendulum of her mind that now oscillated between extreme modesty and extreme audacity.

Not that peril the marquis scorned between the crossbows and arquebuses but the real courage it took to hold that key, to turn it and allow her lover to cross the threshold, the last bulwark of an already profaned heart.

As the fire in the hearth lengthened the shadow of the door that opened into the room, and the fearless knight entered, Beatrice turned abruptly, sensually dropping a pearl from her headdress onto the floor.

“Tell me it is not a sin,” she pleaded.

He slowly bent down to retrieve the pendant, encircled her hips and brushing her neck with his lips whispered the first and only sentence of that night:

“It certainly is. But not to commit it by wasting this moment would be even more so.”

In that instant she closed her eyes and unaware of the bitter news that would come from the battlefield the following day, she turned gently and indulged in passion. And while her promised one was humiliated by the Venetian cavalry, she, a rider in the saddle, exalted, free for one night to be herself.

So, when even the extreme clatter of swords in the field had ceased and the last log of wood in the room had been consumed, the new dawn did not rise to notify the increasingly imminent fall of Ferrara... but only yet another conquest by Tristano Licini de' Ginni.

II

The young Tristano

From Bergamo to Rome

Tristano was a distinguished twenty-two year old, brilliant, cultured and refined; his lean build and physical proportions permitted him to be thought of as “good-looking”; despite his youth, he was already an authoritative diplomat for the Papal States and, therefore, was well integrated into all the Italian courts. However, he did not have a fixed seat, from time to time the Holy See sent him on a mission to the Lordships of the peninsula (and not only), sometimes without the knowledge of the official ambassadors, for the most delicate, confidential, often secret matters. All the Lords and notables involved knew that talking to him was equivalent to conferring directly with the Holy Father, however he had no noble title, no one knew his past, his name never appeared on any official document, he dressed far better than many counts and marquises but there were no decorations or insignia on his chest, he showed that he had almost unlimited available funds but he was not the son of any banker or merchant, he moved casually on the political chessboard but never left a trace, he wrote history every day but never appeared on any of its pages... he was everywhere and yet it was as if he didn't exist.

In his first three decades of life he had grown up in the province of Bergamo, bordering the territories of the Republic of Venice, where he had received a good cultural education and an unconventional sentimental and sexual education. His father had died when he was small and when he was not much more than an adolescent his mother also. He lived with his grandfather, an old and tired nobleman now in decay who, despite everything, always proudly boasted of a family of Federician origin who, at the time of the Crusades, had been related to members of Tuscan families as much as they had been decorated were now practically extinct; the elder, however, commanded a certain amount of respect in the village and in the countryside, which was also reflected on the very young Tristano. At school age he was entrusted into the care of first the Dominicans and then the Franciscans, where he immediately revealed a certain propensity for logic and rhetoric, although every Sunday morning he infuriated his religious tutors as he preferred the angelic vision of the arrival of the young novices in church to the study of the classics, Greek and Latin. Sometimes he was seen to be saddened, perhaps by the absence of parents, but he was never sullen; he had a lively but always composed temperament, seemed to be alert but was never impertinent and had a clean face that caused him to be well liked by everyone in the village, especially the ladies.

He was only 12 when something happened that would frequently re-emerge in his adult dreams and opened up a new world, something far from the monastic rules that he had become accustomed to and from the cardinal virtues he read about in books every day. It was a hot afternoon in early summer, the doors and windows of the library's scriptorium were wide open to allow the air to flow to make reading less difficult; Tristano was holding a tome about Sant'Agostino da Ippona about whom he was particularly fascinated and, settling on an island near the window, was preparing to dive into the heavy parchment when he noticed a movement on the street that was strange for that hour. Antonia, an inconsolable widow, was walking rapidly in the deserted street away from the churchyard, dragging her poor daughter, who had learned to walk only a couple of years before, almost tugging. The unfortunate young woman seemed to be in a hurry to reach her destination unseen. After a while, more and more cautiously, she deviated her trajectory slightly to the right and, as soon as she reached the apothecary's premises, she entered. Immediately afterwards, the owner, leaned his head out of the door, quickly glanced to the left and right and, returning, closed the door, which opened again only half an hour later

to let the mother and daughter out. This dynamic was repeated almost identically on the following Saturdays, so much so that the temptation to deepen the investigation became irrepressible for the adolescent. So it was that he planned to hide in an old chest that a laborer working for his grandfather used to supply bottles of spring water to the apothecary's wife, a wealthy lady who with her two daughters prepared spirits, hydrolytes and perfumes for her consort's laboratory. As soon as the load was ready, Tristano emptied it of the equivalent of his weight and scrunched into it letting the laborer load everything onto the wagon to complete his transport, unaware, directly to the pharmacy as always. Once there, hidden in his wooden horse, like Ulysses in Troy, he waited for the moment when the herbalist's helper left to remunerate the shop assistant and climbing out of the chest he hid among the various sacks of cereals and grasses that filled the room. At that point he only had to wait... And, in fact, shortly after the bell tower of the church sounded the Ninth hour, the beautiful Antonia, with her little one, punctually entered the gloom; waiting for her at the entrance, the alchemist suitor who, like a wolf on his prey, pounced on her generous chest, pushing the woman against the fixed part of the door; and while with his right hand he held the movable part of the door, with his left he rummaged under the robe of the attractive woman, who, letting go of the little girl's hand, at the same time got rid of the cap that a moment before had gathered up her long auburn hair. The young man peered in disbelief at what was happening in that ecstasy of medicinal herbs, spices, roots, candles, paper, inks, colors... After the first outpourings, the apothecary released his grip and allowed the young mother just enough time to better settle the child on a seat with a rag and straw doll, then he took her by the hand and, while leading her to the back room, asked her sarcastically, "Tell me, what did you tell Don Berengario in the confessional today?" The impetus between the two scenes increased more than before: the moans followed gasps; as soon as the audacious intruder pushed the curtain with two fingers, he saw the two lovers sinfully fornicating among herbs, seeds, perfumes, aromatic waters, oils, ointments...

Thus began his sex education, which he soon corroborated, like any self-respecting discipline, with theory (obtaining some texts his tutors considered to be extremely forbidden) and with practice (causing some young novices to become disturbed and to have second thoughts).

His first real relationship with a woman was with Elisa di Giacomo, the eldest daughter of a groom who worked on the estate. Two years older, the beautiful Elisa gladly accompanied Tristano on long walks along the mountain paths, enchanted by his stories, by his plans... and often the two inevitably ended up frolicking in a shed or in a refuge in the area.

They were in fact secluded together that day of the harvest when a handful of foreign soldiers plummeted into the middle of the festival at the gallop, passing alarmed laborers and bystanders they came to the front of the rural alcove, and surrounded it. The highest grade, in armor that shone as never seen before, dismounted, lifted his helmet and, breaking through the door with one foot, to the most intense embarrassment of the astonished lovebirds, broke in:

"Tristano Licini de' Ginni? "

"Yes sir, it's me," replied the young man, pulling up his breeches and trying to shield the half-naked body of his terrified companion with his. "Who are you, sire?"

"My name is Giovanni Battista Orsini, lord of Monte Rotondo. Put your clothes on! You must follow me to Rome immediately. Your grandfather has already been informed and has given his approval for you to leave this place and transfer as quickly as possible to the home of my noble uncle, His Illustrious and Most Reverend Lordship, Cardinal Orsini. My task is to escort you, even if necessary by force, to his holy person. Please, do not resist and follow me."

And so, torn from his provincial microcosm where he had found his equilibrium, at just 14 years old, Tristano left those poor lands with its unstable borders forever to arrive at and be reborn a

man in the opulent city that God had chosen as His earthly seat, in the Eternal City of the Caesars, in the caput mundi...

After 7 days of grueling journey, he arrived exhausted at the cardinal's residence at Monte Giordano, the young guest was immediately entrusted into the care of a servant and shortly afterwards led into the presence of the illustrious Cardinal Latino Orsini, a leading exponent of the Roman Guelph faction, supreme chamberlain and archbishop of Taranto, former bishop of Conza and archbishop of Trani, archbishop of Urbino, cardinal bishop of Albano and Frascati, apostolic administrator of the archdiocese of Bari and Canosa and of the diocese of Polignano, as well as lord of Mentana, Selci and Palombara, *et cetera et cetera*.

During the short distance, Tristano examined the stern gaze of the marble busts of the noble family's illustrious ancestors, held up by shelves with lion-like protomes and roses, the distinctive symbol of the Orsini. The questions in his mind increased dramatically, chasing and scrambling over each other.

That hall with windows, interspersed with pilasters, dominated by curvilinear gables with lion heads and pinecones, crowned eagles, heraldic serpents of the Viscount, etc. ... seemed to disappear into infinity.

His Grace was in his dusty studio, intent on signing dozens of papers that two beardless deacons submitted to him with ritual skill.

As soon as he noticed the young presence, he gradually raised his head turning slightly towards the entrance; slowly, with his gaze fixed on the boy and keeping his elbow on the table, he raised his left forearm, with palm open, in anticipation of his assistant to halt the passage of further documents. Standing up he approached the newcomer without haste, as if to seek the best angle to better appreciate his features; benevolently he caressed his face, lingering under his chin.

"Tristano" he whispered... "Finally, Tristano".

Then he put his hand on his head and blessed him with the other tracing the sign of the cross in the air.

The boy, albeit held back by a tangle of fear and awe, stared at him fixedly to scrutinize the slightest movement of his mouth and eyes that could somehow reveal the reason for his sudden transfer. The cardinal, holding the precious crucifix that adorned his chest in his hand, turned abruptly towards the window and, advancing, anticipated him saying:

"You seem alert, boy. You are certainly wondering about this coercive transition to Rome..."

After a brief pause he continued:

"The time has not yet come for you to know. Not yet... Just know that if you are here it is for your own good, for your protection and for your future. And again for your wellbeing and that of Santa Romana Ecclesia is that you don't know. In these dark times, mindless and diabolical forces are plotting together against good and truth. Your mother knew it. That rosary around your neck is hers, never take it off, it is her protection, her blessing.

If there is something precious in you, you owe it only to her who gave birth to you with this flesh of a temporal life and with heart to eternal life. She, in her infinite maternal love, before reuniting with our Lord, entrusted you to Our Lord and since then we have kept a dark secret that when the time comes, and only then, will it be revealed to you. *Veritas filia temporis*."

"Sir, please," said Tristano in a tremulous voice, "like every good Christian I need to know the truth..." and, holding his beating heart with the strength of

courage, added: “The life of the saints and above all that of Saint Augustine teach us to seek the truth, the same truth that you now hide from me.”

The prelate turned abruptly and, addressing him looking both stern but almost pleased at the adolescent's reaction, replied:

“I reply to you as Ambrogio da Milan did to the one who unworthily loves to quote: ‘No Augustine, it is not man who finds the truth, he must let the truth find him.’ And like the then young Ippona, your path towards the truth has just begun.”

Even before anyone dared to say another word, he looked at the one who had accompanied him and peremptorily concluded:

“Now you can leave.”

Tristano, dumb and dazed, was made to leave and, after a few days, refreshed and dressed according to the canons of that century-old family, by *Mons Ursinorum* he was transferred to the Curia following the cardinal's nephew.

Giovan Battista, despite the young man's persistent protests, never gave him any valid explanations for those mysterious misgivings (perhaps he did not know or perhaps was forced to keep silent)... but he constrained himself to fulfilling the task entrusted to him by his uncle, he started immediately by sending the orphan for the best diplomatic training, ...having already had the chance to ascertain that the boy was in no way inclined to the mystical and religious life.

The latter, in the intimacy of the nights, occasionally thought of the words of that first meeting with Cardinal Latino, powerless before the many because they besieged his mind: why could he not or should he not know? Why and by whom was he to be protected? Why would his humble mother have known and confided an arcane secret to an illustrious prelate concerning him? Why was that secret so dangerous to himself and even to the entire Church?

At other times he thought of the places and people of his childhood but, now definitively entrusted to that new illustrious protector by his only relative in life, he could not miss the chance to try his hand at what he had emphatically heard of from the stories of the Dominican fathers; he therefore concentrated on his studies and soon adapted to Roman ecclesiastical circles, to the sumptuous rooms at the Curia, to the huge monuments, to the majestic palaces, to the lavish banquets...

... *tempora tempore*, it was as if that type of life had always been familiar to him. Not a day passed when he did not have new experiences; not a day passed when he did not appropriate new knowledge for his cultural baggage; not a day passed when he did not get to know new people: princes and valets, artists and courtiers, engineers and musicians, heroes and missionaries, parasites and pusillanimous, prelates and prostitutes. A gymnasium of continuous and inexhaustible life...

Getting to know as many people as possible, from all walks of life, from all backgrounds, from every culture, from every creed, from every lineage, he entered their world, found useful information, analyzed every detail, scrutinized every human soul, ... it was also the foundation of his profession. And it apparently led him to be friends with everyone. In reality, of the priceless multitude of men and women he met in his life, the diplomat could count on only a very few and true friends, three he met during those years and each of them guarded an intimate secret:

Jacopo, a Benedictine monk, fine alchemist, studied botany, concoctions, potions, and perfumes but was also the creator of excellent liqueurs and digestives. With Tristano he shared a passion for the patristic classics and the philosophical search for truth. At a very young age he had killed his teacher with an alembic, an old helpless pedophile who had repeatedly abused his pupils. The corpse, dissolved in acid, was never found.

Veronica, raised by her mother in a Venetian brothel had, at a very early age, learned the art of seduction that she had practiced in Rome for some years; her house for trysts was frequented daily by painters, men of letters, soldiers, wealthy merchants, bankers, counts, marquises and, above all,

high-ranking prelates. She no longer had any family in the world, except for a twin sister who she had never known, whose mysterious existence only Tristano knew about.

Ludovico, son and assistant to the personal tailor of the Orsini family, extremely refined, creative, extravagant, extroverted, expert in the use of many different fabrics, textiles and accessories, always informed on the news and trends from the Italian and European states. His secret? ... he was sexually attracted to men more than women and, although he had never dared to show it, he had an admiration and a particular affection for Tristano, which sometimes transcended the level of friendship.

As soon as he could, freed of the burdens of the Curia, between one mission and the next, the beardless diplomat happily met with his friends... After each mission, as soon as he returned to Rome, he visited them, to tell them about the adventurous dynamics lived and to bring them a souvenir.

In the summer of 1477 Cardinal Orsini became seriously ill; he immediately called his protégé who was then at the abbey of Santa Maria di Farfa. Tristano went at lightning speed but when he arrived in Rome the palace was already in mourning. On the main floor, the hall up to the bed was crowded with mourning princes and whispering notables: the high cardinal was inauspiciously dead and with him the possibility of knowing from his voice the arcane mystery that enveloped the young bureaucrat's past.

Unfortunately, the cardinal had left nothing that concerned him. Nor did the prelate's will mention the secret he had spoken of three years earlier.

In the days following his death, Tristano fiercely and meticulously investigated the holy life of Latino, rummaging through the palace library... but nothing, he could not find anything, no relevant clue... except a single page that had been torn from an old travel diary. The document concerned an important mission of Cardinal Orsini to Barletta in AD MCDLIX. The cardinal's manuscripts were almost all written and preserved with such a maniacal perfection that the lack of a sheet, however badly cut, would have been filled and arranged promptly, if not by Latino himself, by his attentive librarians, and for a moment this attracted Tristano's suspicions; unfortunately there was nothing else that could open a trail nor a hypothesis worthy of study. He therefore decided to halt all research and return to the Curia, where he could continue his diplomatic work under the auspices of Giovanni Battista Orsini, who in the meantime had received the highly coveted appointment as apostolic protonotary.

In his first diplomatic assignments outside the confines of the Papal State, Tristano was joined by the pontifical nuncio Fra Roberto da Lecce, but soon his rare skills of *diligence, prudence e discretion convinced* Giovanni Battista and his advisers to entrust him with increasingly critical and delicate issues for which he necessarily enjoyed a certain independence and autonomy.

One of these was within the intricate context of the Ferrara War. Not only were the lords of the peninsula involved, for various reasons and at different levels, but also within the Church state the situation became more complicated each day and required excellent chess masters who were able to play at least two games simultaneously: one external and one, perhaps the more dangerous for the Holy See, internal; in fact two factions had been created in Rome: the Orsini and the Della Rovere, in support of the pope, against the Colonna princes, supported by the Savelli.

In short, life for our young diplomat was not at all easy: the ally reassuring and full of praise of the previous dinner could well become, overnight, the bitter and deplorable enemy of the next morning, the pawn to be removed from the chessboard to avoid stall or to give room to castling, the piece to be exchanged to launch the final attack...

Already, after the summer of that 1482, the tone of papal politics had become clear. The Holy See had decided to end the war and Tristano had, therefore, been sent to the Gonzaga court precisely to demonstrate Rome's changed will towards Ferrara and Mantua. At the same time, enjoying the utmost welcome from the proprietors and having free access to the refined rooms the

palace, the handsome twenty-two year old certainly could not remain insensitive to the calls of the young courtesans who paraded before him on those cold winter evenings.

III

Alessandra Lippi

The meeting with Pietro Di Giovanni and the rest stop in Prato

At the first glimmer of the Mantuan sun, Tristano, abandoning his very young lover in the arms of Morpheus, had just returned to his room; where he attempted to indulge in well-deserved sleep, when an insistent voice under his window brought him back to reality:

“Excellence... Excellence... My Lord...”

A soldier with a small parchment in his hand urgently requested his attention.

The letter clearly had a papal seal and ordered Tristano to return to Rome as quickly as possible.

Thus, without even waiting for news from the battlefield, the pontifical officer had to leave the Virgilian city with his escort, but not before quickly penning two necessary messages: one for the Marquis Federico, apologizing for his sudden departure and the confirmations of reassurance for the newfound support of the Holy Father towards him and the Duke of Ferrara; the other for his Beatrice, thanking her for having generously shared that night and wishing her to meet that needy love that her promised one could never give her.

He rode without stopping throughout the day, pausing only in Bologna to refresh the horses, before crossing the Emilian Apennines towards Florence.

The following day, crossing a compact and silent beech forest, a shot from a crossbow swiftly crossed the path of the young pontifical trustee, raising a mixed flock of thrushes and frozen blackcaps. While instinctively Tristano and his men slowed and put their hands to their weapons, on the same trajectory, a worn out bay bleeding from the withers, madly cut across their path. It was ridden badly by a man and a young woman who held on to him around his hips. Immediately after, another four riders and then two more, evidently in pursuit of the former.

Impulsively the bold ambassador decided to join the hunt in the dense thicket of deciduous trees, forcing two of the escort to do the same.

However, as soon as the woods opened up on a slightly inclined clearing, the three slowed and, hiding in the underbrush, tried to understand what was happening while keeping at a safe distance.

The brown nag had slumped to the ground; the two youngsters, had been thrown, they tried in vain to barricade themselves into a small semi-abandoned hut, now joined and hunted by the pursuers; two of these had dismounted from their horses swords drawn, while the other four surrounded the hovel.

While the one he protected was trying to open that battered door with all his strength, the young man, *unus sed leo*, was preparing to face the two smirking thugs with a bident. Despite the evident numerical inferiority, the man managed to parry the lunge on the right and hitting the first assailant with a kick to the lower abdomen, he turned towards the second to his left, dodging the blow and skewering his side. Thus obtaining a sword, he glanced quickly at the woman, meanwhile surrounded by the rest of the brutes, and resumed scuffling with the first thug; with a few blows he managed to disarm him and hold him, despite his size, by pinning his shoulders to the ground. At the same time, however, his companion's desperate cry for help drew his attention; turning to the woman, he threw his sword javelin-like into the chest of the brute who had pounced on him, in turn he received a crossbow bolt on the shoulder from the last rider who had remained in the saddle; he could do nothing when two others came up behind him and ensnared him with a metal mesh similar to that used in hunting, he was knocked to the ground and his limbs were immediately tied with a belt.

“No, Pietro...” shouted the desperate young woman bursting into tears, “Leave him! It's me you want”.

“Stop,” shouted what seemed to be the boss. “Don't finish it right away,” and pointing at the poor young woman, he continued: “First let's have some fun.”

“Bastards,” cried the one on the ground, trying in vain to wriggle free, “Thugs, cowards, sons of a bitch!”

The beast grasped the terrified girl by the hair and tearing her clothes off forced her against the shed wall, he held her arms, and while two others tied her legs with a rope, he began to take off his breeches while putting a rag in her mouth to block her screams.

At that point, Tristano, not being able to remain impassive in the face of such repulsive violence, finally decided to intervene: he came out into the open with his men and burst onto the scene as he heroically pounced on that heinous pack of lusty hyenas. The rapists, although reduced in number, still held the upper hand and were not to be subdued: the tension increased again. While, however, when one of the thugs pulled up his breeches, Tristano recognized the Medici lily on the frieze of the hood and even before the crossbowman began to stretch the bow against one of his own, he raised his fist to the sky, ordered them:

“Stop, I order you in the name of Sire Lorenzo de' Medici “; and he stretched his arm forward and then on the right and left again, against each of the four henchmen. “I have twenty-five men behind me ready to arrest you and hand you over to the jail of my friend Lorenzo,” he added.

The largest, then, recognizing the insignia of his lord on the ring and therefore fearing serious repercussions to his detriment, immediately ordered his men to drop their weapons; he also tried to justify what had happened but Tristano stopped him immediately:

“Go, go, felons.”

The four, undoubtedly ranting, mounted their horses and disappeared into the beech forest.

The papal soldiers, still incredulous as to the way the young official had solved the matter, quickly freed the two young people and, dressing their wounds as best they could, loaded them onto the back of a horse.

So he resumed his journey as the sun began to set on their right.

In the evening he arrived in Prato, where Tristano knew someone who perhaps could take care of the two wretches, allowing him to continue the ride to Rome quickly.

Near the Cathedral square, two girls had just given a piece of bread to a poor, cold beggar and were preparing to return home. Tristano suddenly jumped from his horse and pointing at the two young people exclaimed:

“Alessandra!”

The slimmer of the two turned abruptly, looked for a moment at the one who had dared to call out her name at that late hour and, receiving confirmation by seeing how much that sound had just aroused in her casket of memories, replied:

“Tristano”

In an instant she was running towards him and without convention or inhibition, as between young people who had already shared more than a little, she threw her arms around his neck, gently closing her eyes and resting her head on the chest of the unexpected stranger.

Alessandra was the lovely daughter of Madonna Lucrezia Buti and the late Florentine painter Filippo Lippi. Her mother, formerly Sister Lucrezia, had been a nun at the monastery of Santa Caterina, constrained by the family, forced to be a nun. Her father, chaplain of the convent at the same monastery in Prato, was already recognized as one of the best painters of his time and, therefore,

ecclesiastical hierarchies and the wealthiest families commissioned him to paint very important works, especially having a biblical and hagiographic subject. It was during one of these works that the two had met. The attraction was inevitable and irrepressible... she very beautiful and sensual, he very charismatic and sensitive: the two religious people fell madly in love. The sinful relationship within the sacred walls of the convent lasted for some time, during which Sister Lucrezia willingly lent herself as a model for some paintings by Fra' Filippo, until the latter, on the occasion of the procession of the Holy Belt, decided to kidnap his beloved and start a new life with her as concubine, regardless of the sensation, scandal and general disapproval. Obviously the Church strongly opposed the bond between the two, labeling it as lustful and even diabolical; only years later, thanks to the intercession of Lippi's protector, Cosimo de' Medici, with the Holy Father, the two were finally reformed and obtained the dissolution of the vows. So a few years later the beautiful Alessandra was born.

Tristano had known and visited the uninhibited girl during his stays as an adolescent in Florence at the house of the Medici and had immediately been impressed and attracted, even before the appearance of her gentle features, open-mindedness, extroversion and her intellectual independence, characteristics that she had certainly inherited from both parents, of which she intrinsically embodied the *modus cogitandi et operandi*.

Now, after almost five years, he saw her again. She was even more beautiful, even more a woman.

The two entered the house, while the rest of the company waited outside.

There was just enough time to tell the owner of the house what had happened a few hours earlier and the two friends went back outside, inviting the others to make themselves comfortable in the house. Despite the late hour, Alessandra sent for a doctor, arranged the rooms for the guests and assured Tristano generously that she would take care of them, together with her mother, until the wounded had recovered completely.

Thus, while a sincere glass of wine accompanied the convivial tales of the welcome guest and accentuated the blush on the cheeks of the graceful landlady, Ipno and his Oneiroi slowly descended on the city of Prato.

The following day, immediately after the morning praises, the young envoy, duly thanking for the hospitality, resumed his journey to Rome with his escort, where his protector was eagerly awaiting him... and with this last another compelling mission to accomplish.

It was therefore necessary to make up for a few hours of travel, possibly avoiding other unexpected occurrences.

No more than a hundred feet outside the inhabited area, on the dusty road to Florence, the three papal knights had just begun to increase their speed when they were joined by a man on horseback with a showy bandage between his arm and shoulder.

“Sir... Sir, please. Stop...”

The breathless man was the same one Tristano had just saved and had a short while before entrusted, together with his woman, to the care of the Lippi house. The papal officer had to stop again.

“Please, my lord, listen to me,” continued the imploring supplicant, “What you have done and demonstrated is more noble than any coat of arms that adorns your breast and any crown that dominates your family coat of arms.”

Then, getting off his horse, he prostrated himself before the diplomat:

“Allow me to show you my eternal gratitude and offer you my services only as a partial restoration of the unquenchable debt that I contracted when Your Excellency stole me and even more my woman from the murderous ferocity of those brutes. This entire night I could not help but think about what happened and decided,

if you accept, I offer you, without asking for anything in return, my humble sword and I swear my loyalty to you as long as you permit me to serve you.”

Tristano, for the high office he held, was certainly not short of protection and frankly until then he had always managed on his own... but he saw in the eyes of that man, who almost implored him, a particular light and a sense of sincere gratitude, loyalty, disinterest, something out of the ordinary. So much so that, without the humble person being able to add anything else, he asked:

“What's your name, brave man?”

“Pietro Di Giovanni, my lord,” he replied, raising his head.

“Get up Pietro. Given the delay that I am augmenting because of you, alas, your protection against the wrath of my lord will not be sufficient... I have no blazons or coats of arms to display, but I appreciate your gratitude and accept your services. But now, if you care so much, before I think any more about it, get on your horse and let's move on without further delay.”

And so the group resumed their race towards the Eternal City.

IV The Magnificent's ring

Giuliano de' Medici and Simonetta Vespucci

Pietro, a mature man, uncouth, scruffy in appearance but not that rough, was very skilled with the sword (with what he had inherited from his father he had attended the Bolognese school of Lippo Bartolomeo Dardi); he was endowed with an excellent technique and, although no longer young, he was physically well prepared; he did not like to call himself a mercenary, but, like many others, he had hitherto earned a living in the pay of one or other noble, taking part in the many battles and brawls that in those years animated the entire peninsula.

During the journey, at a time they had slowed their pace, the swordsman came up beside Tristano and, being careful never to let the muzzle of his horse go in front of that of his new lord, he dared ask:

“Will you allow me, a question Your Excellency?”

“Of course Pietro, ask me,” replied the distinguished official, turning his head a few degrees towards his daring assistant.

“How did you get that ring, sir? Is it really the Magnificent's ring?”

Tristano was silent for a few moments giving a half smile but then, certain that he could trust this man, whom he had known for a few days but who he valued already, let go of his reserve and began his story:

“Seven years have passed since Cardinal Orsini took me with him to Florence for the first time, following a medical delegation that had been created specifically to provide assistance to His Most Reverend Excellency, Rinaldo Orsini, archbishop of Florence, he had been ill for two weeks with no sign of remission. Once I arrived in the city, while the *physicus* with his apprentices – among whom was my friend Jacopo – were immediately sent to the diocese to be at the bedside of the suffering prelate, the cardinal took me with him to Madonna Clarice, his granddaughter and wife of Lorenzo de' Medici, the Magnificent.

I still remember the sweet and maternal gaze with which Donna Clarice welcomed me, holding out her hand. She introduced me to her family and friends and immediately put every comfort in the edifice at my disposal. Every evening the banquets were attended by writers, humanists, artists, superfine courtiers and... most of all by beautiful women.

The most beautiful of all, the one who still today is unable to match and oust from the throne of my ideal, was Simonetta Cattaneo Vespucci.

The evening I saw her for the first time, she was wearing a brocade lined in red velvet, which left a generous neckline clearly visible, preciously bordered by a black gamurra, which clung perfectly to her turgid breast and fell to her feet holding the soft form of that admired and desired body. She let most of her blond curls fall lose on her shoulders, while only a small part was expertly gathered in a long braid enriched with cords and very small pearls. A few rebellious locks framed that harmonious, fresh, radiant, ethereal face. Her eyes were large and melancholy, very sensual, at least as far as could be seen from the faint smile on her velvety, parted red lips, highlighted by the a small dimple on her chin, the same red color as the day.

If I had not had the disastrous news of her death shortly after, I would still believe she was a goddess embodied in a perfect feminine shell.

Everyone held that she had only one flaw: she already had a husband... rightly jealous. At only sixteen she had married the banker Marco Vespucci, in Genoa in the presence of the doge and all the aristocracy of the maritime republic.

She was very much loved by society (and at the same time envied); in those years she had become the favorite muse of many writers and artists, among them the painter Sandro Botticelli, a longtime friend of the Medici family, who had fallen in love with her platonically and painted her portraits everywhere: even on the banner that he had made for the carousel of that year, epically won by Giuliano de' Medici, portrayed her ethereal face.

The following day we were invited to a banquet at the Villa di Careggi that the Magnificent had organized in honor of the Borromeo family with the implicit intent of introducing their daughter to his brother Giuliano, who, however, like and perhaps more than many, had clearly lost his head for Cattaneo. After the first pleasantries, in fact, Giuliano left the room and the guests, secluding himself in the garden, where Vespucci's wife was waiting for him, took advantage of the absence of her husband, who had been traveling on business since that morning.

Between one course and the next, Lorenzo delighted his guests by proclaiming precious sonnets that he had composed. On the other hand, if necessary, some of the distinguished guests answered in rhyme, pleasantly enlivening the symposium. In addition to noble friends and family, esteemed neo-Platonic academics were seated at the table such as Marsilio Ficino, Agnolo Ambrogini and Pico della Mirandola, as well as several members of the Florentine Council.

Although he was the affirmed head of the richest and most powerful family in Florence and was increasingly becoming the undisputed arbiter of the political balance on the peninsula, Lorenzo was only twenty-six years old and had the undoubted merit of having been able to build a young court around him, brilliant but at the same time wise and capable. In a few days of knowing him, he had become my model to strive for, a concentration of values to which I should aspire. However, what made us objectively different and that I could have never equaled, apart from the eleven years of age, was his being able to count on a solid and closely-knit family: his mother, Donna Lucrezia, was, even more so since the death of her relative Piero, his omnipresent accomplice and councilor; Bianca, sweet and beloved sister, doted on her elder brother, never missed a chance to praise him and every time she publicly pronounced his name her eyes shone; Giuliano, a disorderly younger brother, despite his venial disagreements and impertinences, however, was always at his side and involved in every political success or failure; Clarice, despite having learned of a few marital betrayals, had never ceased to love her husband and would always have supported him against anyone, even against, if necessary, her own family of origin. It was pleasant to watch that family court around which the city, clustered, elegantly subservient and reverent, at every celebration, every banquet. And it was a typical occasion, which like others I was privileged to attend.

Before, however, the confectioner made his scenographic entrance into the dining room, I heard a dog barking repeatedly outside the villa and instinctively decided to go and see why the animal wanted to attract the attention of the owners. Entering the garden I discovered incredulously Giuliano and Simonetta rolling on the ground without being able to control their limbs: Vespucci, red in the face, with eyes and mouth wide open, trembled like a leaf; her lover, on the other hand, tried to

tear his clothes off, alternating spasmodic laughter with hallucinations... I returned to the house without delay and, taking advantage of a break, with utmost discretion asked Lorenzo to follow me.

Rushing to the spot, we saw the two lifeless bodies. Lorenzo ordered me to call the doctor immediately; although he tried to shake his younger brother's head and torso, he did not react in the slightest, neither to slaps or to his voice. After a while seizures began.

The situation was critical and very delicate. After a few moments, excitement and bewilderment on the Magnificent's face turned to panic and helplessness. Although he wanted to ask anyone present at his home for help, he knew well that the public discovery of the two young people in such conditions, in addition to creating an enormous scandal would certainly mean, for himself and his family, the loss of the significant political support of Marco Vespucci, at that moment a needle in the balance of a Council that was already mined by de' Pazzi (the noble Jacopo de' Pazzi, without a shadow of a doubt, would have taken advantage of the situation to claim control of the city).

Lorenzo was not reassured even by the sudden arrival of the doctor and the apothecary, who kept asking me what I had seen before he came. The great doctors in fact, immediately theorized a case of poisoning, they were unable to identify the substance responsible and consequently indicated a possible remedy. In the meantime, Agnolo Ambrogini arrived on the spot, the only one, besides his mother, whom Lorenzo blindly trusted; he was entrusted with the task of fabricating a necessary excuse for the guests, who rightly began to discern and accuse the absence of the landlord. With the help of Agnolo the bodies were quickly and secretly transported to a nearby shelter.

I noticed then that where Simonetta's body had recently lain there was a small basket of apples and berries, all apparently edible and harmless. I grabbed a blueberry between two fingers and crushed it. In a flash I remembered that a few months earlier Jacopo in Rome had shown me a very poisonous plant, called "atropa", also known as "Satan's cherry", the fruits of which were easily confused with the berries of the common blueberry but unlike this the latter could be lethal in small quantities. Young women often used a marinate of atropa leaves to cause their eyes to shine and to dilate the pupil so as to appear more seductive. The doctor accepted my theory as possible and confirmed that both the young people dying had bluish spots on their lips. However, the scientist ruled that if that were the case there was no known cure, throwing the landlord into the most desperate resignation.

The dynamic was clarified days later: someone, in the pay of Francesco de' Pazzi, had not replaced the blueberries accidentally with the atropa in that fruit basket that Donna Vespucci had then shared with her lover. Giuliano had therefore poisoned himself by tearing the poisonous berries, in an erotic game, directly from the mouth of the beautiful Simonetta. And so, after a few minutes, the powerful drug took effect.

Still stunned at what had taken place in such a short time, I dared to intrude a second time and proposed to the Honorable Lorenzo to make an extreme attempt, and to consult the pontifical delegation hosted in the diocese. The Magnificent, making me promise maximum reserve, consented and hurriedly made me escort him to Jacopo, with whom I returned shortly thereafter. My Benedictine analyzed the fruits of the solanaceous and administered an antidote to the sufferers from the unknown lands of Africa. After about an hour the symptoms subsided, their body

temperature began to fall and within eight days the two young people recovered completely.

Together with fate any suspicion was removed, inside and outside the walls. In fact, when Marco Vespucci returned to the city with his bankers, he didn't notice anything: he was even richer, Simonetta was even more beautiful, Giuliano even more in love... but, most of all, Florence was even more Medici.

Even the archbishop, slowly, seemed to recover; therefore we prepared to return to Rome. First, however, the Magnificent, in sign of his affection and esteem as well as thanks and gratitude, wanted to pay homage to me for what everyone considered to be one of the highest awards of the republic: the gold ring bearing six balls, a universal pass within the city territories... and not only.

Since then I carry it with me always, as a precious testimony to Lorenzo's friendship and to the imperishable memory of those two unfortunate lovers who, like Paris and Helen, who had several times risked turning Florence into Ilium.

Throughout the narration, Pietro, fascinated and enraptured by the extraordinary nature of the facts, by the skilled narration of the speaker and by the abundance of details, dared not speak.

He waited a few seconds after the happy ending to be sure not to desecrate that incredible story and, giving a tight squeeze on his bandage, finally said proudly:

“Thank you sir. Serving you will not only be just an honor for me, it will be a pleasure.”

After two days of further journey, the Via Cassia revealed the magnificence of Rome and although men and animals were very tired, at the mere sight spirits regained their force and bodies their strength. Tristano urged on his horse and increased the speed.

V

The countess of Forlì

Girolamo Riario and Caterina Sforza

He didn't find Giovanni Battista waiting for him in the rooms of the protonotary but a plump cleric who invited him to go directly to the busy monsignor who was in the basilica of San Pietro, where he had been urgently summoned by the pontiff. There he found both in the midst of a serious meeting in front of the funeral monument for Roberto Malatesta, the hero of the battle of Campomorto.

Standing beside Sixtus IV was his nephew, the sinister captain general Girolamo Riario, whom Tristano already knew as having been one of the main protagonists of the failed conspiracy in Florence four years earlier, hatched against his friends Lorenzo and Giuliano de' Medici, which had cost the life of the latter.

Not satisfied with having received the Lordships of Imola and Forlì from his uncle, after failing to take possession of Florence and having failed to conquer Urbino, the insatiable Riario was now in danger of seeing his ambitions for Ferrara also fail definitively.

The Republic of Venezia, as has already been said, continued to be deaf to the pontiff's warnings and excommunications; indeed, after having withdrawn its ambassadors from Rome, every day it increasingly threatened the Milanese border and the territories of the Church in Romagna. And now the old Sixtus IV worried about this more than anything else.

Before it was hopelessly too late, it was then thought to play the Aragonese card: it was decided to send Tristano to Naples to King Ferdinando in an attempt to convince him, after Campomorto, to enter into a new coalition agreement (in which Florence and Milan would also participate) against the Serenissima. In truth, Giovanni Battista was not enthusiastic about this solution and had instead proposed dealing directly with the doge, but given the firm determination of the Holy Father, he finally had to put a good face on it and accept the assignment.

The one who was the most satisfied with the deliberate solution was obviously Girolamo, who saw in this move the last glimmer of hope for his being able to sit as a protagonist at the winners' table and finally get his hands on the Este city.

“Monsignor Orsini” appealed to the latter before the Holy Father dismissed those present, “Please do me the courtesy, Your Magnitude and Our honorable ambassador, to accept the invitation to a sober banquet that my lady and I will hold tomorrow evening at my humble palace at Sant'Apollinare to inaugurate the period of Holy Christmas.”

Giovanni Battista accepted and thanked him with deference.

Tristano, who deliberately had not made a statement before the captain, after the meeting, at a separate venue, was also persuaded by his protector to accept the invitation without hesitation. Going down the staircase at the Constantine basilica, Orsini intimated:

“Tomorrow morning at the third hour I will be waiting for you in my office for details about Mantua, but first send a quick confirmation to the Riario. You may also decline the invitation from the pope's nephew but not that of his son!”

Soon after he climbed into the carriage and disappeared into the crowded streets of the city.

The young diplomat was exhausted and that last indiscretion, besides his extreme strength, had also caused him to lose his ability to speak; he entered the first inn that was open and, after having

a bite to eat, sent Pietro and the two horses to a temporary shelter; he walked home as the sun went down.

Having reached home, however, the emotions of that day seemed not to be over yet...

From the street he glimpsed a dim candlelight that for a brief instant illuminated the upper floor of his residence.

He put his hand to his sword and climbed cautiously to the upper level where he saw that glimmer rekindle in the bedroom... Then another more intense glow and a third candle...

“Who’s there?!” He asked, removing a sword from a shield on the wall. “Come on out!” He kicked open the door to the room that was already ajar.

An impertinent laugh then broke the tension and taking shape before his eyes were the soft curves of a female body he knew well. It was his Veronica.

“Tell me, oh my hero. My ears are yearning to hear your voice,” whispered the irreplaceable confidant and priceless lover.

“Not as much as my hands are yearning to encircle your body, my dear,” retorted Tristano, placing his weapons on a chair where the young prostitute had thrown her crinoline and bloomers and, letting his ultramarine blue coat fall to the floor, manfully he went to meet her.

She smiled bringing an index finger to her mouth and shaking her head untied her curly hair. He took off his shirt and pushing her onto the bed, adding:

“You will have to earn your hero's tale.”

And between laughter and the usual erotic games to which the two were accustomed, his fatigue suddenly disappeared.

In the aftermath, having recovered his strength and the elegant black wool overcoat that he had commissioned from the good Ludovico before leaving for Mantua, the young diplomat went, *ob torto collo*, to the Riario feast.

The brand new building, which stood on the ruins of an ancient temple of Apollo, was gorgeous. It was designed by the master from Forlì, Melozzo di Giuliano degli Ambrosi, to please Girolamo's lust for greatness and the refined taste of his young and beautiful lady: Caterina Sforza, the natural daughter of the late Duke of Milan, Galeazzo, and his lover, Lucrezia Landriani.

The amiable, nonchalant hostess welcomed him with her consort, twenty years older, the most prized invited into the admirable courtyard, despite the particularly harsh air of that evening. She wore a long, tightly fitting gamurra, sensually edged with black lace that created a contrast with the paleness of her skin. The robe was closed with back ties and completed with separate sleeves embroidered with gold threads, formed by variegated fabrics and artfully cut and held together with laces, and from whose cuts the white blouse puffed out. Her hair was gathered in a very sensual veil embellished with pearls and golden coronet.

As soon as his turn came, the Riario obsequiously presented the welcome guest to his wife:

“His Excellency Tristano de' Ginni, the one whom His Holiness places his total trust and blessing,” as if stressing that he was precisely the man on whom the success of the next venture depended and the fortunes of his family.

“An extraordinary fame precedes you, sir,” stressed Caterina, addressing the handsome guest.

“The workmanship of your magnificent pendant is extraordinary, engraved using the superlative technique of the French masters of lost-wax casting, madam,” the young diplomat replied promptly, staring at her long neck and looking up into her eyes, deep, proud to belong to a line of glorious but at the same time melancholy

warriors, resigned portals of a dissatisfied soul, faithful indicators of the typical unhappiness of ostentatious joy.

Tristano found them captivating, could not look away for a moment throughout the evening and, taking advantage of the temporary absence of her husband, who had been retained by cardinals and politicians outside the room, he dared to invite the lady to a “bassa danza”.

She, since the Milanese period, used to practice various activities, also considered inconvenient for her sex and rank: she was a skilled hunter, she had a real passion for weaponry and a strong propensity for command inherited from her mother, loved to conduct experiments in botany and alchemy. She was reckless and loved risk-takers.

Despite everyone's eyes being on her, she couldn't refuse.

“I love the Greek sculpture of Polykleitos and Phidias. And you, ma'am?” asked Tristano as the dance moves allowed his mouth to near her ear.

“Yes, sublime. I love it too,” answered Caterina smiling.

“Have you ever seen the art collection at Palazzo Orsini? There are priceless marble Herculean bodies,” added the bold knight.

“Oh,” the noblewoman pretended to be surprised and disturbed, “I imagine... You too, sir, should see the paintings of my Melozzo, which I jealously guard at my palace,” she said voluptuously before the music separated them.

For the rest of the evening, the refined hostess ignored the attentions of the young seducer who, on the contrary, saw and felt nothing but the light and smell of that barely touched skin.

The dinner ended and one after another the diners left the successful banquet.

Tristano was already in the courtyard when a page came to him with a folded leaflet...

“The works of my Melozzo are in the loggia on the noble floor.”

And just as he had not been able to decline the invitation of the pope's son, in the same way he absolutely could not decline the invitation of his esteemed daughter-in-law. He went back inside and followed the servant upstairs, where he waited impatiently for the moment when he could finally untie that long blond hair, under which he discovered the intensity of her lips, scarlet like the wounds of the countless sufferings experienced.

Caterina had a complex psyche... and a good seducer manages to observe the complexity of a woman's psyche best during two very particular situations: in the game and between the sheets.

Until the dawn of the new day, he did not spare himself, not even when she confided to Tristano in tears of the violence she had suffered since she was a child.

“Sometimes secrets can only be confided to a stranger,” he said. Immediately afterwards her moving story began:

“I was not the bride promised to Girolamo Riario but everything had been planned so that it would be my cousin Costanza, at the age of eleven, who would unite with that angry animal before God and men. On the eve of the wedding, however, my aunt, Gabriella Gonzaga, demanded that the consummation of the legitimate union take place only after three years, when Costanza reached the legal age. With this condition, Girolamo, in all his fury, canceled the marriage and threatened terrible repercussions on the whole family for the serious shame he had suffered. So it was that, as is done with a chipped ring, my relatives replaced me with the refused cousin, agreeing to all the claims of the despotic bridegroom. I was only ten years old.”

Tristano, stunned, only sensed that he should hold her tightly and wipe away the tears that streamed down her face.

VI

The siege of Otranto

Ahmet Pascià and the league against the Turks

After a few days, having finalized the last details, as planned, the tireless papal trustee left for Naples.

To accompany him on his secret mission was the brave Pietro, who had now fully recovered and was impatient to see the Neapolitan city that his father had spoken about so much when he was a child.

For Tristano, however, it was not the first time and following the usual impertinent insistence of his footman began to tell what happened to him almost three years before:

“I was as excited and curious as you are now. To think that I knew Naples only from an old Benedictine map my late grandfather had showed me to indicate the court my mother had served at when she was young. I joined Fra Roberto, my teacher and guide, who was well known at the time as Fra Roberto Caracciolo da Lecce, in the wonderful royal chapel of Naples and together we rushed to warn King Ferdinando d’Aragona of the imminent danger from the Turks on the eastern coast.

Shortly before a heartfelt letter from the Grand Master of the Knights Hospitaller had, in fact, informed the pontiff of the attempts of the Republic of Venice to impel the Ottoman Empire to mount an expedition against the Italian peninsula and specifically the Kingdom of Naples. This obviously raised unspeakable concerns not only for the Aragonese, but for the whole of Christianity.

However, Ferrante (the name his subjects gave to King Ferdinando), not only remained deaf to the warnings about the Turks but shortly thereafter, irresponsibly, instead, ordered the removal of 200 infantrymen from Otranto to use against Florence.

Thus, the grand vizier Gedik Ahmet Pascià, after a failed attempt at snatching Rhodes from the Knights of San Giovanni, landed undisturbed on the Brindisi coast with his fleet, where he turned his attention to the city of Otranto. Immediately he sent his legate to those white walls, guaranteeing that he would save the lives of the inhabitants of Otranto in exchange for their immediate and unconditional surrender. The latter, however, not only refused the conditions of the Turkish messenger but unfortunately killed him, sparking the foreseeable wrath of the fierce Ahmet Pascià.

During the summer the Turks burst into the city like bloodthirsty beasts and in a few minutes they overwhelmed all who opposed them.

The cathedral was the ultimate refuge for women, children, the elderly, the disabled, terrified inhabitants, the last bastion where they could barricade themselves when all other defenses had already fallen: the men reinforced the gates, the women with their little ones in their arms, lined up along the cosmogonic tree of life, the religious offered the last holy Eucharist... and like the first Christians they raised a sad liturgical song to God awaiting martyrdom; the cavalry broke through the door, the demons rushed in, raged over the crowd without distinction; in vain the archbishop ordered the infidels to stop but unheeding he himself was wounded and beheaded together with his own; neither women nor children were spared from their blind and murderous fury. Noblewomen were plundered and rendered naked,

the youngest were raped repeatedly in the presence of their fathers and husbands held by the neck, their honor and spirit murdered before their body. The most cruel and heinous violence spread from the cathedral to the entire city. At first 800 men managed to escape to a hill but, also blocked by the Janissaries of the barbarian chief, they were passed one by one under the blade of a scimitar. The population was exterminated abominably. At day's end, the five thousand inhabitants were reduced to only a few dozen living, saved in exchange for their conversion to the Koran and the resounding payment of three hundred golden ducats.

Only when this wretched news reached court, did Ferrante understand the enormous sin he had committed of undervaluation and then he decided to entrust reconquest of those lands to his son Alfonso.

Paternally, the Holy Father wrote to all the lords of Italy, asking them to set aside their internal rivalries and to face the Ottoman threat together and, in exchange, granted plenary indulgence to the members of the newly formed Christian League. Given the seriousness and how critical the situation was, the Curia allocated 100,000 ducats for the construction of a fleet of 25 galleys and the equipping of 4,000 infantrymen.

In addition to the king of Naples, the appeal of Sixtus IV was answered by the king of Hungary, the Dukes of Milan and Ferrara, the Republics of Geneva and Florence. As expected, instead, no support came from Venice, which had signed a peace treaty with the Turks only the previous year and could not afford to block trade routes with the East again.

Despite the late but impressive Christian mobilization, the Ottomans, not only managed to hold the Land of Otranto and part of the Land of Bari and Basilicata firmly in their hands, they were ready to direct their army to the north on the Capitanata and to the west on Naples.

It was only thanks to our diplomacy that we managed to intercept a message from Muhammad II in Anatolia; which was then suitably modified and packaged and delivered to Ahmet Pascià with one of our spies. The Turkish captain swallowed the bait: he left Otranto temporarily with two-thirds of his men to embark for Valona; during the crossing he was surrounded by the ships that had been prepared by the Christian League and finally, after months of conquests and victories, suffered a devastating defeat, so heavy, so much so that he was forced to flee to Albania in a small boat.

The news of the naval victory and even more so of the fearful escape of the barbarian chief raised the morale of the Neapolitans and their allies... Duke Alfonso managed to reorganize a discreet army of mercenaries finally also supported operationally by the other Catholic nobles, who then perceived the possibility of winning back Otranto and Puglia. Spain sent 20 ships and Hungary 500 choice soldiers.

It was one of the most impressive naval sieges recalled by history: the colossal siege of Otranto.”

Meanwhile the horses were starting to become tired and needed clean water. Tristano then looked around and suspended his epic narrative.

Pietro was, as always, bewitched and dumbfounded, pensive, in the same way as children who have heard the Homeric or Virgilian poems told for the first time.

“And then? What happened? How did it end, sir?”

“Well, the rest is fairly recent: after the death of Muhammad II, the new sultan actually forbade Ahmet Pascià from returning to Italy. At the end of last summer, exhausted by hunger, thirst and the plague, the Ottomans surrendered and the Aragonese finally regained control of the city. According to some, the infamous Turkish leader is in prison or was even executed by his own men at Edirne. “*O quam cito transit gloria mundi*”, concluded Tristano.

“What, Excellence?”

“Nothing Pietro, nothing. Let's hurry up now. The generous and abundant breasts of the Parthenope siren await us... “

And spurring his steed forward, he quickened his pace, dragging an even more confused Pietro behind him.

VII

Don Ferrante and the reason for Naples

The ambush and the maid

After a couple of days they came to a sunny and busy capital, in the midst of a colorful market, anything could make one leap to the wildest fantasy: from fruit to furniture, from fish to hemp ropes, from music to sculptures, from sweets to livestock, from relics to prostitutes.

“Anyone who goes on a trip to Naples must prepare to get to know at least three divinities: pasta, mozza and struffoli”, said Tristano amusedly to his companion.

“I hope I get to know them all soon, sir”, replied Pietro.

They left the horses in a small, narrow stable and proceeded on foot through the lanes and alleys that divided the confusing exhibition district.

Soon, however, the two strangers realized they were being followed. So they tried to blend into the crowd, between the tents of the stalls, making their way through the intrusive merchants, but that ugly face seemed to know that environment better than anyone else and he certainly had no problem in maintaining his sinister close stalking. Pietro then decided to face him; he signaled to Tristano to turn through a narrow secondary alley and, as soon as the man emerged from the corner, he pulled his sword out to the side, trying to dissuade the pursuer.

To these were added immediately two others, moreover well equipped.

Threatening mockingly, they began to approach, lowering and coiling like loins on their prey. After a circling around, the scuffle began: the one with the dark feathered cap parried Pietro's double attack, from right and from above, suddenly slashing at the height of his waist making the latter leap backwards. The other, wearing a more lively doublet, had a showy octagonal pomolo, a wide-bladed sword set with precious lapis lazuli; turned and raised his sword to heaven, inviting Tristano to do the same; he then charged the blow on the cinquedeia, a short-bladed sword of the young pontiff, promptly blocked the blow, countering with the long iron and with a kick to the opponent's thigh. Meanwhile, the third, with the striped codpiece, pulled out a rapier and rushed to assist the first, alternating with this against the Bolognese swordsman; he sliced down the length of a man's body, which was blocked by Di Giovanni who raised his arm and turned his sword upside down; then he scored a wide arc in the air and responded to the blow, forcing the opponent to change guard.

As the air heated with the sparks from the blades and the clashing of the blows on the helmets, they unwittingly went into the semi-dark alleys of the old city.

Pietro then made a wise backtrack and a small step forward accompanied by a threatening lunge; then after another hesitation he launched into the attack: he drew his sword very quickly from the bottom upwards and with a masterful twist of his wrist he sliced from right to left forcing the thug to open his arm leaving his body exposed; then he locked the blade with the buckler, and relentlessly struck the weapon in his chest.

On the other front, Tristano was in serious difficulty, as he struggled with a well-trained opponent, he quickly advanced with his left knee, hit to the right and vice versa, to simulate circling with his body, to enable a change in rhythm and guard, he sought any hesitation in the wavering defense of the diplomat. Pietro tried for a moment to help him and would have been able to if he hadn't had a hard bone to pick.

Suddenly from overhead, two huge white sheets that had been patched and weighted on the sides fell over the heads of the two Neapolitans, who became temporarily entangled. A whistle from

a street urchin providentially showed Tristano and his assistant an escape route, and when the thugs were able to resume their pursuit, a door into a hypogean cellar had already swallowed up the two strangers, keeping them safe for a while.

Having escaped the danger, the latter were finally able to return to the alley that in the meantime had revived with a few poor folk, but they were unable to see or thank those little street urchins to whom they probably owed their lives; incredibly they had disappeared, as had the good Pietro's money bag!

In short, after spontaneous and dutiful curses, the two had a great laugh and in mid afternoon they reached Castel Nuovo.

There the elderly sovereign immediately welcomed them with finest tributes and considerations who, although at odds with the Pope, retained a particular sense of gratitude towards Tristano and a respect that went beyond their respective public roles: he probably saw in him his friend Latino.

Indeed, it was Cardinal Orsini, then apostolic legated *a latere*, who, bearing the bull of investiture granted by Pope Pius II and assisted by Cardinal Trevisan, by the archbishop of Nazareth in Barletta, Giacomo de Aurilia, by the archbishop of Taranto and by other numerous prelates, on February 4 AD 1459, during a sumptuous ceremony in the square in front of the castle of Barletta, crowned Ferdinando I of Naples blessing him with the triple title of king of Sicily, Jerusalem and Hungary. Latino had noted the episode and the events of the following days of the coronation on that diary page that had been strangely torn and had disappeared mysteriously from the cardinal's personal archive.

Don Ferrante and Don Tristano were closed in conclave for over two hours.

Before their departure, the pontifical official personally took care of removing the main diplomatic obstruction hindering any relationship between the Holy See and the Neapolitan court: he ensured that the royal secretariat became aware of a few secret missives, obviously false, that the Venetian ambassador to Naples had sent to his doge. In such dispatches the Neapolitan ruler was described as inept, vain, and a libertine. The reaction was immediate.

Thanks to the consequent repatriation of the man from Serenissima and the king's personal esteem, the interview was extremely cordial and, in the end, although Don Ferrante had not come to any decision, it seemed to Tristano that the sovereign was well disposed to considering the reasons set out and to analyze the scenario that had been proposed to him.

And in fact, he was right: two days later he recalled the young pupil of the defunct Cardinal Orsini and verbally informed him that the Kingdom of Naples would take part in the new alliance against Venice. The command would be entrusted to his son Alfonso, the Duke of Calabria, who would also take on the role of captain of the league. The agreement was later formalized and made official on Christmas day.

Tristano was extremely satisfied.

After a rich dinner based on Christmas pastries and sweets, certainly not disdained by the barons and the most courteous representatives of the Neapolitan nobility, the young man decided to retire to his apartment perhaps to try to relax by soaking in a warm tub the His Majesty had generously requested to be prepared.

The elderly woman, who had so thoughtfully set up the bathroom for him, while arranging the last linens in a closet, stared at him persistently. But the numb official paid no mind to her, as he was immersed in his thoughts and unsolved questions at least as far as he was in that steaming tub.

“You have the same eyes. Your mother was a saintly woman,” said the woman before disappearing behind the door of the room.

The one who had been caught dreaming spun around. Those words brought him back to reality like the tone of a bell.

“ Wait,” he shouted in vain.

How did that maidservant know his mother? Had she had the chance to meet her or work with her during the period when the young woman had served at that court? Tristano had to know... He leaped out of the tub and, dried himself as best he could, quickly he put on his shirt, breeches, and boots and rushed to look for her in the palace.

When he reached the service floor, he heard unmistakable human moans, separated by more high pitched grunts mixed with regular squeaks from wooden planks, coming from the room at the bottom of the staircase.

The pastry chef, the sublime architect of those gluttonous sugar architectures that reigned over the tables of the palace banquets, as well as the almond desserts, was as usual filling the young eager servants who tidied up the kitchen at the end of the day. At that moment, however, the young ambassador did not have time for that type of display and casting a fleeting glance, he passed on determinedly.

Beyond the kitchens, in a narrow corridor, he glimpsed a good half of the corpulent profile of a woman, lying on the floor, supine, from the wide-open door of the room, the light from the fireplace lit her face, as if someone had tried to carry the body after felling it. It was the long-sought woman Tristano had been searching for.

Rushing in, the servant was wide-eyed her mouth half-open, she no longer breathed. On the floor of the room he noticed a small deep blue stone, probably part of a lapis lazuli gem similar to those set into the handle of the pursuer's weapon of a few days before.

However, he was warned by the noises coming from the entrance hall and decided to leave before someone noticed his presence, which was hardly justifiable, in that inconvenient place.

The next morning, together with his assistant, he left the castle. In the shadow of a tower, Pietro recognized, among the Duke of Calabria's henchmen, one of the men who had made the attempt on their safety the day they had arrived and whispering he informed his lord. The latter, however, given the diplomatic result achieved and the still murky situation, decided not to say a word and moved away among the salutations.

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