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AGE OF FANTASY

JUDGEMENT AWAITS

*** SHORT STORY ***

JUDGEMENT AWAITS

by Magnus Crain

In the city of Tirenza, a calm breeze lingered in a university courtyard as scholars of all ages shared stories, laughs, and new discoveries. The air brimmed with the thirst for new knowledge. Below the midday sun, flocks of automa birds dispersed from the spired aviary tower, carrying messages across the city. A slow melody from the belltower rang out, signaling noontime to the university members.

Every day, at that exact time, the bell played the same familiar tones. The professors found the alarm comforting, knowing their teaching for the day neared its end and their personal work could begin. While many young scholars, the devout students, lamented the break in their studies, eager to grow their wealth of knowledge and invent the next innovative piece of technology or clockwork construct.

However, on this day, both of these yearnings would be forgotten entirely. As the final chime sounded, a thundering pulse of flames exploded from within the belltower. A hailstorm of rubble rained upon the courtyard, sending startled scholars scattering in panic and disarray. Black clouds of choking fumes and whipping dust filled the area as the structure crumbled. From atop, its giant bronze bell plummeted to the pavement, and a final ring cracked into the air as it split in two.

Later that day, Vicurso Quantanucci, an Assassin's Guild operative, entered the candlelit confines of his guild leader's shadowed chambers.

"Good, you've arrived," said the Guild Leader, Nipalno Oscanazzi, setting down a piece of parchment. "An urgent assignment requires your specialties."

"I am at the guild's service," said Vicurso.

"Earlier today, there was an attack, a bombing, on the University." Nipalno offered a sly grin. "The very cesspool we plucked you from as a young, thieving street urchin."

"That 'cesspool' taught me well." Vicurso laughed. "If I hadn't honed my skills on those city streets, I wouldn't be standing here with you now."

Nipalno nodded. "I felt your familiarity with the locale would be a suitable match for the mission. The report claims the act was carried out by the Sleighted Hands in protest of the university's violation of the Duchies isolationist sanctions. Apparently, the University has begun allowing foreign scholars back into their academic ranks."

"The Sleighted Hands?" Vicurso raised an eyebrow. "I'd never known the organization to be political, let alone bombing in protest of Duchy policy. It's a far cry from the burglary and back alley gambling rackets I knew them for."

"It's as the report says. In addition to the bombing, which appears to have doubled as a distraction, the universities mind stones were stolen. While the chaos of the bomb drew attention, a team of the Hands' agents infiltrated the university's inner sanctum and left behind a message bearing their insignia."

"Much has changed in my absence, it seems."

"It appears so. Their message stated that a bombing campaign would continue across the city's universities until the admittance of foreign scholars ceased and current foreigners were expelled. Subsequently, the Duke of Tirenza is pressuring the university leadership to succumb to the demands. However, they seek an alternative."

"What are my orders?"

"Travel to Tirenza, capture the Hands' leadership, the university would prefer them alive for questioning, and recover the mind stones. The University is expecting you promptly. Tirenza is a day's ride. You had best leave now."

Without another word, Vicurso nodded his understanding, left to gather his gear, and then headed for the guild stables.

Through the shadows of a long night, guided by the light of flickering stars and a pale moon, Vicurso tore across the winding roads and rolling hills of the Vinci countryside. He propelled his automa horse to the limits of its machinery. Its metal body seared to the touch as its inner clockwork screamed spouts of angry steam. As the next day's sun peaked above the horizon, he finally arrived at the base of Tirenza's towering stone walls, numb and drenched in sweat. Droplets from his brow landed and dissolved instantly on the boiling carapace of the automa steed. He dismounted to relieve himself of the infernal heat.

After entering the city gates, Vicurso basked in the city's once familiar atmosphere. Tirenza had significantly expanded since the last time he traveled its footways. The puzzle of buildings, now scraping at the blue hue of the distant sky, proved a maze to his memory. Even in the early morning hours, the city bustled with a countless mass of citizens scampering and hollering against each other. The sheer noise of the city overwhelmed Vicurso's drained senses.

"Finding the Sleighted Hands in this swarming labyrinth could provide quite the challenge," Vicurso thought.

Above the flow of the crowd, he spotted a town-crier automa, perched atop a pedestal, barking out announcements and snippets of news to the disinterested passersby. Vicurso guided his steed toward the crier through the shifting waves of citizens.

"-port to University of Tirenza, and you will be rewarded. I repeat, If you possess any pertinent information on the dealings of the Sleighted Hands, report to the University of Tirenza, and you will be rewarded," bellowed the metallic voice of the automa, barely discernible above the commotion. "I repeat, if-"

"Crier!" shouted Vicurso. The town crier stopped and shifted its focus toward the call. "Give me directions to the University of Tirenza."

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Before entering the University premises, Vicurso donned his guild mask to conceal his identity in accordance with guild customs. The mask was a white, full-faced theater-style mask bearing only a small pointed nose and a pair of emotionless eyeholes. Upon arrival at the university, set in the central depths of Tirenza, Vicurso gave his automa steed to the school's mechanics for needed repairs. Vicurso then met with the school's leadership council to confirm his arrival.

The council allowed him to study the message left behind, a scrawl of ink on a still-crisp piece of parchment paper. Lo and behold, at the bottom of the parchment rested the Sleighted Hand's unmistakable insignia, a contorted red hand. The possibility that they were behind a politically-motivated act still vexed Vicurso.

"How long have the Hands been political? When I knew of them as a boy, they were just common criminals, rarely venturing out from the city's underbelly," said Vicurso to the five council members.

A gaunt elder responded with a weak voice, "Your guess is as good as ours on their newfound political leanings. However, in recent years, their network has indeed infiltrated the more..."

He paused and stroked the knuckles of his bony fingers, searching for befitting words. "The more 'problematic' districts within our city."

"And how long have you admitted foreign scholars to your university?" Although Vicurso spoke evenly and without implication, the question hung heavy in the air between them. The council traded glances of silent conversation amongst themselves.

Finally, a different council member, a plump woman decorated in shining chains and rings of jewelry, answered, "Three months have passed since the first admittance." Her untrusting eyes narrowed as they attempted to study Vicurso's through the slits of his mask. However, his stoic gaze offered nothing under her inquisitive look.

"Do you possess any inkling on why your recent change in admittance policy stirred the actions of the Hands?" he said. "Perhaps the arrival of foreigners signaled potential difficulty to the hold they've acquired in the city during our Dukedom's isolation."

"Isn't that why you're here?" said the plump woman. "Besides, it isn't of interest to us to speculate as to the reasons and desires of criminals. We are only interested in the resolution of our situation and the return of the mind stones, our property."

"Indeed, Madame. Thank you, all-" he said, gesturing widely to the seated council, "-for offering me your time and your audience. I shall proceed with my investigation." He bowed to the council and exited the meeting chamber.

After the meeting, Vicurso went to study the site of the bombing in hopes that the remains of the belltower may offer some form of information. The area had been sectioned off and left for his surveyal. What greeted him was a desolate scene of settled chaos. The entire top portion of the clocktower lay in crumbled shambles scattered throughout the courtyard. The lower half was poised to topple at any moment. Thick soot blackened the surroundings, and a faint sulfur smell still stained the air.

Vicurso noted the scent belonged to burnt black powder.

Daring to test the tower's stability, he crept up the stairs with cautious steps. Upon reaching the tower's shattered summit, he found only a pile of scorched stone from sections of the exterior that had caved in. Slowly, he sifted through the rubble. Turned stone after turned stone led to but more debris.

Vicurso was about to abandon his search until a faint blue glow caught his eye through the wreckage. Focusing on the source, he sorted through the burial and revealed crumpled sheets of tarnished metal. After fully unearthing the object, Vicurso recognized the object as the remains of an automa.

The blue glow came from the machine's mind stone shard, the automa's power source. The fragment was still intact within the remnants of the warped metal body. In addition, he found the puzzling presence of what resembled the edges of a nearly-destroyed ducal seal engraved in its framework.

Vicurso took the automa remains to the University workshop for inspection.

"Had the Hands stolen the automa from the Duke?" he wondered. They may have expanded their sphere of influence in the city, but obtaining a full-body automa from the Duke's personal possession would have been quite the feat. Either the Hands were more formidable than the council could have imagined, or, perhaps, they had quite a prestigious ally.

The university scholars confirmed the seal's resemblance to the Duke's emblem, but that knowledge provided no justification for further action. However, with the mind stone still intact, the scholars speculated that vital repairs may rescue the automa's consciousness for questioning. Accordingly, the university's most elite inventors were summoned for the procedure. Hours of adept and tireless work followed.

Vicurso surveyed the technology and inventions littered throughout the workshop as he waited. There were numerous odd contraptions he knew not the purpose of. Yet, he spotted an out-of-commission scout glider, a military-issue, winged, personal flight device. He noted its presence, admiring the ingenuity of the university inventors.

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Several failed attempts later, under the care of the craftsmen's deft hands, the spark of life finally returned to the automa. Unsure of the automa's sustainability, the craftsmen urged swift questioning.

"Did you plant the bomb in the belltower?" said Vicurso to the automa, which lay unmoving atop the worktable. A harsh scraping response came from the construct.

"Yeh-eh-eh-ess."

"Under whose order did you plant the bomb?"

"Doo-d-d-Doo-dududu-ook-ook-ook-ook-" With that, the automa fell silent and unresponsive. The craftsmen shot wide-eyed looks at each other.

"It may just be confused, simply remembering its former owner," said a craftsman.

"Yes, maybe a malfunction or an error in its processing," said another.

"Perhaps." Vicurso paused in silent contemplation. "As of right now, it's the only lead. The Hands' involvement has made little sense to me from the start. They might have stolen the automa, but looking into the Duke's involvement is currently the clearest path."

"This isn't proof," said a craftsman, shaking his head, "I caution the direction you're headed."

"Indeed." With a piercing gaze through his mask, Vicurso met the eyes of each craftsman in turn. "Not a word leaves this room." All of them nodded in agreement with the assassin's command.

Satisfied with their silent promise, Vicurso said, "Now." He gestured to the wall-mounted glider he'd admired earlier. "How long will it take you to get that operational?"

Under the blanket of night, Vicurso knelt, crested atop the perch of a high rooftop. He had utilized the university's archive of city blueprints to study the layout of the Duke's castle. With a spyglass, he observed the fortification's exterior and determined the best route for infiltration.

The Duke's personal chambers were situated in the tallest eastern tower and offered no landing or noticeable foothold. However, a stretch of the neighboring keep's roof appeared unguarded and provided ample room for touching down. This would be his point of entry.

He collapsed the spyglass and double-checked his gear: he tightened the bindings of his chest-mounted daggers, longsword, studded-leather armor, shoulder pauldron, boots, and greeves; tested the spring-loaded mechanism of his hidden armbalades; situated the smoke bombs and pouches strapped to his belt; fastened his grappling hook; and settled his cloak beneath the folded glider rigging. Finally, he secured the fastenings of his face mask.

Vicurso drew back from the roof's edge and expanded the glider's framed wings. Then, with a running start, he leaped from the building and sailed through the pitch-black veil of the sky. As he neared the keep rooftop, he scanned for guards or movement. Seeing none, he descended onto the slanted roof tiles below.

After landing, Vicurso slid the glider apparatus from his shoulders. He secured the device in a crevice of the roof to stow it until his escape. Leaving it was problematic if the need for a quick escape arose. However, its encumbrance impeded his ability for stealth, which he couldn't risk.

A path to the base of the Duke's private tower presented itself. The walkways below Vicurso were lined with firelit sconces and braziers, stealing his shadows. Keeping to the roof, he slunk toward the tower with soft steps in his padded-sole boots, listening for the stirrings of unseen perils.

Below him, the metal rattle of shifting armor approached his location. From beneath the roof, out walked a guard making his rounds, seemingly unaware of Vicurso's presence.

The threat would need to be dispatched before the assassin could proceed.

Vicurso peeked his head down from the roof and scanned the hall to verify that no other guards stood watch in the area. Then, with the coast clear, he scaled down and crept behind his target. Not wanting to kill an innocent, Vicurso reached over the guard's shoulder and wrapped his arm around the man's neck in a stranglehold.

With no breath to call out and raise the alarm, the guard grasped at the assassin's choking embrace, trying to pry himself free. Slowly, the will to fight left the guard as his limbs went limp, then he passed out. Vicurso gagged the unconscious guard and tied his hands and feet in case he awoke too soon. Finally, he dragged the body out of sight and continued toward the tower.

Arriving at the entryway, Vicurso tested the handle of its wrought iron door. Locked. He reached into a pouch on his belt and removed a patterned metal sphere. With a click, the object unfolded in a tangle of shifting spider-like limbs and sprang to life. Holding the tiny automa to the door knob, it crawled from his hand into the keyhole. After the faint jingle of tinkering metal from within, a click sounded. The automa then crawled out, curled up, and Vicurso returned it to his pouch.

The tower's inner lanterns were ablaze, and it appeared that someone had been there recently but was now unoccupied. After reaching the top, Vicurso searched the Duke's extensive chambers for evidence of his connection to the bombing. Scanning through stacked parchments of personal correspondence revealed no apparent clues. At a glance, none of the letters looked coded, but he didn't have time for a more thorough investigation.

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He hunted through the silk-laden wardrobe, probed the luxurious furniture, lifted every exquisitely framed painting, and dug through chests within chests. Nothing.

From the tower's depths, the solid thump of a door closing echoed upward. Heavy footfalls throbbed up the stairwell. A booming voice shouted. At first, the words were too distant to hear but steadily rose louder. Vicurso slipped around a tight corner near a window and rested a prepared hand on his grappling hook.

Moments later, the voices entered the chamber. "Damn those pretentious bastards! They spit in the face of my rule."

"Certainly, Sire," said a second voice. Vicurso peaked from the wardrobe. It was the Duke, a stout, portly man, who was speaking to an advisor. Standing silently next to them was a guard automa wielding a broadsword and an arm-mounted crossbow.

"First, those insolent fools violate my policies by admitting those bloody foreigners," continued the Duke in a rosy-cheeked rage, "Now, they refuse to save their own skin and cooperate with my demands!" He sank into a chair, slumped his face into his palms, and sighed. "But alas—" His face raised, bearing a toothy grin. "I have their lifeblood, their treasures! Bring me the mind stones. Their brilliance alone will quell my worries."

The advisor walked toward the far wall and pressed an imperceptible pressure plate, opening a hidden compartment. From within, the advisor removed a sizable chest. Vicurso had heard enough. He drew a smoke grenade from his belt, pulled the pin, and rolled it toward the Duke.

A burst of thick grey filled the room. Brandishing his longsword, Vicurso darted from the wardrobe toward the advisor. The Duke hollered in blind confusion. The automa readied itself for combat. Vicurso hammered the pommel of his weapon into the back of the advisor's head, knocking him unconscious to the floor. The chest rattled across the ground toward the Duke's feet. Vicurso spun around to engage.

Coughing and fanning away smoke, the Duke saw the chest, then glanced up, seeing the obscured, unfamiliar shape of the assassin dashing toward him. He squealed and raised his hands in fear. Before Vicurso could reach him, the automa came crashing forward with an arcing swing of his broadsword. A harsh clang cracked as he raised his sword to block its strike. The metal blades bit deep into each other's sharpened edges.

The automa followed through with a solid thrust of its shoulder. The blow connected with Vicurso's head. He was launched backward from the force as his mask shattered. A twang snapped in the air. Vicurso yelped as a bolt punctured the meat of his lower back. Spouts of warm blood oozed from the wound. Seizing the opportunity, the Duke snatched the chest and scurried to the stairs.

Bounding toward Vicurso, the automa raised its sword to a high guard. Vicurso gripped the hilt of a dagger. Then, pivoting on the heel of his unwounded leg, he feinted to the automa's left flank. A diagonal slash from the automa cut through the lingering smoke.

Vicurso dropped to a knee and glanced off the incoming attack with a swipe of his longsword. He drew the dagger and thrust it into the exposed cogs of the automa's hip. Then, he wrenched the blade upward, pinning its differential gears. Rolling forward, he sprang to his feet behind the machine.

Crippled by the impalement, the automa couldn't turn in time. Vicurso drove his longsword deep into an exposed section of its abdomen and twisted the steel. As he tore it free, mechanical guts of gears, wiring, and mangled metal spilled out. Swaying, the automa's grip failed, and its broadsword clattered to the ground. Latching onto the pinned dagger, Vicurso hurled his knee into its back. The force splintered its hip couplings as it toppled to the floor in a clash.

Without a breath, Vicurso whipped around and raced for the spiral staircase in pursuit of the Duke. He unfastened his grappling hook, anchored it to the coiled railing, and dove over the edge. Barely gripping the rope, he plummeted through the open-centered stairwell. Below him, the Duke ripped open the iron door and scampered forward. Right behind, Vicurso slammed to the ground and tumbled out of the fall.

Vicurso lunged. The spike of an armblade sprang open and sunk into the base of the Duke's spine. A tight gasp eked from the Duke's lips as he collapsed, paralyzed. Vicurso lifted the Duke's crumpled body by the scruff of his robes to free the chest beneath him. He tossed the body aside and picked up the case. A blue glow poured out as he pried open the lid. Inside lay a heap of fist-sized, translucent crystals. He gazed at their brilliance in awe.

"Please!" the Duke wheezed, "Take the mind stones! Take them—" He choked on his words as his eyes glazed with tears. "They're yours. Just please, please don't kill me."

Vicurso shut the lid and said, "No, the stones aren't mine." He knelt down to face the Duke. "They belong to my employer." Then, he retracted his armblade. "And fear not, Your Grace. You shall not die, not here, at least. Judgement awaits."

AOF: SKIRMISH - JUDGEMENT AWAITS

Mission Background

A chest of treasure lies guarded at the tallest room of a remote tower. On top of being cramped, the winding stairs and rooms reveal further difficulties as enchanted guards threaten to ambush any trespassers.

The Battlefield

For this mission you'll need a 4'x4' table, with at least 15-20 pieces of terrain on it, with three rings of walls that are each 12", 24", and 36" in diameter from the center of the table.

The Armies

For this mission you'll need two armies of equal point cost, and each army must have at least one hero.

Deployment

The players roll-off, and the winner picks zone A or B to be their deployment zone, with their opponent taking the opposite. Then the players alternate in placing one unit each within their deployment zone, starting with the player that won the deployment roll-off.

First Turn

The players must roll-off to see who gets the first turn.

Objectives

Before deployment, players have to set up one objective marker at the centre of the table.

At the end of each round, if a unit is within 3" of a marker whilst enemies aren't, then the objective is seized and remains seized even after leaving.

Stunned units can't seize markers, and if units from both sides are contesting a marker then it becomes neutral again.

At the end of each round players get 2 VPs if they seized the objective marker, plus 1 VP for each ring (inner/mid/outer) in which they have more non-stunned units than their opponent.

At the end of the game players get 1 VP for each guard construct they control, as well as 2s VP for each guard construct they destroyed.

Starting from the end of round 4, players must roll one die at the end of each round, and on a 4+ the game continues.

The game ends once a 1-3 is rolled, and the player that scored most VPs wins.

Special Rules

Tower Doors: Before deployment, players have to set up a total of 9 door markers. The players roll-off to see who goes first, and then alternate in placing one door marker each on one of the rings of walls, at least 9" away from deployment zones and other door markers, and each ring of walls may only have up to 3 door markers.

Thick Walls: The rings of walls are impassable terrain, and units may only move across them by touching a door marker. When a unit touches a door marker, place it within 1" of the marker on the other side of the wall.

Trespassing: Whenever a unit moves through a door marker, roll D6+X, where X is 1/2/3 if it was to enter the outer-/mid-/inner-ring. On a 7+, the opponent must place a Guard Construct at least 9" away from that door marker, which they control until the end of the game.

Guard Construct: The guards constructs have Qua 4+, Def 4+, Arm-Bow (12", A1, Rending), Hand Weapon (A1).

