

THE COMPETITION:  
Da Vinci's Disciples Book Two  
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## Chapter One

*“Inspiration, when it comes, comes on its own terms.”*

*Specks of sand in a windstorm, eddying about, seemingly chaotic yet cohesive, unified within the calm, unseen core.*

*They stood apart in the vast crowd and yet together, a feat they had managed to accomplish ever since those fateful days. None could see them and know them as a group; society would frown upon it. Few of their number—in truth, but one—cared little for the caprices of society. Their truth had already rendered it specious. But if their truth were known—the deepest, darkest depths of it—they would all be dead, a brutal death at the end of the hangman’s noose.*

*The boisterous throng swirled around them, ignorant to the revolutionaries they stood beside. With the crowd whirled the music, the voices, the change in the wind. Some of the women wore jewels and ermine trim, others simple muslin. Only in their smocks were their ranks and wealth negated. They stood united by what they had done, by all they created, and all they hoped yet to create. Such brazenness, such daring, such criminal activity bound them in a way little else could. They were—now and forever—united as Da Vinci’s Disciples.*

“Isn’t it breathtaking, dearest?” Natasia twittered to her husband, Pagolo, squeezing his arm with a plump hand in her zeal.

Tall and stick-like to Natasia’s round fleshiness, Pagolo Capponi shielded his slim, dark eyes from the midday sun as they watched the grand procession pass before them. “Yes dearest, splendid.”

Viviana tucked her chin down, hiding her motherly grin; so much had changed, and yet some things never would. Natasia may be married now, as she had so craved to be, but her girlish giggles had not abandoned her.

Viviana stood beside the couple and they beside Fiammetta and Patrizio, the Conte and Contessa Maffei, she with her face a blasé mask, he with bright spots of happiness on his round cheeks. Beside them stood Lapaccia Cavalcanti, simply attired as always, an ash walking stick in her hand. The widowed noblewoman held the arm of another elderly woman, a noble as well, down to her luxurious trappings.

On Viviana's other side stood Isabetta and Mattea, both in their finest—if simplest—muslin, both with the kiss of the sun emerging on their pale cheeks.

Viviana was the middle ground between the *ottimati* and *popolo* of their group, the elite and the common citizens. She was a widow herself, that of a disgraced lesser elite, disgraced by his own hands, deceased by hers and those of the women near to her. She was as in limbo in life as she was between these women, not exactly knowing her place, not exactly knowing where life would next take her.

“About time things returned to normal,” Fiammetta grumbled. Viviana wholeheartedly agreed with her, which did not happen often.

“Thanks to *Il Magnifico*.” Viviana felt gladness for him, and all of Florence.

Lorenzo de' Medici was not the man he had once been. The change came the day they murdered his brother in the great cathedral. It came when Lorenzo learned the murder was a conspiracy, with gnarled fingers that reached all the way to the Vatican. All goodness and light within him had been extinguished when he had avenged Giuliano's murder in a massacre of near to one hundred men. He ruled darkly in the wars that followed, and in the years that followed

those wars. What with the pope's decree of excommunication upon *Il Magnifico* and all of Florence, the wars, and the plague, Florence and its citizens had suffered dearly in the intervening years. Lorenzo's grief and anger had hovered over the city like an ominous black cloud. Today, at long last, he had allowed a celebration to take place. And what a spectacle it was.

This *Festa di San Giovanni*, a celebration of John the Baptist, was unlike any the city had seen before. Under *Il Magnifico*'s rule, as every facet of life had become, it blazed with both pageantry and eminence.

"Florence dons her golden gown once more," Isabetta said. "Would you look at that?"

One had no choice. Fifteen wagons drawn by fifty pairs of oxen filled the street, their clomping the air, the cheering of the crowd the ears.

The women leaned away from the heat of the many girandole, their wheels of fire in the shapes of ships and houses, their fires crackling, popping, and spattering the crowd with sparks. Zigzagging their way through the wagons and platforms, the *spiritegli* hovered over all, their legs strapped to poles so tall they seemed to walk on air.

A banner upon the lead wagon identified the *edifizi* upon the lead wagon: Lucius Aemilius Paulus.

"It is his vanity," Fiammetta said once more.

"It is his need to reassert himself," Viviana argued with a whisper, not for her sake, but for Fiammetta's; she had no wish for any to hear of her friend's continued anti-Medicean attitude. There were those who shared Fiammetta's feelings for the city's ruler. Most hid behind a façade of Medici support, in dark corners and shadows, for their own purposes and pernicious agendas.

Lucius Aemilius Paulus was the Roman conqueror of Macedonia, from before the birth of Jesus Christ. His return to Rome, with overflowing bounty, had made him immortal.

“No doubt *Il Magnifico* wishes to make an identification,” Viviana raised her voice in concert with the rising roar of the crowd. “Lorenzo put much at risk to save our city, going to Naples, being held virtually hostage there for more than a year. His safe return, his success in saving Florence from further ravages of war—surely it is a bounty worth celebrating.”

“Humph,” was Fiammetta’s response.

“Indeed, Florence is reborn,” Mattea agreed with Isabetta. “Already women are wearing their finest again, and palazzos are being built. Yes, Florence is reborn. But can it be as if nothing ever happened? Can it be as it was before?”

*Before.* The word had a strange effect. Did they really wish for it to be so?

Viviana studied each face, watched as her friends’ minds traveled back in time with her own. Lapaccia had never regained her health since the days and weeks she’d hidden in the convent. She had become what she had never been, no matter her age... an old, frail lady. Her son, Mattea’s lover, wandered, hiding, the small price he paid for the small part he played in the conspiracy to kill Guiliano de’ Medici and the attempt to kill Lorenzo. Mattea’s longing, her fear was ever there upon her face, in her eyes that did not sparkle as they once had, upon lips slow to curve.

Isabetta in her widow’s weeds, her husband whom she had loved and nursed for years now gone, though not so very long ago. A badge of guilt hung heavy on that woman’s neck. But not nearly as heavy as one did on Viviana’s, for Isabetta had not been the instrument of her husband’s death; that part belonged to Viviana and Viviana alone. Was it truly wrong? No, she

had never thought so, not for a moment. What she feared more was that she had killed something within herself when she killed him.

Fiammetta had slipped down the social ladder—an atrocity, in her mind, for staying on her perch was so very important to her. Her association with the Pazzi family—they who had led the assassination—had chipped away at her lofty standing. Watching her struggle to climb back up was like watching a child attempt to scale a mountain, a pitiable sight.

Only Natasia—sweet, young Natasia—had come away unscathed.

They had even lost their mentor, if only temporarily. They'd lost Leonardo da Vinci to the Duke of Milan, or rather his uncle Ludovico, who acted as regent for his eight-year-old nephew. The wars Florence had endured had left no one to sponsor him, which da Vinci needed in order to become the maestro of the studio that he deserved to be.

But something had happened, something glorious in the *before*. They had saved Lapaccia's life, even Andreano's, and they had created a masterpiece. It hung in the Palazzo della Signoria still, the towering building at their backs. It hung where the original masterpiece had hung and still no one knew the difference. The city and its keepers thought it a warning to all those who dare defy its leaders, most especially the Medicis, and so it remained upon its wall, an accusatory finger to be avoided. In truth, it was a living, breathing testament to the women's growing prowess as artists. It didn't matter that no one knew such beauty had come from their hands; at least that was what they told themselves.

Viviana looked to the sky, to the small prison at the top of the tower where she herself had spent a night. No one knew she and these women, Da Vinci's Disciples, had rendered the painting that hung in that tower.

No, it didn't matter. Or did it? The question had plagued Viviana more and more of late, as she searched for the same fiery purpose she had felt when helping to paint it. She now seemed to crave it, as the souse craved his wine.

Like her city, Viviana carried the scars of those days, yet like Florence, she too was healing. She closed her eyes, raised her face to the sun, and let it warm her. She let gratitude consume her, let the crowd and the cheering and the song and the laughter fade away.

"I purchased that chapel in Santo Spirito three years ago." The words spoken by the resonant, lofty voice of a man, somewhere close behind her, broke through her reverence and shattered it. "Now I shall finally be allowed to have it frescoed."

Viviana's eyes snapped open like a shutter in a gale. Through the haze, she saw the man who had spoken, knew his face.

But more importantly, she saw it, the answer to what came next.