

Bloody Instructions

Shawn Main & Mel Li

From set *Conspiracy: Take the Crown*

The city of Paliano is quickly descending into political chaos. Meanwhile, the goblins Grenzo and Daretti have plans to cause chaos of a different kind.



It was a sweltering night, but the fireworks on the streets kept Paliano aglow. A lone sentry stood at his post. In the distance, the Festival of Our Sovereign Lady's Grace raged. Obscene profusions of color and light danced their way through the plaza, loudly declaring the populace's love for its new sovereign. Drink was flowing. This morning they whispered about Marchesa's legitimacy to the throne, but tonight they sang her praises.

The sentry, however, had neither song nor drink. He considered abandoning his post, but no, he remained steadfast, guarding the home of an old buffoon of a man from the fallen Academy. Royal decree had recently dissolved the institution, long considered the seat of knowledge and study. Stripped of his professional stature, the academic was now simply a citizen. A very old and very paranoid citizen. Night after night he stood here. And night after night the academic told him to remain alert. And it annoyed the guard. He knew the academic had been instrumental in bringing cogwork to Paliano, back before it was outlawed. But who would care about some forgotten relic of a dead institution?



Art by Jason A. Engle

In an alleyway across from his post, the sentry spotted a toothy smile. A goblin, small, probably just a child, watched him. The guard waved. “Go home, kid.”

The goblin slunk back into the shadows.

Then suddenly something came flying at the guard from the alleyway. Small and round. It arced through the air toward him. An overripe, mealy tomato splattered across his carefully polished armor and spilled down the plate like blood.

“Kid, get out of here!”

From the shadows of an adjacent alleyway, another missile came hurtling toward him. An apple this time, with an impact to his helmet that set his ears ringing before it bounced to the ground. He spun in the direction it came from. A volley of vegetables—heads of lettuce, bundles of carrots—sailed toward him. It was like someone had catapulted a fruit cart. From the alley, he could see a dozen squinting eyes on green faces. They chortled and laughed. The sound seemed to reverberate all around him.

“You filthy goblin scum! What’s your game?”

Then from behind him, he heard something else. He spun around again to see a glass bottle sailing through the night air in his direction. It landed at his feet with a burst of liquid that erupted instantly in flames. He stumbled backward, flames burning on the street. He looked around and spotted the mob. They smiled back at him. Some held torches, some weapons, one had a cart full of rotting vegetables. Weapon raised, he raced for them. The mob turned and scattered, tripping over themselves and abandoning their cart to get away from his wrath, laughing all the while.



Art by Jason A. Engle

Waiting in the shadows nearby, Daretti shifted uncomfortably in his chair. He watched after the fleeing guard and the goblin mob. “Buffoonery,” he said. “Amateurs.” The street was empty again, but the distraction hardly seemed like a certainty.

From beside him, Grenzo hobbled across the cobblestones, a hunched but hulking figure of a goblin. “They’re passionate,” said Grenzo, smiling, “like wildfire. You just need to get them started in the right place.” He reached the unguarded door, his huge frame hoisted by his staff. Three of his tiny lackeys hurried to catch up with him.

Daretti gripped the arms of his chair. This was not the delicately orchestrated night of revenge he had planned.

Grenzo looked at the door and shook the knob. It gave a satisfying rattle of heavy metal tumblers and latches but refused to give. He grinned.

“Will you at least maintain a modicum of quiet?” Daretti hissed.

“Bah! I will have you know that I have been breaking down doors since before you had hair on your cheeks.” One sharp thump from his staff and the villa door crashed to the ground. “If Marchesa wants to hang up her poisons and wear a new hat, that’s her business, but if she wants to take away my keys and lock me out of my dungeons, then we’re coming to the surface and we’ll make our own doors.” The goblins answered with a chorus of shrieking cheers.

Daretti scowled and looked over his shoulder.

“You worry too much. Embrace not knowing. Besides,” said Grenzo, pointing up at the fireworks exploding overhead, “who could hear us over this squall?” Grenzo waved and his lackeys rushed in. “Go

forth and claim your bounty, my beautiful cubs!” He stepped inside, alive in the darkness, soaking in the treasures of the villa.

The crowd of goblins flooded into the foyer, covering the pristine Trestian blue marble columns with kerosene fingerprints. One grabbed the hide of a rare albino feline from its artful arrangement over a chair and repurposed it into a handsome cape. From vaulted ceilings above them, framed portraits of aristocratic forebears sneered down at the mob.

Daretti entered more cautiously, maneuvering his chair around the fallen door. “Perhaps, old man, perhaps, but also consider: who could sleep through all this?”



Art by Jason A. Engle

Upstairs, Zadrous Fimarell tossed back and forth in his bed. He could hear the pomp and grandeur outside through latched windows. Through the curtains, flashes of garish reds, blues, purples, and greens from the fireworks illuminated his room. The spectacles he’d left on his nightstand vibrated to the drumbeat of drunken parade heralds. It wasn’t a sound so unfamiliar to him once.

Once. Once those heralds had trumpeted his approach. Once he’d commanded crowds of his own. Back in his Academy days. He’d been their darling. And they’d been his world. A world he moved through with ease. Family members opened doors for him and he played the system like an artist. He was never a genius, he knew that, but one invention, the universal cog (who could even say whether it was his own?), a whole lot of hand shaking, a few books, a few lectures, and he was set for life. Let the Muzzios of the world toil in their laboratories.

Until it all came crashing down...



Art by Svetlin Velinov

Three city guards lay unconscious on the floor, pinned under a toppled bookshelf. Broken vases and mangled paintings lay all around, a sign of their fray with the goblins. As his underlings went about the task of tying up the guards, Grenzo pulled out his loot sack and returned to the wall of bookshelves.

“I thought you told me this guy was some kind of big deal. But this is all junk. Our dank sewer is more luxurious than this festering heap.” With a sweep of his staff, books tumbled to the floor. He tapped at the wall behind. Nothing.

“I told you he was considered a forebear to the field of cogwork.” Daretti lifted a fallen volume. He cringed. *Principles of Cogwork Autonomy: A Comprehensive Treatise on Constructing Mechanical Life*. Daretti thumbed through the pages, but he knew it all only too well. “But your observation is accurate. The professor was in all ways a fraud.”

Grenzo moved onto an exquisitely carved rosewood desk, inlaid with opaline stones. Every drawer was carefully locked. With a heave, he brought his staff down onto the center. Splinters of rosewood flew off and locks scattered across the floor. Inside, he found nothing but stacks and stacks of papers. Daretti picked up one and read. It was a personal note from a supposed academic luminary. Full of effusive praise for Fimarell’s “genius.” Grenzo grabbed a handful and dropped them into his sack.

“What is your goal here, old man?” asked Daretti. “This is nothing but garbage.”

“No,” said Grenzo, hoisting his bag and packing it underneath the hump of his hunchback. “This is fuel.”

Daretti made a face. In the volume was a folded piece of paper. He opened it. “Ha! Old man, do you know what this is? It’s the blueprints for a cogwork sentry. One of the first of its kind, intended for municipal security.” He laid out the sheet on the desk. “Look at these appendages, such a mess. The

power requirements alone must have cost a small fortune. Garbage. Can you imagine the team of technicians it would have required to—”

“Talk! Talk! Talk! It’s all garbage! Every word in here. You gave your life to the academy, you dedicated your existence to that braying pack of blowhards. You begged for scraps from them. You dedicated yourself to that apprentice Muzzio and what did he do for you? What did they all do to you? Well, the academy is dead and Muzzio is exiled. And do you know why? Because all it takes is a few open locks, a few great inventions crawling through the streets, and everyone throws away all reason.” Grenzo leaned in close. “All your precious cogwork is broken, scattered, and outlawed. Everything you dedicated yourself to is dead. And we, we are the hyenas picking at its bones. Now stop acting like a scientist and start acting like a hyena.”

Daretti paused. The academy seal at the bottom of the plans glittered gold. Daretti handed it back to Grenzo. Fuel. He could feel it ignite inside him. Daretti nodded. “Burn it. Burn it all. Burn the ashes. Burn the guilty. Burn the righteous.”

Grenzo smiled.

Daretti eyed something among the papers on the desk. His eyes widened. He withdrew some yellowed parchment. His hands shook. “This is it, old man. This is it!” He swallowed and spoke carefully. “I believe it is time for us hyenas to stop congregating around this particular cadaver and seek a fresher one.” His chair clanked into motion and carried him toward the stairs. Daretti moved with purpose now. Grenzo’s smile broadened. He followed up the marble staircase.

At the top, Daretti came to a sudden stop. He dropped the papers carefully in his lap and started searching himself, turning out pockets. “I’ve forgotten it.” He turned to Grenzo and gave a pleading look. “I must have misplaced it. We need to turn around. I could not possibly proceed without my speech.”

“What? Suddenly, you can’t talk?”

“No, and I am as startled as you.”

“Look, smart guy, you know this.”

“Grenzo, I don’t. My mind is a blank. All that preparation for naught. We’ll reseal the door, we’ll drag the guards out, return the papers. I’ll review and return tomorrow night.”

“Cub, you can you can relock a door, but you can’t so easily put it back on its hinges. Now say it with me, whether or not I agree: ‘To be honest is a constant...’”

“Yes, yes. That’s it. ‘To be honest is a constant, thankless churn.’”

“One cannot hide...”

“One cannot hide behind honesty—”

“Goblins!” Fimarell stood in the hallway in his dressing gown, bedroom door open. Grenzo and Daretti exchanged glances. “Thieves!” Fimarell yelled and slammed the door.

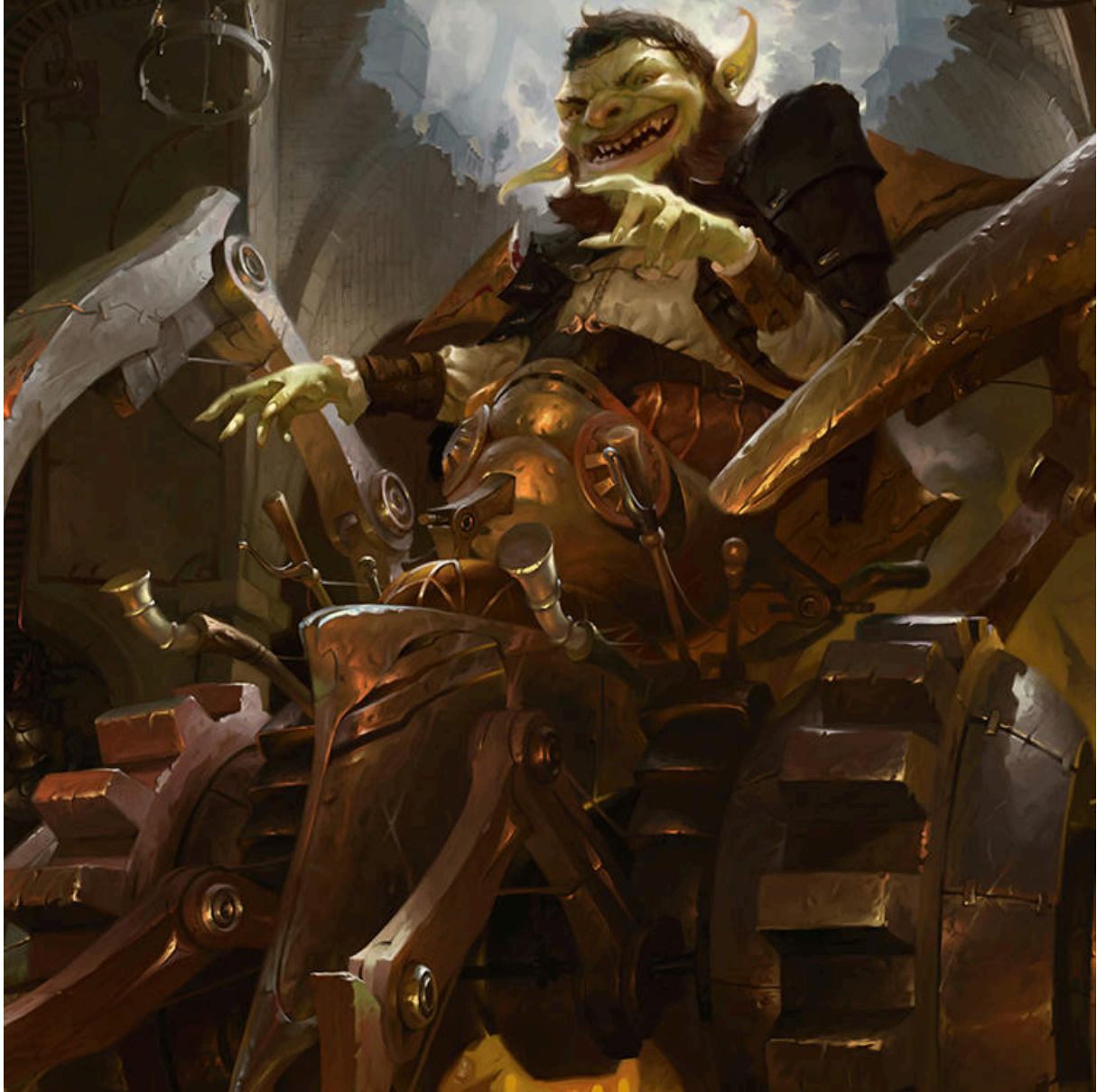
They chased after him. Daretti rattled the door. Locked. He looked to Grenzo. Another thump of his staff and the door collapsed.

The elder human scientist was at the window, calling out. “Someone help me!” He turned toward them, shaking. “Filthy goblin vermin from the street! This is a respectable neighborhood and I am a respectable man!”

Daretti stared blankly. Grenzo tapped his chair with the staff. Daretti shook himself and began addressing Fimarell, “To be honest is a constant, thankless churn. One cannot hide behind honesty. Falsehood

and deception is the chiefest sin for the scientist. And it is the burden of the honest to bring lies to bear and carry the falsifier to justice.”

Daretti’s chair extended its mechanical legs, hoisting itself off from its wheels and raising him up to nearly the height of the ceiling. In the flickering lights from the street, Daretti was like some vast spider descending upon its prey.



Art by Victor Adame Minguez

The whimpering academic shrunk to the ground.

“You may not remember my name, nor my face, but I suspect you remember my robes and my hat. I once wore my station with pride as an agent of the highest order—knowledge, and engineering, and truth.” His tone lowered. “But you would know nothing of such virtues.” The chair lurched the goblin forward, bringing their faces close enough that Daretti could see the beads of sweat running down the wrinkles of the old man’s face. “The academy knows your name very well. Your name is written oh so many times.” He held up the papers. “Like this one.”

Fimarell went white.

“Do you recognize it? Do you recognize the handwriting? You criticized it. You criticized all my words, then took them as your own. You built your career on the back of my words. How dare you call us thieves, you sham!”

Daretti’s breathing was heavy. His eyes narrowed. He balled up the top page of the manuscript and shoved it into Fimarell’s mouth.

From behind them, Grenzo called out in an exasperated tone, “Stop drawing this out, you green fool! This is Paliano—murder is how we get things done. Just kill him and let’s get on with it.”

Daretti and Fimarell eyed each other awkwardly. Daretti called back, “Will you please give me my moment?”

Grenzo raised his hands. “Fine! But I’ll be starting fires until you’re done talking.”

Fimarell’s eyes shifted between them. Daretti tried to regain his menacing composure. “I...” He stammered. “I...the career I was supposed...where was I?”

Fimarell spit out the page in his mouth. “The manuscript I stole from you...” he said cautiously.

“Oh yes,” said Daretti. “Well...it’s you who is the...” He paused. “Very well. Let’s get on with it.” Daretti reached under Fimarell’s legs and heaved him up and through the window. He tumbled down two stories and landed with a heavy thump on the street below.

Daretti leaned forward and held himself by the windowsill to see the limp body. The ground was smeared red beneath it. It was done. So much time had passed since he was a young man desperate to share his words with the academy. He’d long ruminated on this moment, yet it was over in a flash.

“Not bad. Was that as cathartic as you hoped?” Grenzo was beside him again. He held a large ornate pot under one arm and a burning torch in the other.

“I believe it might have been. Next time...let me finish.”

Grenzo held up the pot. It was stuffed full of refuse. Daretti picked up the pages of his manuscript and dropped them in. Grenzo dropped the torch after them. The pot ignited with a crackle.

“One last step.” Grenzo hoisted the pot to the window. Burning garbage rained down onto the Paliano street. Somewhere in the city, the fireworks had begun again.



Art by Steve Prescott

Downstairs, Grenzo's minions had cleared out anything of value and were now smashing apart furniture. They swept it into the corners with heaps of paper and books. One poured oil over the pile.

Daretti and Grenzo descended the staircase. "Well, good work, my protégé. You'll make a fine goblin yet."

Daretti recoiled. "Your protégé? No, no, no. Let's be clear here. You are my enforcer."

"Bah! You wish! More like you're my crony."

"Crony?!"

"Boss," interrupted one of the goblin lackeys, holding a torch aloft. "Er...bosses. Are you ready?"

"We'll discuss this later, Grenzo," said Daretti. "Yes, burn it, please. Burn it all down."

The flames caught quickly and the fire crackled, crawling up the walls. Daretti shook his head. "Let's head home." He sighed. "Back underground."

"Who's next on your list?"

"His name's Alendis. Told me the Academy wasn't ready for a goblin. Told me I was bad for their reputation. Sounds like the oily bastard joined the Custodi."

"Well, if that means he's in league with Marchesa, then he's on my list too." Grenzo stepped out of the house and back into the garden. Daretti followed.

"Okay, you old crank. How about right-hand man?"

The air crackled. Fire burned behind them. Already goblins were scattering in every direction. "The queen used to run in shadows," said Grenzo, looking up at the smoky sky. "She knew the game. She

knew the sweet twist of a knife. Now she's got her comfy chair and locks every door at night. At least she knows how to throw a party."

"I suppose everyone leaves the shadows eventually."

"We should crash a party. We should crash all their parties." Overhead, pyrotechnics lit the sky in reds, blues, and greens. Daretti fanned himself with one hand. The night remained swelteringly hot.