

Chapter 3

Synopsis: Zie, a courier, meets up with their old friend Bash at Dirge Burger to catch up. He expresses concerns about their new employer, the Twins. Part way through their conversation, Zie gets a message from Dispatch to complete a delivery run that another courier bailed on. Bash seems skeptical, but lets Zie go after giving them a taser glove and saying he'll track them via GPS.

The grimey front door yielded with a sticky grit as Zie pressed on it, strolling into the decrepit crypt that is Dirge Burger. It used to be just "The Dirge"; your standard local goth dive bar, but clearly times have changed, and with them an expansion of the previously dismal menu. Some called it suspicious that this happened around the same time that Pizza Armoury had to close; others said it was a ploy to stop Burger Dealer from opening a second location in the neighbourhood. Clearly, the renovations were done on the cheap; a new sign had been bolted directly to the outer wall, and the previous livery now included a crossed out "The", and the addition of the word "Burger" to the bar's namesake in what appeared to be spray paint. Zie sniffed as they passed the threshold; the familiar aroma of incense and cigarette smoke, now accented by the presence of grease, made the previously frequented haunt feel like a stranger's home.

The grubby bartender behind the counter barely looked up to acknowledge them. He was clearly disenchanted with his role in this establishment, which became apparent as Zie bellied up to the bar to scan a ketchup anointed menu.

"Hullo..." he slowly blinked, his expression punctuated by an unimpressed eyebrow.

"Welcome to Dirge Burger... home of the... PLUR Burger." he visibly winced, and let out a sigh. Clearly this job wasn't nearly as cool as he thought it was going to be. To his credit, he was friendlier than the last bartender, Zie thought to herself. The previous barkeep was infamous for changing patron's orders and throwing customers out with whom he disagreed, which was often. A droning, ethereal melody played through ancient, crackling speakers. At least that hadn't changed, considered Zie.

The menu, laminated in a vain attempt to protect it from stains, read off four different flavours of protein patty: hamburger, Dirger, "veggie", and of course, the PLUR Burger. None of these sound particularly appealing to Zie, who now regretted plucking the sordid placard off the bar.

"I'll have the... PLUR burger," Zie said, with a grim tone. BIG eye roll from behind the bar.

"You... want anything with your (ugh)... PLUR burger?" The disaffected youth uttered, with a pained groan.

"Maybe some extra mystery rainbow grease from behind the fryer?" Zie chirped, playfully. The grubtender scrunched up his face.

"I'll do a shot if you do a shot," Zie challenged. Before the grubtender could reply, a cheery voice rang out from one of the booths.

"Hey Zie!!!! Over here!!!" the voice called, from behind a row of empties. It was Bash, who Zie was here to meet. Ever the joker, his perpetual banter and penchant for chaos was endearing - so long as you stayed on his good side. Zie strode over to the booth, and took a seat.

"Yo, Henri, fire me up a veggie burger and some fries!" he grinned. Henri, decidedly the name of the grubtender, groaned, and flipped his hair.

"The fry maker is dead, Bash. It's been dead since you and your buddies demanded we host a fry-off, and then chucked a dozen onions into it."

"Ohhhh YEAH!" Bash grinned at Zie. "We ran out of potatoes... it was either the onions, or Ralphie's old high-tops. I think we made the right choice." Henri, resigned to his role at the bar, shook his head and retreated through the hinged doors that presumably led to the kitchen.

"Man... this place has really gone downhill since Pizza Armoury had to close," Zie said, wistfully. Bash nodded solemnly and looked around, as if observing their old haunt for the first time. "Oh yeaaaah! What happened, again? Was it rats? Again?" Bash quipped.

"Well," started Zie, "Being hospital-bound means you spend a lot of time watching TV, so I remember pretty well - Channel 12 ran a feature on them, and their anchor-"

"The tall lady? With the big necklaces??" Bash interrupted, their eyes widening, eyebrows lifting.

"No, no- it was Vic Durrows, with the bowties. Anyway, after eating a slice of their pizza he started hacking up blood on live TV. Turns out the forge they were using as a gimmick really *did* connect to the pizza oven, which meant: too much iron in the pies."

"Oh *shit*," opined Bash, as Henri approached the booth with an overloaded tray, sitting it on the table, and himself beside Bash.

"Yeah," Henri began, "Despite the City being run by a bunch of corrupt ghouls, City Health actually gives a shit and does a good job for the most part, so they shut them down. Not us, though! Quality is our motto, since, uh... like six months ago!" he gave a snort.

"Good thing I only eat here on special occasions," chuckled Bash, taking a huge bite of his burger.

"Cripes man, don't choke on it- I don't have my CPR training yet", Henri said, giving Bash some side-eye.

"Yeah well, if I die, I die," Bash managed, between chomps of burger. Henri rolled his eyes and took a bite from an apple, decidedly not an item on the Dirge's menu. "So, Zie... why did you wanna meet here, anyway?"

Zie leaned back in their seat. "I got a new job running packages. Gotta pay rent, yknow."

Bash nodded. "I thought you were out of the courier game though, no?"

"Welp, I was getting close to retiring, but my landlord hasn't died or willed my home to me yet. Gotta make some ends meet," Zie said, pausing, before continuing- "I'm gonna be working with those twins I met at that party the other night."

"Wait, YOU'RE GONNA WORK FOR GENIE AND CRAX?!" Bash spat, "Those weird anime villain cosplayers I introduced you to?? That's so cool! I mean, they're kinda sketchy... I've heard some things about them. Like this one time, one of their runners decided to dip into their uh, parcel-"

"You mean like, drugs?" Henri said, suspiciously.

"Oh my god you're an absolute *baby*, Henri! Yes, drugs!" Bash cackled, then continued. "Anyway, so the Twins find out, of course, and send some goons to deal with him. Apparently they made it out to be like this courier was being taken to a party, and just fed him line after line of dope- like, at first it was probably fun, yeah? But you're also not gonna say no to these guys. So the courier just keeps dipping in, until he blacked out."

"Oh shit, did they kill him??" Henri blurted.

Bash laughed. "Apparently not, cause what I heard was this guy woke up in a field an hour out of town, butt naked, *covered* in blood."

"No!" Henri gasped, awestruck.

"Yeah!" Bash grinned. "There was a dead pig on the ground in front of him, with some guts ripped out. The courier had no idea what happened, and freaked out. Apparently he ran through some fields until he got to some farm house, who rightly sussed this guy was a fiend and chased him off. No idea what happened after though; probably got nabbed at a checkpoint and thrown into a tank." Bash concluded, crossing his arms.

"That's pretty messed up," Zie retorted, "But then... how do *you* know what happened?"

Bash paused, looking around Zie. "Oh, well... y'know. People talk, I guess. I wouldn't fuck with those Twins though, not for drugs, anyway."

Zie's phone buzzed and lit up. "Oh, hey... guess who's texting me," they chirped, standing up and unlocking the black rectangle.

"No way!" Henri quietly exclaimed. Both his and Bash's eyes followed Zie as they read through the message. Zie paced around behind the booth for a minute, seemingly re-reading the message, as if to make sure what they had read was for real.

Finally, Zie returned, leaning over the edge of the booth, eyes still on their phone. "Says Dispatch has a special delivery for me? It's got a pickup bonus, and another if I drop it off on time. Apparently the original courier bailed on them, and left the package somewhere in Scarberia? I've just got to get there, locate the package, and complete the trip. Seems simple enough."

Bash frowned. "I don't know, Zie... that doesn't sound right. I haven't run packages in a minute, but like. Nobody just ditches their parcel, you know? Like it's pretty dire if that happens. Especially with these guys - you don't even put your parcel down to take a piss." Henri simply said nothing, just nodding along and observing the other two.

"Okay, so it's kind of sketchy, but the money is pretty good and it won't take me long. I've never been to that part of the city, but I can figure it out." Zie began getting up. "Uhh, Henri, can you put this on my tab?" they grinned.

Henri was taken aback. "Your *TAB*?? What do you think this is, a dive bar??"

Zie raised an eyebrow. "Uh... yes?" they said, deadpan.

Henri capitulated. "...Okay, yes, it is, but I can't just open a tab- it's my ass! I'm on probation!" they cried, pausing before continuing, "Okay... actually, I haven't seen the owners in weeks. I think my pay just gets sent automatically. I've... actually been running this place by myself for a while." Henri seemed apprehensive. "Okay, alright, whatever- just get me back this week?"

"Thanks, Henri," Zie flashed a grin, getting their gear on. "Bash, I'll catch up with you later, alright?"

Bash shifted uncomfortably in his seat. "Zie, wait-" he said, reaching into his backpack. "It might be overkill, but can you take this?" He walked over to Zie and offered what looked like a fingerless glove with some electronics attached to it. Zie palmed it, taking a look. "Is this what I think it is?" they asked.

"Yup," Bash nodded, "New Palma Spark, just got it last week. Uh..." Bash looked off to the side, "You know how it works, right? Turn it on, spike a fool with it, 10,000 volts take their ass to the ground". He glanced at Zie. "Just promise me not to hit yourself with it."

"Gotcha," Zie nodded, trying it on. "Fits like... a glove? Thanks, man." They paused. "Uh... why do you only have one?"

"Oh, haha- Well... fell off the back of a truck, y'know," Bash giggled. "For real though, patch me into your GPS when you get to Scarberia, I can help guide you." Their grin turned into a sigh. "I've got a bad feeling about this, Zie."

"You got it, Bash," Zie said, testing their wheels and throwing a punch in the air. "Later, bud. See ya, Henri!" they exclaimed, wheeling out of the greasy lair, and leaving the pair beside each other in the booth.

“Didn’t even eat their burger...” Bash lamented, “Welp,” he shrugged, and reached for the uneaten food. Henri rose out of the booth, finishing his apple, as Bash chomped down.

“Don’t think *you’re* gonna start a tab now, Bash.” Henri chirped, as he resumed his duties behind the bar.