

A Beautiful Scene

An Age of Anura Story

By Magimor

Drops of rain rolled off the small roof covering the house's entrance. It had only stopped raining a few moments ago and there was still a wetness to the air itself. The house in question was a quaint little thing, located in one of the poorer parts of Svarga. To its immediate right and left were houses that looked exactly the same, a product of the expansion projects the council initiated a few cycles ago.

Grice imagined the families that lived in these houses. Parents working multiple jobs just to pay off their bills, their kids doing their best in school to maybe find their way into a good paying job in the upper quadrants. Sitting around the dinner table every evening and praying to Anura before enjoying their time together.

The family in the house Grice was standing in front will never do any of those things again.

"Sir?" a uniform clad officer asked softly as he approached Grice. "You ready to go in?"

What a funny question, Grice thought to himself.

How exactly can you be ready to walk into a gruesome murder scene? You'd think that after three similar cases, he might have grown numb to it, but every single case felt like the first.

Grice took a deep breath, nodded, and stepped through the threshold.

The smell smacked him in the face like a Fury's hammer, almost making him keel over in disgust. The rain and humidity must have rushed the decaying process of the bodies as if this situation wasn't bad enough to begin with.

This was the fourth family killed in the last month. The last two happened with less than a week between them, pointing to the fact that the killer might be ramping up his murderous spree.

"Anura's grace..." Grice gasped. walking into the dining room and seeing the gruesome scene for the first time. The killer always left his victims in the same manner, sitting around their table, holding hands. The father was sitting at the head of the table, his head lowered in mock prayer. The mother sat to his left, her head propped up toward the ceiling. The two children sat on both sides of the table, the girl right next to the mother, and the boy to the right of his father.

The scene itself could have been out of a nightmare even without the arrangement of the dinner table itself.

In front of each of the family members, a plate resided, containing an organ removed from the victims. The father's heart lay on its side, in the middle of the plate, the blood from the wound in his chest already dry. The rest of the plates contained one eye each, the other eyes left in their place within the bodies.

Everything was the same as the other crime scenes, inciting an overwhelming feeling of despair rushing through Grice. Based on the previous murders, he expected this one to have no relevant evidence. They've been grasping at straws since this serial killer began his work. There was no connection between each crime.

The first was a wealthy family in the upper quadrant of Svarga. The father held a medium-sized office in government. The investigation took them through all the usual motions. A political assassination, a theft, a grudge. Nothing fit within the tapestry, which the murderer took extra care in drawing. The ritualistic nature of the murder eclipsed all normal explanations, signaling that something else was at work here. The same could be said for the other murders, stumping the investigation and making Grice's work almost impossible.

There was a killer out there, and he was toying with Svarga's Police force.

"Take notes, deputy," Grice said as he usually did when he canvased a murder scene. The deputy standing behind him pulled out a small notepad, his nose squinched visibly at the smell. Grice had already gotten used to it.

"Family of four," Grice began, pacing around the table. "The father, a builder based on the calluses on his hands. The mother was a tadpole keeper at the birthing pools, a low-level one based on her markings. The kids, apparently with no order designation, probably expected to continue their parent's work when they grew up."

Grice stepped closer to the table, examining the plates and their gruesome contents. "A single eye removed from the mother and each of the children, placed on the plates in front of them. The father's heart..." Grice paused.

This was new.

"The father's heart appears to have a piece missing from it."

Looking closer at the plate with the heart, Grice noticed that it looked as if a piece of it was bitten off. His pulse quickened. He signaled to his deputy to take an image of the discovery using the Lampyridae camera he carried around.

"Upon further inspection, part of the father's heart was eaten," Grice continued his description of the scene. His immediate assumption that the killer was the one who performed the cannibalistic ritual was quickly debunked as he noticed the mother's mouth, specifically the dried blood on her teeth. "It appears that the mother was the one that bit off the piece of the heart." He said, swallowing his spit, trying to stop the gag reflex rising from within. "The father was murdered while the mother was still alive."

The monstrosity of the scene almost overwhelmed him. The killer was escalating. What was his motive? What was the message he was trying to convey? Murders were all too common in Svarga, the densest of Anura's cities, but they usually turned out to be either an unhinged individual exacting his anger at his immediate vicinity, or a spur-of-the-moment altercation that ended in death.

These murders were full of intent, intricate, and planned. The killer had an intimate knowledge of the Svarga Police procedures, managing to erase his existence from the scenes completely.

Something nagged at Grice's attention.

A small white piece of paper, stained with the dark maroon of the father's blood, poked from underneath the heart-filled plate.

Grice pulled out a black glove from his coat pocket, stretching his four fingers through it before reaching and pulling out the paper. He carefully unfolded it, his eyes widening in horror.

Within the note, a message was set in a perfect font, as if printed instead of written by hand. Grice read through it three times before setting the note down on the table and stepping back. His deputy approached, picking the note up and reading it out loud, breaking the silence that descended on the house.

"Hello Inspector." The message began.

"It is a pleasure to finally address you personally, though this isn't the first time we've spoken. I had my hopes that you might pick up on the little clues that I left you so far, but I have to say, you are quite disappointing."

Grice stared at the ground as the deputy continued.

"Since a game can only be played when all players know the rules, I feel that I must take the logical step and teach you. Everything has meaning, even if it seems like it does not. I ask you to view me not as your adversary but as your competition. My goal is to win, and your goal is to stop me. How do I win? Well, if I told you that, then the game would lose its meaning, wouldn't you say?"

The deputy stopped to swallow, his voice shaking as he resumed.

"I will give you some hints since I seem to have misjudged your capabilities."

"The first is the victims, they are not random, they are meticulously chosen to fit the larger narrative at play here."

"The second is the arrangement, pay close attention to the beautiful organs displayed in front of the souls I have sent to Anura's court."

"Everything I do is intentional, and like a magic trick, once you discover what's behind it, you will feel quite foolish, I promise you."

"The last... is more of a warning. I know you, and you know me. I am much closer than you think, and your entire life is fair game."

"I am watching, Grice. Game on."

As he exited the house, Grice met the looks of the Svarga Police force deployed at the scene. A mixture of pity, concern, and fear washed over him from his surroundings. Grice couldn't feel anything other than suspicion. The killer was someone he knew, someone insane who viewed the horror he was causing as nothing more than a game.

Standing on the curb, the house looming behind him, casting a shadow even though no visible light penetrated from the dark clouds above. Grice felt a soft hand squeeze his shoulder.

“Are you ok?” Verin asked, characteristically late to the scene.

Grice looked up, finding a small comfort in his partner’s question. A feeling quickly replaced with anger at her for being late.

“Do you really think you can just show up after I do all the work and ask me a simple question such as that?” Grice almost yelled.

“This isn’t just another murder Ver, this is something else...” he trailed off into silence.

Verin stood quietly next to him, giving him the space she knew he needed. They’ve been partners for the last five years. Verin, a green cadet from the academy, was surprised to receive a partner as well respected as Grice. Grice was even more surprised than her when the pairing happened, making it vocally known to the entire 95th Svargan Force.

Time did what it usually does, and despite Grice’s complaints, they managed to work well together. The only thing that could still drive Grice mad was that Verin and being on time paired like water and oil.

Grice reached into his pocket and gave the bloodied note to Verin. Verin read through it quickly, gasping audibly as she did.

“Anura protect us,” she said when she finished.

“I got this, Gricey, go home to your family.” She said, turning toward the expectant officers around them, barking out commands.

Grice, left on his own in front of the house, walked to his car quietly. The rain began to fall again, matching in volume the white noise that played in his ears.

A game, that’s all it is to the killer, he thought to himself as he drove home.

He barely remembered the drive, finding himself standing at the doorstep of his house, his family’s happy chatter emanating from behind the door. A door eerily like that of the house he had just left. A family, all too similar to the family that will forever be left sitting at that table.

Grice took a deep breath, put on his happy façade, and stepped inside.

The killer watched as the detective entered his home. His wife embraced him lovingly as his two kids jumped up and down, demanding his attention. It was

unusual for him to be home this early, and his family was visibly excited. As the rain fell hard, the killer smiled, watching the inspector's family gather at the table for dinner. The killer couldn't help but appreciate the detective's acting ability, leaving his job at the doorstep and transforming into a loving and happy father within his household. He's grown skilled over the years. The game was afoot.

As the family in the house held hands, saying a silent prayer to Anura, the killer felt himself getting excited, blood pumping through his veins. What a beautiful scene, he thought, cynically. It took all he had in him to stay hidden and not burst through the door.

"No," the killer said quietly, the cold Svargan evening wind brushing by like a soft whisper.

The beautiful familial scene in the house infuriated the killer, but for the sake of the plan, one that had been years in the making, he was going to wait.

Grice has finally met his match, and this time, all of Svarga will know it.