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CRIME AND GRIME

THE JUSTICIAR

by Sean Punch

DOMINION

by Kyla Ward

HOLY DIRTY MONEY

by J. Edward Tremlett

CRUEL AND UNUSUAL

by Steven Marsh

ON DE MEDICI'S SECRET SERVICE

by Matt Riggsby

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ON DE MEDICI'S SECRET SERVICE

BY MATT RIGGSBY

Firenze (the native name for Florence, Italy) has no formal espionage network and no formal intelligence agency during the Renaissance. The city does have a great many men of skill and discretion, who travel frequently, are interested in affairs of the world, and love their country. They are the FBI, the CIA, and a political dirty tricks squad rolled into one – and in secret affairs, they are a force to be reckoned with.

THE ORGANIZATION (OR LACK THEREOF)

As with many other aspects of Medician Firenze, serious covert activity is handled not by a formal government council, whose membership and records might be compromised, but rather by skilled and trusted individuals, coordinated by the reigning Medici and his closest advisors. When agents refer to themselves and their “organization” at all, which is rarely, it is as *amici degli amici*, or friends of friends.

Typically, agents are approached by a handler, who is likely be an acquaintance or distant relative. The prospective agent will have been thoroughly vetted to determine his abilities and trustworthiness long before he has even the slightest idea he's being considered. Despite existing in a class-conscious era, the amici are an egalitarian organization, recruiting members from all classes and as many women as men.

When approaching the new agent, the handler appeals in equal parts to the recruit's patriotism (“You're helping your country!”) and greed (“Your country will help you . . .”). If the recruit seems amenable, the handler starts showing him the ropes. He takes the recruit around on routine tasks: delivering messages, engaging in cursory surveillance, and picking up unusual supplies. The recruit soon finds himself doing such little jobs on his own, graduating to larger tasks as necessary.

The contact also introduces the new agent to a small group of fellow agents and associates; cells of as many players as a

GM has convenient are typical. The recruit may get to know one or two alternate handlers, who manage other cells of their own but stand by to take over should something untoward happen.

Just as there are no formal ranks or members, there's no official pay. However, friends take care of their friends. Assistance can be slow in coming and follow a roundabout route in order to maintain secrecy. For example, instead of finding a sack of coins under his pillow, an agent may unexpectedly find his debts reduced or acquire a lucrative new customer for his family business. Nonetheless, an active member of the amici can count on at least \$1,000 a month, which is not bad for part-time work.

What You Need to Know

This article describes a made-up intelligence network used by the city of Firenze (Florence) during the Renaissance. *GURPS Hot Spots: Renaissance Florence* presents social and political background for the city in detail, but if you don't own it, here's a sketch: The Italian peninsula is divided among competing city-states (leading cities include Genoa, Venezia, Firenze, Roma and the Papal States, and Napoli), with the growing powers of western Europe (Spain, France, and the Holy Roman Empire) hovering around the edges. This competition is expressed through small wars and complex diplomacy, creating rapidly shifting alliances to maintain a balance of power. Firenze is ruled unofficially by the Medici, a dynasty of wealthy bankers who coordinate alliances and trade favors instead of taking formal office. They exercise immense power over the city, but they have to maintain their popularity at home and diplomatic stability abroad.

RESOURCES

Although the basis of the amici is its agents, they're backed up by some of the finest equipment and support personnel money can buy.

GURPS Banestorm: Abydos describes a necropolis with some unusual punishments, including being turned into a zombie.

Training

The Medici use men who are already capable, though additional training is not out of the question. If, for example, an agent otherwise perfectly suited to a mission keeping an eye on a Turkish emissary doesn't speak Turkish, he may find a Turkish servant recommended to him by an acquaintance.

Most agents are already competent swordsmen. If they aren't, they'll soon be taught to be by one of the many fencing masters resident in the city. Most agents are at some point introduced to Maestro Giuliano Belragazzo, one of many useful men excluded from the history books, to learn the amici's special fighting style, *il lavoro veloce* (see p. 9).

For increased security, codes are often employed. Each handler has his own of greater or lesser complexity, which his agents are taught. Though they tend to be fanciful rather than objectively difficult to crack, they are sufficiently diverse that anyone intercepting communications between agents is going to have his hands full figuring them out. Passages from Classical literature and Biblical allusions are often used for passwords and indicators of preset messages. Likewise, the amici are endlessly fond of obscure symbols.

Example: An upper-class agent learns that he may soon need to steal the correspondence of a particular troubling figure in town, assassinate him, or take no action; he is told that red indicates death, yellow is theft, and white is inactivity. Eventually, a painting that he doesn't remember commissioning is delivered to his house, and the painter delivering it draws his attention to a particularly well-rendered figure in the background. The figure is holding flowers which are, as necessary, red, yellow, or white.

Technical Assistance

Just as the finest architects of the age worked on fortifications as much as they did on cathedrals and villas, some

Il Ramo de Q

The workshops of the amici's technical section may be the source of all kinds of clockpunk and alchemical wonders, or even cutting-edge TL5 equipment appearing in experimental form far in advance of its actual date of introduction. Possible gadgets might include:

Clockwork automata (for example, wind-up "robots" capable of carrying a small payload up a wall and into a window, or simply timed fuses for bombs or flares).

Improved optics (for example, binoculars).

Improved poisons and drugs (for example, fast-acting knockout drops or gases).

Pneumatic weapons.

Rocket weapons (for example, a TL(4+1) gyrojet).

Signal flares.

Stun grenades.

of the city's finest craftsmen may produce clever contraptions to aid the amici. Agents needing material assistance rather than training are introduced to Maestro Pietro Casalegno. Casalegno is connected to a number of alchemists, engineers, clockmakers, and goldsmiths, who produce remarkable items to assist agents in their missions.

Concealed weapons are something close to standard issue. Sword-canes are common, as are knives hidden in a disturbing array of forms: boot heels, belt buckles, boat oars, corset stays, ornaments on furniture and picture frames, detachable bits of sculpture, musical instruments, astronomical instruments, the spines of books, and the handles of any item from mirrors to paint brushes. Amici-supplied knives, all expertly made, may be treated as daggers with a Holdout bonus of at least +2 and easily up to +5. Since they aren't terribly dangerous themselves, they are often envenomed.

Though crossbows are on their way out as battlefield weapons, they're still used for covert operations. A typical version is a pistol crossbow kit. The bow, string, and a multi-piece stock are made to be broken down into innocuous and easily concealed parts. The parts can be incorporated into luggage, toolboxes, portable furniture, or even clothing, providing a Holdout modifier of +0 (instead of the pistol crossbow's usual -4), and they can be assembled in five minutes.

Not all technological developments are related to weapons and armor. Hidden equipment of all kinds is available, such as lockpicks, fire-starters, and climbing equipment (for example, extremely strong cords made from exotic silk sewn into a sash or the lining of a doublet).

The alchemists are masters of invisible writing. They have formulated a number of disappearing inks and developers. They've also been trying out new means of detecting invisible writing by opponents, the better to find hidden messages.

The Medici alchemists have been experimenting with methods of rapidly copying documents. Agents can take a prepared sheet of paper from a sealed tube, press it against a written page where it picks up faint chemical traces of the ink, and return it to the alchemist for further treatment to bring out an impression of the writing. It works fairly well, but the preparations are expensive (\$400 per page, if one were to have to pay for it) and must be kept in well-sealed tubes (a quarter pound each) until use.

MISSIONS

The purpose of the amici is to investigate and, if necessary, eliminate threats against the peace and stability of Medici-ruled Firenze. This often involves actions against major criminals (street crime is beneath their notice, but they might handle burglars who are unusually successful, serial killers, large-scale smugglers, and notable con men), foreign enemies, and native rebels. Tasks frequently shade into purely partisan political espionage and operations against families and alliances that might challenge the current regime.

Modern distinctions between foreign and domestic operations are of no concern. The amici are used internally as secret police and externally as spies. Some may find themselves involved in one kind of work more than another, but

GURPS Alphabet Arcane offers some exotic items that might be found in cities, particularly ones on trade routes.

only because of their particular abilities and association. For example, a member of a politically troublesome family in Firenze would most likely provide intelligence on his local relatives, while someone with a villa and business interests in Rome would spend a lot of time snooping around the Papal Curia.

The amici do a great deal of information-gathering, usually directed against enemies, but also against apparent neutrals and even allies to keep tabs on which way they might be leaning and to head off potential betrayals. There are enough garden-variety informers around to pick up everyday information about regular comings and goings that agents can focus on riskier information-gathering. Notably, they may be used to tail subjects of investigation if they attend late-night meetings (following someone through empty streets at night unnoticed is much harder than through crowded streets during the day) and getting their hands on private papers. This may involve daring breaking-and-entering raids, but the amici generally prefer to insert agents into a subject's home or office under a legitimate cover (for example, as a party guest, servant, or business client) and using stealth and cunning to get the desired information.

The more subtle operations of the amici might be called social sabotage. They work to break up potential conspiracies and turn criminal allies against one another. If they find evidence of a conspiracy, they have many means to create tensions between the members. For example, they may forge and quietly reveal correspondence between one conspirator and an enemy of his fellows, or arrange for the conspiracy's enemy to suddenly (and suspiciously) start granting favors to one of the conspirators. Even more subtly, they may target the conspirators' subordinates, who do most of the legwork in any criminal activity, in their own arguments (for example, putting a pretty girl between two ambitious young blades and having her provoke them into a duel). As tensions rise, it becomes much easier to peel off disgruntled enemies and collect evidence against the most dangerous members for trial.

Finally, the amici are used to take action against criminals and political opponents who are essentially untouchable. Foreign diplomats typically have legal immunity but can be dangerous spymasters, while clergy and favored lay clients of powerful men of the Church are subject to canon rather than civil law, putting them beyond the reach of Florentine civil justice. It falls to the amici to see to it that they are punished, or at least stopped, without making it appear any official action has been taken. Diplomats may be goaded into duels (with the unexpectedly expert opponent vanishing in the duel's aftermath) or die quietly of what seems to be natural causes, and priests may be revealed to be in league with Saracens, devil-worshippers, or Protestants.

To preserve secrecy, agents are generally discouraged from interacting outside of missions. The fewer chances outsiders have to connect members of a cell, the better. They are likewise instructed not to try to *avoid* other agents if they happen to be thrown together through normal business or social activity. Fortunately, it's seasonally acceptable to wear masks, so agents can sometimes work semi-openly without revealing their identities.

Of course, the work is not without risk. Theft and assassination are always dangerous. Likewise, since visible members

New Martial-Arts Style

Amici who need better fighting skills typically learn *il lavoro veloce* from Firenze's master of the style.

Il Lavoro Veloce

5 points

Il lavoro veloce ("quick work"), arguably a style for assassination rather than fighting, takes Italian School fencing to its brutally logical conclusion. It emphasizes speed to operate in a crowded environment. The fighter is trained to closely approach unsuspecting targets, produce his weapon before the target can react, strike with lethal effect, and be on his way quickly. The final test in Belragazzo's studio, it is said, is Belragazzo dropping a florin to the floor. The student must draw, strike a dummy in the neck or heart, and sheathe before the coin hits the ground. Though knives are featured, ubiquitous fencing weapons are necessarily part of the training.

Skills: Fast-Draw (Knife); Knife; Rapier; Wrestling.

Techniques: Choke Hold; any Targeted Attack to the neck or vitals with a knife or rapier.

Perks: Grip Mastery (Knife or Rapier); Quick-Sheath (Knife).

Optional Traits

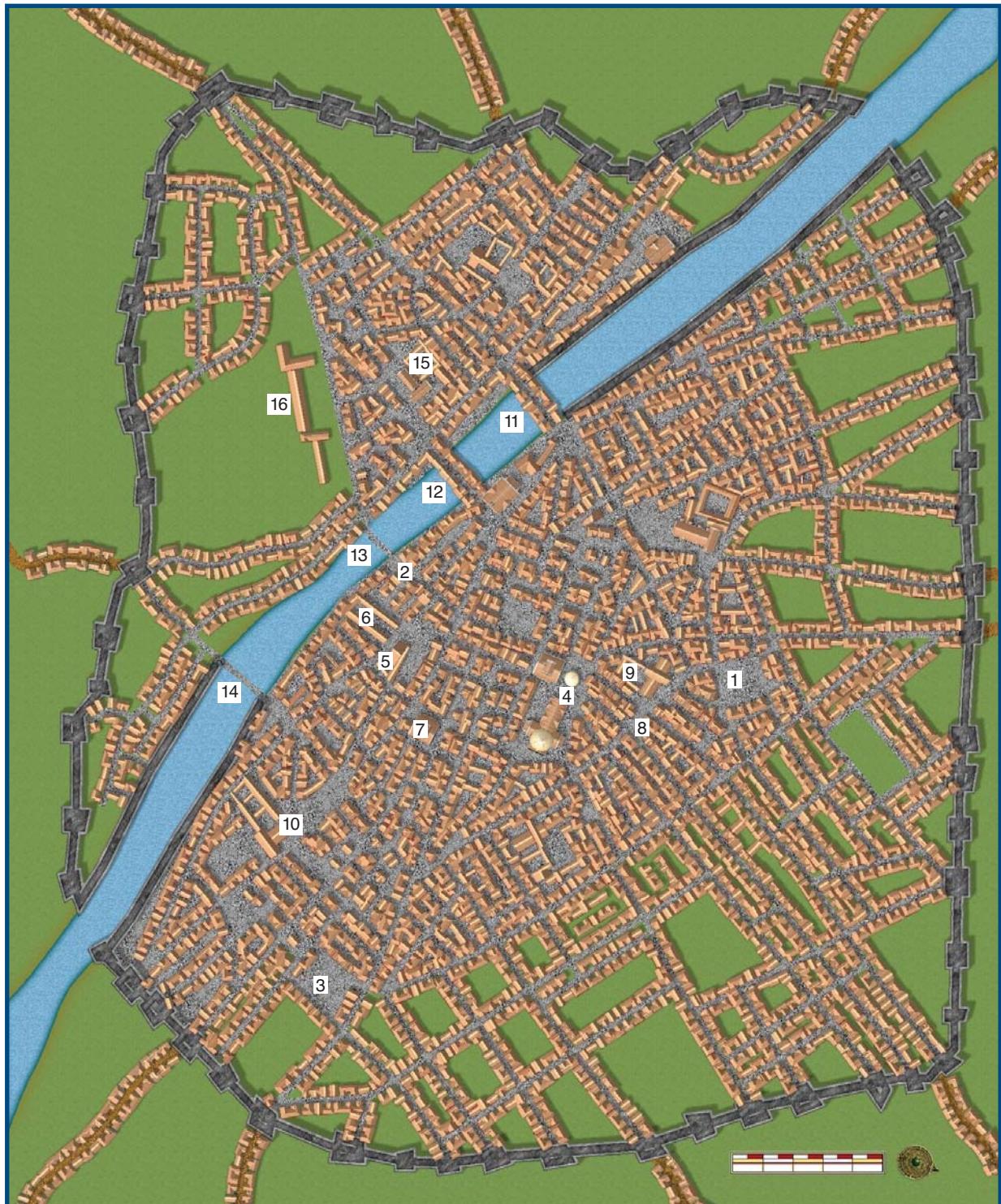
Skills: Holdout; Shadowing; Stealth.

and hangers-on of the Medici's circle make *terrible* covert agents, deniability must be maintained at all costs. It is also generally understood that secrecy is paramount and that agents, if they are exposed, are on their own. Agents who appear inclined to discuss their activities become high-priority targets themselves.

There is also a certain moral risk in being a member of the amici. Subjects of the network's operation are frequently chosen for political reasons, which means that enemies, even the worst wrongdoers, can be officially converted to friends for political reasons. For example, agents who have been setting up the fall of a bishop responsible for selling young virgins into the slave trade for months may be called off at the last minute if the bishop changes his political affiliations and becomes useful to the current regime rather than a rival. They may even be required to fend off the rivals of some very bad people, such as professional assassins, ruthless mercenaries, and brutal noblemen with barbaric but effective armies, because they're useful to the current regime. While corruption among agents is not tolerated, their own leadership could safely be regarded as inherently corrupt.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Matt Riggsby is trained in anthropology and archaeology and, like the rest of his generation, has a job in computers. He works for an international medical technology company and lives with his lovely and talented wife, above-average child, and a pack of dogs. He is unique among game writers in that he owns no cats.



Map of Renaissance Firenze

Scale: 1" = 400 yards

- 1. Mercato Centrale
- 2. Mercato Nuovo
- 3. Mercato San Ambrogio
- 4. Il Duomo
- 5. Palazzo della Signoria

- 6. Palazzo Uffizi
- 7. Bargello
- 8. Palazzo Medici
- 9. San Lorenzo
- 10. Santa Croce
- 11. Ponte alla Carrara

- 12. Ponte Santa Trinita
- 13. Ponte Vecchio
- 14. Ponte alle Grazie
- 15. San Spirito
- 16. Palazzo Pitti