

Now as the curtains rise up

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Now as the curtains rise up

by [softnoblade](#)

Summary

Maybe next it'll snow. Maybe the remains of this server will be preserved, frozen under layers and layers of snow and ice. Perhaps, decades from now, some unlucky archaeologist will stumble across the remains of this server, and simultaneously uncover both the preserved remains of war and the immortal beings that had slaughtered them.

Notes

[Lower by Nightcord at 25:00 & Meiko's where the title came from.](#)

You should also check out [Fear of Cold by Jacob Geller](#). An incredible video essayist, and an incredible video essay.

There is nothing left of his tower. Nothing left of his base; just the bare, broken rocks and the deep cold of a midwinter night. Clown shivers, tucks aching hands into the pockets of his pants, and watches the gorgeous swirling of galaxies above. In the darkness, the rasping gasp of withers echo; the dying, fragile remains of a once-dense army of them. The sound resonates, pulls sharp pain from the scratches on his arms; from the black decay of his fingertips. He shoves his hands deeper

into his pockets, and wanders away from the noise — away from the remains of his tower, away from what had once been the centre of the fight.

Now, with the war over and spawn destroyed; with a thousand withers descending on them, unprepared as they had been, the server is empty. Dead, dreary — above him, thunder rumbles in a cloudless sky. Clown tucks his head against his chest against the ever-changeable weather as the storm rolls in, unnaturally fast, over the horizon.

Maybe next it'll snow. Maybe the remains of this server will be preserved, frozen under layers and layers of snow and ice. Perhaps, decades from now, some unlucky archaeologist will stumble across the remains of this server, and simultaneously uncover both the preserved remains of war and the immortal beings that had slaughtered them.

That Clown himself had slaughtered in turn.

Either way, the place he stands is the remains of an area now long-dead, and as the storm clouds finally roll over his head, he tilts his head up to the sky. Lets the rain wash away his makeup; wash away the blood, the sins, the remains of his life on this server. Lifesteal is dead — this run, at least. Spoke's left anything that's survived this long; left all of the things that people had to return to in ruins, and now Clown's here with it.

A ruined man, on a ruined server.

Maybe it is time to start anew.

He pulls his communicator from the depths of his inventory with numb fingers, ignoring the raw skin and blackened fingertips, and takes himself back to the hub. He'll find somewhere else to rest — somewhere to heal, at least until Lifesteal begins once more.

(One small thing, though: Clown's never been one to let go of grudges.)

The new Lifesteal, when it begins, is bright and sunny. A brand new world, with brand new people; a brand new set of alliances, opponents, potential wars. It's a new world, so of course it's different, but Clown is still *struck* with it when he logs in. He'd logged out in the ruins of his tower, on a cold, dreary day in the aftermath of war.

This new world is untouched. Teeming with life and so brilliantly *warm*.

His hands ache.

They've been aching for months; still stained that rot-black they had when he'd left. He's taken to wearing gloves; thick, leather things that keep prying eyes away and the heat in. Not that there's much of it.

They're useful, in the end; they keep the rough-hewn handles of basic wood and stone axes from leaving splinters. They help him grip his sword, and, most of all, they keep away *questions*. He'd worn gloves before, of course — but these ones are *different*.

Not that anyone seems to have noticed that.

But that serves his purpose, so Clown grins under his mask when Spoke threatens to push them into the fissure in the ground; laughs with Parrot when he makes a joke, and, after hours of gruelling mining, inventories weighted with stone and diamond and iron, bares his teeth at Rekrap's distant form.

Clown's never been one to let go of grudges.

Rek knew that when he killed him.

The thing is: the way servers work, when you die, you heal. Fatal wounds, of course — it's not like you could respawn with a fatal wound, you'd just die again and again and *again* — but the less than fatal stuff too. Perhaps not papercuts, or splinters. Maybe not a scrape on your knee, or a mostly-healed scab.

But something like your hands slowly *rotting*; falling to pieces as the Withering clings to them, desperate and self-perpetuating? That should heal.

The thing is: Clown doesn't die. He barely even thinks about death. Dying is for other people, for those who get caught off-guard, or trust too easily. Dying, especially on Lifesteal, is for *fools*. So Clown had been the sole survivor of server death; had been the only one left standing as a landscape turned on itself, falling apart under the pressure of erosion and Withering alike. It had been raining, when he left. The world turned against itself, set to tear down the last of what they hadn't managed to.

But that's the thing: he *left*. Clown survived the server, and *left*.

The Withering came with him.

It *stopped*, sure; it's been long enough that if it hadn't, Clown doesn't think he'd even *have* hands anymore. But it didn't fade, the way it usually does. Instead, it remained; a cold, burning pain creeping up his fingers, twining around his wrists, colouring his hands in decay and atrophy.

Rek had killed him months later; caught him by surprise in what was supposed to be a test. Clown had gasped back to life at spawn, his hands still cold and burning underneath his gloves.

Clown doesn't die. He didn't, when he'd first been hurt, and now it is a part of him; this ever-present burning, leaving his hands weak and shaky.

(It gets worse in the rain.)

Life goes on. Life *steal* goes on, and the spawn builds itself up over time. A tower pops up overnight, built in the darkness and sold as where you should go if you're interested in NFTs. A cube, bright red, alternating between shades and headphones as Spepticle and Reddoons fight over ownership. And Clown — well, he tried a tower last time.

This time, he builds a circus.

Just the tent, at first; a giant outline, ready for anything and everything he could build inside. He thinks of making it a Circus, then a funhouse, then a Casino; discarding the ideas that seem to on the nose, and holding those that seem to fit close to his chest.

He wants something intricate, this time. Last time, his tower had been intricate in and of itself, but its interior had been empty — plain white floors, with farms and storage but nothing *pretty*.

Lifesteal has never really been the place to build something pretty. Clown's not sure he cares, this time. He'll be strong enough to protect it this time; strong enough to not allow it to fall until he's ready.

It'll be a Casino, this time. A gorgeous scam, built both pretty *and* functional. A building ready to shelter him inside its walls; keep him warm, and offer him all the hearts he could ever want. *This* building won't be left to freeze. This building will keep his hands and his heart safe and warm inside; will offer the same shelter to those who will fall for its pretty, gorgeous tricks, until they give up everything in the hopes of being given something better in return.

But the Casino will be for *Clown*. Anyone who hopes for more will find that hope quickly shattered.

The Casino is not the first thing to form within. Instead, he enlists the help of a redstoner — a newbie on the server, with white hair and fear in his voice. But there's something *harder* in his eyes, in the twitch of his mouth, in the way he's willing to build intricate deathtraps and send his friends straight to them. His name is Branzy, and his ideas are ingenious; building off what Clown requested to create a funhouse where the walls and floor *shift*. The movement is designed to throw their victims, make their jumps harder and give them something fascinating to focus on. Branzy does the rest of it — he's a natural, his smiles charismatic and his voice holding a cheerful, inviting warmth.

Branzy never flinches. He sends person after person, friend after friend to their deaths at Clown's hands, and he never flinches. Instead, he smiles, exudes warmth and trustworthiness, and lures another into the depths of the funhouse.

Their second to last victim escapes. Clown hunts him down and kills him in the caves. It's a winding system of them that stretches deep below the Casino, but it is still *his* territory. The underneath of *his* Casino. And he knows them like the back of his hand, so hunting down Vitalasy is easy.

Ensuring Spepticle dies with him is harder. Even Clown can't be in two places at once.

Luckily for him, he doesn't have to be.

Instead, his communicator pings mid-fight — which he ignores, focused. Instead, he returns to the funhouse floor, and finds Branzy standing there, sword in hand and drenched in blood. His eyes are wild, elated, and his grin, bright and cheerful, reveals teeth stained red.

There is something harder in Branzy.

Clown offers him a place in his Casino.

Somewhere, behind the as-of-yet never opened Casino doors; behind one of the staff-only doors in the depths of these winding corridors, there is a room. The room is warmly furnished, with carpeted floors and heavy woollen blankets. A fireplace crackles away, merrily lit, and deep within his Casino, Clown sinks deeper into his leather couch. It's midnight, the server sleeps around him, and he stares into the depths of the fireplace, watching red flicker orange-yellow-white and back.

The couch is piled high with furs, but Clown curls up further under his newly-woven woollen blanket, and stares blankly into the distance as his hands ache. He knows if he were to hold a sword at this very moment, it would shake — a barely notable tremor, but a tremor nonetheless.

Lifesteal is a server trained to spot weakness.

Clownpierce is someone this server has made weak.

Maybe, in a better life, he'd share this — show Parrot, perhaps, the subtle tremors that wrack his fingers. Maybe show Rek the way decay winds up his wrists, inky streaks feathering up his arms like shadows at the edge of flickering candlelight.

Or maybe, with more recent developments, he could show Branzzy.

But Lifesteal is a server where your weaknesses are used against you, even by those you might otherwise consider friends. So Clown tucks his hands beneath the blanket, and watches his room's locked door with tired eyes.

In the end, he doesn't really have much of a choice.

His death is a violent one. Of course it is — he was never going to die any other way. It's also a stupid one, caused by an even dumber choice, and Clown will never forgive himself for that.

But when he respawns, it's in his safe space turned against him; an obsidian box at his spawn. His clothes are torn, damage not fixed even by the respawn, and he pulls his gloves off to feel against his throat. There's a new scar, but the damage feels like it's been healed properly, and he breathes a sigh of relief.

Then he notices Spoke.

His voice is more of a growl than anything, rasping around the newly-healed in his throat, but he manages.

“Spoke.” He clears his throat, and tries again. “What do you want?”

“Clown?” Spoke says, “I'm not going to hurt you,” and despite everything that's just happened, Clown- well. Believes him. It's foolish, but he *does*, so he settles in to listen to the rest of what Spoke has to say. “Listen, Clown,” he starts, “a lot of stuff has gone down.” Clown almost laughs. “This needs to end, bro. This needs to end. This started out just a troll — we were just going to troll some players with arrows. I did *not* want this to end like this, bro.” Clown *does* laugh, then — Spoke probably should have thought about that before starting the Cleansing, then. “This has been a very long journey, alright-” He pauses; cuts himself off mid-sentence. Blank white eyes narrow as he stares into the darkness of the obsidian box — stares directly *at Clown*.

He hesitates.

Then: “Clown. What's wrong with your hands?”

“Nothing important,” Clown tells him, pulls his gloves back over the lines of decay. He hides his wince with practice, and smiles tightly behind his mask. “Let me out, Spoke. I'm not going to kill anyone.”

Spoke hesitates, visibly torn. For a second, Clown worries he'll push, but—

“The original plan was to, um, spawn kill you,” Spoke admits, like Clown wasn't already fully aware of the typical purpose obsidian spawn traps are used for. “Take away your hearts, take away everything- but I'm not sure that's actually going to end... this.”

“I don't think it would,” Clown agrees, keeping his voice light.

“I just want lifesteal to be- just one week at peace.”

“Just one week?”

They make a deal. It goes like this: Clown gives up four of his hearts, and watches as Spoke burns them in front of him. In return, Spoke lets him out. Simple. So Clown peels his gloves back off, one by one, and studiously ignores the sharp, muffled inhale Spoke does at the sight of them. His hearts fall into his hands easily, as they always have, and he hands them over with only *slight* hesitation.

Then Clown pulls his gloves back on, and watches them burn one by one.

Later- Later, he runs into Branzy. Really, he runs into everyone, but specifically — Branzy is *his*, has been since they built that funhouse together, has been since they started working on the Casino together. And Branzy has six hearts, was on *two* before that, and Clown knows that Spoke still wants things to be even, at his core.

He'd wanted to show Branzy his hands.

“Branzy,” He calls, watches as his — *something* — turns. He can't help the way his smile softens behind his mask. “I have fourteen- I'll give you my four.”

“Aw,” Branzy says, stepping towards him, “That's so sweet! Thank you.”

Clown's smile widens, even as he pulls his gloves off to reach the tattoos. He ignores the muffled gasps from behind them, watches Branzy's eyes widen as he sees them, and pulls four hearts from his arm to press into Branzy's hands.

When Branzy takes them from him, he smiles, covers Clown's hands with his own. And, disregarding the thing Clown's tried so hard to hide, he pulls back to press the hearts into his own wrist, one by one.

Then, hands free, he clasps Clown's hands in his own again. “This is why I love you so much,” he says, and Clown flushes, pulling back to pull his gloves back on.

“Not in public,” he replies, and Branzy's grin blinds him.

“Of course,” he says.

He slides his hand back into Clown's gloved one anyway.

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