

A Beautiful Day for a Murder, Chapter 39

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Mark Gottlieb and the Cult of MaGo

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Victor Luxley strode into the mahogany-lined study and the bickering immediately came to a halt. It had been classic bickering, urgent bickering: The voices were tinged with both malice and anxiety, and though it was impossible to pick out individual words from the roiling sea of chatter, the tenor of the tone was omnidirectionally accusatory. I reveled in the musicality of the verbal tempest for the few brief seconds I could, but Luxley's presence was commanding and silence blanketed the room like a foot of snow on a prairie dog field.



"Jenkins," Luxley snapped at me, "stop thinking of metaphors and close the door!"

I did as he said, and handed him the key. He reminded me that the door didn't have a lock on it, so I took the key back and slowly put it into my pocket.

Luxley paced back and forth at the front of the room for precisely five seconds, stopped, clasped his hands behind his back, and turned to face his surly audience. "You're probably all wondering why I gathered you here today," he began. "I believe that the murderer of Lord Cottington is -" he paused for effect "- sitting in this room!" Luxley beamed widely, but his crest became fallen when no one gasped. When Luxley did this sort of thing, someone usually gasped. If things were going really well, someone fainted. Finding that his supposedly shocking pronouncement had been taken in stride, he continued. "And nobody's going to leave until the murderer is unmasked!"

Somewhere in the back, someone yawned. Apparently this was rather run-of-the-mill for the Cottington estate. The only comment came from little Tabitha, who quite earnestly informed Luxley, "But no one's wearing a mask!"

Luxley awkwardly patted her on the head. "It's a figure of speech, sweetie."

"Oh. Can I have some juice?"

"Do you have to leave the room to get it?"

"Yes."

"Then no."

"Please?"

"Sorry, no exceptions."

"But I'm thirsty."

"The killer probably poisoned your juice. Do you want poisoned juice?" At that, Tabitha started crying and buried her head in her mother's lap. Luxley, relieved that the distraction was over and he could go back to being the center of attention, went back to being the center of attention.



"Each person in this room had a reason to kill Lord Cottington," Luxley declared. "I intend to examine, expose, humiliate, and eliminate each one of you in a manner more shocking and dramatic than the last. After the timeline of Lord Cottington's fateful final day has been established, the identity of the culprit will be self-evident to everyone - even Tabitha!" The crowd murmured, except for Tabitha, who bawled even louder. "I'll begin," Luxley declared, "with Lord Cottington's valet!"

Jeeves, a white-haired spindle of a man, stepped forward. He wore a monocle in each eye, and his white gloves were stained with purple smudges. Luxley eyed him carefully before speaking. "You last saw Lord Cottington yesterday morning, correct?"

"Yes," Jeeves sighed. "Lord Cottington was demanding that I fly up to the condor refuge because he wanted an omelet for breakfast. I told him I couldn't - that Kyle had taken the helicopter out somewhere - but he was adamant. He started . . ." Jeeves faltered before continuing with embarrassment, "he started talking crazy."

"Crazy how?" Luxley demanded.

Jeeves rubbed his top hat nervously. "He told me that if I did as he asked, he'd share his secret research with me. He started telling me about **Urborg, Tomb of Yawgmoth & Mire Boa**. By just putting the land in play, the Boa would be an unblockable 2/1 regenerator for only two mana! He went on to mention **Bog Serpent, Last Stand, Roots of Life, Corrupt, and Filth**, but I begged him to stop. When he blurted out the one-sided Armageddon combo of Urborg, **Kormus Bell & Wail of the Nim**, I knew he had gone too far! I raced out of the room as fast as I could slowly shuffle, but bumped into Allie May in the doorway. I - I never saw Cotty again."



I thought the sad old man's face would sag all the way to the ground, but Allie May, a brazen dump truck of a woman, had seized the floor. "That's right!" she confirmed. "Old coot nearly ran me over! I was a few minutes early for my daily pedicure appointment, and I wound up spilling Nympho Fusion nail polish all over Jeeves there."

Luxley nodded. "What was Lord Cottington's mood when you gave him his pedicure?"

Allie May gave Luxley a look that would melt paint off a log flume. "That's not how it worked, honey. He gave *me* the pedicure. And I'm not one to look a gift foot fetish in the mouth - not when my toes look this fabulous. But Jeeves is right about one thing: Cotty was off his nut. When I told him that the purple polish was gone, he flew into a rage. He started screaming about the needing the right mindset to perform his weirdass experiments, and tossed out **Heroes Remembered & Roiling Horroras** proof. As if I couldn't tell you that giving **Roiling Horror** +20/+20 is a good idea. So I slapped him."



"Aha!" Luxley exclaimed. "You admit that you hit him!"

"Well, yeah," Allie May said somewhat less defiantly, "but I didn't kill him. As soon as I slapped Cotty, his slutty trashy skanky filthy dirty haughty hottie trophy wife stormed in and slapped me right back. Clearly no one was getting a pedicure that day, so I flipped Cotty off and sashayed on out. But I tell you - I'll miss that twisted pervert."

The room settled into silence once more, but a loud snap from the vicinity of the stuffed, mounted polar bear made everyone jump. Delilah snapped her gum once more, just to make sure she had everyone's attention. She then stood up, straightened out her cheerleader's outfit, and pouted defiantly at Luxley. "Of course I slapped Mallie Ay," Delilah slurred. "I gotta protect my hubby, right?" She swayed a bit, but leaned on the stuffed, mounted Eskimo for support. "Now can we get this over with? I have a funeral and some trig homework to get to."

"What did Lord Cottingham say to you yesterday?" Luxley asked.

"The usual blather," Delilah replied. "Blah blah secret research. Blah blah awesome combos. Blah blah the pool boy is on my skull bowling team. Blah blah **Serendib Sorcerer** & **Merfolk Thaumaturgist**." Delilah smiled to the group, blew a bubble, and sat back down, managing to completely miss the couch and nearly miss the floor as well.

Luxley, for once, was taken aback. "What was that?"

Delilah shrugged. "You have **Serendib Sorcerer** turn a creature into a 0/2, then you have **Merfolk Thaumaturgist** switch its power and toughness. Floopity-doo, it's a 2/0. Dead. Like Cotty. Awww.**Ovinize** or **Saltfield Recluse** work well with the Thaumaturgist too."



Luxley smiled with the patience of a cobra eyeing a combination lock. "No, dear, the other thing. The skull bowling thing."

Delilah didn't answer because she had passed out, so Luxley turned his attention to Greg, the pool boy, who was trying to hide behind the couch. Greg was an affable haystack of a man, and he grinned sheepishly as he rose to his feet. "Don't judge me, dude. When you discover the thing you're really good at - the ineffable God-given talent that shows you your purpose in this crazy cosmos - you gotta follow that spark, right? I've got skull skillz, dude, and I have the trophy to prove it."

"Are there a lot of lanes nearby?" Luxley asked.

"It's an underground thing. No ESPN highlights yet. But the marketing department of the International Skull Bowling Association shows that the sport is on the rise and may overtake potbellied pig fighting in popularity by 2013. In our last match together, Cotty was very excited about that - that, and **Pyrohemia** & **Thick-Skinned Goblin**. Make the Goblin immune to the **Pyrohemia** damage and **Pyrohemia** will never go away. He was also stoked about matching **Pyrohemia** with **Light of Sanction**, or with **Circle of Affliction** set to red. Righteous. We had just started to celebrate winning the league championship when Cotty's brother-in-law Herb showed up with a gun and took him away."



"You little snot!" Herb shouted. "It wasn't a gun, it was a glue gun!"

Luxley quickly stepped forward. "Technically," he said, "a glue gun is a gun. So I'm going to have to award the points to Greg."

"What points?" Herb asked.

"What? Oh, nothing, never mind," Luxley said. "No one's filming this for an exploitative reality TV game show at all. Please continue with your lurid, ratings-grabbing story."

"I had a glue gun because I had come straight from the sequin factory down in the rhinestone district," Herb continued. "I heard on the police scanner that they were about to raid the alley - well, actually, I only heard the words 'inhumane' and 'desecration,' but I had a pretty good guess - so I got Cotty out of there. I was taking him back to my nuclear fallout shelter under the toxic waste dump. The whole way, he kept swearing that he'd never tell me anything about his research on **Kavu Predator & Wall of Shards**, and that I'd never realize that the Predator would just get bigger and bigger every turn. I thought he was about to punch me when he started talking about my ignorance of **Fiery Justice**'s effect on the Predator, but that's when Angelinica ran us off the road."



"And that explains why you're in a full body cast!" Luxley exclaimed. "Another puzzle piece falls into place. So, Angelinica, you tried to murder your brother!"

"No," snapped Angelinica, a her wispy blonde hair framing her crazy, crazy eyes. "I was trying to murder my husband. Stupid cars with their stupid safety features. You can't *buy* a good vehicular manslaughter these days. But I didn't know Cotty was in the car with Weasel Face. When I saw what I had done, I pulled Cotty to safety. In gratitude, he shared with me his discovery of **Boom // Bust & Flagstones of Trokair**. Drop a **Mountain** and a **Flagstones** on turns one and two, and you've got a two-mana Stone Rain in the form of Boom, since your **Flagstones** will just replace itself when you destroy it. Alternately, you could target your own **Terramorphic Expanse** and then sacrifice it in response. Boom will still resolve since it's still got one legal target." A wistful look crossed Angelinica's face. "Cotty could be so sweet sometimes. Anyway, I was about to go back and finish Weasel Face off, but Kyle showed up in the helicopter so I took off."



Kyle swept his windswept hair back and took off his shirt. Delilah, who had just regained consciousness, passed out again. "I prefer to be interrogated this way," he growled. "I was on my way back from not smuggling velvet paintings of Elvis singing duets with sad clowns. I was following the tracking chip that I certainly never implanted in Lord Cottingham. And it was a good thing that I did the thing I didn't do, because it had no bearing on letting me find him just in time to airlift him to the hospital. On the way over, he didn't tell me about **Psychotrope Thallid** & **Conspiracy** set to Saproling, which lets you pay 1 and sacrifice any of your creatures to draw a card. I'm pretty sure he didn't mention **Kher Keep** either. After I left Lord Cottingham in the care of his childhood friend Dr. Spano, I spent the rest of the night not spraying biotoxins on playgrounds."



"Finally, an honest, shirtless man," Luxley proclaimed. "Well then, Dr. Spano . . . what have you got to say for yourself?"

Melinda Spano shifted uncomfortably. The still-whimpering Tabitha clung to her side as she began her story. "It was a long day. The police had just raided my lab at the hospital for performing inhumane psychological experiments in which I'd desecrate my subjects' religion, beliefs, and morals. The raid was for the best; the research had been going on for five years and I still hadn't come up with anything better than 'A priest and a rabbi walk into a bar.' Then Cotty was dropped in my lap. He had no significant physical injuries from the car crash, but it was clear that he was clinically berzonkers. He told me that he'd discovered a top-secret monoblue combo that kills even more stuff than the previous one. Sorcerer and Thaumaturgist works only on creatures. **Reality Acid & Tolarian Sentinel** works on any permanent. Play the Acid, then bounce the Acid, and the enchanted permanent would be sacrificed . . . it even worked on indestructible permanents. I couldn't be hearing this - I didn't want to get in any more trouble than I already was. I know Roger's been surreptitiously surveilling me for years by lining my lab with dozens of miniature cameras and microphones, so I asked him to come down to the hospital and take his son away."



The disgraced ex-Lord Cottington angrily swung his cane at nothing in particular and narrowly missed smashing an antique whalebone and unicorn horn lamp. "Aye, I took my son back to the estate. That scheming madman didn't deserve my kindness, but it was the perfect opportunity to murder him with my Killtraption 5000! It had taken me three long years to build - calibrating one of those rooms with the spiky collapsing walls isn't easy, you know - but I'd finally have my revenge!"

Luxley shook his head with the solemnity of a priest playing the tuba. He knew this wasn't a confession. "Sir, the Killtraption 5000 was the first thing I checked upon being summoned here. It's never been used."

"Of course not," the old man snapped. "My son dragged me to his study to show me his 'great works.' He had paired **Aether Membrane** & **Valor Made Real** for a one-sided Evacuation. He had even thrown in Fumiko the Lowblood or Grand Melee to force the issue. Big whoop! I, on the other hand, had built a diabolical device 25% more deadly than the Killtraption 4000! But I never got to use it because Chester chased me out of the room. Oh, I'm glad my son is dead. But I'll probably never get another chance to kill him." Finally realizing the sadness of the situation, Roger shed a single tear, put his pants back on, and sat down.



All eyes now turned to Chester, who had been standing quietly at the back of the room the entire time. This was a bit unusual, since he was a 400-pound silverback gorilla, but the spirit had really gone out of him since he lost his life savings in the banana futures market. He began to sign his part of the story, and Luxley translated out loud.

"I was ransacking Cotty's study looking for my passport. Instead I found the manifesto of a broken mind. There were lists of things to pair with **Fungal Behemoth**: **Vigean Hydropon**, **Forgotten Ancient**, **Energy Chamber**, **Chlorophant**, the **Kavu Predator** combo mentioned earlier, **Shifting Wall**, **Vinelasher Kudzu**, **Vulturous Zombie**, and about a dozen more cards that played fast and loose with +1/+1 counters. The more I read, the more worried I became. Then I heard people approaching, so I hid behind the coat rack. When I realized it was Roger and Cotty, I scared off the crazy older man and brought the crazy younger old man back to my home in the estate zoo where he'd be safe." Luxley interrupted himself to say, "But he wasn't safe, was he?" before he continued translating. "No. The zookeeper shot me with a tranq gun. When I came to, it was too late."

The zookeeper, Helen, a ruddy sparkplug of a woman, picked up the thread. "I was working late at the zoo training the harp seals to actually play the harp when Chester loped in carrying Lord Cottington. Cottington was telling the ape all about the combo of **Waning Wurm** & **Ovinize**: If you have the Wurm - or any creature with vanishing - lose its abilities in response to the remove-the-last-counter trigger, its sacrifice trigger won't exist at the appropriate time. Even after it returns to normal, it'll never vanish since now it has no time counters! I knew I had to shut Cottington up, so I shot him with a tranquilizer - but I missed and hit the ape instead. I was about to clock Cottington with a *Kinixys erosa*, but Sir Frustun Periwinkle jumped out from behind a tree, knocked the serrated hinge-backed tortoise out of my hands, and spirited off with Lord Cottington. I blew my porcupine whistle to get those spiky suckers to attack, but to no avail - they were gone."



Sir Frustun Periwinkle, a cartoonish caricature of a man, cackled from beneath his pith helmet as he twirled his handlebar mustache. "But of course, my dear," he unctuously oozed. "I've been after Cottington's research for years, and for whatever reason, he was in a sharing mood. I hardly had to threaten to blackmail his loved ones before he was offering up **Wild Pair** & Horned Kavu! Why settle for total power and toughness of 6 by using **Dream Stalker**? Once you have **Wild Pair** on the table, you can repeatedly spend a mere two mana (by playing and picking up Horned Kavu) to fetch out any creature with total power and toughness of 7. The turn after you play **Wild Pair**, you can get three **Groundbreakers**! You can get either version of Kamahl, or any of a cadre of 4-power creatures that can attack right away: Thundering Giant, Thermopod, and Dwarven Strike Force. I was primed and ready to steal even more of Cottington's combos, but just then the only person I know who's more evil than me appeared: My wife."



Dame Tymanda Periwinkle unleashed a deep chortle as she twirled her handlebar mustache. "And it wasn't even that hard to take you out, dearie," she said. "Later you'll have to tell me how you escaped from the sack inside the boot of the Rolls Royce that I left half-buried in quicksand. But first, let's get down to business. I had every intention of using my womanly wiles to seduce Cottington's secret research out of him, but he was blurting out what I wanted to hear before I ever had the chance to un-velcro my petticoats. Of especial interest was **Magus of the Tabernacle** & **Vedalken Mastermind** & **Nature's Revolt**. If you keep picking up the Magus during your opponent's turn and replaying it during your own turn, your opponent will be socked by the Magus's upkeep but you won't. Sure, you'll have to pay $3 * 6$ to keep the combo going . . . but your opponent will have to pay one mana per land just to keep those *lands* in play, to say nothing of the extra mana it would cost to keep any creatures in play! I started mwa-ha-haing so loudly that I was incapacitated by my own diabolical glee - making me helpless to stop that brat Tabitha when she entered the room, took Cottington by the hand, and led him out."



The realization spread throughout the room that all the members of the Cottington estate had given their accounts of the last time they had seen Lord Cottington . . . except little Tabitha. She was last. Luxley practically squealed with delight; this was much more scandalous than even he had hoped. "Little girl, is this true?" he asked. "Did you see Lord Cottington late last night?"

"Yes," Tabitha replied as she gave him the stink eye.

"Why didn't you say so sooner?"

"I was going to. Right after I got some juice!"

Luxley rolled his eyes. "Fine. Here." He pulled a juice box out of his pocket and handed it to the adorable murder suspect. "I was saving it for myself, but I guess you can have it."

Tabitha took the juice box and snorted. "No guava?" She slurped it down anyway, then picked up the tale: "All the evil laughter woke me up, so I walked by myself towards the source of the disturbing noises in the middle of the night. I found Cotty up way past his bedtime, so I held his hand, took him to his room, and tucked him in. He told me a bedtime story. He said that his first monoblue combo destroyed one creature at a time, and his second monoblue combo destroyed one permanent at a time, but his third monoblue combo destroys all nonland permanents your opponent controls at once. It was **Dichotomancy** & **Leyline of Singularity** & **Gigadrowse**. You tap your opponent's stuff, then you get a copy of each thing, then they all die because they're legendary. I said that was mean, kissed him goodnight, and went back to bed."



Luxley grinned with glee. "So you say you left him alone? And no one saw you leave the room?" The thought of a 7-year-old murderer had him more excited than a toaster in an electrical storm. But his world came crashing down when Tabitha shook her head.

"No, silly," she said. "That man was hiding under the desk in the corner the whole time." As she said this, she pointed at the only person in the room who hadn't yet spoken a word: Me.

Luxley spun around to face me. "Jenkins!" he exclaimed. "You were here last night?"

"Yes," I admitted.

"You killed Lord Cottington, didn't you?"

Again I nodded. "I was hiding in his bedroom all day, waiting for him to appear. Once Tabitha left the room, I finally had my chance to strike. He tried to talk me out of it by telling me about the **Molten Firebird** & **Confusion in the Ranks** & **Aether Flash** combo. You put **Molten Firebird** into play. **Confusion in the Ranks** and **Aether Flash** both trigger. You stack them up so you trade the Firebird to your opponent first, then **Aether Flash** destroys it. The Firebird's triggered ability means your opponent will skip her next draw step, and the Firebird will come into play under your control at end of turn - meaning the combo automatically starts again. He warned me that the combo will backfire if your opponent has no creatures left to trade the Firebird with, or if the wrong players control the enchantments - if some trading has happened so your opponent controls both of them, or the player whose turn it is controls **Confusion** but the other player controls **Aether Flash**, then the **Aether Flash** ability will resolve before the **Confusion in the Ranks** ability. In those cases, you'd be the one skipping your draws so you'd be wise to pull the emergency lever on the Firebird and remove it from the game. But until that happens, it's a monored lock that prevents your opponent from having a draw step until you take every single one of her creatures. Realizing that these were fitting last words from

Lord Cottington, I picked up the stapler and the rubber bands and . . . well, I think you can guess the rest."



Comprehension washed across Luxley's face like sunrise during a fireworks display. "Of course! That explains why you have a key to bus locker #721 at the Dayton Greyhound depot! Wait, no it doesn't. Why'd you do it, old friend?"

A playful grin danced at the corners of my mouth like an armadillo on a supertanker. "I just love these closed-door confrontations that you do," I said. "They're so exciting and dramatic. Plus I'm completely insane. Melt paint off a log flume? A toaster in an electrical storm? What does that even mean?!"

Luxley patted my arm. "Jenkins, I can't hear your internal narration."

I laughed. "Right as always, my friend. I guess that's why you're the detective." The whole room laughed at that, relieved that the tense confrontation was over and the mystery was solved. We all filed out of the room to prepare for the funeral. It was a new day at the Cottington estate.

Oh, and I was arrested, convicted, and hanged. Bummer.

The End.