

Da Vinci's Disciples, Book 1:

PORTRAIT OF A CONSPIRACY

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PERSONAGGI

*denotes historical character

Viviana del Marrone-a founding member of a secret group of women artists; the daughter of a long line of wealthy vintners; born 1444

Orfeo del Marrone-Viviana's husband; a merchant; born 1434

Contessa Fiammetta Ruspoli Maffei-a member of the secret group of women artists; daughter to one of the great noble houses of Florence; born 1442

*Lorenzo de' Medici-entitled *Il Magnifico* by the people of Florence; renowned Italian statesman and unofficial ruler of the Florentine government; merchant banker; a great patron of the arts; Platonist; poet; born 1449

*Giuliano de' Medici-younger brother of Lorenzo de' Medici; co-ruler of Florence though less politically active; patron of the arts; athlete; born 1453

Lapaccia Cavalcanti-member of the secret group of women artists; widow of Messer Andrea Cavalcanti; born 1438

*Messer Jacopo de' Pazzi-ruling patriarch of the Pazzi family; merchant banker; born 1421

*Francesco de' Pazzi-oldest nephew of Jacopo de' Pazzi; merchant banker; born 1444

*Guglielmo de' Pazzi-nephew of Jacopo de' Pazzi; younger brother to Francesco de' Pazzi; husband to Bianca de' Medici; one time Prior of Florence and member of the Eight; born 1437

Conte Patrizio Maffei-Fiammetta's husband; a high-ranking nobleman; born 1437

*Cardinal of San Giorgio, Raffaele Riario-nephew of Pope Sixtus IV; first adolescent elevated to College of Cardinals; patron of the arts; born 1461

*Bernardo Bandini Baronecelli-banker with the Pazzi organization; born 1421

*Archbishop of Pisa, Francesco Salviati-appointed Archbishop by Pope Sixtus IV; born 1443

Sansone Caivano-professional soldier from northern Venice, born 1450

*Cesare Petrucci-Gonfaloniere (governor) of Florence; veteran militiaman

Natasia Soderini-the youngest member of the secret group of women artists; a member of one of the most powerful and noble houses of Florence; born 1462.

* Alessandro di Mariano di Vanni Filipepi, better known as Sandro Botticelli-Italian Renaissance painter of Florentine School; belonged to court of Lorenzo de' Medici; born 1445

Mattea Zamperini-last member to join the secret group of women artists; daughter of a deceased merchant; born 1461

Andreano Cavalcanti-son of Lapaccia; member of the *Consiglio di Cento*, Council of One Hundred; born 1456

Isabetta Fioravanti-a member of the secret group of women artists; a mainland Venetian brought to Florence by her husband, a once successful butcher; born 1454.

Father Raffaello, Tomaso Soderini-Natasia Soderini's brother; parish priest of Santo Spirito; born 1457

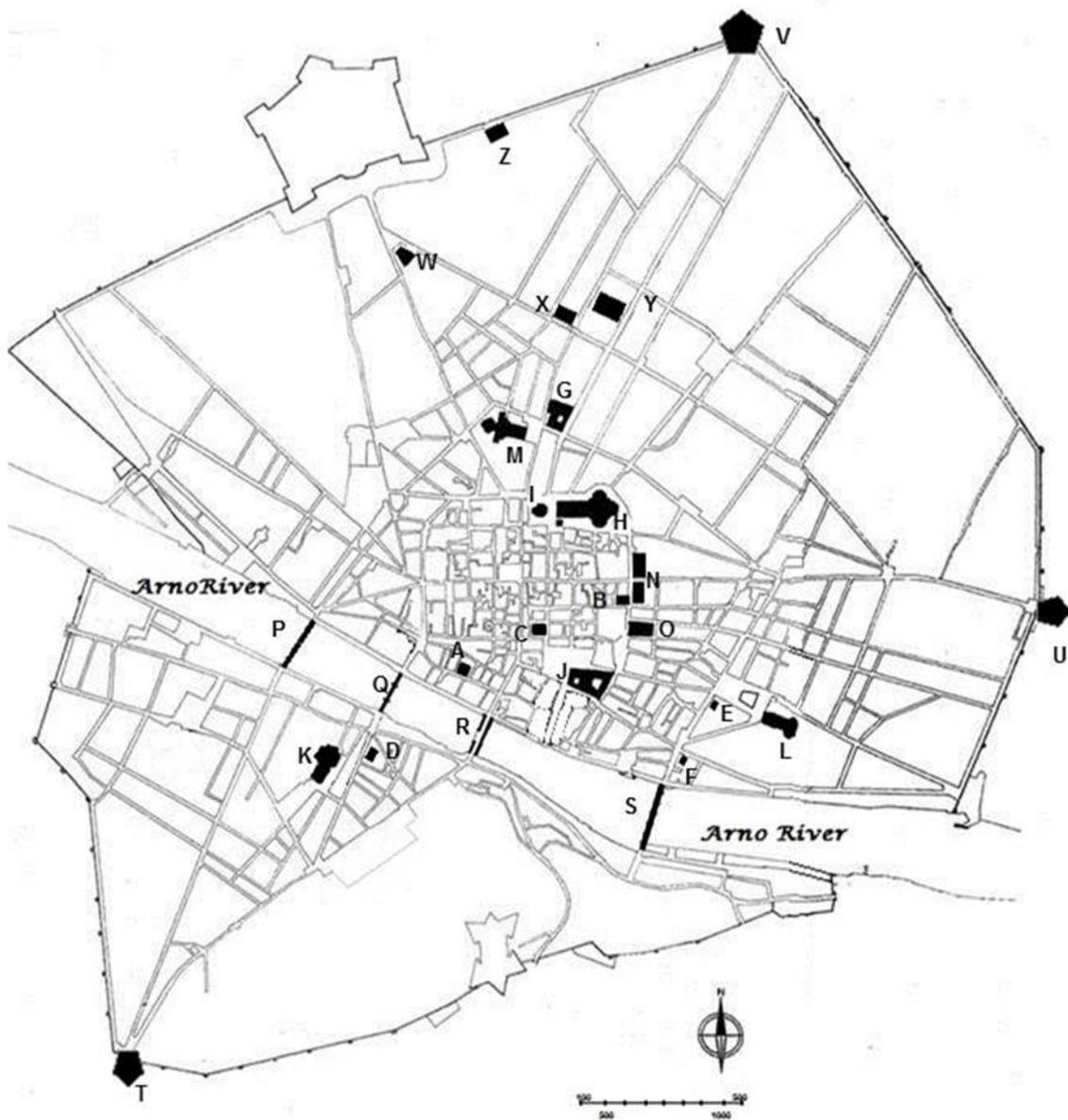
*Leonardo da' Vinci-polymath; born 1452.

Renaissance Florence

A Home of Viviana del Marrone
 B Home of Fiammetta Maffaei
 C Home of Lapaccia Cavalcanti
 D Home of Natasia Soderini
 E Home of Mattea Zamperini
 F Home of Isabetta Fioravanti
 G Palazzo de' Medici
 H Cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore (Duomo)
 I Baptistery
 J Palazzo della Signoria
 K Church of Santo Spirito

L Church of Santa Croce
 M Church of San Lorenzo
 N Enclave of Pazzi Family Palazzos
 O Bargello
 P Ponte alla Carraia
 Q Ponte Santa Trinita
 R Ponte Vecchio
 S Ponte alla Grazie
 T Porta San Piero Gattolino
 U Porta alla Croce/Gallows
 V Porta a San Gallo

W Santa Giuliano Convent
 X Santa Appolonia
 Y Santa Caterina di Siena
 Z Santa Caterina della Abbandonte



God was watching,
and he shuddered in horror at what he saw

Chapter One

Gathering Clouds

Time rules all; it does not discriminate nor exalt. They could not run from it though they did try to hide.

The six women hung their voluminous smocks upon the wall pegs by the locked door. In a dance choreographed by frequency and none other, they formed a circle, each facing the back of the one before them. With eyes trained and strained for the very purpose, they scoured each other's clothing—every inch of gown and overgown, in every slashed sleeve and every partlet covered bodice—searching for the smallest of damning evidence...a strand of a feather brush, a smudge of charcoal, a splotch of paint.

At once and together they turned, now perusing the woman on the other side with the same intense and critical eye.

For these women, for this secret group, to be caught with even the slightest bit of incrimination upon their person...it could be the very worst thing in the world to happen.

It could be.

Viviana longed to tell him to go to hell, but she dared not; the words were there, hanging on the curves of her lips and the hate in her heart, but she had only ever imagined herself saying them.

“Is there nothing I can do to have you change your mind and accompany me?” she asked instead.

She saw the lump of him—shriveled under the coverlet of their bed—in the reflection of the mottled looking glass in front of her; even in half sleep, the face peeking out of the linens was a scrunched and folded mask of discontent.

“It is a great honor to attend mass at the Duomo, as the guest of such a well-positioned family, and on such a momentous occasion. We should be very grateful to Conte Maffei for the invitation,” she cajoled still, hopeful yet, hating the thin tone of pleading in her voice as she tucked a stray chestnut curl back into the russet caul posed on the back of her head. “It was so kind of the contessa to ask, given our casual acquaintance.”

Though not as casual as Orfeo knew, in their studio, as well as in society, the two women existed no more than on the outskirts of each other’s lives, for Fiammetta’s position was far above her own. Today was merely charity from a woman who liked to appear charitable. Viviana knew it but brushed the truth of it away, expecting no more than to be grateful for the opportunity.

A quick glance at her attire and a stab of insecurity jabbed her, at the smallness of the diamond chips trimming the straight neckline of her evergreen gown, the slightly worn look of the thin lace partlet above it, the smallness of the brooch hanging from the plain headband encircling her plucked brow. Sumptuary laws aside, one’s appearance was a reflection of one’s stature and she feared hers was the truth of it, a portrait of a low ranking noblewoman whose

family's wealth had been squandered by a lazy spouse. She was mollified, somewhat, as she donned the newly made *gamurra*, the sleeveless over gown of gold and the same emerald green as her gown gave her at least the aura of fashionable flair.

With one blue eye upon her husband, Viviana del Marrone scurried one finger in her jewelry box, looking for the necklace. She found it quickly, for there was far less in the carved mahogany chest than there used to be. Viviana lifted her chin an inch higher as she dropped the long, Y-shaped necklace upon her bosom, a gift from her sons, young men who spoiled their mother with keen relish. It sat well upon her, beside the chain and its key pendant, that which never came off her neck.

Viviana turned and faced her husband though his head remained upon the pillow, his heavy lidded eyes still closed. Her stabbing stare of envy was keen.

How dare you squander such freedom? Her mind chewed upon the familiar thought. *Were I blessed with the freedom of a man, the paint brush I dare to hold would never leave my hand.*

She shrugged slim shoulders, shrugging away her frequent companion of dissatisfaction.

“Fiammetta assured me not only the Medicis will be there, but many other fine dignitaries. It was quite the impressive crowd arriving with the Cardinal of San Giorgio and the Archbishop of Pisa, was it not? And we will stand at the very front alongside them, far more forward than we would ever...,” she choked on her words with a cough, hearing them as his easily perturbed ego would. With a light step of trepidation, Viviana moved toward the bed. “Many will envy our very privileged position. It would be a most opportune occasion to pay our respects.”

Orfeo spun round, slapped the feather ticking below him with both hands, and thrashed up.

Viviana stumbled back; her words having finally wrought a reaction, but not one she desired.

“What use have I of dignitaries, of the Medici...” Orfeo snarled, a repugnant sight, dark skinned face a contortion of splenetic temper, the few strands left upon his head a tangled, stuck out mess, the revealed bare torso—saggy flesh and protruding belly—quavering with his anger. “Upon their whims they have cast me from their favor. No amount of supplication will change that. You know it!”

He stabbed the air with a stubby finger as if he stabbed her with his misplaced blame.

“How dare you toss it in my face?!”

Viviana staggered forward once more, instinctual sympathy unchecked, unbalanced by the surge of fury hurtled her way.

“I only thought you might try—”

“You thought,” Orfeo snarled. “You think nothing, and do not try, for you might hurt yourself.”

Orfeo flung himself back down on the bed and snapped the linens once more about the small bunch of his curled body.

“I am done. They will not let me back in the fold.” It was, almost, a mewling of a pathetic animal, if not tainted by the venomous rage.

Viviana turned to her dressing table once more, ignoring the shake of her hand as she retrieved the small, embellished drawstring purse.

If you are done, she thought as she tied the delicate emerald silk pouch to the pale pink satin band high upon her waist, *it is only because you have given up, yet again*.

Without another word or glance back, Viviana left her stewing husband to wallow in his silent discontent.

Chapter Two

“Clouds gather only where a storm brews”

“Are you excited, Mona Viviana?” Fiammetta’s husband Patrizio greeted her at his palazzo door with an almost girlish twitter, plump cheeks dimpling as he held his free arm out to her, his grandly bedecked wife already on his other.

“I am thrilled, dear Patrizio,” Viviana replied, taking the offered limb. “And I am grateful to be with you both, as always.”

Around the short man, the women shared bemused smiles, indulgence tinged with shared secrets.

“Have you ever seen the city so beautiful?” Viviana asked, the splendor of the moment enveloping her—erasing her husband’s virulence from her mind—as they made their way through streets teeming with smiling neighbors.

“It has been some time,” Patrizio agreed, strutting along.

Viviana sighed, gaze full of Florence embraced by spring, cleaned to perfection, adorned in its finest costume: festoons of flowers hung on every doorjamb and balcony, their sweet aroma filling the air; family banners fluttered, snapping softly in the gentle breeze.

“*Magnifico* asked us to put on our best for his guests,” Fiammetta said without a smile. “And what Lorenzo de’ Medici bids, we *fiorentinos* do.”

“Whatever the reason,” Viviana held her head high as they walked the crowded, cobbled streets, “I am glad for it.”

With a single gong, the church bells of the city began their clamoring, a splendid concerto, every bell in use to call this, the High Mass of Ascension Sunday, to order. Those so privileged or given special dispensation, rushed to the doors of the Duomo, while the rest of the city made their way to their own parishes in hopes of equal salvation or to the piazza to watch the privileged pass. Friends were in that crowd, special friends of all sorts; Viviana's critical gaze swept the faces for those dear to her, but to no avail.

"You have made us late again, Patrizio!" Fiammetta shouted at her husband. Though he walked right beside her, the tolling grew louder, the urgency of sound quickened her step, speed and breeze forced her free hand to hold fast to the jeweled veil atop her straw-like hair.

"I am moving as fast as I can." The very bald, very round man hurried to keep up with his scurrying wife, pulling Viviana with him, his knees popping outward, his belly jiggling.

With the turn of a corner, the grand and golden Duomo rose up before them, a blazing testament to the glory of Florence; Viviana felt the familiar hitch in her breath at the magnificent sight. As they hurried over the irregular cobbled rectangle of the Piazza del Duomo, her gaze scurried over its sights: from Giotto's *campanile*, the Column of Saint Zanobius, the Baptistry, to the dome itself, the round, golden vault, Filippo Brunelleschi's wonder.

"But what is this?" Patrizio slowed his pace, holding them back with a tick of his chin.

There, on the left side of the Duomo, they spied a small group of men hastening *away* from the side entrance, led by none other than the powerful Medici brothers.

"But...but..." Viviana stammered, a hand lifted to her cheek. "Mass could only have just begun, if at all."

"It is your fault," Fiammetta grumbled at her husband. "It is because we are so late."

Patrizio slanted a petulant look upon his wife. He rushed the women forward, bringing them ever closer to the towering front door of the cathedral, the scrolled pediment above, and the sculptures standing guard on each side.

“Slower,” Fiammetta hissed as they drew nearer and Viviana bit back a smile. She knew there was nothing in Heaven or the cathedral to impel her inquisitive friend to enter its confines until she saw for herself what had impelled the dignitaries out.

But they need wait no longer. From the narrow Via Larga degli Spadia—the straight street of the sword forgers leading directly from the Medici palace to the Cathedral de Santa Maria del Fiore—they glimpsed the return of the Medicis, their group enlarged to an imposing *brigata*, bright with cardinal red, archbishop purple, fine velvets, and shiny leather. As the trio of friends converged on the front entrance, the Medici contingent did so from the west side.

“Oooh,” Fiammetta luxuriated on the picture. “And now they return with their guests.”

Viviana beheld the group of men, their power, their eminence apparent as each step brought them closer. Yet the more she stared at them, the more she knew them, not for who they were...everyone would recognize Cardinal Riario and Archbishop Salviati, even the small and swarmy Francesco de' Pazzi...but she *knew* them, as a group, but she could not recall from where. Something about them together struck a chord in her mind; a discordant note. She tilted her head, study and stare ever more intense, still she could not name it. Her pale eyes narrowed against a bright flash of light, a reflection...

...but no, it could not be. Her sight played tricks upon her mind. What an absurdity; what she saw was nothing but a glint from a strand of fine rosary beads. She believed it, only with a shiver of unease.

Fiammetta salivated on such a juicy tidbit of gossip, “A mistake has been made it would seem. It looks as if the Medici were to meet the guests at their palazzo not the cathedral, but—”

“But I will truly be angry with you, my wife, if we do not enter before they do,” Patrizio hissed between clenched teeth.

“What in the name of...” Viviana hissed in turn.

Within the Medici contingent, a man had suddenly stopped and embraced the man beside him, none other than Lorenzo’s younger brother, Giuliano. Awkward surprise contorted the handsome young man’s face until the other released him.

“Bernardo Bandini, what are you about?” Patrizio whispered aloud. Without thought, Viviana squeezed his arm; he had seen it too. Together they watched as Bandini released Giuliano, as he turned to whisper in the Archbishop’s ear, who whispered in another’s. Head’s shook, hands flayed. The argument ended as the Archbishop left the man for the more accommodating company of two priests.

“What? What is that you say?” Fiammetta slowed her pace once more.

“Come. No more now,” Patrizio replied, yanking her forward without answer.

He hurried them into the cathedral, his wife leaning backward to get a last glimpse of the strange contingent; Viviana leaned forward.

For the third time that morning, Lapaccia Cavalcanti climbed the stairs to the third floor of her spacious home, one she had searched for the better part of an hour; aging knees screeched, inflicted lungs struggled for breath. She could find no sign of her son.

Andreano had promised to escort her to Mass and he had never gone back on his promises, not in all the years of her widowhood. One of the greatest knights in all of Italy, a title earned by blood, both inherited and shed, the deceased Andrea Cavalcanti would be disappointed in his son were he to renege on his promise to his mother, any promise.

As Lapaccia looked in her son's room one more time, her shoulders drooped in surrender. His ornamental sword was gone from its resting place on the bedpost; his boots lay nowhere on the floor; Andreano's notion of 'put away.' There was nothing for it; he had left and early, for she was a dawn riser. She would return to her own rooms and have her maids remove her splendid gown, for she had never, and would never, venture out alone socially, regardless that Viviana and Fiammetta awaited her.

Lapaccia trudged to her chambers, forgetting why as soon as she entered. Crossing thick tapestry set atop grey stone floor, she stopped before the wall of windows and the balcony beyond. The vista took in the better part of the western quadrant, the old section of Florence long since taken over by brothels and their clientele. It was a world of lascivious dirt within a city of elegant beauty.

Lapaccia watched enthralled.

Droves of men flowed from ramshackle inns sandwiched between brightly painted bordellos; stern faced, adorned in dark leather and boots, yet their path could bring them nowhere other than the Duomo. Lapaccia had seen many things from these windows, but never had she seen such a contingent making for Mass.

She turned from the dichotomous sight; one thought alone nagging at her.

Where are you, Andreano?

Viviana stood near the front of the congregation beside the Conte and Contessa, for once as enthralled with Fiammetta's rank as Fiammetta always was. She forgot any and all earlier concerns; her slippered feet—her best yet worn—tapped upon patterned marble, her thumbs twirled around in the clasp of her hands, it was the best attempt at quiet reverence she could do within the multitude of distractions.

The Gothic vaults of the central nave towered above, guarded by the columns and round arches of ancient Rome, so high only birds could reach its height, set aglow by the sweet light streaming in the mammoth clerestory windows. It was a cave of wonders built by the hand of man, a hand guided by God.

Viviana aimed her eyes forward, on the priest standing in wait, small and encapsulated within the chancel and the cupola over it.

"Where is our Lapaccia?" Fiammetta leaned close to whisper and Viviana could merely shrug in ignorance. They had planned to be together on this special occasion but the woman and her son were nowhere in sight.

Mass was often no more than an excuse to see and be seen, but never before had Viviana witnessed so many watching so many others. Yes, it was Ascension Day and with a cardinal coming to celebrate it at that. Still, the congregation appeared incongruently heavy with men...well dressed, well outfitted, standing side by side, and yet apart.

A metal hinge creaked; Viviana blinked as sunlight and the Medici brothers burst through the door. The chorus struck a rousing chord as if to sing their praises and not those of God. Both brothers accompanied the cardinal to his seat beneath the cupola. Viviana lowered her head as

the priests began their parade of blessing, thuribles clacking, releasing the spicy scent of the incense that did little to mask the odor of so many bodies packed side by side.

The brothers separated, each taking the head of one side of the congregation, as far apart and as far forward as they could, Lorenzo to the left, Giuliano to just a few rows before Viviana. She wondered if perhaps they separated to discourage contrast, of one so powerful and one so beautiful. With them and their group, the church filled; dignitaries, nobles, clergy and dashing soldiers; Viviana tried not to but failed, staring blatantly at the luminaries. A few she recognized as those she had seen approach with the Medici contingent, malcontent slick upon their faces, shrouded in a disquiet out of sorts in such a hallowed place.

Many congregants marveled at the sight of the Medici brothers and their guests. Viviana felt it too, their magnetism. But at the glimpse of one of the men among them, at the tall, thin man most simply called da Vinci, her breath became a shallow, elusive thing. Her emulation of the artist bordered on obsession, regardless of the salacious rumors that swirled around him like a storm.

Movement snatched her attention. Archbishop Salviati, the hem of his rich purple cappa magna slapping at his ankles, scampered down the far aisle on his short legs. Viviana turned rudely from the altar—eyes wide, brows high—following the clergyman hurrying passed the ranks. Oh, over there now—an equally disruptive sight. Messer Jacopo de' Pazzi, the presiding patriarch of the powerful family, yanked her gaze to the right as he too rushed from the cathedral, and out the opposite door.

Viviana looked round, forehead creased, wide blue eyes beseeching; had none of the other congregants seen what she had, did they not find it baffling? True, she was not so familiar

with mass among esteemed patrons, but none considered such displays of disrespect normal. Did they?

“Bene dictam, adscri ptam, ra tam, rationábilem, acceptabilém fácere dignéris.”

Viviana pinned her gaze forward, shook her head softly to set aside and away all confusing thoughts, for the priest was making the sign of the cross, three times, over the great chalice. The Consecration had begun; the blessing of the body and blood of Christ.

In this moment, she often found the greatest connection to Jesus.

Today it was not to be.

The bell rang, the host was elevated, and...

“HERE, TRAITOR!”

The scream tore through the church, a shrieking, evil explosion. Viviana’s breath faltered, her heart hammered. Directly in front of her, directly beside Giuliano de’ Medici, a mad man came to life. He was not alone.

“Look out!” Viviana screeched and pointed at the daggers raised high, as the priest upon the altar raised the host, the shiny steel flashing in her gaze, the flaying weapon intent upon spreading pure madness. Downward they plunged.

Viviana’s world turned blood red.