

## CATERUCCIA'S STORY

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I can't sleep on these few handfuls of wet smelly straw. My brown skirt and white house blouse provide the only cushion between me and the damp stone floor in my cell in the Bargello. I have been held here for two days now, and already the fetid air in this dark and dank prison has begun to make it difficult for me to breathe. In summer, the air is always hot and heavy, almost liquid, in this valley where the city that these Italians call Florence sits, on either side of the Arno River. There is a clanking metal sound at the door; it opens, and two stinking prison guards reach to grab my arms and jerk me to my feet. "Get up, you black whore," one of them hisses. Just as well: I couldn't sleep anyway, I say. Manacled at the ankles, they lead me out across the dark inner courtyard, and into another cell-like room lit by candlelight, where five other men are waiting for me. Three of them, older men, finely dressed, are gathered at a long table; another younger man, is seated at a small desk with paper, quill and ink in front of him. They look towards me as I come in. But it is the broad, black-hooded man with the muscular arms who frightens me. He is bearded, his arms covered with thick, black hair and he is bathed in sweat. The others keep their distance from him. He grabs my black arm with a large, strong hand that wraps almost completely around it--and from years of hard work, I am no weakling! - he pulls me to a platform where there is a rope thrown across an overhead beam. Suddenly, I am really cold, and my legs are trembling; I can hardly stay on my feet! This man is an executioner; I have heard the people call him the "butcher." He drags me up the platform, pulls my arms behind my back, tying the dangling rope to them. Going down to the floor, he swiftly pulls the rope, swinging me up and off of my feet; then I feel myself dropped as he lets the rope slide. My shoulder sockets are seared by pain as he abruptly catches the rope and ties it off, leaving me hanging in mid-air with my arms contorted behind my back. A cry emerges from my throat with no effort on my part. I groan: Please, let me down from here! Please, please... The Italians look at me without expression: They have done this before. My shoulders are scorched by pain but I can't feel the rest of my body, though I know that I am now drenched in sweat. The pain is my whole world; I look back at the men through the narrow, teary slits that my eyes have become. Unbelievably, the pain is getting worse. As my body sags further, its weight seeming to tear my shoulder joints apart. My head rolls back, my eyes looking upwards at the ceiling. Then, the seated scribe, inked pen poised over his paper, demands of me in an even voice: "Cateruccia the slave! Confess, that possessed by a diabolical spirit, you murdered Alessandra Macinghi negli Strozzi, a noble woman, your mistress, and head of the ancient Florentine house of the Strozzi, with your own hands!" I could not deny it; I did not want to deny it, the act had been so sweet to me. In a voice just above a whisper, I say, Let me down, and I will confess everything.

Later, the same guards are bringing me back to my cell, where they throw me back onto the straw. At first, the stones poking through feel good, they are cold, refreshing almost but then I began to shiver before falling, I don't know how, into a fitful and pain-wracked sleep.

The next morning the prison guards reappear. I don't want them touching me; I don't want to be touched by any man, so somehow I manage to rise to my feet despite the nearly useless condition of my arms. One of the guards says, "The Captain wants to see you now." Once again, I am led from my cell, this time into the stifling sunlight of the cortile and across it, past the examining room of last night, and into another room, where the police captain, the "bargello" as he is called, is seated at a desk behind which is a statue--a female figure holding scales like the sellers use in the mercato vecchio. The scribe from last night is also there but today he remains silent. "I am Captain Anton Maria Milani, of the bargello police, and we are here to confirm your confession to the murder of Alessandra Strozzi. Sit there." I drop myself into a wooden chair in front of Milani's table. The guards clump out of the room. Leaning back from the table, one arm casually crossed in front of him on the table, the other draped over his chair, the captain of police, a large, handsome man, clean-shaven as was the style but with longish curly brown hair, sizes me up. He wears a short apple green jacket with bloused sleeves, and tight brown pants with matching leather slippers. His head tilts slightly upwards, with his dimpled chin pointing at me; his brown eyes contain hints of amusement and disbelief, even some compassion, which he, in a calculating way, is allowing me to see. His thin lipped mouth is relaxed in a small smile. In the year 1471 of the Christian era, this man, like other Italians, takes so much care to arrange his public face that one doubts that he could ever be sincere about anything. I must really be a sight for him: A very black African woman, about 29 years old as they reckon time here. Through rounded, dark brown eyes over large blue black lips, the bottom tattooed in the Bambara style, set in an oval face, with the scarification marks of my people at my temples, I choose to confront him dispassionately. My wooly, unkempt hair is without its usual wrap of white cloth, and I am disheveled in my dirty skirt and blouse, hunched over in pain, with hands clasped together between my legs; my feet are shod in the wooden clogs worn by all of the poor here. A shaft of sunlight enters the room through a barred window high above us on the left, falling onto the table through a cloud of small black flies circling above us in the heat. Faint street sounds-- the creaking of passing carts and muffled voices-- fall into the room with the light from the window.

Milani pours a glass of coldwater from a metal pitcher on the table, and sets it in front of me. Then, leaning forward, with both hands now clasped on the table in front of him-- nodding to the scribe, who wets his quill-- he says to me in an intensely confiding tone, "Cateruccia, tell us everything about how you came to commit this monstrous act of ingratitude and rebellion." In spite of myself these words cause me to swiftly straighten up in my chair as I spit out--Hah! Surprised by my reaction, the scribe looks up quickly from his quill and paper, while Milani jerks back from the table, his shock momentarily showing itself in his eyes. Closing my ears to the outside sounds of normal life, and ignoring that maladetto glass of cold water before me, I say, Since you want to understand everything, let me start from the beginning. The tension leaves Milani's body. The scribe concentrates once again on his writing. As I begin to speak, irritation at my faulty pronunciation clearly registers on his face.

For almost as long as I can remember, I have been someone's slave, I say. I slide my eyes over to the metal pitcher, watching rivulets of condensed water run down its sides, forming little puddles on the table top. How different Florence is from the Wolof city of Kayor, where my journey began. Not that the Darnel Budomel's prosperous city,

west of the headwaters of the Gambia River was my home. I came to Kayor from the Bambara village of Segu, as one war captive among many. I don't know what has happened to my family. When the Wolof warriors attacked our village, they killed many of our warriors and gutted the old men; others fled wildly into the bush. Those young boys and girls, like me, who could not escape were made prisoners. Now we are linked together by ties made of tree bark, herded into out-door pens on one of the dusty, broad streets amid the mud hut compounds of wealthy nobles and merchants, waiting to be sold. I think I was 12 twelve dry seasons or about 12 years old, and my name then was Nya in the Mandinga language. Taking the first pick of the new captives, Budomel, a tall thin black man with a gray beard and hair, fingers two braids that fell on either side of his face, tying together under his chin. He is dressed in a white cotton tunic and white trousers; he stops dead in his tracks when his appraising gaze falls on me. Looking me over closely, his eyes lingering on my firm, pointed breasts, before continuing to take in my lithe, long-limbs, he begins to smile: "I will take her as my concubine," he said to the merchant who would sell us to the highest bidders. "Bring her to my palace."

As I entered the royal compound, a linked series of courtyards and huts behind the official residence, passing to the interior huts and yards of his wives, several of them stopped tending their children or preparing cloth to follow my passage with hard stares. Well inside, I was deposited in a thatched roof hut equipped with an oxhide sleeping mat. I was without any clothing; that was usual for a young unmarried girl. Budomel then appeared with an older woman; from her bearing I figured that she was his first wife, who put a string of blue cowries shells around my waist, as my only dress. Then she left the hut, followed by her husband. As I watched them walk away framed by the hut's narrow door, I saw her throw him a dismissive glance over her shoulder; his body went rigid with fury but what could he do? She was his senior wife and demanded respect. That night, he returned, and for the first but not the last time, I was forced to endure penetration by a man I did not want. When he had finished with me, he picked up his robes and left, upset that I had not shared his pleasure. I curled myself up on the sleeping mat, clenched fists at my chest, and tried very hard to forget what had just happened in sleep.

Twenty moons later, during the dry season as the harmattan wind blew its hot breath, news of the appearance on the coast of a large ship, moved by enormous pieces of white cloth attached to it, roiled the placid calm of the city. It contained white men. In the succeeding days, some said that these ships flew through the air by means of these pieces of cloth, the only way that we could explain the reports that reached us from different, distant locations along the coast of their presence far from the mouth of the Gambia. One of these ships came up the river to Kayor, where Budomel welcomed a white man from the ship interested in trade. The tall man had sand colored hair, and was clearly uncomfortable in tight pants and boots in the heat, as he strode up from the river "with the Damel through an enormous, boisterous crowd. He said that he served a great king of the Christians, who himself served the greatest of all gods. This white man stayed with Budomel for some days conducting business. Damel Budomel had certain prerogatives; when they had been satisfied, he allowed himself to conclude business with the man. One day, as I was with the Damel's wives and a second concubine, enjoying the shade of the baobab tree while listening to the songs of the griots, a palace slave came to take me with him to the royal palace. From there, Budomel took me down to the river, past the fishermen unloading their catch, and out on one of our dug-out canoes to the

white man's ship. There he presented me as a gift of hospitality to the captain (a Venetian I was to learn), whose name was Alvise Ca'da Mosto. I was told that from now on I would be the Italian's woman but when his ship immediately left the Gambia under gray skies, and headed north, far from the coast I was shocked and terrified. I had heard that many people were being sold to the white men, and that they were being taken away in ships, never to be seen again. Rumors spread that the whites were taking them to be eaten as food. How could my master hate me so much that he would send me away among such ghouls?

The little ship did not fly, although I came to wish that it could! Instead, it heaved and rolled over the blue-green waves, as did over the floor of Cadamosto's cabin. The ship's movement made me wretchedly sick. After many days when a wooden bucket was my most constant companion, I finally adjusted to the ship's motion. Da Mosto kept me in his cabin most of the time, which was built on deck; it was too dangerous to take me outside, exposed to the ravenous eyes of his crew, even though I now wore Christian clothes. When outside, I watched the dark green curtain of palmyra and baobab trees, above white sand shores, rock past, then finally recede from my view altogether as the little caravel beat its way north. Da Mosto was kind to me, teaching me his language as time passed by. He never once tried to make a meal of me! I learned to sleep with him in return, masking my repulsion at his repeated invasions of my body. The ship turned east then north, finally making port in his home of Venice.

As we sailed under clear, cool skies into what looked like a large bay, we passed small fishing vessels, and oared ships larger than I could have ever imagined. Setting down anchor not too far from the piers, we headed to the city in small boats, rowing through water filled with stinking refuse that people had thrown into the water. In Kayor, there was little to discard! I kept a close watch for crocodiles but saw none. In the Gambia, you always had to be alert to them.

I had never seen a city like this Venice. During the voyage, we had stopped many times, at cities of the Muslims on the tip of Africa, and at other Christian cities after turning eastwards. I was by now familiar with cities made of stone but I had seen nothing like Venice! It had been built completely in the water, unconnected to the land surrounding it on three sides. There were no wide streets, just canals through which the people traveled in boats of different sizes. I was surprised to see that black men oared some of the longest and most ornate of these--black boats called "gondolas!" I had seen a black man on board ship, a Bozo who had learned Venetian and served as translator but I had not expected to see any more. I mentioned my surprise to Cadamosto, who told me that "Moors," as he called us, guided all of them. Most impressive of all was the size and number of palaces built of stone. Those that were the palaces of nobles were constructed of multi-colored stone and were of a quality, complexity, and beauty that were unimaginable in my country, and they rose up so high into the air! My people knew of the famous mosque at Timbuctu but that was constructed of mud.

Walking through the city with my master, I noticed that he became very quiet. I had assumed that I would go to his palace to begin life as his slave-concubine but that isn't what happened. Instead, he finally turned to me, saying that he was going to be married while here, and that he would then take up a government post. He did not want to retain a concubine when he was establishing his home with a new wife and a new career.

His blue eyes saddened as he met mine in the eyes, telling me that he must put me up for sale in the slave market here. He said that I should not be too upset, since I would probably be sold to Venetian nobles, who were fast developing a fancy for slaves from Africa; that I would likely be given nice cloths, eat good food, have a comfortable place to live, and enjoy the company of well brought up women who would treat me kindly. But I was devastated to be brought to a new country and immediately exposed once again to the slave-market. I began to believe that I would never have a life of my own.

We arrived in a small square near St. Mark's and the palace of the doges, where slaves were put up for sale. After a few words with the owner of the market, Cadamosto abandoned me to the slave pens. The cells contained men, women, and children; whites and a few blacks were packed behind iron bars. I tried speaking with some of the blacks but we could not understand each other's language. I had never felt so alone, not even when the Wolof had taken me away from my family and village. At least the country was familiar, and I could dream of becoming free to return home but how could I possibly escape the land of the Christians, so far from my country?

Venice was cold and damp, subject in this season to thick fogs and high water, the latter of which came into our cells. We had to stand on wooden benches to keep dry. One day, as the sound of ringing bells drifted over from St. Mark's, the slave-master came and unlocked the cell where I was, and led me and a few other women out, and down a walkway to a courtyard. We were lined up against a stone wall, under the gaze of a young, elaborately well dressed Italian man. He was Filippo Strozzi, a Florentine resident in Naples but in Venice on business. Strozzi was looking for a young, strong African woman to take to Florence to work in his mother's home. As he looked us over, I suddenly resolved to get out of this cold, damp city. I made myself smile, turned sideways to him, pulling my skirt tight over my butt, and I greeted him in the Venetian language: Buon giorno, signor. He stopped, shocked that one of us spoke a language that he could understand, even if it wasn't his native language. I stood straight and tall so that he could see that I had a good body. Io mi chiamo Nya, I said. "How is it that you speak Venetian?" Strozzi asked me. I learned from my master, signor Alvise Da Mosto. "Ah, yes, the explorer, he replied." I'll take this one... Nya" he said to the slave merchant. Money was exchanged, and he took me away with him. We went over land to Florence. I felt my confidence and strength grow at my achievement: I had put myself in a position to make the best of the situation that Da Mosto had described. I wasn't helpless after all, even so far from home!

Signor Strozzi coached me on his language, which was Florentine. After some time on the road, we went through the city of Boloma, stopping finally at the border of the Romagna, a very mountainous area. Florence lay on the other side of these. After a few days, Signor Strozzi left me with a couple of his family servants who had arrived, one of whom was an old man, a 'Moor,' as Africans were called here but a light-skinned one. He is called Zanobi, and used to be a Muslim, he explained but had been baptized and was now a Christian. Filippo Strozzi said to me that he would return now to Naples, that he could not enter Florence, since he was exiled from the city by its leaders, the Medici family. In 1457 of the Christian era, I set out by donkey-cart on the road to Florence with his family servants, at 15 determined to make the best of my life despite

being so far from the spirits of my ancestors. Neither they, nor any of our gods would be able to find me in this distant, strange land, I was certain. I was on my own.

Our group followed the torturously winding road along through the mountains, then down the Arno valley to Florence. Finally, during the drizzly cool dusk of the fourth day, the brown stone walls and towers of the city appeared below us. The green mountains, where single cypress trees stood out like sentinels, parted into fertile plains. Cultivated fields and peasant villages surrounded the city, right up to those imposingly high walls. We entered the city by the Port' a Faenza. When I remarked that there did not seem to be as many people as the number of buildings might lead one to expect, they told me that the city had been hard hit by a terrible and unexplained illness that had carried off many inhabitants. This was one reason, they said, that slaves like me were needed for domestic work in the homes of the rich.

The sky was a deep purple. Darkness was almost upon us. There were no canals in Florence, I noted once we were inside of the massive walls. Instead, buildings, shops and churches crowded together along streets narrow and wide, lit by lamps and candles which threw out some of their light into the open from open windows. With a swelling canopy of clouds darkening above, the scene made my blood race with excitement! Men and women passed by, some on foot, others on horse back, still others driving donkeys or riding in carts drawn by these foul tempered animals, as we were. Voices mixed with the smells of cooking food, and the stink of human refuse. Our cart passed by an immense single-domed church, quite different from the multi-domed church of St. Mark in Venice, surrounded by a large plaza, with an ornate bell-tower along side, and a smaller building, a baptistery, nearby. I had never seen such a large building! The god of the Christians must truly be powerful that his people would build such temples to worship him. Shortly after passing through piazza San Giovanni, we came to the palazzo dello Strozzi.

Inside I was taken to meet my new mistress, Alessandra Strozzi. Two young women and a boy were gathered together for warmth with the servants in a corner of the kitchen on the palace's third level. Seated at the table in the firelight from the hearth was the female head of the family. She was a mature woman on the edge of old age. Her fleshy white face was framed by rows of tightly rolled brown curls topped by a white cover, under which she had stuffed the rest of her hair. Her eyes were half closed, her nose pointed, her small mouth, however, was beautifully formed. Determined to show off my prowess with the language, I stepped forward to address her: Buona sera, Alessandra Strozzi. Her lovely mouth dropped open, and she recoiled a bit into her shawl. Zanobi quickly grabbed me by an arm, and spoke to me under his breath: "Never address her that way, never: Address her as Madonna or Monna, never by her Christian name!" In my haste to make a good impression, I had forgotten the first lesson in proper courtesy from Signor Strozzi. "Bring the slave closer to me," Monna Alessandra said, "I can hardly make her out in this dark" Zanobi pulled me forward into the scant light of the fireplace. Drawing herself together, looking me over intensely from foot to head, she exclaimed, "Mah!" throwing back her head so that her nose pointed upwards. "What an ugly creature! So black!" "Then, looking at me, she laughed, saying," "At night you must be sure to carry a candle with you so that one of us will not run into you thinking to have encountered a spirit! Beware too in the daylight that passersby not mistake you for a shadow and try to tread on you!" The children looked at me with their blue eyes wide and

bright with delight, their mouths opened in false shock--then they burst out laughing, the firelight glittering on their white teeth. One, an older girl, said, "Mama, come siete cattivo!" My face became hot with rage and embarrassment but I could not have spoken even had I been allowed: No one had ever humiliated me in this way, with words, no one. It was worse that being obligated to have sex with Cadamosto; worse than being cuffed across a dusty floor by Budomel. With my heart in my throat, I let myself be led away into the darkened house by one of the serving women.

The next day, awakened on my mattress in a storeroom, my mistress had decided that the first order of business was that I should be taken to the Baptistery of San Giovanni to be baptized, to become a Christian. Zanobi went with me, as did one of the girls, Lessandra, from the previous evening. We entered the Baptistery through a set of the most beautiful golden doors I had ever seen; such exquisite carving! These Christians must be very rich to use so much gold in this fashion! In my country, gold was sometimes used as jewelry but most often as snuff boxes for the Darnel and his courtiers. Once inside, a priest spoke some words over me in a strange language, and then poured a little water on me from a stone fountain. The priest asked what my Christian name would be; Lessandra exclaimed, bouncing the blond curls that framed her face in her excitement, "Your name," she said to me, "shall be Cateruccia!" Later, I learned that she had given me this name to mock her older sister, Caterina, Cateruccia being in this case a diminutive with somewhat pejorative overtones. Naturally, Caterina instantly hated me with all of her will.

Sometime later-- I had not quite completely learned the Florentine system for marking the passage of time--I learned that Madonna Alessandra had freed Zanobi, and that he would leave for the town of Antella, where he hoped to make a living as a share-cropper. After he left, I missed the advice and support of this kindly old Moor. The idea that a slave could be freed was unexpected knowledge; this Italy--had a lot to offer, and there were a few other Africans here: I had seen them on the ship, in Venice, and in the streets of Florence. I let my thoughts drift to the possibility that I might have a husband and family some day, freed from the life of a slave. But how could that happen? I had no idea.

Monna Alessandra kept me so busy with house-work that I had little time for dreaming about being free. It seemed as though our relationship would never improve. All of us servants and I could see that our mistress was in a very stressful situation. How could any woman be responsible for leading a very old and respected family with no man around? Such a thing would never happen in my country; her husband's nearest male relative would have married her and taken on the family responsibility. Monna Alessandra, her husband Matteo, and their seven children had all been exiled to Pesaro by the Medici family. (I saw both men stiffen at the mere mention of the name: they were afraid. I smiled.) Shortly afterwards, Matteo and three of the children died of plague. She returned to Florence short of money, assuming the direction of her children's lives. (The servants told me this but you know it, Captain Milani.) Well, she acted competently but her efforts on behalf of her remaining children were draining, leaving her resentful. She was not really a very strong woman. I had experienced the bite of her bitterness on my first night. Losing no opportunity to use her tongue like a whip, she only smiled when verbally cutting one of us to bits. To serve her, I learned to buy vegetables and

meat in the mercato vecchio or from the peasants just outside of the city gates. I joined the other serving women alongside of the Arno doing the family wash. The house furnishings needed constant dusting; the floors constant washing, on my knees with a wooden bucket. I slept on a mattress in a hole under the storeroom floor. With the passage of years, she never grew used to me. Meanwhile, came to resent Caterina as much as Monna Alessandra; she was living the life that I wanted for myself.

I began thinking seriously about becoming free. After all, I should be married by now with four or five children of my own, in charge of my household. We women would gossip about our masters and mistresses while washing bedding, and clothes at the river. It was pleasant when the weather was good: we were unsupervised for that time. I learned a lot about the problems of other families, and I told what I knew about mine; about how Caterina was about to be forced into a marriage with a certain Marco Parenti, a learned older man but from an inferior family. One of my companions said, "Neither his money nor his eloquent Latin will mean anything to her in the bedroom!" I laughed hardest. Yes, I chimed in, "and his little quill pen will do not more than tickle her!" We laughed still harder but inside of me, what had only been envy turned into hatred. Finally, one of the women from the Pitti family bragged that her master had told his slaves that he had written in his will that they would be emancipated when he died. I asked what that meant, and she said that they would become free after he died, and he was an old man. I thought of old Zanobi, who had been freed while his mistress was alive. Well, I thought to myself that would never work for me; Monna Alessandra would never willingly do such a thing for me dead or alive. Or would she? I decided then that I would become such a nuisance to her that she would gladly set me free. I would take aim at her most vulnerable spot: the reputation of her daughter, Caterina.

I was older and more experienced now, and I was no longer intimidated by Monna Alessandra. With no man in the house I had little to fear. I fussed and complained about every task given to me; she began to lose heart when she saw that she could not get to me with her usual remarks about my skin color. She threatened to have me beaten; she said that Zanobi was returning to her, and that she would have him do it. I laughed out loud: Even you do not really believe that the old man would be up to it, I said. One day, as she prepared for marriage negotiations with Marco Parenti, I spurred the other serving women to begin gossiping within earshot about the rumors surrounding some of the other girls on the marriage market. I said, "You know girls, in my country not every girl who wears blue cowries around her waist is truly pure!" The others knew what I meant, and could not stifle their laughter! Monna Alessandra froze momentarily, and then hurried out of the room. It would be my pleasure to start such a rumor about my mirror opposite, Caterina. The truth of it would not matter in the least: once out of my mouth, the damage would be done.

"Fuck!" Milani interjected, turning to the scribe "but how could this slave bitch be so cruel?" I said, I did not make a judgment: it just seemed necessary.

Four nights ago, she called me into the kitchen. We were alone. Speaking first, I told her that I no longer wished to remain with her in Florence; I begged her to free me as she had Zanobi. I had been her slave for 14 years by then; surely that was long enough, I said. You never liked me anyway; But I had spoken too quickly. Seeing my desperation, her lips parted in a sneer; her eyes glistened in the firelight. "You have had the nerve to

threaten my daughter's reputation, and through that, of my family and its future," she said. "Do you realize that these things are all that I have lived for? I have no personal joy in this miserable life: the well-being of my children is all that matters! And you threaten that! Free you?! I will beat you myself, instead, and if god gives me the strength, my arm will free you alright... from this life!" She reached under the table, pulling out a rod bound in leather, then stood and came around the table towards me. Before she could lift it to swing at me, I grabbed it and wrestled it from her hands with little effort. "Porca puttana," she screamed at me, "You pig whore!" I threw the rod across the room, and seized her soft white throat with my hands. I squeezed it, and spun her around and off of her feet, banging her legs against the table. Cups and glasses flew off of it, bouncing across the red-tiled floor, shattering with popping sounds as they went. I scarcely knew what I was doing; I had never felt so strong! I squeezed and felt with satisfaction my thumbs sink into her throat under the chin; my fingers gripped her neck. Her face went red, then her eyes closed and she sagged to the floor. I bent over her, my arms feeling like they were made of steel. Finally, the others in the house, hearing the commotion, rushed into the kitchen, pulling me off of her. Caterina was screaming; then the police came, called by one of the servants.

Basta! That's it. Milani and the scribe sit looking at me, stone-faced. The window above had darkened. Water still sat in the glass before me; the surface of the pitcher had dried. Milani rose from the table, went to the door and called the guards to come and take me back to my cell. Sitting down on the filthy straw, my knees drawn up to my face, my arms wrapped around my legs, pulling my skirt tight around my ankles, I know that I will be beheaded... but my confession has drained fear away. It will be a quick death, and I will welcome it.

Two days later, the guards return to open my cell door. In chains, they lead me out of the cell, through the cortile and out of the Bargello through a large wooden door. We three were in the streets now, walking through the city under a sunny sky in the general direction of the Porta della Giustizia, the place of execution. But instead, we stop at the massive doors of the prison called Le Stinche. They open, letting us into an interior courtyard. Walking across it, we are met by the head of guards, who releases me from my chains. Then he says, "You have been sentenced to spend the rest of your life within these walls. Be grateful, he whispers. Lorenzo De'Medici has decided to show you mercy." But, I want to die! I shout. "No, no." the guard says, "Now you belong to us."

Inside, I can't make out much because my eyes are slow to adjust to the transition from sunlight to dark. I am led into the depths of this place, thrown into yet another dank stinking cell. The door slams shut behind me. I spin around, collapsing against a slimy wall, my hands covering my face: I am 29 years old.

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