



International espionage, murder, war, and a villain so brutal he'd make George R.R. Martin blush: just a few of the factors that led to the guy who painted the *Mona Lisa* hanging out with the dude who invented modern political science.

INTERSECTING LIVES LEONARDO DA VINCI, NICCOLO MACHIAVELLI, AND CESARE BORGIA

WORDS CHRIS A. SMITH
ILLUSTRATION WE BUY YOUR KIDS

The noonday sun hung low over northern Italy, when it decided to appear at all. Winter had come, battering the region with black sheets of rain and bitter wind. Behind the notched walls of a castle near Bologna, two noteworthy Florentines were hunkered down against the cold: Niccolò Machiavelli, the philosopher-statesman and author of the political classic *The Prince*, and the inventor and artist Leonardo da Vinci, painter of the *Mona Lisa*.

As the crow flies, these prominent Florentines were just 50 miles from home, just a horseback ride over the mountains from the grand palazzos overlooking the Arno. But they weren't going back anytime soon.

They were unhappy guests of Cesare Borgia, the pope's son and reigning dark lord of Italian politics. A ruthless plotter rumored to have murdered his brother and slept with his sister, the 27-year-old duke came on like a cartoon villain, Darth Vader scripted by Tarantino. People said he stalked the streets of Rome after midnight, murdering strangers for sport. Lately, he had begun dressing all in black and, owing to a syphilis infection that scarred his face, wearing a mask—moves that only enhanced his rep.

Machiavelli and da Vinci weren't Borgia's prisoners, but they couldn't exactly leave. It was December in 1502, and Borgia was busily conquering the Romagna, a hilly chunk of land in north-central Italy. Florence's leaders, worried they were next on the duke's hit list, had dispatched Machiavelli to keep an eye on Borgia. Da Vinci, whose notebooks were full of plans for fire-spitting proto-tanks and super-sized siege engines, had signed on as the duke's military engineer. He soon realized it was a job from hell.

At the turn of the 16th century, Italy was like *Game of Thrones* minus the dragons,

a patchwork of mini-states run by oligarchs, warlords, and titled thieves dressed in fine silk. The pope, an aficionado of orgies and assassinations, was merely one of the bigger warlords. Foreign powers such as France and Spain meddled freely in Italian affairs. Meanwhile, the Turks, who had been moving westward for centuries, watched hungrily from across the Adriatic.

In the middle of it all stood Florence, the center of Renaissance culture and an island of semi-democratic governance in a sea of tyrannies. Though freer than its neighbors, ruled by a council rather than a despot, the city was politically unstable and militarily weak. To ensure the republic's survival, diplomats such as Machiavelli worked to balance its ever-shifting alliances, playing one enemy off another and hoping for the best.

The young envoy's first encounter with Borgia was typically unnerving. In mid-1502 the duke launched a new war, setting Florence squarely in his sights. Dispatched to plead Florence's case, Machiavelli arrived at Borgia's court late at night and was escorted to a room lit by just one candle. There sat Borgia like some slasher-film bogeyman, all in black, his heavily bearded face in deep shadow. Shifting into schoolyard-bully mode, Borgia warned that if Florence didn't submit, he would conquer it.

Duly intimidated, Machiavelli rode home, and Florence submitted. That same year, with the war raging and Florence's fate still in the balance, Machiavelli returned to Borgia's court. This time, as a spy. Over the next couple of months, the two played a shadow game worthy of *le Carré*. Borgia regularly intercepted Machiavelli's diplomatic messages, so the envoy learned to cover his tracks, masking his sources and communicating in code.

Da Vinci's route to Borgia's court was less direct. Like most Renaissance artists, he was forever in search of patrons, bouncing from Florence to Milan and back to Florence before signing on as Borgia's military engineer. It seemed an unlikely fit: da Vinci was a pacifist and vegetarian who bought caged birds and set them free. We really don't know why he took the job. Maybe he needed the money. Or maybe, to paraphrase Don Corleone, Borgia made him an offer he couldn't refuse.

Whatever the case, da Vinci set off for the Romagna in the summer of 1502, tasked with mapping the defenses of Borgia's nascent state. He spent weeks sketching Borgia's castles, but it was the natural world—the rivers, meadows, and plants—that spoke to him. Human ingenuity, he later wrote, “will never discover an invention more beautiful, easier, or more economical than nature's.”

The inventor ended up at Borgia's court with Machiavelli that fall. It's likely that he became the envoy's key intelligence asset—a 16th-century Deep Throat. Da Vinci was a loyal son of Florence, after all, and as Borgia's military architect he had unparalleled access to the secretive duke.

The two Florentines rattled around the duke's wartime headquarters for months. Sometimes they were bored, sometimes scared out of their minds. While Borgia's army cooled its heels, his agents probed enemy defenses and forged alliances. Then, after weeks of inaction, he'd strike. Another fortress overrun, another town taken, another set of heads mounted on pikes. It was Machiavelli's job to figure out what was happening, but the duke was secretive and unpredictable. He wrote to his superiors in Florence, “This lord never reveals anything excepting when doing it.”

It was a dangerous game. The morning after Christmas, Borgia's trusted lieutenant, Ramiro d'Orco, turned up gutted like an eel in a public square, the bloody knife at his side. Ordered to pacify the duke's newly conquered territories, d'Orco had dutifully brought the hammer down, executing rebels and looters, but turning the locals against Borgia with his brutality. As smart as he was monstrous, Borgia realized that to hold the Romagna he needed the backing of its people. So he liberated them from the depredations of his own man.

Machiavelli was both horrified and impressed. Here, he thought, was the Borgia MO in pure form. The duke, however, was just getting started.

On New Year's Eve, four Borgian rivals were lured to the seaside town of Senigallia on the promise of a peace treaty. The duke arrived with 12,000 soldiers at his back and adroitly separated his enemies from their own forces. Beaming, he led them into a house to fete their reconciliation. Then his men locked the doors. Two rivals died that night, tied back-to-back and strangled. The other two were killed a few weeks later.

Borgia summoned Machiavelli at two in the morning, flush with victory, and commanded him to report the gory details to Florence, along with a direct message: “His Excellency then reiterated to me his request that I should write and ask you to make every demonstration of friendship for him, saying that at present there was no occasion for your being restrained by any fear or mistrust of him.” For Borgia, this was downright warm and fuzzy. Even so, the undercurrent was unmistakable: Don't fuck with me.

With his enemies either murdered or cowering in fear, Borgia wrapped up his

OLD SCHOOL

Giving hope to truants and slackers everywhere, da Vinci was never given a formal education. Everything he achieved in life, from painting to Latin, geometry to math, was learned on the job.

campaign in January, 1503. After what Machiavelli and da Vinci had seen, they must have been relieved just to get out alive.

The Florentines didn't know it, but Borgia had peaked. The political tides would soon turn against him. By the end of the year he was in prison, and four years later he was dead in the dirt, killed by Spanish soldiers and left to rot.

Machiavelli's experience with Borgia stuck with him, and the amoral duke would become his model for *The Prince*, his cold-eyed treatise on the nature of political power. Until then, political analysis consisted of paeans to the virtues of godly rulers. Borgia showed Machiavelli that getting and keeping power depended less on morality than on ruthlessness, smarts, and good luck. “A man who strives after goodness in all his acts is sure to come to ruin, since there are so many men who are not good,” he wrote. “Hence it is necessary that a prince who is interested in his survival learn to be other than good.” This revolutionary book was a primer in *realpolitik*—and the birth of modern political science.

As for da Vinci, he was shell-shocked by his time with Borgia. That mad season, however, produced at least one artistic grace note: the *Mona Lisa*. In the landscape behind the artist's famous Florentine matron, a bridge arches over a winding river as sloping hills rise to hazy peaks—a scene dating to his travels with Borgia. Da Vinci began the painting in 1503 and never finished it. He would return to it again and again for the rest of his life, trying to get it right. ●

