
Like Cogwork

Matt Knicl

From set *Conspiracy*

Academy at High Paliano Board of Senior Advisors

Meeting called to order by Chancellor Grinaldi.

Members present:

Chancellor Grinaldi

Vice Chancellor Alendis

Professor Emralla

Professor Fimarell

Professor Muzzio

Professor Tulando

Members absent:

Professor Regness (sabbatical)

Business

Motion from Professor Muzzio: For Professor Muzzio to become vice chancellor once Alendis retires.

Vote: 1 in favor, 5 against

Resolved: motion failed

Motion from Chancellor Grinaldi: To elect Professor Tulando vice chancellor once Alendis retires.

Vote: 4 in favor, 1 against, 1 abstain

Resolved: motion carried

“Do you think he was angry?” the ancient professor asked his colleague as they walked into the academy’s antechamber.

“No, Tulando, of course not,” the chancellor replied. “Muzzio is a practical man. He showed no emotion when we rendered the vote. I swear he is no better than a machine.”

“You fail to give him credit, Chancellor. His inventions have revolutionized our society. We now rely on his work in one form or another.”

“Oh, of course,” the chancellor replied. “But that’s why we need him in a workshop and not behind a desk.”

The professor looked around the empty marble antechamber. It was night, and none were around, but still the professor found it best to lower his voice.

“You’ve heard the rumors about him, I take it?”

The chancellor scoffed.

“Spare me. That he is an agent of the Black Rose? Or the one that he is still the patron of the dropout, Sydri?”

“He most certainly killed Daretti.”

“If he did, he did us a favor,” the chancellor said. He instantly regretted the statement, the night’s meeting and late hours raising his temper. “I’ll hear no more of this sort of talk. The matter is resolved.” The professor nodded to the chancellor and they both parted ways.

To Muzzio, the matter was far from resolved. He sat in his workshop, the one unknown to his colleagues, surrounded by dozens of half-finished, half-tinkered devices. Among the clutter of books and parts, Muzzio contemplated. He was not elected vice chancellor, which changed months of delicate planning.



Muzzio, Visionary Architect | Art by Volkan Baga

Unlike his contemporaries, who would have crumpled up all their plans and notes in a rage, Muzzio had collected them all, ensuring they were flat and unbent, and filed them away. *Never know when I might need them again*, he thought. His mind raced with hundreds of scenarios, of blueprints of events unfolding. He needed to work through his thoughts.

After the meeting, he had summoned for his apprentice, Irie. A young man from the Low City, Irie hadn’t the funds to enter the academy. Muzzio had seen the potential in the boy and brought him on as his apprentice. Irie kept up Muzzio’s workshop in exchange for the same lessons others spent family fortunes to obtain—even if most of the boy’s time was spent retrieving parts and books from the Grand Library. Muzzio had spent a few months training Irie, but he needed to accelerate the lessons.

Out of breath, Irie climbed the stairs into the workshop.



"I'm sorry, Master," Irie said hurriedly. "I came as quickly as I could."

"You came as quickly as I calculated you would," Muzzio replied, standing from his desk. "No need to apologize when I inconvenience you."

Muzzio walked over to one of his many cluttered bookshelves. On it sat the helm of an early model of one of his sentinel constructs. He spun it counterclockwise where it sat, and the book shelf lowered into the floorboards, revealing marble stairs that descended down a spiral staircase. Irie pretended to look amazed, having already found the secret passage on the second day of his apprenticeship. Muzzio knew Irie had found it, and that he was feigning shock. Irie suspected his master knew he had been down there before, but both were more than willing to play the game of ignorance.

They walked down the brightly lit stairwell and emerged in a large room, where more than a hundred mechanical constructs stood in rows. At the head of the room, where Muzzio and Irie stood, was Muzzio's true workshop—large tables where Muzzio could tend to his creations like a doctor tends to patients; parts put in deliberate places littered the workspace.

The centerpiece of the room, surrounded by whirring noises of various machines and the iron army, was a scale model of Paliano, with both the High City and Low City replicated in amazing detail. It took up nearly one third of the room. Irie had spent hours vetting its accuracy and was unable to find flaw in its design. The High City towered over the Lower, just as its full-scale version. The Corru River was painted through the Lower City, every twist and turn replicated. The houses themselves were not as intricate as they were in reality, but important locations, like the palace or the academy, were ornate and delicately painted.

Above it, a cogwork device built into the ceiling moved a false moon, and in day was replaced with a bright light that travelled across the fake city in real time. When it rained, Irie noted that the device ran tufts of cotton across tracks in the ceiling to replicate the clouds. There were no figures of people in the city, but Irie suspected that was how his master preferred it.

Muzzio had already begun working on a construct soldier. Irie was doing his best to pretend like he was taking the sights in for the first time.

"Have you ever killed anyone, Irie?" Muzzio asked calmly, as he replaced a gear in the construct.



Muzzio's Preparations | Art by Karl Kopinski

"No, of course not, Sir," the boy replied.

"Do you think I have killed anyone?"

Irie was taken aback by the question and tried to come up with a meaningful response, but could only reply, "Yes."

Without emotion, Muzzio replied, "How unfortunate. I would have hoped you thought more of me."

"Apologies master, I... it's just... you hear things."

"Never believe a word you hear in Paliano, Irie, unless it comes from me." Muzzio removed plating from another part of the construct, taking a jeweler's eye and small tools to the exposed insides. "No, I am proud to say I've never killed anyone, nor have I had a need to. At least, not yet."

"That is quite a relief, Master," Irie said.

Muzzio looked up at him from his hunched-over position and stared through the jeweler's eye. "Don't grovel."

Irie nodded.

"All of the mechanical wonders our city knows today came from me. I do not wish to brag, simply to demonstrate that I not only have vast intelligence, but that I know how to apply it to the greater good. Every construct in Paliano is either built with my designs or from my designs. The magic that fuels them may come from various sources, but the devices themselves owe their allegiance to me."

"Do you mean that you can control them?" Irie asked.

"I can, but I do not need to. For every obstacle toward my grand design, there is a very simple, nonviolent solution: information. Within each of the constructs is a series of needles that transcribes all that they hear onto wax cylinders, which my sneak constructs can retrieve for me. You would be amazed at what people speak of when they think they are in the presence of a nonentity."

Irie felt like he knew.

"The people scurry about, but on every corner, and now in nearly every shop, one of my constructs tends to them. My creations file their documents, count their money."

"Then is that your 'grand design,' to replace people with the machines?" Irie asked. "There are no people in your vision of the future?"



Deal Broker | Art by Cliff Childs

Muzzio laughed, which unnerved Irie.

“Of course not! Everything I do, I do for people, to make their lives better.”

“But the way you describe the city, it’s like you want everything to run like a clock.”

“That is a nice goal,” Muzzio replied. “But foolhardy. The human variables are what will always throw off any plan for clockwork perfection one could hope to attain. I have met some who have been to amazing places and speak of ancient warring artificers and of the perfect worlds they wanted to create. There are even rumors of a place where the perfection of machines blends inseparably with the vitality of organic life. I hope we can one day be like those places. I must mitigate the variables, as best I can, to help society move forward.”

Muzzio closed the panel on the construct.

“A real artificer,” he continued, “can step away from a creation and know it will continue to function on its own. But until I know I can step away, I must tinker and keep everything as it needs to be. I do not make the parts, I’m merely assembling them.”

The construct jittered, then began to move its appendages. It pushed itself from the table and walked toward an empty spot in the ranks of the other soldiers.

“I do not need to be in charge,” Muzzio continued, standing with his arms behind his back, admiring his soldiers. “The vice chancellor position would have given me the autonomy and power needed to move into the next phase of my plan. I wasn’t elected vice chancellor, which based on my projections I should have easily taken. But the death of Brago and his seeming ascension, which I couldn’t foresee, caused them to vote more cautiously.”

“What do you plan to do?” Irie asked. “What do you need me to do for all of this?”

“To watch, listen, and learn,” Muzzio replied. “You are my student, after all.”



Cogwork Librarian | Art by Dan Scott

Over the next few days, Muzzio's constructs received new orders.

Professor Emralla found that the bank no longer had record of her money. The magister assured her that no living soul had been into the vaults, nor would any have been able to. Behind the magister, constructs went about counting coin, no more nefarious than a broom or spade, moving currency from one pile to the next. Emralla understood clerical errors, but she had just been made aware her latest payment on her estate in the Santuo District—which she knew she had given to the delivery construct—never made it to the loan house. She went to sort out the situation, but quickly found that due to clerical errors, the home was not properly registered in her name and she was to be evicted. The ink on the quill of the bookkeeping construct hadn't even yet dried.

Professor Tulando feared a wanton construct attacking him in the streets. He had never taken to the machines and had none in his home. He peered nervously through windows, barely able to sleep at night. *There is nothing to worry about*, he told himself. *Muzzio is a reasonable man. The rumors are just rumors.* He was almost over his fears when he went early to his breakfast table one morning. His servants were not yet arrived to prepare his meal, but there was a stack of papers where his food normally sat. The papers documented, quite thoroughly, how Tulando had misappropriated academy funds for his own fortune, even going so far as to show covert dealings with the smuggler Ervos Trax. There were signed documents, and even one of these papers would result in his arrest and termination. Tulando was innocent of all these crimes, but the message was clear. He resigned less than an hour later.

Chancellor Grinaldi's money was not touched, his titles were not altered, nor was he unjustly framed or blackmailed. He was having an affair, and a construct recorded this information. The details were documented and a blank envelope left outside the chancellor's house for his wife to find. The chancellor was forced to leave his position to fix his personal life.

The equation remained the same, but the variables were different.

Business

Motion from Professor Muzzio: For Professor Muzzio to become Vice Chancellor once Alendis becomes Chancellor.

Vote: 1 in favor, 0 against, 3 abstain

Resolved: Motion carried

Academy at High Paliano Board of Senior Advisors

Meeting called to order by Vice Chancellor Alendis.

Members present:

Vice Chancellor Alendis

Professor Fimarell

Professor Muzzio

Professor Regness

Members absent:

Chancellor Grinaldi (resigned)

Professor Emralla (sabbatical)

Professor Tulando (resigned)

Business

Motion from Professor Muzzio: For Professor Muzzio to become vice chancellor once Alendis becomes chancellor.

Vote: 1 in favor, 0 against, 3 abstain

Resolved: motion carried