

Blood Will Have Blood

Shawn Main

From set *Conspiracy*

Some of the grubs were no bigger than a coin. Pale and fleshy, they squirmed their way along the cracks in the floor. Beetles with wiry, clicking legs scurried over them, hissing at each other as they passed. Centipedes, long as a human's arm, curled in the dry ribcages of long-dead prisoners. For being in isolation, Selvala certainly didn't feel alone.

"Little fawn."

The voice was a gnarled whisper seeping in through the cell door. She hadn't seen the dungeon keeper, but she'd heard that voice, pooling its sound deep in her ears. For the first two days, there had been a parade of goblins knocking at her door, screaming in their tinny voices. She'd dealt with each of them in turn.

"Wee faaawn."

Selvala stood in place and focused on the swarming insects. When she didn't watch them, vertigo overtook her—the individual insects would disappear and instead the floor and walls seemed to writhe and breathe like she was in the stomach of some great animal.

"Happy faaaaaawn."

And when she didn't watch them, tiny things would start to crawl up the leather of her boots. She wondered if they were drawn by the scent of dried blood. Three days later, it was all she could smell.

"Sweet faaaaaaawn."

That blood had drawn a crowd three days before as well, but then it was wet and red and ran down her knife like water. She didn't want to think about that. She didn't want to listen to the dungeon keeper's voice. She focused on the swarm. Her mouth was parched.

"Killer faaaaaaaaaaawn."

Now, soaked into her gloves, the blood was the color of rust. Three coats had been added on top of that. Goblin blood. Black. Viscous. Sticky. She wondered if she should offer the gloves to her cellmates. They might chew the gloves clean again.

Three days felt like a long time ago.

"Deadly fawn. Vicious fawn. Murder fawn."

She focused on her breathing and tried not to listen to the sound of the dungeon keeper just beyond her cell door. She knew he was watching from the bars, squat face pressed close, keys clanking at his side.

"Don't you want your supper, Fawn?"

She wondered if she could move fast enough to reach the door before he could react, wondered if she could get a shard of bone into his skull while he was still so close.

“Certainly,” said Selvala. She swallowed. She hadn’t spoken in three days and her voice was like rocks. “Why don’t you come in here and give it to me?”

The dungeon keeper chortled. His disembodied voice echoed from beyond the heavy door.

“Oh fawn, what do you take me for? You took the eye of one my best agents. What do you have smuggled in there, knitting needles?”

Selvala smiled and fingered the crudely sharpened weapon at her side. “A femur.”

“Ha!” he cried. “Bone to the eye! I knew you would be good. A master! The others said you were all talk, yet here you are: my perfect assassin.”

Her smile dissipated. She didn’t look at her jailer’s face, but she imagined it. Yellow teeth, bulging eyes, breath hot and putrid. He wasn’t made for Paliano either.

“Well, your uncle Grenzo forgives you,” said the dungeon keeper. “What’s a little blood between friends?”



Grenzo, Dungeon Warden | Art by Lucas Graciano

She turned her attention finally toward the door. His smiling, bloated face watched from between the bars of the narrow window. “Why don’t you get out of here?” she asked. “I’m formulating my escape.”

His smile grew until it showed all his rotting teeth. He asked, “What’s it like to kill a man you love?”

She turned away, back to the beetles that crunched under her boots. She’d been to the lowlands, she’d survived in the wild, she could stand the taste of insect. Had bluebloods starved to death in here, refusing to deign to eat from the floor?

“Answer me that one question, dainty fawn, and I’ll unlock this door.”

She tensed her muscles. All it would take was one quick lunge and this conversation would be over. Her shard of bone was no rapier, but he was a lump of a thing and it would do the job.

She said, “I’m sure you don’t need me to answer that question.”

“Oh, but I do. My hands are clean.”

She eyed the skull that lay in the corner. Its empty sockets would stare forever at the dripping ceiling of this cell.

He said, “All I do is turn some keys and talk.”

She contemplated the stories she’d heard about the dungeon keeper, about his agents swarming in the sewers, crawling through the night—mercenary killers and spies, dispatching problems and watching for opportunities to blackmail.

He waited for her to speak. When she didn’t, he said, “And I’ll turn this key here—I’ve done it before—if you answer your dear old uncle Grenzo’s question: What’s it like to kill a friend?”

Selvala said, “All too easy.”

He scoffed. She waited. Above the hiss of beetles, the jangle of keys, the click of the lock. The door slid open with a creak.

“Next time, maybe it will stick,” he said from the hallway.

She turned her attention to the door. No one came. Beyond, she could hear the keeper’s labored breathing in the passage.

She didn’t understand, didn’t know his game. She knew she was being manipulated, but to what end?



Backup Plan | Art by David Palumbo

"Come on out," he said. "I've got a skin of water and a jug of wine. You've split your time between the low city and the high. Didn't know which one you'd want."

Selvala took a light step toward the door. The shadows trembled in the torchlight. Grenzo had a huge frame for a goblin, but he was hunched over, like his bones were rebelling against him. He clutched his staff and she wondered if he could walk a step without it. He held the waterskin aloft. She waited for the trap—a dozen agents around the corner? Poisoned gifts? Some dark magic?

Grenzo turned his head from side to side as if considering the tunnels. "You can run, Fawn, but the trail is treacherous. I'll take you on your way."

She gripped the shard of bone and contemplated his jugular. It was thick, like a snake sleeping in his neck.

"Well, go on then," she said, nodding. "Lead the way."

Grenzo was right. The tunnels were like arteries, forever branching and changing direction. Selvala was studied in tracking and tried to make sense of the paths, looking for exits with which to escape or landmarks in case she needed to double back to lose pursuers in the tunnels. But the stonework was relentless. The only guide points were the occasional chatter of goblins—averting their gaze from Grenzo as he passed—and the moans of the prisoners—pleading with Grenzo for his keys.

They walked for a long time. Every so often, Grenzo would stop and poke at the ceiling above them. "Palace," he would say and laugh. Or "Brago's bedchamber. Won't need that anymore!" "Sydri's shop—at least since sundown yesterday." Slowly, the map of Paliano began to make sense to her, but still she didn't know where he was leading her or to what end. "Secret council chamber," he said, and watched her face to see if she knew.

At one point, he stopped and sniffed the air. He lofted his staff and banged it against the ceiling above them. "Treasury," he announced. Then he pointed his staff like a long, bony finger. "Take that passage and it leads straight into the vault. Take a handful of gold for your trip if you want. Fill your boots if you want. It's free for the taking."

He stared at her, waiting for a reaction. "Doesn't it excite you? The thought that we're in the secret heart of Fiora?" She stared at him, tried to make her face neutral, offering him nothing. "Did you ever want to see the king's private sculpture collection? Ever eat poached egg of paradise bird? Not of this world! There are stairs into that kitchen, too. Every secret door, every secret lock is known to me!"

He held his keys aloft and shook them at her. "What do you want, Little Fawn? What's your price? I know it's not gold, but I can offer you heaps. Access? Do you want to leave the high city? Or free it? Open the secret gates and let the rabble below up into our streets? Great pulleys to hoist up the beasts from the old world? Information? Just think what it would have been to spy on your dear friend, Brago, and peer into his secret plots. Then maybe you wouldn't have been so quick to stab. Or you would have been quicker! Gotten the job done while you still had the chance."

He stepped closer and hoisted himself level with her face. She gritted her teeth.

"Another chance to kill a friend? Is that what you want? More murder? I can provide that as well. We can make these sewers run red from the carnage of it all." He smiled and his eyes watched her closely. "What about the opportunity to kill an enemy for a change?"

"What," she said, "am I being asked to do?"

He laughed triumphantly. It was loud and unfettered. She didn't know how deep the tunnels ran, but it must be deep enough to mask the cackling of a madman. He scurried down a passage, then stopped, motioning for her to follow.

He put an ear to the wall and she followed suit. There was sound there, although she couldn't place it—low and resonant, like a great elephant dragging a chain, but there were other sounds too. Soft, rhythmic clicks and whirs. They reminded her of bird calls, but there was something off about them—something impossibly regular.

Grenzo sorted through key after key, looking for one in particular. With a grin, he found it and tucked it into a secret lock in the stones. The wall swung open. Grenzo, dancing with excitement, waved her up the stairs.

The nightingale was wound from wire, its beak two brass clasps that opened as it sung out seven perfect notes. It then waved its false wings and spun once in a circle to sing again. Those same seven notes carried through the library, rising high up toward the vaulted ceiling.

All around Selvala, ornate automata clanked and whirred. Metal, spidery limbs sorted books into the shelves. Glass eyes on long wrought necks followed them, twisting back and forth as if checking for errors. In the corner, a shell of iron shaped like a human ran thin paintbrushes over a canvas in even circles, a landscape taking slow shape in their wake.

"Muzzio's library?" asked Selvala in a whisper.

"There's a terrible order to it all, isn't there?" said Grenzo. His breath was labored, as if the air were thinner. "The grand tyrant architect, Muzzio—student of Daretti, who looked down at his legs one morning and said, 'I can do better.' He promised us a new world. One that was perfectly crafted. One that was programmed and understood. One that he would build to replace us all."



Muzzio, Visionary Architect | Art by Volkan Baga

Against the far wall, towering nearly two stories in height, was a beast of a machine. Pulleys stretched across its wooden limbs like sinews. A maw of terrible gears seemed to smile at them. The beast was still as a statue, but between its legs, Selvala could see a great red door.

“So what do you want, Little Fawn? Your world is doused in mud and blood and bile. These shining animals would be a new menagerie for a new world.”

“What am I being asked to do?” she repeated.

“It’s a new world, Fawn. You’ve set it in motion. We have a king with no blood. We have beasts with iron flesh. The future is deathless, inorganic, unless you act now.” Grenzo held up his key ring and picked out a single key. It was decorated with interlocking spiral patterns—an artisan’s object, like everything there.

Grenzo’s smiled and his eyes bulged, ready to escape his skull. With heavy, excited breath, he said, “Through that door, Muzzio lies sleeping.”

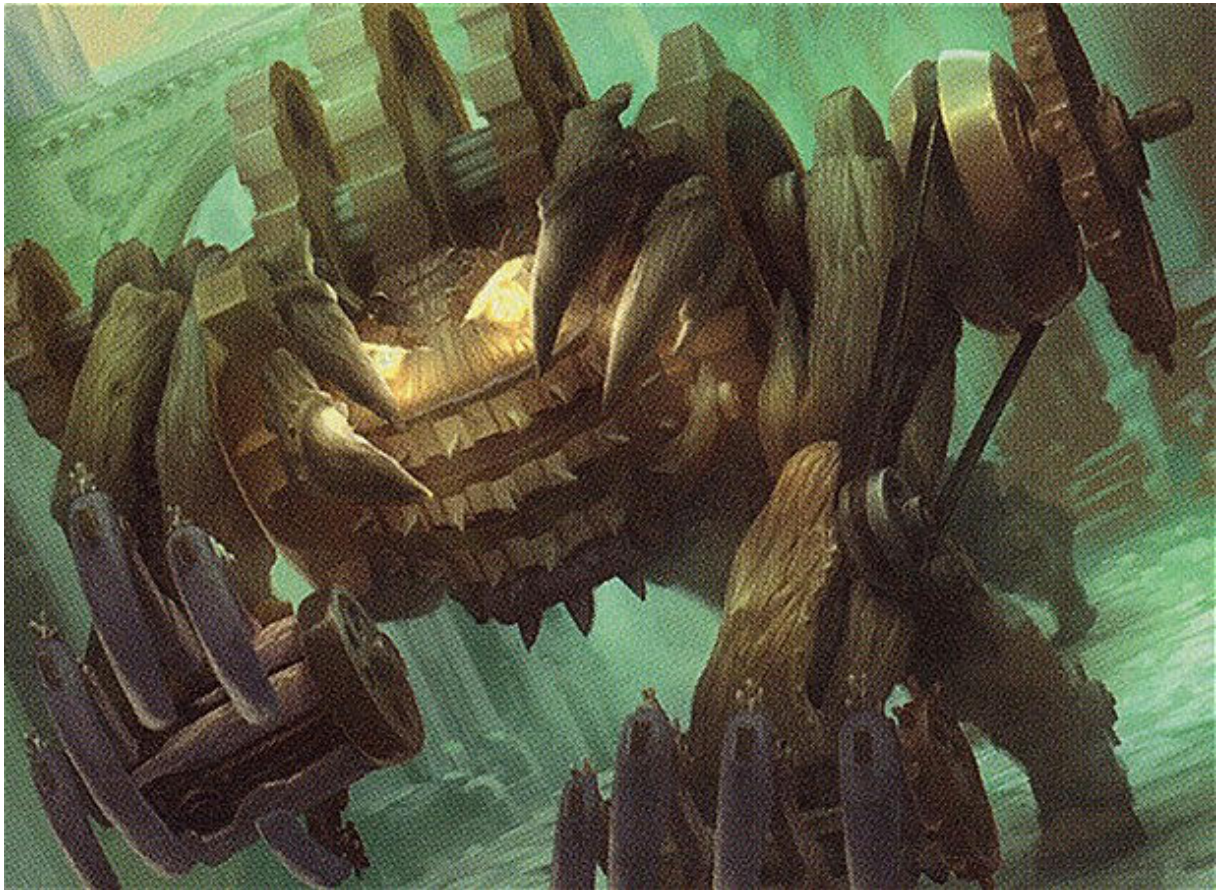
Selvala pulled away from him. “Is that what you’re asking me? To eliminate your rival? What? As thanks for turning a little key?”

“Not my rival. One who would see your bleeding world swept away and replaced.”

She stared at Grenzo, holding the gaze of those yellow eyes. He smiled wider and she kicked at his staff, sending it sailing. Grenzo crumpled to the floor. She reached for the bone blade at her side with one hand and knelt to grip the goblin’s leathery throat with the other.

“I should cut you open right here. I will not be your hired thug. I will not help you mutilate Paliano into your twisted image.”

And then she saw the yellow glow. She turned her head to watch the great construct rise from its spiritless slumber. Its gears wound faster and faster. Its pulleys stretched themselves taut as it prepared to spring forward.



Lurking Automaton | Art by Yeong-Hao Han

Letting go of Grenzo, Selvala tumbled from the path of the machine. Grenzo moved too, scurrying away with a speed she had not expected from his haggard frame.

The machine swiped with a great paw. She ducked low and books went flying overhead, tomes raining down on her. The mechanical librarians scurried to collect the debris.

Selvala looked at the cracked femur in her hand. It wasn't much of a weapon. She knew where to strike on something human, knew how to hunt the great animals, but the femur wouldn't even dent the machine's casing.

She hurried between the machine's legs and scanned for the dungeon keeper. He was back down the secret staircase, pulling closed the trap door concealed in the floorboards.

"What world do you want, Selvala?" he yelled and, with a great laugh, slammed the door closed.

She dove and tried to pry her fingers into the secret lock of the secret door that led back down into Grenzo's undercity. Behind her, Muzzio's guardian was twisting its wooden limbs, readying itself to strike again. She sunk her weapon into the lock, crudely forcing harder and harder as the beast descended. Then, with a snap, the bone cracked in half and the lock gave way.

Selvala felt like she was falling as she stumbled through the sewers. Behind her, she could hear the clomping of great machine legs. In her mind, she could feel the beast's cold breath on her neck, but she knew that was just her imagination. In her arms, she carried Muzzio's tomes. They spilled from her arms as she ran, but that was the point. An army of artificial librarians chased after her, filling the dark tunnels with the clicking of their limbs.

Somewhere, she could hear the squeal of goblins, their tunnels opened and filling with things not of their world. Soon they would clash—Grenzo's secret killers and Muzzio's artificial animals—and she

didn't know which side would win. She hoped both sides might find their secrets laid bare for all of Paliano to see, but she knew that too might not succeed.

When Selvala had run far enough that she couldn't hear the battle behind her, she collapsed. She found an unlocked cell and crawled into the corner with the beetles. The next day, she would leave the High City and go back to the wild places far below and far beyond. Her boots would be caked with mud, her limbs tired and sweaty as she ran through the trees, picked fruit, and watched the wild beasts. But, at the time, her task was to hide in the darkness with the insects and sleep.



Worldknight | Art by Adam Paquette